

Feeling Like Jonah
HHDs 5770-2009
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President Lincoln is said to have regularly told this story:

A frontiersman lost his way in an uninhabited region on a dark and tempestuous night. The rain fell in torrents, accompanied by terrible thunder and more terrific lightning. To increase his trouble his horse halted, being exhausted with fatigue and fright. Presently a bolt of lightning struck a neighboring tree, and the crash brought the man to his knees. He was not an expert in prayer, but his appeal was short and to the point: 'Oh, good Lord, if it is all the same to you, give us a little more light—and a little less noise.'

The story relates in a humorous way the feelings that all of us have when we are lost and afraid. All we need is a little hope, to see the rays of sun peeking through the clouds: a bit more light to reassure us and a bit less of those things that scare us.

Most of us feel that we are not "expert in prayer." At times even the most "expert at prayer" could not do better than to repeat the words of Lincoln's frontiersman. The best prayers are not necessarily grandiloquent, or perhaps, to use a more appropriate term, highfalutin. The best prayers are poignant, relevant, and meaningful.

The sailors on the ship with Jonah could easily have uttered the same words as those uttered by Lincoln's frontiersman amid the storm that tossed their ship. Overwhelmed with fear, they sought help from the divine as well, asking of the cause of their plight and eventually coming to the conclusion that Jonah was to blame. They sought forgiveness from the divine hoping that the storm would relent. It finally did, when Jonah was tossed overboard.

Just as an aside, please do not assume that sending people around you into the depths of the sea will alleviate the things that trouble you. That ONLY worked in the story of Jonah, though it has been tried again and again throughout history to too many scapegoats, people wrongly blamed. As members of the Jewish community, we know that accusations can be totally without merit. As individuals, we often forget that fact in our lives and may take on blame that is undeserved.

Please do not assume that just because bad things happen to you or to those around you that YOU have something for which to ask forgiveness, blame to accept. Bad things happen in our world. There are bad people in our world. Natural disasters occur. Accidents happen. Illness strikes. People make mistakes. There is irrational hatred.

Though in the story of Jonah, God brings the tempest to toss the sea, in the Reform Jewish tradition, we do not believe that God does such things. God is our support through times of distress, not their cause and not having "allowed" them to happen. This is one place where Reform Judaism is dramatically different than any fundamentalist religious tradition.

In the story of Jonah, Jonah was not at all happy to have to do this work for God. He did not want this "noise" in his life and fled from it. But, he could not escape from it. That part of the story is very much in line with many of the challenges we face in our lives.

During the High Holidays, we work toward returning ourselves to the right path. We perform teshuvah, turning, repentance... All of us have strayed at times from the path of righteousness and may, like Jonah, have found ourselves trying to escape from the challenges that face us.

For many of us, this past year has found us wandering on unknown paths. Darkness has set upon us. Storms have shaken us to the core. Some of us have experienced the loss of employment, the end of relationships, the onset of illness and the death of loved ones. We have been left bereft on a lonely way. Others of us have taken on daunting tasks and encountered challenging circumstances. We all stand arrayed today before God and we feel...we may feel hurt, sad, pained, alone, afraid, guilty—just like Jonah.

If only we could flee. If only we just go away, our problems would...but they won't just go away. We are like Jonah trying to flee from that from which we cannot flee. The task must be done: the mourning for lost loves, the healing from pain or illness, the continuation or completion of the daunting task, the dark tunnel or deep valley that must be traversed before we come into the light.

It is not without reason that this morning it is customary to read the words, "For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, nor too remote" while this afternoon it is customary to read the story of Jonah, who believed that it was exactly that. These stories come to teach us that when we are faced with a challenge, we must try to overcome it, to succeed at it, even though it may scare us so much that we wish to hide from it.

And our tradition teaches that God is with us as we face these challenges:

Yea, though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for You (God) are with me.

And when we find ourselves with mountains to climb:

I lift my eyes to the mountains: what is the source of my help? My help comes from Adonai, maker of heaven and earth. God will not let your foot give way.

God is with us when we face darkness and fear and when we have mountainous tasks to overcome. God is within us, urging us on, giving us the strength, if we but only listen.

Jonah needed a bit more encouragement than most. God doesn't usually provide a large fish shaped limousine to deliver us to the door! Long distances take time to cross and often, no little amount of work.

In our story, once Jonah was delivered to dry land, God reiterated the task before him—and Jonah, this time, faced it. "Forty days more, and Nineveh will be overthrown!" He believed that his task was an easy one. Deliver the message and wait.

Jonah did not understand repentance. He had only just come to understand acceptance. The people of Nineveh were ready. They changed their ways and God changed in response to that action. We have to accept the challenges, to face the tasks, to be willing to deal with the work, first. Then, and only then, can we begin to do the work necessary to achieve teshuvah, turning ourselves, turning our lives, in a new and more positive direction.

Jonah became angry because he didn't understand why he had to be put through what he himself went through. How could it be that the result of his going to Nineveh, of his taking on the work of the daunting task, enduring the darkness and fear, was that God so easily forgave the people of Nineveh? Why didn't God forgive Jonah's fear? Why force him to face it? Jonah felt unappreciated. He had difficulty accepting the task and even more difficulty changing direction: acceptance and teshuvah.

Jonah did not realize that by changing his actions, even reluctantly, he brought great change to his world. In the story, Jonah saved the people of Nineveh by performing the

task that made him grievously afraid. We may ask what had scared him so.

Perhaps, it was hearing God's voice in his head. That might have frightened him a bit. It would certainly frighten most of us here if it happened to us. But perhaps, Jonah was not frightened of God at all, but of the people of Nineveh and how they would react to him. Prophets, even in ancient times, were often not well received, prophets of doom even less so. Jonah may indeed have been scared of the task that he was being asked to perform. We may have tasks that scare us as well.

While the obvious lesson of the story of Jonah is the connection between the teshuvah of Nineveh and God's willingness to forgive us today. Another lesson is that great change can be brought by the positive actions of individuals even if they find difficulty taking them on, as Jonah did. Individual actions may harm a great many, but they can also benefit a great many.

As I said earlier, as Reform Jews, we do not believe that God challenges us in this way. Yet the outcome of dealing with difficulties in our lives is similar. Facing challenges changes our perspective. I spoke about that a bit on Rosh Hashanah morning, when I talked about standing up for ourselves and accepting responsibility for our actions. The same is true with taking on challenges.

The view at the top of the mountain is very different than that from the deeply shadowed valley below. In the midst of our troubles, we often cannot see out of the darkness into the light. In the light, we gain perspective: often gaining pride and courage.

Rabbi Israel Salanter, the great Orthodox rabbi, once said:

When I was young, I wanted to change the world. I tried, but the world did not change. Then I tried to change my town, but my town did not change. Then I tried to change my family, but my family did not change. Then, I knew: first, I must change myself.

Sometimes that change comes when we engage our own weaknesses, our own problems. It is much like when a parent flies on an airplane with a child and is given the simple advice, "Put the oxygen mask on yourself first." You need to be at your best in order to do your best to help others. God judges us by our best.

That task, to be the best we can be is not necessarily easy. It may even be downright difficult. The cards may be stacked against us. We may well feel like Jonah and want to flee. Or perhaps, pain, loss, and difficult challenges have been put into our path. We may even be angry at God or feel that God is angry with us.

In that vein, Rabbi Marc Gellman writes:

It's okay to be angry with God, because your anger is just a sign that you care... God would rather have you be angry at God than not to speak to God at all. And you'll see, chances are that speaking to God will help you lose the anger and keep the love.

Anger and hatred can eat us up. We can make ourselves sick or we can spread our anger and hatred around, sharing it with others and make their lives miserable. Those who try to maintain tight control and harbor anger and hatred as well can easily become abusive of others. They can wreck havoc in their homes, in their workplaces, and among their friends, often losing friends because of outbursts of anger, making working relationships uncomfortable or impossible, and causing emotional harm at home.

God is not an abusive parent. Avinu Malkeinu is "rachum v'chanun," "merciful and gracious." God is "patient, loving, and true, showing mercy to multitudes, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and granting pardon." We should try our best to be as well: of ourselves and of others who have offended against us.

We should try to be like God in our mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. But we are not God. We are faulty, emotional, irrational at times, ignorant, swift to anger and a whole host of other traits that are not ideals. We are not perfect. We all err. We all sin. Our best is never perfect. Perfection is impossible, though we try to attain it nonetheless.

On this Day of Judgment, there is never a more appropriate quote from the Jewish Tradition than the following story of the Chasidic sage Zusya:

While on his deathbed, a student asked "Rabbi, what worries you about your death? Surely you will be welcomed into the gates of heaven."

Zusya sighed. "My son, I am not worried that God will ask me, 'Zusya, why weren't you more like Moses?' Because I am not Moses. I am worried that God will ask, 'Zusya, why weren't you more like Zusya?'"

We fear being held to unfair standards, yet we too often hold others to unfair standards. We, knowing that we are imperfect, demand it of others.

We are like Jonah, cowering before daunting tasks, acting childish at times. We need to remind ourselves of the words of Zusya. We need to remember that though we may feel like Jonah at times and believe that we should be like Moses or some other great figure whom we hold as an exemplar of perfection, we are instead the people who we

are. Our task is not to be perfect, for that is not possible, but for us to be the best that we can be.

We are like the frontiersman when confronted with darkness and noise on our way through difficult places in our lives. We too simply wish for "a little more light" and "a little less noise." We are fallible and imperfect beings.

"Atem nitzavim kolchem hayom lifnei Adonai."

"We all stand this day arrayed before Adonai."

Unable to hide ourselves behind another. Like Jonah, it matters not where we go because God, within us, always follows us. And we each matter. We each count.

May we be judged fairly by ourselves and others.

May we strive to be the best people that we can be, though we will never be perfect.

May we not turn others into scapegoats but instead claim our responsibilities.

May we, feeling like Jonah tossed at sea or like the frontiersman lost amid the storms of life; find solace and hope, compassion and mercy.

As we travel through darkened paths in our lives, O God, give us a little more light and a little less noise so that we may proceed in our tasks unafraid.

Gamar Hatimah Tovah, may you be inscribed in the Book of life for a good, happy, and healthy new year.

Kein yehi ratzon.