

Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Yom Kippur Mincha (Sefer Yonah)

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Haftarah No. 13: Yom Kippur Afternoon, The Book of Jonah

Chapter 1

Considering how many people know the story of the Book of Jonah, I will restrict myself here to noting aspects of the drama I have not heard emphasized elsewhere. First, Jonah's decision to flee rather than follow God's command demands comment, especially as Jews commonly assume that prophets did not achieve that status until they had developed religious personalities to a high level.

In perusing the sources, I was struck by the Sages' assumption that Jonah fled because he was afraid the people of Nineveh would repent sincerely; this would contrast embarrassingly with the Jews' failure to do so. In the Sages' words, Jonah knew that non-Jews were "*krovei teshuva*, likely to repent" and resisted giving them that opportunity. Avot de-Rabi Natan has a similar idea in mind when it identifies Jonah as a prophet who cared more about the Jews' honor than God's. (Elijah is cited as a prophet who cared only about God, while Jeremiah cared about both).

Jonah's fears coming true, in that the people of Nineveh do repent, explains to Radak why Scripture included a book completely about non-Jews. In his read, the story is supposed to lead us to reflect on how they listened to the first prophet sent to them, and we Jews ignore the lessons of prophet after prophet. For him, the book exposes a sharp irony—Jonah ran away to avoid the non-Jews showing up the Jews, and ended up being the central figure of a book inserted into Scripture precisely to exert pressure on the Jewish people.

We might wonder why that is true, why non-Jews are closer to repentance than Jews. Perhaps it was only the emptiness of paganism that made them so open to it; certainly, non-Jews today do not appear as open. If so, much of the sting of reading the book is lost on modern audiences.

I suspect, though, that their lack of experience with prophets and miracles made Jonah's coming more moving than for Jews, to whom it was almost common. What would happen, for example, if a prophet—fully identified and authenticated—would accurately predict some catastrophe (one which there would be no scientific way of foretelling), and connect it to some set of sins we commit (which would, by the nature of the beast, be sins that listeners were loath to confront)?

Jews are so used to miracles that we can imagine them disputing the prophet, either denying that he performed a miracle or claiming that he misunderstood its proper interpretation. Familiarity breeds contempt, and we are familiar with God, prophets, and miracles, sometimes to our detriment.

Chapter 2

Rashi records the tradition that Jonah spent his first three days in the spacious belly of a male

whale. With no discomfort involved, he showed no sign of acceding to God's wishes, so God had him transferred to a smaller, pregnant whale, eliciting a prayer in which Jonah promised to go to Nineveh as ordered.

At a technical level, the Midrash explains a shift from masculine to feminine in how the prophet refers to the whale, from "*dag*, fish" to "*dagah*, female fish," but the implications for our perspective of Jonah go further. Note Jonah's comment in verse 5 that he had assumed he had been expelled from God's Presence, only to find he had erred, that he would be required to again stand before God.

Combined with the first chapter's comment that Jonah had decided to flee from before God, we get a remarkable picture of Jonah's world view. The Talmudic tradition assumed Jonah believed he could escape his prophetic mission by fleeing Israel; once that fails, he seems happy to sit in a whale's belly, being shown all the wonders of history that happened near the sea.

Only when he got uncomfortable did he yield, a fact I find astounding. That a storm on his ship only abated when he was thrown in the sea, that a whale swallowed him whole, regurgitated him, and another whale took him in, none of that convinced him of the need to pray; only the discomfort of the second whale did. And this was Jonah, a prophet of God!

It strikes me as teaching us the perils of getting locked into a worldview-- even miracles cannot cause a truly pious man to rethink his perspective. For many of us, perhaps for all of us, (and I note this with sadness and trepidation) only discomfort moves us to the actions we need to take. (Worse, some of those people will bitterly resent the discomfort when it comes, will blame God for mistreating them.)

Chapter 3-4

First, we should notice the sincerity, depth, and breadth of the repentance of Nineveh; I cannot imagine what in our times would stir people, Jews or not, to such a thorough rethinking of their way of life. Change is not easy, a lesson of Yom Kippur, and watching Nineveh reminds us of how high they have set the bar.

Jonah's reaction also teaches us a lesson, but of the Berenstain Bears kind, where we are meant to learn the opposite of what the character does. What Jonah feared had exactly come true, the non-Jews shamed the Jews by readily accepting a prophet's admonishment. Still, his adamant wish for Nineveh's destruction jars us.

Jonah is so upset at Nineveh's salvation that he would prefer death, and God says "*ha'heteiv charah lecha*, are you so bothered?" The prophet does not answer, leaves the city, and then we have the short, sad life of the shade-giving plant. Discomfort again moving Jonah, he says *tov moti me'chayai* death would be better than this life."

God again asks, "*ha'heitiv chara lecha*," are you so bothered?" It seems to me that when God asks the same question twice in a row, it signals that the first answer was wrong, and God asks again, to try to teach the prophet a lesson.

Jonah does not get God's point, but we should. We can close off the possibility of repentance by rejecting the less than perfect as completely unlivable, by focusing on the minor failure, not the room it leaves for other successes. What would have happened if Jonah had stayed in Nineveh, worked with the people, fortified their sincere repentance, set them on a well-structured path to improving the world?

That we will never know in that one instance is perhaps not a tragedy; that instances like that repeat in our lives, perhaps daily, is part of what we try to repent on Yom Kippur. May we all be sealed for a life of comfort that also brings us closer to God.