

**CONGREGATION B'NAI MOSHE**  
**The Abbreviated Book of Jonah**

JONAH

# Jonah יונה

1:1-4

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai:

Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me.

Jonah, however, started out to flee to Tarshish from the LORD's service. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to sail with the others to Tarshish, away from the service of the LORD.

But the LORD cast a mighty wind upon the sea, and such a great tempest came upon the sea that the ship was in danger of breaking up.

וַיְהִי לִי דְבַר-יְהוָה אֶל-יוֹנָה בֶן-אֲמִתַּי  
לֵאמֹר:

קוּם לֵךְ אֶל-נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה  
וְקִרָא עָלֶיהָ כִּי-עָלְתָה רָעָתָם לִפְנֵי:  
וַיֵּקָם יוֹנָה לִבְרֹחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה מִלִּפְנֵי  
יְהוָה וַיֵּרֶד יָפוֹ וַיִּמְצָא אֲנִיָּה | בָּאָה  
תַּרְשִׁישׁ וַיִּתֵּן שְׂכָרָהּ וַיֵּרֶד בָּהּ לָבוֹא  
עִמָּהֶם תַּרְשִׁישָׁה מִלִּפְנֵי יְהוָה:

וַיַּהֲזֶה הָטִיל רוּחַ-גְּדוֹלָה אֶל-הַיָּם  
וַיְהִי סֶעַר-גָּדוֹל בָּיָם וַהֲאֲנִיָּה חֲשָׁבָה  
לִהֲשָׁבֵר:

1:15-16

And they heaved Jonah overboard, and the sea stopped raging.

The men feared the LORD greatly; they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and they made vows.

וַיִּשְׂאוּ אֶת-יוֹנָה וַיַּטְּלוּהוּ אֶל-הַיָּם  
וַיַּעֲמֹד הַיָּם מִזְעָפוֹ:

וַיִּירָאוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים יְרָאָה גְדוֹלָה  
אֶת-יְהוָה וַיִּזְבְּחוּ-זִבְחַ לַיהוָה וַיִּדְּרוּ  
נְדָרִים:

## 2:1-3

The LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah; and Jonah remained in the fish's belly three days and three nights.

Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish.

He said: In my trouble I called to the LORD, And He answered me; From the belly of Sheol I cried out, And You heard my voice.

וַיִּמֶן יְהוָה דָּג גָּדוֹל לִבְלָעַ אֶת־יֹנָה וַיְהִי יֹנָה בְּמִעֵי הַדָּג שְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים וּשְׁלֹשָׁה לַיְלֹת:

וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל יֹנָה אֶל־יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו מִמִּעֵי הַדָּגָה:

וַיֹּאמֶר קָרָאתִי מִצָּרָה לִי אֶל־יְהוָה וַיַּעֲנֵנִי מִבֶּטֶן שָׁאוֹל שְׁמוֹעִתִי שְׁמָעַתָּ קוֹלִי:

## 2:10-11

But I, with loud thanksgiving, Will sacrifice to You; What I have vowed I will perform. Deliverance is the LORD's!

The LORD commanded the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon dry land.

וַאֲנִי בְּקוֹל תּוֹדָה אֶזְבְּחָה־לָּךְ אֲשֶׁר נָדַרְתִּי אֲשַׁלְּמָה יְשׁוּעָתָה לַיהוָה:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לַדָּג וַיִּקָּא אֶת־יֹנָה אֶל־הַיַּבֶּשָׁה:

## 3:1-5, 10

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time:

“Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it what I tell you.”

Jonah went at once to Nineveh in accordance with the LORD's command. Nineveh was an enormously large city a three days' walk across.

וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֶל־יֹנָה שֵׁנִית לֵאמֹר:

קוּם הָלֵךְ אֶל־נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה וְקִרָא אֲלֶיהָ אֶת־הַקְּרִיאָה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי דֹבֵר אֲלֶיהָ:

וַיָּקָם יֹנָה וַיֵּלֶךְ אֶל־נִינְוָה כְּדִבַּר יְהוָה וַנִּינְוָה הָיְתָה עִיר־גְּדוֹלָה לְאֵלֹהִים מְהֻלָּךְ שְׁלֹשָׁת יָמִים:

### 3:1-5, 10

Jonah started out and made his way into the city the distance of one day's walk, and proclaimed: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth.

God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out.

וַיֵּחַל יוֹנָה לָבוֹא בְעִיר מִהֲלָךְ יוֹם אֶחָד  
וַיִּקְרָא וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְנִינְוָה  
נִהְפָּכֶת:

וַיֵּאֱמִינוּ אַנְשֵׁי נִינְוָה בְּאֱלֹהִים  
וַיִּקְרְאוּ-צוֹם וַיִּלְבָּשׁוּ שָׂקִים מִגְדוֹלָם  
וְעַד-קִטְנָם:

וַיֵּרָא הָאֱלֹהִים אֶת-מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם כִּי-שָׁבוּ  
מִדֶּרְכָּם הָרָעָה וַיִּנָּחֵם הָאֱלֹהִים  
עַל-הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר לַעֲשׂוֹת-לָהֶם  
וְלֹא עָשָׂה:

### 4:1-4

This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved.

He prayed to the LORD, saying, "O LORD! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment.

Please, LORD, take my life, for I would rather die than live."

The LORD replied, "Are you that deeply grieved?"

וַיִּרַע אֶל-יוֹנָה רָעָה גְדוֹלָה וַיִּסָּר לוֹ:  
וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל-יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר אָנָּה יְהוָה  
הֲלוֹא-אָנֹכִי דָּבָרִי עַד-הָיֹתִי עַל-אֲדָמָתִי  
עַל-כֵּן קִדְּמָתִי לְבָרֶחַ תַּרְשִׁישָׁה כִּי  
יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה אֱלֹהִים-חַי וְרוּחוֹם אַרְךָ  
אֲפִימֹל וְרַב-חֶסֶד וְנִחָם עַל-הָרָעָה:  
וַעֲתָה יְהוָה קַח-נָא אֶת-נַפְשִׁי מִמָּוֶי כִּי  
טוֹב מוֹתִי מִחַיִּי: (ס)  
וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה הֲהֵיטֵב תָּרַח לָךְ:

## 4:9-11

Then God said to Jonah, “Are you so deeply grieved about the plant?” “Yes,” he replied, “so deeply that I want to die.”

Then the LORD said: “You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight.

And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!”

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־יוֹנָה הַהֵיטֵב  
תָּרָה־לָּךְ עַל־הַקִּיקְיוֹן וַיֹּאמֶר הֵיטֵב  
תָּרָה־לִּי עַד־מָוֶת:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵתָּה חֲסַפְתָּ עַל־הַקִּיקְיוֹן  
אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָמְלָתָ בּוֹ וְלֹא גִדְלָתּוֹ  
שָׁבוֹן־לִילָה הִנֵּה וּבוֹן־לִילָה אָבָד:  
וְאֲנִי לֹא אֲחֹס עַל־נִינְוָה הָעִיר הַגְּדוֹלָה  
אֲשֶׁר יֵשְׁבֶיהָ הֲרַבָּה מְשִׁתִּים־עֹשֶׂיהָ  
רַבּוֹ אָדָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַע בֵּין־יְמִינּוֹ  
לְשִׁמְאֹלּוֹ וּבִהְמָה רַבָּה:

## Micah 7:19-20

He will take us back in love; He will cover up our iniquities, You will hurl all our sins Into the depths of the sea.

You will keep faith with Jacob, Loyalty to Abraham, As You promised on oath to our fathers In days gone by.

יָשׁוּב יִרְחַמֵּנוּ יְכַבֵּשׁ עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ וְתִשְׁלִיךְ  
בְּמַצְלוֹת יָם כָּל־חַטָּאוֹתָם:  
תִּתֵּן אֱמֶת לִיעֲקֹב חֶסֶד לְאַבְרָהָם  
אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְתֵּינוּ מִיְמֵי קֶדֶם:

# Our Prophets, Ourselves: Jonah, Judgment and the Act of Repentance

*In many ways, the message of the Book of Jonah seems antithetical to that of Yom Kippur.*

BY [RACHEL ROSENTHAL](#) |

If one were to name sympathetic characters in the Bible, it is unlikely that the prophet [Jonah](#) would make the list. If ever there were a model for the flawed prophet, Jonah would be the prototype. He is callous, clueless, and closed off to the notion of shades of gray in the world. Indeed, it is easy to list Jonah's faults. He runs away from God in direct opposition to God's command; he laments the successful *teshuvah*, repentance, of the people of Nineveh and the fact that they are not destroyed; and he scolds God because he feels that he has been made to look like a fool. Jonah lives solely inside of himself, unable to consider the larger world as it exists outside of him. Because of this litany of unflattering characteristics, Jonah often arouses harsh judgment within us. We read his story, criticize him for his actions, and congratulate ourselves for not being like him.

In many ways, the message of the book of Jonah seems antithetical to that of Yom Kippur. After God saves the people of Nineveh because of their sincere repentance, Jonah says:

O Lord! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country?  
That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. ([Jonah 4:2](#))

Rashi highlights Jonah's despair at the people's successful *teshuvah*, explaining that Jonah knew that God would forgive the people if they repented, and therefore feared that he would be seen as a false prophet in their eyes (Rashi on [Jonah 4:2](#)). Never before has God's mercy and compassion been framed so negatively, as a reason to wish for death. Never before has the ability of an entire nation to do *teshuvah* successfully been framed as a cause for mourning! In light of this, Jonah's story seems like a strange one for us to read on Yom Kippur, especially so close to *Neilah*, the closing prayer of the holiday. Why choose such a callous and unapologetic prophet? Why don't we read the story of King David's *teshuvah* after Uriah's death, or Isaiah's promise that redemption will follow repentance? What are we supposed to learn from the story of Jonah, where *teshuvah* and the salvation it brought were lamented?

In the final *mishnah* of *Masekhet Sotah*, following an extensive litany of ways in which the Jewish people had fallen away from mitzvot and thus lost their ability to commune with God, R. Pinhas ben Yair brings the following teaching:

Quickness leads to cleanliness; cleanliness leads to purity; purity leads to separation; separation leads to holiness; holiness leads to humility; humility leads to fear of sin; fear of sin leads to religious devotion; religious devotion leads to the Spirit of God. And the Spirit of God leads to the resurrection of the dead, and the resurrection of the dead leads to the coming of Elijah, may he be remembered for good, Amen. ([Mishnah Sotah 9:15](#))

On Yom Kippur, our experiences are often framed around the initial items on this list. As we fast and abstain from many of our usual daily activities, we strive to achieve *kedushah*, holiness. However, as R. Pinhas reminds us, these behaviors are not an end in themselves; rather, they are tools to move ourselves closer to humility and toward ruah haKodesh, the Spirit of God. By framing *kedushah* as a tool instead of as an end, the *mishnah* reminds us that we must confront our failures, instead of only lauding ourselves for our successes. We must acknowledge the uncomfortable ways in which Jonah reminds us of ourselves, and we must learn to forgive, rather than condemn him. Only in the moments when we have the humility to admit the uncomfortable reality of our own flaws—instead of focusing on condemning the failings of others— will we be able to hasten the redemption.

In the shul where I grew up, every year on Yom Kippur there would be a handout that listed an extra set of [al hets](#)

to be said beyond those traditionally in the *mahzor*. The idea was to help the congregation better connect with the liturgy by framing the litany of our sins in the context of our contemporary human experience. There is one that stays with me, and that I think of every year— *Al het she'hatanu lifanekha*, for the sin we have sinned against you by condemning traits in others that we excuse in ourselves.

The choice is within us to decide whether we will condemn or forgive; whether we will focus on others or do the hard work of truly looking at ourselves. As the Rambam ([Maimonides](#)) reminds us in *Hilkhos Teshuvah*:

Free will is granted to all people. If one desires to turn himself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is his. This is [the intent of] the Torah's statement: "Behold,



man has become unique as ourselves, knowing good and evil.” ([Bereshit 3:22](#)) The human species became singular in the world with no other species resembling it in the following quality: that person can, on his own initiative, with his knowledge and thought, know good and evil, and do what he desires. There is no one who can prevent him from doing good or bad. ([Rambam, Hilkhhot Teshuvah 5:1](#))

*Teshuvah* is a complicated process, but the choice of how—of whether—to do it is only up to us. It is difficult to admit the sins we have committed against others, against ourselves, and against God. Consequently, it is sometimes our instinct to retreat into ourselves and focus on the sins of others. It is true that we are guilty of wrongdoing, we tell ourselves, but perhaps our wrongdoing pales in the face of the sins of those around us. We have stumbled, but it could always be worse—we could be like our neighbor or our colleague. Or, God forbid, we could even be flawed like Jonah. However, these flaws are what make Jonah a profoundly human prophet, one who is more like us than we would care to admit. This is why Jonah makes us uncomfortable, why we are so quick to dismiss and condemn him. His traits are too recognizable, too familiar to us. It is too easy to see Jonah in ourselves, so we push back against the idea that we would—that we could—ever be like him.

Perhaps, then, we do not read about Jonah because he presents a great paradigm of *teshuvah*. Perhaps we read Jonah because our reactions to him can serve as a test of sorts to determine whether we have effectively internalized the lessons of the *teshuvah* that we claim to have done. Perhaps it is not only the story of Jonah itself that is important, but also whether we have developed the capacity to view him with compassion and understanding, rather than anger and judgment. As Israel Salanter said, “Most people worry about their own bellies, and other people’s souls, when we all ought to be worried about our own souls, and other people’s bellies.” May we find a way to worry about our own *teshuvah*, while viewing the sins of others through a lens of compassion. May we find a way to forgive Jonah for his sins and inability to value the *teshuvah* of others. Perhaps that is when we, too, will be forgiven.