


the prescribed encounter with security.

As an artist, I am inspired by these dichotomies and also aware of the aloneness that drives my work — an aloneness inherent to the creative process. To use Jonah's images, my daily experience in the studio oscillates between the "aloneness of the belly of the ship" and the "aloneness of the belly of the fish." As I mix the colors on my palette and apply paint to the canvas, I sometimes feel sluggish and lost, and I doubt that these actions will bear any meaning or the power to communicate. This is the belly of the ship, the experience of feeling alone amid people — feeling such apathy in the face of a task that I lose the desire to try. It is hiding and waiting for someone outside to come wake me up. Other times, two spots of

color suddenly reveal a figure; a piece of duct tape takes on the form of a man's head. This is the belly of the whale, an intimate encounter with the edge of what I know. In this place, though the techniques I have mastered may feel inadequate to the new situation, I feel pushed to tap into new and unknown resources. This is the place where all the boundaries and constraints of the medium suddenly give form to something new, fresh, and unexpected. Beyond subject matter and formal questions, it is this sense of mystery and otherness that is at the core of what a painting communicates when it comes from the belly of the whale. From that belly, the work speaks of the void that we dread so intently and also of our desire to return to the voice and be awakened. 

'Where Is God in Our Justice System?'

JUDITH CLARK

I have served 31 years of a 75-years-to-life prison sentence for my role as a getaway driver in a 1981 robbery in which three men were killed. Six years into my sentence, on the eve of Hanukkah in 1987, I was suddenly whisked out of the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women in New York and taken to an isolation unit in a federal men's prison in Tucson, Ariz. I had no idea if the transfer was permanent or what would become of me.

Before this jolt, I had reached a turning point in my life; I had begun to reckon with the enormity of my crime, the loss of life it caused, and my separation from my child. I had shed my militant political group identity, but I was unclear about what would take its place. I attended Jewish services at the prison, for reasons I could not yet enunciate, and found comfort in our biblical explorations.

Exiled in the Arizona desert, I continued to study, turning to the book of Jonah. I identified with Jonah because I felt that I, too, had been swallowed by a great fish and was being transported by forces other than myself. I was surprised to discover that this fish, rather than being Jonah's undoing, was God's means of rescuing Jonah from his own suicidal impulses. Perhaps, I, too, had to decide if I was being offered a choice.

Jonah's story raised other questions for me: Can one change enough to alter the course of one's life? Are some terrible deeds too indelible for one to be able to shift the

consequences? Like Nineveh, I wanted to repent, but could I ever be forgiven?

I tried to understand Jonah in order to understand myself. Jonah is on a death trip. Unable to stand and argue with God, he disengages. He hides and flees. On the ship, he opts for the oblivion of sleep. How can one escape an omnipresent Being except to jump into the great sea and drown?

How many times had I fled from my reality rather than stand and address the conflicting choices that pulled me — unable to acknowledge my fear, conflicts, and confusion? I'd chosen the oblivion of group dogma rather than face the storm of doubt and self-doubt.

Jonah appears to have a change of heart when he recites a prayer of entreaty from his depths. The fish spews him out onto the shores of Nineveh, where he brings God's message of condemnation. But the shallowness of Jonah's shift is revealed when God rescinds the decree against Nineveh. Jonah is angry with God's mercy. Jonah cannot do what we are all called to do during the Ten Days of Awe: forgive. There is no repentance without forgiveness of self and others. Jonah's "stuckness" is not his alone.

As I endeavor to do *teshuvah*, I look to the God we find in the book of Jonah, the Creator of all: Hebrews and Ninevites, humankind, animals and plants, land and sea. We are all from the same source. When I face my worst enemy, I must recognize our kindredness. When I

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *Sh'ma* sought to include a response to this essay by one of Clark's victims' family members. The family member declined, beyond saying: "She can repent while she's in prison; I don't want to have anything to do with her." Clark is currently petitioning New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo for clemency. For an account of Judith Clark's life — her involvement in the Brink's robbery of 1981, during which three men were killed for which she received a 75-years-to-life sentence — see the January 29, 2012 *New York Times Magazine* article, "Judith Clark's Radical Transformation" by Tom Robbins (<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/29/magazine/reply-all-judith-clark.html>).

Judith Clark writes, studies, teaches, and mentors mothers in prison. She raises service dogs for wounded veterans as part of Puppies Behind Bars. Her work and story can be viewed at judithclark.org.

witness another's misdeeds, I must recognize that she could be me and I, her. God's compassion grows out of the Creator's willingness to feel connection, loss, and mourning. This God is fallible, willing to be moved and to repent.

MY NAME IS JONAH

Jonah isn't a hero — except in the 1993 film "Sleepless in Seattle." Did the writer Nora Ephron consider little Jonah, the boy who calls a radio show on behalf of his widowed father, a sort of prophet?


Jonah Lowenfeld, *The Jewish Journal*, Los Angeles

What Jonah Teaches Us about Repentance

AVI KILLIP

Jonah wants strict justice. The instinct is understandable, perhaps even universal. He sees people who have sinned and wants them to pay for their crimes. God, however, has a radically different idea of how to address those who transgress: *teshuvah*, the insistence that everyone can change, even the worst sinners.

This debate between God and Jonah continues to play out today in our American prison system. The punitive system touts a Jonah-like demand for a type of justice in which crimes are punished and sinners suffer. In the past 20 years, the U.S. prison system has sought ever-stricter punishments through increases in mandatory minimum sentencing.¹ These increases have led to a system of greater incarceration in overcrowded prisons. Overcrowding has led to fewer resources per prisoner and more violence within prisons — including the increased use of solitary confinement as punishment. In many states, those who have been imprisoned for a felony, for any amount of time, lose (even


It is so apt that Jonah's story ends with a question that we, in each generation, must answer: Where is this compassionate and vulnerable God in our world today? Where is this God in our justice system and social policies? Where is this compassionate God in each of our hearts? Now, 31 years into my sentence, the God I encounter in Jonah challenges me to deepen my *teshuvah* — to seek ways to communicate my remorse to my victims; to nurture my bond with my now-adult daughter; and to allow myself to believe in my own redemption and desire for forgiveness, for mercy, and for freedom. 

once they've been released from prison) the right to government subsidies, including access to public housing, food stamps, and student aid, as well as the right to vote.²

Each year, we devote an entire season to reminding ourselves that *teshuvah* is real, possible, and necessary for ourselves. Are we willing to protect this right for others?

We often feel that prisoners earned their fates. We can tell ourselves that many of the people in prison are dangerous criminals who have committed horrendous crimes. Jonah believes that people should get what they deserve, and sometimes we do, too.

God, however, teaches Jonah about *teshuvah* and the opportunity to begin the process of change from any starting point. In the words of the Rambam, "Nothing can stand in the way of *teshuvah*." (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva* 3:14) God is open to *teshuvah* from any person, at any time, for any sin. No matter how hard it might be for us to trust that a criminal can change, the book of Jonah reminds us of God's patience, forgiveness, and healing. Each year, we devote an entire season to reminding ourselves that *teshuvah* is real, possible, and necessary for ourselves. Are we willing to protect this right for others?

Many of us are unaware of the current state of the American prison system. Like Jonah, we refuse to "go to Ninveh." Like Jonah, we must hear God's call, rise to the task, and take responsibility to ensure that all people, including prisoners, have the opportunity to change. 

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¹See "Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History" by Heather Ann Thompson, *The Journal of American History* 97 (Dec. 2010).

²See *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander for details about these hardships.

MY NAME IS YONA

I took the name "Yona" as an adult. Water is integral to my homeland, the Netherlands. Half of the country is under sea level and it is surrounded by water north and west. Yonah's maritime provenance made this name an obvious choice. And his containment in the belly of the whale resonated with me. Containment is a theme that surfaces in my art work. My current installation addresses the *eruv*, a ritual enclosure that allows observant Jews to carry items outside of their homes on Shabbat.

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