

Yesterday I spoke of four questions – today I will speak about four texts.

Over the course of Yom Kippur, we read from four different sections of our TNK, our Hebrew Bible. First we read from Deuteronomy and hear the beginning of what some say is Moses' farewell speech to the Israelites. Then we hear of God's anger via the ranting criticism of the prophet Isaiah. This afternoon we will read a list of just a few of our ethical mitzvot, those commandments that teach us how to treat each other. Finally, we will conclude our day's tour of the TNK with the entirety of the Book of Jonah, a strange tale of God, a man, and a fish.

These four pieces of text vary greatly both in chronology, style, and tone of voice:

We have two speeches, one story, and one list of rules.

We are spoken to by God through Moses, God through Isaiah, God God's self, and an anonymous narrator.

One text comes from a point when the Israelites were still learning how to be a people in the desert. A second speaks to a fledgling people, about to enter their homeland for the first time. Our third represents a people who has lost their path, gotten carried away with the ritual and forgotten the reasoning behind that ritual. And the last is a narrative, a fable perhaps, brought to teach the Jewish people something about the nature of man, of God, and of t'shuva.

Looking at these pieces of text, I had to wonder – why these four texts? And why today? Is it possible that these four very different types of TNK text, which all have significant messages to bring when they stand on their own – is it possible that they can come together to present one unified message for us on this Day of Atonement?

Let's take a look at each of the texts.

Our first reading is made up of two specific chunks of Torah portion Nitzavim, near the end of Deuteronomy. If the reading sounded familiar, it should – I chanted it just 12 days ago!

The Reform Movement chose this reading specifically for this day; in most other congregations, the reading revolves not around standing together and receiving the

covenant but instead relays the instructions God gives to Moses and Aaron regarding the procedure for the priestly services on Yom Kippur. The Reform Movement, at least in the 1970's when *Gates of Repentance* was published, wasn't interested in reading a procedure for a temple service in a time without a temple. Perhaps we also took issue with the idea that the high priest alone is able to atone for all the sins of Israel. Most importantly though, Nitzavim makes a compelling statement:

- a) *Atemnitzavimhayomkulchem* - you are all standing here – this is a communal moment
- b) *Lo bashamayim hi* – the law of God is not so far away – stop making excuses, God's law is NEAR – it is in your mouths and in your hearts
- c) *U'vachartabachayim* – Choose life – and be sealed in the Book of Life for another year!

This tri-fold messages is quite an appropriate set for today.

Our second text is similarly appropriate, but in a different way. Isaiah Chapter 58 begins right away with a connection to these Holy Days. In the first verse, God commands Isaiah to “raise your voice like a rams horn!” Call to the people like a shofar – call them out, call them on their transgressions. Call them to repentance.

Isaiah's angry speech via God focuses on the importance of sincere fasting: Going through the motions is not enough – in fact, it is more than not enough; it is WRONG. Doing the required work without the proper intention behind it will not work. The Israelites are not walking the talk. They are performing the action of fasting and then complaining that God is still mad at them.

It reminds me of myself at age five – I used to sit in the backseat of the car and get upset when no one paid attention to me. I would work myself into a tizzy, shed a tear, and then point at that tear and say “Mooom! Look, I'm CWYING!” The Israelites are fasting, they're “cwyng”, but there is nothing behind their fast, there is no repentance; they are not becoming better people and they are not helping other people.

This afternoon we will read from our third text, which comes from the last ten chapters of Leviticus, known as the Holiness Code. The Holiness Code is called such because it contains an overriding theme of God's holiness and our holiness vis-à-vis God's holiness. Again, we have an alternative reading. The traditional reading is from Chapter 18 and presents a long list of forbidden sexual relationships. There is no way of knowing why the early rabbis chose this specific reading for Yom Kippur afternoon, but one interpretation

posits that “the cornerstone of morality is self-control over animal sensuality”.¹ In other words, on the day that we work to ensure our morality in all things, we must start with sexual morality. Perhaps the Reform movement took issue with the Torah’s definition of sexual morality, or perhaps there was just a desire to focus more on ethical mitzvot than physical mitzvot. Either way, the reading in our prayer book and in the prayer books of the Conservative movement as well are from the following chapter, Chapter 19.

In this relatively short reading we find 41-ish commandments (depending on who’s counting), 30 having to do with how to treat one another. Many of these ethical mitzvot are familiar to us, they have permeated society in universal ways and these days they are often thought of simply as “How to be a good person.”

*Love your friends, your companions as yourself; and love also the *strangers* in our midst.

*Leave the corners of your field for those people who have nothing else on which to survive.

*Do not place a stumbling block before the blind

*Rise in the presence of old people

*Judge fairly

*Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor

The form of this text makes it all seem relatively simple: here is a list of how to treat Me (God) and your fellow human beings. But as we all know, loving even your friends – let alone the strangers in your midst – can be quite difficult. And judging fairly always requires a decision, and that decision can be a much harder process than one would think.

Our last text of the days speaks to the difficulty of truly adhering to that list of commandments. Our afternoon haftarah portion comes from the book of Jonah, a story about a man who hides from God, disagrees with God, gets grumpy with God, and yet ultimately, despite his best efforts to the contrary, serves his role as prophet to the people of Ninevah. He has been called the clown of the prophetic world; first he attempts to run away from God (as if you can run from God), then when God causes the seas to boil, Jonah goes down into the hold (hold? Is that the right part of the ship?) for a nap.

His eventual action is an afterthought – “Oh yah, it probably is my God that’s causing all of the trouble...probably best to throw me overboard.” This indeed does solve the fishermen’s weather problem, and God, being merciful – and determined to have Jonah complete his task, has a big fish swallow our haphazard prophet. Three days later, when Jonah is spit up onto the shores of Ninevah, he goes one third of the way into the city,

¹ OU Website on Readings for Yom Kippur

utters one four-word sentence, and the entire city of Ninevah immediately goes into extreme repentance mode.

Jonah may be reluctant, but he sure is effective.

Unfortunately, he doesn't very much approve of God's decision to accept the repentance of the Ninevites, calling God's act "indulgent of evil". He continually puts himself in a position to be angry and frustrated, and does not seem to enjoy his job.

Commentators tend to cite the Ninevites successful repentance as the reason we read the book of Jonah on Yom Kippur. After all, if a non-Jewish city worthy of destruction is able to save themselves by repenting completely, so too will our prayers and repentance reach God. However, I wonder if there is another message here, one that relates more to Jonah's temperament. Perhaps Jonah can teach us about the nature of our roles here on earth – we may not like the task, and we may run from it. We may curl up and take a nap when the storm begins to rage. But just like Jonah, eventually we have to wake up, acknowledge the task, and complete it.

Now that we know what each of these texts is all about, we can connect them. Nitzavim is our pep talk: "You can do this!" Isaiah's finger-wagging says "But don't do it wrong." Leviticus explains "this is HOW to do it," and Jonah teaches us that doing it works, even if you do it badly.

In other words, you're human and that's okay; but it doesn't give you the right to transgress.

In each of these texts, we are held accountable. Leviticus teaches us how to hold ourselves accountable to others, Isaiah's speech gives us an example of how to hold each other accountable, Nitzavim shows us that we must hold our community accountable, and Jonah – well, Jonah's experience reminds us that escape is futile – we will all be held accountable. We count, each of us, especially on this day. **Unetaneh Tokef**, one of the High Holy Day-specific prayers we recited earlier this morning, describes how we pass, one by one, under the staff of God our shepherd. And when God sees each of us individually, all that we have done is accounted for.

Today is the day; we are in the final hours. We have been preparing for a month and ten days, and we will be held accountable.

Now is the time.

Let us hold ourselves accountable, let us hold each other accountable, let us hold our community accountable. But as we do that, let us also remember that these tasks are not easy. Like Jonah, sometimes people need to run away for a little while before they are able to complete the difficult tasks that have been laid out for them. Let us trust that regardless of how far people run, they will always eventually return – just like Jonah.

May your fast be meaningful and your name firmly sealed in the Book of Life.