Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

YOM KIPPUR 2024

Jonah's Journey

BY RABBI DR. MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

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> ***Shipmates, this book, containing only four chapters—*** *four yarns—is one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures. Yet what depths of the soul does Jonah's deep sealine sound! What a pregnant lesson to us is this prophet! What a noble thing is that canticle in the fish's belly! ... But WHAT is this lesson that the book of Jonah teaches?"*

Thus, Melville's Father Mapple passionately preaches in *Moby-Dick*. His question has been pondered by Jews throughout the centuries. Read in its entirety in the synagogue on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, Jonah is the only multi-chapter book of the Bible to be so honored. Indeed, Rabbi Yitzhak Etshalom has suggested that if the brief Torah reading preceding Jonah has little to do with the day, but merely continues where the morning reading left off, this may be precisely in order to emphasize that, in a departure from the usual priorities, the haftarah, or prophetic portion, is in fact the critical text for the occasion.

What, then, makes it so significant, and what lesson does it teach about Yom Kippur?

At first glance, the lesson could not be clearer. Sent to the Assyrian city of Nineveh to foretell its destruction, Jonah, despite himself, ends up inspiring its denizens to repent, and the city is spared. This is precisely the outcome that Jonah himself had most feared—he wanted the sinners to suffer God's punishment, and had acquiesced in his assignment only after having first tried to flee and been forced to endure an underwater ordeal. So Jonah himself had to be taught a lesson—about God's mercy and forgiveness—and at the end of the book this lesson is conveyed by God Himself in so many words.

Is that the reason why Jonah is read on Yom Kippur: namely, to focus our minds on the power of repentance? That is certainly part of the explanation. But numerous other prophetic passages dwell on the same theme, and all of them have the virtue of being briefer. Is the reason then that the book of Jonah emphasizes not just repentance and atonement but the repentance and atonement of Gentiles living in a faraway land? Some, including Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik and the essayist Milton Himmelfarb, have suggested that this is indeed the case, and that the point is for Jews to approach the conclusion of their own day of atonement on a universalist note. But wouldn't Rosh Hashanah, with its emphasis on the entire world's standing in judgment, make a better occasion for such sentiments than Yom Kippur, when the stress is on the Almighty's merciful love for His people?

What each of these discussions tends to overlook is not the end of Jonah but the beginning. For, if the rest of the story makes Jonah a prime candidate for reading on Yom Kippur, the very first chapter makes it the perfect candidate for the day's conclusion.

Let us recapitulate. Seeking to escape God's command by fleeing the Holy Land, Jonah boards a ship bound for Tarshish. When the ship is struck by a storm, the sailors attempt to puzzle out the source of their ill fortune. And here we are presented with the book's most problematic passage:

> And they said every one to his fellow, Come, and let us cast lots, that we may know for whose cause this evil is upon us. So they cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. Then said they unto him, Tell us, we pray thee, for whose cause this evil is upon us; what is thine occupation? and whence comest thou? what is thy country?

> and of what people art thou? And he said unto them, I am Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land. Then were the men exceedingly afraid, and said unto him, Why hast thou done this? *For the men knew that he fled from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them.* [emphasis added]

They knew? Because he had told them? But if they knew from the beginning that he was fleeing from God, why now were they mystified as to the cause of the storm, and why, when the lot fell on Jonah, did they need to know his biography?

In considering this puzzling passage, we should observe that Jonah does not answer all of the sailors' questions about his identity. The only fact he supplies is "*ivri anokhi*," I am a Hebrew. But that is evidently enough.

In his own analysis of the book's first chapter, Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun notes that in the ancient Near East, most people believed in territorial divinities: local gods who exercised tyrannical rule over a country's inhabitants but were powerless beyond its borders. As far as the gods were concerned, an area that was not part of any particular realm was no man's land, a place where one could do whatever he wanted. In the Bible, by contrast, the God of the Hebrews is a God whose power is everywhere. Thus, when Moses informs the Egyptian Pharaoh that the "God of Israel" has demanded the release of His people, and Pharaoh parries by claiming that the deity of a non-Egyptian land is of no relevance to him, Moses proceeds to instruct him otherwise. "The God of the Hebrews has sent us," he declares: that is, a God whose writ is not contained by borders.

A hint to Moses' meaning may lie in the very term "Hebrew," which derives from the verb *la'avor*, to cross over. Abraham is the first to be called *ivri*, no doubt because he crossed over to the land of Canaan from the other side of the Jordan. But there is a theological corollary to this point: Abraham crossed over because the God who addressed him in Mesopotamia told him to, assuring him that He would be with him on the other side. For this is a God Who is not attached to one country because He existed long before countries, a God Who rules the universe because He created the universe. The name "*ivri*" thus connotes one who, believing in this God, asserts that no place on earth is devoid of His presence and providence.

Back to the first chapter of Jonah. It would seem that Jonah told his fellow sailors from the start that he was seeking to flee his God. If this did not disturb them, it was because they were sailing into international waters where the territorial gods had no power. Then, as the storm hits, each cries out to his own god—in the vain hope, perhaps, that the various deities thus summoned might get together and mount an international rescue operation. When that fails, when the lot falls on Jonah, and when they demand to know who he really is—and he tells them—then, stunned and awed, the men finally grasp the true gravity of their situation. The rest of the story, starting with their casting Jonah into the sea, follows in logical progression.

And so we return to what the rabbis may have had in mind in choosing the book of Jonah as the final scriptural reading on Yom Kippur. The sun is beginning to set, and worshippers are scant hours away from returning to their regular lives, where God's presence is not so easily apprehended as it is in the synagogue on the year's most sacred day, and where every temptation exists to gerrymander the divine out of one's daily experience. Here, in Jonah, is the only place in the Bible where the essence of Jewish identity is so succinctly and powerfully summarized.

Ivri anokhi! God is to be found anywhere, at any time. In the words of the American founder John Adams, this doctrine—"of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty sovereign of the universe," which Adams took to be "the great essential principle of all morality, and consequently of all civilization"—constituted *the* gift of the ancient Hebrews, who alone "had preserved and propagated [it] to all mankind." It is the lesson taught by the book of Jonah, and its message to all who hear it on Yom Kippur is that we must live our lives accordingly.

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Depths of Devotion

BY RABBI DR. STUART HALPERN

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In 1865, a blue-whale calf washed ashore near Näset, Sweden. After its death, its skin was preserved with arsenic and mercury chloride, and its body was reconstructed using copper furniture studs. When the whale was displayed at the Museum of Natural History in Gothenburg, its mouth was propped open as if ready to swallow visitors. "Its interior was decked out as a lounge, with wooden benches, red carpet, and a ceiling lined in blue muslin decorated with little gold stars," writes Rebecca Giggs in her recent book, *Fathoms: The World in the Whale*. On special occasions, guests were served dinner and coffee inside the 52-foot-long animal. American tourists liked to have their photos taken in the belly of the preserved beast, praying, as Jonah had done in the Bible. That is until the 1930s, "when two lovers were caught inside the whale, having consummated their passions in its esophagus." The whale's mouth was then closed.

Intrepid tourists are far from the only ones who have been fascinated by the setting of Jonah's prayer. Chapter 2 of the book of Jonah tells us only that "The Lord provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah," where he remained "for three days and three nights," leaving quite a bit to the reader's imagination. In fact, imagining Jonah's uncomfortable predicament as he "called out to the Lord" from the depths turns out to have been surprisingly common among literary modernists.

To Herman Melville's Father Mapple, Jonah's yarn, "one of the smallest strands in the mighty cable of the Scriptures," reaches its apex with Jonah's prayer from the abyss. "What depths of the soul does Jonah's deep sealine sound! What a pregnant lesson to us is the prophet! What a noble thing is that canticle in the fish's belly!" the preacher proclaims. Later in *Moby-Dick*, Jonah is "historically regarded" by way of the real-life religious scholar Bishop John Jebb, who imagined the unfortunate prophet not as "tombed" in the whale's belly but rather temporarily lodged, and having prayed from, somewhere in its mouth. After all, "the Right Whale's mouth would accommodate a couple of whist-tables, and comfortably seat all the players. Possibly, too, Jonah might have ensconced himself in a hollow tooth; but, on second thoughts, the Right Whale is toothless."

Aldous Huxley, in a 1920 poem, depicted the scene even more graphically. Picturing the prophet "seated upon the convex mound of one vast kidney," he describes the gruesome hollow vault of the great fish's mouth through which Jonah's prayer resounds, causing the fish to "spout music as he swims":

> Many a pendulous stalactite
> Of naked mucus, whorls and wreaths
> And huge festoons of mottled tripes
> And smaller palpitating pipes
> Through which a yeasty liquor seethes.

It was the implausibility of a giant sea creature burping up lines like "You cast me into the depths,/Into the heart of the sea … Would I ever gaze again/Upon Your holy Temple?" (Jonah 2:4–5) from an interior passenger that sank any presumption of the Bible's historicity for Clarence Darrow. "But when you read that Jonah swallowed the whale—or that the whale swallowed Jonah—excuse me please," he snarked at William Jennings Bryan during the Scopes Trial, "how do you literally interpret that?" To which Bryan replied,

> When I read that a big fish swallowed Jonah—it does not say whale. … That is my recollection of it. A big fish, and I believe it, and I believe in a God who can make a whale and can make a man and make both what He pleases.

In George Orwell's review of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, Jonah's predicament becomes an allegory for authors like Miller who avoid the political waves buffeting their contemporaries. "There you are," Orwell writes, "in the dark, cushioned space that exactly fits you, with yards of blubber between yourself and reality, able to keep up an attitude of the completest indifference, no matter *what* happens." According to Orwell, such writers rob reality of its terrors by submitting to them. Of Miller, he writes, "all his best and most characteristic passages are written from the angle of Jonah, a willing Jonah. … He has performed the essential Jonah act of allowing himself to be swallowed, remaining passive, *accepting*." Decades later, Salman Rushdie argued that our own times are "whaleless," absent of "quiet corners, there can be no easy escapes from history, from hullabaloo, from terrible unquiet fuss."

The ancient Rabbis, too, couldn't help but imagine what it must have been like for Jonah to offer his devotion from the depths, but, unlike Melville and Huxley, they did not picture what it would be like to be caught in the viscous confines of a fish. Neither did they think, as Orwell did, of Jonah's confinement as an allegory about the individual and society. Rather, the midrashic work *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* describes Jonah entering the fish's mouth "just as a man enters the great synagogue."

> And he stood inside. The two eye-windows were like windows of glass giving light to Jonah. Rabbi Meir said: One pearl was suspended in the belly of the fish and it gave illumination to Jonah, like the sun which shines with its might at noon; and it showed to Jonah all that was in the sea and in the depths, as it is said "Light is sown for the righteous" [Psalms 97:11].

In this rabbinic rendering, the belly of the fish is a shul in which Jonah prays for forgiveness just as the congregation does on Yom Kippur when the book of Jonah is read as evening descends and light—one hopes—is once again sown for the righteous.

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