

Jonah, Not Noah: Yom Kippur's Prophet

Kol Nidre 5780

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Sesame Street turns fifty this year. I was only six at its debut, way too old and mature for a “little kids’ show,” or so I proclaimed. Fortunately, I have a younger sister, so I could watch her show—just to keep her company, of course.

Sesame Street had a regular feature called, “One of these things is not like the other.” Kids were shown three shoes all the same size and a much larger one, for example, and asked which of those is unlike the others.

We find the same phenomenon in our Sacred Scriptures. Our Bible includes fifteen books of the Prophets which are known by the prophet’s name, like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Among those fifteen, one is entirely unlike the others. Only one of those prophets is successful in rescuing sinners from being annihilated. That prophet is Jonah, whose entire book we shall read as the Haftarah tomorrow afternoon.

Another way that Jonah is unique among the fifteen is that he runs away from his assignment. God has commanded him to prophesy to the corrupt Ninevites, and Jonah doesn’t want to do it. Jonah doesn’t believe that the sinners are capable of changing their behavior, so he decides to shirk his responsibility. Sure, a few other prophets, like Moses,ⁱ initially tell God that they not up to the task. However, none of them attempts to flee on a boat, like Jonah.

Jonah prefers to die rather than serve as God’s prophet: When a storm rages, threatening his vessel at sea, Jonah understands that God has sent the tempest and that his shipmates’ lives are imperiled because of his own dereliction of duty. He urges them to throw him overboard. The pious sailors protest, but he insists. Jonah would never prophesy, except that God sends that giant fish to swallow him up, carry him for three days, and spit him out at Nineveh, the sinful city.ⁱⁱ

Interestingly, the King of Nineveh,ⁱⁱⁱ not Jonah, leads the people to repentance, and they faithfully comply. Their penitence, with God’s gracious acceptance, gives us hope as we resolve to better ourselves this Yom Kippur.

Turns out that while Jonah is unlike the other fourteen prophets with their own books, his story has a lot in common with another biblical narrative most familiar to us. Let’s see if you can guess: Both stories involve storm-tossed boats. But that’s only at the surface. Both promise devastation of a large group of sinful people, none of them Israelites. The more famous story is about a forty-day destruction. Jonah predicts that Nineveh will be overthrown in forty days. You guessed it: Noah and the Flood.

Even the sin of Noah's generation and that of the Ninevites is the same. It is described with the identical Hebrew word, *chamas*,^{iv} translated as "lawlessness" and "injustice."

I had never thought about the similarities between Noah and Jonah until this summer, when I studied with Judy Klitsner, author of *Subversive Sequels in the Bible*.^v

Emphasizing the similarities between Noah and Jonah, Klitsner focuses on the sages who compare Noah unfavorably to Abraham.^{vi} When Noah is told that his fellow human beings, and all but two of every animal species, will be destroyed, what does he do? He builds an ark, just as God has instructed him.^{vii} Noah seems to care only for himself and those closest to him.

By contrast, Abraham is troubled by the plight of others, even sinners. When God tells Abraham of a plan to destroy the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, our patriarch's first reaction is to ask, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the wicked?"^{viii} Abraham even seems to rebuke God for the destructive plan, when he says: "Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the Earth deal justly?"^{ix} Abraham imagines that righteous people can be found, even in sinful Sodom. Noah and Jonah, on the other hand, can't imagine that sinful people might change.

Even though their stories are much alike, the differences make Jonah, not Noah, the appropriate prophet for Yom Kippur.

Klitsner highlights two important distinctions between Noah and Jonah. First, God rules with strict justice at the time of the Flood and doesn't give the evildoers the chance to change. By Jonah's day, God is open to repentance. Second, we have no reason to believe the wicked generation of the Flood to be remorseful. However, the Book of Jonah allows for the possibility that the "wayward population" may "repent and...repair its actions, thereby achieving its own salvation."^x

God treats Jonah very differently from Noah. God instructs Noah to build an ark, consigning every living creature outside that ark to death. Noah, unlike Jonah, is entirely obedient to God's command, but then the request is considerably easier. Noah doesn't need to interact with the sinful people who are going to be destroyed.

Jonah, on the other hand, must prophesy directly to the sinful Ninevites. We are asked to do something similar to Jonah on this eve of Yom Kippur. Our prayer book tonight led us to proclaim, *anu matirin l'hitpalel im ha-avaryanim*, which translates literally: "We grant ourselves permission to pray among sinners." We acknowledge that we and others seated with us here tonight have sinned and must

seek repentance. Uttering these words, we, like Jonah before us, are commanded to invite even the most sinful among us to return to God.

More importantly, God treats the Ninevites differently from the generation of the Flood. God gives the Ninevites a chance to repent, and they respond accordingly. God offers Noah's contemporaries no such opportunity before they perish in the flood.

Perhaps God has learned a lesson from the carnage of the Flood. God is now eager to forgive, a message we need to hear and hopefully believe on Yom Kippur. As we come face-to-face with our own sins and those of others, we may derive hope that forgiveness may be found anywhere, even in the blackest places of our hearts, even for those debauched Ninevites.

Klitsner entitles her chapter on Noah and Jonah, "The Wings of the Dove."

After the flood, Noah sends a dove—in Hebrew, a *yonah*—out of the Ark, to learn if dry land has appeared. First, the dove returns empty-beaked. Noah sends the *yonah* a second time, and it returns, an olive branch in its beak, a sign of hope for the future. The third time, the dove finds a place to make its home on land and does not return. Only then, Noah knows that he and his family may safely emerge from the Ark.^{xi}

But here's the punchline. *Yonah* doesn't only mean dove. *Yonah* is Hebrew for "Jonah." That event near the end of the flood story may point directly to the forgiveness found in the Book of Jonah.

Yonah is the symbol that a better future may be ahead—when that *yonah* is the dove, signaling time to exit the Ark, and when *Yonah* is a recalcitrant prophet who successfully brings the Ninevites to God.

Tonight, we are here to confess that all of us have done wrong, and all of us now have the opportunity to repent. The possibility for our moral rehabilitation remains very much alive in the coming year, even as it was for the Ninevites.

Let each of us find hope in the *yonah*, Noah's dove and the outcome of the Book of Jonah. Let us face the year ahead with that hope: If the Ninevites could repent, then surely we are capable of doing much better than we have. Let each of us act decisively on that hope.

Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 3:11, 4:1, and 4:10.

ⁱⁱ Jonah 1:4-2:11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jonah 3:6-9.

^{iv} Genesis 6:11, Jonah 3:8.

^v Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other*, Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2011.

^{vi} See, for example, Rashi to Genesis 6:9.

^{vii} Genesis 6:22.

^{viii} Genesis 18:23.

^{ix} Genesis 18:25.

^x Klitsner, p. 2.

^{xi} Genesis 8:8-13.