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*Our Prophets, Ourselves:
Jonah, Judgment, and
the Act of Repentance*

by Rachel Rosenthal

Ronda Angel Arking, Editor

In honor of our grandchildren, Leora, Eli, Elinor, and Aliza, who inspire us to keep working to create an Orthodox world in which they will each be able to live fulfilling religious lives. Thank you to their parents and teachers who help lead the way.

—Audrey & Chaim Trachtman

Our Prophets, Ourselves: Jonah, Judgment, and the Act of Repentance

Rachel Rosenthal¹

If one were to name sympathetic characters in *Tanakh*, it is unlikely that the prophet Jonah would make the list. If ever there were a model for the flawed prophet, Jonah would be the prototype. He is callous, clueless, and closed off to the notion of shades of gray in the world. Indeed, it is easy to list Jonah's faults. He runs away from God in direct opposition to God's command; he laments the successful *teshuvah*, repentance, of the people of Nineveh and the fact that they are not destroyed; and he scolds God because he feels that he has been made to look like a fool. Jonah lives solely inside of himself, unable to consider the larger world as it exists outside of him. Because of this litany of unflattering characteristics, Jonah often arouses harsh judgment within us. We read his story, criticize him for his actions, and congratulate ourselves for not being like him.

In many ways, the message of the book of Jonah seems antithetical to that of Yom Kippur. After God saves the people of Nineveh because of their sincere repentance, Jonah says:

O Lord! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment.²

Rashi highlights Jonah's despair at the people's successful *teshuvah*, explaining that Jonah knew that God would forgive the people if they repented, and therefore feared that he would be seen as a

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² Jonah 4:2.

false prophet in their eyes.³ Never before has God's mercy and compassion been framed so negatively, as a reason to wish for death. Never before has the ability of an entire nation to do *teshuvah* successfully been framed as a cause for mourning! In light of this, Jonah's story seems like a strange one for us to read on Yom Kippur, especially so close to *Neilah*, the closing prayer of the holiday. Why choose such a callous and unapologetic prophet? Why don't we read the story of King David's *teshuvah* after Uriah's death, or Isaiah's promise that redemption will follow repentance? What are we supposed to learn from the story of Jonah, where *teshuvah* and the salvation it brought were lamented?

In the final mishnah of *Masekhet Sotah*, following an extensive litany of ways in which *B'nai Yisrael* had fallen away from *mitzvot* and thus lost their ability to commune with God, R. Pinhas ben Yair brings the following teaching:

Quickness leads to cleanliness; cleanliness leads to purity; purity leads to separation; separation leads to holiness; holiness leads to humility; humility leads to fear of sin; fear of sin leads to religious devotion; religious devotion leads to the Spirit of God. And the Spirit of God leads to the resuscitation of the dead, and the resuscitation of the dead leads to the coming of Elijah, may he be remembered for good, Amen.⁴

On Yom Kippur, our experiences are often framed around the initial items on this list. As we fast and abstain from many of our usual daily activities, we strive to achieve *kedushah*, holiness. However, as R. Pinhas reminds us, these behaviors are not an end in themselves; rather, they are tools to move ourselves closer to humility and toward *ruah haKodesh*, the Spirit of God. By framing *kedushah* as a tool instead of as an end, the mishnah reminds us that we must confront our failures, instead of only lauding ourselves for our successes. We must

³ Rashi on Jonah 4:2.

⁴ Mishnah *Sotah* 9:15.

acknowledge the uncomfortable ways in which Jonah reminds us of ourselves, and we must learn to forgive, rather than condemn him. Only in the moments when we have the humility to admit the uncomfortable reality of our own flaws — instead of focusing on condemning the failings of others — will we be able to hasten the redemption.

In the *shul* where I grew up, every year on Yom Kippur there would be a handout that listed an extra set of *al hets* to be said beyond those traditionally in *mahzor*. The idea was to help the congregation better connect with the liturgy by framing the litany of our sins in the context of our contemporary human experience. There is one that stays with me, and that I think of every year — *Al het she'hatanu lifanekha*, for the sin we have sinned against you by condemning traits in others that we excuse in ourselves.

The choice is within us to decide whether we will condemn or forgive; whether we will focus on others or do the hard work of truly looking at ourselves. As the Rambam reminds us in *Hilkhot Teshuvah*:

Free will is granted to all people. If one desires to turn himself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is his. This is [the intent of] the Torah's statement: "Behold, man has become unique as ourselves, knowing good and evil."⁵ The human species became singular in the world with no other species resembling it in the following quality: that person can, on his own initiative, with his knowledge and thought, know good and evil, and do what he desires. There is no one who can prevent him from doing good or bad.⁶

Teshuvah is a complicated process, but the choice of how — of whether — to do it is only up to us. It is difficult to admit the sins we have committed against others, against ourselves, and against

⁵ *Bereshit* 3:22.

⁶ Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 5:1.

God. Consequently, it is sometimes our instinct to retreat into ourselves and focus on the sins of others. It is true that we are guilty of wrongdoing, we tell ourselves, but perhaps our wrongdoing pales in the face of the sins of those around us. We have stumbled, but it could always be worse — we could be like our neighbor or our colleague. Or, God forbid, we could even be flawed like Jonah. However, these flaws are what make Jonah a profoundly human prophet, one who is more like us than we would care to admit. This is why Jonah makes us uncomfortable, why we are so quick to dismiss and condemn him. His traits are too recognizable, too familiar to us. It is too easy to see Jonah in ourselves, so we push back against the idea that we would — that we could — ever be like him.

Perhaps, then, we do not read about Jonah because he presents a great paradigm of *teshuvah*. Perhaps we read Jonah because our reactions to him can serve as a test of sorts to determine whether we have effectively internalized the lessons of the *teshuvah* that we claim to have done. Perhaps it is not only the story of Jonah itself that is important, but also whether we have developed the capacity to view him with compassion and understanding, rather than anger and judgment. As Israel Salanter said, "Most people worry about their own bellies, and other people's souls, when we all ought to be worried about our own souls, and other people's bellies." May we find a way to worry about our own *teshuvah*, while viewing the sins of others through a lens of compassion. May we find a way to forgive Jonah for his sins and inability to value the *teshuvah* of others. Perhaps that is when we, too, will be forgiven.



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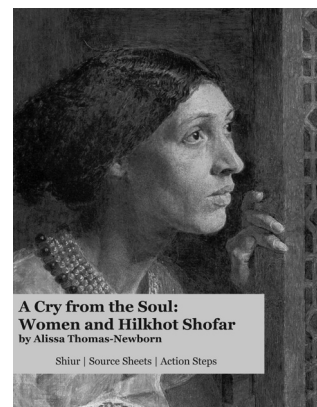
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