



Maybe There Is Hope?

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The story of Jonah, a story we turn to during the waning hours of daylight on Yom Kippur, has a stronghold on us. On one level, the connection between the story of Jonah and Yom Kippur is evident. It's a story about the possibility of atonement and the power of *teshuvah* for both a community gone astray as well as an individual who turns his back on God. But there might be another reading contained within the story of Jonah that is also deeply resonant with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Not only is Jonah a powerful story about atonement and *teshuvah*, it is also a story about hope and the possibility of new beginnings.

When Jonah found himself caught in the midst of a crazy storm, thrown about back and forth on the hull of the ship, he went down to the innermost parts of the boat and slept. While everyone around him cried out to God, Jonah gave in to complete despair.¹ In the midst of this chaos, the captain finds him and says to him, מַה-לָּךְ נִרְדָּם קוֹם קְרָא אֶל-אֱלֹהֶיךָ אוּלַי יִתְעַשֶּׂת, “Why are you sleeping? Get up, call out to your God. *Ulai*—Maybe God will notice us, and we won't perish.”

As I learned in a teaching from Rabbi Alex Weissman, the captain doesn't make any promises to Jonah. He doesn't say “have hope, turn to God,” with a surety that things will turn out for the positive. Rather, he says, *ulai*, maybe. Maybe God will take notice. Maybe we will be saved. But, this giving in to despair, this allowing oneself to be paralyzed, sleeping on the bottom of the boat while the world around you falls apart, this is unacceptable. You've got to choose hope. You've got to believe in the maybe.

Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the Jewish New Year, is a time of rebirth, a time of rebuilding. During the month of Elul, the month leading up to Rosh HaShanah, we take stock of the year, the places we've gone astray, and we have a chance to start again. Often, we focus on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as a time of scrutiny and failure, but it is also a time of

¹ Jonah 1:5-6.



great hope. To begin the new year with hope, that maybe this year we'll be different. Maybe this year we'll be better.

But, when we look around and we see brokenness, both in ourselves and in the world around us, how do we begin again with hope? There are the flaws that never get fixed, the relationships that never get healed, the distance from God that at times seems insurmountable. At a certain point, when we find ourselves stuck in the same place, year after year, does hope even make sense?

The Czech writer and philosopher Vaclav Havel wrote this of hope: "Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul; it's not essentially dependent on the world or estimate of the situation. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart."²

Hope is not about an accurate reading of the situation on the ground; it's not based on the likelihood of a certain outcome. Rather, hope is a state of mind. It is an orientation in which we choose to approach the world. We can choose to be hopeful, to transcend the situation of the world around us. Or, we can give in to despair.

Howard Zinn, in his essay "The Optimism of Uncertainty," finds hope by placing our current situation in the perspective of history; he encourages us to look to all of those moments of utter unpredictability and surprise when suddenly the world shifts in an incredible way opening up new possibilities and hope. Jonah, however, is unable to see that the world around him has shifted. Whilst the people of Nineveh have changed, truly repentant and reformed, Jonah insists on only seeing them as they once were. Steady, small change comes in the form of that still small voice that hopes for a better world. But, we can only bear witness to that change if we open ourselves up to that voice.

Sometimes to be hopeful feels crazy, even foolish, when faced with what feels like the impossible reality of the situation. Zinn writes, "To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, and kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—when people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction."³

² Vaclav Havel, "An Orientation of the Heart," in *The Impossible Will Take A Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), p. 106.

³ Howard Zinn, "The Optimism of Uncertainty," in *The Impossible Will Take A Little While*, p. 86.



For Zinn, it's all about perspective. Do we focus on the worst, allowing ourselves to be paralyzed by that which is wrong, or do we choose to pay attention to the good, to those who behave magnificently, to stories of compassion, courage, and kindness? Our chosen perspective, whether it be one of despair or hope, determines our ability to act. Jonah falls exactly into the trap of which Zinn writes. He sees the wicked ways of the people of Nineveh and sees only a history of cruelty. Ironically, despite his role as a prophet, it's Jonah's short-sightedness, his inability to see the people in all of their complex, messy, beautiful humanity that destroys his capacity to act, to inspire them toward something better.

While Jonah may have given in to despair, the people of Nineveh and the sailors on the ship did not. They believed in the possibility of *ulai*, the power of the maybe. I wish for us all that we make this a year in which we choose hope, in which we lean into the magnificent goodness around us, and allow that to inspire us toward action.

Shanah tovah.