

## Jonah D'var Torah – Yom Kippur 2019

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When I was invited by Rhonda to speak this summer I was sitting by the beach on Plum Island Massachusetts, watching the crashing waves and, by coincidence, reading Moby Dick.

That book happens to include a sermon about Jonah early in the story. It's given by a fire & brimstone preacher in New Bedford to sailors about to ship out for a long voyage. The imagery of the dangerous dark sea and the great whale is very powerful. Even if you never read the book, I highly recommend you turn to the chapter called the "Sermon."

At the start of the story, God asks Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell the population that if they don't end their evil ways, they'll all be in trouble. Jonah is scared and makes a run for it, getting in a ship and sailing to a destination as far away as possible.

Now the preacher in Moby Dick is very hard on Jonah. He alternates between giving him credit for all the wrong things and then being, in my opinion, very harsh on him in other ways. He criticizes Jonah for being a coward. Of being more concerned with his good name than being good. Of not being willing to stand up for the truth and denounce evil.

Well, isn't it possible Jonah has something legitimate to fear? If Nineveh is as evil as they say, maybe it's dangerous to go there and tell everyone they'd better shape up.

And then of course, Jonah gets a lot of credit for finally bending to God's will. But that only happens after he's thrown overboard the ship and gets swallowed by a whale. Seems a little late for a genuine bout of tchuva to me. Indeed, his actions seems much more like they derive from some serious coercion. I give Jonah very little credit here.

But when you look closer at the story, it's after this that things go really haywire. After getting spit up by the whale, Jonah finally goes to Nineveh, speaks the truth, and everyone miraculously repents and becomes good.

Mission accomplished. Just when Jonah has acquitted himself so well, he becomes suicidal. He says he wants to die.

This is very strange. He's bent out of shape because God made him preach the truth when God intended to forgive everyone all along. Get a grip Jonah.

Then the story gets even stranger. God makes a tree grow up. Some kind of gourd vine or calabash. It's called a "Kikayyon."

Suddenly Jonah's happy. So then God kills the tree. Jonah gets depressed and suicidal again.

What's going on?

Now, I'm not a mental health professional  
And I don't intend to go back and try to psychoanalyze Jonah.

But this is a guy who seems to have a history of depression. When he's running away and his boat gets into life threatening storm, he gets into bed and pulls the cover over his head.

Then at various stages in the story he's suicidal. A very wise person, not a mental health professional, once told me: if you want to understand a person going through emotional distress, don't ask what's wrong with them. Ask what happened to them.

And what happened to Jonah? He was swallowed by a whale.

Now maybe I have been influenced by Herman Melville's account of things. The preacher in the story describes vividly Jonah being tossed onto the ocean. Into the crashing waves in the dark sea. Of going down down down to the darkness and gloom. As Jonah himself describes in the story, he's enveloped in seaweed and he thinks he's going to die.

Now some Jewish commentators have said that Jonah was actually comfortable and safe inside the whale. He had three days in there to quietly contemplate things before he turned to God.

I don't buy that one bit. To me, being swallowed by the whale seems like a powerful metaphor for deep deep depression. How many of you have ever felt — or knew someone in your life who felt — that they were thrown over it to some stormy sea, sunk to the bottom and swallowed by a whale. That feeling of being trapped. Of being in a dark, dark place. It's very frightening.

What can we learn from this? What do we know about what brings people back?

I have had a recent experience in my life that gives me some perspective on this.

As those of you who know me may know, I run a non-profit, Disability Rights International, that specializes in fighting for the basic human rights of people with disabilities abroad.

A few years back, we discovered a psychiatric facility in Guatemala called Federico Mora. It is a terrible place. It is one of the Ninevahs of the world that unfortunately still exists in too many places. At that facility, rape and abuse is so common that we found a 15 year old boy, newly admitted, locked up in an isolation cell for his own safety. We were told by staff that the minute they release him into the facility, he'll be violated.

The facility is in zone 18 of Guatemala, essentially under the control of narco-traffickers. And they exploit the population as sex slaves. If you're unlucky enough to have a breakdown in Guatemala, you can be locked up there and sold for sex.

My organization wanted to take a case. We wanted to fight against this abuse and make sure

people could get released and live free in the community. We wanted to bring a human rights case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington DC.

But we needed a named plaintiff. We needed someone who'd be willing to let us publicly use his name as the basis for the claim on behalf of all patients in the institution. And we needed to find someone willing to stand in front of the cameras and denounce the abuse.

Most people were afraid to stand up. People who talked to us off the record did not want to risk going public.

But there were two men willing to do it. Ricardo and Estuar Kostalecky. Ricardo was diagnosed with mental illness. His brother Estuardo theoretically had an intellectual disability. He didn't speak much but he knew how to speak. He only talked to his brother. The two stuck together and protected one another in the hospital.

And after we used their names on our legal petition, the hospital released them. They owned a house in Guatemala City and went to live there.

Unfortunately, shortly after his release, Ricardo died. He had untreated diabetes. He wasn't getting much treatment in the hospital, so I don't think he died because of his release.

Everyone thought Ricardo was taking care of Estuardo, but it turned out to be the opposite. After Ricardo died, Estuar was ok for a while. He took care of himself and lived in his home.

But I'm sorry to say I recently received news that Estuar has been killed. He was found strangled in his home. The police say it was the neighbors who were mad because he brought farm animals into the house. But there was no real investigation or prosecution. For the police, this was enough.

To this day, I do not know whether Estuar was killed as a form of reprisal for our case.

As a human rights lawyer, I have to ask that question. That is my tchuva. Did I improperly endanger someone by encouraging them to speak out?

But when I look back on our conversations, we discussed the risks. Ricardo certainly understood. He told us in no uncertain terms he was ready to die to stop other people from being abused the way he was abused.

Estuar listened closely to these conversations. He didn't say much, but I believe he understood. He did not hesitate to join and to sign on the dotted line.

So that brings us back to Jonah. He was afraid to speak to. Ricardo and Estuar were not. What is the difference?

Empathy. They knew they were taking a risk to help others. Jonah did it because he was coerced into it.

But I do think this explains the last few sentences of the story. God asks Jonah why he cares so much about us gourd-vine and not about the people (and the animals) of Nineveh. We never get an answer.

But the story ends with a much lighter touch on God's part than it starts with. No storm, no whale. Maybe that's because it's easier to motivate people by empathy than by brute force.

Ricardo and Estuar were locked up for being mentally ill. But they know they wanted to be free. They were ready to make the choice to take risks to help others.

In closing. If you should ever find yourself inside a whale, have empathy. Think of the people in this world who you can help. Think of the people who love you.

It takes true courage. Being a whistleblower is dangerous. It is not easy to do. This is why we so admire whistle blowers and wish them safety.

But it often can't be done alone. Ricardo might not have been able to stand up without his brother Estuar.

We have to do this together. We have to support each other.

And we must remember. The true prophet may be the person who doesn't speak.