

The Book of Jonah: Again

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One of the features of Fabrangen's High Holiday services is the sharing of old melodies for familiar words, new melodies for the old verses, and, sometimes, new and different songs altogether. It's a feature not ordinarily associated with the *d'var torah*, but there's no rule against it that I know, so....

This song is probably known to many of you -- or at least its chorus:

It ain't necessarily so, it ain't necessarily so,

The things that you're liable to read in the Bible

It ain't necessarily so...

The pertinent verse for today may be less familiar:

Oh, Jonah, he lived in the whale. Oh, Jonah he lived in the whale.

Oh, he made his home in that fish's ab-do-men,

Oh, Jonah he lived in the whale...

That was fun! – and I've wanted to do it from the time I began to prepare this drash. But, like many service participants since the terrible events that have shaken and continue to hover around us all, I've become a bit conflicted about my presentation, self-conscious speaking for others, and perhaps a bit less coherent, even to myself, than in a more peaceful hour. To continue the musical metaphor, I've been less sure what melody should be put to **The Book of Jonah** this year, or can be found in it; less confident about an appropriate tone for this drash.

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I am sure that what “ain’t necessarily so” are the things that we’re liable to read **into** the Bible -- which is why I want to offer some of both the comforting and challenging notes I’ve found in (and around) this text, in the belief that both are “true” and the hope that together they can be of value this afternoon.

Jonah seems so easy, familiar, its simple language so seemingly accessible (if, as we may discover, rhetorically sophisticated). We know it. Or at least we think we know it.

In fact, all the “People of the Book” know the story of this prophet – or some version of it. I make, in advance, apologetic disclaimers for my very quick tour through Islamic and Christian views of Jonah, offered to provide at least a sense of how something in this story resonates for so many – in memory, midrash and homily – and to place our dilemma in a context.

In the **Qur’anic** rendition of the Prophet Yunus (peace be upon him), the narrative elements just heard in the Haftorah are somewhat re-arranged. Yunus accepts Allah’s first command to go and preach the true faith to the sinful people of Ninevah. When they ignore his advice and warnings, however, he becomes disgusted, angry and – human, frail, as he is – impatiently curses them and departs, without honoring Allah’s power and waiting for further command. Then the ship; stormy sea; Yunus thrown overboard for the safety of others; rescued by an enormous fish, and, after his penitence and supplication (had he not glorified Allah, “he would have tarried in its belly till the Day of Resurrection”) delivered to a desert shore. While he recovers from his ordeal, he is sheltered by a leafy plant, fed by the milk of a wild goat, and comforted by many believing folk.

And then, when he's regained his health, he's commanded to return to Ninevah to fulfill his mission. This time the people do listen, repent, follow their Prophet, and are forgiven.

Although, it seems, Ninevah later, gradually, backslid and was eventually destroyed, that was no fault of Yunus' (also known as Lord/Companion of the Fish). His story seems relatively straightforward. Lesson learned, lesson taught: God is All-Powerful and forgiving to those who heed His word. Maybe that's what the Book of Jonah might or should have been about – and is, in some of our flawed recollections – but that's not the text we actually have to grapple with.

The Christian tradition(s), and there are several, do share our text. Even many of the questions it poses and the answers it suggests: about Jonah's character and actions, about the nature of prophecy, repentance, and God's power and mercy. Many, but not all.

If anything, Jonah may have a higher standing in Christian than in normative Jewish tradition. The Torah makes one reference to Jonah, outside his own book, in **II Kings** (14:25): a brief and (to me, at least) odd mention of a promise made by God through His servant, the prophet Jonah, son of Amittai, for restoration of territory to Israel. Scholarship on this point may be fascinating, but I suspect there are few non-specialists who have pursued it. In Christian Scriptures, however, the reference to Jonah in the **Gospel of Mathew** (12:38-40) is crucial for later theology:

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a (miraculous) sign from you. He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonas.

For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish (sea monster, Whale) so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

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Jonah is presented, thus, as a pre-figure of Jesus and his resurrection – and in Jesus’ own words. Who continues (41): “The men of Ninevah shall rise in judgement with this generation, and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonas and behold, a greater than Jonas is here.”

So – Islam finds in Yunus a minor prophet, with his failings, to be sure, but essentially an exemplary figure by the end of his tale, and that tale essentially a hopeful one. Christianity finds Jonas a flawed prophet, for much the reasons we might, whose story – ultimately – has a hopeful ending for those who will accept the subsequent news of the coming of the one greater than he... All three traditions can agree that God is a God of universal compassion, whose plans for individuals and empires are far beyond human claims and control, who protects Jonah from himself and tries to teach him... but we’re left with Jonah, the sulky, more-than-reluctant prophet, and his book with the open ending.

If, as Heschel suggests, the prophet is marked by his/her identification with God, Jonah doesn’t even seem to identify with Israel, let alone others beyond. Various excuses, explanations and interpretations are available for Jonah’s behavior. Ninevah, then as now, wasn’t exactly around the corner, and its inhabitants not just another small settlement of happy idol worshippers: in its time and place (both fairly specific), Jonah’s assignment was both physically daunting and politically problematic. And yet, like the worm that destroyed the plant that had sheltered him, something else gnaws at Jonah’s heart, at his soul, and threatens to kill him from within. Say what you will – and commentators do – about the imagery of renewal and rebirth in this book, it’s not happening for him.

Can we recognize anything like in ourselves? That challenge is left to us, perhaps the reason the rabbis set this reading at this point in this day.

In a 1984 essay (“Why Jonah? [i.e., why on YK]: Anger, Forgiveness and Change,” Sherrie Israel, whom many here know from the world of the National Havurah Committee, sees – to put it more crudely than she did – Jonah as depressed, i.e., a person filled with anger turned against the self. And unforgiving, of the Other and of himself. Even onto death. I don’t know if she’d hold to what she wrote then, but others since have named a “Jonah Syndrome” (like Peter Pan’s), and/or written on the urgency of forgiveness as a theme in post-exilic Israel. John’s drash on Rosh Hashanah taught about the practical power of apology; its obverse, the ability to forgive – what Buber spoke of as the great yes – must deserve our attention now. Without it, one is stuck, fearing and resenting the possibility of change, in others and self, that’s needed if we are to mature and grow.

Jared spoke last night about the limitations of the English in our current *machzor* (some of which some of us find comforting from long repetition, but that’s another topic): one such occurs in **Jonah**. God is said to respond to Jonah’s saying “It’s better for me to die than to live,” with “Art thou greatly angry?” Even if that read, “*Are you* greatly angry?” it wouldn’t be a very good translation for *Ha-hativ ha-rah lach?* And the question doesn’t even make sense: yes, Jonah is obviously greatly angry. Instead, at least suggestively, consider David Rosenberg’s version in **A Poet’s Bible** (a book I commend to you): “Can it be a good thing that you are hurt so deeply?” And if the answer: for Jonah, or any of us, or all of us, as I believe it is, is no, is there anything to be done to heal that hurt, whatever its source in family, history or “life?” If not before the Gates close tonight, then soon? Before the next cycle of destruction?

If I had first heard it earlier than this past weekend and been able to find a copy to learn from in time, I would have ended these reflections with another “Jonah song,” by Bob Franke, this one not – like most – about the nurturing whale, but about the bitter man in his booth outside the great city, “Waiting for Ninevah to Burn.”

When I sang “The Star-Spangled Banner” at a vigil at the Capitol Reflecting Pool two weeks ago, I found its words made felt sense for the first time since 1814; similarly, when I heard “Waiting for Ninevah to Burn,” it was with a stunned realization that Ninevah was 150 miles northwest of Bagdad. And there are still remnants of Assyrians in that neighborhood...

Instead of that song, I’ll end with a poem by Gabriel Preil: about Jonah in the 8th c. BCE – and all too much else. Preil was an Estonian-born poet who, although he spent most of his life in the U.S., wrote in Hebrew and Yiddish. This poem, here in the author’s translation with David Curzon, was written in Jaffa, in October, 1967, at the time of that war; the reference in it to W.H.Auden is to Auden’s poem, “September 1, 1939,” written as that war was beginning. And now it is September, 2001/Tishri, 5762.

Then, Too, It Was Autumn

Planes pass over avenues of air
and Jonah set out from this very city
on a journey that ended in
the innards of the fish.

Had the same sky also turned festive,
had the same waves also conversed?
Had the landscapes of history
kept repeating themselves –
and all remained as is?

Even Auden’s poisoned glass
in a dive on fifty-second street
is the glass that scalds my hand.
Then, too, autumn was in full melancholy
and a picture on a wall slipped from its frame.

Only the viewer of things is another.
