

# JEWISH IDEAS DAILY

## Jonah and Yom Kippur

By Meir Soloveichik

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*"Shipmates, this book, containing only four chapters—four yarns—is one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures. Yet what depths of the soul does Jonah's deep sealine sound! what a pregnant lesson to us is this prophet! What a noble thing is that canticle in the fish's belly! . . . But WHAT is this lesson that the book of Jonah teaches?"*

Thus Melville's Father Mapple passionately preaches in *Moby-Dick*. His question has been pondered by Jews throughout the centuries. Read in its entirety in the synagogue on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, Jonah is the only multi-chapter book of the Bible to be so honored. Indeed, Rabbi Yitzhak Etshalom has suggested that if the brief Torah reading preceding Jonah has little to do with the day, but merely continues where the morning reading left off, this may be precisely in order to emphasize that, in a departure from the usual priorities, the haftarah, or prophetic portion, is in fact the critical text for the occasion.

What, then, makes it so significant, and what lesson does it teach about Yom Kippur?

At first glance, the lesson could not be clearer. Sent to the Assyrian city of Nineveh to foretell its destruction, Jonah, despite himself, ends up inspiring its denizens to repent, and the city is spared. This is precisely the outcome that Jonah himself had most feared—he wanted the sinners to suffer God's punishment, and had acquiesced in his assignment only after having first tried to flee and been forced to endure an underwater ordeal. So Jonah himself had to be taught a lesson—about God's mercy and forgiveness—and at the end of the book this lesson is conveyed by God Himself in so many words.

Is that the reason why Jonah is read on Yom Kippur: namely, to focus our minds on the power of repentance? That is certainly part of the explanation. But numerous other prophetic passages dwell on the same theme, and all of them have the virtue of being briefer. Is the reason then that the book of Jonah emphasizes not just repentance and atonement but the repentance and atonement of Gentiles living in a faraway land? Some, including Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik and the essayist Milton Himmelfarb, have suggested that this is indeed the case, and that the point is for Jews to approach the conclusion of their own day of atonement on a universalist note. But wouldn't Rosh Hashanah, with its emphasis on the entire world's standing in judgment, make a better occasion for such sentiments than Yom Kippur, when the stress is on the Almighty's merciful love for His people?

What each of these discussions tends to overlook is not the end of Jonah but the beginning. For, if the rest of the story makes Jonah a prime candidate for reading on Yom Kippur, the very first chapter makes it the perfect candidate for the day's conclusion.

Let us recapitulate. Seeking to escape God's command by fleeing the Holy Land, Jonah boards a ship bound for Tarshish. When the ship is struck by a storm, the sailors attempt to puzzle out the source of their ill fortune. And here we are presented with the book's most problematic passage:

And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause

this evil is upon us; what is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country? and of what people art thou? And he said unto them, I am Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land. Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, Why hast thou done this? *For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.* [emphasis added]

They knew? Because he had told them? But if they knew from the beginning that he was fleeing from God, why now were they mystified as to the cause of the storm, and why, when the lot fell on Jonah, did they need to know his biography?

In considering this puzzling passage, we should observe that Jonah does not answer all of the sailors' questions about his identity. The only fact he supplies is "*ivri anokhi*," I am a Hebrew. But that is evidently enough.

In his own analysis of the book's first chapter, Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun notes that in the ancient Near East, most people believed in territorial divinities: local gods who exercised tyrannical rule over a country's inhabitants but were powerless beyond its borders. As far as the gods were concerned, an area that was not part of any particular realm was no man's land, a place where one could do whatever he wanted. In the Bible, by contrast, the God of the Hebrews is a God whose power is everywhere. Thus, when Moses informs the Egyptian Pharaoh that the "God of Israel" has demanded the release of His people, and Pharaoh parries by claiming that the deity of a non-Egyptian land is of no relevance to him, Moses proceeds to instruct him otherwise. "The God of the Hebrews has sent us," he declares: that is, a God whose writ is not contained by borders.

A hint to Moses' meaning may lie in the very term "Hebrew," which derives from the verb *la'avur*, to cross over. Abraham is the first to be called *ivri*, no doubt because he crossed over to the land of Canaan from the other side of the Jordan. But there is a theological corollary to this point: Abraham crossed over because the God who addressed him in Mesopotamia told him to, assuring him that He would be with him on the other side. For this is a God Who is not attached to one country because He existed long before countries, a God Who rules the universe because He created the universe. The name "*ivri*" thus connotes one who, believing in this God, asserts that no place on earth is devoid of His presence and providence.

Back to the first chapter of Jonah. It would seem that Jonah told his fellow sailors from the start that he was seeking to flee his God. If this did not disturb them, it was because they were sailing into international waters where the territorial gods had no power. Then, as the storm hits, each cries out to his own god—in the vain hope, perhaps, that the various deities thus summoned might get together and mount an international rescue operation. When that fails, when the lot falls on Jonah, and when they demand to know who he really is—and he tells them—then, stunned and awed, the men finally grasp the true gravity of their situation. The rest of the story, starting with their casting Jonah into the sea, follows in logical progression.

And so we return to what the rabbis may have had in mind in choosing the book of Jonah as the final scriptural reading on Yom Kippur. The sun is beginning to set, and worshippers are scant hours away from returning to their regular lives, where God's presence is not so easily apprehended as it is in the synagogue on the year's most sacred day, and where every temptation exists to gerrymander the divine out of one's daily experience. Here, in Jonah, is the only place in the Bible where the essence of Jewish identity is so succinctly and powerfully summarized.

*Ivri anokhi!* God is to be found anywhere, at any time. In the words of the American founder John Adams, this doctrine—"of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty sovereign of the universe," which Adams took to be "the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently of all civilization"—constituted *the* gift of the ancient Hebrews, who alone "had preserved and propagated [it] to all mankind." It is the lesson taught by the book of Jonah, and its message to all who hear it on Yom Kippur is that we must live our lives accordingly.

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