

JONAH COMMENTARY: YOM KIPPUR 2013/5774

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SONG: Gershwin: "Oh Jonah he lived in a whale! Oh Jonah he lived in a whale! How he made his home in that fish's abdomen-----It ain't necessarily so!"

That's Rabbis George and Ira Gershwin's approach to Jonah.

I am going to speak about several approaches to Jonah. You have now heard the four short chapters and you know that the book begins with God's command to Jonah "Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim against it, for their evil has come before me." The book ends with a question, "Now should I not take pity on Nineveh, the great city, in which there are many more than one hundred twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?"

The three approaches I will speak about involve 1. Jonah as a political allegory, 2. Jonah's Subconscious ie what is not remembered or verbalizable, and 3. Jonah in relationship to his inflexible world view. There are innumerable approaches to Jonah—he and his book have puzzled interpreters of the Torah for over two thousand years. He is unique in that he is the only prophet from the northern kingdom, Israel; the other prophets were from the southern kingdom, Judea. The kingdom of David and Solomon soon split after their reigns. Jonah takes place around 800 years before the common era when the Northern Kingdom is a vassal state of Assyria. Israel, the Northern kingdom, was destined to end with the Assyrian conquest, 80 years later and its people became the ten lost tribes; Jonah takes place around, 800 BCE or 80 years before this conquest.

Stephen Gabriel Rosenberg writes of Jonah as political allegory in his book, "Esther, Ruth, and Jonah, Deciphered." His ideas, based on text and other archeological finds from Assyria, Egypt, and Aram (wh/ is Syria). Many of these are in the British Museum.

According to Dr. Rosenberg, the action in Jonah takes place during Syria's siege of Samaria, part of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. Jonah's mission is to find allies in the region to distract Syria from the siege. Tarshish is a word for a type of boat or the name of a city on the Lebanese coast where the Phoenicians are in power. As he flees to Tarshish, the wind wh/ threatens the very existence of his boat can be related to the god of storm, Hadad, which is also the name of the Syrian Emperor, Ben Hadad.

The rescue by the great fish, Heb. Dag Gadol or Dagon, is the name of the Philistine god, Dagon, who is man from waist up and fish from waist down. The interpretation is that the Philistines shelter Jonah, but only for 3 days.

Back at King Ben Hadad's siege of Samaria, King Jehoahaz of Israel, has lost all his army and the people are starving. According to 2nd Kings, "and God gave Israel a savior and they came out from under the hand of Aram and the children of Israel lived in their tents as yesteryear and before."

Who was this savior? Probably the local Assyrian ruler, General Shamshi-ilu, who attacked the Syrians from the east; at that point the Syrians had to withdraw their forces from Samaria to meet the Assyrian challenge. If Shamshi-ilu was at Bet Eden, 350 miles north of Samaria, Jonah could have arrived by horse in about 3 days. Ninevah mentioned in Jonah probably refers to this area and not Ninevah the capital of Assyria located 700 miles away in Northern Iraq on the Euphrates River.

The last chapter (4) is a metaphorical recording of events following the long ie 40 year reign of King Jeroboam II of Israel. The original evil of Ninevah was that Assyria did not aid the Northern

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Kingdom, Israel, during the siege of Samaria. Repentance involved coming to Israel's aid by distracting Aram (Syria) in the north. Sackcloth is what soldiers who wear armour wear between skin and metal. Fasting is what soldiers at the time did before battle. The fast of the beasts may refer to the quarter-masters who bring food and supplies or to the actual meat animals which feed the army. So Ninevah's repentance is that it did the right thing and aided Israel, its vassal state.

The gourd represents Egypt who was too weak to give aid. Dr. Rosenberg arrives at this through a complicated analysis of Hebrew, Egyptian, and Greek names for this plant, the kikayon in Hebrew.

Why would Jonah be written as a political allegory? During his time, the king and nobility were concerned about the amount of money it took to have Assyrian protection; they came to favor an alliance with Egypt. Jonah, the court prophet, knew that the Assyrians were so powerful that an alliance with Egypt or the Philistines or the Phoenicians—all of whom had areas of hegemony in the area of modern Israel and Lebanon—would be disastrous. His opinion was so far from that of the people in power that he would probably have been punished for treason if he had uttered it.

The second approach I will speak about is Jonah's Subconscious ie that which cannot or has not been verbalized. Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg in her book "The Murmuring Deep" mentions a story of Jonah's boyhood from the Midrashic tradition. In Kings 1 (17), the prophet Elijah returns to life the dead son the the widow of Zarefat. This boy is identified in Midrash as Jonah. Jonah is again restored to life in the belly of the great fish. Being saved from death twice is traumatic. Jonah's life has confronted death and survived. Dr. Zornberg possits that this happened without Jonah's conscious awareness, ie it is not verbalizable or remembered.

Because the experience is in his Subconscious, it is traumatically re-enacted in indirect ways. "An anger wich expresses itself as engulfing sadness, makes the child flee—and desire—the re-enactment of the same shock." He ran away from God and undertook a dangerous voyage in his search for death. This re-enactment of the shock of death "returns in dreams, flashbacks, to a great storm at sea, and in the belly of a great fish."

At the end of the book, after he prophesized in Ninevah and the people repented, Jonah prays in the succah, "And now, O Lord, take now my soul from me, for my dealth is bettern than my life." God's replies, 'Are you that deeply grieved' or in a more modern translations, 'Are you thoroughly angry?' To Dr. Zornberg, "This is a therapeutic question"—ie it brings into consciousness the desire for death as an expression of anger toward onself.

In his encounter with the plant, Jonah becomes aware of the see-sawing intense feelings of joy and despair. Again God frames a question, "Are you thoroughly angry about the gourd?" And Jonah replies, "I am angry unto death."

God asks yet another question, "You took pity on the gourd, for which you did not toil nor did you make it grow, which one night came into being and the next night perished. Now should I not take pity on Nineveh, the great city, in which there are many more than one hundred twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?"

Will Jonah allow God to value life and to act with mercy? Will bringing his life experience out of his Subconscious allow him to move on from his death wish? Here God gives Jonah the ability to feel pity, to empathize. This conversation gives Jonah feelings other than anger. God expresses the belief that Jonah can change. This change is the basis of all healing.

The third interpretation I will discuss is Jonah's world view and what it was for him. He probably believed that God only cared about Israelites, that non-Israelites had no moral compass, that God was a punishing rather than merciful God, who promised death and at the last moment reneged. You may have your own ideas of Jonah's world view.

During these chapters, much happened to challenge his world view. During the storm the Captain comes below and asks how he could sleep, neglecting the duty of everyone to attend to the storm—in this way the Captain behaves like a prophet. The sailors do everything possible to avoid throwing him overboard until it becomes obvious that that is what his God wants them to do.

The king and inhabitants of Ninevah repent and God shows mercy toward them. Still Jonah cannot conceive of moral non-Israelites.

Because his world view is so inflexible and/or unconscious, he cannot explore other possibilities for his own or God's behavior.

For example, besides being thrown into the sea, he could have, as an example, stood and prayed or vowed to resume his mission. You can probably think of other possibilities.

The sailors tried to get to dry land but could not. “And they called to the Lord and said, 'Please, O Lord, let us not perish for the life of this man, and do not place upon us innocent blood.'” They felt all the other options were exhausted. It was only then that they cast Jonah into the sea and then “made sacrifices to the Lord and made vows.” A very moral process.

While inside the great fish, he prayed in the past tense only and showed his gratitude for the past. He does not acknowledge missing the mark in the present, he does no prayer for forgiveness, he does not acknowledge who he is or what he needs—Dr. Zornberg calls this a prayer of non-identity. I call it being stuck in a model where only gratitude can be the subject of prayer.

Finally he says, “What I have vowed I will perform. Deliverance is the Lord's!”

That must be what God has been waiting for; God then orders the great fish to release Jonah onto dry land.

In Chapter 3, Jonah goes to Ninevah and says, “Forty days more and Ninevah shall be overthrown.” Does Jonah not think of other possibilities i.e. T'shuvah/repentance? Is this not a possibility for non-Israelites as well as Israelites? The non-Israelite king of Ninevah figures out the behavior of repentance i.e. sackcloth, ashes, fasting which were not even mentioned by Jonah. Perhaps Jonah rejected even the possibility of repentance. And God spared Ninevah.

In Chapter 4, why is Jonah so displeased that the city was spared? He re-configured the attributes of God which appear in Exodus and which we say on the high holidays: “Adonai, adonai! compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and truth.”

Jonah said, “abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment.” Jonah substituted 'renouncing punishment' for 'truth'. Jonah's set was that pagans could not behave morally. The behavior of the sailors and the Ninevans challenged this set. Also it became obvious that God's mercy extended even to those who did not embrace monotheism. The God, who has little patience for immoral behavior, has mercy for foreign moral people who worship many gods. The actions of repentance are more important than belief in one God. This illustrates the universal aspect of Judaism.

Jonah was so uncomfortable that his ideas did not hold, that he wanted to die. He is unable to comfortably amend his ideas to reflect reality that the possibility of T'Shuvah extends to all beings. I think Jonah believed that a real prophet had to be right all the time—so his prophesy at Ninevah which turned out differently was a source of shame.

The book ends with God's question to Jonah, “Now should I not take pity on Nineveh, the great city, in which there are many more than one hundred twenty thousand people who do not know their right hand from their left?”

How would Jonah have answered this? The book does not tell us—it just ends with this question.

This third idea about Jonah, how he could not live with the challenge to his world view, is something we can change in ourselves. How is our world view preventing us from enjoying our full potential? How does it limit each of us? How do we bring those hidden feelings which so influence our behavior into consciousness? Will it give us the flexibility to change our behavior? To become better people? That is one of the challenges of this Yom Kippur, this day of atonement.

May you all be inscribed and sealed for blessing in the Book of Life!