

## Yom Kippur 5786/2025, Rabbi Mark Wildes, MJE

### The Perfect Storm (Yom Kippur Day)

At Mincha on Yom Kippur afternoon, when we are hungry and tired, the Torah throws us one of the strangest stories in the entire Tanach (Hebrew Bible): the story of Yonah and the whale.

G-d tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and calls its people to repent. Jonah runs away in the opposite direction, boards a ship, and in the middle of the sea, a storm breaks out. The sailors cast lots and discover Jonah is the cause of the storm. At his request, they throw him overboard, the sea calms, and Jonah is swallowed by a great fish. He prays inside, spats out, and finally fulfills his mission — saving Nineveh.

Why do we read this story on Yom Kippur? What does it have to do with us on the holiest day of the year?

Rav Soloveitchik teaches us to read this story to remind ourselves of our responsibility to *all* humanity. The people of Nineveh were *not* Jewish, and yet it was the duty of a Jewish prophet to help them improve their ways, reminding us of our responsibility to be concerned not only with our own morality, but with the whole world.

But there's another message from this story that I want to focus on today on Yom Kippur, an idea I heard from a contemporary rabbi - Rabbi Joey Haber.

First, a few questions: The opening verse of Sefer Yonah refers to Jonah as *Yonah ben Amitai*. Who is Yonah exactly, and who is Amitai? The Torah also tells us that when Yonah was on the ship and the storm was raging, he goes to sleep. How could Yonah sleep during the storm, especially when he knows it's happening because of him! Also, the Torah says Yonah was swallowed by a *dag*, a male fish and then again by a *dagah*, a female fish, so what kind of fish swallowed Jonah, a male or female fish? And lastly, when Yonah gets swallowed up into the mouth of the fish, the Talmud says it was *k'adam shenichnas l'beit hakeneset* — “like a man going into synagogue”. What does that mean?

During the time of the First Temple, one of the earliest prophets was Eliyahu HaNavi — Elijah the Prophet. Elijah was forced to run for his life from the wicked King Achav. While hiding, Eliyahu was cared for by a woman who risked everything to keep him alive. In return, Eliyahu blessed her that she would merit to have a child.

And she did. But then tragedy struck, and the child died. In anguish, the mother turned back to Eliyahu and cried: “*You blessed me with this child, and now he's gone?*” Eliyahu prayed, and miraculously, the child's life was restored. In shock and awe, the woman declared: “*Ata yadati* — now I know — *ki ish Elokim ata* — that you are truly a man of G-d, *u'dvar Hashem beficha emet* — and the word of G-d in your mouth is truth.”

That child, our Sages tell us, was Yonah — Jonah the prophet. And his mother's name? Amitai — from the word *Emet*, truth — because she saw that G-d's word through Eliyahu was true.

Yonah's whole life was about resurrection, second chances: he shouldn't have been born, yet he was. He died and was brought back to life. He's thrown into a raging sea yet survives. He's swallowed by a fish, yet lives. Nineveh was destined for destruction, but Yonah saved it.

That was Yonah's unique talent and mission — to bring others back to life. That was his gift.

We all have some kind of talent, a unique gift, and like Yonah, we often run away from using it. Yonah flees to the opposite direction of Ninveh, of where he could use his gift to help others and so, G-d sends this storm to follow Yonah, to get him to use his talents and gifts. Rashi says the storm *only* impacted the ship Yonah was on. All the other boats in the ocean felt nothing from the storm, only Yonah's. And when all the passengers on Yonah's ship drew straws to determine who on the boat was the cause of the storm, the lottery fell on Yonah. They conducted this lottery several times and it always fell on Yonah. He was the reason for the storm.

That storm was for Yonah, to get him to grow, to use his gift and actualize his potential, and in each of our lives G-d brings a storm which is also *just for us*. A challenge that that is uniquely ours, and that we naturally want to run away from. Maybe it's a family member that's creating a problem, maybe it's a financial difficulty, a stumbling block in my ability to build relationships or in my career dreams. It's a challenge that is unique to me. We all have it, and it feels like Hashem sent this storm right in our direction.

To confront this challenge, we naturally focus our energies on getting *out* of the challenge. On getting *out* of the problem. But that problem, that challenge is for us. That storm is a perfect storm made just for us to be able to grow. But like Yonah we want out of the challenge, so we run.

And that's how we often approach prayer. We look at prayer as a way out of our problem. I stub my toe I pray to Hashem to heal the toe. I lose some money - I pray to G-d to get the money back. I have a problem; I pray my way out of the problem. But that's *not* what Tefillah is about. Prayer is why we're in the problem in the first place! The Talmud asks why all the Matriarchs were initially unable to have children? Sarah took many years to have a child, Rebecca and Rachel, all of them struggled with fertility. Why? The Talmud answers: *Hakadosh Baruch Hu mitaveh l'tefilatan shel tzadikim* – "because G-d desires the prayers of the righteous".

Wait, I thought prayer was the way out of the problem? It's just the opposite. G-d creates the challenge so that we pray. The challenge is there to help us grow in our connection to G-d.

We see this when G-d created the world, He created the grass on the third day of creation, but the grass didn't grow until man was later created on the 6th day and he prayed. G-d withheld the rain until Adam would pray for it because G-d creates the situations to get us to pray so we can develop from those crises in our lives.

That explains why the Torah says Yonah was first swallowed up by a *dag* – a male fish and then a *dagah*, a female fish. Because in a male fish there's lot of room for Yonah to move round so he didn't feel the need to pray. So, as Rashi explains, G-d causes the male fish to spit Yonah out and to be swallowed by a female fish which has babies inside and now there's less room and so Yonah feels the need to pray.

Hashem wants us to grow by having a relationship with us and so He sends us these tailor-made storms - just us. Our challenges are meant to be used as the very impetus for spiritual growth and connection. And so, instead of figuring out how to get *out* of the challenge, we need to figure out how to use it to become better. Outside a certain gym, they have this awesome sign: *If it doesn't challenge you, it doesn't change you*. That's why G-d sends us storms because that's how we can create the new "us" for the new year - through the challenge, through the storm. Yom Kippur is Hashem putting us in that "female fish." He's saying: *I don't want you to just escape. I put you here because I believe you can grow here. Don't waste the challenge — use it to transform yourself*.

Find your challenge and you'll find your change. Rabbi Yehoshua Neuwirth, the author of the *Shmirat Shabbat K'hilchata*, one of the most widely used guides to Shabbat observance was a teenager during the Holocaust. While in the concentration camps, he was forced by the Nazis to perform hard labor and could not observe

Shabbat. For a young yeshiva student who loved Torah, this was crushing experience. Young Yehoshua resolved that if he survived, he would devote his life to strengthening Shabbat observance for Jews everywhere. After he was liberated, he studied under great masters and authored this incredible book that has helped tens of thousands of Jews improve their Shabbat observance. Rabbi Neuwirth took his storm and used it to grow.

Using our storm also applies on the collective level. In an army unit of the IDF just before Rosh Hashana of this year, they decided to make a celebration. Each soldier put 50 shekels into a big box, wrote his name on an envelope, and placed it inside. The plan was to hold a raffle: whoever's envelope was chosen would win all the money. There were about 300 soldiers. That means 50 shekels times 300 — a total of 15,000 shekels. There was also a Jew from the United States who said: "Whatever amount is collected; I will double it." That brought the total to 30,000 shekels (like \$8,000 - \$9,000), all inside the box.

Each soldier wrote down his name. But one soldier thought to himself: Maybe I won't write my own name. Among them was a soldier who had been badly wounded when he stepped on an explosive. His legs had been torn apart, and he was now facing a long and painful recovery. So, this soldier said to himself: He surely needs the money more than I do. Instead of writing his own name, he wrote down the name of the wounded soldier. And then he prayed: Please, let my friend win.

When the winning envelope was pulled out, the name that was read was indeed that of the wounded soldier. The friend who had written his name was so moved. Everyone cheered and clapped; it was incredibly emotional.

But at the end of the evening, when they opened the box and looked through all the envelopes, they discovered that almost every single soldier had done the same thing. Every slip of paper had the same name.

That's what Am Yisrael does with challenges, with the storm of October 7th. We've used it to grow. Some have used that storm to find their Yiddishkeit, like Agam Berger who began reciting brachot and praying while in Hamas captivity while others right here in NYC who in response to the increased anti-Semitism have stepped up their own Jewish identity and religious observance. And that's what we must endeavor to do in the coming year. To convert our challenges to opportunities for growth.

And that explains why the Talmud says when Yonah gets swallowed up into the mouth of the fish, the Talmud says it was *k'adam shenichnas l'beit hakeneset* — "like a man going into synagogue" - why a synagogue? Because wherever that challenge is for you in your life - it could be in your office, in your living room, could be in a hospital, finding out your new tech start up is going belly up. If that's the place you feel the storm, and that's the place you realize G-d is giving you a challenge to grow and that's the place you feel the need to pray - to turn to Hashem then THAT place becomes your synagogue. That becomes your shul, your MJE, your opportunity to grow into the person Hashem meant you to become. It may happen to you at work, in a relationship that goes south, but that's your synagogue!!!

My bracha to all of us, this Yom Kippur, is that we have the clarity to see our storms for what they are, the courage not only to endure them, but to transform them — to use our struggles as the very path to becoming the people we were meant to be. In that merit, may we all be blessed with a year of true meaning, deep growth, and the sweetness of a new beginning.