

Neilah 2016 – a meditation on the book of Yonah

Dvar Torah – Mandi Katz

I love this hour.

There is something wonderfully uplifting being 24 hours in to this time out from the suburban, pedestrian natures of our lives. We are 24 hours into something sacred, separate from the rest of our life – 24 hours into a process of cheshbon nefesh, taking account, being in community.

Much of the imagery and language of neilah is of finality – of closing gates, and books to be sealed but with all the sense of judgment and resolution, we also know that life will continue and that as soon as the book of life closes, it will reopen – if the sound of the yamim noraim is a wail, its shape is circular – that things continue on and on and beginnings and endings are marked but they merge, and just as soon as the shofar blows we sing about next year.

To take us into this last hour I want to share some thoughts on the Book of Yonah which Lionel read so beautifully. Yonah is both enigmatic and intriguing. It is often caricatured - a man living inside a fish for three days before being spat out and it is often told as a moralising story of the power of repentance, but I'd like to share a more impressionistic reading of this sparsely written tale that reflects the themes of the yamim noraim.

Yonah is first a story that acknowledges our spiritual and emotional vulnerability alongside the physical fragility so clearly described in the machzor, of how we react when life challenges us and when taking action feels hard or pointless.

Yonah is called by God to go to the town of Nineveh and to admonish its people to change their ways and stop sinning - literally he is asked to shout at them to repent, to change - but he refuses to do so. We hear here echoes of Avraham's argument with God to save Sodom and Gomorrah, except reversed – Yonah, unlike Avraham, doesn't want any part of saving people who have sinned, and does not accept the mission, instead he decides to run away from God. In keeping with his name – Yonah means dove - he takes flight.

But it's not an upwards journey, he doesn't become a loftier version of himself. Yonah's flight from what God asks, has a downward trajectory – the text tells us that goes down to Jaffa and buys a ticket on a boat to Tarshish. Once at sea a terrible storm comes along and again he descends to the ship's hold to sleep - he just can't face what God has asked him to do. But as most of us know – while sleep can make problems feel more manageable - it tends not to solve things – and the storm

gets worse. The sailors on deck cast lots to work out who is bothering the gods of weather, and Yonah is identified as the problem.

So they wake him and ask him a whole lot of questions – who are you? What do you do for a living? Why is this happening to you?

And Yonah tells them – I am a Hebrew, and I fear the God who made heavens and earth, and he tells them to throw him overboard but they are good men; instead they try to row back to shore but the storm is too violent, and finally in despair they cry to the Hebrew God and cast him overboard.

And now a quick fast forward past the best known but least interesting bit – Yonah is swallowed by a big fish – and after three days of what the requires us to imagine as terrifying discomfort inside the fish, he turns to God in some strange mix of gratitude and resignation prayerfulness and is spat out by the fish and again God tasks him with saving the people of Nineveh and this time he accepts the mission. And the people are saved after three days of repentance. A tidy tale of the power of teshuva. Right?

No because it doesn't end here and it's only at this juncture that we begin to get an understanding of Yonah's objection, the key tension in this tale.

Here's the thing – what Yonah objects to is to God's forgiveness and mercy.

He expresses his fury to God - "Oh God isn't that just what I said when I was still in my own country? This is why I fled to Tarshish. For I knew that you are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in loving kindness, renouncing evil".

Yonah doesn't want God to be all forgiving, he is angry at this abundance of compassion and forgiveness - and while it is shocking in its own way, we also understand it. We too know that there is something deeply unfair about evil going unpunished as there is about goodness being unrewarded. And especially in times of trauma and loss, it feels absurd to us to see that chessed – loving kindness – is as apparently arbitrary as loss and pain.

Where is the evidence that divine compassion works fairly? - where is the truth, the fairness that determines who is hungry, a victim of conflict, or crime? Who is in pain, or grieving deep loss, whose children are struggling, who is ageing with difficulty, who has been injured and undone by accident, or is facing illness, who has family conflicts that feel overwhelming, who is struggling to provide for their family, who feels isolated, unsupported, unloved?.

We understand why Yonah despairs at the task of being an agent of easy mercy – why should the people of Nineveh get a second chance when so often there is no first chance.

And so we have a glimpse of why Yonah has been slipping away – compared to the sailors who in the face of the choice between death and life, take action and try to resolve things, and shout to their gods, to the Hebrew God, Yonah prefers sleep, even death.

The machzor has a very different prescription for our encounter of the chaos and unpredictability of the world. "Teshuvah, Tefilah and Tzedakah" we are told.

Repentance - Self knowledge and the desire to be our better selves.

Prayer – the crying out, the will to live

Charity - doing good thing, taking action in the world

Repentance, Prayer and Charity transform the harshness of our destiny."

The machzor urges us to shout out, live as if life is anything but random. Our tradition demands us to partner with the divine in finding a way – in almost any circumstances - to choose life with all its chaotic fullness – grace and suffering alike. That is the work of this day – there is stillness but not silence – Yom Kippur is our moment of standing between life and death, and choosing life in a cry, in song and prayer.

And the story has one more enigmatic episode – God stages a drama of life and death. As Yonah is sitting under a booth in the heat of the day, a gourd appears from nowhere and provides Yonah with shade. For the first time in the tale Yonah is animated – with joy at this unexpected blessing. But just as quickly, God sends a worm and a hot wind, and his joy is followed by despair and again he asks for death – "I am ANGRY to death" he yells at God.

And the last words of the story are a question from God– "You pitied the gourd which you did not work for, and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and which perished overnight. And should I not pity Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120, 000 human beings who do not know their right hand from their left, and many cattle?"

The story of Yonah sits with what we have been reading all day – that even in these days of awe full of images of justice and consequences – hine yom hadin, the balance between justice and mercy is tipped towards mercy. Judaism is often characterised as a tradition of harsh justice. But the overarching theme of this day is that our tradition always offers the possibility of forgiveness where we have true intentions for improvement and change.

Sometimes in our lives, like Yonah, we experience this as meaningless, frighteningly random rather than as graciousness and compassion.

But this text resonates with my own experience that when I least deserve compassion and kindness is when I need it most, and when it is most likely to change me, to move me. When I am most lost, most like a being who doesn't know my left from my right, is when I most need loving kindness. And that's the lesson I take from Yonah – the rightful place of kindness, the idea that each day is a new day, of second chances and compassion.

God's last word in this story is a question which isn't answered in the text – our tradition has more than one response to our lived experience that the balance between mercy and justice in the world is all too often out of whack.

The enigma of Yonah will have to be answered outside the narrative, in our lives, and differently for each of us.

My prayer for myself, for my family, for this kehilla is that the next hour is a harbinger of deep compassion, of kindness to ourselves in our reckoning with what we are capable of, and kindness to the people in our lives as we step back into the life of work, and tasks, and responsibility.

May we enjoy forgiveness, kindness and compassion and may we leave this hour more forgiving, kinder, full of compassion, having been so blessed.

Inspirations:

To heal a fractured world, Jonathan Sacks

A Time to Every Person, Jonathan Sarna

The Murmuring Deep, Aviva Zornberg