



**Handout for week of 1/15/18** Mk. 1: 14-20 & Jonah 3: 1-5, 10

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Jonah 3: And the word of HaShem came unto Jonah the second time, saying: 2 'Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and make unto it the proclamation that I bid thee.' 3 So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of HaShem. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city, of three days' journey. 4 And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he proclaimed, and said: 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.' 5

And the people of Nineveh believed G-d; and they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.

6 And the tidings reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. 7 And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying: 'Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing; let them not feed, nor drink water; 8 but let them be covered with sackcloth, both man and beast, and let them cry mightily unto G-d; yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. 9 Who knoweth whether G-d will not turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?'

10 And G-d saw their works that they turned from their evil way; and G-d repented of the evil, which He said He would do unto them; and He did it not.

COMMENTARY:

<b>c. 931-722</b>	<b>writing of much biblical text</b> <b>Early prophets (Amos)</b>	<b>Solomon's kingdom divided:</b> <b>North, Israel; South, Judah</b> <b>722 Assyrians conquer Israel</b>	<b>* North Africa: founding of Carthage by Phoenicians</b> <b>* Greece: first Olympic Games; Homeric epics</b> <b>* Italy: founding of Rome</b>
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COMMENTARY:

The facts narrated are such as suited the purpose of the sacred writer. He told a story of glory unto the **God of Israel** and of downfall to the gods of Ninive. It is likely that the incidents took place during the period of Assyrian decadence, i.e., the reign of either Asurdanil or Asumnirar (770-745 B.C.). A pest had ravaged the land from 765 till 759 B.C. Internal strife added to the dismay caused by the deadly disease. The king's power was set at naught. Such a king might seem too little known to be mentioned. The Pharaoh of Mosaic times is not deemed to have been a fiction merely because his name is not given.

Jewish tradition assumed that the Prophet Jonah was the author of the book bearing his name, and the same has been generally maintained by the **Christian** writers who defend the historical character of the narrative. But it may be remarked that nowhere does the book itself claim to have been written by the Prophet (who is supposed to have lived in the eighth century B.C.), and most modern scholars, for various reasons, assign the date of the composition to a much later epoch, probably the fifth century B.C. As in the case of other Old Testament personages, many legends, mostly fantastic and devoid of critical value, grew up around the name Jonah. They may be found in the "Jewish Encyclopedia".

### **Jonah: Success or Failure?**

The story of Jonah teaches compassion by not following the prophet's example.

By Rabbi Michael Strassfeld

On Yom Kippur we confront our mortality. This is done by denying our physical needs and by wearing white, the color of shrouds. The Yom Kippur liturgy adds to this somber message by focusing on life and death, as well as on our human failings. The result is twofold: The worshipper feels alone, yet this sense of loneliness spurs the individual to repair relationships with others. The following excerpt sees the rebuilding of relationships as central to repentance. This theme plays a pivotal role in the story of Jonah, read on Yom Kippur afternoon.

Yom Kippur calls for profound reexamination of our self-definition and our relationship to the rest of the world. The tradition recognizes the difficulty of this process and sets aside the day of Yom Kippur specifically and this whole period more generally to force us to focus on a subject we prefer to avoid. All of us are like Jonah, ready to flee to some exotic Tarshish rather than face the reality of who we are and, even more threatening, the possibility that we could become different.

Ironically, Jonah is the only successful prophet in the whole Bible, the only one whom people listen to and who causes them to actually change their ways. Yet it is his knowledge that he will succeed, not doubts about a possible failure, that causes Jonah to flee. Jonah is not afraid that the people of Nineveh will dismiss him as a quack; rather, he knows that they will repent. As he says: "O Lord! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are compassionate and gracious God. . . . Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live."

Rather than face that possibility, he flees. To the end, Jonah resists any sense of responsibility for the fate of the world or his own fate. Jonah lacks compassion for the people of the city, a compassion found in everyone else in the story, including the sailors, who are extremely reluctant to throw Jonah overboard. Lacking compassion for others, he lacks compassion for himself. Fearing teshuvah [repentance] and change in others, he fears change in himself and flees the truth, only to find it at least for a moment in the dark depths of the whale.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur together affirm the chance for positive change; for no matter how old or routine, there is hope for new birth and new ways. Each year these days ask us, "Which shall it be, Tarshish or Nineveh? Darkness or light? Death or life?"