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## YOM KIPPUR READER

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### TESHUVAH, FROM THE (DIS)COMFORT OF YOUR OWN HOME

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Have you also thought, even for a moment, that it's time to run away from home? Sure—six months into the covid-19 pandemic, the living room sofa is feeling comfortable (by now it bears an indent in the shape of your back), making fresh lunch is better than packing it in the morning, and you've really gotten to know your quarantine buddies. But the restlessness is starting to set in, or maybe it's been gnawing at you since April—no more lockdown, or shutdown, or hunkering down, or all the feeling down that comes with feeling cooped up. Just to get out, to leave everything behind and breathe in some fresh air in a faraway place, to be somewhere that isn't here—you're starting to feel a deep, existential need for a vacation.

I have never been to Uman, and any responsible epidemiologist would have told you that going this year would pose a major public health threat. But as the policy conversations between Israel and Ukraine unfurled, I found myself pausing to consider what it would mean, for all of us, to escape our living rooms for just a few days on a penitential escapade, to break free of the monotony to which we're rapidly growing accustomed and to rediscover ourselves somewhere else.

This is because *teshuvah* is an essentially spatial experience, figuratively and literally. Repentance means to change, to bring oneself to a different 'place,' and that process, [Maimonides teaches](#), is facilitated by physically journeying away from home, an embodied experience of change that allows our souls to follow suit. Consider how you think more clearly, more reflectively, on a long flight or train ride, or when you're hiking through the mountains or strolling through the woods. By fleeing 'elsewhere,' a practice [R. Nachman of Breslov](#) calls *hitbodedut* ("seclusion"), we can break free from our lives and ourselves in order to gain a fresh perspective and start anew.

In this respect, Uman—like the airplane seat or hiking trail—is what [Michel Foucault would call a 'heterotopia'](#): a real place whose very function is to stand, so to speak, 'outside of the world,'—a place standing in contrast to, and in conflict with, all the real places that fill the rest of our lives. A place designed for escaping, for fleeing, for

taking refuge from what real life holds in store back at home. Heterotopias, Foucault claims, are the places away from home where we go in moments of crisis, when we feel that the world cannot handle us—nor can we handle the world—leaving us with no choice but to step outside of the world, regain our footing, and start over again.

But we're at home this year. There is no traveling for the holidays—maybe not even synagogue services; no contemplative train or plane rides, and no visits to Rebbes or other sacred spaces. As we face the crisis of *teshuvah* this year, when we are most in need of escape—of heterotopias—we are stuck within the confines of our own homes. How, then, will we repent this year? If we cannot run away, what will our *teshuvah* be?

To this end, I believe we can find inspiration in the teachings of Sefat Emet (R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, 1847-1905), who offers—in contrast to R. Nachman's *hitbodedut*—penitential models better suited for at-home repentance. What follows is three *torot*, each suggesting that *teshuvah* is not about running away from home or one's self; rather, it has some alternate relationship with self and with home. Each of these *torot* stands independently, and Sefat Emet did not clarify if and how they relate to one another. Yet they all seem to draw on the same motif, *teshuvah* from the vantage point of home, even as each points in an alternative spiritual direction. Perhaps for this year's at-home *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* (the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), the wisdom of Sefat Emet can guide us to new kinds of *teshuvah* that resonate with our shared homebound experience.

#### Cleaning Up the House

*The laws of the appointment of judges (Deut. 16:18-20) follow the laws of the festivals (Deut. 16:1-17), for the judges represent Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur following the three festivals. [This is because] the locus of the festivals is the Temple, while Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are focused upon 'all your gates' [i.e. the localities where judges are appointed]. (Sefat Emet, Shoftim, 5654)*

Religious pilgrimage, though hardly practiced among Jews today (save, perhaps, by those who journey annually to Uman), is familiar to the Torah. Three times a year, we are commanded to ascend to Jerusalem and appear before God in the divine abode: the Temple. What's striking though is that on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, among the holiest days on the calendar and just days before the start of Sukkot, there is no pilgrimage obligation. Were the Temple to be

standing today, no one would be expected to show up in Jerusalem in time for Rosh Hashanah. True, this could be practical; it would be taxing to make the trek three times in a month or to stay in Jerusalem for all of Tishrei. But Sefat Emet seems to think that staying home for the penitential season is associated with the geography of the judicial system. The Torah demands that each city and town have its own court to deal with local issues that arise. Justice, which Sefat Emet goes on to identify as both the settling of interpersonal squabbles and personal reflection regarding one's deeds, needs to happen at home. If what needs to be fixed or resolved arose between you and me, then the work of resolution needs to happen here, right where the problem lies.

*Teshuvah* is an act of introspection, an honest accounting of our lives, including all of our faults and failures. Penitence isn't about looking up to the heavens or down into the *mahzor*, but straight into the mirror. The family that needs my love, the community institutions waiting for my support, the dry cleaner whom I forgot to pay, the *mishnayot* I never learned—all of that is right here, at home. [Maimonides](#) (borrowing from the statement of R. Yehuda in [Yoma 86b](#)), in his formulation of what it means to be a penitent, does not allow us to suffice with trying better next time in a similar situation. *Teshuvah*, or what Maimonides calls “real *teshuvah*,” means confronting the same person, at the same time, in just the same place you were before. Still echoing in that very place is the memory of the mistake you made last time, and fixing it here means not only engaging in change but also confronting the past in order to move forward. And this year, there's no better place to look for error than the house where you've spent the past six months living through this new normal.

*Mishnah Berurah* ([603:2](#)), citing R. Yonatan Eybeschutz, teaches that on each of the seven intermediate days of the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* (excluding Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), one should reflect upon and repent for the sins committed on that day of the week. This makes sense, because who I am on a lazy Sunday differs from the me of a hectic Monday, a stressful Wednesday, or a dragged out Shabbat afternoon, and each calls for its own introspection. Maybe this year, having spent so much time within the same four walls, the same can be done with each room within our homes. Is the couch the place where I doomscroll through nonsense on my phone, or is it where I spend quality time with the people I live with? Does my kitchen reflect my values, my appetite, my budget, or some healthy combination? Is my bedroom a space to re-energize for a new day or where I arrive too late into the night (and from which I depart too late in the morning)? Have I given my roommates enough personal space, or too much? This penitential season, appoint yourself as the judge of the hyper-local court of your home, and stand as the first defendant. Take a good look at your home and ask whether the life that happens within it is the one you want to live this coming year, or whether it's time to chart the course of a better one.

### Even Home Isn't Home

Regarding the verse “the boy is gone; where shall I go?”—it is stated [in the Midrash] that Reuven was [thereby] the first to repent. For this is the ultimate repentance, in discovering that, due to sin, one has no place or existence in the world. ([Sefat Emet, Vayeshev, 5664](#))

Breaking ranks with his brothers, Reuven attempts to save his brother Joseph, but for one reason or another he arrives at the scene too late. The [Midrash](#), through a wordplay on the word *vayashav*, claims that Reuven did not merely return to the scene; in doing so, he had actually performed *teshuvah*, though what exactly he did to repent is unstated in the biblical text. Sefat Emet, however, finds Reuven's

penitence in his peculiar response to discovering his younger brother's absence: “The boy is gone; where shall I go?” ([Genesis 37:30](#)). The text leaves no indication of why he was left confused regarding his next destination. But Sefat Emet sees in the power of these words a deep act of *teshuvah* in the wake of Joseph's disappearance. The foundation of *teshuvah*, he claims, is the honest declaration that you have nowhere to go. It's the realization that the places we call home and the people we call friends and the way of life we call familiar are all fragile, transient, temporary. In the midst of strife and chaos, we reach out for a foothold or stepping stone, but there is none. Life—mine and yours and everyone's and everything in it—no matter how stable it may seem, is always up in the air.

When the pandemic broke out, so many people made their way home, seeking out places of refuge and security to wait out the storm. Cabin sickness notwithstanding, nothing beats the reassuring sense of coming home, feeling the stark contrast between the threatening outside and a welcoming within. But as those who have experienced eviction, homelessness, and house fires all know in their respective ways, even home can let us down. The same goes for those who thought over these months that home would be a place of security, only to find physical and emotional impediments to safety and wellbeing there too. And even for those still enjoying this six-month staycation, the existential meaning of vulnerability, of the real possibility that our homes and lives are here today and gone tomorrow, awaits internalization. Vulnerability inspires us to keep both the gifts and misfortunes of our lives in perspective and also to keep the lives of others—whose differences from our own lives are so drastically outweighed by their similarities in plight and fate—closer to our hearts.

That is *teshuvah*: not just technical fixes to local problems but a rude awakening to the world as it really is—a humbling before the God whose awesome glory fills the world in which we hardly deserve a place at all. If we can embrace that our lives are indeed ‘[like a puff of dust and a fleeting dream](#),’ if we can ask God—not R. Nachman's iconic ‘[where are You](#)’ but Sefat Emet's ‘where shall I go’—then God will be the one to create a special ‘place’ just for us, the itinerant penitents, beyond the world we know. Sefat Emet notes that it is not by chance that the tribe of Reuven was [the first to house an ir miklat](#), a city of refuge for wrongdoers, in its territory. The *ir miklat* embodies Reuven's understanding of *teshuvah*—the realization, in the wake of sin, that we have lost our place in the world. And only once we accept how transient our life on earth really is, how no place can ever really be home, then God reassures us: ‘And I shall make for you a place for you to flee there’ ([Exodus 21:13](#)).

### Coming Home

*The essence of repentance does not [address] any individual sin; rather, one must return to, and reconnect with, one's [spiritual] root. (Sefat Emet, Nitzavim, 5650)*

Returning home, or even just spending a lot more time there, has offered an opportunity to reconnect with family, with ourselves, and with the four walls within which the basic elements of our lives take place. Covid has brought a return to thoughtful cooking and collective eating, a reevaluation of whether we really need the clutter hiding in our closets, and a wardrobe makeover from what we think others expect us to wear to what feels right today. Not everyone has found this extended at-home sleepover comfortable or even manageable, and for others it has produced lethargy, take-out orders, and binge TV-watching. But I think many of us have discovered within it a return to square one, a chance to feel out what it's like to live by ourselves and as ourselves.

If we listen closely, at the core of this experience of returning home is the challenging yet enriching question: Who am I really? What kind of person am I, especially when there's no one watching, save for, perhaps, the people I'm closest to? The personality you wear in the comfort of your home, and the gap between it and the one you let others see—that's what needs a check-in and tuning at this time of year. Ask yourself: When cutting costs during the pandemic, did the budget cuts come out of what makes you comfortable, or from what you spend on supporting others in need? Who are the people who have made an effort to keep in touch with or support you, and how have you reciprocated? Without community life keeping you going, have your prayers, Torah study, and Shabbat observance dwindled to the bare minimum or taken on new layers of personal flavor? How have you filled the long pockets of quiet time that the lack of commuting and 'kiddushing' has opened up in your schedule?

Sefat Emet teaches that this return to our home, to our roots and our rootedness, is the very essence of *teshuvah*: to strip ourselves of the layers and facades we wear in the world, to once again meet our best and truest selves and figure out how to let that person shine through year round. This is the *teshuvah* of authenticity, the *teshuvah* of journeying—not from home, but back home—a trek whose destination is clear yet whose starting point and direction await determination. Standing in stark opposition to penitential escapism, Sefat Emet teaches that home is what *teshuvah* is all about. Were Sefat Emet to join you in quarantine this Yom Kippur, perhaps he would ask: Do you feel at home with your family, your life, yourself, your God? And do you think God feels at home with you?

#### **Conclusion: Finding Your Way Home**

Three pathways of repentance: examine your home, accept the transience of home, or trace your steps back home to your truest self. Three modalities of penitence that share at their core a home-focused approach to *teshuvah*, allowing us to turn our shared Covid predicament into a spiritual opportunity. Whichever path you take, may the journey homeward strengthen and empower you for the days and months ahead. Let the time you spend at home—this week, over Yom Kippur, and over the long road ahead toward the end of Covid—be an opportunity for reflection, growth, and change. And may it be said of the home where you're reading these words, as Sefat Emet would repeatedly remind his students, that 'in the place where true penitents reside, even the most righteous of people have no right to stand' ([Berakhot 34b](#)).

## WHY WASN'T JONAH PUNISHED? READING JONAH DURING COVID

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**Y**om Kippur will be different this year. How could it not be? The stark differences may help us withhold judgment even in a time of judgment, while affirming the way ancient texts wrap themselves in today's challenges and offer us new conceptual frameworks.

To this end, there is something about the distress, the isolation, the narrow world we've occupied for these many months that may make us more sympathetic this year to Jonah's desire to run away from the life he knew. Rather than judge him for his foolish escapade and the supposition he could run away from his Maker, a part of us may think, "Hey, Jonah, is there any more room on that boat for me?"

Among those who justify Jonah's flight, the French medieval commentator, Rabbi David Kimche (1160-1235), best sums up the traditional posture. Jonah was concerned not "about the honor of the father but the honor of the children." He challenged God in order to preserve his people, a tactic taken straight from the playbook of Abraham and Moses. If Jonah's pleas were successful in his mission to Nineveh, its spiritual successes would be leveraged for the punishment of Israel. All of this would be traced back to Jonah, who would be regarded for posterity as a traitor. This mental model of betrayal and total accountability would lead anyone to run away from the task at hand. Add to that the view from II Kings 14 that Jonah was afraid to be labeled a false prophet, and we can understand Jonah's legitimate concerns.

Yet while this reasoning makes sense, it does not unlock the full picture. Neither Abraham nor Moses ran away. They confronted God and used words as a ladder to negotiate a more humane outcome. Jonah said nothing. The text tells us that he was not merely running away from something; he was running *toward something else*: "Jonah, however, started out to flee to Tarshish from the Lord's service. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to sail with the others to Tarshish, away from the service of the Lord" (1:3).

We are told three times that Jonah had a specific destination in mind: Tarshish. Unlike the immoral, warring power that was Nineveh, Tarshish was associated with travel<sup>1</sup> and expensive goods,<sup>2</sup> high seas, and extravagance, as recorded in I Kings: "All King Solomon's drinking cups were of gold, and all the utensils of the Lebanon Forest House were of pure gold: silver did not count for anything in Solomon's days. For the king had a Tarshish fleet on the sea, along with Hiram's fleet. Once every three years, the Tarshish fleet came in, bearing gold and silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks" (I Kings 10:21-22). Disappearing far away and into the lap of luxury must have been quite the enticement for a prophet running away from the burden of his heavy mission. Many interpreters, like Radak cited above, tackle the obvious question of what Jonah was afraid of, but few try to

<sup>1</sup> Other verses that discuss the rich merchant fleets of Tarshish include Isaiah 23:1, 6,10, 14, Ezekiel 27:25 and 38:13, Psalms 48:7.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, I Kings 10:21-22, Psalms 72:10, Isaiah 60:9, Jeremiah 10:19, Ezekiel 27:12.

understand or honor his desire to break free, to go to a place far from the ordinary to experience another world that is represented by Tarshish.

People who overturn their lives are often looking for something they cannot find where they are. Harry Houdini, perhaps the most famous escape artist who ever lived, is quoted as having said, "The greatest escape I ever made was when I left Appleton, Wisconsin."<sup>3</sup> One of his biographers claims, however, that Houdini's greatest escape "wasn't from handcuffs or straitjackets or Appleton. It was from the shackles of reality."<sup>4</sup>

The world of literature abounds in freedom journeys, whether it's Melville's sailing exploits or Kerouac's open road. They allow us to experience larger vistas than the ones we have; we are invited to enter the mindset of someone who volitionally lets go of society's constraints and expectations.

One of the most popular recent documentations of this desire to run is presented in Jon Krakauer's book, *Into the Wild*, about Christopher Johnson McCandless, who graduated Emory, donated his life savings to Oxfam, and began a journey to the wilds of Alaska in 1992, woefully underprepared. He kept a journal and wrote postcards that helped Krakauer understand the narrative arc of McCandless's journey and his motivation for going. Although McCandless enjoyed meeting people on his trek across the country, his retreat from people explains part of his enigmatic run: "We like companionship, see, but we can't stand to be around people for very long. So we go get ourselves lost, come back for a while, then get the hell out again."<sup>5</sup>

In the long run, it was not an unhealthy introversion that drove McCandless farther and farther from the margins of safety but a profound desire to rid himself of the life he knew in search of endless possibilities:

So many people live within unhappy circumstances and yet will not take the initiative to change their situation because they are conditioned to a life of security, conformity, and conservatism, all of which may appear to give one peace of mind, but in reality nothing is more dangerous to the adventurous spirit within a man than a secure future. The very basic core of a man's living spirit is his passion for adventure. The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences, and hence there is no greater joy than to have an endlessly changing horizon, for each day to have a new and different sun.<sup>6</sup>

We could chalk up his adventure to a naïve, almost adolescent need to overturn a sad life on the edge and a background of family secrets and possible parental abuse,<sup>7</sup> but there is something compelling

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<sup>3</sup> Although this quote is commonly associated with Houdini, Tom Boldt, who runs the Boldt Company in Appleton, claims Houdini would never have said it because of his fond associations with the city and its people, as discussed in Joe Posnanski's *The Life and Afterlife of Harry Houdini* (Simon and Schuster, 2019), 19.

<sup>4</sup> Posnanski, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild* (Anchor, 1997), 96.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 56-57.

<sup>7</sup> This background was supplied by McCandless's sister Carine in her memoir *The Wild Truth* (HarperCollins, 2014) and contested by her parents, as cited in Johnny Dodd, "Chris McCandless' Sister Pens New

about McCandless's desire to remove the shackles of convention that made Krakauer's book into another bestseller and then a popular movie. Inside each of us is the closet whisper as McCandless is about to leave: "I now walk into the wild."<sup>8</sup>

McCandless met an electrician on his way to Anchorage and hitched a ride with him. The electrician noted the lightness of his pack and voiced concern about this ambitious, ill-informed young man's plan. "Alaska has long been a magnet for dreamers and misfits, people who think the unsullied enormity of the Last Frontier will patch all the holes in their lives. The bush is an unforgiving place, however, that cares nothing for hope or longing."<sup>9</sup> Human desire is often no match for nature.

Jonah, too, learned this the hard way. He never spoke his desire; he just proceeded with a determined gait and a pounding silence. "The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me.' Jonah, however, started out to flee to Tarshish from the Lord's service..." Jonah's obstreperous about-face – he was told to rise and go, which he did, just in a different direction - leads the reader to conclude that a substantial punishment awaited this fugitive.

But it never came. God never punished Jonah. Instead, like a loving parent of a lost child, God used the forces of nature to stop Jonah's flight and allow him to analyze of his own accord his desire to run. As Jonah lands on the sea's breakers, we think of Odysseus and his grasp for life: "He lunged for a reef, seized it with both hands and clung for dear life, groaning until the giant wave surged past and so he escaped its force, but the breaker's backwash charged into him full fury and hurled him out to sea."<sup>10</sup> Jonah's prayer in chapter two reflected his downward spiritual descent. Finally, at the very bottom of the sea, the words tumbled out.<sup>11</sup>

Jonah longed for the Temple. He longed to see God again. He pledged fealty to the mission. If Jonah thought his life was overly constrained by duty and obligation before, he ended up in the greater constraint of an oversized fish that ironically forced the long-awaited confrontation. The fish then spat him out on dry land. Maybe the book could have ended here. Personal salvation helped Jonah overcome the desire to run and replaced it with a newly energized will to serve God as commanded. The Yom Kippur message ties Jonah's mortality to his mission and helps us understand that running away serves no positive end.

But the book does not end here. Jonah continues to Nineveh. Only one day into Jonah's new commitment, the prophet fled again. He left Nineveh for the small comforts of his booth despite his obvious success in transforming an entire city. No storm, no fish, no hot sun or burning wind, no gourd or small worm ultimately worked. It is then that God used a series of three direct questions in a chapter of only eleven verses. To the first question, "Are you that deeply grieved?"

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Book Detailing Parents' Violence and Abuse," *People* (November 12, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> From his postcard of April 27<sup>th</sup>, 1992.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (Penguin Classics), 165.

<sup>11</sup> See the similarities of Jonah's prayer to Psalm 139.

(4:4),<sup>12</sup> Jonah offered no answer. To the second question, “Are you so deeply grieved about the plant?” Jonah replied: “Yes, so deeply that I want to die” (4:9). Jonah could not even see the sham that was his answer, that he could cling so tightly to something in which he made no long-term investment. The book’s concluding question lingers.

Then the Lord said: “You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!” (4:10-11)

This is not really a question about Jonah but a statement about God. It seems God had, for the moment, bypassed Jonah. God’s loving efforts to use the range of nature to help Jonah see himself only resulted in Jonah’s shameful answer about the gourd. In the absence of punishment, all God had left, so to speak, in the arsenal of persuasion was to be the Divine Model to create and sustain a world where everyone matters. It’s as if God said to Jonah, “I cannot help you understand who you are if you keep running. Perhaps if you refuse to see yourself, you can understand, however, who I am. I am not the God whom you describe as having every quality Moses attributed to me in Exodus 32 but *emet* (truth). Instead, I am a God for whom truth and mercy are intertwined so as to be inseparable. For you, these are binary qualities. for me, they are one. Jonah, were that not the case, you would not be alive today. You ran away to expand your world, but, in *truth*, it has never been more narrow.”

Maybe God never punished Jonah because it is no sin to leave the confines of one’s life to pursue one’s truth. But maybe God thought that when Jonah left Jaffa to expand his world, he really would. Instead, Jonah built a man-size booth that made his world even smaller. Jonah, who in II Kings enlarged the Land of Israel’s borders, never really adjusted his worldview despite his travel experiences. After all, if you can go to Tarshish, you should be able to go to Nineveh.

Like Jonah in his fish or his booth, this Yom Kippur we are masked, restricted, and constrained, tossed on some difficult seas and distant from the spiritual anchors of our lives. Our world is so much smaller that we too long to run and get happily lost somewhere far away. And maybe we read this book on Yom Kippur to reject that urge and make peace with the lives we have. But maybe we read Jonah on Yom Kippur for the exact opposite reason: to enter that small enviable moment of wanderlust and ask ourselves; when we are finally let out of this crucible of introspection, where we have spent so much time only with ourselves, who will we become when the world opens up again? God never punished Jonah for running. He only questioned him for traveling the world without seeing anything new and never really changing.

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<sup>12</sup> Note the similarities to another penitential text, Genesis 4:6, where God tries to induce Cain into understanding his primal, violent emotions and thereby curbing them. Neither Jonah nor Cain respond.

## RETURN... AGAIN? THEORIES OF TWICE-BAKED TESHUVAH

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**E** lul and the *Yamim Noraim* are the primary time for increased introspection and for *teshuvah*, repentance from our sins and the concomitant [return to God](#). Central to the process of *teshuvah* is the act of *vidduy*, confessing sins and seeking atonement. It would be surprising, then, to find a traditional Jewish text dissuade a sincere individual from confessing or repenting – presumably you can never go wrong with some extra *vidduy*! Yet there is a perplexing Talmudic passage in which at least one opinion seems to deter undertaking this process.

[Bavli Yoma 86b](#), citing [Tosefta Yoma 4:15](#) and [Yerushalmi Yoma 8:7](#), reads as follows:

תנו רבנן: עבירות שהתודה עליהן יום הכפורים זה - לא יתודה עליהן יום הכפורים אחר, ואם שנה בהן - צריך להתודות יום הכפורים אחר, ואם לא שנה בהן וחזר והתודה עליהן - עליו הכתוב אומר ככלב שב על קאו כסיל שונה באולתו. רבי אליעזר בן יעקב אומר: כל שכן שהוא משובח, שנאמר כי פשעי אני אדע וחטאתי נגדי תמיד. אלא מה אני מקיים ככלב שב על קאו וגו' - כדרב הונא, דאמר רב הונא: כיון שעבר אדם עבירה ושנה בה - הותרה לו. - הותרה לו סלקא דעתך? אלא אימא: נעשית לו כהיתר.

The Sages taught: With regard to transgressions that one confessed on this Yom Kippur, he should not confess them on another Yom Kippur. But if he repeated those same transgressions during the year, he must confess them again on another Yom Kippur. And if he did not repeat them but did confess them again, about him the verse states: “As a dog that returns to its vomit, so is a fool who repeats his folly” (Proverbs 26:11). Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya’akov says: [If one confesses in subsequent years,] all the more so is he praiseworthy, as it is stated: “For I know my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me” (Psalms 51:5). But how do I establish the meaning of the verse: “Like a dog that returns to its vomit?” It may be established in accordance with the opinion of Rav Huna, as Rav Huna said: When a person commits a transgression and repeats it, it is permitted to him. [The Gemara is surprised at this:] Can it enter your mind that it is permitted to him because he has sinned twice? Rather, say it becomes to him as if it were permitted.

There is a dispute as to whether sins atoned for a previous year should or should not be confessed and atoned for once again. The opinion of the *tanna kamma*, the presumed normative opinion, is that one should not confess again for the same sin, while Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya’akov argues that one should.

The issue does not clearly resolve itself if we consider the commentaries and codes. Both the [Rif](#) and [Rosh](#) codify both opinions,

not offering a clear normative position. Rambam ([Teshuvah 2:8](#)) asserts that one should repeat repentance on these sins; [Tur Orah Hayyim 607](#) quotes the Ri"tz Giat that one should not, but himself is disposed to returning to those sins when confessing. There are also some compromise positions: Meiri 86b says that one should not repent, but it is not so bad (*ein kepeida be-kakh*) if one does, and [Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 607:4](#) rules that one *may* (*yakhol*) return to those sins when repenting. It thus emerges there is no clear consensus, although the evidence does tip in the direction of at least allowing for the return to these sins.

Now that we have established that the reticence to repent a second time on prior sins has at least some standing in the authoritative halakic literature, it is worth considering why this might be. What would be a reason to stay away from repenting once again for previously repented sins?

One answer could be that such a process would be redundant. If one has already done proper *teshuvah*, and also undergone the cathartic expiatory process of a previous Yom Kippur (see [Yoma 85b](#)), the sin has been fully atoned for, and there is simply no need to go back and atone once again. There are two drawbacks or limitations with this approach: First, such a strong response by the Talmud – decrying this act “as a dog who returns to its vomit” – would seem to be unwarranted. Second, not all sins can simply be atoned for with a *teshuvah*-and-Yom-Kippur cycle. An extra confession would not be redundant for those sins which still remain after Yom Kippur, yet the *tanna kamma* would still forbid it. The *Minhat Hinnukh* ([Mitzvah 364](#)) offers a nod in this direction – he tentatively suggests that the whole debate here is only for those sins that are too severe to have been previously forgiven; for those sins that were resolved at an earlier point, there is no dispute at all – both sides agree that the confession would not be necessary. One might offer a modified version of this point as the source of debate between the *tanna kamma* and Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya'akov. Maybe they are precisely disputing whether these severe cases are to be seen as completely atoned previously, in which case there is no reason to go back (the *tanna kamma*'s position), or whether at some level, the atonement is incomplete or at least can be enhanced (Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya'akov).

Alternatively, we might assert that all agree that the sin under discussion has previously been atoned for, but the question is whether, despite that fact, there is still reason for atonement. Is repentance in such a case praiseworthy or condemnable? Rabbenu Yonah, in his magisterial [Sha'arei Teshuvah 4:21](#), offers two explanations for why repenting for an already atoned-for sin should be condemned, building on the version of this Talmudic passage appearing at *Midrash Tehillim* ([Shokher Tov 32:2](#)). He first suggests that one who feels a need to continually return to prior transgressions for which they previously repented demonstrates a lack of belief in the power of repentance. Rav Yitzhak Hutner (*Pahad Yitzhak, Sha'ar Yerah ha-Etanim*, 17:5) offers a slight variation of this teaching – even if this person does not reject the concept of repentance as a whole, he seems uncertain of his own prior repentance on this matter. Following the metaphor, he has failed to successfully “vomit out” the poisonous sin he had previously experienced; returning to it again, even with a repentant attitude, indicates insufficient prior transformation. Rabbenu Yonah's other reason pertains more to the issue of having the appropriate focus. He argues that one who dwells on last year's sins, now resolved, rather than on the more pressing, untouched sins of this year, irresponsibly ignores the more urgent work immediately in front of him. In both approaches, the repentance itself is not problematic as much as a

broader attitude that it reveals, whether distrust in repentance or unwillingness to face pressing challenges.

If returning to previously repented sins runs the risk of redundancy or inappropriate focus, what are the positive ramifications of returning to these actions? Aside from the basic point that more repentance can only help, two more developed perspectives have been offered by two great thinkers of the twentieth century, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler and the Lubavitcher Rebbe.

R. Dessler, in his *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu* (*helek 4*, p. 86), notes that just because one has repented for a previous sin, they have not necessarily removed their susceptibility to that sin entirely. The fact that one previously failed in connection with that sin means that it will be easier to sin the next time around, a theme emphasized at the end of the Talmudic passage cited above. (One might additionally suggest that previous sins reveal not just one's established patterns but also one's natural proclivities, which have not necessarily changed despite the prior atonement.) In order to remove all remaining traces of sin and undue behavioral patterns, it is necessary to revisit the sin and repent again, not to earn atonement (already achieved) but to continue improving one's disposition.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, has a different suggestion as to why one might need to repent for these sins despite having previously accomplished atonement, which he explains in his *Likkutei Sihot* (vol. 29, pp. 208-09). First, he argues that Yom Kippur demands repentance from each person apart from the usual obligation to repent in resolving an outstanding sin. The repentance on Yom Kippur takes on a communal rather than individual nature, and applies to all prior sins, regardless of whether they were previously atoned. He then adds to this framework a theory of distinct levels of repentance, based on the *Tanya*: the previous repentance may suffice to yield atonement, but only relative to the spiritual level the person was inhabiting at that point; however, if one later attains greater spiritual heights, the need for repentance increases as well. (This is similar to the idea of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav that *teshuvah* requires another *teshuvah*, relative to one's newfound spiritual state; see also the [discussion](#) of this phenomenon by Rav Shagar.) In this context, the impetus to repeat repentance is a function not just of one's generally more elevated spiritual state, but particularly of the temporal context of Yom Kippur. This is why the Talmud speaks of “this year” and “next year,” referring to *teshuvah* season, rather than simply referencing previously atoned sins. The spiritual level one reaches on Yom Kippur fosters the potential to undertake higher-order repentance on prior sins.

In addition to these various insightful views into the phenomenology of repeated repentance, I wonder if it is possible to draw in another perspective from the psychology of religion more generally. Herant Katchadourian, in his [Guilt: The Bite of Conscience](#), notes that different religious traditions have distinct views on the value of guilt in one's religious life. In his admittedly overly broad typology, cultures and religions of “the West” dwell on guilt, while Eastern religion and culture often deny having any experience of guilt at all, and certainly deny it any religious value. One might reconstruct a debate between these reified systems of thought as to whether one should employ guilt that “enhances empathy towards others... restraining people from engaging in risky, illegal, and immoral behavior” (p. 135), or whether it is better to “recognize some version of feelings of regret and remorse, but... not dwell on them, [simply] dealing with their consequences” (p. 237). The two sides of the debate on whether to dwell on past sins once they have already been

atoned for apparently fall out along similar lines. Is the benefit of the constant awareness of one's past foibles – “and my sin is before me always” (Psalms 51:5) – determinative? Or does that sense of guilt actually drag down the repentant individual, forcing them to dwell on their sin, to stew in their own vomit, as it were? Does this guilt prevent religious growth more than it fosters it? It could be that these various perspectives are bringing different aspects of this psycho-religious question to the fore.

As we find ourselves situated within the focal season of repentance and atonement, it is essential that we find the proper path forward, balancing between these competing values. May we all succeed in avoiding the pitfalls of twice-baked *teshuvah* while growing from situating our prior sins ever before us.

*I would like to thank Rabbi Shalom Carmy and Rabbi Elinatan Kupferberg for their input to earlier drafts of this article.*

## THIS IS NOT A POEM

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*Editor's Note: These are excerpted from R. Poupko's soon-to-be-published work of poems, What Is Lost.*

### This is not a poem\*

**t**his is not a poem  
nor a parable  
it is a vision  
from a sin master  
to read  
the list and liturgy  
for we have sinned  
is to report  
and record  
and then to add  
and to reckon  
and to balance  
the accounts  
and close the book  
and cast to  
the cleansing river waters  
but if the reading  
flows to chant  
and chant to singing  
and singing to swaying  
then guilt and pain  
seek their same  
in the embrace  
of sin  
she said  
reclining on one arm  
for life  
is a breath  
and sin  
its net  
as the holy  
gives way  
to the good

\*See *Avodah Zarah* 17a.

### Starlings and pigeons

the other  
day  
between  
shofar blast  
and yom kippur fast  
I saw  
the starlings  
and pigeons  
against  
the autumn  
heavens  
god grey  
and fateful  
flying  
racing  
southward

to warm  
skies  
blue  
and godless  
o that  
i had wings

**Kol Nidrei – All my vows**

i am lost  
a wandering jew  
in Yom Kippur  
land of violated promises  
failed oaths  
unkept vows  
alien to me  
as Canaan  
to Abraham  
sin's topography  
sculpts all form  
of landscape

and who shall  
scout the land  
for dangerous  
outcropping  
of rock and craggy sin  
soul faults  
quaking with offense

wadis rushing  
with sin  
flooded Noah's Ark  
shattered on  
secret perfidies  
sins and lives drowning

the angel recorder  
of sins  
faithful custodian  
of bones crushed  
in falling words  
echoing through desert  
and canyon  
none shall escape  
the day of the lord

**Roster**

as i  
read  
read and recite  
recite and chant  
chant and read  
the list  
and litany  
roster  
and all  
of my  
sins

and a few  
not yet  
thought  
and formed  
in fantasy  
and deed  
i wonder  
did you  
really  
make me  
make  
and create  
create and  
form  
form and knead  
knead and breathe  
life and  
image  
as i  
read  
and recite

**When the goat escaped**

when the goat  
escaped Temple's altar  
climbing desert hills  
searching the barren  
for green and grass  
unwittingly bearing  
Israel's sins  
red ribboned  
by a deftly priest  
climbing the precipice  
the earth yawns  
surprises the grass  
munching goat  
and a sin or two  
bounces down  
the hill  
as goat's brains spill  
on rock and crag  
all is forgiven



## WHY I DON'T MISS SHUL ON YOM KIPPUR

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When I was single, I stayed with my brother and sister-in-law for Yom Kippur every year. They lived next door to a yeshiva, and I much preferred the yeshiva-style davening to the standard synagogue service. While I typically wasn't the most fervent *shul*-goer, Yom Kippur was different. I was present when davening started and there when it ended.

I managed to tap into the intensity of the day: the dread of *Kol Nidrei*; the heartfelt pleas of *viduy*; the emotion-packed crescendo of the room exploding at the end of *Neilah*, "*Hashem hu ha-Elokim*," and the euphoria of the declaration, "*Le-shana ha-ba bi-Yerushalayim*!"

I was very comfortable in my Yom Kippur routine. Year after year, I sat in the same seat, wearing the same Steve Madden (non-leather) slides, using the same *mahzor*, anticipating the tune that was coming next. As I traveled the familiar and yet always emotional journey that is Yom Kippur, I had the full confidence of knowing that I was exactly where I needed to be in that moment, doing what I needed to be doing. I was in *shul*. Because that is what you do on Yom Kippur.

There is a level of *simha* in knowing you are doing the right thing.

Only that's not what I do anymore. I haven't been to *shul* on Yom Kippur in years. And I am okay with that.

Back in my yeshiva-going days, when my brother and I would go back to his house during the short break, my sister-in-law would greet us at the door with a smile. Drained from the hours in *shul*, I could barely muster a smile in return. She, on the other hand, was relaxed and upbeat. And I, still in the intense headspace of *shul*, couldn't relate. To be so "chilled" on Yom Kippur seemed wrong. But now, that is me. And it is kind of nice.

These days, I don't spend hours standing in *shul*, feeling the heaviness of the day, the intensity, the dread. These days, I spend Yom Kippur reading storybooks and playing board games. I try to talk with my kids a little about Yom Kippur, but I end up devoting more time to building elaborate structures out of Magnatiles. When I get tired, I rest and adjudicate inter-child disputes from the comfort of my couch. I also hang out with the other moms on the block as we have a steady stream of rotating playdates/tag team *davening*. With my friends' and my husband's help, somewhere along the day, I sneak in the five requisite *Shemoneh Esrehs*. is the co-editor of the forthcoming anthology, *Bound in the Bond of Life: Pittsburgh Writers Reflect on the Tree of Life Tragedy* (University of Pittsburgh Press, October 2020).

Towards the end of the day, the kids who are still awake daven the end of *Neilah* along with me. It's not quite as impressive as at the yeshiva, but it still gets a little loud. It may be less inspiring, but it's not just about me. It's about sharing the meaning of the day with my kids.

Not every woman experiences Yom Kippur the same way. Thankfully, most *shuls* have groups, babysitting and families make other arrangements that allow women with young children to be in *shul*, at

least part of the day. I hope that the available options continue to increase.

For me, staying at home works and makes the most sense. Sure, there are elements of being at home on Yom Kippur that are challenging. But during the many years I spent the *Yomim Norai'm* single, the primary thing I davened for was to be in this stage of life. While there is certainly much to daven for today, and I could daven more effectively in *shul*, I can't feel upset. My prayers were answered.

While this most definitely is not the Yom Kippur of my single years, this is the reality of my stage of life. So I don't feel guilty for not missing being in *shul*. And I don't feel guilty for being less intense and more relaxed. Instead, I have the full confidence that I am exactly where I need to be in the moment, doing what I need to be doing. And there is *simha* in that too.

## CAN WE LEARN FROM JONAH'S HAPPINESS?

**BETH KISSILEFF** is the co-editor of the forthcoming anthology, *Bound in the Bond of Life: Pittsburgh Writers Reflect on the Tree of Life Tragedy* (University of Pittsburgh Press, October 2020).

How The primary connection between the book of Jonah that we read on the afternoon of Yom Kippur and the holiday that comes next, Sukkot, is the "*sukkah*" (Jonah 4:5) that the prophet builds for himself. This serves as a reminder that we need to start building our own *sukkot* once the fast ends. However, there is another connection between Jonah and the Sukkot holiday this year: happiness. The Torah requires us to be happy on the *hagim*; and as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks [points out](#), *Parshat Re'eh* contains more concentrated mentions of "same'ah" and "simha" than anywhere else in the Torah (Deut. 12: 7, 12, 18; 14:26; 16:11,14 15). Of the 12 times "sameach" is used in the Torah, seven are in *Re'eh*, the portion about the holidays, read on the second day of each of the pilgrimage festivals. What is the essence of the joy prescribed for the holidays? Communal joy, experienced as a group. True joy, these verses teach, is that which is not personal but shared by all as the command to include "son, daughter, manservant, maidservant and Levite within your gates" (Deut. 12:18, 16:11) in the rejoicing makes us aware.

Yet Jonah's happiness is completely different from that in *Re'eh*. In the verse after he builds himself a *sukkah* as he waits to see what will happen with the city and the forty day warning he has proclaimed about its destruction, we read that Jonah is, of all things, happy. Sitting alone with the shade of the *kikayon* plant "Jonah is happy about the plant, a great happiness" (Jonah 4:6).

For readers used to associating happiness with festivals and communal times and even making others happy, the thought of Jonah sitting alone with his happiness is quite odd. Yet having Jonah experience his own happiness seems to be another link to Sukkot, the time when we are told to be "*ach sameach*" "completely happy" (Deut. 16:15). As well, Kohelet which is read on Shabbat Hol Ha'moed Sukkot mentions happiness no fewer than 16 times.

Of course, Jonah's happiness, like many of his other behaviors, is something we may best learn from as a way not to live. Jonah is not happy when doing something for others, but rather when focused on himself and his own comfort. God is genuinely surprised that Jonah is unable to have empathy for the animals and residents of Nineveh, unable to comprehend Jonah's lack of concern for anything beyond the reach of his own needs. It is a bit odd to think of this prophet as happy; after all, he spends most of the book either in the depths of a ship, sea or fish and then on reluctant mission to a city of an alien empire. He takes no joy in anything he does and he never connects with those around him. Beginning with fleeing from God, Jonah avoids connecting to anyone.

One might think that he would apologize to the sailors on the ship for causing them difficulties or try to compensate them for their efforts on his behalf in some way. He does not. Though the sailors try valiantly to assist and connect with him, waking him from his anesthetic slumber, Jonah shows no awareness of their needs and what the storm is putting them through. When he does deliver his message in Nineveh a city that is a three day walk across (Jonah 3:3) he applies minimal effort, walking only one day, not even halfway into the city, and uttering five words in Hebrew "Forty more days, Nineveh overturned!" (Jonah 3: 4). He doesn't stay to see what happens, or meet with the king to console him for his fate, but departs.

Sukkot is a time of year when we open our booths and try to invite guests in, from the *ushpizin* to human guests. This entails a great deal of work and preparation, shopping and cooking. In many of our households the burden of all this is on the females, and it can be overwhelming, with many meals to plan. And yet, in order to be happy, unlike Jonah, we need to connect with others and invite them in.. Beyond reaching out to those in our own community, Sukkot is likely Judaism's most universalistic holiday—we are to offer 70 sacrifices for the 70 nations of the world and are told of a vision of the end of days in Zehariah, the chosen Haftarah for the first day of Sukkot that "all the families of the earth" (Zehariah 14:17) shall "celebrate the holiday of Sukkot" (14:16).

Though there is labor involved in Sukkot preparations, I have learned from Jonah's example that I prefer the happiness of connecting with others on holidays to sitting under my *kikayon*. Since this plant appears nowhere else in Tanakh, no one is entirely sure what it is. One [suggestion](#) is a castor bean plant which is possibly toxic. Jack Sasson in his *Anchor Bible Commentary on Jonah* writes that Aquila and Theodotion, early Greek translations, saw *kika-yon* as being a play on Jonah's name, *Yonah*. This suggestion, that Jonah is happy only in the projection of his own shade with the "*kika*" possibly being connected to the verb "*k-ih*" to vomit out, as the fish did to him in Jonah 2:11, makes sense for an isolated Jonah. Jonah is never able to extrapolate his own experiences of salvation and redemption to empathize with others and be concerned about their plight, at least in what we are told of him in these four chapters.

The example Jonah provides of solo happiness is one that is taken away easily—as soon as the *kikayon* withers, Jonah wishes to die once again. A sense of joy as being rooted in connections to others and the empathy generated from those connections provides us a wonderful transition from Yom Kippur to Sukkot.

## JONAH AND THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS MOTIVATION

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The consolations of Religion, my beloved, can alone support you; and these you have a right to enjoy. Fly to the bosom of your God and be comforted.

— Letter of Alexander Hamilton to Elizabeth Hamilton, 4 July 1804

**Rust Cohle:** What do you think the average IQ of this group is, huh?

**Marty Hart:** Can you see Texas up there on your high horse? What do you know about these people?

**Rust Cohle:** Just observation and deduction. I see a propensity for obesity, poverty, a yen for fairy tales, folks putting what few bucks they do have into little, wicker baskets being passed around. I think it's safe to say that nobody here is gonna be splitting the atom, Marty.

— *True Detective*, Season 1, The Locked Room

**T**he journey towards more fervent religious life so often begins with personal turmoil. Some people turn to religion because they are lonely, some are looking to cope with feelings of mortality, while others may turn to religion in the hopes that it will serve as a respite from a broken family. As a religious educator, it is hard to ignore the gnawing feeling that the object of these people's search is not authentic spirituality, but a very, almost secular driven, emotional catharsis from the everyday pain of life. Of course, as an educator, there is a duty to remain egalitarian as to the religious motivations of those who seek counsel; but can I be faulted for noticing that so many people who are seeking religious commitment would seem to be better suited in finding simple healthy social interactions? Does the teenager looking to make sense of her or his parents' impending divorce really need theological purpose or would she or he be better suited with the guidance of a mental health professional and a friend?

I don't think I am the first educator to develop fatigue from watching many who began with intense motivation and then slowly watch said motivation (d)evolve into either disappointment or disuse. The prime suspect, in my eyes, of such abortive entrances into religious life was often the nature and substance of the motivation that brought them there in the first place. Perhaps, I wondered, if people came to religion for the "right reasons," if such can even be said to exist, the resulting religious experience would be more fruitful.

Of course, I recognize that everyone is welcome to seek meaning where they see fit, but my frustration was couched not so much in the breadth of what motivates religiosity than by incredulity towards the religious commitment that emerges from such fleeting emotional pain. A person can surely find God after a devastating diagnosis, but what enduring sense of duty could such motivation produce? Can religious motivation devoid of theological urgency still foster lasting religious commitment? It is an uncomfortable question to ask, for who has the authority to question others' religious search, but it was a question I nonetheless found myself asking, however quietly.

I don't know if I ever found a definitive answer to my difficulties, but my frustrations were assuaged, somehow. In December of 2014 I was invited to deliver a series of classes at a weekend program for teenagers. Many of the participants would have the personal backgrounds that typically irked me in my endeavors at religious education. But, those classes changed my view on the varieties of religious motivation and experience. My classes focused on a personality, who I learned, dealt with a set of frustrations and difficulties similar to the ones with which I had been grappling. His name was Jonah.

## II.

Jonah was approached by God to convince the people of Nineveh to repent and return to Him. Instead of listening, Jonah chose to run. Why did Jonah, a prophet, decide to run?

Like many biblical characters Jonah's underlying religious ethos was alluded to in his name. He was Jonah the son of Amittai, which derives from the Hebrew word *emet* – meaning truth. Jonah was a man of truth. He was not interested in religious comfort or convenience. He was not concerned with escaping the terror of death and finitude. Jonah was motivated by truth. Jonah's religiosity was founded on theological fact and doctrinal integrity.

After fleeing, Jonah found himself on a boat in a tempestuous storm. His fellow sailors began to panic. "And the mariners were afraid, and cried every man unto his god." Throughout the story the operative description of the sailors is fear. The religious motivation of the seamen was based on the impending crisis of their own mortality. Jonah, however, took a nap. He was not interested in being a prophet on this boat. The task of reminding them of repentance so as to escape death's grasp is the very job he absconded by running away from Nineveh. Jonah understood that the people on that boat were not seeking religious truth, but rather religious comfort.

After being thrown overboard in the midst of the storm, Jonah is saved from drowning by miraculously being swallowed by a fish. Inside the fish, Jonah prays and recommits himself to God, who in return ensures he is safely returned to dry land. Jonah, now seemingly reformed, agreed to return to Nineveh – which he did. The Nineveh community, hearing Jonah's exhortations to repent, promptly responded with a communal commitment to return from evil, which God just as promptly accepted.

Jonah, however, is still in pain. His outreach work still leaves him unfulfilled. He finally discloses to God why he ran:

וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל ה' וַיֹּאמֶר, אֲנִי ה' הֲלוֹא זֶה דְּבַרִּי עַד הַיּוֹתִי עַל אֲדָמָתִי—  
עַל כֵּן קִדְמָתִי, לְבָרַח תַּרְשִׁישָׁה: כִּי יָדַעְתִּי, כִּי אַתָּה אֵל חַנוּן וְרַחוּם,  
אֲרַךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חַסֵּד, וְנָחָם עַל הַרְעָה.

He prayed to God and said: Please, God, was this not my contention when I was still on my own soil? Because of this I fled towards Tarshish; for I knew that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and who relents of evil.

While Jonah clearly intends to offer an explanation as to why he ran, his justification at first glance still remains unclear. A close reader, however, will notice that Jonah invokes the opening of the familiar refrain of Moses (or God, depending on who you ask), known as the Thirteen Attributes, that are repeated throughout the High Holiday season – albeit, with one exception. The standard sequence of God's

attributes that most readers are surely familiar with ends **not** with the term "*nicham al ha-ra'ah*," but rather with the term "*emet*"—truth. The word *nicham* derives from the word *nechamah*, comfort. Jonah in his aggravated description of God substitutes comfort for truth. Jonah the son of Amittai finally discloses his frustration with outreach to God. "You want to know why I ran away? Because for most people God, religion, spirituality—it's not about truth—it's about comfort."

Why did the fear of death and mortality seem to have no bearing on Jonah's religious outlook? Perhaps, it was his childhood. I Kings ch. 17, presents the story of the widow Zarephath, whose son died only to be revived by the Prophet Elijah. That son, according to the Midrash, was Jonah. Death for Jonah, then, was not an abstract fear lurking in his future, but a reality he had already experienced. Having already lived through the terror of death, Jonah sought another motivation to ground his religious commitment: truth.

Jonah's concern has been articulated by many critics of religion. David Hume, in his *History of Natural Religion*, considers the concerns which motivated the advent of religion commitment. Hume, who was quite skeptical of religion, assumes that religion began not in the search for truth, but rather in a search for comfort:

But what passion shall we here have recourse to, for explaining an effect of such mighty consequence [i.e., religion]? Not speculative curiosity surely, or the pure love of truth. That motive is too refined for such gross apprehensions; and would lead men into enquiries concerning the frame of nature, a subject too large and comprehensive for their narrow capacities. No passions, therefore, can be supposed to work upon such barbarians, but the ordinary affections of human life; the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death, the thirst of revenge, the appetite for food and other necessaries. Agitated by hopes and fears of this nature, especially the latter, men scrutinize, with a trembling curiosity, the course of future causes, and examine the various and contrary events of human life. And in this disordered scene, with eyes still more disordered and astonished, they see the first obscure traces of divinity.

His pessimistic view of the underlying motivation for religion is shared by many philosophers. Ernst Becker, in his Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Denial of Death*, flatly declares that "religion solves the problem of death." No doubt, this view is best encapsulated in Karl Marx's often cited declaration that "religion is the opiate of the masses." An opiate does not bring its users truth, of course; it is a specious solution for the harsh pain of a harsh world.

Long ago, Maimonides was also concerned with this issue. In his Laws of Repentance (10:2), Rambam makes an important distinction regarding the proper motivation for religious commitment:

Whoever serves God out of love, occupies himself with the study of the Law and the fulfillment of commandments and walks in the paths of wisdom, impelled by no external motive whatsoever, moved neither by fear of calamity nor by the desire to obtain material benefits—such a man does what is true because it is true...

The ideal form of religious commitment, according to Maimonides, is founded upon truth as opposed to the solace religion proves in the face of calamity. Of course, he readily concedes, most will never

achieve such purity of motivation – but it stands as an ideal nonetheless.

In 1967, Gordon Allport wrote “Personal Religious Orientation and Prejudice,” an important essay that invoked a similar dichotomy in religious motivation to that of Maimonides. According to Allport, religious motivation can be characterized based on two binary poles – intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. He succinctly defines this scale as follows:

Perhaps the briefest way to characterize the two poles of subjective religion is to say that the extrinsically motivated person uses his religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated lives his religion. As we shall see later, most people, if they profess religion at all, fall upon a continuum between these two poles. Seldom, if ever, does one encounter a “pure” case.

Using Maimonidean terminology, those motivated by truth could therefore be considered intrinsically motivated, while those motivated by fear of calamity or, for that matter, by social, emotional, or any other form of temporal comfort could be typified as extrinsically motivated. Thus, what plagued Jonah was his insistence on pure intrinsic motivation.

The story of Jonah can be read as the narrative of a frustrated outreach professional. As a prophet, Jonah has proclaimed God’s impending wrath to wayward communities and time and again he sees them repent out of fear. Man, when confronted with his own mortality, finds comfort in the community and eternal promises offered by religion. Jonah, however, grew tired of serving as the temporal haven for man’s fear of crisis and transience. If religion is only a blanket to provide warmth from the cold, harsh realities of life, did concerns of theological truth and creed even matter?

### III.

What was God’s response to Jonah’s religious torment? The story of Jonah ends abruptly. God provides a tree for the ailing Jonah to find shade. After momentarily providing Jonah comfort, God summarily destroys the tree. Jonah is crestfallen. With the sun beating down on Jonah, he pleads for death. God, in the closing statement of the story, rebukes Jonah for becoming so attached to the comfort of the tree, while still failing to develop any empathy for the religious struggle of the people of Nineveh.

Comfort, God reminds Jonah, is a need inherent in the human condition. The comfort provided by a tree no more obscures the role of God, than the comfort that religion provides. The means through which we find solace need not obscure the ultimate source from which all comfort derives.

Christian Wiman, a noted American poet, knows that his religious motivations are looked at with suspicion. After living as an atheist for much of his teens, he rediscovered God following a bout with cancer. As he acknowledges in his brilliant collection, *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer*, “[t]hat conversion often happen after or during intense life experiences, especially traumatic experiences, is sometimes used as evidence against them.” As he surely was accused of himself, “The sufferer isn’t in his right mind. The mind tottering at the abyss of despair or death, shudders back toward any simplicity, any coherency it can grasp, and the man calls out to God.” Wiman, however, does not accept this skeptic narrative of religious motivation, “[t]o admit that there may be some

psychological need informing your return to faith does not preclude or diminish the spiritual imperative any more than acknowledging the chemical aspects of sexual attraction lessens the mystery of enduring human love.”

Religious motivation, however fleeting, however fearful, can still beget dignified religious commitment. Many people seek out religion, just as Jonah thousands of years ago desperately sought shade. Few, if any, are purely and intrinsically motivating by theological truth – but the story of Jonah teaches that their stories are still endowed with religious depth and significance. Perhaps this is why the story of Jonah is read on Yom Kippur. People come to synagogue for all sorts of reasons on Yom Kippur; many come only on this day. Reading the story of Jonah is an apt reminder that it doesn’t matter what brought you to synagogue, be it comfort, truth, or otherwise.

Religious integrity is not determined by the door through which you enter, or even the length of your stay. Our momentary religious experiences are meaningful, regardless of their motivations or durations. So whatever brings you to prayer on Yom Kippur, know that your presence has meaning. We’re glad you’re here.

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