

Jonah = Noah 2.0

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Have you ever had a question that went unanswered? Not for minutes or even days, but years?

There are some light questions like that:

For example:

- Why do they call the little candy bars "fun sizes," when it's more fun to eat a big one?
- Why does quicksand work slowly?
- Why is it that when we "skate on thin ice", we can "get in hot water"?
- If money doesn't grow on trees then why do banks have branches?
- And from Jerry Seinfeld, What's the deal with grape nuts? No grapes, no nuts!

But there are some serious questions that go unanswered.

For many years now, I wonder the same thing every time we conclude the Book of Jonah - which we will read again on Yom Kippur afternoon. My question is, "What are the animals doing here?"

Let me explain.

The last verse of Jonah has G-d chastising Jonah for caring more about a plant than the people of Ninveh. G-d says, "Should not I care about Ninveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 people who don't know their right hand from their left, *and many beasts as well!*" (Jonah 4:11).

Once again, What are the animals doing here? I mean, did PETA sponsor this verse?

I really do like animals, but I'm puzzled why they are on the same level as humans here when human life is on the line. I can't figure out why *animals* get the final word in the book.

If that's not odd enough to you, consider this verse in Jonah Chapter 3. Jonah warns the people of Ninveh that destruction is coming, and the king urges everyone to repent.

But look carefully: "The king had it declared in Ninveh: By decree of the king and his nobles, nothing should taste anything, no man, *beast, herd, or flock*. They shall not pasture and not drink water. Let them be covered in sackcloth, man *and beast*, and let them cry out mightily to G-d" (Jonah 3:7,8). So the king instructs people and *animals* to fast, wear sackcloth, and pray to G-d in order to win G-d's favor. That's really strange. Again, what are the animals doing here?

Last year – finally - I heard a podcast where a teacher named Judy Klitnsner, of Pardes in Jerusalem, cared about the animals and explained it in a way that satisfied me. She sees the story of Jonah as having many parallels to another story in the Bible, the one where the animals take center stage: the story of Noah and the ark. Today I share her observations and insights before concluding with my own.

If we had 30 seconds to conjure up parallels between the stories of Noah and Jonah, I think we could come up with a few on our own: they're both about destruction...storms...boats...and one righteous man. And those animals. But when we open the books, we see so many more shared elements.

Let me briefly retell each story in a very specific way to highlight their commonalities.

Noah was a righteous man who lived in an era when the world was **wicked through lawlessness, Hamas**. Noah builds a **boat** and carries aboard **animals**. It **rains for 40 days, destroying** all life on earth. After a long time, Noah sends a dove, a **Yonah**, to see if trees are visible. Once everyone is off the boat, G-d promises never to destroy the earth again with a flood. Noah then tries to **escape his burdens** by getting drunk. Finally, we read a genealogy of humanity which includes people and places, like **Tarshish and Ninveh**.

And now Jonah.

Jonah, **Yonah**, was a prophet who lived in an era when the massive city **Ninveh** was **wicked though lawlessness, Hamas**. G-d told him to warn Ninveh to change their ways, but instead Jonah runs away. He boards a **boat** heading for **Tarshish** and tries to **escape his burdens** by sleeping. But then **rain** and storms force Jonah off the boat, where he is swallowed by a whale. Jonah prays for another chance and delivers the message to Ninveh that in **40 days** it will be **destroyed**. The king and people, and apparently the **animals** too, repent and G-d spares Ninveh. And its animals.

Just look at all those parallels, not just big pieces like boats but extremely specific and rare names like Tarshish and Ninveh that appear in both Jonah and Noah. So the animals at the end of Jonah are an arrow pointing to the Torah's other animals, in Noah.

When I heard these parallels from Klitsner, I thought, finally, somebody answered my question. I felt like Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria in the Passover Haggadah who said, "*Harei Ani Kven Shivim Shanah*...even though I'm almost 70 years old, I had never understood the answer to my question until Ben Zoma explained it to me."

So much of these two stories are the same: a messenger from G-d, a wicked society, destruction, a boat, a storm, a Yonah - Hebrew for dove and Jonah's name - 40 days, Tarshish and Ninveh.

Basically, Noah Act 1 and Jonah Act 1 are the same. They each describe a wicked society.

But what is really enlightening about Klitsner's take is the differences between the two accounts. In Noah, G-d destroys the wicked world without warning in 40 days' time. In Jonah, by contrast, G-d gives the wicked metropolis 40 days warning to repent or be destroyed...and they succeed. Having done Teshuva, they are spared. Each story's second act is totally different.

Klitsner says that the Jonah story rewrites the ending of the Noah story. This is not an isolated case but a pattern of one part of the Bible rewriting another. She wrote a whole book about this, starting with her Noah/Jonah analysis, called, Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other. It's worthwhile and available in our library. But something tells me this book will *not* be made into a Hollywood movie!

Do you remember a book series called "Choose Your Own Adventure"? You the reader got to make the choices for the protagonist. For example, in book 146, Soccer Star, you were taking the penalty kick to win the championship. The book prompted you: if you want to aim for the lower right corner, turn to page 83. If you want to aim for the upper left corner, turn to page 58." Remember those? So I turned to page 58 and discovered... that I clanged the shot off the post and basically lost the game.

But wait! What if I chose the other corner? I flipped to the other page and saw my shot fire past the goalie into the net. We were champions!

Wouldn't it be nice if life worked like that? That we could press pause, rewind to a certain moment or conversation, press play and do things differently? I would love that. There are definitely situations I would do differently. I bet many of you would too. But unfortunately, life is not a Choose Your Own Adventure book where you can go back and choose a different direction.

Unless we're talking about Teshuvah, repentance. Teshuvah is all about moving in a different direction. And the Book of Jonah is all about Teshuvah.

Kids think the Jonah story is about the whale. But adults know this story is about Teshuva, repentance, on the part of the Ninevites and Jonah. This theme is why the book is read on Yom Kippur. This Shabbat Shuvah, before Yom Kippur, is an opportune time to think about it, which is why I speak of Jonah today.

Maimonides, in his Laws of Teshuvah, defines the moment when one can be sure he's actually succeeded in his Teshuvah. It's when he's in the exact same spot where he went wrong, still has the urge and ability to do wrong, and instead chooses a different path.

Here's my example: let's say somebody cheats on their taxes. Nobody knows but him and G-d. Then on Yom Kippur he's so inspired by the services and sermons that he really, truly regrets having cheated on his taxes. Honestly to the core.

How can he or anybody be sure he's truly repented? First, he has to pay back what he owes. Next, he has to wait until the following April 15th, when he's filing his taxes again, nobody is watching, and he's again tempted to keep money for himself. If he files his taxes honestly the next time around, the Rambam would say his Teshuvah is a demonstrated success.

Not always do we get another chance while standing in the same spot. But sometimes we do, and Teshuvah heightens our awareness of this ability to do things differently.

Klitsner notes that G-d responds differently to the two groups of wicked people. In Noah, G-d destroys them on the spot without warning, but in Jonah G-d provides a chance to improve.

I want to take this idea further.

Forever I had understood the Ninevites as being the party to Teshvuah, the ones who repent. After all, they change their wicked ways, fast, put on sackcloth, and take up the ways of honesty. It's an admirable and inspiring about-face.

Klitsner has me thinking that the real Teshuvah is done not by Nineveh or even Jonah, but by G-d. G-d does Teshuvah. In the aftermath of the flood and Noah's ark, G-d promises not to destroy the world again with a flood (Gn. 9:11). Later in the Bible, in the Book of Ezekiel, which comes in between Genesis and Noah, G-d says this: "Get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit, that you may not die, O house of Israel. For it is not my desire that anyone shall die - declares the L-rd G-d. *Repent*, therefore, and live" (Ez. 18:31-32). No longer is destruction the only possibility. Repentance is possible and thereby preferable.

G-d is faced with the same situation in Jonah as in Noah: the wicked Hamas and lawlessness of a society. But in Jonah, G-d responds differently. That's real Teshuvah, says Maimonides.

There's wisdom everywhere, even in Sports Illustrated. When the phenom basketball player Kobe Bryant was in high school, somebody asked him, "Why are you pursuing this pipe dream of going to the NBA straight from high school? Don't you know that your odds are one in a million?"

To which Bryant responded, “Then I want to be that one in a million.”

The odds of Bryant going on to a stellar career were slim, but he succeeded. The odds of the entire city of Ninveh repenting and starting over were small, but they did. G-d knows, and we know, that not everyone will repent perfectly every time. But G-d gave Ninveh that chance in case they were the one in a million to buck the trend. And they were.

This Shabbat Shuvah and this Yom Kippur, the odds of achieving Teshuvah are not perfect, nor are they miniscule. But no matter what habits you’ve failed to break in the past, give yourself a new chance to do Teshuvah because this could finally be when you have a breakthrough and begin to change.

Some changes take years to make. Just like some questions take years to be answered.

Shabbat Shalom.