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ON RESISTING LOVE

The Book of Jonah



Rabbi Ben Bag-Bag encourages us
to keep turning the text. Such
turning promises to reveal an
unexpected fullness: "For everything
is contained therein."

- Pirkei Avoth, 5:26

I keep turning the story in view of our season of creation. Here is a story about an unusual encounter between a big fish and a prophet. God is said to have sent what might have been a whale to rescue Jonah from drowning in the sea. A fascinating conspiracy to make sure that the city of Nineveh hears the call to repentance. A call which, in the end, is not only addressed to the inhabitants of the big city, but to all creatures living in the city. By the king's special decree humans and animals are asked to wear sackcloth and roll themselves in ashes. A moment of magical realism, comical in nature, and yet deeply moving. One does not quite know if one should laugh or cry. I am touched by the writer's vision of solidarity, a bold imagining, humans and animals for once in unison, united in grief and remorse. And I am surprised that this scene has not sparked more artistic or philosophical attention.

We know, for example, that elephants are able to show deep affection to each other and have the capacity to feel and grieve deeply. There are 70 different elephant calls. We know that humpback whales stay in touch through a song that can last between 5 and 30 minutes.



The fact that the song changes over time, but all keep singing the same song, speaks of a profound connection between them. Is the song just a way of locating each other, or is there a greater mystery at work? Those who argue that we will only care for what we love, celebrate those findings as a tremendous gift and inspiration. We now have enough scientific findings that question the divide between “us” and “them” and call for a radical rethinking of our anthropocentric worldview. Elephants and whales become subjects, whose identity is not reduced to what they can be for us. Such affection generates a profound respect. The Latin *respectare* from which the English word derives, indicates a second, fresh look, that resists silencing difference and remains open to a process of unknowing and unlearning. In that sense we should be talking not only about turning texts, but also about turning whales and elephants. It is a turning that evoked a wonderful response after the service: “Robert, you forgot to say that ultimately the natural world would be far better off without us.” In other words, what we need to learn again, is to step aside, to step back, to get out of the way. We do not need to protect and save nature, but nature needs to be protected and saved from us.

I keep turning the story of Jonah. It was a very difficult week in Cape Town. The news had reported horrendous stories of gender based violence and of xenophobic attacks. The “evil” of Nineveh against which Jonah was asked to cry out took on a concrete, urgent meaning. And the protests organized around the city gave prophetic expression to what it means to both cry and cry out. There was a sobering realization: We are Nineveh, and the evil Jonah had to cry out against, included the violence committed against the most vulnerable in our society. But how would Jonah's mission, or rather his resistance to his mission speak to us, who feel rather overwhelmed as the enormity of the crisis dawns on us. What Avivah Zornberg describes as “Jonah's flight” strikes a new chord. Just as Jonah had to arrive at a place of emotional honesty, we too have to gain clarity about our emotional turmoil. At the heart of his emotional journey is the challenge of fully owning the anger about God's love and care for Nineveh. One can only wonder about what Jonah must have witnessed himself, to feel such deep resentment towards the people of Nineveh. It is not enough to

point out that they were regarded Israel's arch enemies. There must have been more in it for Jonah. But we, too, find ourselves on a journey of discovery, learning to be more honest about our reservations towards a God, who keeps reaching out not only to the victims of violence, but also to the perpetrators. Renewed calls for heavier punishments, even capital punishment, reveal despair and rage, a legitimate desire for revenge and retribution. Why plead for restorative justice, when the lives of the victims cannot be restored? Why plead for restorative justice, if the survivors of crime cannot find restoration? Do we need to discover again how outrageous the invitation to repentance is, how unacceptable the possibility of forgiveness can be?

Are we often too quick and glib in offering a second chance, a new beginning, to those who committed cruel and inhumane acts against our fellow human beings? The silence in the story about Jonah's reasons for not wanting to deliver a message of hope and forgiveness is significant.



South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission was hailed as model of national building. But 25 years later, when those asked to forgive have still not been compensated, there is a growing feeling to have been shortchanged. We need to keep turning the text, our world, the pain and despair that can so easily consume or numb us.

Avivah Zornberg's reading of the book of Jonah in *The Murmuring Deep* makes me think of Jonah arriving for a psychoanalytic session. He lies down on the couch, and the first question she asks

him is: "What does your name mean in Hebrew?" "It means 'dove'", he replies, "and indeed, since I received God's calling, my life has turned out to be a constant flight. In fact, I still feel at large. I am a riddle to myself, trapped in a story without resolution." And I hear Zornberg respond with yet another question: "Are you not running away from what you are pursuing. What, if what you fear most, is what you long for most?"

I would like to read the story of Jonah as a symbolic account of an inner journey we all have to embark on. There is a movement in the story that invites identification with the protagonist. The story culminates in a dialogue where God speaks like a therapist, not to persuade, but to enable the integration of a complex landscape of feelings. As interpreters we are always in danger of silencing the text, the plethora of voices calling for our attention. Meanwhile, as Zornberg points out, there is a silence dwelling in every story. In Jonah's case, the silence engulfs Jonah's own inability to articulate his real feelings of anger. Only in the final chapter, in the final verses of the book, does Jonah finally come out with his anger and death wish. He finds his voice, his own voice. He cannot and will not accept that those deemed evil would be given a chance to repent, to show remorse, and be given a second chance. And I wonder, how wounded one has to be, to deny one's "enemy" the possibility of genuine remorse and forgiveness. Can righteous anger not include profound resentment towards God's compassion for all people?

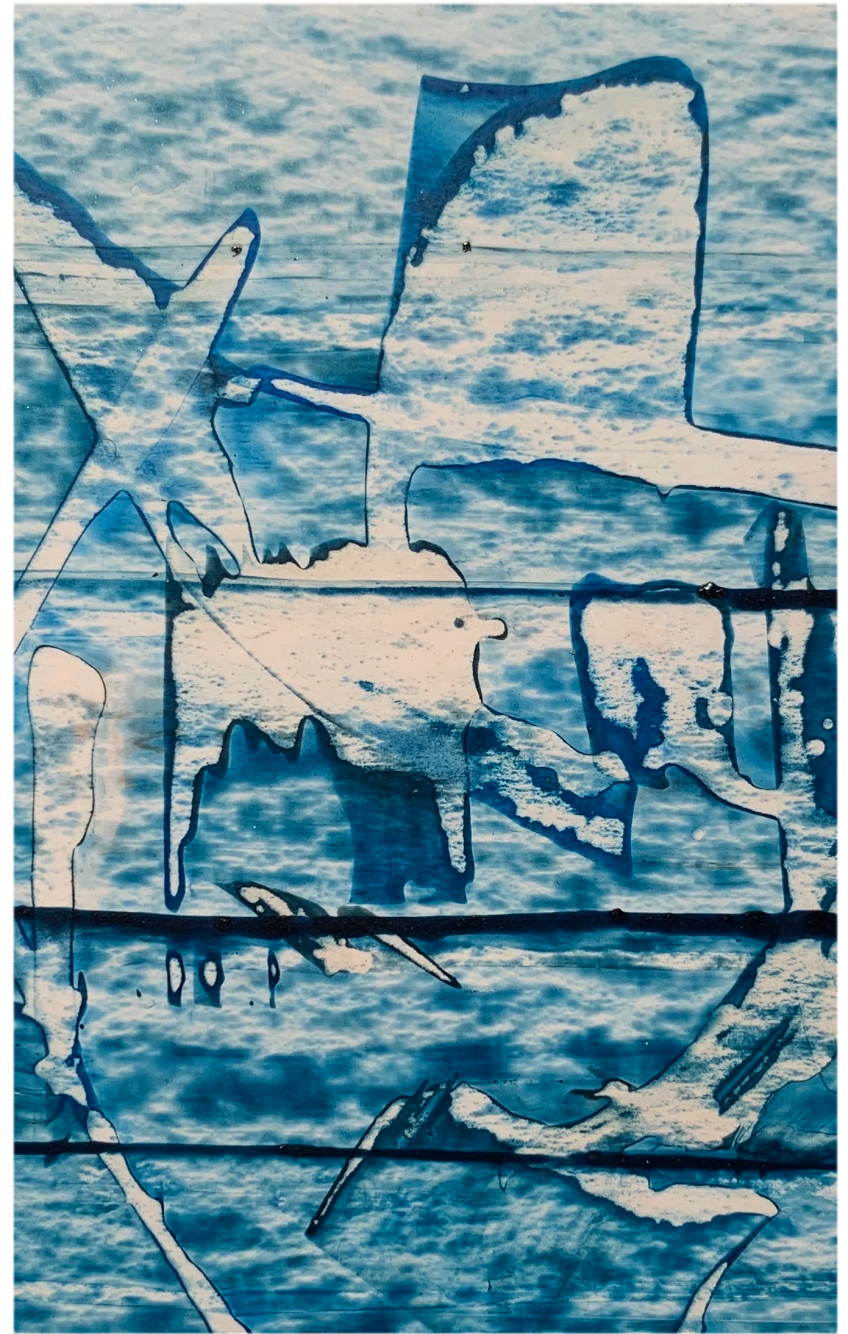
It all began with the divine call to rise up, go and cry out against evil. But what if he would be actually heard? What if his warning would lead to a dramatic turn around? He could not bear the thought. There are things, that cannot and should not be forgiven. Even God's compassion should have a limit. There are lines, that should not be crossed. There is a hurt that cannot be undone. Scars would bleed again. Jonah resists a love that does not discriminate. But his flight to Spain comes to a sudden halt.

And would it not have been for the saving grace of a big fish, his downward movement into the belly of the boat, into a blissful sleep, into a raging storm, and into the depths of the sea would have completed his death wish. What could have become his tomb, becomes more like a womb. Artists have depicted him in a foetal position, waiting with anticipation. Three long days in utter darkness. Three long days before the waters break loose, once again, but this time not to bury him, but to return him to life.

How daring to imagine him in prayer throughout this time. How disappointing to cast his prayer in what would be classified as a typical prayer of thanksgiving. The prayer is in the past tense, removing the words and feelings even further from the actual situation Jonah finds himself in. There is a dissonance, that is difficult to resolve. Did later editors underestimate the state of terror when they inserted this prayer into the story? Does the prayer not offer the attempt of an early resolution and submission that goes against the persistence of Jonah's resistance to the very end of the story? According to Zornberg, though, it does have a place in the narrative if considered as an expression of "emotional plagiarism". It would mean that Jonah's persistent resistance to God's call goes hand in hand with a

form of emotional detachment that comes at a high price: a loss of authenticity. Or, to put it differently: Jonah seems to rather draw on set phrases about past salvations, than boldly step forward and assert a more authentic and honest stance in the present crisis. Zornberg's murmurings are convicting:

The emotional plagiarist is thus one who assumes a false identity substituting what is felt to be someone else's more authentic experience for one's own fragmented sense of self. In this sense, Jonah uses borrowed words to express a classic stance of gratitude, instead of speaking, or crying, out of his own unresolved situation of terror. The fear of his own blankness aborts his voice.



It is only after Nineveh's repentance and God's pardon, that the reader is confronted with the full truth of Jonah's rebellion. For the first time we hear about his anger, and that in Jonah's eyes Nineveh's change of heart and God's forgiveness is as evil as the original evil that gave rise to God's call in his life (Jonah 4:1). It is followed by Jonah's honest confession. Now, finally, he musters the courage to speak with his own voice:

That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I knew that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in loving-kindness, renouncing evil. (Jonah 4:2)

He finally admits that all along to him death has been better than life: "Take away my life, better to die than to live." Let us pause here for a moment. Strong feelings are expressed by Jonah. There are times when death is easier to bear than life. In this instance, it is about the difficulty of remaining a faithful witness to God's love. God's compassion for others is experienced as an imposition, an unreasonable demand, exceeding one's own capacity of reconciliation. But what a gift

to our faith tradition. Here is someone longing to rather die than be part of God's vision of shalom. And Jonah's resistance and the way God responds to it pastorally authorizes a greater honesty with our own feelings of anger and resentment, which all too often are quickly silenced by the expectation "to forgive, as you have been forgiven."

A moving dialogue between God and Jonah ensues. Zornberg's translation of the Hebrew avoids the moralistic overtones of many of the standard bible translations. God does not ask, "Is it right for you to be angry?" God rather wonders: "Are you thoroughly angry?" This is repeated after the parabolic intermezzo of the growing and dying plant and Jonah's second declaration that death would be better than life. Twice God challenges Jonah to acknowledge his huge anger. But only the second time round does Jonah speak his truth: "I am so angry. I wish I was dead." (Jonah 4:9)

This kind of confession can only find a home with a God who does not judge us for our unwillingness to become an instrument of forgiveness. This kind of confession can only be elicited and aired in a religion that does not blackmail us into striving for reconciliation. What is driven by fear will sooner or later backfire. But genuine feelings of compassion need time and a counterpart who is a sounding board and not a threshing floor.

Jonah remains a resistant instrument of God's grace. He delivers the bare minimum, far from an impassioned speech: "Forty more days and Nineveh will

be overthrown." No guarantees are given that their repentance will be rewarded. But the "perhaps" is enough for the emperor to issue a radical decree. And Nineveh's enormous response stands in stark contrast to the rather dire prophetic "crying out." But sometimes that is all that is needed: To step aside and let God's grace take its course. It is not even important that our heart is in it. We can be quite honest about it: I cannot forgive you, but God can. And that must be good enough for now. And it was good enough for Nineveh. And it was good enough for God.



The book ends with another striking contrast. While Jonah seems to insist on his right to be angry and unforgiving, God appears even more generous and accepting. A deep affection for all of humankind is revealed. And now it seems to be no longer conditional to Nineveh's remorse and repentance:

And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals? (Jonah 4:11)

This is how the book ends. It does not lead to any resolution for Jonah. It must have rather intensified the rawness of his own feelings and woundedness. God seems to take Nineveh's side. He is moved by what is portrayed as

Nineveh's childlike ignorance. It powerfully anticipates Jesus's words from the cross, that speak of the same affection and generosity: "Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34) Words, that keep unsettling our anger and resistance. The turning does not end, and at times it is spinning out of control, dizzying and frazzling.

Sources: My realization and interpretation of Jonah's persistent anger is based on Avivah Zornberg's reading of the book of Jonah (in: *The Murmuring Deep*). Also her choices of translation have opened up a less moralizing understanding of the final dialogue between God and Jonah.

