

Every Yom Kippur afternoon, congregations all over the world read the Book of Jonah. Most people believe that this haftarah is chosen because it models complete teshuvah or repentance. In this story, we read that from the king to each individual, by decree, everyone fasted and turned from their evil ways. In the end, God is so impressed with the atonement of the city of Ninevah that no evil comes upon them.

Yet, the book is named for Jonah, the only prophet to be chosen to warn a people outside of Israel of their impending destruction by God for their evil ways. God tells Jonah to go warn the people but Jonah decides not to accept what he believes is an impossible mission and he runs. Eventually, he realizes that it is futile to run and impossible to hide. Ultimately, he fulfills God's mission to warn the people of Nineveh of their impending doom. But, once his job is done, Jonah is still a very unhappy prophet.

So why do we read this particular story on Yom Kippur? I think that we read the Book of Jonah on Yom Kippur afternoon to remind us that **sometimes we are Jonah**. How so? Each of us has times when the responsibility of the world is thrust upon our shoulders and each of us has times when we feel very much alone. We run, we are swallowed up, and we are spit out. Sometimes, just like Jonah, we feel that life is too much for us. Who wouldn't want to book a cruise, get on a ship, and run away from such burdens? Perhaps, we are more like Jonah than we even want to admit.

The biblical text tells us that Jonah was in the whale for three days. Three days in the Torah means a long time, but not too long a time, unless you have no food. Three days can seem like an eternity.

What would you do if you had three days with no phone, no food, no Internet or television, no place to go, and no one to see? What might one do with three days of isolation? We are not given a clue about what Jonah did for his first three days in the "big fish hotel," but the Rabbis who studied the book speculated. Rashi, the great French commentator of eleventh-century France said, "God showed Jonah the Red Sea and how the Jews passed through it: for the eyes of the fish were as two windows and he looked and saw all that was in the sea." In the eighth century commentary in *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer*, we are taught, "Jonah entered the fish's mouth, as a man who enters a great synagogue, and he stood and the two eyes of the fish were like glass windows giving light to Jonah."

Sometimes we are Jonah. We enter our synagogues looking for light that will illumine our path in life and provide windows into our souls. Sometimes we receive light and vision, and other times we face our reflection in the darkness beyond the windows. Many have experienced crises of faith, especially in times of tsuris, "trouble," or when confronted by the pain of life or the harsh reality of death. Some know well the darkness that can

challenge their faith. At those times, the sanctuary may feel cold and the prayer book empty.

Jonah wasn't doing "nothing" for three days and three nights. I believe he was taking time to reflect and examine his thoughts and actions. That is **not** *nothing*. With time to think, Jonah was forced to confront his fears, his loneliness, his mistakes, and his God. Today, we are Jonah, doing exactly the same thing for our sacred Days of Awe.