

## **Father Mapple, Ambassador Oren, Prophet Jonah**

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There are two kinds of people in the world. Those who divide the world into two kinds of people and those who do not. Now usually (okay, paradoxically), I would place myself in the latter category, but today I fear I may be close to falling into the former. For when it comes to the Book of Jonah—why it found a place in the Yom Kippur liturgy—there seems to be two kinds of Jews, those who actually read the text to find out why Jonah ran and those who don't. And those who don't themselves divide the world into two kinds of people, good and bad, awestruck and scoffers, obedient and reckless. Get it? Bare with me.

Since we are in New England's church of churches on this Sabbath of Sabbaths, I can't resist starting with someone who, though not a Jew, had some pretty strong opinions about Jonah and what makes for good Hebrews—one who gave perhaps the most famous sermon on the subject, certainly the most paradigmatic for our purposes. I am speaking of course of Father Mapple in Moby Dick, whom Ishmael hears just before he first sets sail:

*Shipmates, it is a two-stranded lesson; a lesson to us all as sinful men, and a lesson to me as a pilot of the living God. As sinful men, it is a lesson to us all, because it is a story of the sin, hard-heartedness, suddenly awakened fears, the swift punishment, repentance, prayers, and finally the deliverance and joy of Jonah.*

The “joy of Jonah.” Really? Mapple continues, explaining why Jonah ran away.

*All the things that God would have us do are hard for us to do- remember that- and hence, he oftener commands us than endeavors to persuade. And if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists. With this sin of disobedience in him, Jonah still further flouts at God, by seeking to flee from Him. He thinks that a ship made by men, will carry him into countries where God does not reign but only the Captains of this earth. He skulks about the wharves of Joppa, and seeks a ship that's bound for Tarshish.*

Father Mapple, *en passant*, ferrets out of the Book of Jonah Jonah's idea of what a Hebrew is, someone who knows God's power, and who knows better than to expect mercy when sins are great:

*I am a Hebrew,' he cries- and then- 'I fear the Lord the God of Heaven who hath made the sea and the dry land!' Fear him, O Jonah? Aye, well mightest thou fear the Lord God then!*

We know what happens next. Jonah is tossed overboard according to his own wish. Then Mapple reaches his climax:

*He goes down in the whirling heart of such a masterless commotion that he scarce heeds the moment when he drops seething into the yawning jaws awaiting him; and the whale shoots-to all his ivory teeth, like so many white bolts, upon his prison.*

The fish pukes him up, Mapple says:

*And Jonah, bruised and beaten- his ears, like two sea-shells, still multitudinously murmuring of the ocean- Jonah did the Almighty's bidding. And what was that, shipmates? To preach the Truth to the face of Falsehood! That was it!*

That was it. The challenge is to preach the Truth in the face of falsehood. Who does and to whom? This requires an implied structuring. The world is made up of two groups of people, clumps of people, and most significantly for Jonah's purposes people who know the truth and people who either don't know it or resist it, or both. The good are good, moreover, because they obey authorized wisdom, or are in awe of God's power, or preferably both. And the way to get people to be good, or afraid to be bad—and, again, what's the difference?—is through a kind of permanent regime of deterrence: we warn like Father Mapple, warn like Jonah eventually did. And we will preach the truth of a force that will find you anywhere, idiot. No place to hide. No place to avoid consequences.

Nor will life be very good if you shirk this Truth. If you fail to fear the forces of good, if you scoff at the sacrifices asked of you, then your life will hardly be worth living. You will be mangled by human corruptions. Or wind up in the prison-belly of fish. To rail against the pressures of this terrible justice is naïve and pitiful; it is to “weep and wail” as the text tells us Jonah did *not* do; like a child or weakling. *All the things that God would have us do are hard for us to do.*

I REMEMBER READING Father Mapple many years ago and feeling vaguely sorry for Ishmael. Not what you needed to set sail: the kind of sermon you expected for, or from, the simple son at the Passover Seder; the ideology of the battered child. Was this really what the Book of Jonah taught? Is this why Jonah ran? Because he was afraid of doing hard duty and taking its consequences?

I should add that I was already part of this Harvard minyan at the time, and took a certain pride in my skepticism. I felt that being a “Hebrew” meant something more than panic in the face of dire consequences, which is why the sages had the guile to include Jonah, of all times, at the most poignant moment on Yom Kippur. I also thought that being a modern Hebrew (I was back and forth to Jerusalem even then) was a particular privilege. This Manichean view, Father Mapple’s view, would have felt terribly out of place in a Yehuda Amichai poem, a Shalom Hanach song, or over an Emeq Refaim cappuccino.

WHICH BRINGS ME to another sermon on the Book of Jonah, this time a Yom Kippur sermon, delivered exactly a year ago in Washington, and by another pilot of the flock, the Ambassador of Israel, our Republic of Hebrews, Michael Oren.

His entire sermon is worth reading. I don’t claim to do justice here to all of the notes he strikes, though I think I am getting the music right. Here is some of what Oren said:

*On Yom Kippur we read the Book of Jonah, one of the Bible's most enigmatic texts... And it features one of our scripture's least distinguished individuals. Yet this same everyman, this Jonah, is tasked by God with a most daunting mission. He is charged with going to the great city of Nineveh and persuading its pernicious people to repent for their sins or else.*

I stop only to notice that word “pernicious.” Hold the thought. Oren continues:

*Jonah, though, cannot escape the responsibility. Nor can he dodge his divinely ordained dilemma. If he succeeds in convincing the Ninevehians to atone and no harm befalls them, many will soon question whether that penitence was ever really necessary. Jonah will be labeled an alarmist. But, what if the people of Nineveh ignore the warning and the city meets the same fiery fate as Sodom and Gomorrah? Then Jonah, as a prophet, has failed.*

*Such is the paradox of prophecy for Jonah, a lose-lose situation. No wonder he runs away. He flees to the sea, only to be swallowed by a gigantic fish, and then to the desert, cowering under a gourd. But, in the end, the fish coughs him up and the gourd withers. The moral is: there is no avoiding Jonah's paradox. Once elected by God whatever the risks, he must act.*

Once elected by God he must act. Oren might have just said "elected," for Jonah is for him a handy stand-in for political leaders. What the fates ask from pilots is hard: responsibilities that cannot be shirked, not like those who carp from the sidelines--the

"pundits," Oren says. Nor can real consequences be avoided. Fishes swallow, gourds whither. Stuff happens. And what is the moral dilemma that truly responsible people face? Oren continues:

*The quandary of statecraft: Every national leader knows it and few better than Israeli leaders. They, too, have had to make monumental--even existential--decisions. ...My personal hero, Levi Eshkol. On June 5th, 1967, Eshkol had to decide whether to unleash Israel Defense Forces against the Arab armies surrounding the Jewish State and clamoring for its destruction or whether to alienate the international community and especially the United States and be branded an aggressor.*

This hard decision is paradigmatic for Oren. The choice is between being right and labeled, or, being wrong and dead. You do the right thing or do the popular thing. Go to your Ninveh or run away. The contemporary meaning of Jonah is all too clear:

*Consider the case of terror. Israel today is threatened with two major terror organizations: Hamas in Gaza and, in Lebanon, Hizbollah. Both are backed by Iran and both call openly for Israel's destruction. And, over the past five years, both have acted on that call by firing nearly 15,000 rockets at Israeli towns and villages. Next imagine that you're the prime minister of Israel. You know that in order to keep those thousands of rockets out of Hamas's hands you need to blockade Gaza from the sea. The policy is risky--people may get hurt, especially if they're armed extremists--and liable to make you very unpopular in the world. But you have to choose between being popular and watching idly while a million Israelis come under rocket fire. You have to choose between popular and being alive.*

And again:

*You know that Israel has in the past withdrawn from territories in an effort to generate peace but that it received no peace but rather war. And, lastly, you know that many Arabs view the two-state solution as a two stage solution in which the ultimate stage is Israel's dissolution. Imagine that you're Israel's prime minister. Do you wait until Hizbollah finds a pretext to fire those rockets or do you act preemptively? Do you risk having the much of the country being reduced to rubble or having that same country reduced to international pariah status?*

Now, I don't want to go into all the various ways Oren represents these events. He is an historian and I have benefited from reading him. Let us say I find his facts partial. And I know this synagogue and this day are not the place for politics, certainly not "punditry"; nor would not I want to slight Oren, whom I have often admired. I knew him in Jerusalem and found him good company. Indeed, Oren is representing things

much like most Israelis and American Jews do, and much like certain other sacred texts do. If this were a gloss on the Book of Joshua, no problem.

No, what's on my mind is not the arguable facts Oren ticks off, but the way he presents moral dilemmas, presents, "responsibility"—the way his version of Jonah suggest a more general, even archetypal, structure to the way Israeli Jews should view themselves and their dilemmas. The details are not merely partial. They are partial in order to set up a particular kind of drama. It goes something like this:

We were fair and got war. Why? As with Father Mapple, it is because you have two clumps of people, us and them, the peace loving and the bloody-minded, though Oren hedges his categories about with phrases like “a great many” and the use of the passive voice. Once you establish this bifurcation, you establish the moral dilemma. And Oren's plain, if implied message maps to the structure implied by his interpretation of Jonah: in this contest between the righteous and the "pernicious," Israeli leaders must do something hard but inescapable: exercise firm power, bring a message of deterrence, preach the truth in the face of falsehood, bomb if you have to and the *New York Times* be damned.

Indeed, Oren's only real innovation in Mapple's Manichean drama is the idea that what makes things particularly hard for the prophet-leader these days is that doing what's necessary could lead to the loss of global reputation, something statesmen have to be concerned about but God did not—well, except for that time after the Golden Calf, when Moses warns God his reputation among the nations will suffer if he wipes Israel out in the desert, but that's another story.

YOU THINK ABOUT Oren's tone, his framing, his pathos, and what's missing from his Jonah is something quite like what is missing from Father Mapple. I would call it critical self-consciousness, the gift that leads to a kind of moral triangulation: I see this course, I see that course, but I also see myself seeing. I see this person, I see that action, but because I am fallible like any person, I understand that I might, under similar circumstances, do what he or she does. Indeed, what have I done that may have contributed to some escalating evil? How can I change my part of the tragic story? An historian with this sensibility would, I suspect, have more to say about what happened in this conflict.

Let me be clear. Terrorism is not tolerable; members of my own family have been its victims. Just because something is understandable does not make it right. No matter what, your actions have to pass an ordinary moral test—to do to others what you would have others do to you. But before you can agree to be bound by such a test you have to see the other's humanity, not just ostensibly collective crimes—you have to

see yourself a part of a common humanity. You have to renounce Manichean visions, this notion that life presents us with struggles against evil forces—the idea that goodness rests merely, or even mainly, on the terrible power of good forces to intimidate the bad.

What is a Jew, if only on Yom Kippur, if not someone who sees this? And where would we learn this, ironically, if not from the Book of Jonah? For what, if not the humility of self-consciousness and the renunciation of Manichaeism does Jonah teach?

THE PEOPLE OF Ninveh are not the real villains, are they? They are not *very* bad: one perfunctory warning from the prophet and even the cattle are put into sack-cloth. No, it is *Jonah* the book is warning us about, that we should not be like him: small, angry, certain of right and wrong, hungry for the punishment of crime, more than a touch depressive, incapable of handling uncertainty.

For why, really, did Jonah run? Actually, he tells us, or God, after God forgives Ninveh. It has nothing to do with fearing God's mission and everything to do with fearing God's compassion. This is what Jonah says just after Ninveh atones and God pardons:

*I pray Thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in mine own country? Therefore I fled beforehand unto Tarshish; for I knew that Thou art a gracious God, and compassionate, long-suffering, and abundant in mercy, and repentest Thee of the evil.*

*Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech Thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.'*

*And the LORD said: 'Art thou greatly angry?'*

*Then Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city.*

You sort of get the feeling that Jonah builds the booth to look out onto the city in the forlorn hope that God would incinerate the sons of bitches after all. Anyway, he obviously feels more comfortable far away from the people he was notionally saving, that he cares about humanity more than humans. He is Javert in *Les Misérables*, someone who rather die than live with the confusions brought into the

world by forgiveness. You can almost hear him shouting for "responsibility" from the audience of a Tea Party candidates debate.

Jonah, in other words, is hardly the hero in the book. God is. God has a lesson to teach, but the heart to be transformed is Jonah's. God sends the gourd, not to prove his power some more, but because he realizes that, as with a numbed child, you can teach Jonah compassion only step by step; by starting with the potential personal loss of something precious, intimate and then hope the child will extrapolate to a larger class of things. What makes moral dilemmas really hard, as opposed to merely daring, is the sense of identity people develop for all people, the idea that "there but for fortune go you or I," that none of us can really "know our left hand from our right"?

The problem is that Jews, like all people, like Jonah quintessentially, find critical self-consciousness hard. As Philip Roth put it: "Jews are members of the human race; worse than that I cannot say about them." We find it hard to look in the mirror and not blame the mirror. We find reciprocity hard. We find telling the whole story hard, indeed we find the building blocks of stories more and more complex and various the more gourds we encounter.

What we *don't* find hard—because childhood inculcates this simple drama—is Oren's elevation to archetype the idea that the most powerful personalities in our lives are good, though they may just be stuck with a public relations problem.

How would God, the hero of the Book of Jonah, try to imply statesmanship to a prime minister? What gourd would He send—what worm—to try to get all leaders to see enemies as many individuals and see risk as permanent? How would He help Israel's prime minister to see, to paraphrase David Grossman, the little Hezbollah in you?

I suspect the future of what Jews mean by Jews will depend very much on the answers we provide to these questions in the coming year. So let me end with a story. I have spent a good deal of time with another prime minister this past year, nobody's hero now, who actually launched two wars against "the missiles." He can speak for himself, but my impression of Ehud Olmert is that he is not at all certain in retrospect that he saw enough of the consequences, enough of the story, though he certainly saw as much as Oren implies statesmen must. Anyway, when I asked him about his proudest moment of statesmanship, he told me this:

Olmert had sat in on meetings in which Ariel Sharon had treated Abbas as the representative of a defeated, insurgent enemy that needed to be intimidated. This often made Olmert cringe. So when he assumed office, and tried to set appointments with Abbas, he was not surprised that Abbas kept putting him off, determined, Olmert

surmised, to avoid more humiliation. Finally, they set an appointment for a Thursday evening, and again Abbas cancelled at the last minute. So Olmert got him on the phone and said: "I understand why you might want to insult me, but why insult my wife?" Abbas was taken aback and said he did not understand. Olmert said: "When Aliza found that you would be coming, she spent the last 24 hours preparing your favorite dishes for dinner. What shall I tell her now?" Abbas came, eventually met with Olmert 36 times, and the two came closer to a comprehensive agreement than any previous leaders.

This is not the kind of approach to truth and power Father Mapple or Ambassador Oren, or Jonah, for that matter, would have respected. But I like to think that the Book of Jonah's God would have been relieved.