

READING THE BOOK OF JONAH

Everett Fox

SESSION SUMMARY

In this workshop, participants did a close reading of the *Book of Jonah* with an eye to understanding its place in the journey of *Yom Kippur*. They specifically looked for themes and ideas that will appeal to the understanding of children and teens. They discussed how to teach this in the school setting and how to use it in worship. The text of the *Book of Jonah* was provided, as well as questions for teachers to use.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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YONA

Note: This is the whole book of Jonah. The name of God, YHWH, is what is in the Hebrew, and we usually pronounce it was “Adonai” (the Lord). You can also simply use “God,” “The Eternal One,” or whatever makes sense to you.

A prophet is sent to a foreign city, the capital of an evil empire, to warn them that if they don't change their ways, they will be destroyed. But instead, he runs away and gets on a ship. God sends a storm, and everybody realizes that it's because of this stranger. He admits who he is and tells the sailors to throw him overboard to stop the storm. They try to save his life, but in the end they have no choice.

- 1 Now the word of YHWH [came] to Yona son of Amittai, saying,
- 2 Arise,
 go to Nineveh, the great city,
 and call out concerning it
 that their evil-doing has come up before my face.
- 3 Yona arose
 to flee to Tarshish, away from YHWH's face;
 he went down to Yafo
 and found a ship traveling to Tarshish
 and gave its fare
 and went down aboard it, to travel with them to Tarshish, away from YHWH's face.
- 4 But YHWH hurled a great wind upon the sea,
 And a great storm was on the sea,
 so that the ship was on the brink of breaking up.
- 5 The sailors feared, and they cried out, each one to his god,
 and they hurled the gear that was on the ship into the sea, to be lightened from them.
 Meanwhile, Yona had gone down into the hindmost deck and had lay down and had gone to sleep.
- 6 The captain approached him and said:
 How can you sleep?
 Arise, call upon your god!
 Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, so that we will not have to perish!
- 7 Each man said to his fellow:
 Come, let us cast lots,
 so that we may know on whose account this evil has happened to us.
 They cast lots
 and the cast-lot fell upon Yona.

8 They said to him:

Now tell us,
you on whose account this evil has happened to us,
What is your business?
Where do you come from?
What is your land?
And from what people are you?

9 He said to them:

I am a Hebrew,
and I fear YHWH, the God of Heaven,
who made the sea and the dry-land.

10 The men feared—a great fear,
and said to him:

What, now, have you done?
For the men knew
that he was fleeing from YHWH's face,
for he had told them of it.

11 They said to him:

What should we do with you
so that the sea may quiet down from us?
For the sea keeps on storming more fiercely!

12 He said to them:

Lift me and hurl me into the sea,
so that the sea may quiet down from you!
For I know
that this great storm is upon you on my account.

13 The men rowed hard to return it to land,

but they could not,
for the sea kept on storming more fiercely against them.

14 So they called upon YHWH; they said:

Ah, YHWH,

now do not let us perish because of this man's life!

And may you not put innocent blood upon us!

For you yourself, O YHWH,

as pleases you, so have you done.

15 So they took Yona and hurled him into the sea,

and the sea ceased from its rage.

16 The men feared YHWH—a great fear;

they sacrificed a sacrifice to YHWH and vowed vows.

Thrown into the ocean, Yona is swallowed by a huge fish, but doesn't die. He prays to God, thankful that he's still alive, and longs to see the Temple in Jerusalem again. In the end, God commands the fish to throw up Yona, and he's safe on dry land.

2:1 And YHWH had appointed a great fish

to swallow Yona.

And Yona was in the body of the fish

For three days and three nights.

2 Yona prayed to YHWH his God from the body of the fish;

3 he said:

I called in my distress to YHWH

and he answered me;

I implored from the belly of Sheol,

and you hearkened to my voice.

4 You threw me into the vortex,

into the heart of the seas.

The River surrounded me;

all your breakers and your waves passed over me.

5 Already I thought, I am driven away from your eyes—
 may I but look once more
 upon the Hall of your Holy-Place!

6 The waters encompassed me up to the throat;
 the Primeval-Flood surrounded me.
 Seaweed was wound around my head.

7 [Sinking] to the roots of the mountains I went down;
 the land, its bar [shut] behind me forever—
 yet you brought up my life from the Pit,
 O YHWH my God.

8 When my life was fainting within me,
 I called YHWH to mind,
 and to you came my prayer,
 to the Hall of your Holy-Place.

9 Those who wait for the mists of illusion,
 they must forsake their bounty!

10 But I, with the voice of praise,
 I will sacrifice to you;
 what I vowed, I will repay—
 deliverance is YHWH's!

11 YHWH spoke to the fish
 and it vomited up Yona onto the dry-land.

Yona is sent to Nineveh a second time, and this time he goes. After he warns them, everybody, from the king to innocent animals, asks for forgiveness (they don't eat or drink, they dress in canvas like they are in mourning, and pray). God decides not to punish them, since they are sincere.

3:1 And the word of YHWH [came] to Yona a second time, saying:

2 Arise,

go to Nineveh, the great city,

and call out the call to it

that I speak to you.

3 So Yona arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of YHWH.

Now Nineveh was a great city before God, [taking] three days to walk through.

4 Yona began to come into the city, one day's walk, and called out; he said:

Another forty days, and Nineveh will be overthrown!

5 The men of Nineveh had faith in God:

they called a fast and dressed themselves in sackcloth, from the smallest to the greatest.

6 The word reached the king of Nineveh;

he arose from his throne and took off his mantle, and covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in ashes.

7 And he had [them] cry out and say:

In Nineveh, by order of the king and his great-ones, saying:

Man and beast, oxen and sheep—

they shall not feed on the slightest thing,

they shall not give pasture,

and water they shall not drink!

8 Let them be covered with sackcloth,

man and beast;

let them call out to God with might

and turn, each one from his evil way,

from the wrongdoing that is in their hands!

9 Who knows, the god may turn and relent,

he may turn from the flaming of his anger,

and we will not perish!

10 God saw what they did,

that they turned from their evil way,

and God relented concerning the evil

that he had said that he would do to them,
and he did not do it.

Yona is furious. He goes outside the city to see what will happen (It looks like he's expecting them to be destroyed). God provides a big leafy plant to give him shade, but then sends a worm which eats the plant. Yona is hot and miserable, and wishes he were dead. God's response is to say that just as Yona cared about the plant, shouldn't God care about all the living creatures in Nineveh and not kill them? The book ends on this question.

4:1 This was evil to Yona—a great evil.

2 he became upset, / and he prayed to YHWH; he said:

Ah, YHWH!

Was this not my word when I was still on my [own] soil?

Because of this I wanted to forestall, to flee to Tarshish!

For I knew

that you are a compassionate and merciful God,

long-suffering and of much loyalty,

and would relent concerning the evil.

3 So then, O YHWH,

now take my life from me,

for it is more right that I should die than that I should live!

4 But YHWH said:

Are you rightly upset?

5 Yona left the city

and sat down east of the city;

there he made himself a hut

and sat beneath it in the shade,

until he would see what was to happen to the city.

6 And YHWH God had appointed a castor-oil plant,

that it should shoot up over Yona

to be shade over his head,

to save him from his evil [discomfort].

And Yona rejoiced over the plant—a great joy.

- 7 But God appointed a worm when the next dawn came up
which bit into the plant, so that it withered.
- 8 And it was, when the sun shone,
that God appointed a cutting east wind;
the sun beat down upon Yona's head,
and he became faint
and wished his life to die; he said:
It is more right that I should die than that I should live!
- 9 Then God said to Yona:
Are you so rightly upset
concerning the plant?
He said:
I am so rightly upset,
up to [the point of] death!
- 10 God said to Yona:
So you took pity on the plant
for which you did not labor,
which you did not cause to grow,
which as a child of a night came to be
and as a child of a night perished.
- 11 Now should I now take pity on Nineveh, the great city,
in which there are more than twelve ten-thousands of human beings
who do not know [the difference] between right and left,
and many beasts?

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For Teachers: QUESTIONS ON THE BOOK OF JONAH

I CHOICES

1. Yona is sent to Nineveh to warn the people about their evil ways. He has a choice to go; why doesn't he? **We learn later on (in 4:2) that he knew that God would forgive them, and he really wanted to see them punished.**
2. In the middle of a storm, Yona has a choice to help the sailors. Instead, he goes to sleep down below. Have you ever separated yourself from people who need help?
3. Yona has a choice about whether to tell the sailors the truth about who he is and why the storm has arisen. Why does he? **Because he doesn't want these innocent people to die for something he did.**
4. Yona is asked a second time to go to Nineveh. He does. Why? **He now realizes that he can't run away from God and his responsibility.**
5. At the end of the book, God asks Yona to forgive the people of Nineveh. What do you think he will do? **The text ends here, so we don't find out.**
- 6.

II ATTITUDES

1. What does Yona think about being sent to Nineveh? **He doesn't want to do it.**
2. When he is inside the fish, what does Yona talk about in his prayer? **He's grateful to be alive, and thinks about the Temple in Jerusalem, not about what God wants him to do in Nineveh.**
3. Why isn't Yona happy that the people of Nineveh decide to turn their lives around? **He didn't think people could change, and he wanted his prophecy to come true. He cared about his reputation as a prophet.**
- 4.

III DOING HARD THINGS

1. What's hard about going to Nineveh and warning them? **They might listen to him—or they might yell at him or make fun of him or try to hurt him.**
2. Do you think it was hard for him to confess to the sailors that the storm was his fault? **Yes.**
3. Is it hard to forgive other people? **What do you think?**

TWO IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

1. **How does the story of Yona apply to your life today?**
2. **How do the issues of Yona tie in with the issues of Yom Kippur?**

POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES AROUND JONAH

The kids can ask questions of the text.

Teaching younger kids:

A play (lots of different characters, including animals).

Crafts.

A midrashic book—point to places where there are holes in the story and kids can add their own ideas.

Put Yona on trial.