

**Matthew Baigell**

*2004 Yom Kippur Sermon*

## **Book of Jonah**

I have listened to the story of Jonah on many Yom Kippur afternoons and have heard many interpretations, all interesting and valid, and some, in good Jewish tradition, with totally opposite explanations—as it should be. When Niles asked me to add my penny's worth, I immediately called one of my brothers-in-law, a formidable Talmudic scholar and a true son of Torah, who told me in two or three sentences what one of his teachers, Rabbi Joseph Solevechick, told him at Yeshiva University. I base my comments on what he told me.

The first thing to keep in mind is that there are two parts to consider—Jonah's activities and those of the people of Nineveh. The first question is why is the story of Jonah read toward the end of the Day of Atonement? What is there about it that makes it an obvious choice? Obviously, it has to do with repentance, but of a sort that Niles has discussed with us both last year and this year. That is, repentance is not just about paying lip service, but of acting upon it in our daily lives. There is a feel good level laced with good thoughts when we say we will repent, and then there is the difficult matter of actually fulfilling and completing the tasks set before us. I don't know if Niles knows Rabbi Solevechick's interpretation, but it is basically one and the same thing.

Now, nobody knows exactly when Jonah's prophecy was written, perhaps in the mid sixth century before the common era, that's around the year 550. There is mentioned in Second Kings, a prophet named Jonah, son of Amittai, who lived two hundred years earlier, around 750. But nobody knows if that is our Jonah. That Jonah might even have been alive when the Assyrians, whose capital was Nineveh, conquered the Kingdom of Israel in 722, causing the first Jewish diaspora. These Assyrians, whose home was in northern Iraq, were known to be cruel and savage.

I mention these dates because chronology seems to work with rabbinic interpretations. Even if it does not, many believe that Jonah had powers of prophecy and would have known about the future attacks on Israel or perhaps he witnessed them. Some commentators believe that this is why Jonah argued with God, even rebelled against God, before submitting to God's will when he was asked to tell the people of Nineveh to repent. Because he knew, as a prophet, that they would later contribute to the downfall of Israel. So hostile were the Jews to Assyria that not only Jonah but the prophets Nahum and Zephaniah in their books of prophesy consider with some relish the ultimate destruction of Nineveh itself, which took place in 612.

This helps explain Jonah's harsh comments which we just heard. "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." In most prophetic passages of this sort, there is usually some mention of repentance as well as Divine judgment tempered by mercy. Not with Jonah. Probably, he refused to invoke God's mercy because he knew that the Ninevites, or Assyrians, would one day oppress Israel. Jonah was ultimately unconvinced of their sincerity even though the people of Nineveh dressed in sackcloth and their king sat in ashes. They paid lip service to Jonah's words, but he knew they could not be trusted to fulfill whatever were the obligations of their repentance.

According to Rabbi Solevechick, the people of Nineveh simply mouthed the words of repentance. Dressing in sackcloth was for them merely a sham. Or, as my brother-in-law told me, when Solevechick discussed the Jonah story in class he was still so furious with the Ninevites that he shouted out in a harsh voice "*m'ret un m'ret un m'ret.*" Meaning "they said and they said and they said." But what was their repentance worth? Nothing, because of their subsequent actions against the Israelites. They deserved God's punishment, not redemption.

One can agree or disagree with the severity of Solevechick's judgment, but his larger point was this. The story of Jonah is not just about Jonah carrying out God's will, but equally about the people of Nineveh. We are not Ninevites, but true repentance is not based on lip service, going

back on your word, or breaking promises. So why is the story Jonah read this afternoon? First, it is to remind us not to make promises in vain. And, second, on this difficult day of Yom Kippur when our lives are held in judgment, it is about the fact that we should be reminded that true repentance is not easily achieved by a handful of promises or good intentions. It is in some sense a covenant we make with ourselves, with our community, and, if we are so inclined, with God. It requires continuous application and the kinds of commitments Niles has asked of us. It is interesting to note, as Niles mentioned to me a few weeks ago, that the half-Torah for this morning's service is taken from Isaiah 57 which also calls for active moral behavior on our parts. Of course, if we fail, Niles will not accuse us of being Ninevites, but rather my sense is that he is asking us to understand how serious and personal are the intentions and meanings of the Jonah story and, certainly, the purpose of Yom Kippur, and I am framing Niles' intentions in light of this particular interpretation.

Shanah Tovah and Gamar Hatimah Tovah. A healthy year and a good seal.

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