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## **Book of Jonah**

Good Yom Tov.

I'd like to talk with you about the story we read today of Jonah and the whale, or, more truly, Jonah and the really big fish.

In the story, God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and proclaim God's judgment on it. Jonah flees from God's command and boards a ship going elsewhere, causing God to make the sea so wild that it threatens the ship. Jonah confesses to his scared shipmates that God's anger at him is the cause of the storm. He tells them to throw him overboard to calm the waters. God provides a big fish to swallow Jonah. After three days and nights, the fish spews Jonah out, and when God tells him again to go to Nineveh, he goes. Jonah reports to the wicked Ninevites their city is about to end, causing them in turn to repent and act righteously. God sees the Ninevites changing their ways, so he does not enact his punishment. That upsets Jonah because the prophecy – of death – that he had delivered to Nineveh does not come true! God is angry that Jonah values his personal concerns over the lives of 120,000 people...and punishes him again, by giving Jonah a plant for shade but then making it wither and die.

Jonah is so human, isn't he?

He dodges responsibility...protects his reputation...gets smacked by unforeseen consequences...tries to get right with God, and does better...then returns to his self-centered ways.

Jonah is our brother.

Let me tell you how I answered Rabbi Niles's charge, from Erev Rosh Hashanah, that we each perform one act of justice or compassion between that night and this day. No one in this story is thrown overboard into the stormy sea, but I think there's a connection to Jonah nonetheless.

It was midnight this past Saturday when I entered the subway at Penn Station. I was very tired, coming back from a day of traveling, and impatient to just get home, hug and kiss my husband, and burrow into bed for a long night's sleep.

As I approached the turnstile, I saw a trio having difficulty getting their Metrocard to work. It looked like a twenty-something brother and sister had already gone through, leaving their clueless middle-aged mom, visiting from the provinces, behind on the other side.

As I strode up I took this in, sensed a look of pleading from the hapless son despite avoiding his eye, swiped my Metrocard and kept going. Rationalizing madly. The subway hazes us all, I thought, and this was their turn to get hazed, and I just need to get home, et cetera ... but the hardheartedness wasn't sitting too well. A few steps down the platform I stopped in my tracks. Oh! I realized. This is my chance!

Since the rabbi's challenge last week, I had been looking for that lost child, that hungry man, that bewildered stranger, who could use some help – and oddly, I could not find one. Usually, it seems needy people are everywhere. But now: an opportunity for compassion.

I tromped back to the trio, handed my Metrocard across the divide, and said, "You can use mine." If I hadn't been so tired, I would have tried to teach them how it all works...but in this case, just getting Mom through was enough.

They used my card and thanked me with wide eyes. Who knows, it may have made that chilly night feel a little warmer for them.

Now. The reason I mention this is not to boast of the quite small thing I did right, but to reveal the larger thing I did wrong. I deliberately overrode my conscience! ... and I doubt I'm the only person here who has done that. Conscience is not exactly quiet, or vague. It's actually clear as a bell. But we are well able to muffle it, or contradict it...to pretend not to hear, to turn away.

Jonah was a prophet, and the voice he pretended not to hear was that of God. It's understandable: he basically didn't want to tell people that God will do this, if God is going to do that instead. It would make Jonah look bad. That had already happened once between Jonah and God, when Jonah warned the people of Jerusalem of their imminent destruction, but the people repented and God had mercy. That earned Jonah the title of "false prophet" among the Israelites.

So this time, when God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, he hopped a boat and ran straight down into the hold to go to sleep, like a depressed teenager. Jonah is our brother.

And we, what's our reason for doing our best to sleep when our conscience tries to shake us awake? Well ... We don't want to be distracted or slowed down. We already had a plan for this day. We don't like confrontations. We see no personal gain. It's scary. And dirty. And unknown.

It's outside our area of expertise.

So, we keep on working and going to movies and eating out and drinking wine and going to plays and watching TV and reading magazines and talking to our friends and sitting at the computer and decorating and taking classes and going shopping and listening to music and riding our bikes and working out and cooking.

It's comfortable here.

And you know, I think that big fish's stomach was comfortable, too. Smelly, yes....but soft and warm and protected – a womb.

Legend tells us God made the fish at the creation of the world, specifically to harbor Jonah! It was custom-made! It was spacious inside, its eyes were like windows, and it had a diamond that allowed Jonah to see all the way to the bottom of the ocean.

The only reason Jonah finally prayed for deliverance was that another fish swallowed Jonah's fish, and it wasn't so pleasant anymore.

So, what will force us – or allow us – or encourage us – to take a step away from our comfort, these comforts that muffle the call of conscience and distract us from it – to face, full-on, the challenge our conscience poses?

Courage.

It takes courage, and courage is a habit, attainable to us all. It will take courage not to conform, but to resist...the unjust, immoral norms of a conformist society.

A poet of nonconformity, Nelson Algren, noted the "faces of the American Century, so satisfied yet so abject...for complacency struggles strangely there with guilt." Courage is a decision you make to act in a way that works through your own fear, for the greater good, as opposed to pure self-interest. It's a daily decision to wake up and try to do the right thing, no matter how big the reward or how great the fear.

This habit roots most solidly in a foundation of faith. It's no accident that two moral giants of the last century, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., said that faith was essential to their world-changing actions. And the great Jewish teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel, who marched with King, spoke of faith's imperative: "A Jew is asked to take a leap of action rather than a leap of thought. He is asked to do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does."

Put in another, circular way: Following our conscience brings us closer to God, and closeness to God makes us follow our conscience.

Indeed, in his mystical interpretation of the Book of Jonah, the Vilna Gaon, the genius rabbi of Vilna, Lithuania, says that when a person knows he is standing in God's presence, it is impossible for him to conceive of committing a sin. Transgressions occur only when you feel distant from God, deluded into thinking God can be evaded.

This world is God's primary dwelling place, the Vilna Gaon says, and our purpose in life is awesome: to safeguard the palace of the King of kings.

This is heady stuff for many of us secular Jews, so appalled by the destruction wrought in the name of religion that we are hesitant to embrace creation in the same name. But consider this. Our persistent, lonely conscience needs a bolster...a booster, a support and an anchor. Let it be our faith.

So...we go out into this new year drained, hungry, with renewed empathy for those who are always hungry.

Remember Jonah, who ran from God's voice...but then had the courage to admit to his shipmates that the terrible storm was because of him. He found the courage to transmit God's decree to the people of Nineveh despite the possibility that these words would not come true. Jonah is our brother. We can be like him. We can turn back, and listen to our conscience, and follow it.