

Sermon for Yom Kippur Afternoon
October 8, 2011 - 10 Tishri, 5772
Temple Beth El of Boca Raton
By Rabbi Daniel Levin

"The word of the Eternal came to Jonah son of Amitai: Arise and go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me. Jonah, however, arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Eternal."

Why? Why does Jonah flee?

The word of the Eternal came to Abraham, and Abraham answered, *Hineni*, here I am. Abraham answers with an open heart, a willingness to submit completely to God's command. There is no skepticism, no concern, only an open faith in God's direction.

The word of the Eternal came to Moses, and Moses answered, *Hineni*, here I am. Moses answers with an open heart, but a questioning humility. "Who am I that I should go before Pharaoh in Egypt?" "What if they don't listen to me?" "Please, Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." Moses wonders about his capability, whether he has what it takes to accomplish God's mission. It's not a question of will, but a question of how?

But the word of the Eternal came to Jonah, and Jonah refuses to answer in words. He answers with a flat out rejection of God's command. Instead of acceding to God's request and going to Nineveh in the east, he finds a boat to Tarshish, near the rock of Gibraltar, at the edge of the west.

Why? Why won't Jonah do as God says?

In fleeing from God, Jonah descends. He goes down to Jaffa, he goes down into the hold of the ship, and eventually, goes down into the depths of the sea. Rather than comply with God's command, Jonah would rather die.

This morning we read Moses plea that we, faced with life or death, blessing or curse, should choose life, that we and our descendants may live. Jonah, faced with the same choice, again and again chooses death. He seeks to die in the water, he asks to die when the Ninevites repent, he asks again to die when the plant withers away.

Why? What so deeply grieves Jonah that he would rather die than live?

While commentators across the generations offer varying ideas, one that strikes me is Jonah's anger at God's compassion. The Ninevites are an evil people, Israel's enemy, bent on destruction. It seems only fair that their iniquity and transgressions be met with Divine wrath. Jonah figures if he flees from God, then there will be no warning. The Ninevites will have no opportunity to repent and they will experience Divine justice. Jonah the prophet, who lives but to serve God, knows God, knows that the Eternal is a God of compassion, who loves repentance and is quick to pardon. But for Jonah, it's not about compassion and love. It's about justice. It's about being right.

Jonah doesn't trust that the God of justice will do justly. He would rather be right and die than to be loving and live.

There is much to learn from Jonah as we look at the world in which we live. Jonah is embedded in the land of Israel, and yet he is asked to leave that land and visit the capital of the enemy.

He knows this enemy. It is an enemy worthy of downfall, worthy of divine retribution, it has earned its destruction. Jonah believes, frankly, that the world would be better off without the Ninevites, and if the Ninevites are to be redeemed, then the world would be better off without him, and certainly, he would be better off without the world.

For decades, the Palestinian Arabs have been Israel's enemy. Since the beginning of Jewish settlement in Palestine, so many among the Arab population have rejected our presence, refused to accommodate us, met us with violence and sought our destruction. Offered a state in 1947, they rejected peace and co-existence in favor of war. Over the years, they attacked us with terrorism, destroyed our holy sites, and murdered thousands of innocent men, women, and children.

Repeated overtures for peace were met with continued violence. In 2000, Ehud Barak met Yasser Arafat at Camp David and offered him a comprehensive settlement, a fair settlement, in which the Palestinians would be given a state in the entirety of the Gaza strip, the vast majority of the West Bank, a capital in Jerusalem and compensation for refugees. That offer was met with ... another war.

In March of 2002, on a Saturday night, as dozens of young people flocked to the popular Café Moment, a suicide murderer blew himself up, killing eleven people and injuring 54. I was in Jerusalem that night, having coffee with friends at a hotel just two blocks away. Walking by the remains of the café the next morning, I was sickened by the destruction I witnessed.

What kind of monsters could commit a crime like this? I could conceive no justice that would make up for the horror that was committed there that night, a horror that was repeated in discotheques, pizza restaurants, and even the celebration of a Passover seder.

So imagine my ambivalence when I was invited this summer to visit Ramallah, the Palestinian capital, and to meet with members of the Palestinian authority and business leaders in the area. In many ways I felt like Jonah. I felt an extraordinary reluctance to go.

Sure I was curious. I wanted to know what Ramallah looked like. I wanted to see who these people were. I wanted to look them in the eye, and try to understand a people that has sought to visit violence and destruction on the homeland of my people and on my people themselves.

I am also not naïve. I know that Israel bears significant responsibility for the hatred that exists between these two people. Israel's settlement policy has been in many respects a horrible mistake, one that will ultimately cause extraordinary hardship on hundreds of thousands of people or make peace itself impossible. I am also aware that extremism is pernicious on both sides. The arson attack on a mosque in northern Israel, committed by Jewish settler extremists during these days of awe, is without question a desecration of God's name and a horrible act of terrorism.

But I also know that in the aftermath of that attack the entirety of the Jewish leadership of the state of Israel and the diaspora condemned the attack in the strongest possible language. The chief rabbis themselves went to the mosque and met with the imam to show a solidarity that such acts will not be tolerated. It is this commitment to our founding principles, that Israel will be a state that secures the religious freedom of all its citizens that makes me proud to be a Zionist, and proud to be a Jew.

What I found in Ramallah surprised me. I met in Ramallah an enemy I hadn't expected to meet. In Ramallah, the chief spokesman for the Palestinian authority acknowledged to me that he still believes the settlements to be the major impediment to peace. But he also understands that Hamas and its hate-filled refusal to renounce violence, warfare, and recognize the State of Israel is an equal impediment to peace. In Ramallah, the chief advisor to the Palestinian prime minister Salaam Fayad told me that there was only one intifadeh, the uprising that led to the Oslo peace process. The violence that followed the Camp

David meetings of 2000, he said, were a catastrophe, a terrible mistake.

In Ramallah, I saw an enemy that appeared more interested in building than destroying, who had transformed government institutions rife with corruption into institutions of unprecedented transparency. I met with Sameh Masri who told me that the security forces who were once themselves complicit in acts of terror are now so effective and respected that in addition to dismantling the terrorist infrastructure of which they used to be a part, they now give traffic tickets to drivers who refuse to wear their seatbelts, or who text while driving. I met Huda El Jack, who moved her family from Los Angeles to Ramallah in 2003 because she wanted to build a Palestinian future that was based on economic prosperity and hope rather than violence and despair. Huda has opened a chain of high end coffee shops in Ramallah. Why coffee shops? Because going out for coffee is a symbol of normalcy, of peace and prosperity. Coffee, she said, is classless. While we were in her shop, at one table was the CEO of the Palestinian stock exchange, and at the next table, two young women enjoying an afternoon snack. Her stores, she explained, were open to secular and religious, young and old, rich and rising.

I visited the developers of the city of Rawabi, a planned city that will one day house 40,000 people in a modern, sophisticated, high tech pedestrian town, with jobs and innovation incubators, parks and culture.

I saw in my enemy something I didn't expect to see. I saw an enemy that was choosing life.

This is how a real state will grow alongside Israel. It will not grow because of a UN resolution, for there have been more resolutions in the United Nations condemning Israel than any other country, and none of those resolutions has advanced the cause of peace. It will not grow from negotiations that give no ground for compromise. It will only grow when our enemies choose the path of compassion and life over an insistence on right and death.

My dismay from my visit came from a sense that among the leaders on both sides of the border, we and they are more interested in being right than in pursuing peace. There is much that is true and right in what many Israelis claim, that we have an historical claim to the land of Israel that goes back thousands of years; that the Palestinians could have had a state had they not rejected partition in 1947, that Israel had every right to settle the lands we took in 1967, that Jerusalem shall forever be the united capital of Israel, that if the

Palestinians truly wanted peace and their own state, then they would have responded to the offers made by Barak in 2000, and by Olmert in 2008.

There is also much that is true and right in what many Palestinians claim, that they have an historical claim to that land that goes back centuries, that the rejection of partition in 1947 was not a choice entirely of their own, that they have a right, as do all peoples, to self determination, that Israeli settlements in many respects represent a land-grab and that the peace offers they rejected failed to account for fundamental issues of enormous importance to the Palestinian people.

But the paradox is that both claims are true at the same time, and each side's insistence on holding fast to those claims at all cost will never lead to peace.

Jonah knows this paradox. On the one hand, he is right that the Ninevites are deserving of divine punishment for their Sodom-like waywardness and iniquity. On the other hand, the God Jonah knows who is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and who allows the evil to atone has more than once applied that mercy to our people as well.

Jonah does not trust God to do the right thing. So consumed is he by the need to be right, that he cannot understand God's need to be compassionate. And my sense from visiting Jerusalem and Ramallah is that we are more like Jonah than like God. Each side is consumed by a need to be right. Each side has little, if any, faith in the enemy's ability or desire to transform itself, to choose a different path, to collaborate or compromise. Each side is convinced that the extremists will overwhelm those of good will who seek to find a solution.

Ultimately, God teaches us something important in the book of Jonah. God teaches us not to wish our enemies' destruction but rather that we go to our enemies, talk to them, try to understand them, and even allow for the possibility that they may one day change.

But until that day comes, we must also be strong and resolute. We must be careful to secure our borders, and to create within Israel a society that is just and fair, and also compassionate and loving. Jonah flees from serving God and runs away from the land of Israel. We, on the other hand, must run toward Israel and invest in her future. For Israel's prosperity and Israel's security are mutually interdependent.

For decades Temple Beth El has asked our community to support the state of Israel by investing in Israel bonds. I am

excited that we will be honoring Ronnie and Marba Mallett and my dear colleague Rabbi Jessica Brockman this year at our annual Israel bonds dinner which I hope you will make plans to attend. But I hope today you will purchase an Israel bond. Your investment in the State of Israel not only helps to secure Israel from threats outside its borders, but also helps Israel to secure the lives of the millions of our people who live within its borders, helping them to respond to the thousands who took to the streets this summer by creating affordable housing, improving public schools and facilities, and securing the safety net so that Israel's hungry are fed, its poor sheltered and clothed, and its future made bright by a vision of understanding and hope.

Ultimately, on this Yom Kippur, we pray that the hearts of all who share the land of Israel be turned toward God, toward an understanding of the other that will lead to mutual prosperity, respect, trust, and peace.