

A Midrash on Jonah
Yom Kippur 5772

“But we’re all going to die,” I said to God.

“What do you want from me?” God asked. “You mourn for the tree that you did not plant; should we not work together to heal the people of Ninevah and the people of the world?”
PAUSE.

Before that, God had called me. God said to me: “Jonah, son of Amittai go to Ninevah, and prophecy there.” I said, “I wouldn’t. I can’t. Not this time. Please don’t ask me to do this.” And I ran to the waters, to Tarshish, in the opposite direction.

I didn’t want the job. Would you?

Been there, done that, God, I thought. This wasn’t the first time God called me. “Remember?” I said to the Holy One. “Remember when you called me once before—before the book that bears my name-- to prophesy to Jeroboam ben Yoash, king of Israel—that evil king?”

Back then, God called me to prophesy the destruction of Jerusalem, though I knew the king would not stop sinning.

And though he would not stop, God gave Jeroboam the power to expand his kingdom from the entrance of Hamath to the sea of Aravah anyway. I couldn’t believe it. I knew it all along—God would give in, the merciful One would be merciful to this stiff-necked people. I was disgusted and embarrassed.

The Holy One took pity on the people of Israel. God saw their affliction—that it was very bitter, that there was no one left free. And God saved Israel, despite me. I hated God’s call in that moment. “You made me a liar!” I screamed to the heavens. But God was silent.

Back then, God made me look like a false prophet. They tormented me. They said I was a pretender. Of course, I knew the truth—that they didn’t really change, that they would sin again. And boy oh boy, sin they did.

So I resolved never to prophesy again. When the Rock of Israel called me once again, this time to preach to another nation entirely, I said, “Whatever. You’re merciful God—do what you want; I am not interested in ephemeral things. The Jewish people call me a false prophet--- you want me to be ridiculed by the people of world, as well?”

I ran to the sea, to a boat headed I knew not where, as far away from the Jewish people as I could go—as far away from God’s glory as I could get. Could you blame me? Who would want this miserable job? But even in the ocean, there was God, making the sea rumble with a mighty storm.

In the middle of the storm, a tossed ship on a tossed sea, I went down to the hold to sleep.

I wanted nothing more than to be comatose, oblivious to the problems of the world.

Ah, to escape awareness.

But the Shechina would not let me sleep. “Prophesy to the sailors, she said. Tell them to repent.” I turned over in my bed and pulled the covers over my head. And God threw me out of bed. She sent the idol-worshipping captain to get me.

I went up to the deck, where the other sailors were all bowing low to their so-called-gods. They told me to cry out to mine, and they begged to know who I was. I couldn’t help myself. I opened my mouth, and prophesied to them. “I am a Hebrew, and I fear the Eternal. I am faithful to the one true God,” I told them; “the God who made heaven and dry land.”

After I finished prophesying, I begged to die. I couldn’t take it. “Throw me in to the sea,” I told the sailors. “I can’t stand to live.”

Though they feared for my life, those men believed in me more than I believed in myself. They rowed harder, but the sea would not calm. Finally, they threw me in to the waves. And no sooner had they assisted me with my suicide, than the sea calmed, and the men began to tremble with fear. And-- would you believe it-- they repented of their sins; they renounced idol worship. I knew they would-- there are no atheists on tempest-tossed ships.

But I knew that theirs was a false repentance—only temporary. “They’ll go back to their ways as soon as the waters calm,” I told God. But God was silent.

I longed for death, but Adonai was not finished with me.

Avinu malkeinu sent a big fish (or was it a whale?) to swallow me in the dark night of my soul. Damn if God hadn’t already foreseen this moment in the days of creation—on the fifth day of creation the Creator had made a Leviathan that would wait in the depths for me for 2000 years, waiting for this moment, to be there to swallow me. And though I wanted only darkness, the eyes of the fish were like windows of glass that allowed glaring light to torture my soul.

For three days I lingered, fighting the Holy One. “Life is temporary!” I railed against God. “Why should anyone do good when it will all go away someday?!” I remembered what King Solomon once said: “Vanity of vanities—all is vanity;” I couldn’t agree more. “Let me rot in this beast,” I begged the Eternal.

But the Maker of Light showed me that even in the depths, there is life. Even when all seems despair, when it all seems for naught—perhaps especially when we face our mortality, especially in that realization-- meaning itself comes to life.

The fish took me to the Reed Sea, and showed me where the waters parted to allow the Israelites to go free on dry land. And I heard Miriam with her timbrel cry out, "*Mi chamocha ba'elim Adonai, Mi kamocha nedar bakdosh. Norah tehilot, oseh feleh.* Who is **like** Adonai || among the **so-called** gods? || Who is **like** You, tremendously Holy, || Awesome in Splendor, doing wonders?"

Then the fish/whale took me to the waters under the foundation stone itself—the bellybutton of the universe-- that stone where Abraham nearly sacrificed Isaac; where someday the Holy Temple would rest. And I heard the priests-yet-to-be call out their blessing: "*yivarecha Adonai, v'yishmerecha.* May God bless you and keep you."

And then, that great fish took me to the very depths of Sheol, as if I needed or wanted to be reminded that I am mortal. And I heard King David's words, "*Adonai ro'i, lo echsar.* Adonai is my shepherd, I shall not want."

And then, just when I was at the deepest depths of the sea, and the weeds were wrapped around my head; just when my soul fainted inside me; just when I thought God would finally give me relief from the need to face the frustrations of the world, the Eternal brought me out of the pit. God spoke not to **me**, but to that **fish**, and told it to vomit me out alive on the shores of Nineveh, that great city, capital of Assyria, greatest of Israel's enemies.

And there I was, again. Can you believe that God called me again to preach repentance to my worst enemy? I was incredulous. "You want me to face the King of my nightmares and tell him to change his ways?" I argued with God. "This is Your reward?" I shouted. You wait and see. These non-Jewish sinners will be false in their repentance. They will, and you know it, but I'll stay true to You."

And God—shocking, I'm sure-- said nothing.

I walked three days across that great city. I shouted out, with bile welling up in my throat, "Repent, or Nineveh will be overthrown in 40 days."

I knew what would happen. Those pagan deceivers believed God. They put on the sackcloth and ashes of repentance- from the greatest of them to the least. Even the king himself made a show, throwing off his fancy robe, decreeing a fast, and a day of atonement.

And what did those people do? You guessed it-- they cried out to God. They resolved to do better, and never to sin again. And the Eternal, in God's great Mercy-- God relented. The Holy One heard their repentance, and repented from the decree of destruction in God's great kindness. Did I tell you?

I couldn't stand it. It was enough to make anyone snap. "How can you be so naïve?" I asked God. "They're pulling the wool over Your eyes," I lectured to God. "Don't you know by now that

people can't change? That people can't really return to You? Tomorrow they'll go back to their ways, because nothing good really lasts. We're all doomed to die in the end. This is why I ran away in the first place. I can't bear to live any longer when there's no meaning in the world. Please, God, I've begged you before-- take my life. I'd rather die in certainty than bear the uncertainty of this world."

And God finally answered. After all this time! And what did God have to say? "*Ha'heitev ha'rah lach?*" "How's that anger working for you?"

So I ran away again—this time to the desert. If the Eternal's Mercy is in the city, and in the sea, I thought maybe I could hide from the Holy One in the heat and desolation of the desert, and finally, perhaps, die in peace.

But God still wouldn't leave me alone!

The Holy One made a *kikayon* plant grow over my head in the heat of the day, when I longed for death, for a relief of my distress. And, in spite of myself, I was grateful.

But the next day, the Creator of Darkness sent a worm to eat the plant. And the sun came down to beat on my head. I screamed to God, in the depths of despair. "But we're all going to die anyway! What will it be? Will you kill me so that I can be rid of the ambiguity of life, or will you save me in the shadow of Your wings? Will you please make up Your mind?"

And then God told me this parable.

"I told Abraham," said God, "'Leave your land, your birthplace, and your father's house.' To what may this be compared? To a man who was traveling from place to place when he saw a palace in flames. Abraham wondered, 'Is it possible that the palace lacks an owner?' The owner of the palace looked out and said, 'I am the owner of the palace.'" So Abraham our father said, "Is it possible that the world lacks a ruler?" I, the Eternal looked out to Abraham and said to him, "I am the ruler, the Sovereign of the universe." Abraham's bewilderment is clear. This sensitive human being gazes at a brilliantly structured universe, an extraordinary piece of art. Abraham is overwhelmed by the grandeur of a sunset and by the miracle of childbirth; he marvels at the roaring ocean waves and at the silent, steady beat of the human heart. The world is indeed a palace. But the palace is in flames. The world is full of violence, bloodshed, injustice, imbalance and strife. Selfish people, thugs, abusers, rapists and killers are continuously demolishing the palace and its royal inhabitants. "What happened to the owner of the palace?" Abraham cried. "Why does God allow man to destroy God's world? Why does God permit such a beautiful palace to go up in flames? Can God have made a world only to abandon it? Would anybody build a palace and then desert it?" And I, the Holy One, said to Abraham, 'I am the owner of the palace. 'I am the ruler, the Sovereign of the universe.' I built the palace, and humanity has set it on fire. Only you can put out the flames. I have faith in humanity despite it all. Do you?'"

And then, at the end of the story, God said to me, in God's great and wise *chutzpah*: "Jonah son of Amittai: What do you want from me? You mourn for the tree that you did not plant, nor did you make it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night. Should we not work together to heal the people of Nineveh, and the people of the world? In spite of our doubt and uncertainty? Even in the face of long odds and long experience? I know that life sometimes seems to you, easy come, easy go. But will you love it while it lasts? Will you strive to make it better? The reason death exists is to give meaning to life. Only things that are limited have meaning. Or would you prefer that the people of Nineveh and the people of the world simply give up and go to their Eternal home? Jonah: What will it be?"

And when God finished, it was I who was silent.