

Darshan Jonah

by Joshua Isaac

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Greetings –

- Giving the Darshan Ha Jonah is something I've wanted to do since rejoining our synagogue in 2001 and seeing a number of brilliant people come up here to speak each year and share their unique perspectives.
- In the last seven years I've heard counselors, performance artists, teachers, and psychologists all come up here and share their personal and professional outlooks on the Book of Jonah. They've brought new, unique insights coupled with scholarly research. I thought what an excellent way to learn and enjoy this compelling piece of Torah. And I looked forward to stretching my thinking to similar degrees.
- Also by doing this, I thought it's another way to honor my parents. They were active members here, who both passed away around the high holidays. I do this in your memory mom and dad.
- I'm also honored to have my uncle Hymie Rosenblatt here on a visit from Winnipeg, Manitoba.
- By studying the Book of Jonah, as an added bonus, I learned with many of the scholars and rabbis here at shul, growing my relationships and knowledge in turn. One of those persons I was honored to get to know through this process was Jason Kintzner, who did a beautiful job with the reading. Thank you Jason, Jill, Beth, Elana, and all for your help and guidance.

So in sharing my professional views, I guess I come at this as a storyteller, someone who's worked in journalism, film and publishing. From that angle, I'm intrigued and engrossed at how this surreal, deep, yet elementary story succeeds so fabulously in capturing our thoughts and feelings. It's obviously worked on many levels for thousands of years as we continue retelling the story every Yom Kippur.

- In my studies of story I have found that the first, most rudimentary element of creating a valuable tale is to have conflict. And not just conflict but an arch where the conflict evolves and builds throughout.
- Most Hollywood movies you see the start of the conflict arise early, usually by minute ten. For example, with his aunt and uncle now dead, Luke must join a couple droids and old man Ben Kenobi to save a princess; Or this rich business mogul comes to terms with a Hollywood prostitute that they'll date for a week while he's in town; or this ship, sailing with two young lovers who we're beginning to care about, will sink in a week's time.
 - In Jonah, we need not even wait that long for our first glimpse of conflict: G-d tells Jonah to prophesize to the Ninevites and Jonah runs to Tarshish. Immediately, we're sucked into the conflict. As a reader you got us, right? This dude Jonah just can't run from Hashem. And Hashem won't just let this happen, will he?
 - § Well sure enough, Jonah buys a ticket on a boat and sails for Tarshish. But, while he goes off to nap, Hashem causes the seas to storm. Now we have sailors with their nautical religions pleading with their gods and determining the culprit of all this must be Jonah.

- § Early on Jonah purchases a ticket aboard the ship, and with the waters storming, he heads down below to nap. ‘How can you nap at a time like this,’ asks a sailor and as readers, where we know even more, his actions seem all the more absurd. But as a storyteller, this is the kind of small detail that speaks large volumes of a character. It’s like in a movie we might learn more character exposition by seeing a quick glimpse into their bedroom than through ten minutes of dialogue. Here we get a sense of Jonah’s belief system, his value of his own life, and his faith.
- § But just as we might gather facts from that, we learn more of his character as he tells the sailors to throw him to the sea versus just volunteering to jump in. He puts the onus on them. Not the heroic actions of a leader but more the cunning moves of someone testing those around him. I diverge here but I always thought a Woody Allen, Jerry Seinfeld, or a Jon Stewart type would be perfectly cast in this role of Jonah.
- § Anyway, as we come to have questions of Jonah’s character and detect the flaws in his soul, we are moved by the beautiful poetry he creates from inside the belly of the fish. Perhaps it is foresight into why G-d chose him. It certainly breaks the story up to provide this musical outlet for prayer, like a movie with a rockin’ montage placed just right.
- § Certainly the questions we have of Jonah’s character do not deny the fact that he’s successful as a prophet – as commentators say, one of G-d’s most successful prophets. The sailors are moved to acknowledge and sacrifice to G-d. The Ninevites quickly repent and change their ways. All around Jonah, creatures are moved by his actions from their current state to a place closer to Hashem.
- § Yet through it all Jonah remains convicted to his beliefs. He holds forth this argument – and not a simple argument but a fundamental argument that lies at the heart of life’s questions -- how can You be such a forgiving G-d, forgiving the sins of others so that they may prosper in this world while Your chosen people suffer? Jonah remains steadfast, and in the face of all this action and conflict he still argues his point.
- It’s interesting because as much as Jonah doesn’t chose to change all these other characters do, these secondary characters like the sailors and the Ninevites. Yet in each case their tsuvah comes so effortlessly, their doubt too easily changed – so much so that their story seems relevant in that it only enhances the conflict and builds up the tension and the arch of our key characters – Jonah and G-d.
 - § The sailors believe in their superstitions and demigods yet fear “the G-d of the sea and dry land.” They make all the right moves so to speak – first attempting to save Jonah, then praying and sacrificing to Hashem once they’re forced to throw him in. These men prove to be good people; their lives transformed from this chance encounter.
 - § Perhaps the greatest change comes with the Ninevites. These sinners, upon hearing the brief words of Jonah, quickly turn to good. Jonah’s declaration reaches the king who sets forth a decree to his people. Why? We don’t readily have available an answer as to why they make tsuvah so easily. It’s often speculated that this is why we tell this story on Yom Kippur because it shows

man's ability to repent and G-d's willingness to forgive. I think that message does resonate from this story but we know so little of the Ninevites – and in something I'll get into with more detail, isn't it odd that G-d makes this point through the suffering of Jonah? So the Ninevites' tsuvah only seems relevant in how it fits into the argument between the prophet and G-d.

- Which leads me to our most complex character – Hashem. Since we attribute the loftiest marks to Hashem we don't often see G-d as a character with flaws and growth potential. Yet we know from past stories, our actions can change Hashem's decisions. And so it's important to note His journey.
 - § The first most interesting insight into G-d's character is that he chooses Jonah as the prophet. This all powerful, all knowing Being chose a character he knows will respond with doubt and defiance. So He basically orchestrates a series of events – storming seas, a swallowing fish that leaves Jonah little choice on how to respond.
 - § Then once Jonah delivers on the prophecy G-d continues to exercise His power for the point of argument. Of course, He delivers one of the stories more memorable sound bites, something in the realm of 'go ahead make my day,' or 'you can't handle the truth,' asking 'Jonah, are you so grieved?'
 - § He is so grieved. But once Jonah finds comfort in the material pleasure of a plant, Hashem sends a worm to destroy the plant which He created to give Jonah comfort. And if that isn't enough he commands an east wind to add more discomfort. He first gave Jonah the plant for comfort but then takes it away. It's almost like a cruel joke that is meant to inflict more harm than had it not happened at all. Bringing me to wonder why does He so easily forgive the Ninevites but makes Jonah suffer?
 - § For this, G-d does not make sense in a way that is easily understood. In fact it's like He purposefully confounds. And why? His last rhetorical question to Jonah shows His love for all His creatures. Then, we must also deduce He loves Jonah. So could tough love be behind His actions? Sometimes the means justifies the end, and teaching one a lesson of G-d's love is worthy of a fish, a long prophetic journey, a plant growing and dying overnight and a harsh east wind. These are certainly actions of a character whose depth does not seem to be meant to be understood by us.
- I've discussed conflict, consistency and character, but I think truly successful stories compel us to think. And the Book of Jonah resonates on so many levels. It's a story we do not easily forget. It broods in our mind and sticks with us long after the words are read. It's compelling.
 - Chalked full of symbolism, the story is made all the more meaningful by its inclusion on Yom Kippur – this holiest day of the year. We can see protection in a great fish and devastation in a small worm or vices versa. We can learn sacrifice from the sailors and tsuvah from the Ninevites and know Hashem's hand in it all. We can understand tsuvah and G-d's willingness to forgive but we can't overlook our responsibility, whatever that may be.
 - Then there's Jonah's prayer. It's poetry, music that can carry us through to a new day. We see the transformation and hear the gratitude in his words. Yet we also know the

frustration and pity that captures him in the end. All these others are moved by this prophet. How can we not be by reading his story?

- And finally we have the ending. This amazingly powerful ending in the form of a rhetorical question asked by Hashem. No more description or plot execution. No response from Jonah. No follow through by G-d. Only silence, the sheer power of silence that if you listen closely can be heard throughout the day of Yom Kippur. It's a reverberating silence that is loud and unforgiving. We have no answers so we must come up with our own. We add our own prayer to the ending – 'G-d remember that You love us Your chosen people too.' But the writer of this tale left it purposefully silent. And in that silence we must rationalize an answer. Indeed, we're given clues but we must listen for our own answer to the question, our own ending to the story.

Which moves me to my own personal reflection. Every bit of Torah reflects upon our own lives; Each piece of Torah tells us something about ourselves. And the great value of any story is how we personally are affected by it. Standing up here before the congregation of my youth, now the congregation of my consciousness, I'd be remiss if I didn't look at the Book of Jonah through the lense of my own life, as a husband and father of three young children battling each day for my life against cancer. Not even a month ago I suffered a collapsed lung and came within a few breathes of dying. And now again I stand up on the bema, at the place where I celebrated my Bar Mitzvah, giving another talk along my life's journey.

I see myself as Jonah, given this burden I do not want. I'd too run to Tarshish, if that were an option. Instead I run to Portland for experimental chemotherapy and to the UW hospital for lung surgery. No, I never made it to Tarshish but I've spent days in the belly of the fish – in the dark chamber of the netherworld. In there only a couple weeks ago, I wrote my own poem. So here it goes, hear my prayer Hashem, as you once heard Jonah's:

*I've been blessed that I've known
parents who loved me and feared You
And then a wife who loves me more than herself
And I've been given children that flourish around my table like the vines of sweet grapes*

*And when I've suffered
I've been comforted that You are there
In a hospital as my mother exchanged worlds
On a telephone call between my brother and I, in the silence that preceded and followed the words "dad's
dead"
for You turned grief to wisdom
And gave courage when I needed it most*

*When I have faltered
You kept me from drifting astray
And as my wickedness and temptations torture me
You call out with signs and wonders to light the way*

*Even now as the waters rise and the space narrows
I see Your promised land – I always see Your promised land – and know Your golden city*

*I will sing Your praises to my children and anyone who will listen
And I will make Your work my work here on earth.*

Of course that was my prayer from inside the fish. But now I'm out again, as I've been before. Now I wait in the desert, outside the city, holding forth with my argument to G-d. No, I'm not waiting for the eventual destruction of the Ninevites as they inevitably turn back to their sinning and debauchery. Let them have their fun. No my argument is different.

I sit here wondering how much more I have to endure. Why must I suffer? And believe me the pain and the pity is not for me but for that of my wife and kids. Why must they have to consider the future without a husband, a father? How hurt will they be from this? No, this isn't a story with an ending or lack of one. This is life that goes on regardless of the pitfalls and setbacks. And me, I believe I've shown love and care for all creatures. I want them all to be guided by Your glory. And I pray my sins can be forgiven – that they're not that heinous.

The plant, or chemotherapy if you will, once provided me hope. We can only pray it still works but if it fails and these small worm like cancer cells progress, I'll ask the rhetorical question this time. I will ask, "I've learned so much in my life and I've come so far. Don't you think I still have lessons to teach these children and at a time when it is most desperately needed light to offer this world?"