

YK AM 5775

This afternoon, as is our custom, a group of our teenagers will read the traditional Haftorah, the book of Jonah.

Whenever we read from our sacred texts, our reading should be close. For countless generations we Jews have learned from what Scripture tells us, but the rabbis remind us that we learn as much from what Scripture doesn't tell us. We are to look for the ellipsis, for the irony, for the seeming contradiction, for the implicit moral...the Torah teaches us on different levels. We must search for them all.

No introduction, no preface. The book begins with God's call to Jonah, "go to Nineveh, to that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it, for their wickedness has come before me." Usually, when God speaks to our prophets, they respond. Quickly. Upon hearing a direct and specific command from God, who would not make haste?

Evidently, Jonah. He goes to the port of Jaffa, and boards a ship to Tarshish, which is clearly not in the same direction as Nineveh. Once at sea, a raging storm threatens to capsize the ship. The passengers and crew members each call upon their own Gods to protect and save them. It makes no difference. The storm continues to rage and rage. The captain of the vessel goes down into the hold and there, to his surprise, he finds Jonah. Asleep. He rouses Jonah and says to him, "How can you be sleeping so soundly? Up, call upon your God! Perhaps it is your God and he will be kind to us and we will not perish!"

The passengers cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. He tells them why he is on the ship, that he is fleeing God. He urges the other passengers to throw him overboard. If he remains on the boat, all surely will perish; however, if he goes overboard, hopefully, he will be the only victim.

They resist, but the storm grows ever stronger, and finally at the last possible moment they take up Jonah and heave him overboard. At once, the sea grows calm.

As we will be reminded this afternoon, Jonah is swallowed by a large fish, spends three days in the fish's stomach, and when the fish spews him out on dry land, Jonah wisely decides it is time to go to Nineveh, it is time to do what God wanted him to do.

Every year, when I read this text, I find something new. Some mystery or question or idea that I had not noticed before. This year was no different.

Think back to the first part of the story. Jonah gets on the ship. The ship sails on from Jaffa. A storm comes up. It is a terrible storm. How terrible. So terrible that not just the passengers but the crew are scared. So terrible that every sailor is praying to his God to be saved. So terrible that the captain is deep in the hold of the ship making sure everyone is accounted for.

Imagine such a storm! Pounding rain. Hurricane speed winds. Raging waves that seem to reach up to the heavens before plunging down into the deep. And where is Jonah? What is he doing? He is sleeping. Sleeping. How could anyone sleep at such a time? How can he be sleeping?

A few weeks ago I reread one of the most acclaimed books of the twentieth century. Victor Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist. An intellectual prodigy, he delved into philosophy and psychology at an early age, studied with Freud, and became a highly sought after Viennese practitioner with a special interest in those with suicidal tendencies.

As the 1930s went on, Frankl and his wife remained in Vienna. With the Nazi takeover he was banned from treating Aryan patients. He continued treating the Jewish patients he could, then, in 1942, he and his wife were taken into custody and deported to Theresianstadt. He followed a path too well known, and aside from a sister, was the only member of his family to survive.

The year after the war, he wrote a book, only published here a decade and a half later, with the English title *Man's Search for Meaning*. It is an extraordinary book. Frankl looked at his Holocaust experiences through the eyes of a psychiatrist. It's an interesting idea. Viewing the Shoah from within, what would we expect a psychiatrist to see? What Frankl saw is probably not what we would expect.

Yes, he saw horror and cruelty and all that we would expect. He also saw pettiness an envy and compassion and valor. And he saw something else, something that surprised him, something that, professionally and personally, changed his life. What Frankl saw, was what he termed the importance of meaning. This had been his thesis long before the war, but in the camps he saw it validated under the most extreme and horrible conditions imaginable. The thesis that those who were able to maintain some kind of meaning in their lives, were those best able to withstand the daily privations and cruelty to which they were subjected.

It is perhaps impossible to put ourselves in Frankl's shoes. He was a victim, a participant in the day to day grinding routine of horror, but in some section of his mind, the scientist in him took over. The scientist scrutinized others, examined their behavior, sought motivations for that behavior, and attempted to draw logical, rational conclusions from his observations.

Here was his conclusion. Happiness is a wonderful thing to have. But even happiness is not all. Frankl saw, even in that hell on earth, that those individuals who went about their days with a sense of meaning, were those who, even there, had lives worth living.

What could be "meaning" mean in that place and time? It varied. The attempt to maintain Jewish rituals and prayer. Keeping images of loved ones before one's eyes, keeping strong for their sake, for a hoped and prayed for reunion. Looking out for the weaker and more endangered. What gave life meaning varied. But as Frankl concluded, the best possible lives, were those that had meaning. And if meaning could animate life in a concentration camp, where would that not be so.

One of the curious things about Jonah is that we know so little about him. At 1,321 words Jonah clocks in as the fourth shortest book in the Bible. Just like with Abraham, we meet Jonah only when God calls out to him. We know nothing about him. Is he married? Does he have children? What kind of work does he do? Just about the only thing we know about him is...the boy can sleep!

Yet we can, I think, make one other conclusion. God did not choose Jonah because Jonah was so upright. An upright God-fearing person would not have run from God's presence like Jonah did. So perhaps it is the opposite. Maybe Jonah

was not a particularly admirable guy. Maybe he was shallow, or self-absorbed. Maybe this was God's way of giving Jonah an opportunity, an amazing opportunity.

Jonah! I, God, need you to do this really important thing. I need you to go this place and confront these sinners and convince them to change their ways. I need you to engage them and work with them to better their lives. I need you to do this now!

Imagine receiving such a call. Imagine God speaking directly to you, to me, to any one of us, and charging us personally with such an important, crucial task. Would not any of us drop whatever we were doing and run to do God's will? At least, wouldn't we like to think that's what we would do?

That's not what Jonah did. And interestingly, God did not simply look for someone else. He pursued Jonah with all his considerable might. And that too is interesting. Why did God do that? If he wanted a prophet to go to Nineveh, why did he not simply look for another, more willing prophet? Why did it have to be Jonah?

And finally, because I know you've been waiting for it, let's talk about my broken ankle.

I must tell you, the first few weeks of this adventure were really, really bad. Lots of pain. No attention span. I really couldn't do anything. I found was anxious and, frankly, pretty depressed.

Intellectually, I knew this was foolish. I had an accident, a one of those things incident. It couldn't have been helped, it was legitimate and it was real and the one important contribution I could make to getting better was to do nothing and give it time. Watch TV! Read books! Think deep thoughts! Use the panacea of Percocet to enjoy some enforced indolence. Sitting around has never been my style but now, I felt despondent.

I confided to a friend that I was not doing well. And it was at his suggestion that, for the first time since college, I picked up Victor Frankl. The book gave me insight. Maybe the extended separation from so much of what gave my life

meaning fed into those bad feelings. My family could not have been more loving or supportive. But not being able to do those things that make my life meaningful hurt.

I began to get better. And as friendships resumed, and I entered into a limited work schedule, and could begin to pay attention to and be involved in, at least somewhat, causes and efforts important to me, I began to feel better.

Throughout all of this, I had a lot of time to think. And I found myself thinking about one thing in particular over and over. For me, this is temporary. Transitory. It did not seem like it ten weeks ago, but even then I knew that one day this would be over.

But...what about those for whom it is not transitory?

This morning I would like to mention two wonderful families who are part of our congregational family, two families many of us know, two families I am honored to call friends, two families with something important to teach.

Bruce and Joyce Freeman, the parents of Erica and Ilene, have been members for many years. Bruce is a past president of the Men's Club. Joyce has been involved in a variety of Temple activities. They are lovely, warm, people.

Several years ago Bruce was diagnosed with MS. Today, he is largely confined to a wheelchair. A journalist by training he amazingly maintains a teaching schedule at Kean and Seton Hall Universities and write a weekly column that Scripps Howard distributes to over 350 newspapers. His disease is exhausting. He spends many hours daily resting, and his care is the focus of his and Joyce's day to day life, Joyce who herself works full time.

Despite that, both Joyce and Bruce remain active in and supportive of the Temple. They both usher. Bruce even volunteers as a head usher on Saturday mornings, a truly thankless task! With all they have to contend with in their lives, with all they must have on their minds, why would they possibly do this? Because they want to. Because they like to. Because it infuses their lives with meaning, helping an institution that they love.

Erica and Steven Gendel are also beloved members of Temple B'nai Abraham, as is their joyful son Josh, who became a Bar Mitzvah two years ago. Josh, too, spends his days in a wheelchair. He was born with a number of maladies which make life not only challenging for him, but often painful. His vision is not great. Speaking is difficult. Yet a smile on his face is ever present, he is funny, and he likes to make himself heard.

Caring for Josh takes a lot of time...and a lot of strength. Literally. And Steven and Erica both work full time. Yet when I broke my ankle, one of the first phone calls I received was from the Gendels. Steven's exact words were, "what can we do to help?" My eyes got a little misty. "Steven," I said "Your plates already pretty full." He laughed, as he often does, and simply said, "this is important."

By 8:00 AM Steven and Erica have accomplished more than most of us do by the time we go to sleep at night. The family motto is "no days off." But I know, as does every single person who knows them well, that if anyone ever calls and says, "Could you please...." they would not hesitate an instant to drop what they are doing and run.

God chose an unwilling prophet, because he needed to teach him something, something important. And Jonah learned his lesson.

Recall what happens. Jonah is sleeping deeply in the hold of the ship. The captain comes and shakes him awake. Under the circumstances Jonah probably came to awareness pretty quickly. He sized up the situation and ran up to the deck with the captain. What a scene he encountered, with crew and passengers frightened for their lives. The text tells us that Jonah knew it was his fault the storm had come, his fault they were all threatened, and he urged, urged his fellow travelers to throw him overboard.

Later, when the fish had spewed him out onto dry land, what did Jonah do? Precisely what God wanted him to do. He headed straight to Nineveh and with passion, and intent, and commitment, he told the Ninevites why he had come, what God wanted of them, and why they needed to change. There was no one, no one, more eager to do God's will than Jonah.

Was this simply because God had scared Jonah into doing the right thing? I don't think so.

Jonah slept soundly. When we sleep soundly, we...dream. Abraham had a dream, in which God promised him and his descendant's greatness. Jacob had a dream, in which he saw angels going up and down on a ladder. Joseph had dreams, of cows, and of sheaves of grain. Why not also Jonah, as he slept way at the bottom of the ship?

Jonah had a pretty good life. Paying the considerable fare to Tarshish was not a problem. He was probably comfortable, not a lot of stress, thought he had the world by the tail. That's the only logical explanation for his running from God. Pun fully intended, he didn't want to rock the boat.

But I am convinced that God came to him in a dream, as He had previously come to Abraham and Jacob and Joseph. And in that dream Jonah understood that, good as he thought his life might be, it could be even better. And it was easy. All he had to do was imbue his life with meaning. And for him, that meant heading straight to Nineveh.

If there is anyone I know with the right to make their world solely about themselves and their families, it is the Freemans and the Gendels. Who would blame them? Yet they both reach so far in the opposite direction. And they do so not grudgingly, but with spirit, with compassion and with joy. Because they understand what God hoped to teach Jonah, that the greater the meaning they put into their lives, the more satisfied, gratified and enriched they will feel. That is what Victor Frankel witnessed in the camps. And that is what we must learn as well.

As we sit here this day of all days, it is a question to ponder. What puts meaning into my life? Jonah, and Victor Frankl, and Bruce and Joyce and Steven and Erica, teach us their extraordinary answer, and it is a powerful answer indeed. If I have a spare ounce of energy, an extra moment in my day, a single opportunity to turn my eyes outward, how glorious it is to walk the path God wants us to; however we can, for whatever brief time we can, to make someone else's life better.

As we sit here this day of all days, it is a question to ponder. What puts meaning into my life? What might I do that I don't? What might I do differently?

The answers are manifold, and easy. It is the question that is hard. May the question remain with us throughout this day, and at day's end, may we find an answer that lights our path, with sharing and feeling and joy, for the year ahead.