

Elie Wiesel In the Bible: Jonah

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) What a strange character, admit it. No one is like him in scripture. No one has his problems. And no one had any suggestions as how he might go about solving them. Was he a prophet? If so, why is there no official reference to such a title? In fact, why is the very word, the verb to prophesy, *l'nabeh*, omitted from the text altogether? What kind of prophet was he anyway? A man who argued with God not to save man, but to punish them, and kill them, and destroy them. Jonah, the man we shall meet tonight, is clumsy. [00:01:00] Less than lucky. He does not feel wanted or at home anywhere. He shows up where he's least expected, and where he's supposed to go, he doesn't go, he refuses to go. What is it he wants? Why is it that he, of all people, opposes both the Almighty and his weak, vulnerable human creatures? If at least he were someone, I mean, someone great, someone influential, a prince such as Isaiah, a royal advisor such as Nathan, a witness such as Jeremiah whose task had been to speak truth to power, or at least if he had lived through historic events and chosen to change or explain them with words or with his life.

But though, as we shall see later, we do not know too much about him, we do know this much, [00:02:00] he was not great. Nor did he participate in any of the great dramatic upheavals in the history of our people. Jonah is what we call a minor prophet. To be precise, the fifth in a series of twelve whom he does not even resemble. We remember their words, but not their lives, whereas in his case it is the opposite. Granted, his story is presented on prime time. On Yom Kippur, which isn't bad. But when do we get to it? At *Mincha* services, at dusk, when everybody is tired and hungry, and waiting for the climatic chanting of *ne'ila*. One might almost say a parentheses, an incident, [00:03:00] a handout for the poor. One is almost tempted to consider Jonah's story on Yom Kippur as a so-called filler. Poor prophet. He entertains rather than disturb his readers, he makes them smile rather than weep. And yet, when we read his story we also realize that he also moves us to think more deeply and to dream more fervently. At the mention of his name, your mind immediately begins to wander eagerly in search of adventure and enchantment. You think of the whale, you hear the roaring tempest, you roam the streets of noisy cities with their seductive nightlife and their corrupting day life. You watch the sky and expect it to burst open at any moment and send

down fire and brimstone upon all those that forget that the earth too [00:04:00] is the Lord's.

So, the book of Jonah may be read as the novel of Jonah. A work of pure fiction with religious and theological overtones, and with even a page or so for the ecologists as well. As such, the story is appealing in its simplicity and naiveté, and above all, its drama or melodrama. Actually, it is a story about waiting. Waiting for events to unfold. It's a story about things that are expected to happen, but do not happen. We are forever kept breathlessly on the edge, miraculously prevented from taking the last step. Jonah runs away, but not far enough. The boat is in danger of sinking, but does not sink. Jonah almost dies, Nineveh is almost destroyed. [00:05:00] One might describe it as a unique suspense story a la Beckett. A story with a magnificent happy ending nevertheless, which is not a la Beckett. And suddenly at the end, vanished are the fears, gone the ominous predictions, all personal and national catastrophes are averted, everybody involved is pleased. Nineveh is pleased because it avoids punishment. God because he succeeded without really trying in saving Nineveh from punishment. And the reader too is happy, if the wicked people of Nineveh got away with

impunity and continued to live and flourish, why wouldn't everyone else?

As for Jonah, what about him? Is he too pleased with the outcome? What has he gained in the test that opposes him to all the other characters in the cast? [00:06:00] We shall explore this question and many others in the course of our encounter tonight. But first, as usual, a few preliminary remarks.

Nineveh is not a mythical city lost in fantasy. Nineveh exists in today's reality. Nineveh exists wherever people inspire fear, use fear, and worship fear in their pursuit of power. Whoever hates and kills, kills and hates, helps erecting a city of Nineveh, not limited by time or space. Two, this year's overall topic is the anti-hero in ancient and modern literature. Who is a hero and how does one become a hero? And how does the hero cease to be a hero? What is the process that lifts a person out of anonymity [00:07:00] and what moves history or destiny to reverse the process? All these questions we intend to examine in the weeks ahead.

Of course, lastly, lest we sound too ambitious, we feel we ought to repeat a familiar warning. We have no heroic ambitions for these lectures. Our scope is modest. We do not pretend to

innovate, only to retell old stories. We do not mean to speak as philosopher of history, as teacher of Talmud or scripture. I speak only as a disciple. My hope is to share with you what I have received from the text itself. And the text has much to offer, beauty, wonder, and depth. As in years past, ever since we began some 14 years ago to celebrate annually our tradition, [00:08:00] our civilization through the study of its great masters, we shall once again open the book, examine its hidden layers, seek the clues, watch the cast perform, and use words as living links between the distant past and ourselves. We shall try to bring back Jonah using ancient sources, Talmudic commentaries, and Midrashic legends. As we reconstruct his portrait we may hear his voice. Though spoken centuries and centuries ago, his words reach us and affect us today. For this is adherent in our approach to life according to our tradition. Our memory cannot but be collective, thus active, and creative. To evoke Jonah is to look into the depths of our own memory. To meet him [00:09:00] is to meet the secret being within each of us who tries to save us from ourselves. His voice reverberates in our own, his outcry penetrates our own, his pain is our pain, as is his defiance.

Just as the light of our eyes reflects God's, every minute contains the mystery of eternity. The past pulls us to one side, the future to another, and in the middle as the great Rabbi Nachman of Breslov put it, "The road is narrow and dangerous. What matters is not to be afraid, what matters is not to forget." That is and remains the lesson communicated to us by all our teachers, all the sages that preceded us. And there they stand behind us, looking over our shoulders, [00:10:00] judging our endeavors, or perhaps helping us to overcome the fear of being judged. David and Saul, Elijah and his disciple Elisha, Jeremiah and Habakkuk, they are all present. It is up to us to make their presence more real. As the Rabbi of Kotzk used to say, "God is where He is allowed to get in." And so, let us go and meet Jonah. Let us listen to his warnings, they are so topical. Let us listen to his silence, we need some silence in this generation. Let us join him in his solitude, let us follow him as he escapes and leads us far away. But you guessed it, before inviting you to join him, let's invite those outside to join us inside. [00:11:00]

Surely you remember the story, the short story. One day God orders a certain Jonah son of Amittai to hurry to Nineveh and warn its inhabitants to repent lest their city be destroyed in

forty days. So, prophet of both doom and consolation, Jonah ought to accept the divine assignment, after all, that is his profession, his calling. As emissary of God, he must obey God's will if he hopes to move others to do the same. It is probably not his first mission, but it is his first refusal. He does not wish to go to Nineveh, anywhere but Nineveh. [00:12:00] In other words, he does precisely what he has been ordered to tell Nineveh not to do. He resists God's will. And so determined is he that he decides to run away. He buys a ticket and boards a ship going from Jaffa to Tarshish. In other words, if you know the biblical geography, he takes the opposite direction from Nineveh. Why Tarshish? Are its people more righteous than those of Nineveh? We do not know, nor are we supposed to care. What matters is that Jonah leaves Nineveh behind and gets farther and farther away from Nineveh. And from God.

In the second chapter, which is the second act of the drama, what do we read? Caught in a sudden storm, the boat is about to sink. [00:13:00] The crew gives up hope and resorts to prayer in vain. One sailor remembers a passenger who has not been seen praying. Jonah, where is he? They find him below in his cabin sound asleep. They wake him up, make him come up on the deck. Surely one among them is responsible for the impending disaster.

Who is it? They draw lots and soon they turn on Jonah. He is the culprit. He readily confesses and even suggests a punishment, to be thrown into the sea. He wishes to die and the crew is willing to oblige. He is thrown overboard. Then comes the third act, and the action has suddenly been moved from the ship to an immense whale sent by God to swallow and save Jonah. He stays inside the whale three days and [00:14:00] three nights, he's uncomfortable, he implores God's mercy, he repents, he will go Nineveh, he will go anywhere God wants him to go, he will preach, he will do anything, say anything, but please God, free him from his underwater prison.

Fourth act, out of the whale, out of the water, out of prison, Jonah hurries to Nineveh, speaks in the name of God. And wonder of wonders, the people listen and repent which pleases God and displeases Jonah. Because Jonah is more disturbed by his success than by his failure. And again he wishes to die. On the outskirts of the city, he builds himself a hut as protection from the blazing sun. More interestingly, a plant called *Kikayon* grows above his head, conveniently offering him some shadow. [00:15:00] Now at last Jonah is happy. Not for long, however. At dawn, the poor plant is devoured by a worm. Gone the protecting shadow, the unrelenting heat causes Jonah to

faint and of course, he wants to die. No prophet has ever been gripped by so strong and so recurrent a death wish. What a perfect opportunity for God to teach him a lesson, Jonah. You felt pity for a plant and not for a human community? Really, Jonah?

Fifth and last act? No. There is no fifth act. At least not in the script. The dialogue comes to an abrupt end, God wins the argument since Jonah is unable to refute it. [00:16:00] But then, what happens then, what will happen? If there is an answer, nobody knows it. No sooner has the question been touched upon inferentially than the story is finished and we go to *ne'ila*. Poor prophet, he is not even informed of the *denouement*, of the outcome of his own story. Is he upset? We are. In fact, upon close scrutiny, we cannot fail to find something altogether disturbing about his personality. Also, the storyline is too superficial, the plot too transparent, all these miracles, all these surprises are too predictable. The book lacks poetry. Except for here and there a verse, or a thought, or a prayer. It lacks inspiration, [00:17:00] it lacks grandeur, but above all it lacks logic. Listen, if Jonah wishes that much to die, why does he cling to life? Why does he seek the coolness of the shade when he should do nothing to avoid

suffering? His is a peculiar combination of life force and death wish, which part is more real? Second, when God asks him at the end, "Jonah, you feel sorry for a plant and not for a community," this is not true, it's not in the text. Nowhere in the text do we learn that Jonah felt sorry for the plant. Jonah felt sorry for himself. That is why he cried. So, where is God's logic? Let's continue. [00:18:00] Why is Jonah so determined to allow destiny to crush Nineveh? Why is he bent on sabotaging its repentance and chance for survival? What kind of prophet would prevent a people from returning to God's ways? By acting as he does, hasn't the prophet suddenly turned anti-prophet? But then, was he ever a prophet? He's described as such by the reader, not the author. As I said earlier, in the book bearing his name all we find is a super production about the man who, why not say it, appears more like a misfit than a hero. His prophecy consists of one sentence, "In 40 days, Nineveh will be destroyed." And that is all he said.

[00:19:00] The rest centers around--around whom and what? A whale? A plant? Really? To have written a whole book for one sentence?

The man is also disturbing because of the secrecy surrounding his biographical data. What we do know about him is that he was

somewhat weird. In fact, so weird, that in some circles he was looked upon not as one person, but two. In other words, there lived a man named Jonah son of Amittai, and there was a book of Jonah. But while that man was the prophet, he was not the author of the book. According to this theory, the first Jonah lived in the eighth century before the Common Era, and the book was written some five centuries later. Their proof? The book contains certain [00:20:00] technical terms that were invented not under King Jeroboam, but much later. And so, to solve the mystery of the 500 years delay or interruption, some experts chose to deal with two men named Jonah. Ask any detective and he will tell you. It is easier to deal with a double mystery than with one. Ask any novelist, he will confirm it. It's much easier to enlarge the action and the cast than to create one single complex character. Well, with two Jonahs on our hands, we may have solved the problems of language, but not those of history, and surely not of philosophy. We know pitifully little about the first Jonah, son of Amittai, and about the second even less.

Of the first we are told that he was dispatched by God to convince the wicked King Jeroboam [00:21:00] to mend his ways and that he failed. Of the second we learned that he was sent

to Nineveh on a similar mission, but one that was crowned with success. Of course it is the latter that interests us, first because of the story itself, and second because of his obvious taste for failure and tragedy, and third because of his profession, after all he was a writer. And a good writer at that. Fantasy, imagination, vocabulary, he is so good that one is not surprised by his lack of success. Unhappy Jonah, unlucky Jonah always, no friends, rarely does anything good happen to him, no honors, no rewards, no supporters. Whatever he [00:22:00] undertakes seems to go wrong. Whatever he wishes to win, he loses. And whenever he would prefer to lose, he wins. Poor man, he is a displaced person, he lives in an eternal exile. The quintessential anti-hero, he takes no initiative, aspires to no glory, works on no grandiose scheme, completely passive he lets others worry and make decisions for him. Instead of shaping events, he lets himself be carried by them. Instead of guiding people, he allows them to push him around. He's always pushed around if not by God, then by people, or the whale, or the sea. He appears on stage only to question God or himself a very naïve, and innocent, and helpless question, "What am I doing here? Why have I been sent there? What is the meaning of these things I have been involved in?" [00:23:00]

He's always looking for answers, always seeking some kind of assurance that he has not boarded the wrong ship. Actually even his questions are wrong. Instead of asking, "Why must I go to Nineveh on a futile mission?", he ought to say "Why must I go?", period. True, I am your prophet, but a prophet is human and free, I may choose not to go to Nineveh. Isn't man's goal to deepen his own sense of freedom? Instead, he acknowledges his duty to obey the travel orders and his inability to follow through. And then what does he do? He runs away like a child afraid of being scolded. One reason why he refused to go to Nineveh, by the way, may be that there were no Jews in Nineveh. [00:24:00] That we know from historical sources. And maybe he didn't want to be the only Jew there. But really, Jonah, God would be with you, why don't you want to go? Of all people you, a divine messenger, don't you know that geography has nothing to do with theology, that starting with Adam, man could never hide, not from God, not even from himself? Don't you know that God is always faster than man, that God arrives first and last everywhere? Even when he leaves last, he arrives first. Don't you know, Jonah, that man can run away from anything and anyone, but not from God? Why did a prophet, chosen by the Almighty to serve as his preacher, his emissary, [00:25:00] his spokesman,

why did he all of the sudden decide to behave like a runaway slave?

Elijah fled from Jezebel, Jeremiah fled from Jehoiakim, only Jonah fled from God. Didn't he know that he had to lose? Once he had taken the wrong turn all that followed would inevitably end in failure. At every step he realizes that he has made another mistake. He boards a ship only to fall into the ocean. He falls into the ocean only to save the ship. For the ship to remain afloat he had to jump off the deck. His life and the life of others had to follow parallel courses when they were not in conflict. Except for his one initiative to escape, the first one, he passively quietly allowed things [00:26:00] to happen. The whale swallowed him, kept him, and freed him, he had nothing to do with it. Someone else pulled the strings. Someone else chartered the course. The text often emphasizes that fact, God is the director of the drama in which Jonah performs. What is his role? Is he the star? No, not really. The wind in the story says the Talmud has been created before creation with the sole purpose of provoking the tempest which threatens to wreck the boat. Were it not for that wind, there would be no story. So, the wind had the starring part. Or perhaps the whale, why not? The whale performs rather impressively. To keep a human

being alive in its belly for three days and three nights, that is something to be proud of. [00:27:00]

Jonah? Jonah is only the object rather than the subject of a story which he dislikes from the odd start, and rightly so. It does not do him justice. Jonah seems to appear in it only to emphasize his own weakness, his own frequent downfalls. Nineveh will be saved against his will. Which means he will succeed against his will. At the end he feels not only useless, superfluous, but also guilty. Hasn't God given and taken back the plant, the *kikayon*, only to prove a point? And Jonah, as we shall see, came to love the *kikayon*. He must have loved it more than anything in the world, for alone in the world the plant was kind to him, it offered him protection, and asked nothing in return. But now [00:28:00] it had died because of him, or rather because of God who wanted to teach him a lesson. So, in a way the plant had died for him. And so, Jonah would appear to be the perfect illustration of the anti-hero in scripture. In scripture a hero is always linked to action and belief. We shall see in the course of our meetings who the hero is in the Talmud and who the hero is in Hasidism. And in the Bible we know already who the hero is. It is always the man of faith combined with a man of action. And Jonah is just the opposite.

Actually he protests against his faith, and he protests against his action. So, he was a failure. He failed as a prophet since he chose to become anti-prophet. [00:29:00]

He failed as a fugitive since he did show up in Nineveh. He even failed in his death wish. Twice he asked to die, only to survive and live in remorse. Is there a more frustrated prophet in the Bible? No wonder that he refuses to obey God, which is as you remember the prologue to the story. God orders him to go to Nineveh and Jonah says no thank you. Actually, to be fair, we must recall other prophets who have also said no to God. He was neither the first or the only one. Even Moses argued with God and said, "Why me? You need a messenger, send someone else. My brother." And you remember of Jeremiah of last year and Jeremiah's excuses. "I am only a child," he said. "You need a grownup, a man of experience. But Jonah is different. He is the first [00:30:00] and the only one to reject his mission not only in words, but in deed as well. He flees the country. In the true tradition of romantic figures he sails off into the sunset. But what if his resistance itself was willed by God? And what if God actually wanted him to say no? And what if his escape from Nineveh was designed by God to bring him back to

Nineveh? Why did he not think that far ahead? Why did he contradict himself so often?

Technically a prophet whose prediction do not come true, it has been established and reestablished by Maimonides, is considered a false prophet. And yet Jonah was and remains a true prophet. So, how is one to understand his complex and bizarre destiny? What [00:31:00] makes our task even more difficult is the almost total lack of information about him. His file in scripture is astonishingly poor. His name and the name of his father, nothing else. Where does he dwell? Mystery. When? No date is indicated. Who are his friends, his teachers, his enemies? Impossible to ascertain. What was he doing until the incident that made him famous? What became of him afterwards? Nobody tells us. Without Nineveh and its sinners, Jonah might not have figured in our sacred history, and neither would the whale. All we find in the text is a sober and realistic description of the only event we are ordered to remember about him. And the story is like a [00:32:00] Chekhov play. Jonah refuses to obey, Jonah obeys, and Jonah has obeyed, period. And now start all over again.

Fortunately, as always, the Talmud is more generous and more imaginative. More literary. Its biblical portraits are endowed with more detail. One source places Jonah after David and Samuel. Rashi places him under the reign of Amaziah. We are even asked to believe that he was equal to Elijah and that Elisha had ordained him prophet. Midrashic legends describe him as *Tzadik Gamur*, a true just man, an absolute just man, so much so that he was among the few chosen to enter paradise alive. One source in the Talmud finds [00:33:00] it necessary and significant to mention his economic situation. He seems to have been wealthy, extremely wealthy. And what is this conclusion based on? The fact that he could afford to buy a boat ticket. That he did not travel as a stowaway. There existed text that tells us something even funnier. Namely that a ticket costs more than the ship itself, which illustrates many points. One, that already then there was first class. (laughter) Two, at the same time that the ship could not have been too luxurious, since he could buy it. And three, that Jonah may have been rich and a prophet, but a businessman he was not.

Incidentally the Midrashic imagination [00:34:00] does not limit itself to his portrait, but covers his family as well. On his maternal side he was said to belong to the tribe of Asher and on

his paternal side to the tribe of Zebulun. What else? He was married to a woman, unfortunately anonymous, who was so pious that she things in common with Michal, the daughter of King Saul. Just as Michal used to lay tefillin, phylacteries, and the sages did not object--women's liberation--Jonah's wife went three times a year on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and no one found that objectionable either. Faithful to custom, the Midrashic storytellers paid attention to secondary characters as well. The sailors, for instance, in the Midrash, were not just simple sailors. Otherwise they wouldn't have made it into the Bible. [00:35:00] Mind you, they represented the United Nations so to speak. They expressed themselves in 70 tongues and prayed to all the existing gods to come to their rescue in vain. But there the similarity to another United Nations end because the sailors did repent. (laughter) Yes, having witnessed Jonah's successful intercession with his God, they threw their idols into the sea, sailed back to the Jaffa harbor, went to Jerusalem, and says the text, I quote, "Returned their wives to God," whatever that may mean, "And became learned men."

The Midrash description of the tempest itself is realistic. Almost three dimensional. We see the boat as it bobs around haplessly [00:36:00] on the water, we hear it cracking, we see

the crew running around in despair, we hear their laments. They do not want to throw Jonah into the ocean, but they have to. The moment he is off deck the sea quiets down. So, they bring him back and immediately the sea starts raging again. And this game goes on and on and is interrupted only by the whale, which has no taste for games. Says the Midrash, and I quote, with magnificent simplicity, "Jonah entered the mouth of the whale as one enters a synagogue." (laughter) And I never understood this image except when I came to the United States of America and I have seen some Jews when they enter a synagogue. (laughter) Still, poor Jonah. One can easily imagine how he felt [00:37:00] as the crew made him go back and forth, back and forth. A quick death would have been more merciful, poor prophet, the world was against him. Everybody wanted him dead except the whale. But then, didn't Jonah want Nineveh dead?

Seen from this angle, the story of Jonah disturbs us even more than before, for it sheds a gloomy light on all the characters in the cast. All are reprehensible. And I would even say all are guilty. Let's look at Nineveh. Its guilt is self-evident. By definition, Nineveh was guilty. A city filled with sin, a population that manifests an ancestral hate towards Israel, whose antithesis it represents. In biblical imagery you should

know Nineveh [00:38:00] is made to symbolize war, and deceit, and envy, and cruelty, and the enmity towards Israel, and therefore deserves death. It ranks not far behind Sodom. What about the crew? Guilty as charged. They disposed of a helpless passenger in order to save their own skin. So what if they tried to save him later? They did not try very hard. And in the end they did get rid of him, never mind that it was he himself who asked them to do what they did. Since when must one oblige a person with suicidal tendencies? You may say I exaggerate, that the sailors were not really anti-Semites, even though they were a mini United Nations. (laughter) You may say that their predicament was such that they would have done the same thing to anyone else. True, they might have, and would have. [00:39:00] In other words, they would have manifested the same selfishness, the same thirst for survival at any expense. They would have shown no less cruelty to any other victim irrespective of his or her race, or color, or creed. But this is not new. We know from experience that whoever hates Jews will end up hating all man. Whoever hates one group does in fact hate mankind.

And perhaps this is the right moment for us to leave Nineveh for a second and move to France. And move to France because it

is impossible for a man of good will to gather together these days and not to speak about France, whatever the subject. In France we have seen the last couple of days morally perverted and socially demented fascists who have renewed their ugly war against Jews. [00:40:00] And I must say that what seemed outrageous to me was not that Jews in Paris were inadequately protected, but that they needed protection altogether. For the first time since the end of World War II, Jews have been targeted for murder simply and solely because they were Jewish. Well, I have no words to tell you how upset I am and we should be. Because what does it mean? What does it mean that in France, after all a civilized country, a France that used to be even officially friendly to the Jews and to Israel, that in France today these crimes could be committed? [00:41:00] It was not only one. For one week, night after night, these criminals would go in the streets of Paris in their car and machine gun first Jewish buildings, Jewish houses of worship and study, nurseries, and the monument to the victims of the Holocaust. For a whole week it went on and the government and the police somehow didn't manage to catch them or to stop them. Only when there were victims was there an outrage. I tried to read the signals. I'm afraid that history is trying to tell us something. And I'm trying to decipher the message. All I know

is that something is terribly wrong in France, and probably Europe, and maybe the world. [00:42:00] For you cannot listen day after day, and week after week, and almost hour after hour, speeches in the United Nations and everywhere condemning Israel, censoring Israel, denouncing Israel, and then be surprised when anti-Semites see in these condemnations an acquiescence to their hate of Israel and the Jews.

Well, let's close the parentheses and back to Jonah and the ship. The sailors are not appealing human beings. We may not choose life at the expense of another. Our law says that a community must never hand over one of its own to the enemy. Even if refusal means death for the entire community. This is the basic concept of [00:43:00] solidarity and of mutual responsibility that all man, irrespective of creed, or faith, or race, should feel for one another. So, Jonah was not one of their own, but he was their guest, he was their passenger. Didn't they know that a ship's crew is duty-bound to save the lives of the passengers before their own? And remember Jonah was no simple passenger, he paid his fare. The sailors were guilty. Even the sea was guilty. And the wind too. Why did they interfere? If God had problems with Jonah, and Jonah with Nineveh, it was none of their business. Why were they involved

at all? Why did they get involved? If God wished to punish Jonah or to test him, the sea had no reason to offer its services. [00:44:00] What does that mean? The wind was created for that sole purpose. Could it not have argued with God, "Listen Almighty God, I understand I must help you test Jonah, I was created for it. But he's not alone aboard that ship, there are other people on it. And they are not participants in this game, are they? I understand that you might want Jonah to become a little seasick, but why they? I understand that you want Jonah to sense that death is approaching, but why they? You want me to help you punish or at least worry Jonah, so be it. But don't expect me to deliberately frighten innocent bystanders."

As for the whale, better not talk about the whale. It must have frightened its unexpected visitor and prisoner however unintentionally. And the Zohar says so explicitly. The Zohar [00:45:00] says that Jonah died of fear. He died. But he came back to life. You may think of that as a good thing, I don't. It must have been Jonah's most painful experience, and he says so himself. His plea from inside the belly reverberates in our own to this very day. And we still evoke that episode in our prayers. "*Mi she-anah l'Yonah haNavi*" we say it, we invoke his

example, and his words, and his destiny, for his prayer is heartbreaking. Did the whale really have to obey God? Couldn't the whale have asked God what evil it, the whale, had committed to be forced to inflict such suffering unto this man who is his and his alone? The whale saved Jonah, granted, but why only after three days and three nights? [00:46:00] Why not have spit him back ashore right away? God didn't tell the whale how long the whale should wait. So, each of the elements could put the blame on God. After all, just as they are responsible to Him, He is responsible for them. In fact, He's both author and director of the drama. As such, sadly, His part is not too flattering either. One gets the impression that He has singled out Jonah only to mock him. And that He consecrated him prophet only so that the whole world could ridicule him. After all, God sends him to Nineveh knowing very well that either way people will laugh at Jonah. If they don't listen to his sermons, they will laugh while he's delivering them. If they do listen, they will laugh at him afterwards.

God knows what no one [00:47:00] else knows, that Nineveh will not be destroyed, and yet He is sending Jonah to predict its destruction. At least if Jonah had been allowed to use the subjunctive mode, the conditional tense, and had said "Beware,

if you do not repent, your city may be reduced to ashes." But his warning is precise and clear, irrevocable, "In 40 days Nineveh will be destroyed," quote/unquote. No ifs, no buts, no perhaps. His warning is final, inevitable, inexorable. Too late for remorse, too late for penitence, too late to start again. But it was not too late. Everybody knew it and everybody knows it. When it comes to repentance it is never too late. Only Jonah was led to believe otherwise, why? Why did God order his servant to bypass truth? Why did He take this [00:48:00] knowledge away from him? Why did He choose to turn him into a buffoon, thus depriving him of his right to pride and dignity? Read the story and you will see for yourself God is doing everything to humiliate his prophet. He makes him lie, suffer, and eventually disappear from the stage. He goes so far as to cut him off in the middle of a sentence, He prevents him from talking, for the last word in the Book of Jonah is not Jonah's, but God's.

And yet, if you are ready to put all the blame on God alone, wait a minute. Leave some for Jonah. Not only because after all the book is his, but also for reasons that are less than literary. Let's see Jonah. Why is he so hostile to people he doesn't even know? They are not pious, so what, they are human.

And he, in the name of divine abstract justice is ready to condemn them all, to see them all perish. Doesn't he know that in the eyes of God and man ideas and beautiful phrases are less important than simple human beings? Surely he knows that. But his self-image stands between him and his knowledge. Yes, Jonah is concerned not with other peoples' lives and welfare, he is concerned with his own image. Could he be ready to see an entire city fall into ruins only to safeguard his reputation? Was he ready to see an entire city die to get better [00:50:00] ratings? Could he want Nineveh destroyed only because he predicted it? Did he forget what Moses had done and would have done in similar circumstances? "Let me die," Moses had said, "but do not touch one child in Israel." That is what Jonah should have said, let me tell lies, and I shall go on telling lies till the end of my life, but I don't want human beings killed. When it comes to saving a community with its men and women, with its children, I as a person, even as a prophet, do not count. Why did he say the opposite?

The moment he senses that Nineveh was meant to live on he became angry. Listen carefully to the text, it is the survival of a city rather than its destruction that angers Jonah. But then how is one to feel sympathy for its problems? [00:51:00] For

centuries we have been beseeching the Almighty to be more compassionate with his children and he, Jonah, wants him to be less compassionate. Not very attractive. Not attractive at all this main character in our play. In fact, he seems to be the least attractive of them all. Let us reread the passage of the tempest, which is an astonishing episode. Remember, the wind is howling, the waves are rolling, the ship is about to break up into a thousand pieces, everybody's busy, everybody tries to help. Some work, others pray, all efforts, all energies are being mobilized, everybody's trying to be useful, except Jonah. Where is Jonah? What is his contribution to the collective rescue operation? Tell me. What is he busy with? Well, we would never have [00:52:00] guessed it were it not for the text saying it. Jonah is not on the deck with the sailors, nor is he with the captain on the bridge, nor is he with the other passengers. Jonah is down below deck alone.

And what is he doing? Working? No. Is he praying at least? Is he meditating? Is he trying to intercede with God on behalf of his fellow man? Is he pleading with God not to harm them even though he himself is guilty? No, nothing of the sort. He is not even praying. But then what is he doing? Nothing. Yes, you heard well. Nothing. In fact, it's worse than nothing. He

is asleep. Incredible but true. In that supreme hour of crisis and of mortal danger when the world is upside down, [00:53:00] when creation is in turmoil, when human lives are at stake, he, the prophet, who by definition should be more sensitive, more alert, more tense than the common mortal, is asleep. Instead of sounding the alarm, instead of leading the rescue activities, instead of leading the men in prayer, he goes on sleeping. He wakes up only when the sailors wake him up. What kind of prophet is he? Why shouldn't the people refuse to listen to his sermons? And tell me, why shouldn't God mock him? But then the question arises, if every one of the participants to be blamed, why do we invite all of them into our sacred Yom Kippur services? Couldn't we find some better ones? Is it because they too need atonement [00:54:00] and forgiveness now? Is that the moral of the story? One thing is clear, the story's more complex than it appears on the surface. The various situations hide more than they reveal. As for the characters, they live on more than one level and show more than one face. And so, when we reread the story for the third time, we discover that it can easily be turned around. Just as we said earlier that all characters are guilty, we may now claim that all are innocent, and infinitely touching, and deeply appealing.

Let's begin with Nineveh. Granted its inhabitants are wicked, why shouldn't they be? They live in a large urban development, a huge city. The description in the text is, [00:55:00] *Mahalach shloscha yamim*, it takes three days to go from one end of Nineveh to the other. And there is no one to teach them, to warn them, to show them the right way. But remember, as soon as Jonah does get there, and as soon as Jonah does speak, they hear him, and they accept the message, and they do repent, and the text says so. The king is the first to confess his sins, he proclaims a state of national penitence. And all the inhabitants, young and old, men and women, and the animals too, join in solidarity and prayer. The Talmud quotes examples upon examples to illustrate their metamorphoses. They pay their debts, they pay their pledges, they return what does not belong to them, they help one another, they care for one another, life becomes bearable. Better yet, although, and remember this is important, although they have 40 [00:56:00] days to change their ways to avert catastrophe, they do not wait until the end. They do not wait until the thirty-ninth day to do penance, they begin immediately. They repent on the very first day, not the last. So, I am asking you, aren't they worthy of praise these so-called wicked people of Nineveh?

As for the sailors, oh, we were too harsh on them too. You know the reputation of sailors, how they are supposed to act and talk. But not these sailors, these sailors are actually polite and helpful. At the moment of danger, they do not jump into the water to save their own life, their own skin, they remain together. Together as a team and begin to work together to save the ship and all its passengers. And as the danger increases, they dispose of objects, their own valuables, their own precious belongings. [00:57:00] And when they did discover their troublesome passenger sound asleep below deck, they could cover him with angry insults, they do not. They are not even angry. The captain himself takes the trouble to wake him gently, softly, in a friendly manner. And the expression is so beautiful, "*Mah l'cha nirdam?*", he wants to know, which means many things. One, how come that you fell asleep. And also *Mah l'cha, nirdam, nirdam* being a noun, what happened to you, Sleeper? And listen to his voice, calm, courteous, almost friendly. Surely he should send him upstairs and put him to work. He does not. With tongue in cheek he asks him, and this is perhaps the third interpretation of his question, whether it is with his sleeping that he hopes to save the ship from going under. [00:58:00] *Mah l'cha? Nirdam!*, what are you doing when we are working? *Nirdam*, you help us with your sleep. But then

becoming serious the captain asks him to pray to his God. And when all prayers fail they draw lots, and Jonah emerges as suspect. Clearly this is not the crew's doing, it's destiny's. They question him, and he tells them his story. How he rejected the divine mission, how he deserted God. Again, some sailors would punish him for endangering their lives, they do not. Even now they are not against him. Even now they do not consider the possibility of getting rid of him. Remember the text, what do they do after his confession? They go back to work. They try to guide the ship out of the danger zone. And the idea of throwing Jonah into the sea is not theirs, it's his. [00:59:00] And at first they refuse to hear of it. True he is a stranger, true he is responsible for their troubles and maybe for their deaths, but they tried to dissuade him from seeking a solution in death. So, I am asking you again, how can we not admire such elegance, such generosity of spirit, such manners, such refinement in people who usually are tough guys? As for the sea, not guilty, not even of maliciousness. As God's instrument, she knows her limitations and functions. It is up to her to remind Jonah of his duties as man and emissary of God. The sea cannot disobey as the wind cannot. As soon as Jonah leaves the boat, the sea quiets down. The sea bears no grudge, not at the sailors, not even at Jonah. The sea does what she

must because the wind makes her do it. Nor does the wind have a choice, it was created [01:00:00] for that purpose. Would you want the wind to live with no purpose?

And the same reasoning, of course, applies to the whale. The whale swallowed the suicidal prophet, but it also saved him. It could have stifled him, it did not. It could have kept him a prisoner longer. Instead it set him ashore safe and sound. And as for God, really, what do we want of God? He has rarely shown himself to be as charitable. Usually we would think he would be quick to punish, not this time, he would do anything but punish. He readily accepts to humiliate his own spokesman in order to spare Nineveh, the sinful city whose inhabitants aren't even Jewish. [01:01:00] He is cruel to Jonah, it is for his own good. So, as to teach him the importance of repentance, to show him the way to humanity rather to inhumanity. He teaches him not how to suffer but to remain humble in the face of suffering. Justice must be human, truth must be human, and compassion must be human too. Don't leave it always up to God. The way to God leads through man, however alien, however sinful he or she may be. Naturally Jonah has every right in the world to be angry with God. He, yes, not we. The rest of us should be grateful to God who like a father may threaten his wayward children but

shies away from executing his threats. So, then, in this story, should we view God as being good and merciful with all his children, [01:02:00] including Jonah? Yes, including Jonah. Though he had to go through fear and pain, that was a small price to pay for saving first an entire shipload of people, and then an entire city.

But there is no novel, there is no story without a villain. Who is the villain in the story? Usually we invoke Satan. Not this time. Is Jonah the villain? Earlier we portrayed him as angry, and selfish, and self-centered, and image conscious, and worse, indifferent, asleep. Please Jonah, forgive us, we were wrong. I must tell you I like him. It may shock you, but not surprise you. I like Jonah for many reasons and I'm going to tell you all of them or some of them. But first of all, we live in such strange times [01:03:00] and in these crazy times when everybody in America is running for office, it's so encouraging to find one who is running away from office. (laughter) Indifferent? Jonah? How could we say such a thing? He chooses to take refuge in sleep, I believe, because he's not indifferent. On the contrary because he's too sensitive to other peoples' pain, because he's too open to their suffering, but he knows he cannot help it. And he finds it so unbearable that he tries to escape

first, geographically, and then into his subconscious, into sleep. He knows the horrors of reality, that's why he runs away from it.

Oh yes, Jonah, the kind and gracious prophet, the friend and defender of man, Jonah is [01:04:00] aware of his helplessness when faced with human misery. If he refuses to go to Nineveh, it's not because he wants it destroyed, but quite the contrary, because he does not want to deliver the threat. And he is convinced that as long as he would not deliver the threat nothing would happen. It's as if he told God, I don't agree with your way of ruling your world. You say to man, be just or perish, don't you, God, know that this choice in itself is inhuman because it is impossible? You who know everything, don't you see that life is mixture and synthesis, not polarization. That to be human means to sin a bit and then repent, and then sin again and repent again. And start all over again from the beginning. Why do you condemn Nineveh to total extinction? You ask why Jonah didn't want to go [01:05:00] to Nineveh? Perhaps because of his enormous love for humanity. And at that point in his life, of course, Jonah deserves our love and affection. He is so pathetic. Think about him in Nineveh, a stranger amongst strangers, roaming among the streets

and marketplaces urged on by a mysterious impulse, shouting again and again five or six words always the same, "In 40 days Nineveh will be destroyed. In 40 days Nineveh will be destroyed." What an impact the repetition of these few words must have had. Think about it. There he is Jonah, the man who knows, the man who sees the future, the man who goes around with knowledge. And yet, and yet he makes no speeches, delivers no sermons, writes no poems, composes no litany. He goes on repeating always the same [01:06:00] few words. He knows when the life of a community is in peril, one may not indulge in philosophy or art. At this moment his anguish is even greater than it was while in the belly of the whale. His own death does not frighten him, theirs does.

And so, I believe Jonah really has his role to play and his place to fulfill on Yom Kippur. Because on a very strange but beautiful level, he acts as spokesman not only for our people but for mankind in general. Still certain sources claim that his love for his own people was greater than his love for mankind. The key to his drama, the Talmud says it, and I quote, "He took the side of the son against his father." In other words, [01:07:00] he took the defense of Israel even when that meant defending the people of Israel against the God of Israel.

But then, you may ask, why does the name Israel never appear in the book itself? True, it does not, but its absence is so unusual that it is noticeable, remarkable. Israel is haunting the story from the beginning to the end, although it's never mentioned. The Talmud says it, that Jonah is afraid. What is he afraid of? He's afraid of succeeding too well with the people of Nineveh. Meaning he is afraid that it will be too easy for him to convince them, to enlighten them. They will listen, they will understand, they will follow him, but then what? Then, he, Jonah will be embarrassed. Embarrassed because of his own people. His own brothers. In the time of King Jeroboam, says the Talmud, they refused to listen, they refused to understand, [01:08:00] they refused to follow his advice. His own brother sent him away while strangers would celebrate him. And therein lies Jonah's dramatic inner conflict. His triumph in Nineveh could harm Israel. What would other people say about the Jews? What would God say about the Jews? Look, Jonah, God might say, look at the pagans and look at your Jews. That is why Jonah was so reluctant and that is why he refused to accept the assignment.

I must say that this explanation seems valid and psychologically sound at times. Jonah knows his Jews. He knows that some of

them, only some, are attracted by and to the stranger. The same words uttered by a Jew and by a non-Jew, by a Jew and by a Buddhist, or a Marxist, whom would our social and intellectual snob heed? [01:09:00] This is not a new phenomenon. Here is how Rabbi Moshe Sofer, the Chatam Sofer from Pressburg commented on the biblical verse describing Moses refusals to go to Egypt. Moses said, "I don't want to go to Egypt since my people don't listen to me." "*V'eich yishmaeini Paroh?*" "How will Pharaoh listen to me?" So, he Rabbi Moshe Sofer says, "Read it differently." "Look God," he said, "What will happen that my people don't listen to me?" *V'eich*, what will I look like *yishmaeini Paroh*, that Pharaoh will listen to me. They don't and he does. So, Jonah prefers not to face the test, not to go at all, and spare the people of Israel from being humiliated not by God, but by the repentance of his enemies.

A true prophet, he is faithful to tradition and wishes to serve not only as God's messenger [01:10:00] to mankind and Israel, but also as man's and Israel's messenger to God. When forced to choose between God and Israel, he chooses Israel, even if that means he will be punished. He will do no harm to Israel. Even if ordered to do so by God himself. And his strange and passionate behavior reveals to us his lucid devotion and

commitment to his people. Though he is a prophet and must speak words that are not his own, he refuses to speak, to testify, to uncover the truth, if that truth is indeed likely to damage the reputation and security of his people. The people of Israel is in danger, it has always been in danger, and Jonah felt that it was not the right moment to criticize its policies. Not in Nineveh. [01:11:00] It was not the right moment to judge its decisions, for doing so would retroactively justify the hostility it aroused among other nations then and now. At that point, how can one not empathize with Jonah? Jonah, the brave and magnificent prophet who flees abroad, but whose heart stays with his people. And yet, before we become too emotionally involved with him, let us pose and ask ourselves yet another question. Since obviously this story is without a villain, what does it all mean to us? What does it teach us? And why must we repeat it on Yom Kippur?

Two hypotheses, two major themes. One, the emphasis is on repentance, which has dominated the Jewish thought from its origins, meaning since Adam and Cain. [01:12:00] Unlike Greek mythology, Judaism rejects the concept of fatalism. Fate is not inexorable. Decisions are never irrevocable. Man is not a toy whose functioning is prearranged. His link to infinity assures

him or her access to endless possibilities. Destinies march can be stopped, its triumph is not pre-determined. In other words, the cycle of crime and punishment can be halted before it is completed. Evil can be aborted, deviated, vanquished. Better yet, it can be transformed. It can undergo endless mutations. How? By choosing, by choosing repentance. It's efficient for man to take hold of himself, to say to himself enough, I must turn around before it's too late. And all evil decrees will be lifted, such is the theme and the teaching of the book of Jonah. *Teshuva* means an act of consciousness, [01:13:00] of awareness, a willingness to take sides and take responsibility for the future. One cannot modify the past, but one is given the power to shape the future. It all depends on the individual and the community. They can, if they wish, foil destiny and celebrate free choice. The lesson in Jonah, nothing is written, nothing is sealed, God's will itself may change. Even though punishment has been programmed, it may be cancelled. And therein lies the beauty, and the grandeur, and the humanity of the Jewish tradition. Every human being is granted one more chance, one more opportunity to start his or her life all over again. Just as God has the power to begin, man has the power to continue by beginning again and again.

And the second theme, is the universality of the Jewish message. Jonah is not the only prophet who in the name of God speaks to other nations. Others did so before him. But Jonah is the only one whose mission it is to serve other nations exclusively. "Go to Nineveh", "*leich el Nineveh,*" says God. Only to Nineveh, not to Jerusalem. Not even to Jaffa. His task is to bring God's word to the Gentiles but without forsaking his own people, without reneging on his own beliefs. In other words, he is to teach the Gentiles but without ever ceasing to be Jewish. More than that, it is the Jew in him who will teach the Gentiles. The more Jewish the poet, the more universal his message. The more Jewish his soul, the more human his concerns. [01:15:00] A Jew who does not feel for his Jews, a Jew who does not share in their sorrows and joys cannot feel for other people. And the Jew who is concerned with his Jews is always concerned for more than his Jews. A Jew who is concerned with Jewish problems is inevitably concerned with the fate of other people as well. Remember the dialogue Jonah had with the sailors. They ask him, "Who are you? What are you doing?" And he answers, "I am Jewish, *Ivri anochi,* and I fear God who has created heaven and earth." That is all, that is enough. Without the slightest hesitation, he reveals his Jewish identity to them. He does not hide under disguises and false pretenses. Wasn't he afraid?

There might have been enemies. "*Ivri anochi*", he says, "I am Jewish. [01:16:00] And it is as a Jew that I am telling you that God is to be feared, for He created heaven and earth."

Of course for those who enjoy humor that too can be found in this exchange. The sailors ask him what he does, and he tells them who he is. Since when is being Jewish a profession? Could it be that there were professional Jews already then? You know, those who claim to control the Jewish vote? (laughter) Still, Jonah is right. To be Jewish means to do things, to speak up and take a stand. Whatever he is seeking to accomplish, it is as a Jew that he will accomplish it. Heine was wrong: to be Jewish is not a calamity. It is not even a problem. It's a philosophy of action. As a Jew, Jonah feels gifted enough and strong enough to confront the world and influence its [01:17:00] future. As a Jew he feels he has certain things to tell the nations of the earth. As a Jew he feels he has both the right and the duty to tell them "if you do not change, if Nineveh does not stop hating Jerusalem, its hate will spread beyond its borders, and the world of Nineveh will lie in ruins."

So, my friends, in conclusion, we understand Jonah. We understand Jonah in contemporary terms. He knows that men are

evil, he knows that they deserve punishment, and he also knows that God is capable of inflicting it. Nineveh has done much harm to Israel. Jonah, the Jew, might have wished to serve as an emissary of vengeance and retribution, but paradoxically. Jonah, the Jew, ultimately saves Nineveh, just as our generation may be called upon to save a [01:18:00] world filled with hate and guilt. It may be senseless, but that is how it is. There are those of us that feel that only by reminding the world of what it has done to our people, can it, the world, be spared from bringing catastrophe upon itself.

And so, Jonah emerges as an unparalleled humanist and pacifist, beaten by life, humbled by God, this anti-hero, though he chooses despair for himself and others, thinks of others before he thinks of himself. He opts for life, society, in order to prevent others from dying, he must live. Of course superficially he does not seem to play a major role in historic events, so what? He does not emerge during dramatic upheaval, so what. He's a little prophet, [01:19:00] modest and austere, so what. One grows to love him for his humanity, for his refusal to act as the hero.

But then who is the hero of the story? God? Nineveh? The whale? No. When all is said and done, we suddenly release that

the real hero of the story is a small insignificant plant, the *kikayon* is both the hero of the story and its victim. Brought into the world only to die, only to serve as example with its quick death, the plant appears and vanishes. Poor *kikayon*. It dies so as to bring light and life to a distant city named Nineveh.

And God feels no pity for the plant. [01:20:00] Only Jonah does. The text doesn't say it, but God says it, and I believe him. And I must tell you that there Jonah moves me so deeply. He who has seen so much suffering in the world, he who anticipates even more. Look at him, he weeps over a plant, a little plant. Do you know many people who take the death of a plant so much to heart?

I am telling you that a man who feels such compassion for a plant cannot be insensitive to people, any people. So, Jonah's problem was that he was too sensitive, even to plants. He did not wish Nineveh to die, yet he did not wish Nineveh to live at the expense of Israel. To love mankind is honorable, to love it against Israel is not. Is that the reason for Jonah's death wish? [01:21:00] Is it that he wishes to die because of the inner moral conflict of reconciling his love of man with his incommensurate love for his people? Is that why God showed him the tragic fate of the plant? To provide the ultimate

illustration that all things are connected? And that one must feel pity for both Nineveh and the plant *kikayon*? That one must love other people through one's own and never outside one's own?

Of course on a practical level and viewed in the light of today's events all this is neither easy nor simple, so what? Whoever said the truth, that the quest for truth must be and can be simple? The Book of Jonah offers proof that nothing is ever simple. All its characters stumble on obstacle after obstacle, yet they continue to search, to love, to live, to remember.

[01:22:00] They all have a mission to fulfill, and ultimately they fulfill it. So, the most touching aspect of the book is not even the *kikayon*.

Do you know what is the most touching aspect of the book: its ending? No. Its lack of ending. God points to the death plant and asks Jonah the famous and unfair question, "You feel sorry for the plant and you want me not to feel sorry for Nineveh, and its people, and its animals?" What a question.

If indeed Jonah answered this question, the answer has not been recorded. The book ends with God's word, which is only natural. God makes sure He has the last word, always. But uniquely this book is so exceptional because it ends on a

question. And that is what leaves [01:23:00] us astonished and deeply affected and moved.

Now I ask you, do you know many other sacred and eternal, inspired and inspiring books, in which the last sentence of the last chapter is neither affirmation nor injunction, not even a statement, but quite simply a question? (applause)

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