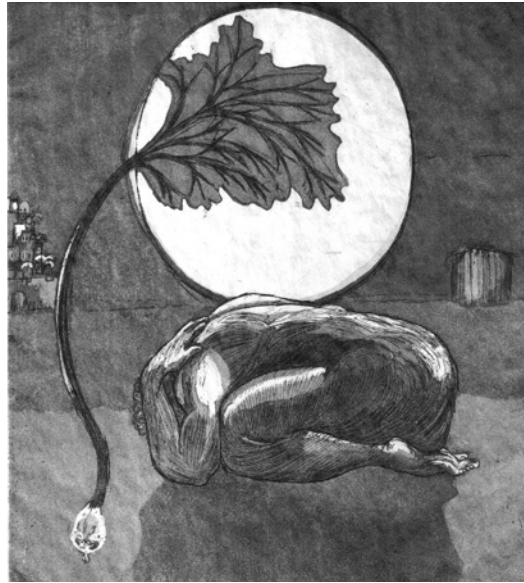




Mordechai Beck – “A small figure hounded by large fears” (inspired by Jonah 1:3, etching with aquatint and sugar lift)



Mordechai Beck – “Jonah bent over like a fetus” (inspired by Jonah 4:3, etching with aquatint and sugar lift)

Imagining Jonah

MORDECHAI BECK

When I began to create a modern graphic interpretation of the book of Jonah, I was faced with a paradox. Jonah’s story was part of my childhood; it was the text we read every Yom Kippur in the synagogue. Yet, as I grew up, Jonah became a mystery. Who was this strange man whom God had commanded to preach repentance to the wicked members of the city of Nineveh? Here was a man who came to us without a family, without greatness, and with no apparent connection to tribe or family that might have suggested his rank. Moreover, whereas others had merely refused the mission of prophecy, Jonah fled from his calling.

Jonah is the only prophet whose mission is a complete success. And though his dissatisfaction prompted him to attempt suicide, his story is what we read on Yom Kippur. It is Jonah’s story that captures the hearts of our sages and is brought into our most sacred of days.

As an artist, I wondered how I would depict the prophet. There is no description of him other than a hint that he is a rich man. Where would I find a peg upon which to hang my graphic interpretation of this unusual man?

It took half a year to come up with a solution. During that time, I made sketches, cartoons, and drawings. Simultaneously, I read and reread *sefer Yonah*, as well as many commentaries, including a contemporary Israeli anthology that collected obscure references on the book.

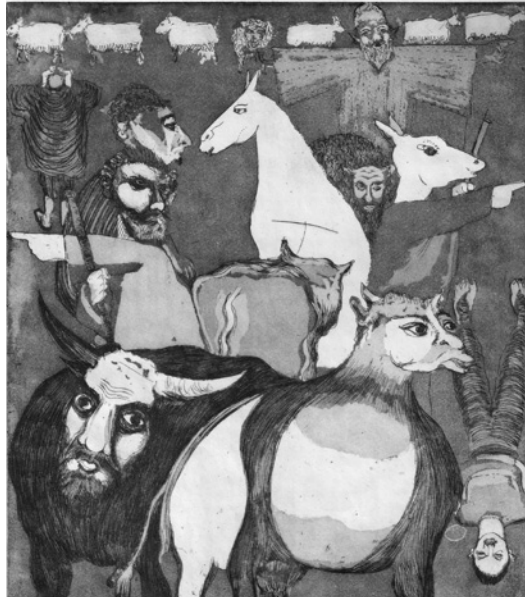
One day, as I entered my workshop, I decided that I had to either produce something or shelve the project. I was unconvinced that I still had it in me to produce the work I had set for myself. And then, I began to sketch what was to become the opening etching of the story. What I had discovered in reading the text again was the repetition of one word that seemed to point to the nature of the hero’s quest, his reluctance to do what he had been asked, his turning to suicide, and why God reacted the way He did. The word is “great” (*gadol/gadola*), and it appears thirteen times in the short text. Great is the city of Nineveh; so is the storm, as well as the fish; the fear of the sailors is great and also the joy of Jonah at the sprouting gourd. It occurred to me that this very greatness is what Jonah was lacking. He feels small, incapable of doing what God asks him to do. His fear of inadequacy leads ultimately to his desire to commit suicide. He doesn’t believe in himself.

Suddenly, Jonah is a modern man. He rushes away from God, from religion, from the obligation to help his fellow human beings. He rushes toward an illusion — Tarshish — a fantasy land that is at the end of the world. When the illusion is torn from him, he wants to die.

To all of this, God says: “No. You can do it if you want. I am here to help you.”

That is the message the sages wanted to give
continued on next page

Mordechai Beck, born and educated in England, attended the Hornsey College of Arts and Crafts. He moved to Israel in 1973. His work has been exhibited in the United Kingdom, the United States, Israel, and the former Soviet Union, and is included in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Library of Congress, several universities, and private collections. Beck’s book, *Maftir Yonah (The Book of Jonah)*, a limited-edition volume on handmade paper, was published by Bet Alpha Editions in Rochester, N.Y. Judaic artist David Moss, who created the Hebrew calligraphy for the book, financed the project with his partner, the late Neil Norry. Beck’s illustrations are being used here with the permission of Bet Alpha Editions.



Mordechai Beck – “Nineveh as Jonah himself would see it”
(inspired by Jonah 4:11, etching with aquatint and sugar lift)

to us on Yom Kippur. We can turn; we can begin again. The greatness of the world should give us confidence, not crush us; the world’s greatness must give us a sense of awe, not dread.

This was my artistic peg. My Jonah is mainly a cipher, a small figure hounded by large fears — mainly of his own making. One etching shows Jonah bent over like a fetus, in the darkness of his soul, desiring eradication — not believing in his ability to renew himself. The final etching shows Nineveh as Jonah himself — and by extension ourselves — would see it. It is a metropolis where there are no boundaries between man and beast, between spirit and flesh. This is the world we live in. This is the world that, we learn on Yom Kippur, we can change, can elevate — even though we’re small and vulnerable to the storms of uncertainty.



Teachings from a Reluctant Prophet

SUSAN LAEMMLE

Over the centuries, the book of Jonah has generated many meaningful interpretations. We draw upon them each Yom Kippur. Midrash has always been able to generate spiritual sparks when rubbed against biblical stories. Today, we mine those lessons that speak to the pressures and conflicts we struggle with personally. Here, I offer eight teachings that have come to me after decades of studying and thinking about this book.

1) It’s better to face a difficult situation directly than to try to evade it. Real responsibilities cannot be easily ignored or escaped. Passive-aggressive behavior is at its core aggressive — filled with anger, cruel and dangerous. Not expressing feelings directly to others, or figuring them out for oneself, creates great pressure, both within and beyond oneself.

2) Jonah’s words and actions give us permission to doubt. We don’t fully understand the process of *teshuvah* (repentance) even when we value and engage in it. Jonah, in effect, voices our doubts about self-transformation just as Yom Kippur is drawing to a close. Almost all of us have some of Jonah within ourselves.

3) Letting depression take one to the depths can be a choice, though often it is not. Affirming life requires moral courage, more for some people than for others. Reaching out,

though difficult (especially to someone who is depressed) can help a great deal. Jonah’s loneliness — which is generated by his flight from God and human beings — takes him down, down, down.

4) For most people, in most situations, there is no depth of despair from which we cannot arise and return. Life often gives us second chances to do better. In Chapter 3, God’s direct intervention grants Jonah another chance to accept his prophetic role. For us to actualize second chances, we need to take risks and stretch ourselves.

5) It is dangerous to take oneself too seriously and identify too zealously with any particular role. If problems arise in performing that role, one’s life loses purpose and meaning. Jonah lost hold of who he thought he was (a God-fearing person) when he fled; even more, when God pardoned Nineveh. We should know that nothing we do or don’t do, nothing we take on or fail to take on, nothing we believe or disbelieve, encompasses all of who we are.

6) We need to defend not only our personal and national interests but also larger humanist values. God’s great statement at the end of the book rejects narrow parochialism. Jonah divides his world into two camps: us and them, the good guys and the bad, Israel and

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