No Shade for Jonah: Engaging the Other in Challenging Times

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Every High Holiday season, I think about and appreciate how our biblical forebears are depicted not as superheroes but as flawed individuals whose jealousies, rivalries, power plays, and desires are evident, even as we find admirable qualities to emulate. On Yom Kippur afternoon, we read an entire book of the Bible – Jonah – about a particularly flawed prophet.

Jonah is given an assignment by God to warn the gentile people of Nineveh of their impending devastation if they don't repent. Jonah actively refuses to accept this mission; he flees and boards a ship. When Jonah's presence on the boat leads God to whip up a storm that endangers not only Jonah but all the sailors on board, Jonah is sleeping in his cabin, seemingly avoiding accountability.

To his credit, when Jonah realizes that his flight fueled God's wrath in the form of a raging sea, he implores the sailors to throw him overboard to end the storm and save their lives. He famously lands in the belly of a huge fish and prays for deliverance, as he was supposed to instruct the people of Nineveh to do. Only after enduring all of this does he heed God's directive and warn the people of Nineveh. Lo and behold, they take his warning to heart. The people – and even their beasts – fast and cry out to God, leading God to renounce the impending punishment.

We generally assume that this dramatic example of forgiveness is the reason we read this story on Yom Kippur afternoon. We hope our repentance will merit God's complete forgiveness. But I think there is another reason why we read Jonah at this point in the process of repentance, for the story doesn't end there.

In chapter 4, a postscript to the repentance narrative, we learn that Jonah feels angry and upset by the success of his mission. He felt it vindicated his initial impulse of bolting, for, as he had expected, God's compassion overrode God's impulse to punish. Feeling betrayed, Jonah asks God to take his life. In response, God again tries to rouse Jonah from this self-pitying posture. Once Jonah finds a place east of the city where he can observe what was going on from a distance, God provides Jonah with a ricinus plant to "provide shade for his head and save him from discomfort" (Jonah 4:6). The next morning, God creates a worm that causes the plant to wither and then brings an east wind. When the sun rises, it beats down on Jonah, causing him to feel faint. Jonah again tells God he wants to die, but this time God offers a withering critique:

You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should I not care for Nineveh, the great city, in which there are many more than one hundred twenty thousand human beings who do not know between their right hand and their left, and many beasts? (Jonah 4:10–11)

God attempts to provide some perspective, to zoom out and help Jonah see beyond his personal suffering. As the poet Thomas John Carlisle expresses in “Coming Around”:

And Jonah stalked
to his shaded seat
and waited for God
to come around
to his way of thinking.

And God is still waiting
for a host of Jonahs
in their comfortable houses
to come around
to His way of loving.

As Carlisle notes, in helping Jonah see the expansiveness of God’s love, God offers a new way of thinking, a new perspective on the vastness and depth of God’s dominion and concern.

In times of personal suffering, it can be difficult to maintain an awareness of what others are going through. And in times of collective suffering and struggle—a time such as now, when the precipitous rise in antisemitism has exacerbated our sense of vulnerability, we as a people can struggle to remain open and connected too. Understandably, we feel a deeper affinity with those who may share our sense of upset, betrayal, and fear, people who share our values, culture, and beliefs. Many Jews are now feeling a need to turn to one another for support and validation even more acutely.

Yet, in the face of this, the story of Jonah reminds us that it is precisely in our most challenging moments that God invites us to move beyond our comfort zone and show compassion, concern, and understanding for others, just as God wished Jonah had done with the plant and with the people of Nineveh. Building bridges of understanding and caring in our global and interconnected world with members of other faiths, cultures, and political allegiances honors our recognition of God’s love for all and of everyone’s potential to achieve redemption. It also gives us new opportunities for finding common ground with those who are different from us, who can work alongside us toward a better future.

As Jews, we have experienced, throughout our history, many moments of uncertainty, fear, and suffering, but also many times when Jews and Judaism flourished because of the strong ties we built with those around us. Just as Jonah found unlikely allies in the sailors who hoped to save him and in the fish that gave him respite and a fresh start, so, too, must we look for allies – even in unlikely places.

At the end of the book, Jonah doesn’t respond to God’s critique, but I like to imagine that he’s mulling it over as he processes all that he’s just been through. As we listen to this story being chanted near the end of the Days of Awe and our own period of contemplation and reckoning for

our relational missteps, we can appreciate the importance of both internal reflection and engagement with others. This year, I pray that we be granted not only forgiveness for our shortcomings but also the fortitude to engage more generously with others to improve the lot of all of God's creatures.