

Jonah Comes for Rosh Hashana

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Erev Rosh Hashana 5780-2019

Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles

It's human to want to run. Many of us try to hide, flee and disappear into the crowd and into the background.

Yet, we know, these *Yamin Norahim*, these Days of Awe are not for the faint of heart or those who want to keep living life in the stands.

This is our huddle, to get back on the court and play - to play and to play bold.

We come together on Rosh Hashana to reignite our courage and hope; to renew our sense of determination and possibility.

So if you are wondering why you are here: You are here because your team needs you, desperately. In case you haven't noticed our planet is on life support, our country full of hate and our souls are starved for meaning and purpose.

Tonight, we are going straight into the belly of the whale, together. Usually we wait to talk about Jonah until Yom Kippur and we will return to him. But tonight I invite us to see through Jonah's eyes, why our boldest selves are so desperately needed in this world.

To understand why our boldness is needed we first look to see what's in the way. Often we don't believe we are capable, wanted, worthy or needed.

Jonah shows us our humanity. In our truest state we, like Jonah, try to run, hide, deflect, dismiss and most of all, obstinately avoiding our sacred mission. Yet, like Jonah, tonight and over the next ten days, my invitation for each of us is to stand, *lifnai Adonai*, directly in front of our Maker and really see what / who / why what's there is there.

I was not someone who wanted to be a rabbi her whole life. I didn't *play rabbi* as a child, which is apparently a thing. I fled from Jewish summer camp. I hid my acceptance letter to Brandeis. I didn't study abroad in Israel.

When people ask my why I became a rabbi I often say that I wake up each day and commit to it. In many ways rabbinical school, all seven years by the time I was done, especially congregational rabbi-ing is about the hardest and least likely thing I could do. Yet, here I am.

I did feel that I wanted to know people's stories, be helpful in the world, and that teaching was an important way to serve and act and support others to do the same. My Grammy Sybil was a public school substitute teacher till she was 83 years old. Mrs. Solomon could walk into any classroom, oh my did she, even for a day, and lay down the law of love and learning.

So you grandparents out there, step it up, go might just have a rabbi or a cantor in your neighborhood, looking up to you, craving connection, chop liver, pride in identity that

their own parents might not have or be able to offer. We all can be these kind of mentors and friends, unconditionally loving, generous and bold in our sense of ourselves.

And yet, we forget. We forget where we come from. Maybe we never knew in the first place. Like Jonah when we are called, we run to Tarshish, away from Gd's call to help a people.

We let Gd's call go to voicemail. And so it was with Jonah.

V'yehi divar Adonai el Yonah ben Amitie,
The word of the Eternal came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying:

Kum, lech, el Nineveh
Get up and go to Nineveh

Nineveh, a city on the bank of the Tigris River, historically, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, later to conquer the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

When Gd called Jonah, Nineveh's people were acting wickedly and Gd wanted Jonah to call them to repent and return. Know anyone else who is being called to repent?

Rabbi Sheldon Blank, professor of Bible at Hebrew Union College for over 60 years asks, "What is Tarshish?" He says: ...In the story it is anywhere – anywhere but the right place; it is the opposite direction, the direction we take when we

turn our back to our destiny... It is the excuse we give – our rationalizations.”¹

We often say, “No, I can’t. I don’t know enough. I’m not old enough or I’m too old. I’m not strong or pretty enough. I wouldn’t know - I haven’t been married or had children. I don’t own a home or have enough of a pension.” Or, everyone’s favorite: “I don’t have time.” We are experts at excuses.

So we, like Jonah, pay our fair to board a boat, thinking that the sea is wide and we’ll be able to *get away*.

The Hebrew text says that Jonah fled *mi-lifnei Adonai*, “away from the Eternal One’s presence.” Interestingly, with this description we notice that in order to flee from the presence of someone, one first had to have been in that Presence.

Perhaps it wasn’t Jonah’s first rodeo. Perhaps Jonah came last year and all his big plans fell through? Perhaps we can’t even compare ourselves with Jonah because who’s to say that we have ever stood *lifnai Adonai* to begin with?

Jonah did at one point Jonah had stood *lifnai Adonai*, in front of Gd, and audaciously packed his bag and he turned and went in the other direction.

This time of year is about turning. And yet, it depends on which way we turn.

¹ From Mahzor Hadesh Yamenu, edited by Rabbi Ronald Aigen, pg. 676.

Jonah turned away. As we know from our Prophets and Disney, Jonah got on the boat and yet, so did Gd. Gd cast a *ruach gedolah*, a violent storm, at the sea and the ship began to crumble.

The sailor in terror pray to their gds and throw their cargo overboard to lighten the load. Jonah flees to the hold of the ship and falls asleep.

As we know kids never want to sleep. Adults *only* want to sleep. How is this working for us?

My Papa Ben was also liked to disappear. Of blessed memory, *alav ha'Shalom*, he would book himself a ticket to Vegas and call from the airport. As he got older we thought those days are gone.

He was well into his 80's when my Grammy Anne called looking for him. "Where's Benny?! I thought he was just going to the store, but I haven't seen him for hours."

It turned out Papa Ben had gone to the Shilo Inn, a hotel down the street from their house, he had booked a room and was happy as Jonah.

We run and yet, Gd, especially when Her name is Grammy Anne, finds us.

Our relationships with each other are the ways in which we practice relating to Gd. And our way of relating to Gd is how we practice relating to each other.

In *Sefer Yonah*, the Book of Jonah, the captain runs in and tries to wake Jonah, saying, "Get up and cry out to your Gd! Perhaps that Gd will consider us and we won't die."

Get up! Wake up!

The sailors cast lots to see who has brought this upon them and the lots - *purim* - fall on Jonah. Often life only changes when our world flips upside, when it's a matter of life or death, Haman or Mordechai, Ester or Vashti.

In *Sefer Yonah*, and during these Days of Awe, our tradition flips us! The sailors peel back Jonah's mask and ask, "Who are you? Where are you from? Where is your land? To what people do you belong?"

Wait, aren't these the questions we ask ourselves: Who am I, where do I come from, who are my people?

Jonah discloses:

"Ivri anochi, I'm a Hebrew

v'et Hashem Elohai HaShamayim ani yarea, I revere the Eternal, Gd of the Heaven,

We might wonder: Wait a minute? Who's team are you on Mr. Jonah? You go in the get-away boat so fast and now you're using the secret handshake to get back home?!

In Hebrew the word for revere is *yarea*. *Yirah* is fear or awe and this is of course why these days are called *Yamim Noraim*. These are our Days of Awe and Days of Dread. Days of trembling and days of Mystery.

Meanwhile, back on the boat, the sailors also had great fear, *yirah gidolah*, and initially they refuse to throw Jonah over and shed innocent blood. It's contagious this *yirah*, there's a whole community of tremblers or *charadim*, the Hebrew name for those who tremble before Gd. We are these *charadim*, these tremblers.

We fear screwing up again, wasting more time, being stingy or withholding our love from people. Or, perhaps that we have become resigned, cynical, over it. So we gather collectively to respond to our *yirah*, our fear, by making efforts, vows and putting into motion our best efforts, to try to calm the seas.

As Jonah hits the water the sea is calmed. And yet... Gd finds Jonah again. Gd is not convinced that Jonah is on solid ground yet alone solid faith. Gd has just started to enjoy the chase! This time, Gd swallows Jonah up inside a great fish. Jonah goes deeper and deeper. Now in the heart of the sea, in the heart of a great fish, in the depths of the depths.

Karati meZarah li

In my trouble I call out to Gd

Anyone come tonight to call out? I did. I hope you call out. I hope you cry out so loudly from the belly of the whale. I hope you pour out your urgent call.

Only then perhaps:

V'ya'an'nai'ni

And I was answered

Jonah also makes promises, vows and sacrifices. And Gd, eventually commands the fish to spit him out.

Jonah too comes, *lifnai Adonai*, back in front of Gd and eventually he goes to Nineveh. The city repents and even the King removes his garb of awful ways, puts on sackcloth and sits in ashes.

Seeing that Nineveh has done *t'shuvah*, repented, Gd sets aside the decree to destroy the city.

Jonah is outraged and feels cheated! "What!? I refused this mission because, as he says, I knew that you are *El Chanun v'rachum, Erech apayim v'rav hesed* – merciful, compassionate Gd, slow to anger and great in goodness."

Jonah tries a "see I told you so," almost to say, "Ha, Gd! I knew You wouldn't do it and that's why I ran in the first place!

Ultimately, Jonah is put in his place. Gd does this by showing him an increasingly larger context so that he might step up and see the stage on which he is called to act. Stay with us through the end of Yom Kippur and we will return to this idea of the larger context, the stage on which we are called to Be.

In the meantime, this erev Rosh Hashana, I invite us to be in our Jonah. To be in fleeing, frail, fragile, faulty, fallen, fumbling, flawed humanity.

We know that we flee. We run. Yet Gd - whether its your higher instinct or your Grandmother, your sense of nature

or nurture, your doubt or your hope, our tradition calls us together to find each other, to find ourselves anew.

Tonight and over these next ten days we are called, loud and clear for a mission, to be Gd's partners. We are called to shout back - I am here. *Asey Imanu, use me - do with me, make with me, be with me.*

Let me out of the belly of the whale, out of our haze out of our laze. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah we will gather at the shore to toss out our sins, our excess, our shmutz in the ritual of *tashlich*.

Tonight we are reminded that we can't toss out ourselves.

We are called. We stand *lifnai Adonai*, before the Eternal because Gd has plans for us. Gd has a mission for us. Gd is with us and in us.

We wouldn't be here if Gd didn't have faith in us.

We are Jonah, partners with Gd. We might try to run to Tarshish, but Ninevah is our lot.

Jonah is not the only reluctant prophet, Gd has had many to deal with many, including each of us.

So before we head to Tarshish, I want to acknowledge: there is a risk in the encounter. There is a vulnerability in the meeting. And ultimately in that surrender there is opportunity and blessing.

I bless us this year to remember Jonah, as evidence, as a reminder that even when we forget to believe, Gd believes, in us.

It's human to want to run. Yet we come together to remind each other and ourselves, it is time to be bold. Bolder than we might be inclined to be. Bolder than we think we should be or are able to be. Bolder in our courage to live a life called by a purpose and in a covenantal partnership.

With *yirah*, that is reverence and awe, and yet still some fear and reservation, we stand, together, *lifnei Adonai*, before Gd awaiting our assignment.