

Jonah Study for Yom Kippur

Based on The Book of Jonah a Social Justice Commentary
by Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz (CCAR Press, 2020)

Chapter 1

לֹא-תִשְׁנֵא אֶת-אַחֶיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת-עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֵטְא:

You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him.
(Lev. 19:17)

Everyone who can protest [the sin of] one's household and does not, is punished [ie: responsible] for the [sins of the] people of one's household. [Anyone who can protest the sin of] the people of one's town, [and does not], is punished for the [sins of the] people of one's town. [Anyone who can protest the sin of] the whole world [and does not], is punished for the [sin of the] whole world.

(Babylonian Talmud 54b as quoted on p. 4)

It is not easy to be a prophet. The prophet is neither cool nor popular; the prophet is not the life of the party. The prophet is an anxious personality juggling the demands of God with the needs of humans. Constantly risking alienation or even death, the prophet is isolated and lonely. But we are not allowed to turn away. (p.7)

Chapter 2

In contrast to the Book of Genesis, in the Book of Jonah it appears to be the big fish that has dominion over humanity, or at least over one human. Jonah is swallowed by the fish, but the fish does not kill him, and Jonah lives. Typically, humans go fishing for consumption, for livelihood, and even for sport. Here, the fish does not want the flesh of Jonah's body. Instead, the fish provides enough space in its own body for Jonah to survive. According to the rabbis, the fish in the Book of Jonah is so important that it was already assigned its task during the days of Creation. (pp. 33-4)

Chapter 3

Human perfection is impossible...and Jonah falls short. Human beings, even prophets, stray from the path of righteousness, but their moral mandates do not fade away. God waits for us to follow our call to redemption. Each of us might resemble Jonah a bit; we might be hiding from our responsibilities, we might feel anxious, angry, or confused. But we, too, are allowed to reengage. (p. 71)

Chapter 4

Rabbi David Kimchi asks why in Hebrew Scriptures there is a book entirely about a gentile nations (Ninevah) without any mention of Israel. He answers that it is a more lesson for Israel: If other nations can repent before God, they we can repent as well. (p. 127)

The open question with which the Book of Jonah concludes suggests that while there is no guarantee that humanity will embrace the opportunities for self-transformation, it is indeed possible for them to produce constructively subversive sequels within their own lives. (Judy Klitsner as quoted on p. 131)