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A JOURNAL OF JEWISH RESPONSIBILITY

Inside Lessons from the book of Yonah

Ed Feinstein How Can You Sleep?.....	1
Mordechai Beck Imagining Jonah.....	3
Susan Laemmle Teachings from a Reluctant Prophet.....	4
Susan P. Fendrick The Specificity of Gratitude.....	5
Ruhama Weiss Jonah's Death Wish.....	6
Devora Steinmetz Questioning God's Mercy ..	8
Aryeh Cohen On Prophecy and Democracy.....	9
Yvonne Sherwood Jonah and Jesus.....	10
Tirtzah Bassel Encountering the Void....	12
Judith Clark Where Is God in Our Justice System?.....	13
Avi Killip What Jonah Teaches Us about Repentance.....	14
Penina Adelman Spiritual Direction with Yonah.....	15
Maya Bernstein Why Jonah Resonates with Children.....	16
Stephen Hazan Arnoff Emerging from a Locked Room.....	17
Howard Smith Jonah and the Multiverse.....	18
Ruby Namdar Great Fish.....	19
Discussion Guide.....	20
Jake Marmer, Adeena Karasick, Hank Lazer, Alicia Jo Rabins But I, with Loud Thanksgiving.....	21
Leonard Gordon, Howard Cohen, Howard Kelfer, Yael Ridberg <i>NiSh'ma</i>	22
David Saperstein <i>Sh'ma</i> Ethics.....	24

Late in the afternoon of Yom Kippur, deep into our chosen fast, we read the book of Jonah (Yonah in Hebrew). It is a magnificent story whose themes and characters have resonated with writers and artists over the millennia, and whose lines have been mined for nuggets of wisdom about the myriad ways we are to learn, repent, and change. (For a primer on the story, please see the box on page 2.) In this issue, we draw upon some of the themes of the book and stretch them out — as an artist might stretch out a canvas before beginning to paint. Several essays explore the theme of *teshuvah*, including Jonah's complicated response to mercy and the search for justice. Jonah is often described as a reluctant prophet, and we include two essays that address prophecy, including one on how prophets can both distort and amplify the voices of democracy. Jonah's experience of fleeing and then finding himself in the belly of the fish raises questions about incarceration, and we include the voice of a woman in prison for decades grappling with the text, her guilt, and forgiveness. We also include pieces that explore minor themes of the book: What can it teach us about gratitude and loneliness, for instance? One educator recounts the story of Jonah through a child's imagination and another sees it through a teenager's angst; a scientist suggests how we might understand "chance" in light of the story. Several essays touch on a vision of Judaism that is outward looking, that emphasizes mutuality and doesn't see the world divided between "us" and "them." Once again, we've asked four poets to collaborate on a poem — this year drawing inspiration from a verse in Jonah about giving thanks. Remember to make use of our discussion guide (p. 20) to stimulate discussion in your community.

Our back page re-launches our yearlong ethics series — now focusing on democracy. Among the themes we'll address this year are: How can we reconcile Jewish law and Israeli law? What are the limitations of democracy? What is the relationship of money to the democratic process? Must citizens always accept all decisions made by a democratically elected government?

If you are not a subscriber, please consider becoming one. The journal is the perfect conversation-starter for small salons, larger community events, or discussions around any Jewish table. A subscription envelope is included. Questions? Please feel free to contact me at SBerrin@shma.com.

After reading this issue, we invite you to log on to our recently-launched S-blog (shma.com) and join those who are taking this conversation about Jonah, its meaning, and its wisdom even further.

— *Shana tova u'metukah*, Susan Berrin, Editor-in-Chief

How Can You Sleep?

ED FEINSTEIN

Once upon a time, there was a man named Jonah who constructed a cozy world neatly divided into clean binary terms: us/them; our people/those people; insiders/outside. Jonah enjoyed the security of knowing exactly who he was because he knew precisely who he wasn't. He drew a comfortable sense of self from a carefully constructed image of the "other." He had a precisely defined sense of his duties, and an unambiguous sense of his boundaries. He knew to whom he owed concern, and exactly where his concern ended.

Then, one day, God appeared to Jonah and shattered his world. In God, there is a unity beneath the divisions, wholeness behind disjunction: you and me, us and them, ours and theirs. Though separated on the surface, we are deeply connected within. The boundaries of self, God insists, must include the other. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote from the Birmingham Jail: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

continued on next page

All life is interrelated.”
 “Go to Nineveh,” says God, “and save that city from its wickedness.” This single command destroys Jonah’s neatly ordered world: Historically, Nineveh was the capitol of the Assyrian Empire. In 722 BCE, the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and exiled its population. They besieged Jerusalem, humiliated its king, and carried off its treasures. For an Israelite, Nineveh was the

Engagement with the world is more than a cultural value; it is the very life breath of the Jewish soul. Cut off from the world and turned entirely inward, the Jewish soul suffocates.

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enemy, the world center of evil, the heart of darkness. Save Nineveh? Why would Jonah want to save Nineveh?


By this command, God is asking Jonah to confront the humanity of the enemy and to discover that the divide that separates him from his enemy can be healed. Jonah had made a career preaching the hard choice between particularism and universalism. Now, suddenly, the prophet of either/or is confronted by the God of both/and. God is *Melech ha-Olam*, Sovereign of All, the God of global concern. In God, there is no such thing as care for our own apart from concern for the other, because in God there is no such thing as the other. Global responsibility is the meaning and purpose of Jewish particularism, just as particularism is the indispensable foundation of global concern. “*Heyeh brakha!* Be a blessing!” begins the Jewish project, “and let all the families of the earth be blessed in you!” (Genesis 12)

“Go to Nineveh!” God commands. But

Jonah can’t go. To see the world through God’s eyes threatens his very identity. If we’re not “us,” and they’re not “them,” then who am I? Instead of rising to meet his responsibility, he escapes down to the port, to the ship, into the hold, into a deep sleep. “How can you sleep?” shouts the ship’s captain.

This is *the* question of the book — the question of all time: How can you be sleeping? How can you rest in oblivious serenity when the tempest rages about you?

God isn’t finished. God has a lesson to teach. Jonah is swallowed by a big fish. At the bottom of the sea, far from the world, Jonah sits alone in the dark, putrid innards of the fish. Welcome to God’s classroom. You craved a life protected from the needs and claims of others? You yearned for a refuge from the cries of a suffering world, from responsibility for any but your very own? Congratulations. You’ve found your reality! How do you like it? How does it smell? A little like death? Engagement with the world is more than a cultural value; it is the very life breath of the Jewish soul. Cut off from the world and turned entirely inward, the Jewish soul suffocates.

Unlike every other prophetic book, the book of Jonah has no particular time or place. He lives in all generations, because the temptation to separate, divide, and withdraw is always present. So, each year, in the middle of Yom Kippur, at the very moment of deepest self-absorption, when the stomach groans, the head aches, and the feet are tired, we revisit the prophet in the belly of the fish to learn again that for the Jew, reaching to the soul within us and reaching to the world beyond us are the ways we reach the God who cares for us all. 

The Book of Jonah: A Primer

The biblical **book of Jonah** tells the story of Jonah ben Amitai, whom God sends to Nineveh to warn the inhabitants of the city’s imminent destruction. Refusing his prophetic mission, Jonah flees aboard a ship traveling in the opposite direction — to Tarshish. God brings a storm that threatens the ship. To save their lives, the sailors throw Jonah into the sea, where he is swallowed by a great fish. For three days, Jonah lives in the belly of the fish and repents his disobedience. Vomited up onto dry land, Jonah proceeds to Nineveh and preaches God’s warning. The inhabitants of Nineveh promptly and sincerely repent all their sins. Witnessing their contrition, God spares Nineveh and its inhabitants. Jonah is overcome with great consternation at God’s forgiveness, and he asks that God end his life. But God has other plans for Jonah: First, a gourd appears, providing shade for Jonah from the blistering sun, and then a worm eats the gourd. God tries to teach Jonah to see the world through divine eyes and to practice divine mercy. The book of Jonah — one that is traditionally read on the afternoon of Yom Kippur — is an important story of *teshuvah*, repentance.