

Truth and Compassion - Yom Kippur - Sanctuary - 2013

New York City folklore tells the story of Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, who strived to *live with the people*. It was not unusual for him to ride with firefighters, raid with police, or take field trips with orphans.

On a bitterly cold night in January of 1935, the mayor turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told the mayor that her daughter's husband had left, her daughter was sick, and her two grandchildren were starving.

However, the shopkeeper from whom the bread was stolen refused to drop the charges. "It's a real bad neighborhood, your Honor," the man told the mayor. "She's got to be punished to teach other people around here a lesson."

LaGuardia sighed. He turned to the woman and said, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions. Ten dollars or ten days in jail." But even as he pronounced the sentence, the mayor was already reaching into his pocket. He extracted a bill and tossed it into his famous hat, saying, "Here is the ten dollar fine which I now remit; and furthermore, I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

The following day, New York City newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered woman who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren. Fifty cents of that amount was contributed by the grocery store

owner himself, while some seventy petty criminals, traffic violators, and New York City policemen, each of whom had just paid fifty cents, gave the mayor a standing ovation for enacting the law with the proper dose of humanity for the situation at hand.

Regardless of its veracity, this is a tale of justice combined with equal parts mercy, compassion, and generosity. It is a feel-good story, particularly appropriate on Yom Kippur, a day when we ask God to tip the scales of judgment towards mercy.

Today is the day when we judge ourselves harshly - when, together as a community, we recite a list of sins that we've committed (even if we haven't individually committed them!), and then we ask God to ignore these sins and to focus on our virtues. We plead with God to play the role of Parent, and to see us through compassionate, loving eyes. Today we repeat: "י, י, אל רחם וחנן" -- "Merciful and Compassionate God". Today mercy and compassion are the themes.

So it is with a trace of irony, perhaps, that this afternoon at mincha we read the story of Jonah, a man who acted without compassion and lived without mercy.

Most of us remember *Sefer Yonah* from childhood as the story of a man who was swallowed by a whale. As we grow into adulthood and read it each Yom Kippur, we hopefully discover much richer lessons derived from the story of the battle waged in each of us -- the fight between compassionate justNESS and vengeful JUSTICE.

The story opens in the city of Nineveh - if you're interested in following along, it begins on page 411 of your machzor.

Jonah is sent by God to Nineveh, to tell the terrible, wicked citizens there that they must repent and change their ways, lest God destroy them. But Jonah doesn't want to be a prophet; he is comfortable minding his own business. So when God tells him to go to Nineveh, he does what any reluctant prophet would do: he goes the other way. Fleeing to Yaffo, Jonah finds passage on a ship and does his best to hide from God.

He quickly learns, of course, that no one can hide from God. As Jonah lounges below-deck, God sends a storm so huge that the vessel is in danger of being destroyed. Jonah - asleep despite the winds and rain - refuses to help his fellow sailors survive the storm. "How can you be sleeping so soundly?!" exclaims the bewildered captain. "Call to your God. Perhaps your God will be kind to us and we will not perish".

Of course, in a twist of dramatic irony, the captain has no idea that it is precisely Jonah's God that is causing the ship's peril. Jonah, who repeatedly voices his desire for death, begs the sailors to throw him overboard. Torah scholar Erica Brown¹ says that this is the ultimate statement of passivity; Jonah is unable to take responsibility for anything, not prophecy nor prayer nor even his own death. He is a man who prefers life to happen *to* him; not a protagonist, but a side character in his own story. Even as the sailors focus on saving their own lives, he asks them to end his, because he cannot bear the thought of taking such drastic action, or truly, any action at all.

¹ Brown, Erica, "Return: Daily Inspiration for the Days of Awe", page 67

At first his shipmates refuse to toss him overboard, for fear of being liable for an innocent man's death. This changes once Jonah admits that the roaring seas stem from his battle of wills with God. Owing up to the fact that the only way to calm the storm is to get him off the boat, he is finally granted his wish - the sailors throw him overboard, into the churning waters... where, rather than dying as we might expect, he is promptly swallowed by a giant fish.

And there, in the belly of the fish, Jonah remains for three long days....and three long nights. Perhaps it is simply being swallowed that changes him. Or perhaps it takes all three days and three nights of reflection to cause a change of heart. Whatever the reason, Jonah - ready to acknowledge and accept God's command - prays from within the belly of the fish. Upon hearing Jonah's prayer, God commands the fish to spew Jonah out onto dry land.

Finally, Jonah does what God originally asked him to do: he goes to Nineveh, where he half-heartedly prophesies the city's destruction. He inches his way into the city, pronounces עֹד אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם, וְנִינְוָה נִהְפָּקֶת, "Forty more days, and Nineveh will all be overturned!", and promptly turns around and leaves, his job complete.

Surprisingly, the citizens of Nineveh actually listen: they declare a fast, don sackcloths, and repent - in other words, they do *teshuvah*, repentance. *And it works.* "God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring up on them, and did not carry it out."

That should be the end of the story. And if the tale DID end there, it would make for a beautiful Yom Kippur haftarah: a model story about the power of repentance. The people of Nineveh were so terrible - so incredibly wicked - that God chased a prophet across land and sea to make him warn the city's inhabitants before destroying them. And thus warned, the people demonstrated their remorse through the act of *teshuva*, and God in turn showed them mercy. If the story did end there, we would explore themes of remorse, forgiveness, and second chances - and we would applaud Jonah's great success as a prophet who brought about social change.

But the story *doesn't* end there.

The final chapter in the book is Jonah's indignant reaction to God's mercy - and a final show of God's infinite patience.

Jonah is unable to fathom why God would show compassion toward the people of Nineveh; so perplexed is Jonah that he begs for death once again, this time from God. The Lord responds with a question: "Are you so deeply grieved?" In essence: what is it to you that I let these people live?

The story ends with a *mashal*, a parable, in which God gives Jonah a plant. This plant offers Jonah shade, which makes him happy; God then kills the plant, which of course upsets Jonah. In response to Jonah's distress, God responds: "You cared

about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons and many beasts as well!?” In other words, God says: I’ve cared about that city much longer than you’ve cared about that plant, and there is much more work to be done with them - why did you think I’d give up on them so quickly?

And so God has the final word. What Jonah thought of God’s argument is open to interpretation: had he finally learned to accept God’s judgment, or would he yet again rebut it? What we do know - what we can learn from this story - is *our own* response to God’s words and actions.

We read this final chapter and ask: Am I someone who believes in repentance and mercy? Or do I demand justice and punishment enacted for mistakes?

We read *Sefer Yonah* on Yom Kippur because on this day above all others we identify with the Ninevites and their repentance and pleas for compassion. We read this story today because, in the middle of a very long day of reminding ourselves of our sins, we need a story of mercy and redemption. The story of God’s compassion is a beacon of light for us on this Yom Kippur, this day of doing *tshuvah*.

But what if we *also* identify with Jonah? Is it possible that Jonah’s righteous indignation - his belief that the citizens of Nineveh should have died for their sins - appeals to our sense of justice?

Like Jonah, we hurt when someone rebukes us; we nurse our wounds, comfort ourselves, and look for solace where we can find it. There's a part of us that believes that, after all that he's has been through to get to Nineveh, Jonah's indignation at God's choice of mercy over justice is warranted.

Clearly, Jonah is not in a healthy emotional state during much of this story. He repeatedly vocalizes the desire to die; he sleeps through a storm, jeopardizing the lives of others; he even has emotional swings over a plant! Comical as this last one may seem, these emotional imbalances are no laughing matter.

Stuck in his negative frame of mind, Jonah lives a colorless life - everything is black or white. In his stark worldview, there is good and there is evil, but no shades of gray exist in-between.

And we leave him in this state, in this distorted thinking, at the end of the tale; but the absurdity of it all makes Jonah a good parable for the reader. We understand more than the character himself, and ideally, we take a better lesson from his journey than he does.

We all have moments of malaise, some longer than others. Sometimes the resolution is clear: when we are feeling particularly stuck in our job or in a relationship, even though we struggle, we often have a sense of how to solve our own problem. Occasionally, though, these phases encompass more of our lives, seemingly consuming our whole world. How, then, do we become "unstuck," so that we can see clearly again?

Sefer Yonah speaks to me in ways that most other Biblical tales do not. It is more than a morality play; more than a show of the power of repentance; more still than an acknowledgment that it is at times acceptable to challenge God. The reason we read the Book of Jonah on Yom Kippur is that - much like the blast of the shofar - it is a call to wake up, change our routines, fix what is problematic in our lives. That is, to “unstick” ourselves.

Yom Kippur comes at the end of the *Aseret Y'mei Teshuva* - the ten days following the start of Rosh Hashanah that are supposed to be spent in repentance, recalibrating our moral center and endeavoring to become the best versions of ourselves. For Jonah, repentance is a legal fiction. For God and, when we are at our best, for us, true repentance can change the course of history, both past and present.

The story of Jonah pushes us to reconsider our views on mercy and justice. Jonah's greatest flaw is that he desires compassion for himself but justice for others. How often are *we* Jonah, judging others more harshly than we judge ourselves? How often do we judge ourselves more harshly than God is judging us?

Empathy is the glue that binds together the individual members of a society. It is the ability to see a bread thief not as a villain, but as a neighbor, fallen on hard times - and to treat that person graciously, allowing them to do *teshuvah* for themselves.

Jonah's greatest flaw - the reason for his silence at the end of the story - is his inability to believe that people can change. He lives in a world with no hope of *teshuvah*, even for himself - a world in which the wicked stay forever tainted by their sins.

Jonah serves as a counter-example for us: he is someone we wish to avoid emulating - a guidepost for what we do not want to allow ourselves to become. And if we are to achieve that goal, then we must remember to strive to see events through others' eyes, not just our own.

What makes us different from Jonah is that we see ourselves as able to change. For ten days, we have acknowledged that we have the power to do *teshuvah* - that the person we were this past year need not dictate who we will be in the coming year. The true test is not in acknowledging our *own* ability to change, but in having the empathy to believe that *others* can change as well. When we accept that our own future is not set in stone, we can allow for the possibility that others may repent - and in doing so, may join us in moving toward the best version of ourselves.

The amazing thing about Yom Kippur is that no one expects us to become the best version of ourselves on our own. Later today, we'll sing the piyyut "Ki Anu Amecha," a poem that exemplifies our partnership with God. We recite this piyyut before we recite our Vidui - the confessional - because both we and God know that this ritual only works if we repent and God accepts that repentance. Tshuva is a prescribed ritual - our job is to repent and God's job is to accept it.

We are God's people only because God is our God. "We are Your children and You are our Parent. We are Your flock and You are our Shepherd. We are Your servants and You are our Master. We are Your creatures and You are our Creator."

Without God, we would lack parental guidance, a moral compass, and a partner for the ritual of tshuva. Like clay in the hands of a potter, God shapes us, teaches us, grows us, and guides us. Together, we do repentance and strive to inhabit the best versions of ourselves. God too repents, prays, and strives to do better. We have witnessed God's transformation from Biblical destruction where justice and thus destruction ruled - to Nineveh, where God's mercy and compassion supersedes anger.

You and I are not the only people bothered by the story of Jonah. So bothered were the rabbis that they wrote a midrash to help excuse what they saw as Jonah's odd behavior. They didn't want Jonah to be portrayed as simply a lazy, reluctant person, so they give us some context and background about Jonah's life.

We know from Second Kings that this was not Jonah's first time being a prophet. God sent Jonah to relay a promise to the people of Southern Israel, to restore the borders there, and his prophecy came true. So why, the rabbis ask, does Jonah refuse his mission to go to Nineveh?

To answer this question, we turn to Pirkei D'Rebbe Eliezer, where we find a midrash about God sending Jonah to prophecy the destruction of Jerusalem. The Jerusalemites who hear him actually repent, God takes pity on them, changes His mind, and does not destroy the city. The Israelites, Jonah's own people, call him a false prophet for predicting the destruction that never came.

Never mind that he saved these people from destruction; Jonah simply does not want to be the kind of prophet who encourages people to repent. Yonah Ben Amitai wants to live up to his name: Jonah, Son of Truth. He would rather accurately predict of the future than have a part in changing it. He is confused over the difference between prophecy and prediction. When your prediction comes true, you're a success. When your prophecy comes true, you've failed. But Jonah expects his prophetic destruction to bring about actual destruction.

Last week, I was talking with a four-year-old friend of mine about what clouds are and where rain comes from. He asked me if it is the weathermen who tell the clouds when to rain. /// Jonah wants to not only be the world's most accurate meteorologist, who knows precisely when rain is coming; he wants to be the one who tells the clouds when to make it rain. Anything less would not be truth - and Jonah can not stand for what he perceives to be a lack of truth.

Disappointed, angry, and frustrated from the Midrashic encounter with Jerusalem, Jonah has no interest in a repeat performance of God allowing the Ninevites to repent. We can almost hear Jonah yelling at God like a stubborn teenager, "Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? THAT is why I fled to Tarshish! For I KNOW that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment." Having learned from his

time in Jerusalem that God is compassionate and desires repentance, Jonah is furious that God has again put him in the position to be called a false prophet.

The words that Jonah uses in his angry rant are *almost* the same words that we repeat over and over again this High Holy Day Season. Jonah says “כִּי אֶתָּה אֱלֹהֵי-תְנוּנִי” - but he stops there, leaving off one word that we include: אֱמֶת. He leaves off the word “truth.”

For Jonah, truth is about impartiality and accordance with fact. But for God, Truth has a capital T, and it is more aligned with justice than with accuracy. Jonah perceives that HE is the only one standing for truth, and he is unable to recognize that God allows for genuine repentance to change someone’s path - to change the Truth.

God’s attributes that we see in Jonah’s story and that we recite over and over again today, first show up in the immediate aftermath to the sin of the Israelites building a Golden Calf to worship, in Exodus 34. Moses successfully pleads with God not to wipe out His people who have sinned, but instead to be compassionate and forgiving. By all accounts, the Israelites deserved God’s rage; luckily for them, God did not share Jonah’s world-view - or his definition of truth - and found a role for compassion.

Truth without compassion is a recipe for an angry life. We recognize Jonah’s anger and resentment because it mirrors our own capacity for these destructive feelings. In these moments, we must do what Jonah was unable to do - channel those feelings of vengeance and justice into feelings of compassion.

The unfortunate part of Jonah's life is that he has set up a dichotomy between mercy on the one hand, and truth and justice on the other.

The prophet Micah said, "Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God." Proverbs says, "One who pursues after justice AND mercy finds life, prosperity and honor." When we wrap tefillin in the morning, we recite Hosea's words "וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי בְצַדִּיק וּבְמִשְׁפָּט, וּבְחֶסֶד וּבְרַחֲמִים" - "I will betroth you to Me in righteousness, in justice, in lovingkindness, and in compassion."

The goal is not to choose between justice OR mercy, like Jonah; we instead strive to be more Godly, pursuing justice AND mercy in concert. Righteousness, justice, mercy, compassion, lovingkindness: all go hand-in-hand in our tradition.

These qualities came instinctively to Mayor LaGuardia on that cold, dark night. The Talmud, in Brachot 7a, imagines a prayer that God prays for God-self. It is a simple prayer. Just one line. "May My capacity for mercy overtake My capacity for anger."

And so too is it for us. We know that God is compassionate and merciful. Today we strive to emulate God's qualities in ourselves. May our own capacity for mercy overtake our tendency to bend towards accuracy, anger, and dispassionate justice.

G'mar Chatimah Tova.