

Jonah Words

Jonah words: for Yom Kippur afternoon service
By Joann Green Breuer

Jon Lipsky, of blessed memory,
stood at this podium two years ago. He devised a charming game with the
congregation playing the role of Jonah.
Thanks to Jon for spurring me to consider this religious fable though my own
sensitivity.
And thanks to the many rabbis who guide my thoughts,
and shape their expression.

Yom Kippur, today, is our DAG GADOL, our big fish.

Jonah turns away from the world, his destiny, his duty.
Jonah turns inward.
Jonah returns to the world, with renewed commitment to fulfill that destiny, which he
does.
But, the story does not end there.
There is no guarantee of happiness.

Jonah has a voice.
His destiny, his duty, is to embrace the courage of speech. A small
thing, a voice,
but even as creation was spoken into being,
Jonah's voice can change a city, and himself,
even if he may not be sure what he is saying....

The religious fantasy, which is the Book of Jonah,
is a story of changes.
Jonah is asked to speak to the enemy.
If, as the adage claims, a hero is one who changes an enemy into a
friend, then Jonah is asked to become heroic.
A lot to ask of anyone.

Running from responsibilities is all too human.

It is hard to speak out.
Especially if, as Jonah, one is to called speak to the enemy, among the
enemy.

A chaos, a sea of doubt, deters Jonah, as it may us. If there is
destiny, can we recognize it?
Can we, should we, create our own destiny?
Must we follow our destiny, if we think we know it, even at the
cost of discomfort,

self sacrifice or the sacrifice of others? Is martyrdom ever egoistic?

In our brief lives we cannot foretell, let alone determine, consequences. how then can we distinguish self serving justification from altruistic action?

Seven Hebrew words can make a new world.

"In forty days, Nineveh will be undone - overturned" or, as Rabbi Marc Brettler suggests: not 'overturned', but "In forty days Nineveh turns over"

Jonah himself may have misinterpreted his call to Nineveh. Jonah assumes destruction, but the city embraces teshuvah.

This mythic tale bears a powerful charge:

Change, Jonah's, like Nineveh's, like nature's itself, is possible. More, it is necessary for life. Else, we shrivel and die. Therefore, if we are to believe anything,

it is our obligation to believe in the possibility of change.

The metaphors are well known to Jewish, Christian, and Moslem traditions: three stages:
crisis: regeneration: hope:

Crisis: shadowy evening's chaotic sea of denial - the floundering
ship headed in no direction

Regeneration: night's darkness in the isolate womb, the belly of
the beast,
suspension between decision and neglect, time of
transformation,

Hope: the casting out into re-birth,
day's light of awareness of obligation, acceptance
of responsibility,
the horizon of adulthood

Jonah is asked to be responsible, surprisingly,
not to his own community, but to Nineveh, the stranger, the enemy.
This is not the first call of a Jewish responsibility,
to speak to the nations.

Quite a burden for such a small minority.

But, each individual is a small minority among the populace... each individual
has a special voice.

each individual matters.

the dag gadol / the big fish
has existed since the instant of creation.
It is an essential arc of the cycle of life.
It is the necessary, nurturing spirit-space
within each of us, imperfect creatures that we are,
that we may be re-constituted in courage, commitment, wisdom.

Yom Kippur is a difficult privilege.
Yom Kippur is the opportunity to turn from,
and to turn to.
The DAG GADOL, the big fish, is YOM KIPPUR.

The story begins again.
Jonah is given another chance. He takes it.

Unlike Jonah, today we do not descend and emerge alone. We echo his journey
as a community, a public discomfort, and comfort.
The narrative of Judaism is equally, importantly,
at once personal and communal.

Anyone can repent:
 Jonah, who changes direction, literally.
 G-d, who repents of the evil He said he would do - Nineveh, the city, hearing
 and heeding Jonah's words.

To repent is not to undo.
It is turning to the past, to evaluate, and turning to re-form
a future. Not to forget,
but to gain the strength to forego.

Is it worth it?

Jonah has done what he felt he must. The story is not
finished.
Happiness is not guaranteed.
Jonah is not happy.

Beside a vine, Jonah contemplates creation. He complains.
He questions.

Is Jonah unhappy that Nineveh is saved?
That is the part of which Jonah is able to speak. But we know how
difficult it is for Jonah to speak.