

## Do We Really Have a Choice?

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*Gmar chatima tova!*

In my recent move from New York to Berkeley, there were certain challenges that my family and I had to accept. For example, all of the sudden we have to wake up **each and every** day to the same achingly beautiful weather. Walking down the street or at shul, we are forced to interact with warm, welcoming people, it's terrible. Can you believe we have to keep doing this? In truth, it's actually been unbelievably incredible to be here, but there are challenges involved in taking on new roles and moving to new schools. How do we become the people we want to be in these roles? How do we do things that are new and exciting but also scary and difficult?

I've been thinking about different examples of people who are asked to do things which feel beyond their capacity. Moshe immediately comes to mind. Moshe meets God at the burning bush and asks God, "Isn't there someone better you could send instead?"

Another timely example is the prophet Jonah, who we will read about this afternoon. Jonah is not your typical prophet. Asked to deliver a message to the failing city of Nineveh, Jonah runs away.

There are moments in our lives when we are asked to do things that feel outside of our comfort zones. In these important moments, do we step up like Moshe, or do we turn away like Jonah? Do we accept the possibility of failure and rise to the occasion, or do we flee to safer shores?

I'd like to take a closer look at what causes Jonah to flee. There are two moments in the book of Jonah that I think explain why he initially runs away.

The first, is the image of a whale with a person in its belly. I can't imagine a better image to depict the feeling of anxiety: Instead of butterflies in your belly, imagine that you have an agitated person clomping around inside of you. Jonah is that very overgrown, human-sized butterfly in the pit of your stomach. He is a swirling mass of anxiety inside a whale. The whale has to spit him out, and so I would suggest that Jonah represents the emotional experience of feeling like you have to throw up. Jonah in the whale is a picture of what it feels like to feel nervous, really nervous, and that feeling causes him to run away.

However, there is also another moment in the book in which Jonah explains in his own words why he ran away and he actually explains it differently. After he has already gone to Nineveh, and, lo and behold, the people of Nineveh actually listened to him and repented, the book tells us that Jonah is mad at God. Jonah tells God:

הַלֹּאֲצָה דָּבָרִי עַד־הַיּוֹתֵי עַל־אֲדָמָתִי עַל־כֵּן קִדְמָתִי לְבָרֶחַ תִּרְשָׁשָׁה

Isn't this what I said would happen back when I was in my own country? This is why I fled to Tarshish,

כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה קֹל־חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם אֶרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְנִחָם עַל־הַרָעָה

because I knew that you were a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and mercy for what is bad. (Jonah 4:2)

Jonah is speaking to God and Jonah says to God, “My worst nightmare has come true! They listened to me. They repented and You, You, had the gall to forgive them.”

Why does Jonah find this so unsettling?

I’d like to suggest that at the root of Jonah’s preference for strict justice is a deep intolerance of mistakes. That is why Jonah runs away. Jonah runs away because he cannot accept errors, either in others or in himself. And in order to do something new, we have to accept our fallibility. We have to accept that things might not turn out how we’d like.

Let’s look even closer. The words that Jonah says when he is complaining about God’s forgiving nature, echo the prayer of the thirteen attributes of mercy, which we say over and over and over again over Yom Kippur. These lines first appear in the book of Shemot when God tells Moshe to climb the mountain a second time and make a new set of tablets to replace the first, which Moshe had smashed after the sin of the golden calf. As Moshe climbs the mountain for the second time, the Torah tells us that God came down to meet him:

וַיֵּרָד ה' בְּעָנָן וַיִּתְיַצֵּב עִמּוֹ נֹשֵׁם וַיִּקְרָא בְּשֵׁם ה':

God came down in a cloud—and stood with him there-

וַיַּעֲבֵר ה' אֵלָיו וַיִּקְרָא

God passed before him and he proclaimed

ה' ה' קל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אֶרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת:

“Hashem! Hashem! A compassionate and merciful God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and truth.” (Shemot 34:5-6)

There’s something ambiguous about this verse. Who is saying it? The verse states, “God passed before him and he proclaimed.” But who is ‘he’? It would make sense for the ‘he’ to be Moshe, calling out to God for mercy, but the Talmud actually understands the ‘he’ as referring to God. Hashem is the one who proclaims, “ה' ה' קל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן Hashem! Hashem! A god of compassion and grace.” Why would God be calling out to God? According to a statement by Rabbi Yochanan in the Talmud, God says this line as God teaches it to Moshe. Rabbi Yochanan paints an amazing picture. He says that God wraps himself in a tallit and He teaches Moshe how to pray (Rosh Hashanah 17b). God teaches Moshe how to pray.

According to this interpretation, God is saying this about Himself. He says about Himself, “I am merciful, I am forgiving, I am slow to anger.” As we say this line on repeat today, we are asking God to be merciful. But we can also follow His example, and say this line about ourselves. If God is teaching Moshe, maybe he is also modeling how we should speak to ourselves since He is speaking about Himself. We can say, “I am merciful, I am forgiving, I accept that I make mistakes.”

The moment when God teaches Moshe this line is a time when Moshe feels let down as a leader. His flock has sinned and he feels vulnerable. At that very moment God models empathy by standing with Moshe as support, “וַיִּתְיַצֵּב עִמּוֹ נֹשֵׁם He **stood** with him there.” God stands with Moshe in his discomfort.

Herein lies the big difference between Moshe and Jonah: Moshe stands in his discomfort and accepts the possibility of failure and forgiveness. Unlike Jonah, Moshe accepts vulnerability. We’ve seen this before. Earlier in the story, Moshe goes to Pharaoh even though Moshe considers himself a poor speaker. He does something really hard. And here, he confronts mistakes, and accepts instruction and support.

What can we learn from this? I would like to suggest that there are two lessons from the book of Jonah that can help us do hard things: The first is accepting vulnerability. And the second is accepting inevitability.

Let's look at the first, accepting vulnerability. The researcher Brené Brown defines vulnerability as "Uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure." She suggests that the armor that protects us, can also restrict our growth. Jonah is asked to prophesize to the people of Nineveh without knowing how they'll respond. He must take a risk and put himself out there in order to fulfill his role.

Let's look at the second lesson, accepting inevitability. Jonah cannot escape his destiny. He tries to run away, but is swallowed by a whale and spit out on shore. Ultimately he does not have a choice, he has to carry out God's plan.

So it seems that sometimes the answer to "How can we do hard things?" is that we do not have a choice, we have to try. On Yom Kippur we are working on our ideal selves. If we want to become our ideal selves, we have to take the risk that we might fail. That is Jonah's difficult dilemma.

As we think about our actions of the past year, I think it is important to consider the things that we did not do. Where did we hold ourselves back? What are the goals that we should strive for even though they feel uncomfortable? And how can we be gracious to ourselves and accept our inevitable mistakes? What are the choices we did not make, what are the choices we must make, and what are the choices that make us feel vulnerable.

Yom Kippur is a day filled with vulnerability. We are not eating. We are not drinking. We are examining our misdeeds and mistakes. There is vulnerability in realizing that we are not quite what we want to be. We are about to stand for Yizkor. At Yizkor we may be at our most vulnerable, confronted with loss, love, and mortality. But there is also inevitability. As we stand for Yizkor, we stand together, just as God stood alongside Moshe. We offer support as imperfect people to other imperfect people, emulating God, and allowing ourselves to live, to take risks, and to become who we would like to be.