

# JONAH'S MITZVAH REWARD

By Magidah Khulda bat Sarah & Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

The day departs. . . . The gates are closing. . . . It's an emotional time for a lot of us. But emotion isn't what gets the job of *teshuvah* or repentance, done.

What does?

Well, if you're old enough to remember what the southern police officer in the movie "Alice's Restaurant" said to the guy on the "Group W" bench, and even if your not: "Boy, what you need is *rehabilitatin!*"

*Rehabilitation* is why we read from the Book of Jonah at this time, for it brings to our minds the nature and power of repentance. It brings to our minds the return of a people to God out of the deepest depths into which they have sunk.

And yet, what do we know about this guy named Jonah?

Not much. We know nothing more than the four chapters we read regarding his mission to Nineveh, unless you count the few words spoken about him in II Kings (14:25), which tell us that King Jeroboam II restored the border of Israel in accordance with the word of God, as spoken by God's servant, Jonah, the son of Amittai.

We do know that Jonah was suddenly commissioned by the way in which the verse is framed, without any introduction. According to tradition, his commissioning took place during the time of the most exuberant national joy in the Temple in Jerusalem. And yet, Jonah flees.

Why?

It helps us to keep in mind that this mission to Nineveh was Jonah's first. He is a prophet in training. And our Haftarah presents to us his education—and *ours*.

Isn't it interesting that we are in synagogue on Yom Kippur to be educated about repentance from the example of the *Ninevites*, who were not only *not* Jewish, but idol-worshipping heathens. It is characteristic of the broadmindedness and universality of Judaism that the Torah does not hesitate to teach us, using their example.

But then we also learn from the example of Jonah. Jonah was to proclaim the downfall of the mighty city of Nineveh, the brilliant capital of the world-embracing empire of Assyria.

But why should we learn from Nineveh?

It wasn't even Jewish! But it was a very large city. According to our Haftarah, it would take three *days* to cross it. And Nineveh was of such far-reaching influence that by its lead, God's pur-

poses could be furthered or hindered. Moreover, the Creator's love for the creation is not just a love for *us*, it is a universal love that looks on every creature and every creature's thriving as an object of special care.

So if that's the case, then why doesn't Jonah want to go there?

In all fairness to Jonah, we have to realize that sending him to Nineveh is kind of like sending one of us to Las Vegas to preach to organized crime. That's how bad it was. So our Haftarah says about the Ninevites that they lie, they cheat, they steal—they're cruel to everyone and everything.

And Jonah is further afraid that he will be sent there, not with a threat of what would happen if they persisted in their bad behavior, but rather—as afterwards turned out to be the case—that he would be sent to proclaim an unconditional destruction of the city—a done deal.

Now Jonah, being aware of God's ways, would not for one moment doubt that even an unconditional sentence could be withdrawn from sinful people if they truly repented. But the problem is that Jonah knows people. He knows that once the danger has passed and their fears are over, they will call him as a *liar*.

Of course, a true prophet doesn't let that stop him. When it comes to the demands of God, even if it means sacrificing his own honor, he may not shrink back from challenging others. But Jonah had not yet reached that height.

So he hurries to leave the land of Israel, before God can give him the contents of his mission as a direct command. Not that he has any ridiculous idea that he can flee from God. But, apparently, he does have the ridiculous idea that he can withdraw from God's mission. He's a beginner prophet—what can you say.

And so he flees. We all know the story. He boards the only ship he can find, one bound for the islands of the sea, to Tarshish. A terrible storm comes up. And he and his fellow sailors soon realize that he is the cause of this storm. And so, at his insistence, they lower him into the sea, and there a great fish swallows him.

It sounds like a fairy tale and yet, as he cries out to God from inside the fish, his cries sound so much like our own. Both of us having once nearly drowned, we can understand where he's coming from.

Who among us has not, at some time, perhaps today, cried out from the depths of our own despair, from a place where no one can reach us? Who has not said, like Jonah: “Mountain deep did I sink. The bottom seemed to hold me. My soul was wrapped in darkness. I thought I would never again come before your presence, oh God. I thought the earth was closing in on me forever. But then, out of the depths of the sea, with all the longing of my heart, I sought You, and you answered me. From inside the grave I cried, and You heard my voice. You heard my prayer. And You restored my life. What I have promised You—I will do.” (Jonah 2:7-10)

And so he does. He goes to Nineveh. And Jonah’s words in the name of the Invisible God make a deep impression on these idol-worshippers. He causes great agitation in their hearts. In fact, he only gets about a third of the way through the city, and already his words have set the whole population on fire.

And from their own initiative, the people proclaim a fast and call for repentance. The king leaves his throne, takes off his royal robes, clothes himself in sackcloth, and sits in the dust. The order is issued: All are to turn back from their evil ways and return what is wrongfully in their hands. And so they do. And our Haftarah tells us that God saw their deeds and decided not to destroy them. (Jonah 3:10)

You’ll notice that it doesn’t say that God saw them inflicting themselves with suffering. And it doesn’t say that God saw how devoutly they prayed. It says that God saw their *deeds*. So changing what we *do* is the real nature of *teshuvah*. That is what is required of us. That is what we learn from the example of the Ninevites.

But what do we learn from Jonah?

Jonah’s first mission, to save a great city, was completely successful. Now, you’d think that he would have been really happy. But he wasn’t. Instead, he was angry.

Maybe he didn’t think that the people were truly sorry. Or maybe he thought that they would call him a liar again because his prophecy didn’t come true. But when God asks him, “So, to do good upsets you?” (Jonah 4:4) Jonah doesn’t answer. In silence he leaves the city and camps outside of it.

There, overnight, God makes a gourd tree grow up over Jonah to shade his head and make him more comfortable. And Jonah is very happy about that. But the next morning God makes a worm that attacks the gourd tree and it dies. And Jonah decides that he would rather die than live.

And God responds: “So! You have pity on the little gourd-tree. And you think it’s only right to spare its life, even though you didn’t do any work to make it grow. But for the great city of Nineveh with more than one hundred and twenty thousand human beings, and innocent children and animals, you have no pity?” (Jonah 4:10-11)

Again, Jonah didn’t answer. Perhaps, it was a rhetorical question. But in case we’re inclined to be harsh with Jonah, we should remember that, for someone just setting himself up as a prophet, if what he prophesied did not happen, he was liable to be thought of as a “false prophet.”

And there could easily have been, among the hundreds of thousands of people in Nineveh, individuals who would call him a lying imposter and incite the people against him.

Moreover, it is quite possible that the words of our Haftarah refer to actual harm that Jonah suffered. If we doubt it, we can remember the horrible mishandling that proven prophets, such as Isaiah or Jeremiah, had to endure from degenerate Jews. We can remember that Jeremiah may have been stoned to death for telling the truth.

So we shouldn’t be surprised if Jonah, as a Jew who had brought the mighty non-Jewish Nineveh, the brilliant Assyrian capital, completely out of its own control, and now is exposed as an apparent liar, might well be subject to serious persecution and violence.

Nonetheless, what God required then was a person who was ready to sacrifice himself to challenge his fellow-creatures. And so does God require of *us*. We are given the wherewithal to get the job done. But we don’t get a reward for it. God doesn’t promise us a rose garden.

As our great sage Malbim (Rabbi Meir Lob ben Jehiel Michael, 1809-1879) has said, “Do not imagine that there is a reward for a mitzvah.” The only reward is that, like Jonah, we are brought near to God in doing it, which as our sages tell us, is the greatest good of all.

Click [here](#) for more congregational development and organizing tools.

Help support the work of Gather the People with a tax-deductible donation by clicking [here](#)!