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TORAH SPARKS תַּיְצוּלוֹת תּוֹרָה

Yom Kippur Mincha Haftarah - Jonah

September 22, 2007 – 10 Tishrei 5768 - י' תשרי תשס"ח

Annual: Leviticus 16:1 – 34 (Etz Hayim, p. 679; Hertz p. 480)
Maftir: Numbers 29:7 – 11 (Etz Hayim, p. 933; Hertz p. 696)
Haftarah: Isaiah 57:14 – 58:14 (Etz Hayim, p. 1241; Hertz p. 960)
At Minhah: Leviticus 18:1 – 30 (Etz Hayim, p. 688; Hertz p. 488)
Haftarah: Yona 1:1 – 4:11 Micha 7:18 -- 20
(Etz Hayim, p. 1247; Hertz p. 964)

Prepared by Rabbi Avram Kogen

SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF THE BOOK OF JONAH

The prayer books for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur have sound, informative translations and summaries of the day's Torah readings. Rather than repeat material readily available in these machzorim, in this week's Torah Sparks we will focus upon the Yom Kippur afternoon haftarah, which is the book of Jonah.

Both the Hebrew text and the English translation of Jonah are readily available in most machzorim, but generally without extensive commentary. This brief but significant book is read at a time of the day when many Jews who have been in the synagogue that day have left. Our objective is to focus attention on the book of Jonah, in the hope that its message, so often overlooked, will enrich the lives of those who concentrate upon it.

Our understanding of the book will be enhanced if we can transcend certain engrained assumptions:

A. While the large fish (sometimes characterized as a whale, although the text does not call it that) plays an important role in the early part of the book, this book is not simply a tall tale about a fish.

B. Although Jonah was a prophet, he was not blindly obedient to God. Like many of us, he occasionally questioned God's orders. He even rebelled against God's directives on more than one occasion.

The book of Jonah consists of four short chapters. There is no substitute for reading it in its entirety. However, a brief summary may help us to think about several themes that otherwise might elude us:

Chapter I

1-3: God commands Jonah to deliver a prophetic message to Nineveh. Jonah then boards a ship headed in the opposite direction.

4-16: God brings a storm that threatens the survival of Jonah's ship. Even after it becomes known that Jonah is the cause of this danger, the gentile sailors seek to find a way to save not only the ship but Jonah as well. When all else fails, they succumb to Jonah's request to throw him overboard. The sea then becomes calm.

Chapter II

1a: God is clearly not finished with Jonah. The Lord sends a large fish to swallow him.

1b-9: During three days in the belly of the fish, Jonah is prayerful and reflective. (However, he does not recommit himself to his prophetic mission.)

10: At the Lord's behest, the fish expels Jonah onto dry land.

Chapter III

1-3a: God repeats his command that Jonah go to Nineveh.

3b-10: Jonah obeys. The people of Nineveh are remarkably receptive to the prophetic message. They repent, and God retracts his decree against the city.

Chapter IV

1-5: Jonah complains to God about the futility of his mission. His mood is worse than grumpy.

6-11: God teaches Jonah a lesson by means of a shade plant.

A masterful treatment of this book and its message can be found in the JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah (1999). In this commentary, Professor Uriel Simon calls our attention to several basic questions that must be dealt with in any serious treatment of Jonah:

1. Why was Jonah unwilling to prophesy against Nineveh?
2. What did the Lord teach his prophet by means of ...
 - a) the tempest?
 - b) the fish?
 - c) the gourd?
- 3) What are readers supposed to learn from the book as a whole?

Try to keep these questions in mind as you read through the full text of the book of Jonah. (Now might be a good time to read it.)

A further conundrum was pointed out several decades ago by Professor Bezalel Porten. As we try to understand Jonah's petulant avoidance of prophesying publicly against Nineveh, we may wish to take note of the fact that the Hebrew name for that city is an anagram of Jonah's Hebrew name. (In other words, the letters of the prophet's name – with one letter repeated – make up the name of the city to be castigated.) Since many

scholars assume that the book of Jonah is an allegorical tale, rather than a historical one, what might be the message behind the author's choice of name for the city targeted for divine punishment?

It has been pointed out that Jonah yearned for consistency, favoring strict justice over divine compassion. On a personal level, the prophet is not entirely comfortable with God's mercy and compassion – even at the end of the book. Yet one of the lessons of this book may well be that the world survives only by the triumph of divine mercy over divine justice. In his commentary, Professor Uriel Simon points out a subtle but profound shift that the ancient rabbis introduced to our understanding of the life-lesson of the impatient Jonah:

The halakhic sages ... expressed the same exegetical view by appending to the Book of Jonah, when read as the haftarah of the Afternoon Service on the Day of Atonement, the last three verses of the Book of Micah (7:18-20), through which Jonah, as it were, recants his condemnation of the attributes of compassion and grace (Jon. 4:1) by reciting the praises of God, who desires to be gracious to His creatures and lighten the burden of their sins and transgressions:

Who is a God like You, forgiving iniquity and remitting transgression; who has not maintained His wrath forever against the remnant of His own people, because He loves graciousness. He will take us back in love; He will cover up our iniquities. You will hurl all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will keep faith with Jacob, loyalty to Abraham, as You promised on oath to our fathers in days gone by.

Professor Simon also quotes a fragment of midrash that conveys the ancient rabbis' ideas about divine receptivity to repentance. (Please note that King David was assumed to be the author of the psalms. Also, we have revised one phrase to render it gender-neutral. Other than that revision, this passage is quoted verbatim from Simon's work, on page xiii of his Introduction.)

They asked of the Torah: "How is the sinner to be punished?" It replied, "Let him bring a sacrifice and he will be pardoned."

They asked prophecy: "How is the sinner to be punished?" It replied, "The person who sins,... he shall die." (Ezek. 18:4).

They asked David: "How is the sinner to be punished?" He replied: "May sinners disappear from the earth and the wicked be no more." (Ps. 104:35).

They asked Wisdom: "How is the sinner to be punished?" It replied, "Misfortune pursues sinners." (Prov. 13:21).

They asked the Holy Blessed One: "How is the sinner to be punished?" The reply: "Let him do repentance, and I will accept it, as it is written: 'Good and upright is the Lord [; therefore He shows sinners the way]' (Ps. 25:8)."