

Sympathy for the Divine Talya McCurdy

The Midrash Bemidbar Rabbah says that the book of Yonah, Sefer Yonah, although it shares a scroll with the Book of Twelve Prophets, is not a part of the Book of Twelve; and that the book of Yonah is a book by itself.

Why is this prophet different than all other prophets? In these High Holy Days we have revisited the origin of our people in the birth of Isaac and the origin of our prayer in Hannah's plea, the pinnacles of the Akeda, Mother Rachel weeping for our exile, the holiest rites of the Beit HaMikdash... what is there in Sefer Yonah to measure up to our need for sustenance at this late hour of the Day of Atonement?

It's probably not the fish.

Too often Yonah is reduced to the fish, or examined in isolated incidents-- a useful approach for scholarship, but one that loses the impact of the continuous strangeness of this entire story. The oddities begin at the beginning, when Yonah runs away. Now, as we learn from Torah in the story of Balaam, a prophet is not necessarily smart, a prophet is not necessarily even ethical. The one and only thing a prophet must have is a capacity to realize divine will, to experience the active immediacy of omnipresence, omnipotent HaKadosh Baruch Hu. For Yonah to consciously connect with infinity-- and then to try to run away-- is not merely unintelligent, it's an absurdity. It's like saying, "I'm drowning, throw me a towel!" We have a long list of prophets who talked back to Hashem, often successfully, but only Yonah runs.

Yonah heads out across the Mediterranean, a sea so typically calm that it is described as "sailing on glass" and its storm frequency patterns must be calculated in centuries. Promptly, wind and storm rise up that threaten to break the ship apart-- now for the region and time, this is a trading vessel fifty to a hundred and fifty feet long and crewed by dozens, and it is being tossed and pummelled. The sails have been battened, the cargo-- the crew's livelihood-- thrown away, everyone is praying except Yonah, who has somehow slept through all of this.

He wakes, divination reveals he is the source of all this terror and loss, and suddenly Yonah finds his tongue, makes a full confession and bravely persuades the remarkably reluctant sailors that tossing him overboard is their only hope.

Enter the giant transgendered selectively-digesting fish, which sets the stage for the most unlikely event of the book: after seventy-two hours of pressing damp darkness, dehydration and starvation and the smell, Yonah finds the inspiration to unleash a paean of triumphant gratitude and absolute trust.

For the duration of one verse as Yonah begins his prayer, the fish-- dag, becomes dagah, female, not merely a simple devourer but now a bearer of life and potential. After the poem this huge fish-- dag again-- either beaches itself or projectile vomits our prophet on to dry land.

Where we start over. This time Yonah goes to Ninevah, described as a great city of three days walk. That is, if the city gate is at the Tacoma Dome, the far wall of the city would be at that big Holiday Inn in Everett that overlooks I-5. This city is a superpower of its time blessed by every luxury the ancient world can imagine. He walks for one day-- from the Tacoma Dome to the Nordstrom flagship store-- and announces "Forty days and all this is gone."

The supremely entitled imperialistic citizenry listen to every word, universally drop all ordinary business and leap to humble themselves through rigorous fulltime repentance. In this way they return to the good graces of Hashem.

What is the reaction of Yonah, direct agent of salvation, front-line witness to this human miracle? That he knew it was going to happen. Yonah calls out the Almighty as a Goody Two-Shoes. The man we've seen storm-tossed, jettisoned, half-drowned, wholly devoured, starved for days, and bodily expectorated all by direct divine intervention complains that Hashem is just too darn nice to get anything done. (Apparently, prophets don't need to be Torah Scholars, either.)

Here Yonah says the words that fly against all Judaism is, words with no echo in our scripture except in the anguish of our very greatest prophets, Eliahu HaNevi v' Moshe Rabbanu.

Yonah says, *tov moti mekhaya*, better I die than live.

And Hashem responds in exactly the words of a concerned parent. Like any mortal mother or father, Hashem asks, "Is it really that bad for you?" Yonah stomps off to sulk in the sun, where the Master of the Universe, Creator of the Heavens and Earth personally undertakes to mischievously harrass him. Shade is given, shade is taken away, a hot wind is hand-delivered just as the sun hits its height, and Yonah breaks down. Again he says, *tov moti mekhaya*, and again Hashem asks if things are really that bad for him, and when Yonah says "Yes, bad enough to die from," then, as if this entire topsy-turvy series of events was one long set-up for single divine punchline, Hashem asks, "So how do you think I feel?" (*Ba dum bum!*) And the book cuts off.

What can we do with this? Always, we can go back to the root, back to Torah. What does Torah teach about prophets and the nature of prophecy? Torah says, *v'lo kam navi od b'ysrael c'moshe asher ydao adonai faneem el faneem*. There has been no other prophet of Israel like Moshe who knew Hashem face to face. From this our sages teach that only Moshe, the most humble of men, could communicate with Hashem in a consciously present state of mind, in the real here and now. All other prophets work through visions, and we are instructed to approach any study of matters of prophecy with discerning eye for what words and events we are meant to read as actually happening... and what words and events make sense in the context of a vision. This is especially stressed by Ibn Ezra, who is very picky about miracles.

The whole of Sefer Yonah, is one wonder after another, with neither nature, nor people, nor our prophet, ever falling into step with the world we know. Everything in Yonah makes sense in the context of an uninterrupted vision. This would indeed make Yonah a book by itself! Every other Book of the Twelve is the record of the delivery of a prophecy; the Sefer Yonah appears to be the prophetic vision. The ending is not abrupt, and there should be no further concluding note necessary, if what would be the final line is too implicit and too cliched to set in script, if the next thing to happen is simply, "And then, he woke up."

But what is the purpose of the book if the whole of it is a vision, where is the relevance if all this happens only in the mind's eye? The message would certainly not be about Ninevah, nor even Jewish relations with other peoples. If the whole of Sefer Yonah from tip to stern happens only between Yonah and Hashem, than the core of this book is a Jewish scriptural commentary on the relationship of the divine with the individual. The direct dialogue between Yonah and Hashem is not an enigmatic denouement to the business with Ninevah but the climatic culmination of the true matter at hand.

What does Sefer Yonah teach on this matter of individual interconnection with the divine? Running

away from what you are supposed to do doesn't work? Sometimes you have to throw everything you've been trying overboard before you can get anywhere? Sometimes the success you get isn't the success you wanted? Details! The primary focus of Yonah, with its safety net of hyperbole, reversals, and surprises, is interconnection between Hashem and human in the face of personal death and despair.

Yonah is a figure profoundly associated with death throughout our tradition. In the Talmud, he is identified as the child of the widow of Tzarefat, who sheltered Eliahu, the boy who died and was revived through the merit of Eliahu. In midrash upon the meeting between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba one of the riddles with which they tested one another's wisdom was, "The dead lived, and the grave moved, and the dead prayed," the answer being Yonah in the belly of the fish. Yonah's poem is a litany of folkloric netherworld imagery: Sheol, the roots of mountains, the bars of the gate that block the dead from life, the pit. Messianic legend states that Yonah became so familiar with the passage to death that ultimately he walked down to Sheol alive and waits there for the perfection of the world. Even his name, Yonah, dove, a sacrificial animal, ben Amitai, interpreted as son of Truth, Emet, but also punned against Met, death.

Most of all, Yonah's own words: *Tov moti mekhaya*. His own sense of existing at the absolute limit; the voice of his despair.

The voice of our greatest threat at this late hour of the Day of Atonement, as we stand here in the whiteness of shrouds, without eating, without drinking, without having made love, our bodies whispering, please let it end. I am so tired. I have never known a person struggling with despair who was not so tired, tired of feeling, tired of numbness. The Gates of Heaven are closing, the days of awe are ending, another year gone, another year gone wrong. Weeks of review and repentance and resolve, yet I did not prepare as I wanted to prepare, did not live the year as I promised I would, am not ready, and it is time to promise again, to pursue again, knowing, it will never be enough, it will never be all right, and I am going to die no matter what.

What relationship is possible between Ein Sof, The Without End, and this-- flash in the pan?

That, is up to me. And you.
It was up to those who left us this year.

Many of you know that in early summer, my dear Elric and I buried a friend, a Jewish woman, but without Jewish family. Elric promised to be her kaddish, some of you came to the burial so we would have a minyan, some of you come to minyan so we have minyan, and we have been greatly comforted.

I did not know how to seek comfort when the first acquaintance of mine died earlier this year. A long acquaintance, friend of friends, mentor of friends, a role model of mine for years. His death was very unexpected, the news came on a Friday afternoon, just before Erev Shabbat. Next morning, services, mourner's kaddish, people around me standing up while I sat, silent, grieving for a man who had decided, *tov moti mekhaya*, thinking of the tradition that it is not permitted to say kaddish for a suicide. Around me, the familiar rhythm of reaffirmation, "Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted,"... silence, silence, silence. In that silence, I tasted the helplessness of God.

It is not permitted to God to despair. It is not permitted to God, to want to die. If such a thing could happen, even nothingness would not exist. What an incredible gamble free will is, to subject Hashem to such helplessness, the risk that the created being will take his choices somewhere God cannot go-- into the absence of hope.

What good is it to be HaRachaman, if we will not be comforted?

Look at Yonah, poor Yonah, who cannot get away from Hashem, from that terrible will that forgives, and relents, and perpetually prepares another opportunity, another learning experience. Look at the trail Yonah leaves behind of people who care for Hashem because of him, but do not care for him, who believe in Hashem because of him-- chapter three verses four and five, Yonah proclaimed; the people believed God-- they do not believe in Yonah. All this is happening not only outside the borders of eretz israel but outside the borders of klal israel; Yonah runs away not only from Hashem but also from us. In solitude, imprisoned, he is able to renew his commitment to life, gratitude, and faith, but he is not able to sustain that commitment to life while living a life in which his connection to humanity is a burden rather than source of sustenance. There is the crux of the Jewish commentary on individual connection between Hashem and human, that the personal relationship is inextricable from the communal action that is the over-riding mandate of Torah.

Harachaman is the comforter who never leaves us, and whom we may never have all to ourselves.

Occasionally I hear a person say that she or he has a "scientific view of the Deity". I try to keep a scientific view of humanity. That is, of the matter in the universe, the vast majority appears to be dark matter, to incoherent to even see. The exception, the minority, is coherent light-reflecting matter, almost all of which is tied up in supermassive black hole and white dwarfs and gas giants, the anomaly, the exception, being stable orbiting bodies. A statistically insignificant minority of this exception are capable of supporting life. On this planet-- there is vast, teeming life, in the form of unicellular organisms. The exception, the fraction, that are multicellular organisms, are almost entirely plants and insects. And so it goes, at the very edge of possibility moving forward in exceptions and anomalies, bigger brains, awareness, experience, emotion, past simple physical pain into the layering of psychological pain, in consequence the capacity to suffer, and in consequence the capacity to be comforted-- babies and beasts-- and beyond, mature humans who are conscious of being conscious... and what fraction among us turn that consciousness towards lives of learning, love, and good deeds?

It is not to be imagined that the Master of the Universe could give up hope in a single one of us.

Picture a universe almost entirely of shifting broken shells and statistically insignificant sparks of light, exposed, concealed, flashes in the pan. Picture Shekhinah in the sukkah we call eternity. Who will be the vine that stretches towards the light and flourishes, sheltering and consoling, bringing joy for a day, and gone in a night?

No wonder it is said that each of us is nothing but dust and ashes. No wonder it is said that all the world is created for each of our sakes.

We stand here wearing the consciousness of our own inevitable deaths. We are the dead who live, the dead who pray. The difference between us and Yonah is that we are here together. Our danger of despair is divided and our chance of hope multiplied by our connections with one another-- the surface tension of our souls.

In this moment, Hashem is pleading with us for mercy, mercy on ourselves, mercy on each other, mercy on Harachaman, source of compassion, compassion that embraces all creation. There can be no compassion without empathy no empathy without pain. Infinite compassion; unending pain. Where is our sympathy for the Divine? In response to our every frustration, grief, and failure, hear, the Lord is asking, "How do you think I feel? Ani lo akhus-- should I not have pity?"

Our sacred work this day is not done, until we are comforted.