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Jonah and the Crew of the Nervous Wreck¹

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Shana tovah.

Chanukah, Purim, Passover—the best Jewish holidays have a really good back story. Well, I want to tell you that Yom Kippur features a great story, too! You will have to come back this afternoon for the Mincha service to hear the complete book of Jonah, but I would like to offer a trailer for this very theatrical narrative. Jonah is the haphtorah, the prophetic reading for the afternoon of Yom Kippur. But this book is very different from most other of the prophetic books; its not a collection of Jonah's greatest speeches. The Book of Jonah is a short story or a novella. To recap quickly: Jonah is just hanging out when God texts him one day: "Yo, Jonah. Get up and get going off to the city of Nineveh and tell the people to repent of their ways."

Now Jonah is not interested in the job and so he runs away, jumping aboard a ship in Jaffa's port. But a great storm comes up and the sailors on the ship discover that it is Jonah's fault and, very reluctantly, drop him over board. The sea calms down and then a whale swallows him up! ... And that's only in Chapter I – which, I think, is all we will have time for this morning. You'll have to come back next year for the sequel which, I've got to tell you, is very anticlimactic. Eventually, Jonah show up in Nineveh and announces his prophecy; everyone from the king on down takes him very seriously, and they engage in *teshuvah*, mending their ways. At the end, to Jonah's great disappointment, nothing terrible happens at all.

My colleague and friend, Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig has reread the classical commentaries and has a new understanding of Jonah which I would like to share with you this morning.

¹ This sermon was researched and written by Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig for Rosh Hashanah evening 5770 at the People's Temple, Washington Heights, New York. Revised, edited and new opening and conclusion by Rabbi Yoel Kahn. I am indebted to my friend and colleague Rabbi Wenig for her generosity of spirit and creative writing.

At the end of the reading of the Book of Jonah, by tradition, we read three verses from the prophet Micah, including “*V’tashlich bimtzulot yam kol chatotam* –You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Micah 7:19).

This verse is also always included in the readings for Tashlikh. Tashlikh is when we gather on the afternoon of Rosh Hashanah at a moving body of water—ours was very slow moving! —and we threw breadcrumbs in, reciting, among other things, the verse from Micah: “*V’tashlich bimtzulot yam kol chatotam*—You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.”

Jonah was cast into the sea.

We cast bread crumbs into the sea.

And, the verses teaches, God casts our sins into the sea.

But first, how did Jonah end up in the sea?

“*Vayehi d’var Adonai el Yonah ben Amitai*. The word of God came to Jonah son of Amitai.”

Who was this guy, Amitai? One midrash imagines Jonah to be the dead child revived by the prophet Elijah. And since, Elijah’s prophesy was known as *emet*, truth, Jonah was called “*ben amitai*—son of truth,” spiritual son of Elijah.²

But I think Jonah earned the name himself.

Jonah was the kid who hocked his parents to quit smoking, and the brother who criticized his sister for eating junk food.

Jonah was the student who tried to stop classmates from cheating and who corrected the teacher in front of the class.

Jonah was the high schooler who turned his friends in for drinking and doing drugs.

Jonah was the guy who yelled at people who brought drinks onto BART trains, who corrected people’s grammar while they spoke, and instructed numerous professionals how to do their job properly.

Jonah was the one who wrote brilliant and scathing reviews of his colleagues’ work and ripped his students’ papers to shreds.

Jonah as the parent who harangued his teenage daughter for spending too much time on Facebook and who criticized his grown son’s girlfriend behind her back—and then said the same things directly to her face at Thanksgiving dinner.

² See Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer 33 and the link to I Kings 17:24, “And the word of the Lord that is in your mouth is true/emet.”

Jonah was the person on the Board who told the fellow trustees they were running the organization into the ground.

You've got to appreciate such a personhe's so earnest!

But Jonah was almost killed by a teenager on the bus home from Berkeley high when he reprimanded the kid for littering.

Jonah was laid off after he warned his boss to stop carrying on an affair.

Jonah was devastated after he tried to stop a mother in Ikea from cursing at her four-year-old child. The mother screamed "Who the hell do you think you are? Is this your child?" and then proceeded to drag the child away by the arm, screaming at her the whole time.

Jonah ben Amitai—Jonah, son of truth. That's what people called him, affectionately, and sometimes not so affectionately, because Jonah was always right and everyone knew it. He couldn't help himself. He felt compelled to speak the truth in every moment. He took seriously the Torah's command: "*Hoke'ach, tochiach et amitecha*—You must surely rebuke your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:17— and it became his life's calling.

As a result, Jonah was exhausted. Its hard to be right all the time.

So when the word of the Eternal came to Jonah ben Amitai, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh the big city and cry out against it for their evil has come to my attention," Jonah fled.

"Not again. Not this time. Find yourself another messenger. No way am I going to go to that neighborhood. I am *not* going to walk into that huge city, all by myself, and tell people they are doing evil. I, a Jew, am going to walk around this completely non-Jewish town and announce myself as a prophet of God. Nineveh?No way! "

Can you blame him?

All his life he'd been doing God's work, a divine messenger, a prophet of truth and righteousness . He felt called, and he'd had it with being called.

Some call Jonah the reluctant prophet. Its not that he was reluctant, he was exhausted. Jonah—the exhausted prophet. The guy needed a break. It was someone else's turn to be right.

So instead of arising and going to Nineveh, as God has instructed, Jonah arose and fled towards Tarshish, the furthest point in the other direction in the known world. In the port of Jaffa, he found a ship headed there and, according to the text, paid not only *secharo*, his own fare, but *sechara*, the ship's fare — which is to say, he chartered the entire boat.

"Now the Eternal cast a mighty wind onto the sea..." According to a midrash, it was a perfect storm—so perfect that it affected only Jonah's ship and none other on the whole ocean. "*V'haoniah chishva l'hish-shaver*—and the ship was in danger of breaking apart," or, as one modern reader put it, the

ship was so afraid of wrecking, it became a nervous wreck.³ The sailors too were frightened and each prayed to his own god while Jonah—well Jonah had run down to Jaffa, he had run down into the ship, and now he was so emotionally run down that he was lying down, curled up in a fetal position, in the hold of the ship. The ship's captain had to come after him and try to wake him up.

Then the sailors cast lots, like Aaron, who on Yom Kippur cast lots over two goats to determine which would carry the sins of Israel away. The sailors cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

So Jonah is the scapegoat! But the twist in this story is... he deserves it.

Jonah, always the one to correct and rebuke others, is now the one at fault. His transgression is no longer victimless; he is endangering the whole ship.

Now if you didn't know the story you'd surely expect the sailors to "let him have it" right then and there.

But the miracle is -- they do not.

Instead they try to understand his situation. "What is your work and where do you come from? What is your land and who are your people?" they ask him.

Jonah, who always speaks the truth, conceals nothing: "Ivri anochi I am a Hebrew..."

Now you might expect the sailors to beat the living daylights out of Jonah for being a Hebrew, and bringing upon them not this storm, and every bad thing that's ever befallen them.

But the miracle is—they do not.

Instead the sailors ask him more questions: "What is it you have done? Higid lahem—and he tells them" his whole story.

OK, so now, knowing that Jonah has defied "the God of heaven... the master of sea and the dry land," we would not be surprised to find the sailors sacrificing Jonah immediately or doing something to get him off their ship!

But miraculously, they do not. Instead, the sailors ask the very same guy whose actions have put their lives in such danger: "*Ma na'aseh lach*—What shall we do with you?"

³ See Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 251. "The phrase, 'the ship expected itself to crack up [Jack Sasson's apt translation] ... blurs the lines between physical disintegration and psychological disintegration, between breaking up and breaking down, so the ship, fearing wrecking, became a nervous wreck."

Jonah, who is used to seeing the world in a very binary way, advises: excise the problem! “Throw me overboard,” he advises them. And we might expect that the sailors would do just that.

But the miracle is—they do not.

No, the sailors try to row to shore against the waves and the wind, hoping to unload this toxic asset on to someone else’s balance sheet. (Sorry, mixed metaphor!) But the storm is too powerful and the sailors cannot bring the ship to land.

You’ve seen this scene in the movies. In their rain gear, hatches battened down, the boat tossing and the rain like sheets—how are they going to make it? Well, even then, according to another midrash, the sailors would not simply toss Jonah overboard. Instead, they rig up a block and tackle and lower Jonah into the sea up to his knees—and sure enough the sea calmed down. But when they raised him up again, the sea begins to rage. So they lower Jonah again, this time up to his waist and the sea is calmed. A moment’s respite - but when they bring him back up the storm renews its fury. So a third time, they lower Jonah into the sea— this time all the way up to his neck and once more the sea grows calm—but only until they start to pull him out again.⁴

Finally, the sailors reluctantly throw Jonah overboard to save themselves.

So what’s their story? What’s with this crew? Why should they suffer for his disobedience? Aren’t they just “innocent bystanders”?

Well, perhaps they weren’t so innocent after all.

What kind of traveler shows up for a cruise with no carry on—in fact no luggage at all, not even a trashy novel—for a trip that will take months?

Did anyone notice anything suspicious?

We watch out for travelers who buy one way tickets with cash. What about a traveler who arrives the gate—or the dock—and offers cash to charter the entire vessel, so long as it departs immediately?

Only a captain and crew who had carried suspicious passengers before, or were used to harboring fugitives, would look the other way when Jonah boarded their ship without even a change of socks. I bet that the ship’s crew was well aware that they were taking a risk by accepting a passenger such as Jonah, just as Jonah must have known that he was taking a risk sailing on a ship whose flag and registration were conspicuously absent.

⁴ Based on Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, 10.

I don't think that these sailors were so innocent. This was a freighter carrying cargo besides Jonah. As soon as the storm started up, they immediately started tossing the cargo they were carrying over board! Long before they thought about Jonah into the sea, the crew had plenty of stuff they were rushing to get rid of. The biblical text says that they threw the cargo overboard "*l'hakeil mealeyhem*—to lighten the load"—but this makes no sense, for the lighter the ship is, the more prone it is to be tossed about by wind and wave.⁵ Rather, as the Hebrew suggests: they sought to lighten [the burden] "*me-aleyhem, from upon themselves.*"

What were they carrying on board that was weighing so heavily upon them? Smuggled missile parts? Stolen goods, moving from one black market to another? Quantities of drugs?

No, these sailors had their own secrets and their own transgressions.

Here we have the pirate ship and the fugitive, two guilty parties in the midst of a life threatening storm – might not we expect each one to cast blame on the other?

Casting blame. Isn't that often what we do in our families, between parents and kids?

And isn't this often the way we argue, as a couple?

And is this not what nations so often do?

But the miracle is that's not what Jonah and the sailors do. They stop. They listen. They ask: what do you need to do?

Each party initially assumes the fault lies with themselves and each one initially accepts responsibility for their actions—the sailors by unloading their illicit cargo and Jonah by confessing his disobedience.

Jonah doesn't berate the sailors for their smuggling and the sailors voluntarily divest themselves of their smuggled goods.

The sailors don't accuse Jonah of running away from his responsibilities and Jonah voluntarily confesses.

For Jonah, confession felt good for a change. Offering confession and admitting responsibility frankly felt better than offering endless criticism of others' errors.

I cannot tell you exactly what Jonah said, because after reconciling himself with the sailors, Jonah's confession was private. But having come to terms with his own transgressions, he was able to forgive others theirs:

⁵ The sailors in my congregation have subsequently informed me that this is incorrect; throwing ballast overboard in a storm is a plausible thing for sailors to do. For our midrashic purposes, we shall allow the original to stand as written.

I now forgive all who have hurt me, all who have done me wrong, whether deliberately or by accident, whether by word, by deed, or by thought. May no one be punished on my account.

May it be Your will, Eternal One, my God and the God of my fathers and mothers, that I no longer be bound by the wrongs which I have committed, that I be free from patterns which cause pain to me and to others, that I no longer do that which is wrong in Your sight.

Let my words, my thoughts, my meditations, and my acts flow be consistent with who Are and what You would have me be, Source of my being and my Redeemer. Amen.

Jonah was cast into the sea.

We cast our breadcrumbs and regrets into the stream in Live Oak Park...which pours into the sea.

Last night and today, having worked to redress our wrongs, we cast our words of confession heavenwards.

"V'tashlich bimtzuot yam kol chatotam—May all our transgressions and everything that that is holding us down be cast into the depths of the sea." Ken yehi ratzon. Amen.