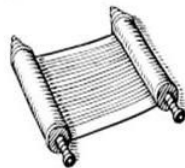


# **CMTL Aseret Yemei Teshuvah & Yom Kippur Reader 2018 Edition**

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**"Taking Responsibility for Torah"**

*Unless otherwise noted, all pieces are by Rabbi Klapper and published on the CMTL website or blog.*

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## “Frum Week” and Aseret Yemei Teshuvah

September 28, 2011

A recent article in Reform Judaism described a Yale undergraduate’s “frum week”, in which she tried out kashrut, traditional tefillah betzibbur, distinctively Orthodox tzeniut, and the like so as to make sure that her choices **not** to observe were authentic and thoughtful. She was on the whole very appreciative of what she tried. We the intransigent Orthodox have much to learn from her appreciation of birkot hanehenin, davening, and the need for kiddush Hashem (behaving in a way that sanctifies G-d’s Name) when one is publicly identifiable as Jewish.

I had two immediate concerns. First, wasn’t she trivializing halakhic experience by engaging in it with no permanent commitment, as a spiritual tourist (transient Orthodox)? Can one understand marriage by living together with someone for a week? Second, was her presentation and experience of Orthodoxy as an almost entirely ritual phenomenon reductive, or worse, accurate? Is ritual observance purposeful if it does not make one a significantly “better person”?

Then I realized that I could ask the same question in a traditional learning contest. Shulkhan Arukh YD 112 teaches that while pat nokhri (bread baked by Gentiles) is forbidden lekhatchilah, it is permitted to buy commercial bread when no other is available, and the RAMO cites an opinion that permits commercial bread under all circumstances. SHAKH declares that this is the standard practice. But SHAKH then endorses a custom of being particularly concerned about this during the 10 Days of Repentance.

SHAKH’s custom has a long history, but one antecedent that particularly interested me is the Minhagim of Rabbi Yitzchak Isaac Tirana, who lived in Austria from the late 14th to mid-15th centuries.

ספר המנהגים (טירנא) הגהות המנהגים עשרת ימי תשובה אות (קלו) אבל  
בכל י' ימי תשובה אין אוכלין פת של גוים (קלו) אלא מכשירין תנורים בקיסם (קלו) אבל מצוה מן המובחר לאכול פת שאפו  
. . . היהודים ולא שהוכשר ע"י קיסם

*Throughout the 10 Days of Repentance we do not eat bread of Gentiles, rather we kasher ovens with a twig.*

*(Note 136) But it is a mitzvah min hamuvchar to eat bread that Jews baked, rather than bread kashered via a twig.*

The Bar Ilan Responsa Project’s biography tool says that the notes are not by Rabbi Tirana. In other words, what we have here is

- a) An acknowledgement that halakhically it is permitted to eat any commercial bread
- b) A statement that for the 10 Days one should nonetheless only eat commercial bread which a Jew has played a minimal role in baking (adding a twig to the flame of the oven)
- c) A note acknowledging that adding the twig suffices to fulfill the custom, but claiming nonetheless that an even higher level requires bread that was fully baked by Jews.

Now the key point here is that unlike teshuvah, which requires regret for the past and commitment for the future, this practice consciously and explicitly justifies the past, and is not intended to continue past Yom Kippur. What is the point of temporarily adopting an extrahalakhic ritual stringency? Why does this practice not trivialize the year-round effort of fulfilling the details of Halakhah?

My suggestion is the following: One of the great barriers to positive change is the reasonable desire not to confound our friends’, colleagues’, even families’ expectations of us. We are justly leery of destabilizing critical and comfortable relationships. It is in a sense a violation of tzeniut to call attention to ourselves by suddenly changing our practices, even for the better, and sometimes a direct violation of meichazei

keyuhara (appearing to be spiritually arrogant). ‘Who is s/he to walk away from a lashon hora conversation – s/he was never better than us before, and I remember just last week that s/he . . .’

The 10 Days of Repentance offer us a space where positive change is the expectation, where improved action is not arrogance but conformity. To ensure this, we standardize certain minor changes, and perhaps tolerate or even encourage a certain amount of competition and one upmanship. This provides a cover, or at least a halakhic fig leaf, for more substantive changes which might otherwise seem threatening to one’s social and emotional circles.

I hope that “frum week” eventually generates a lifetime. But even if it doesn’t, I hope it opened a space for positive change, a context enabling peers and family to see and support this young woman not only as she is but as she might be. Similarly, I hope that the coming 10 Days will provide us as individuals and as communities with the opportunity to live up to our best selves, and that we will seize those opportunities. Shanah Tovah - May we all be inscribed in the Books of Life, Joy, and Meaning.

## Haftarat Shuvah

September 21, 2012

“For the ways of Hashem are straight, and the righteous will walk in them, but the posh'im will blunder in them.”

Rabbinic literature regularly concedes that Torah study does not guarantee proper behavior or even good character: “If he merits, it becomes an elixir of life for him; if he does not merit, it becomes an elixir of death for him.” The texts of the tradition cannot reliably defend themselves against corrupt interpreters, nor can they redeem the interpreters' corruption.

The concluding verse of Haftarat Shuvah suggests that this is also true of Torah practice, that the intrinsically straight Divine paths will mislead anyone crooked who enters them. This seems to be an antecedent for Ramban's famous notion of the “naval birshut haTorah”, the one who behaves disgustingly despite not violating any formal Torah prohibitions.

Making that connection requires us to identify the “paths of Hashem” with the Law, so that one can walk in them without truly following His Will, which extends beyond the Law. Talmud Nazir 23a considers this possibility, but seems to move beyond it, and instead reads this verse as referring to cases where the “path of Hashem” goes not only beyond the Law but even contradicts it. The conversation takes place via a series of dueling and sometime shocking parables, as follows:

*Said Rabbah Bar Bar Channah said Rabbi Yochanan:*

*“What is the meaning of “For the ways of Hashem are straight, and the righteous will walk in them, but the posh'im will blunder in them”?”*

*A parable:*

*Two men who roasted their Paschal lambs.*

*one ate it with intent to fulfill the mitzvah, but one ate it with intent to overeat;  
the one who ate it for mitzvah-sake – “and the righteous will walk in them”,  
but the one who ate it for gluttony-sake – “but the posh'im will blunder in them”.*

*Resh Lakish said to him:*

*You call such a one a rasha?! Granted that he did not do a choice mitzvah, he nevertheless ate a Paschal lamb!? Rather,*

*A parable:*

*Two men, each having their wife and their sister with them;*

*this one found his wife (in his bed)*

*but this one found his sister (in his bed)*

*the one who found his wife - “and the righteous will walk in them”,  
while the one who found his sister - “but the posh'im will blunder in them”.*

*How is that comparable?! We spoke of one path, but here there are two paths!? Rather*

*A parable:*

*Lot together with his two daughters.*

*They intended (their incest) for mitzvah-sake - “and the righteous will walk in them”,  
He, who intended simply to sin - “but the posh'im will blunder in them”.*

*Perhaps he also intended for mitzvah-sake?!*

*Said Rabbi Yochanan . . .*

The first parable assumes that the Divine Path is the law, here the obligation to eat a Paschal lamb. Resh Lakish, however, cannot see fulfillment of the law as a blunder. (Tosafot note that gluttonous eating may not fulfill the law, and accordingly offer distinctions, but in my humble opinion Resh Lakish deals only with intent, not actuality.) The first parable offered, however, seems bizarre and off-topic – the posheia is

caused to commit a sin by doing something never intended, and thus the person is not in any way following the Divine path. The second parable moves to a case in which the law is being deliberately violated, but for a worthwhile cause – here the conclusion is that the Divine path in fact sometimes contradicts the Law, but that the *posh'im* will blunder when they follow it against the Law since they will not have pure intentions, and thus will be justified neither by form nor by the intent of their action. Meiri, relating back to the previous phrase in our verse, suggests that “*posh'im*” will always perform the law by rote rather than out of understanding, and accordingly their violations of the law cannot be attributed to a realization that the purposes of the law are here better accomplished in the breach.

Read this way in Biblical context, the last line of the haftarah – and of Sefer Hoshea – suggests that repentance can happen in two ways – either by accepting ourselves as so flawed that our only behavioral option is complete obedience to law, or else by improving ourselves to the point that we can violate the law when necessary in perfect submission to the true Divine Will. My experience is that those who declare themselves capable of following Divine Will against Halakhah turn out to be radically deficient in self-awareness, with tragic consequences. But the recognition that the law is more binding than ever in our day, that we legitimately have less room than in the past for the ad hoc exception or civil disobedience, should drive us to redouble our efforts to minimize the gap between Will and Law. To the extent that the Orthodox community has instead sought to deny that Will has any meaning other than Law, i.e to deny that currently dominant halakhic interpretations are legitimately subject to practical and ethical critique, repentance is urgently necessary.

## Should I Feel Guilty for Wearing Comfortable Shoes on Yom Kippur?

October 7, 2011

I mentioned to one of my classes yesterday that Tish'a B'av and Yom Kippur were, back in the days before I found comfortable shoes, my "happy feet days", when I could wear massage sandals in public. I still prefer Crocs to shoes in any case. Some of the students were very disturbed – doesn't this undercut the whole purpose of the leather-shoe prohibition?

This question also been asked to and by prominent rabbis over the years, with varying results. Very likely an authoritative rabbinic would rewrite the prohibition to cover many non-leather shoes, but until then, I'm good with it being largely symbolic.

But this begs the underlying question – should one seek to suffer on Yom Kippur? My sense is that this is not the Rabbinic spirit – we eat well the day before, not just enough to enable agonizing survival. But I want to take a somewhat lengthy excursus examining the origins of a contrary position, which sees suffering on Yom Kippur as a crucial good.

<sup>1</sup>Responsa Siach Yitzchak # 300 records a fascinating Yom Kippur custom:

*With regard to the custom of the Sefardim who set a table for Yom Kippur.  
Now I have heard from truth-tellers whose speech is reliable,  
that the custom of our Sefardic Jewish brothers who live in Turkey,  
that on the sacred day of Yom Kippur they set up before the eve of that holy day  
a table full of delicacies and sweets and fine quality fruit and confections,  
and on that holy day,  
I imagine before Mussaf, but I have heard after Mussaf,  
they go from the shul to their houses for a few minutes, gaze at the table and stare at it intently, and say  
"This is the day on which Hashem has commanded human beings to afflict their nefesh,  
it is Yom HaKippurim,  
and we are restrained from chas vechalilah eating or drinking",  
and then return to the synagogue to pray the liturgy of the day.*

Rabbi Weiss' initial reaction is amazement that this would not be forbidden; aren't they tempting themselves to eat? However, he has great faith that Turkish customs were instituted by competent rabbis, and in addition has a report of (a presumably Ashkenazi) holy Rabbi Frishelman who had a similar custom when Yom Kippur fell on Shabbat, although that custom seems to have been intended to apologize for the absence of a Shabbat meal. As a result, he searches for and finds a variety of justifications.

The coolest of these is the ruling in Shulkhan Arukh OC 275:16 that one may recite the second chapter of Masekhet Shabbat (Bameh Madlikin) by candlelight on Friday night, *because* it mentions the prohibition of reading by candlelight on Shabbat lest one adjust the flame, and therefore will prevent you from adjusting the flame. Similarly, Rabbi Weiss argues, one may stare at food on Yom Kippur if one simultaneously recalls the prohibition against eating. This seems questionable to me, as Bameh Madlikin inevitably and intrinsically mentions the prohibition, whereas one might accidentally see the table outside the context of this particular custom, and thus come to eat. On the other hand, perhaps no halakhic justification is needed at all, as there are no technical violations – no work is actually done on Yom Kippur, and there is no formal prohibition against seeing food on Yom Kippur.

The more interesting questions are psychological and theological – what does this custom seek to accomplish, and are we in sympathy with its aims? Here Rabbi Weiss comes up with a Talmudic source that seems directly on point, and the obvious source of this custom: as he presents it, Talmud Shabbat

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<sup>1</sup> R. Yitzchak Weiss, 1873-1942

115a records that Rav Yochanan permitted cracking nuts on Yom Kippur afternoon, and engaging in a parallel operation on pomegranates, *mipnei agmat nefesh*, to heighten the agony of the day.

Rabbi Weiss does not mention any other interpretation of that text here. However, in responsum #196, he refers to the position of Baal Hamaor that these actions are permitted *mipnei agmat nefesh*, so as to *prevent agmat nefesh* following Yom Kippur, when one would be permitted to eat but otherwise still be delayed by these preparations. This interpretation seems to me clearly superior to the one in Responsum 300 – indeed, when I first saw R. Weiss' claim in #300, I assumed that he created it in a desperate effort to justify the Turkish practice. Why would the rabbis permit preparing from Yom Kippur for a weekday, which is generally prohibited, for this purpose? Did they not have available more effective and less halakhically problematic ways of heightening the pain of fasting, such as this Turkish minhag? And since when is heightening the pain of fasting a religious desideratum?

A little research showed, however, that Rabbi Weiss had a long tradition behind him. Ramban, Rashba, Ritva, Meiri, and others record this as Rashi's position, although each of them promptly and strongly reject it in favor of the interpretation of Baal HaMaor. And closer to our day, Arukh HaShulchan OC 611:8 adopts this interpretation without comment. But none of these sources make any effort to address the religious and psychological issues.

They are addressed, however, in the 14th century work Kaftor VaFerach's discussion of the ongoing religious implications of the destruction of the Temple. Kaftor VaFerach records a widespread custom for Diasporans to come to Jerusalem on festivals *mipnei agmat nefesh*, meaning to increase the agony of the day. This custom, he says, is parallel to the permission of Shabbat 115a of smashing nuts. He then notes the position of Baal HaMaor and rejects it out of hand: why would the Sages permit preparing on Yom Kippur for afterward, which is forbidden on every holy day, especially when universal Jewish custom for ages has been to prepare before Yom Kippur for afterward?!

*“Rather, as Yom Kippur goes toward evening, the suffering increases,  
and thus afternoon is a time when the deed of fasting is greatest,  
and lefum tzaara agra (the reward is proportionate to the suffering).”*

Indeed, he concludes, the Sages did not merely permit engaging in this food preparation on Yom Kippur afternoon; they mandated it! Kaftor VaFerach properly cites Eruvin 61a as evidence that the phrase “they permitted” can mean “they mandated”.

Siach Yitzchak was therefore correct that the Turkish minhag he reports is well grounded in the masoret. At the same time, I remained unconvinced that it was accurately grounded. The Talmud in the last chapter of Yoma explicitly rejects the idea of actively causing ourselves suffering on Yom Kippur – that is why halakhah forbids wearing leather shoes rather than mandating self-flagellation or sitting outside in the cold. Furthermore, the Talmud records various Sages' attempts to mitigate the fast by constructing nonleather shoes, or cooling themselves with fruit, etc., and later minhagim include the use of snuff in place of food. So I hoped I could demonstrate that “*mipnei agmat nefesh*” in fact meant “to prevent *agmat nefesh*”, rather than “to heighten *agmat nefesh*”.

Alas, I was sadly disappointed in this hope. The three other uses of the phrase in Chazal - Megillah 28a, Yerushalmi Megillah 3:1, and Masekhet Semakhot 8:7 – all plainly mean “to heighten”. I began to wonder whether Baal HaMaor's reading was plausible. Happily, I then found a citation of Rashi himself (Shut Rashi 258) as banning the recitation of *tzidduk hadin*, the justification of Divine judgment in the face of a death, on Shabbat or Yom Tov, *mipnei agmat nefesh*. So ironically, it now seemed that the first use of it to mean “to diminish *agmat nefesh*”, is in Rashi, who is the source of the position that it means “to heighten *agmat nefesh*” in our context.

And on reflection, and even having read Kaftor VaFerach, I still found the idea that Chazal permitted food preparation on Yom Kippur in order to increase the pain of fasting both psychologically and halakhically



implausible. So I decided to take a closer look at the Rashi. Here is what I see as the crucial section, as it is printed in the Vilna Shas Shabbat 114b-115a, with Rashi's comment inserted.

אמר רבי חייא בר אבא אמר רבי יוחנן  
יום הכפורים שחל להיות בשבת - מותר בקניבת ירק,  
דשבות לאו איסורא דאורייתא הוא, אלא דרבנן,  
והכא משום עגמת נפש, שמתקן ואינו אוכל, והרי קרוב לעינוי -  
שרי, ודווקא מן המנחה ולמעלה,  
שהוא שואף ומצפה לעת אכילה, ואיכא עגמת נפש טפי.

*Said Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba said Rav Yochanan:*

*Yom Kippur that falls on Shabbat – one is permitted to be konev vegetables  
since a shevut is not a Biblical prohibition, but rather rabbinic,  
sohere, because of agmat nefesh, in that he is preparing but not eating, so it is near to inui –  
it is permitted, but only from the minchah and on,  
when he is yearningly anticipating the time of eating, so there is more agmat nefesh.*

On first reading, this Rashi seems explicitly to say that is cited in his name, that we permit *kenivah* so as to heighten *agmat nefesh*. But a closer look reveals a peculiar use of language. Rashi says that “here, because of *agmat nefesh*, in that he is preparing but not eating, so it is near to *inui*” – what does the phrase “near to *inui*” add to “because of *agmat nefesh*”?

I tentatively suggest the following. Several lines above, Rashi distinguished the obligation generated by the word “shabbaton” with regard to Yom Kippur from the obligation that it generates with regard to Shabbat.

ואף על גב דכתיב ביה נמי שבתון שבות,  
לאו ממלאכה הוא  
אלא מכל דבר המעכב מלהתענות,  
מדסמכין לועניתם.

*as even though Scripture also writes shabbaton shevot regarding Yom Kippur,  
that does not refer to resting from melakhah  
but rather to resting from anything that interferes with being afflicted,  
since it is juxtaposed with “v’initem”.*

With regard to Shabbat, the obligation is to abstain from *melakhah*-like actions; with regard to Yom Kippur, the obligation is to abstain from *inui*-preventing actions.

With that background, we can note that a problem with Baal HaMaor's reading is that the *agmat nefesh* prevented by allowing vegetable preparation occurs *after* Yom Kippur, not during, which intensifies the issue of preparing from *kodesh* to *chol*. Kaftor VaFerach, however, refers to heightening the suffering on Yom Kippur.

But maybe Rashi says both. In other words – Rashi says that the *motive* for allowing this preparation is to prevent *agmat nefesh* after Yom Kippur, which has no religious purpose – people should be able to eat immediately. At the same time, food preparation is generally prohibited on Yom Kippur because it is an adjunct of eating, it is an act that contributes to *inui*-prevention, and so falls under *shabbaton*. But, Rashi says, in the afternoon, when hunger hits its peak, food preparation is actually “near to *inui*”, it makes the affliction sharper, and therefore it does not technically violate “shabbaton”. So we permit it technically because it causes immediate *agmat nefesh*, and is therefore *karov leinui*, so that we can prevent eventual *agmat nefesh*.

Now this still leaves open whether, according to Rashi, one should be able to put on comfortable nonleather shoes – wouldn't that violate Shabbaton? But it does not put Rashi on record supporting the Kaftor VaFerach's claim that the more suffering the better.

Moreover, we have other religious models in which mitigating Divinely ordained suffering is a good deed – medicine, for example, and charity. And no contemporary I'm aware of seriously suggests that women should forgo epidurals so as to better experience “with travail you will birth children”, or that farmers should forgo labor-saving equipment to better fulfill “by the sweat of your brow etc.” So perhaps the development of massage sandals and the like so as to make Yom Kippur easier is part of the work of Redemption.

## Correct Belief and Moral Luck

May 6, 2016

Why aren't all true beliefs self-evident to everyone? Perhaps the answer is weakness of character or willful ignorance. We evade the truth about the world in order to avoid facing truths about ourselves, or to gain this-worldly pleasures and avoid this-worldly pains. I suspect that every religion/ideology has adherents who make these assertions about everyone who doesn't accept their beliefs..

Yet almost every believer – including baalei teshuvah and converts – wonders at some point whether holding true beliefs is just a matter of spiritual luck, of being born in the right place at the right time to the right people. But how can we be held responsible for bad luck, or rewarded for good luck? If belief matters at all, what room is there for Divine justice?

Parashat Acharei Mot opens by describing the rituals that a Kohen Gadol must perform before entering the Holy of Holies, if he wishes to survive the experience. (This was regardless permitted only on Yom Kippur, although Chokhmah Adam cites R. Elyahu of Vilna as arguing that Aharon, the first Kohen Gadol, was permitted to enter on any day.) Performing the ritual was no guarantee of survival; during the Second Temple, many High Priests died in their first year of service. (although likely without a rope tied around them to pull them out in case of death; see the ever-remarkable Dr. Ari Zivotofsky's article at <https://www.ou.org/torah/machshava/tzarich-iyun/tzarich-iyun-the-kohen-gadols-rope/>).

Finally, the people did not rely on G-d to eliminate the unworthy; according to Mishnah Sukkah 4:9, they stoned a Kohen Gadol with their etrogim one Sukkot when he seemed to be following Sadduceean halakhah.

The ritual involves an incense offering, which is mentioned twice. In 16:2 we read: כי בענן אראה על הכפרת which can be read as requiring the cloud of incense to be present from the moment of entrance, but in 16:13 we read:

ונתן את הקטרת על האש לפני יקוק וכסה ענן הקטרת את הכפרת אשר על העדות ולא ימות

which indicates that the incense was set on fire in the Holy of Holies itself.

Rabbinic law understands verse 13 as primary, and thus requires the incense to be brought into the Holy of Holies still unlit; Sadducee law took verse 2 as primary, and required it to be lit before entry.

All this is necessary background for a fascinating and surprising narrative found on Yoma 19b

*This happened: A Sadducee (High Priest) prepared (the incense-offering) outside (the Holy of Holies) and then brought it in (already lit).*

*When he exited, he was greatly joyous.*

*His father met him and said: "My son, even though we are Sadducees, we are in fear of the Pharisees".<sup>2</sup>*

*He said to him: **All my days I was pained by this verse: "For in a cloud I will be seen above the ark-cover" – when would it come to my hand that I might fulfill it? Now that it has come to my hand – should I not fulfill it?!***

*They said: It was not many days until he died, and was thrown on a trashheap, and maggots came out of his nose.*

*Some say: He was struck down as he exited,*

*for R. Chiyya taught a beraita: Some sort of sound was heard in the Courtyard, for an angel came and smacked him on his face, and his brother kohanim entered and found a palm(print) like that of a calf's*

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<sup>2</sup> In context, the father seems to be saying that the son should be cautious lest the Pharisees physically assault him. However, see Niddah ??, which opens the possibility that the father was suggesting that the Sadducees respected the Rabbis and would not necessarily follow their own positions when they conflicted with Rabbinic law.

*foot between his shoulders, as Scripture says: “and their feet – a straight foot, and the palm of their feet like the palm of a calf’s foot”.*

On its surface this narrative is just straightforward propaganda. The Sadducee’s devotion to his law is contrasted negatively with his father’s caution/respect, and leads to his horrible, possible supernatural death. There seems no basis for sympathy.

However, this story is a linguistic echo of a more famous story from Berakhot 61b.

*When R. Akiva was taken out to be executed it was the time of Keriat Shema. They were combing his flesh with metal combs while he accepted the Yoke of the Government of Heaven.*

*His students said to him: Rebbe, thus far?*

*He said to them: **All my days I was pained by this verse: “with all your life-force” – even if He takes your spirit – when would it come to my hand that I might fulfill it? Now that it has come to my hand – should I not fulfill it?!***

*He extended the word “echad” (one) until his life-force departed on that word.*

*A voice emerged from Heaven saying: Fortunate are you, R. Akiva, whose life-force departed with “echad”.*

*The ministering angels said before the Holy Blessed One: This is Torah, and this is its reward? “From the dead, O Hashem, from the dead . . .”?!*

*He replied: Their portion is in life.*

*A voice emerged from Heaven saying: Fortunate are you, R. Akiva, who is reserved for the life of the World to Come.*

I suggest that the story about the Sadducee is deliberately framed as a response to the Rabbi Akiva story. Here are three possible implications of the parallel:

1. (PreModern) – Rabbi Akiva and the Sadducee both die horrible deaths for the sake of their understandings of Torah. Rabbi Akiva is praised by the ministering angels; the Sadducee is killed by an angel. Blessed are those who have the character and will to understand Torah properly.
2. (Modern) – Rabbi Akiva and the Sadducee have identical characters; they are equally virtuous. What a pity that and tragedy that the Sadducee was trapped by circumstances into believing in falsehood, so that a man with the potential to be Rabbi Akiva was instead tossed onto the trashpile of history.
3. (PostModern) – Who killed the Sadducee, and who reported hearing the Heavenly voices at Rabbi Akiva’s martyrdom? Since the Rabbi Akiva story proves that dying a horrible death is no evidence of Divine disfavor, why is it significant that the Sadducee was left unburied (and wasn’t that a human choice, just as the Roman chose to torture Rabbi Akiva?)

I suggest that a viable Modern Orthodoxy needs to be able to hold all three of these readings in mind. We need

1. firmness in our truth, with gratitude to G-d for having allowed us to see that truth;
2. the ability to appreciate that many of us deserve little or no credit for recognizing that truth, and that belief is not evidence of individual character, nor is lack of belief evidence of individual lack of character; and
3. the ability to avoid triumphalism and confirmation bias when evaluating interpretations of Torah.

We need to be grateful for our spiritual luck, to believe in Divine justice, and to leave it to G-d to resolve the tension between our gratitude and our belief. *Shabbat shalom!*

## Two Sons, Two Sins, Two Goats

by Betsy Morgan (SBM 2013, 2014)

May 6, 2016

(Vayikra 16:1)

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, אַחֲרֵי מוֹת, שְׁנֵי בְנֵי אַהֲרֹן—בְּקִרְבָּתָם לִפְנֵי-ה', וַיָּמָתוּ  
*God spoke to Moshe after the death of Aharon's two sons,  
as they sacrificed/came near to God, and died.*

After the death of Aharon's sons in Parashat Shemini, Parshiyot Tazria and Metzora dealt with other matters, and (in America) there have been two additional weeks of break from the regular Torah reading because of Pesach. How helpful of the Torah to reorient us to pertinent events so that the subsequent verses flow naturally!

(Vayikra 16:2-3)

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, דַּבֵּר אֶל-אַהֲרֹן אַחִיר, וְאֶל-יָבֵא בְּכָל-עֵת אֶל-הַקֹּדֶשׁ . . . וְלֹא יָמוּת  
בְּזָאת יָבֵא אַהֲרֹן, אֶל-הַקֹּדֶשׁ: בְּפֶר בֶּן-בִּקְרָ לְחַטָּאת, וְאֵיל לְעֹלָה  
*God said to Moshe, speak to your brother Aharon to not come at any time into the Holy . . .  
and (thus) he will not die . . .*

*Thus should Aharon come to the Holy: with a calf for a sin offering, and a ram as a burnt offering.*

It seems the death of Nadav and Avihu was only mentioned as a transition. But what is the nature of this transition?

1. Literarily, these laws, which describe the Yom Kippur service in the Temple, occurred after the death of Nadav and Avihu, which has been distanced in the text by other laws. Thus, it makes sense that the Torah would orient the reader before starting the new topic.
2. The topic of priests' death is returned to, to point out that they died from inappropriate action regarding the Mishkan, and Aharon too will die if he enters the Holy of Holies, where God dwells. There is, however, one exception: on Yom Kippur, when performing the service, Aharon is allowed to enter the Holy of Holies. God then describes the Temple service to be performed on Yom Kippur. So the subject of the death is a stepping stone to arrive at last to the real topic of Yom Kippur with its laws and services.
3. There is a substantive relationship between the death of Nadav and Avihu and the service of Yom Kippur, and Aharon's development is the center of it.

I prefer to read this the third way.

The story starts in Shmot 29, when God spends 46 verses telling Moshe how the consecration of the Mishkan and Kohanim will be done – describing donning the correct garments, and the order and procedure for various sacrifices. Vayikra 8 is when these events begin, the sacrifices prepared and brought, the priest washed, dressed, anointed, and thus consecrated.

On the eighth day of this consecration there are a new set of sacrifices to be brought, with the people of Israel watching in order that they see the “glory of God” (Vayikkra 9:6). One of these sacrifices is a calf. Rashi (9:2) comments upon the verse telling Aharon to take the calf

להודיע שמכפר לו הקב"ה ע"י עגל זה על מעשה העגל שעשה

*To inform that God would grant atonement through this calf for the sin of the (golden) calf that he made*

Later verses corroborate this reading, categorizing this sacrifice as a sin offering “to atone for [Aharon] and for the nation” (Vayikra 9:7). How fitting, that a calf once a symbol of betrayal straying and waywardness, now the ultimate display of devotion to God. Aharon, once at the heart of a dire

disappointment, became enabled to publicly transform failure into worship, sealing his consecration with atonement. Aharon blesses the assembled nation and they do indeed see the glory of God. A fire descends upon the altar and consumes the burnt offering and the nation as witnesses sing and bow in awe (Vayikra 22-24).

At the climax of the consecration of the Mishkan and the priests who serve in it, Nadav and Avihu do what was not prescribed by God. They offer a strange fire, and are consumed by God in the eyes of all. The message in this case is immediately clear: one cannot assume to know the correct way to serve God in the Mishkan. Those who fail to comply are unfit for the service.

But there is an additional failure present in these actions. At the very moment that Aharon is atoning for his and the nation's sin of the golden calf, a gesture of misplaced faith, his sons act out in another desperate attempt to worship. Aharon once again fails to stop misplaced religious ecstasy. At Sinai, and then again during the consecration of God's dwelling on Earth, Aharon is present and closest to severe deviations from God's path.

Later that day, in Vayikra 10:12, Moshe finds that Aharon and his remaining sons did not eat the sin offering that was specifically meant to atone for the community; instead they burned with the other burnt sacrifices. Aharon replies by asking if really God would want him to eat the sin offering in the wake of the day's events. Aharon is really asking Moshe, through his acrid question, if the atonement still applies after his own demonstrated inability to improve. (There may be other underlying aspects of legalities of his status as an onen (a mourner who is technically exempt from performing mitzvot).)

Our parsha opens reminding of us of the death of Aharon's sons, another of his failures. But the tone turns. While the second verse of the parsha describes what Aharon must not do, lest he die, God tells him that he can enter this holy place, if done properly. Every year, Aharon is given another chance to atone.

I find it deeply meaningful that this character at the center of religious disasters is also the primary character carrying the atonement of the entire Jewish people. These two roles that Aharon plays are not accidental features, but inherent to the process of repenting. The inherent nature of combining sin and service is demonstrated with the two goats of the Yom Kippur service. Their fates are determined by lot: one is marked for God and one for "azazel". Mishnah Yoma 6:1 teaches that these two goats are to be as identical as possible in regards to general appearance, size, and worth. Moreover, they should be taken as a pair, meaning if two are taken together and one dies after the lot has been drawn, two new goats must be found to replace both. The goat for God is slaughtered as a sin offering, the goat for azazel is sent off to wander in the desert with Aharon's confession riding it.

Vayikra 16:21 describes the confession part of the process thusly:

וְסִמָּךְ אֶהְרֹן אֶת-שְׁתֵּי יָדָיו, עַל-רֹאשׁ הַשְּׂעִיר הַחַי, וְהִתְוֹדָה עָלָיו אֶת-כָּל-עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֶת-כָּל-פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל-חַטָּאתָם; וְנָתַן אֹתָם  
עַל-רֹאשׁ הַשְּׂעִיר, וְשָׁלַח בְּיַד-אִישׁ עֵתִי הַמְדַבֵּר

*Aharon will place his two hands on the head of the living goat, and confess upon it the iniquities of the children of Israel. All their misdeeds and sins he will place on the goat's head and he will send by the Timely Man into the wilderness.*

Mishnah Yoma 6:2 details the words of the confession

אָנָּה ה'—עוּ פְשָׁעוֹ וְחַטָּאוֹ לַפְּנֵי עַמְךָ, בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל;  
אָנָּה ה'—כִּפֹּר נָא לְעוֹנוֹת וּלְפְשָׁעִים וּלְחַטָּאִים, שָׁעוּ וּשְׁפָשְׁעוּ וּשְׁחַטְאוּ לַפְּנֵי עַמְךָ, בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל: כְּכַתּוּב בְּתוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה עַבְדְּךָ לְאֹמֹר  
"כִּי בְיוֹם הַזֶּה יִכְפֹּר עֲלֵיכֶם, לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם: מִכּוֹל, חַטָּאוֹתֵיכֶם, לִפְנֵי ה', תִּטְהָרוּ" (ויקרא טז, ל).  
*Please God, Your nation the House of Israel have committed iniquities, misdeeds, and sins before you. Please God, please forgive them for their iniquities, misdeeds, and sins, that Your nation the House of Israel committed before you. As it is written in the Torah of Moshe Your servant "on this very day He will forgive them to purify them from all of their sin. Before God they will be purified" (Vayikra 16:30).*

The two goats must be similar, as if they are one being, despite their disparate paths. They parallel Aharon, his two roles as being burdened with sin while also being the vehicle for repentance. The two are meant to be inexorably intertwined, sinning and repenting. Only he that knows the meaning of iniquity, misdeed, and sin can confess and pray on behalf of Israel to be able, even if momentarily, to attain purity.

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## Can We Handle the Truth on Yom Kippur?

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“You can’t handle the truth!” Jack Nicholson’s famous line from the movie *A Few Good Men* captures the point of Rabbinic stories that describe G-d hurling angelic avatars of Truth out of Heaven so as to allow the creation of human beings. It seems that His democratic court was evenly divided, with Chesed and Tzedek supporting the creation of humanity, while Shalom and Emet opposed – so G-d expelled Emet, leaving a majority in favor.

At least, that is one way of reading the story. Another is as follows: Truth opposed the creation of humanity because “humanity is entirely lies”, in other words because humanity had no access to truth. G-d accepted the argument that human survival required access to truth, and so threw Truth to earth where humans could find it – in other words, he agreed to reveal the Torah.

In this version truth is essential for human existence – we can’t handle the absence of truth.

Talmudic thinkers will recognize immediately that these two readings are not mutually exclusive – perhaps some truth is essential for human existence, but too much is deadly. I want to explore the contours of that accommodation through readings of two traditional Jewish stories, the first the narrative of the Deposition of Rabban Gamliel (Talmud Berakhhot 27b-28a) and the second Sefer Yonah.

A.

After Rabban Gamliel is removed from his nesiut for repeatedly humiliating Rabbi Yehoshua in public so as to preserve his absolute halakhic authority, the new administration immediately overturns his restrictive admissions policy, and the result is an efflorescence of Torah study. This depresses Rabban Gamliel, who wonders whether he has been responsible for constraining the growth of Torah in Israel.

But he then has a dream, in which the new students are symbolically represented as whited sepulchers, as fancy barrels containing nothing but ashes. As the result of this dream, he finds the strength to return to the Beit Midrash as simply a colleague, to accept defeat in halakhic conversations, and finally to apologize to Rabbi Yehoshua. In other words, he does teshuvah.

On the surface, this is a fairly conventional, though beautifully executed, story of an arrogant but essentially good-hearted aristocrat who is taught humility. But it contains an astounding interjection by the narrator – the dream was not true, but rather was sent by G-d so as to ease Rabban Gamliel’s depression! All the subsequent developments – specifically, Rabban Gamliel’s return to the rabbinic conversation, his willingness to accept defeat, and his apology – stem from Rabban Gamliel’s false belief in that dream.

Here G-d preserves Rabban Gamliel for His service by abandoning truth.

B.

Yonah is introduced as “the son of Amittai = my truth”. While it is of course possible that this was simply his father’s name, the Rabbis did not see it that way. Instead, they identified Yonah as the boy resurrected by the prophet Eliyahu, whom they saw as the human embodiment of the value of uncompromising Truth.

Emet is also conspicuous, albeit by its absence, when Yonah explains to G-d his objection to participating in the warning of Nineveh.

*“For I knew that You are a Divinity Who is gracious and merciful, long-tempered and chesed-abundant, Who can be reconciled to evil (alt. “Who changes his mind regarding punishment”).*

Yonah presumably has in mind Exodus 34:6, where Hashem describes Himself to Mosheh as



*“a Divinity Who is gracious and merciful, long-tempered and chesed-abundant and emet”*,

and he deliberately replaces emet with changeability. This is not intended as praise.

Yonah’s resurrection and his mission both center on whether the survival of human beings is compatible with Truth. Eliyahu was willing to let a deadly and devastating comprehensive drought continue until Israel acknowledged and acted on the truth that only the one G-d exists. G-d, however, is unwilling to risk the chance that Israel will refuse, and so be destroyed. Accordingly, he plays on Eliyahu’s one human connection – to Yonah’s mother – so as to compel Eliyahu to ask for mercy at the expense of Truth. Having requested and received mercy, Eliyahu cannot with consistency thwart the Divine desire to save Israel. Accordingly, the trial at Mount Carmel is convened – the people, caught up in Eliyahu’s moment of triumph, slaughter the prophets of Baal and declare Hashem to be the only true divinity – and so it rains. The next day, of course, the people are back as they were.

So Yonah grows up knowing that his very existence undermined Eliyahu’s commitments. Of course he does not wish to be part of yet another such charade. One wonders what he – and Eliyahu - thought each year on Yom Kippur, surrounded by crowds of deeply moved penitents who would be no different tomorrow than they had been yesterday. They saw the Divine willingness to accept teshuvah as a failure to uphold Truth.

Yet Hashem here is not changeable – in each case he seeks out and accepts even ephemeral repentance, even at that means the Eliyahus and Yonahs must leave His service. Perhaps what He keeps trying to teach them is that their job is to bring Truth to Earth rather than to discover where/if it can already be found.

A2.

Rabban Gamliel’s policy was to instruct the Beit Midrash guard that only students whose “insides matched their outsides” could enter. Some of my students imagined the guard as having a mirror to hold up that displayed each applicant’s soul, to see whether it matched their immaculate appearance. The Kotzker Rebbe’s coruscating vorts sometimes play that role in my life.

If we could not recognize that there is a standard of truth toward which we broadly aspire, not even the most ephemeral of repentances would be possible. Without the stories of Eliyahu and Yonah, the Talmudic narrator would not have dared say that the dream was false.

But Rabban Gamliel’s policy was mistaken – like the mirror of Erised, the mirror of Truth About Oneself should not be freely available, perhaps especially at a school.

We are entitled, even encouraged, to think of ourselves as somewhat better than we actually are. Repentance – or at least some kinds of repentance - requires a strong and confident sense of self. G-d k’b’yakhol perjures Himself to permit this, as He does to preserve marital harmony.

This is a lesson that those of us with a particularly critical bent should take to heart. If I looked in the mirror, I suspect I would know this includes me.

May this Yom Kippur, and this year, provide us all with the ideal combination of self-worth and self-knowledge, so that we may collectively achieve the state in which self-worth and self-knowledge are one and the same.

## “So Long” vs “Thanks for All the Fish”: A New Reading of Sefer Yonah and Its Implications for Modern Orthodoxy<sup>3</sup>

September 26, 2009

Imagine a man coming into Times Square looking and smelling like he’s spent considerable time inside a fish. The man climbs onto a soapbox and declaims: “The end is nigh!” How many people would pay any attention to him, let alone people of prominence and power?

Sefer Yonah asks us to believe that the cosmopolitan city of Nineveh reacted to such a declaration by engaging in mass repentance to an almost farcical extent, with the king ordering a fast and citizens dressing even their animals in sackcloth as a sign of mourning. The contrast to the impact of prophets on the Children of Israel is stark. In Israel, prophets with extraordinary literary gifts recited immortal religious poetry in the name of a G-d whom the people believed in, and yet they generally had minimal social impact. The temptation is strong to follow my college Creative Writing instructor in reading Sefer Yonah as a satire on the whole notion of effective hortatory prophecy.

I do not propose, however, to surrender to this temptation. Leaving aside the religious implications of such a reading, it ignores a broad range of textual phenomena. On the same ground I will reject any claim that the narrator merely chose to present the content of Yonah’s speech while radically truncating its form. Rather, I will contend that the brevity of Yonah’s speech to Nineveh needs to be understood in the context of his full-length formal song while inside the fish, and of the high rhetoric he employs in conversation with people and G-d. In other words, we need to understand why Yonah refuses to employ his rhetorical gift when speaking to the people of Nineveh, and perhaps also why he nonetheless – or as a result – inspires their repentance.

Now, Yonah’s refusal to speak well to Nineveh seems likely to be a shadow of his initial refusal to speak to Nineveh at all. Let us therefore turn our attention to that refusal.

### **Yonah’s Refusal to Speak to Nineveh**

Sefer Yonah opens with G-d commanding Yonah to *rise* and *cry* against the great city Nineveh “because its evil has come *up* before me”. Yonah instead *rises* to flee<sup>4</sup> from G-d’s presence. He goes *down* to Yafa, *down* into a ship, *down* to the bowels of the ship, and finally *descends* into trance. Yonah goes down instead of rising to G-d, and so far as we can tell communicates his resignation to G-d exclusively through action.

The beginning of Chapter 3, however, gives a very different picture. “Was this not *my* word while I was still on my land? That is why earlier I fled toward Tarshish, for I knew that You are a G-d gracious and merciful, long to anger and greatly kind, who regrets the bad.” Here Yonah’s flight is presented as following a notification of dissent, as his choice of “my word” over the word of G-d. Why is that notification absent in Chapter 1?

My reading of Chapter 1 is that Yonah’s rationale for flight is not merely left out, but rather deliberately censored (1:8-14)

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<sup>3</sup> The title is a play on So Long and Thanks for all the Fish, the fourth book of five in Douglas Adams of blessed memory’s “increasingly misnamed Hitchhiker’s Trilogy”. The reference in the original is to a message left by dolphins for humanity along with their present of a copy of Planet Earth, the original having been destroyed to make way for an interstellar bypass.

<sup>4</sup> What Yonah expects flight to accomplish is unclear, since his statement in 1:9 that Hashem is G-d of land and sea is presumably not a new discovery. The midrashic claim that he sought to escape prophecy by leaving the Land of Israel is attractive, but does not explain why he needed an ocean voyage, and also does not explain how Yonah and Hashem could converse just outside Nineveh at the close of the book.

*They said to him: “Tell us, please, for what – to whom – this evil is for us; what is your work, and from where will you come? What is your land, and from which nation are you?”*

*He said to them: “I am a Hebrew, and it is Hashem God of the heavens that I fear, Who made the sea and the dry land.:*

*The men were frightened with a great fear; they said to him: “What is this that you have done?” For the men knew that he was fleeing from before Hashem, for he had told them.*

*They said to him: “What will we do to you, and the sea will quiet from upon us?”*

*For the sea was continuing to storm.*

*He said to them: “Pick me up and הטיילני to the sea, and the sea will quiet from upon you, for I know that it is because of me that this great storm is upon you.”*

*The men sought a passage to return to the dry land, but they were not able;*

*for the sea was continuing to storm upon them.*

*They cried to Hashem; they said: “Please, Hashem, let us please not be lost in trade for the soul of this man, and do not place upon us innocent blood,*

*for You, Hashem, as You have wished You have done.”*

Each verse in this section ends with a prepositional phrase beginning “for”. Only the meaning of the first verse, however, is changed by the “for” clause. The “great fear” that initially seems like the sailors’ reaction to Yonah’s powerful religious witness becomes instead a reaction to his disobedience; “What is this that you have done” changes from an inquiry to an accusation. This awkwardness, followed by such a formally beautiful structure, makes us realize that the narrative deliberately interrupts Yonah’s speech to provide the sailors’ reaction to its climax, and then provides the content of that climax anticlimactically.

In other words, the author not only censored Yonah, he wanted readers to notice that Yonah was censored. The interchange with the sailors is thus of a piece with Yonah’s apparent silence at the book’s outset, which we learn in Chapter 3 was not real.

My contention is that both omissions serve to prevent us from focusing on the substance of Yonah’s objection. The central theme of Sefer Yonah is the relationship between G-d and His prophet, not the issue between them.

### **Theme of Sefer Yonah: The Relationship between G-d and His Prophet**

Indeed, without this recognition the plot of the book is a theological travesty. Why does G-d need Yonah to cry against Nineveh? Do not “thousands at His bidding speed and post o’er land and ocean without rest”<sup>5</sup>? Yonah’s unwillingness to serve should have led simply to his dismissal, and the reassignment of Nineveh to a different prophetic portfolio. Instead the heart of Sefer Yonah is G-d’s pursuit of His prophet, which tells us that the book must be about their relationship.

G-d’s pursuit apparently succeeds. Yonah does obey His second call to cry against Nineveh. But here we must return to Chapter 3’s quotation of Yonah as saying, “Was this not my word while I was still on my land?”, which tells us that Yonah’s substantive position has not changed at all<sup>6</sup>. Why, then, does he obey the second call after disobeying the first?<sup>7</sup>

### **Structural Analysis: Centrality of Yonah’s Poem**

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<sup>5</sup> John Milton, “When I Consider How My Light is Spent”

<sup>6</sup> My analysis here grows out of the brilliant analysis of “gap-filling” in Biblical narrative found in Meir Sternberg’s *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, and it is perhaps in order to acknowledge that almost every aspect of my analysis and appreciation of Tanakh is indebted to that work.

<sup>7</sup> It is possible to argue that Yonah has simply been intimidated by the fish, that he was prepared to endure death by drowning for the sake of principle, but not death by drowning or piscine life imprisonment. But this reading seems to me to trivialize both prophet and story, and to eliminate the relationship that makes sense of the narrative structure.

The answer to this question also emerges from a structural analysis. Sefer Yonah is divided into three sections – two units of narrative prose surrounding a unit of poetry. Both units of prose begin with a Divine call. This structure leads us to see the poem as the fulcrum around which the action turns, and suggests that the key to Yonah’s shift must be contained within the poem.

Here a brief excursus on the role of poetry within Biblical narrative will be helpful. Bracketing problems of definition and of history, we can make the general statement that poetic interjections in Biblical narrative never add objective information necessary for plot. What they do instead is give us subjective perspectives on events that have been narrated objectively in prose. For example, the purpose of the Shirat HaYam is to let us understand how Bnei Yisroel experienced the splitting of the sea. It follows, then, that the poem in Sefer Yonah is there to tell us something about Yonah’s perspective on his experiences. When we recall that the narrative earlier contorted itself to avoid giving us Yonah’s perspective, this becomes highly significant.

Let us turn then to the poem (2:1-10)

*Hashem appointed a great fish toward Yonah; Yonah was in the entrails of the fish three days and three nights.*

*Yonah prayed to Hashem his God from the entrails of the fish.*

*He said: I have **cried** from trouble to me toward Hashem; He responded; from the belly of Sheol I pleaded; You heard my voice.*

*You threw me מְצוּלָה in the heart(s) of seas, and a river surrounded me; all Your breakers and waves upon me passed.*

*But I had said: I was chased away from opposite Your eyes; instead I will continue to gaze toward Your Holy sanctuary.*

*Water overlapped me until it endangered my soul, the deep surrounded me; reeds saddled my head. To the ends of hills I descended; the land barred my way for eternity; but You caused my life to ascend from shachat, Hashem my G-d.*

*When my soul went faint on me, It was Hashem that I remembered, and my prayer came to you, to your holy palace,*

*Those who stand watch for meaningless hot air; they will abandon the objects of their chesed.*

*But I, with a sound of gratitude I will sacrifice to you; that which I swore I will repay. Salvation belongs to G-d!”*

A reasonable expectation for the poem in context would be for it to contain descriptions of the claustrophobic insides of the fish and pleas to be removed from it. But it actually contains none of that – rather, it expresses Yonah’s thanks to Hashem for saving him from drowning, and his joy that, contrary to previous fears, he will be able to continue in G-d’s presence. These are strange sentiments for someone who has fled G-d’s presence willingly and apparently chosen death over what would be necessary to return to it.

One more point. Since Yonah, so far as we are told, never prays to leave the fish, why does G-d have the fish vomit him out? Note well that the text nowhere claims that G-d instructed the fish to vomit him out in response to a request from Yonah, but that it is nonetheless clear that the instruction comes only after G-d hears the poem. I argue as follows: If G-d has the fish vomit Yonah out, it must be that Yonah is no longer defying G-d, that G-d knows that Yonah will obey the second Divine call.

If Yonah did not ask to be released – and note the somewhat contemptuous description of him as being regurgitated, in stark contrast to the poem’s lyric of salvation – it follows that just as Yonah previously preferred death to obedience, he still prefers being inside the fish to obedience. But he no longer sees himself justified in disobeying a Divine command. What changes between Chapter 1 and Chapter 3 is not Yonah’s disagreement with the command, but rather his understanding of it as binding.

### **Yonah’s Understanding of Prophecy**

I suggest that Yonah initially conceives of prophecy as an entirely one-way communication, with the prophet's only role being to understand what G-d wants, then salute and obey. He does not see prophets as having any role in choosing or defining their tasks. But Yonah believes strongly that power is not a sufficient basis for obeying G-d, that even ultimate might does not make right. He does not see why fear should lead to worship or service, and he assumes that G-d had no interest in human beings other than to command them. Certainly G-d has no interest in human opinions.

So when Yonah is assigned a mission that he disagrees with, he sees no option other than resignation. He tries to run away from G-d's presence, to end the prophetic relationship, in the hope that G-d will simply let him go. When G-d sends the storm, he understands with equanimity that his resignation has not been accepted, and prepares to die.

But Yonah is a deeply religious man, for whom awe of G-d is a dominant emotion. It is not easy for him to walk away from the core of his identity. His disobedience is the rebellion of the religious zealot rather than of the skeptic or secularist. He disobeys G-d, but only for G-d's sake.

Chazal convey this insight in a brilliant exegetical move by identifying Yonah ben Amitai, son of Truth, as the boy resurrected by Eliyahu<sup>8</sup>. Eliyahu's relationship with G-d is marked by his refusal to tell G-d what He wants to hear, and as the Talmud compellingly reads II Kings, by continual efforts to force His hand<sup>9</sup>. Yonah believes – as does the midrash – that G-d is, *kibiyakhol*, capable of self-deception, that his love of human beings causes Him to overlook their true nature<sup>10</sup>.

So when Yonah is commanded to go to Nineveh, he knows how his mission will likely end. He will give a stirring speech, the people of Nineveh will repent briefly, G-d will repent of punishing them and forgive their past sins, and the whole cycle will start over again. G-d will accept shallow service rooted entirely in fear, but Yonah wants no part of it. It may even be that Yonah has a deeply humanist motive for objecting. He may see G-d's acceptance of shallow repentance as a diminution of human dignity, as a statement that ultimately what we do matters little to Him.<sup>11</sup>

Yonah resigns, not as a gesture of protest, but because he can do nothing else. When the storm comes, he may even welcome the opportunity to die, as the willing service of G-d that had previously justified his life<sup>12</sup> has been ripped away. But then G-d sends the fish.

The fish has two meanings. On the one hand, it tells Yonah that attempted escape is futile, that he cannot die and thereby avoid confronting the paradox of deriving all value from G-d but rejecting G-d's values; the cuneiform symbol for Nineveh was a fish. On the other hand, it tells Yonah that G-d values Yonah's speech. G-d says to him: I will maintain a relationship with you even when we disagree, and I will listen to and consider your opinion; why else would I bother to rescue you from drowning? Disagreement does not lead to execution or even excommunication, but rather to dialogue. So Yonah is given a real option – he can argue with G-d.

Yonah accepts, but he understands what acceptance implies. To engage in a decision process voluntarily initiated by a party that could act unilaterally, and wish that party bound by the outcome, means that one must genuinely accept the outcome of that process. G-d's only motive for listening to human beings, for

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<sup>8</sup> See II Kings 17. Eliyahu had been sent to a widow's house to experience the suffering caused by a famine he had decreed. When he fails to learn the lesson, as the Talmud understands the story, G-d kills the widow's son to force him to trade in the key of rain for that of resurrection. Eliyahu then resurrects the child, and the drought ends.

<sup>9</sup> See my "The Temptation of Normalcy: A Spiritual Psychobiography of Eliyahu HaNavi" on the [www.Torahleadership.org](http://www.Torahleadership.org) website.

<sup>10</sup> Note that Yonah's bitter list of Divine attributes in 4:2 pointedly leaves out "Truth."

<sup>11</sup> In this regard see Rav Dessler on Rabbi Akiva's agonizing martyrdom as evidence that he received the ultimate reward of being allowed to try to live in a world without Divine Mercy, in which all human actions have their just consequences.

<sup>12</sup> Remember that according to the midrash he was saved miraculously while all around him died of drought; Yonah's life requires far more justification than does the average person's.

giving human beings the chance to change His mind, is His desire for their willing obedience.<sup>13</sup> So Yonah recognizes that if he cannot convince G-d, he must obey Him.

So Yonah goes to Nineveh. He does so while still deeply opposed to his mission, and thus this eloquent poet walks into the Assyrian Times Square looking like he's been vomited out of a fish and says, essentially, "Repent for the end is nigh!" Never has a prophet tried harder to fail.

### **Yonah and the Relationship of Modern Orthodox Jews to Halakhah**

I see Yonah as powerfully relevant to an aspect of the relationship many Modern Orthodox Jews have – to varying extents – with Halakhah. We too experience the power and beauty of Torah to the point that we cannot imagine ourselves without it, and yet many of us find particular halakhic rulings deeply troubling, not because they infringe on our own desires, but because they violate our image and experience of a just Divinity.

If Halakhah were a purely heteronomous phenomenon – if the Law were given to us cut and dried to the point where there was no room for human discretion and interpretation<sup>14</sup>, then perhaps we would be justified in rebelling and accepting the consequences. But it was not – G-d gave us an open Torah precisely so we could be partners in its creation, remembering all the while that our task is to fathom and obey His true will. We are eligible for partnership only so long as we obey our best current understanding of His Will, even if we wish it different.

This procedural point is critical not only theologically but to the relationship of *klal Yisroel* to her poskim. If individuals sense that poskim have no interest in their opinions and values, or if sub-communities sense the same about the broad halakhic community<sup>15</sup>, they will – sometimes legitimately – not feel bound by their decisions. It is therefore a particular responsibility for poskim and the halakhic community to listen to the voices of those who feel most disenfranchised. But when our poskim and/or our halakhic community listen and yet disagree, it is our job to obey, even if we have to grit our teeth to do so.<sup>16</sup>

The irony is that sometime mitzvot performed with gritted teeth are the most powerful<sup>17</sup>. Had Yonah walked into Nineveh in full rhetorical flourish, there is no reason to assume that lyric poetry would have been any more effective in Assyria than it was in Israel. Perhaps what overawed and inspired Nineveh was the power of watching someone perform their duty to G-d, of seeing someone genuinely subordinate their will to His<sup>18</sup>.

Nonetheless, this state of moral tension is not an ideal, and likely not long-term sustainable. When Nineveh indeed repents, and G-d as predicted forgives them, it turns out that for Yonah G-d's presence is not enough to overcome his sense of personal violation at having participated in a fraud.

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<sup>13</sup> In other words, G-d chooses to compel participation in a decision process rather than direct obedience to His decisions. Obviously, the process works only if both sides are genuinely open to persuasion. In this article I am not dealing with the philosophic problem of how G-d can change his mind, but simply saying kibiyakhol; I hope to address it in another context, very likely in a discussion of Yirmiyahu.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Masekhet Soferim 16:5

<sup>15</sup> On this see my "The Halakhic Rights of Ideological Minorities" on the [www.Torahleadership.org](http://www.Torahleadership.org) website

<sup>16</sup> My wife notes that my contention that the relationship between Halakhah and community, or Halakhah and halakhically observant individual, is parallel to that between G-d and prophet, depends on the community or individual's acknowledgement that halakhic decisions with which they disagree are nonetheless the voice of G-d. I think this follows ineluctably from an acceptance that the Torah's command of *lo tasur* binds us to a decision process rather than to specific content.

<sup>17</sup> When I served as Rabbinic Adviser to the Orthodox Minyan at Harvard Hillel, some well-meaning zealots would sometimes challenge the sincerity of my community's observance on the grounds of their feminist or other ideological convictions. I generally replied that observance in accordance with one's own opinions and preferences says far less about one's *kabbalat ol mitzvoth* than observance in conflict with them.

<sup>18</sup> My wife comments that she has never seen "Acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven" more deeply expressed than at the circumcision of children whose parents' every autonomous fiber sees the practice as barbaric.

G-d tried repeatedly to make Yonah appreciate His word. He allowed Yonah to board the ship, and then sent the storm, so that Yonah could experience firsthand the foxhole repentance of the sailors, and see that it was not without its genuineness, and that idolaters can have the virtue of resisting murder – however briefly – even at the risk of their own lives. But Yonah’s a priori convictions as to how the world should be run could not be overcome<sup>19</sup>

G-d’s final effort to convince Yonah is peculiar. He causes a vine to grow that shades Yonah from the hot sun outside Nineveh, then kills the vine the next day. When Yonah expresses anger about the death of the vine, G-d argues that His attachment to and investment in the Ninevites is much greater than Yonah’s to the vine, and thus he is compelled or at least entitled to save them. The analogy fails, of course, because the vine has done nothing to deserve destruction.

I mention the weakness of the analogy only to strengthen us against yet another interpretational temptation. Since G-d is given the last word, we might say, perhaps he convinces Yonah, and prophet and Divinity speak amicably ever after. But the last word of the book is not actually the last word of the dialogue.

The close of Chapter 3 tells us that, in the aftermath of Yonah’s declaration to the Ninevites that their end was nigh, a mass repentance on their part convinces G-d to cancel their punishment. At the start of Chapter 4, Yonah conveys to G-d his deep displeasure with this. G-d says in response only “Have you become angry for good reason?” Following this, Yonah leaves the city “until he would see what would be in the city”. But since G-d had already told him that nothing would happen, what was Yonah waiting for?

Possibly Yonah is waiting for to see whether the Ninevites’ emergency repentance will be sustained. Ibn Ezra however, suggests that the narrative is out of order, that the dialogue at the beginning of Chapter 4 takes place *after* Yonah has left the city. The chronological record of the conversation between G-d and Yonah accordingly is as follows.

*Yonah left the city and settled to the east of the city. He made a booth there for himself, and he sat underneath it in the shade, until he would see what would be in the city. Hashem appointed a gourd-vine, and it ascended above Yonah to be a shade over his head to shade him from his ra. Yonah rejoiced over the gourd-vine a great rejoicing. Hashem appointed a worm at the rise of dawn the next day. It struck the gourd-vine and it dried out.*

*When the sun shone, G-d appointed a burning east wind. The sun struck on the head of Yonah and he fainted. He asked his soul to die, and said “My dying is better than my living.”*

*G-d said to Yonah: “Are you angry for good reason about the gourd-vine?”*

*He replied: “I am angry for good reason, to the point of death.”*

*Hashem said: You had pity for the gourd-vine, which you did not labor over or nurture, which came into being overnight and was lost overnight – should I not have pity for Nineveh the great city, which has in it more than 120,000 people who do not know their right from their left, and much cattle?*

*Yonah experienced a great ra (wrongness), and he was very angry.*

*He prayed to Hashem and said: “Please, Hashem – was this not my word while I was still on my earth. That was why I originally fled toward Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and merciful divinity, long to anger and of great lovingkindness, Who changes his mind with regard to ra (causing*

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<sup>19</sup> Here again, the identification of Yonah as the boy resurrected by Eliyahu is powerful. Yonah is the child of mercy, the one chink in Eliyahu’s armor of total devotion to G-d. He might have reacted against Eliyahu and justified all human beings – perhaps that is what G-d is hoping he will become. But instead, this midrash may be arguing, he seeks to outdo Eliyahu’s devotion to strict justice.

*bad things to happen). Now, Hashem, please take my soul from me, for my dying is better than my living.”*

*Hashem said to him: “Are you angry for good reason?”*

This ordering makes clear, as the formal end of the book does not, that Yonah is *never* convinced by G-d. The joy of relating to the Divine is once more insufficient. And so Yonah asks again for death, this time directly at the hands of G-d. The elated “Thanks for all the fish” becomes a dejected request for a final “so long”.

Relationships that address ultimate issues are not panaceas, and profound religiosity can lead to profound depression and frustration. Indeed, suicidal ideation seems almost an occupational hazard of prophecy. As the Rav strikingly declared<sup>20</sup>, the Lord as shepherd Who makes us lie down in green pastures is a fantasy rarely achieved by the deeply religious in this world.

But communities need joy to survive, and Modern Orthodoxy cannot be built on constant moral self-denial. It is true that as subjects of Halakhah, our foremost duty is to find ways to obey even when our opinions are not followed. But as creators of Halakhah, we must work to make sure that every halakhically committed voice is genuinely heard. As stewards of Torah who seek to make halakhah a live option for every Jew, we must understand and acknowledge that obedience can be difficult for reasons other than self-interest, and make every effort to let the voices of our religiously passionate rebels find authentic expression in the practice of our community.

In other words – like Yonah, we must go to Nineveh whether we like it or not. But in *imitatio dei*, we should not ignore those who refuse to come with us. Rather, we should send storms, and fish, and sheltering vines, and miraculous resurrections, and whatever else we have at our disposal to start a genuine conversation with them. If, having listened, we are not convinced, we can be confident that Yonah’s degree of certainty and single-issue identity are rare, and pray that the joy of human and Divine relationship combined will nonetheless inspire them to full participation, as subjects and creators, in the halakhic process.

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<sup>20</sup> *Halakhic Man*, footnote #4.



## The Universal and the Particular in the Book of Yona

by Rivital Singer (MA 2015)

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There's a *machloket* between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua in the *gemara* in *Rosh Hashana* about when the world was created and when redemption will come. Rabbi Eliezer says both dates are in *Tishrei*, but Rabbi Yehuda says they're in *Nissan*. This *machloket* reflects a greater question: Is the universal or the particular more important in Judaism? Which aspect led to Creation, and will ultimately be the source of Redemption?

Passover, which takes place in *Nissan*, represents the national aspect. On Passover we celebrate the start of our particular nation. Non-Jews are not allowed to take part in the Passover ceremonies (although converts may). *Tishrei* (specifically Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur), however, is a universal time. G-d judges the whole world in *Tishrei*, and makes decisions as to how the year will turn out for everyone. When we pray on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, we pray for the whole world, and anyone is welcome to take part in this time of forgiveness.

We also see the universal aspect of *tshuvah* in the story of Yona that we read on Yom Kippur. Yona is asked to help the people of Nineveh, who are not a part of the Jewish people, with the process of repentance/forgiveness. Yona refuses to accept that he has an obligation to non-Jews. He thinks that Jews need to stick together and be a good moral nation, and that we should keep apart from other nations as much as possible. Throughout the story, G-d tries to convince Yona that there is more to Judaism. Our job is not only to have our own society, based on justice and kindness, but that we spread our moral code to the rest of the world. Even though Yona doesn't want to, G-d makes him go through with helping Nineveh achieve repentance and forgiveness.

Amazingly, it doesn't seem that at any point in the story G-d succeeds in convincing Yona. When he's in the stomach of the big fish and he prays to G-d for three days, he never admits to changing his mind. He asks G-d to let him out, he praises G-d and he agrees to go through with G-d's request, but he still thinks that he shouldn't have to go to Nineveh. As he journeys, he continues to question G-d's judgment, and until the very end of the story, he is waiting for G-d to punish the people of Nineveh even though they repented.

Yona, who sees the Jews as a special "chosen people," feels very committed to his nation, and is unwilling to be a part of the universal world. He wants G-d to be the G-d of Pesach, who gives the Jews special treatment and saves us when we're oppressed. With Yom Kippur approaching, this is a good time for us to reflect on these two very important aspects of Judaism. How much should we be focused on making the Jewish community a better place, and keeping ourselves apart from the other nations, and how much should we be trying to be a part of the universal community and affect it, being "a light of the nations"? When asking for forgiveness, are we speaking for ourselves, for our people or for the whole world?

I hope that this Yom Kippur we can find the correct balance between caring about our nation the way Yona did, and caring about the world the way G-d wanted him to.

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