

D'var Torah Nidhe Israel

Haazinu and My Yom Kippur Address at Westminster Synagogue : **“Give ear, ye heavens, and I will speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth.”** (Deuteronomy 32:1).

This week's Torah portion Haazinu is the penultimate portion of the Book of Deuteronomy and it is the portion read before Succoth and Simchat Torah. After the heavy days of the High Holydays we are to celebrate the travelling and building the Such as well celebrating on Simchat Torah the ending and starting to read the Five Books of Moses. Moses is saying goodbye, having just appointed a new leader Joshua. He is asking the Children of Israel to be faithful to their faith and approach the settling in the Promised Land with determination and keeping the tenants of Judaism. In this portion we find one of the most beautiful poems, the poem which could not have been easy to either compose or deliver as Moses is facing his own death and the disappointment of not entering the Promise Land for which he dedicate his life's work. His is a sacrifice for a home so much desired. It is a heroic moment of great man who has given up his reign and also given his life. May his Memory be a Blessing. And as we read

this portion let us reflect on the world of today through the eyes of Jonah, the Hafotrah we read in the afternoon of Yom Kippur. Please see my address to the community of Westminster Synagogue:

A few weeks ago I was invited for dinner to one of our members. Towards the end of the evening, I asked my host if I could brainstorm with him some ideas for a Yom Kippur sermon about Jonah, which would be a first for me. Interestingly, he told me that not that long ago he had received a Mitzvah at his 'other shul' (West London Synagogue) to read the Jonah Haftorah and to give a short Commentary. The honour had been given as he was following in his father in law's footsteps, a past Chairman and President of the Synagogue, and one of the best known Old Bailey Judges. I asked if I could have the commentary and, miraculously, it was in my Inbox the same evening. So here are my thoughts intermingled with some of his.

This afternoon we shall read from the Book of Jonah, a book of the Nevi'im, the Prophets, in the Hebrew Bible. This is a great tradition in Synagogues around the world. As it is read in the late in the afternoon of Yom Kippur, it is often less than a full house, and equally those present can be excused from perhaps not paying close attention as it comes quite late in the day afternoon when the fast starts to take its toll.

Whilst the story of the Big fish swallowing Jonah has a great appeal to children, I think we can bring the story closer to our times and we can perhaps derive a few less obvious messages.

Geographically, Niniveh's ruins are just across the river from the modern-day city of Mosul, Iraq where battles have have been waged in recent years with ISIS. Historically, the British have ceded the area to France in 1916 under the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and then shortly after the War, Lloyd George and Clemenceau have agreed that Mosul will be ceded back to Britain. The end

of the First World War brought about the Balfour Declaration of 1917 announcing support for the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, at the time part of the Ottoman region, with a small number of Jews living there. It was the start of greater animosity between Jews and Arabs and has brought about the mistrust of the Arab population as a result of the decisions reached by Britain, France and Russia who were sitting on the sidelines.

This sets the scene and points us to a now, very much known part of the world, which thus takes on an even greater importance when we read the story. The **Book of Jonah**, is a narrative set in the reign of Jeroboam the II (786–746 BC), it was probably written some time between the late 5th and early 4th century BC. Fragments of the book were found amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls were in all probability created and preserved by a group of ascetic people called the Essenes who withdrew from the world which they found and considered corrupt and wicked. We are grateful that firstly this People has preserved the texts and secondly to the Rabbis who have decided that the Book of Jonah should be included into the Hebrew Canon - around the 2nd or third century ACE.

Jonah is portrayed as a recalcitrant prophet who flees from God's commandment to deliver judgement over Nineveh because of its wickedness. Nineveh was the evil capital of Assyria, which would later exile the northern kingdom of Israel. Nineveh can certainly be equated to Sodom & Gemorah and we know what happened to them.

According to the opening verse, Jonah is the son of Amittai. This lineage identifies him with the Jonah mentioned in II Kings 14:25 who prophesied during the reign of Jeroboam II, about 785 BC. It is possible that some of the traditional materials taken over by the book were associated with Jonah at an early date, but the book in its present form reflects a much later composition. We are never told what Jonah thinks when God calls on him to act, but we do know what he does.

Let's step back a little and I'll recap the story in case you are not here this afternoon to hear Philippa Bernard, who has traditionally read this portion for a number of years since the passing of Jacqueline Golden.

Jonah hears God's voice. Jonah is go to to Nineveh to deliver God's message that in forty days Nineveh will be destroyed because of the sinfulness of the people. Defiantly Jonah turns a deaf ear, boards a ship heading in the opposite direction to Tarshish. God thwarts his escape by whipping up a violent storm and Jonah buries himself in the hold of the ship. The storm does not abate and the sailors come to realise it is Jonah's presence that is the root cause of their problem.

Jonah offers to be thrown into the water, but the sailors refuse until they come to understand they have no choice and reluctantly drop Jonah into the water, a final downward descent for our anti-hero who is swallowed up into the belly of a whale. He is then spewed out, miraculous, on the dry land of Nineveh, where Jonah finally, and begrudgingly, preaches God's word.

To Jonah, Nineveh is an evil place and he does not believe Nineveh will survive because he believes God will carry out His punishment. But the king of Nineveh and the people DO repent. They donned the sack cloths having realised their sins and were saved from terrible destruction. God saw how they turned from their evil ways, and "God relented of the evil He had said to do to them and did not do." Nineveh was thus saved but to Jonah's great distress and anger.

So we can ask ourselves some questions. Why is Jonah so angry and with whom? Why did he suppress his prophesy? Why did he flee to Tarshish?

We know that out of love for his people, Jonah the Prophet would serve only his people and no others. He is loyal only to his fellow Jews. He said to himself "Why should I preach repentance to the uncircumcised? The people of Nineveh are Israel's enemies. Who cares about them and their fate?" But Jonah forgot what a Jewish prophet must be, what his people were meant to be, and what kind of God called him to service. He forgot that God is the creator of all people and that God mourned for the Egyptians when they were drowned at the Red Sea.

Through Jonah we are reminded of the power of atonement for all the world. The God of Israel is not a tribal God. He loves his chosen people, but He is not the Creator or Protector of Israel alone. He is the one God whom Abraham discovered as the Ruler of the entire universe. God created the world and God created Israel to live in the world, among the peoples of the world whom God created. This is an important message we can derive from

the story. Indeed the tradition by choosing this Haftorah for Yom Kippur believed that the Book of Jonah was about Teshuvah-Repentance and whilst it is indeed it is also about something different and that is about asking us not to run away from responsibilities but to face them head on.

Jonah, in the name of his love for Israel, fled from God and himself. Flight is an ancient-modern strategy of escape. It's something we do when we do not want to face the realities and challenges in front of us. It was the American psychologist Abraham Maslow who coined the term the "Jonah complex," a condition whereby an individual seeks to escape the vocation, mission or responsibilities that are his or hers to realise.

In the Talmud, we learn of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, known as the Rashbi, and one of the greatest scholars of the Mishna and possibly the primary author of the holy Zohar. For him, Rome was a corrupt society in every way and his decision was to withdraw rather than confront, albeit his life was clearly in danger. For twelve years, we are told, he and his son fled to a cave where they , studied, fasted and prayed. Receiving a message from the Prophet Elijah that it was safe to leave the cave, they came upon men plowing in the field, and their 'ordinaryness' angered them: "People forsake life eternal for the business of temporal life." A voice then emanated from above saying: "Have you come to destroy My world? Get back to the cave." God rejects the spiritual isolationism that escapes the real world.

The parallels are there- Shimon Bar Yochai fled from Rome into the depths of a cave. Jonah fled from Nineveh into the bowels of the ship and the womb of the whale. But of course that was for different reasons, Simon bar Yochai to save his life and Jonah to escape what?- his responsibilities.

Jonah forgot how to be a Prophet. Unlike Abraham, we can imagine Jonah thinking: "God, you've chosen the wrong person to do this task for you !" Abraham alone argued with God not to destroy all the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah. The citizens of Sodom, like those of Nineveh, were not Jews. They were pagans. Abraham appealed to God's conscience. "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do righteously?" The first Jew, Abraham, defended the people of Sodom because he was called by God and told "In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed." Not cursed but blessed. The book of Jonah reclaims this vision of Jewish universalism. It warns us against the intolerance of nationalism and thus another important message for us today.

There are moments when we hear that still, small voice of conscience. There are moments when we know in the depths of our being what is right, what God requires of us, what we should do. There are moments when we subtly, repress our conscience, hide, and pretend that we hear nothing. There are two kinds of false prophets: one prophesies what he has not heard. The other suppresses the prophecy he has heard.

For many of us it is not easy to take on certain challenges because of fear of failing, or even confronting difficult realities. In the Talmudic tractate of Rosh Hashanah (17a) we read the following: "One who overcomes his natural tendencies that is to hold a grudge and instead forgives, all his sins are forgiven".

In other words, if we are merciful to those who offend us, then God will be merciful when our behaviour offends Him. Whilst this passage relates to Jonah's story emphasising the concept of forgiveness the same could apply to not running away from responsibilities or challenges. If one is able to accept responsibility, and not give in to the perhaps natural tendency of shrugging ones shoulders, then results may take on a different dimension.

Judaism teaches, and particularly at this time of the year, the importance and willingness to stand up, acknowledge facts and face them openly and with courage, however difficult that may be. We need, for example, to stand up to the wickedness of antisemitism and the fear from decisions we have made as a nation and as a people. It is only standing together rather than against each other which can bring fruits of the good kind. The danger signs for us are there and the worst are family disputes, disputes from within. Civil wars are worse-see what is happening in Hong Kong and other places. The French Revolution brought many a destruction and death. One nation fighting another is unifying whet destruction within is weakening and more destructive. Brothers and sisters against one another is painful and because of its divisiveness weakens the spirit and body and thus more cruel in its destructiveness.

When Jonah eventually ended up in Nineveh he fell asleep under a gourd and God causes a plant to grow over Jonah's shelter to give him some shade from the sun. Later, God causes a worm to bite the plant's root and it withers.

Jonah, now being exposed to the full force of the sun, becomes faint and pleads for God to kill him.

And God said to Jonah: "Art thou greatly angry for the gourd?" And he said: "I am greatly angry, even unto death." And the LORD said: "Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for which thou hast not laboured, neither made it grow, which came up in a night, and perished in a night; and should not I have pity on Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than six score thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand, and also much cattle?"

God did not let Jonah die as there was an understanding that his running away was due to weakness and misunderstanding and that if he had faced the challenge from the beginning he would not have been in the situation he found himself.

It took some time for the Torah to introduce the concept of *T'shuvah*. When Adam and Eve sinned, they were punished and thrown out of the Garden of Eden. But there was no mention of repentance. When Cain killed Abel he was punished, but nowhere did it occur to Cain to repent.

When the people in the time of Noah sinned there was a great flood and destruction, but no cry from Noah for the people to see the error of their ways. When Sodom and Gomorrah sinned there was punishment even in the face of Abraham's pleadings. Indeed, when the people of the world tried to build a Tower, their destruction was the symbolic introduction of different languages, creating chaos and misunderstandings, as it were, losing things in translation.

The book of Jonah is different in respect to all of these Torah stories. Jonah is all about change. If the people of Nineveh can change and if God can change, we can all say "I can change". Of course, there are things that cannot be changed but not all things are unmovable. The event of Jonah have taken place in what we know as the place where ISIS has taken hold, where change of history has taken place -and where the Middle east have changed. All and everyone is running away from the responsibilities of the Middle East, whether it be in Syria, Israel Iraq or Iran. The setting up of the region which included the trusting and at the same time difficult situation of the Kurds seems to be part and parcel of the running away from responsibilities.

let alone repentance it is the responsibility and its heavy duties which seem to keep people and leaders awake or not as the case may be. When one party pushes the duty of setting up and creating a government to another you can see that running seems to be the order of the day. It is the soma in our country today- whilst we have court hearings and which bring the responsible result it is still not taking on the needs which should take priorities. Delaying as in the case of Jonah is and can be disastrous but on the other hand as Jonah was not killed only suffered a bit under the fading gourd so we can survive and overcome. When you look at the Middle East and realise that the history of mistakes and neglect and running away from problems goes back many years as we have seen with the thing and fringe of Mosul we can see that there is a point when we need to face up to reality as otherwise even we are spewed out in the banks of the river we will have a lot to do. The lessons of the past and the story are here for all of us to see .

On the Day of Atonement we focus on the areas where we can transform ourselves.

May we have the strength, and the moral courage to do so.

L'shana tova and May we be all Inscribed in the Book of life

Amen