

Drash on Jonah - Yom Kippur Mincha - September 2000

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Why do we read the book of Job on the afternoon of Yom Kippur? From among all the sections of the Bible, why did our ancestors select this book to be the last section of Scripture that we read on the High Holidays?

I think the answer to this question can help guide our ethical choices as we move forward in the coming year and give us courage to act, individually and collectively, in the face of the four interrelated crises we now face: a global health crisis, one affecting everyone, but disproportionately the poor and people of color; an economic crisis with tens of millions of Americans and hundreds of millions across the globe struggling to meet their basic needs; a movement for racial justice to repair the deep scar at the root of our nation's history; and a climate crisis that has spurred forest fires across the West and threatens the future of our children and grandchildren.

How do we move forward, how do we retain hope and optimism, how do we orient our moral compass at a time like this?

Throughout the High Holidays, we have read sections of the Bible that are morally complex, forcing us to grapple with the tensions in the stories of the role of G-d, faith, and human nature as we read about Abraham and the binding of Isaac, Sara and the sending of Hagar and Ishmael into the desert, Hannah's prayer for a son, Jeremiah's ringing celebration of our people's redemption from exile, and today Isaiah's memorable words that remind us that ritual is empty unless it inspires us to live a life of justice and tzedakah.

Against this backdrop, what does the story of a man named Job who flees from G-d's command to save Nineveh, then chastises G-d for wanting to save an evil city, yet in the end realizes, through the death of his beloved Kikayon plant, that G-d's partnership with humanity is grounded not just in a strict sense of justice, punishing those who do bad things, but also in deep compassion, love, and connection to others.

Certainly, the book of Job is a tale of redemption, so appropriate for Yom Kippur. But it's also so much more.

The book teaches us so much about the Jewish view of morality. Judaism is a restless faith, one rooted in the cognitive dissonance between the impulse to do good and the impulse to do evil (Yetzer ha tov and yetzer ha rah). Our religion is grounded in a covenant, in a partnership, between fallible human beings and G-d. And for those who have difficulty with the G-d image of the Machzor and the Bible, imagine then a covenant between human beings and the forces for good and meaning in the world. We human beings have free will and we are partners with G-d in the work of creation. It is this faith, this belief that there is purpose and meaning, and that we find this purpose and meaning through tzedakah and chesed, compassion, lovingkindness, caring, that we can change the world. The flames of injustice, violence, oppression

are not inevitable. Because we have faith in the vision and power of a better world, we act both individually and collectively to make this a better place. To borrow a phrase from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Britain: “Judaism is the revolutionary moment at which humanity refuses to accept the world that is.”

I think this is the message we can find in the book of Job, and which we can carry forward from this unique Yom Kippur day of introspection and atonement.

May we all find our own personal kikayon, a beloved source of compassion and connection, to give us courage and strength to do good and pursue justice in the coming year.

Gmar Hatimah Tova.