

These have been an awfully difficult few months. My memory may be short, but I can't recall a period so marked by brokenness. These have been months of violence of many sorts, across the globe in Israel and Syria and Iraq, and as close as down my own street in Skokie. Months that cracked open and spewed out hatreds that seemed to have been covered over for a time. Now they are out lying out in the open, raw and dangerous and deeply unsettling.

This past summer, I was especially grateful for our family's annual two weeks up at Ramah. It is a magical place in any year, but this summer, particularly, it was an enveloping refuge from the painful noise of the outside world. We could live a seamless and unapologetic Jewish life there, praying, singing, speaking in Hebrew, exploring new activities and building new friendships. It was a welcome salve. Then, not long after we arrived, the boys' bodies were found, and although camp works to keep the events of the outside world at bay, they knew that this horrific turn demanded some kind of response – with Jews and Israelis sharing this small world, it couldn't go unrecognized. So the Israeli staff planned a memorial ceremony where the boys' lives were celebrated and their deaths were held onto and spoken about. It was moving and important, yet also jarring and very discomfiting. Not only because of the pain of the loss of these boys, but also because the response of this ceremony permitted the outside world to intrude onto our idyllic cocoon. It pierced our shelter from the storm swirling just beyond our gates.

As we drove home from our two weeks and our cell phones reclaimed their connectivity and emails and news bulletins began, once again, streaming into our lives, my instinct was to run back to camp, to retreat to that haven, to ignore the storms and pull back from it all. With the articles, blog posts, commentaries, new reads and new takes on the rapidly changing situation bombarding us hourly, I kept wondering: how am I supposed to respond? How do I respond to this pain, this tumult, these threats, this cacophony of emotions, opinions, photos and words? Must I respond?

Vayikra gives us the most well-known command associated with this day - “veinitem et nafshoteichem.” Commonly translated as “and you shall afflict your souls” this verse calls to mind all of the particular examples of self-denial that are part of our experience of this day – no food or water, no bathing, no leather, no sexual relations. I have always understood these as possible pathways towards purity and clarification, but this idea of “afflicting my soul”, to be honest, remains a difficult idea for me to embrace.

Several months ago, I came across a striking teaching from Orach Le’Chayim, a 19th century Hasidic text, that reimagined this command. In this text, Rabbi Avraham Hayyim of Zloczow comments on the custom of Yom Kippur to recite the second line of the Shema – baruch shem kvod malchuto le’olam va’ed - aloud, when it is usually said in a hushed whisper. Rabbi Hayyim of Zloczow suggests that this practice is a reflection of the central command of YK – ve’initem et nafshoteichem – but that instead of reading this pasuk as “veinitem ” it should be read “**ve’anitem et nafshoteichem**” – literally “and you should respond with your souls.” This is striking and radical. Rather than viewing this command as focusing on self-denial and abstention, he completely reorients us. **Respond with your souls. The instruction today is to make our souls responsive.**

But how do we do that, truly – respond with our souls? If we view the central invocation of YK as a call to respond, how does that reshape our understanding of what we’re doing here today?

With these questions in mind, I want to look to Jonah, the book that we will read this afternoon. We all know the basic story – God calling out to Jonah to rise up and prophesy to the people of Nineveh to urge them to repent from their wrongdoings.

But who was Jonah? Midrashic sources connect our Jonah ben Ammitai with a Jonah that is found in the book of Kings. In that story, Jonah is a young boy, the son of the widow of Zarephat. Impoverished and alone, she nevertheless welcomes Eliyahu

when he shows up at her door, and feeds him. Her son - Jonah - then suddenly dies, and because of the widow's kindness to Eliyahu, she merits his miraculous intervention - Eliyahu resurrects Jonah from the dead. So our Jonah of YK - our midrashic tradition tells us - is the adult survivor of childhood death and resurrection - some pretty heavy baggage to carry through life.

The traditional reading of this text shows us God calling to Jonah and telling him to rise up and cry out, and Jonah responds in an audacious way - he doesn't. He ignores the call and flees, tries to hide from God by doing the opposite of rising up - he descends, runs away, finds a ship and hunkers down below. He is desperate to escape the call. He evades all response - similar to my own instinct these days.

Avivah Zornberg says that "to flee from God is to refuse to stand between death and life; it is to refuse to cry out from that standing place."

And Jonah's fleeing, in Zornberg's reading, is a remnant of his experience with death and rebirth as a child, as she says that both his sudden death and sudden revival are equally traumatic. Both inflict the shock of incomprehensibility; both testify to the impossibility of living."

Zornberg argues that after undergoing that trauma, Jonah could not engage with life and interact with the world in the same way. It left its scar. He came face to face with the randomness and unpredictability and fragility of the world in which we live, and he could not respond. He could not stand. He could do nothing but run away.

So Jonah flees and escapes aboard a ship. God sends a storm to follow him, the sailors throw him overboard in an effort to quell the storm, and God then sends a large fish to swallow him whole.

The classic interpretations of this traditional reading of the story and its connection to YK are known, but I think that there is something more interesting at play here.

Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, an 8th century midrashic work, presents a fascinating picture of this narrative; it is a provocative reading that can shed more light on this question – how do we respond to the noise and the pain and the impossibility of living?

Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer rereads the story as one depicting Jonah's fulfillment of his own preordained mission, rather than as a tale describing his evasion of God's call. The midrash tells us that this big fish was created on the fifth day of creation explicitly for this very purpose – the swallowing of Jonah. God sent this large fish to swallow Jonah in order to guide him in a messianic mission. Much of this section of midrash is dense and enigmatic – and not appropriate for full analysis here –but one section is illuminating.

The text describes Jonah's entrance into the fish:

“Jonah entered its mouth like a man entering a great synagogue and stood. The eyes of the fish were like windows which shone with light and he could see all that there was to see...Rabbi Meir said: there was a pearl which hung from within the belly of the fish that lit up all that was in the seas and in the underworld...”

When Jonah entered this enormous fish, it was as if he was entering a great synagogue. The cavernous space became a refuge for him, a place of awe, stillness, a place that allowed for reflection and transformation.

And there was this light inside, so says Rabbi Meir – the midrash goes on to tell us that it was the original light of creation. And in many texts, from Tanach and midrash, this light is identified as THE light. This was the light that enabled Adam to see from one end of the earth to the other. This was the light that illuminated Noah's ark for the duration of the flood. This was the light, mentioned in Ezekiel, that emanated from the crystal beneath God's kishah ha'kavod. It is the light that was created during the Creation of the world and is meant to remain hidden, buried, until the end of days. It is a light reserved for the righteous – Or zarua la'tzadik. And this was the light that Jonah saw, while sheltering within the fish.

DW Winnicott, an English psychoanalyst, offers an important insight, both for our understanding of Jonah and our struggle to live in this world:

He says: “Although healthy persons communicate and enjoy communicating, the other fact is equally true - that each individual is an isolate, permanently non-communicating, permanently unknown, in fact, unfound...At the center of each person is an incommunicado element, and this is sacred and most worthy of preservation.”

Our common assumption is that we find resolution and peace through talking and engaging with others, but Winnicott argues that actually, acknowledgement and acceptance of those incommunicado elements of ourselves – those parts that cannot be shared, cannot be spoken, cannot be blogged about or dialogued or debated aloud – those are sacred and must be protected.

And I think that we can read Jonah’s sojourn in the fish in this light. Perhaps it is not a cowardly escape from the call of God. Perhaps it is his attempt to reclaim that space of quiet and non-response – a space that is illuminated by this powerful, primordial light, a space that is likened to a synagogue.

After this experience in the bowels of the fish, what, then, does Jonah do? He prays directly to God. And it’s an outpouring of raw emotion, fear and gratitude. In his prayer, he talks about being encompassed, wrapped by water and reeds, deep below the surface, a kind of entombment. It is only after this period of deep retreat, that God pulls him back, and Jonah finds the ability to respond, to pray.

On this day of YK, when we are looking to “respond with our souls”, we can draw guidance from Jonah – a man who endured trauma, who encountered demands upon himself and who sought to respond to the call he heard by first *not responding*. While Yonah is inside the fish, he enters a separate realm, outside of the natural world, and here he finds this light that transcends time and space - a light that

connects him backwards and forwards, both to his deepest origins and ultimate future of the world. He glimpses beyond time - he steps outside of it - in order to discover prayer and his ability to respond. This process of hearing the call, retreating, experiencing solitude and distance from ordinary life, that is what allowed him to find the words and strength to answer.

Jonah offers an argument for the embrace of interiorization.

I am not advocating for a withdrawal from the world and its brokenness. But in this midrashic reading, I find a model for the careful movement from intentional interiorization towards reentry and reengagement with the outside world and its demands on us. And there are very serious demands for sure— demands to respond and to act and to dialogue that can't and shouldn't be evaded. As human beings and as Jews, we must respond and take action in clear and strong ways when we are called. There are local, communal issues and global concerns; there are issues that demand our action as Jews and those that obligate us because we are human.

But I feel that, these days, we may have lost that middle place between call and response –that space of quiet and focused interiority. And Jonah teaches us that that sheltering is not an embarrassing escape. It is a necessary sojourn. This interior can be a personal interior or a communal interior – the interior of a community or of our synagogue life here. And during this retreat, we can draw peace and stability from that inner light that is both within us and much larger than us. Judaism gives us tools to bridge the interior and the exterior: prayer, niggunim, piyyutim, meditation, movement, Torah study, art and other such pathways. These all hold the potential to transform our chaotic world from painful noise into intentional forms of response.

Jonah's call was to serve as a prophet for others on God's behalf. The calls that we each hear may be as booming or not much louder than a whisper of a loved one or friend in need. They may be mundane demands of the everyday, they may be conflicts in our relationships with others, or deep questions and challenges that

hinder us, plague us, and prevent us from finding a sense of resolution and wisdom and peace.

Today, may we trust in our ability and need to look inwards, find that refuge and quiet and light, to uncover that nekudah pnimit, and discover the capacity to respond with honesty and integrity to our souls.