

The Subversive Story of Jonah: by Jacob Kaufman

(D'var Torah, Yom Kippur Morning, 2016)

When I was a kid I only knew one thing about the book of Jonah: Jonah got eaten by a whale.

When I was a slightly older, more... precocious kid I knew another thing about the book of Jonah: that Jonah did *not* get eaten by a whale (because Jonah was eaten by a “great fish” and I had learned that whales were mammals).

But now that I am older and - hopefully slightly wiser - I have been thinking more about the Book of Jonah and have become fascinated by it. Now, Eden normally tells the story of Jonah, which I will go over.

I am always struck by how subversive a story it is. We have a narrative throughout our holy books about the prophets: the righteous man who directs the Lord's vengeance against the sinners.

But this the book of Jonah inverts this. Jonah, in many ways, acts like a petulant child. Everyone who Jonah meets who behaves righteously and acts in a manner more befitting of a prophet. More importantly, the book of Jonah raises more fundamental questions of how we should live our lives.

The book of Jonah starts off with God telling Jonah to go to Nineveh – to preach at how God has learned of their wickedness. And on hearing this, Jonah goes down to the port of Jaffa and flees via ship Tarshish. We do not know where Tarshish is, some have said Spain, others Carthage (in Northern Africa). The point is - it is far away from Nineveh (in modern-day Iraq). This is the first divergence from the standard story. Of course, not all prophets are enthusiastic about the burden of prophethood – remember how Moses pleads with God to pick someone else because he is

slow of speech. Here, Jonah does not argue or negotiate: he simply flees.

As he sails, God then causes a terrible storm. And as the sailors all try to save the ship, Jonah goes to sleep. The sailors wake Jonah up and cast lots to try to determine who caused the storm. When the lots fall upon Jonah he explains to them the story so far. The sailors aren't particularly happy about this and Jonah advises them to throw him into the sea – because it is on his account that the storm occurred. But the sailors refuse – they do not abandon Jonah, they double their efforts to row back to shore. It is only when they know that they will fail that they finally throw Jonah into the sea – at which point the sea immediately calms. Again – this is not the righteous Jonah among non-believers: the sailors fought for Jonah even though it is entirely Jonah's fault that they are in peril. The sailors only threw him overboard after they tried every possible alternative.

Jonah does not drown because God sends the aforementioned great fish (possibly a megalodon shark – you can google it after) to swallow Jonah. Jonah lives in the belly of the beast for three days and prays, at which point God instructs the fish to spew Jonah onto dry land. Again God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh. And this time Jonah goes: “Okay”.

Nineveh is famous at this time, it actually may have been the largest city in the world (there are records that Nineveh was the largest city in the world, a century after the events of the book of Jonah occurred). In any event, it is a very large city - the book of Jonah says it took 3 days to walk across. It's located near modern day Mosul (which was in the news recently). Jonah enters Nineveh and must've looked a bit odd – he has been in a shark for 3 days - and cries out: “Another 40 days and Nineveh is overthrown”. Look what happens. No one curses him, no one spits on him: they believe him. And everyone – from the poorest

beggar to the king himself dress in sackcloth and ashes and fasts and repents of their evil ways.

God sees this and relents of the evil which God had promised to wreak upon them.

And Jonah is *pissed*

He is livid. And he prays and he says – "I knew this would happen – this is why I fled to Tarshish – I knew you were merciful and compassionate. So kill me, Lord, it's better for me to be dead than be alive."

And God responds: "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Jonah doesn't answer, he leaves the city and sulks, waiting to see what would happen to the city. Maybe God will recant his recantation and Jonah will see the explosions. That doesn't happen. And God sent a castor-bean plant to grow up over Jonah – and Jonah is very happy at the nice shade (because it's hot). Then God sent a worm to gnaw on the bean plant's roots and kill it. Jonah is angry again and says to God: "It's better for me to die than be alive." And God asks: "Is it right for you to be angry about the bean plant?" And Jonah replies: "Yes – it is right for me to be so angry that I could die."

And God says: "You had compassion for the bean plant which you did not raise. It was there one night; the next it was gone. And this great city of Nineveh with 120,000 human beings who don't know their right hand from their left, and much cattle beside, should I not have compassion?"

And that's the end. The main question it raises: why did Jonah flee to Tarshish?

We have his reasoning: he was afraid God would be merciful. That doesn't make much sense, unless you think Jonah's a

horrible sociopath (which I do not think is reflected in the text). So why did he? I submit it was because he was afraid. Not physically afraid, Jonah displays great physical courage. He is in a massive storm and goes to sleep. He doesn't beg for his life, he says: 'I caused this, throw me into the sea.' He is in a shark, but still maintains his composure to pray to God. He goes to a faraway city and tells passer-bys to their faces that they're evil.

What Jonah was afraid of was being embarrassed. Jonah does not want to travel to a city to preach doom and hellfire and then for nothing to happen. He would be humiliated. People would say, look at that crazy Jonah, like the woman in Aviva's sermon yesterday night. That fear of embarrassment was more important to Jonah than the lives of the citizens of Nineveh – a vast city with over 120,000 children. He's privileging his desire not to be mocked over his fellow human beings.

But, I don't want to be too critical of Jonah. It's easy for us to judge him. But the question here is posed not just to Jonah but to all of us. Remember, the book of Jonah ends not with Jonah repenting not with an explanation of what happens. It ends with a question: should I not have compassion? That is the fundamental question to all of us: do you want to help people or avoid their scorn. In the words of Albus Dumbledore: we must choose between what is easy and *what is right*.

And that is a difficult question. We do not get a resolution to the story. We do not get it spelled out what we should do. Because it *is* hard for us.

We should read this story and ask why is there a tale of subversion in the bible? Because Jonah is us. All of us do not want to be embarrassed. We don't want to be humiliated. All of us have to think, when that choice comes: what is right or what is easy.

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