

יונה: Defining Yourself as a Jew

ספר יונה, פרק א', פסוקים ד'-ח'

וְה' הִטִּיל רוּחַ-גְּדוּלָה אֶל-הַיָּם וַיְהִי סַעַר-גְּדוֹל בַּיָּם וְהָאֲנִיָּה חֲשָׁבָה לְהִשָּׁבֵר:

But the LORD cast a mighty wind upon the sea, and such a great tempest came upon the sea that the ship was in danger of breaking up.

וַיִּרְאוּ הַמַּלְחִים וַיִּזְעְקוּ אִישׁ אֶל-אֱלֹהֵיָו וַיִּטְלוּ אֶת-הַפְּלִים אֲשֶׁר בְּאֲנִיָּה אֶל-הַיָּם לְהַקֵּל מֵעֲלֵיהֶם וַיֹּנֶה יַרְדְּ אֶל-יָרֵכְתִי הַסְּפִינָה וַיִּשְׁכַּב וַיִּרְדָּם:

In their fright, the sailors cried out, each to his own god; and they flung the ship's cargo overboard to make it lighter for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the vessel where he lay down and fell asleep.

What do you do when you are afraid?

Why do you think יונה separates himself from the rest of the group?

וַיִּקְרַב אֵלָיו רֵב הַחֵבֶל וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ מִה־לָּךְ נִרְדָּם קוּם קְרָא אֶל-אֱלֹקֶיךָ אוּלַי יִתְעַשֶׂת הָאֱלֹקִים לָנוּ וְלֹא נֹאבֵד:

The captain went over to him and cried out, "How can you be sleeping so soundly! Up, call upon your god! Perhaps the god will be kind to us and we will not perish."

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל-רֵעֵהוּ לְכוּ וְנַפִּילָה גּוֹרְלוֹת וְנִדְעָה בְּשִׁלְמֵי הָרַעָה הַזֹּאת לָנוּ וַיַּפְּלוּ גּוֹרְלוֹת וַיִּפֹּל הַגּוֹרֵל עַל-יוֹנָה:

The men said to one another, "Let us cast lots and find out on whose account this misfortune has come upon us." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו הַגִּידָה-נָא לָנוּ בְּאֲשֶׁר לָמִי-הָרַעָה הַזֹּאת לָנוּ מִה־מְלֹאכְתְּךָ וּמֵאֵין תָּבוֹא מֵה אֶרֶץ וְאִי-מִזֶּה עִם אֶתָּה:

They said to him, "Tell us, you who have brought this misfortune upon us, what is your business? Where have you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you?"

If you were יונה, how would you answer these questions?

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֵיהֶם עִבְרִי אֲנִי וְאֶת-ה' אֱלֹקֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם אֲנִי יְרֵא אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה אֶת-הַיָּם וְאֶת-הַיַּבֵּשָׁה:

"I am a Hebrew," he replied. "I worship the LORD, the God of Heaven, who made both sea and land."

How does יונה define himself?

What does it mean to be an עברי? Why does יונה choose this description?

בראשית רבה פרשה מ"ב -

וַיַּגֵּד לְאַבְרָם הָעִבְרִי, רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוּ מֵעֵבֶר אֶחָד וְהוּא מֵעֵבֶר אֶחָד

Rabbi Yehuda says: The entire world was on one side, and he was on the other.

R' Hirsch on Bereshis 14:13:

What is said here about Avraham is the very opposite of what is said in the preceding verse about Lot. Avraham remained העברי, which means: "the one who came from the other side of the river" or, as R. Yehuda explains, "the one who stands aside," in opposition to the rest of the world (Bereshis Rabbah 42:8). In either case, העברי indicates that Avraham lived in isolation, preserved his own distinctive character, and was renowned as one who seeks isolation.

In what way did אברהם live in isolation?
Why does יונה feel isolated right now?

"Something similar can be traced in modern times. Rav Kook, when he arrived in Israel, wrote, "There is no one, young or old, with whom I can share my thoughts, who is able to comprehend my viewpoint, and this wearies me greatly."

Even more candid was the late Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik. Near the beginning of his famous essay *The Lonely Man of Faith*, he writes, starkly: "I am lonely." He continues, "I am lonely because at times I feel rejected and thrust away by everybody, not excluding my most intimate friends, and the words of the psalmist, 'My father and my mother have forsaken me,' ring quite often in my ears like the plaintive cooing of the turtledove." This is extraordinary language.

At times of loneliness, I have found great solace in these passages. They told me I was not alone in feeling alone. Other people had been here before me."

"Loneliness and Faith," *Covenant and Conversation*, Beha'alotecha, 5780.

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/behaalotecha/loneliness-and-faith/>

Rabbi Sacks feels comforted in the knowledge that he is not alone in this feeling of loneliness.

Why do you think יונה might have felt comforted by remembering אברהם's loneliness?

"Abraham is without doubt the most influential person who ever lived. Today he is claimed as the spiritual ancestor of 2.3 billion Christians, 1.8 billion Muslims and 14 million Jews, more than half the people alive today. Yet he ruled no empire, commanded no great army, performed no miracles and proclaimed no prophecy. He is the supreme example in all of history of *influence without power*.

Why? Because he was prepared to be different. As the Sages say, he was called *ha-ivri*, "the Hebrew," because "all the world was on one side (*be-ever echad*) and he was on the other". Leadership, as every leader knows, can be lonely. Yet you continue to do what you have to do because you know that the majority is not always right and conventional wisdom is not always wise. Dead fish go with the flow. Live fish swim against the current. So it is with conscience and courage. So it is with the children of Abraham. They are prepared to challenge the idols of the age."

"The Courage not to Conform," *Covenant and Conversation*, Lech Lecha, 5774, 5781

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/lech-lecha/the-courage-not-to-conf>

[orm/](#)

Is loneliness always a bad thing?

Has יונה shown himself to be a leader? Is his decision to isolate himself reflective of his role as a leader?

"But there are uses of adversity, and consolation in loneliness. When we feel alone, we are not alone, because the great heroes of the human spirit felt this way at times – Moses, David, Elijah and Jonah. So did modern masters like Rav Kook and Rabbi Soloveitchik. It was precisely their loneliness that allowed them to develop a deeper relationship with God. Plumbing the depths, they reached the heights. They met God in the silence of the soul and felt themselves embraced.....

I believe that isolation contains, within it, spiritual possibilities. We can use it to deepen our spirituality. We can read the book of Psalms, re-engaging with some of the greatest religious poetry the world has ever known. We can pray more deeply from the heart. And we can find solace in the stories of Moses and others who had moments of despair but who came through them, their faith strengthened by their intense encounter with the Divine. It is when we feel most alone that we discover that we are not alone, "for You are with me."

"Loneliness and Faith," Covenant and Conversation, Beha'alotecha, 5780.

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/behaalotecha/loneliness-and-faith/>

As you continue reading through the story of יונה, and specifically as you read תפילת יונה, ask yourself:

At what point does it seem that יונה uses his loneliness "to develop a deeper relationship with God" as Rabbi Sacks suggests?

What seems to be the turning point for יונה from "plumbing the depths," to reaching the heights?

Questions for Reflection:

Can you think of a time in your life where you felt lonely in an experience? Would it have helped to know of other people who could relate to your experience?

Do you agree that loneliness can be a catalyst for growth? Can you think of a time in your life that loneliness sparked growth and development?

What lessons have you learned in your own life from experiences where you felt lonely?