

Had 33 miners been trapped alive a mile beneath the surface in a mine collapse somewhere in West Virginia, our news networks would be devoting themselves 24-7 to updates, interviews with relatives, experts, and officials, and an overload of information about them. I guess the fact that this is happening in Northern Chile means that we will be spared the unrelenting coverage, but it is a very compelling story.

When I heard about the story, I tried to imagine what went through the miners' heads during the first two weeks after the collapse, cut off from the world. How did they feel, having only two bites of tuna to eat and a half a glass a milk to drink every 48 hours. What was it like, hearing the drills going through the rock around them, missing them 7 times, until the 8th attempt broke through into the tunnel in which they were living. I imagine that they alternated between hope and despair until that moment when one of them was able to attach a scrawled note to the drill bit to be carried up to the surface, the first confirmation that the men were alive.

What goes through your head now when you find out that you are going to be rescued, but not for another four months? When your only connection to the surface is first one, ultimately three, 6 inch boreholes, through which all food, water, oxygen, other supplies, and communications must flow? How do you distinguish one day from another? How do you mark time? What do you do to make the time pass? The Chilean government actually consulted NASA for help on how to maintain physical and mental fitness in a closed environment for such a long period of time.

When I heard about the miners trapped in Chile, it wasn't long before I connected that story to the book of Jonah. They, like he, had descended to some great depth and were trapped there without knowing for exactly how long. I know that first of all, the story of Jonah is a metaphor, a religious lesson, not a historically true account. I also know that in the story, Jonah is swallowed by a great fish, not a whale. But the six inch borehole reminded me of the blowhole of a whale, the living room size space in which they are confined is the size of the inside of a whale, and I imagine that there were and are a lot of prayers being generated by the trapped miners.

The book of Jonah is our Haftarah for Yom Kippur afternoon. It is a perfect story to read as our 10 days of repentance draw to a close. The book of Jonah describes Jonah's three day sojourn in the belly of the fish as a spiritual experience. He literally hit bottom. After going down from Jerusalem to Jaffa, he boarded a vessel and went down into the hold where he fell - again, a verb with a downwards motion - into a deep sleep. Finally, he told the sailors to throw him down into the sea. He hit the bottom of the sea and then, with no where else to go, he was swallowed by the fish.

Jonah's prayer, a short and compelling piece of poetry, tells us what happened after the sailors throw him overboard:

“In my trouble I called to Adonai and God answered me; From the belly of Sheol I cried out,
And You heard my voice.”

Jonah first called out when he was in the belly of Sheol, the underworld. I understand this as being in the water, before he was swallowed. He moved from the belly of Sheol to the belly of the fish, God's presence. This is a description of his state of mind as he is sinking into the sea before he was swallowed by the fish:

“You cast me into the depths, Into the heart of the sea, the floods engulfed me; all Your breakers and billows swept over me. I thought I was driven away out of Your sight: Would I ever gaze again upon Your holy Temple? The waters closed in over me, the deep engulfed me. Weeds twined around my head. I sank to the base of the mountains; The bars of the earth closed upon me forever.”

What drama! Can't you just hear the voices of the Chilean miners after the collapse, a mile beneath the surface of the earth? Job continues:

Yet You brought my life up from the pit, Adonai my God! When my life was ebbing away, I called Adonai to mind; and my prayer came before You, into Your holy Temple. They who cling to empty folly forsake their own welfare, but I, with loud thanksgiving, will sacrifice to You; What I have vowed I will perform. Deliverance is the LORD's!" (Jonah 2.3–10 JPS)

Can you hear the voices of the miners when that drill bit found their tunnel? They were still trapped, but must have felt like they had just been saved. The Midrash Pirke Rabbi Eliezer imagines that Jonah could look through the eyes of the fish. He saw the foundation of the world, the foundation stone of the Temple, and the underside of the rock on which the Ark rests, and on which Abraham took Isaac for sacrifice.

The Midrash reflects the irony that while in the belly of the fish he has greater vision and insight into the functioning of the world than he had when he was in Jerusalem hearing God's voice. Therefore it is precisely at that moment that he finds himself able to pray. His thanksgiving comes when he is still inside the fish.

The fish spits him out on dry land, and the story begins again. He gets a second chance to do it right. He does what he is told, but with as little enthusiasm as he can generate. Yet, it is enough.

The king of Nineve calls for a fast, and the people repent. It's an amazing scene. As unenthusiastically as Jonah called them to repent, they responded with 10 times the enthusiasm. You have to wonder - who is this king with such incredible power over their lives? It cannot be that their belief in God was so strong, or they would not have found themselves in such straits to begin with. The classical rabbis were puzzled. How could any earthly king engender such devotion? Why would any human king bow so quickly to an outsider's authority?

For the rabbis, a wonderfully imaginative midrash solves the problem. A midrash posits that after Pharaoh alone escaped from the Reed Sea, alone and desolate, he left Egypt and wandered, eventually winding up in Nineve. He rose to become the King of that evil city, winding up exactly what he had been in Egypt. When Jonah came, however, Pharaoh recognized that history was repeating itself - and that he had a chance to take a different path this time. It's a wonderful story, one of my favorite midrashim, about the possibility of redemption.

On the other side of the tale, at the end of the story Jonah should be happy. The story should conclude with Jonah going back home secure in the knowledge that he had done God's will, and saved an entire city. However, this is not the case. Jonah is angry that God didn't destroy the city, just as he knew would happen. That's why he didn't want to go in the first place. He thinks God is a knee jerk liberal marshmallow, unable to mete out proper punishment when deserved. The book ends with him sulking under a shady plant that has just withered and died, giving him even more reason to be angry. The book ends with God reprimanding him for being more concerned about a silly little plant than the lives of tens of thousands of animals and human

being who live in Nineve.

So here is my list of lessons we can learn from the book of Jonah.

First, we learn that **being a religious person means doing what you need to do rather than what you want to do. It means finding your destiny and following it.** We learn this as Jonah does his best to escape his destiny. Not that the path that God had chosen for him was easy. It was simply what Jonah had to do. Nothing else in his life would work right unless he went where he was supposed to go. Much of what we go through in our lives is not easy - some of it is explicitly the result of our choices, sometimes we find ourselves in difficult situations that we didn't intend, but are the result of decisions we have made; and sometimes we find ourselves suffering through painful situations that are entirely not of our own making. It doesn't matter. Being a religious person means that we do what we need to do. It may be keeping to a practice of consistently observing Shabbat every week, or sticking to a diet guided by kashrut, or coming to minyan regularly, or behaving according to strict ethical norms, even when such behavior is inconvenient.

Next, we learn from Jonah that **we usually don't recognize God's voice when it speaks to us; or perhaps we do recognize it, but our first instinct is to deny it and run in the opposite direction.** Our world is loud and immediate. Too often, we respond, we hit the send button, before we have deeply considered what we are doing. The background noise of our lives makes it difficult to hear the *kol d'mama daka*, the still small voice of God. It may also be the voice of our conscience, urging us to take the difficult or painful path against our self interest. If we listen, though, we will do what Zach Nash did.

Zach, a 14 year old boy from Wisconsin voluntarily disqualified himself and gave up a Wisconsin Junior PGA medal last month. He had won the tournament, left the golf course, and was showing his medal around at a different golf club when one of his mentors noticed that he had an extra club in his bag. It belonged to a friend of his who had forgotten the club at his house. Without thinking, he had added it to his golf bag. When he played the tournament, he had one too many clubs, which should have resulted in a penalty on his scorecard. When he signed the scorecard at the end of the tournament, he had signed an incorrect scorecard, which should have resulted in disqualification. That night, Zach called the tournament director and disqualified himself. This is what it means to be a religious person who does what he is obligated to do by the rules of ethics.

Next, we learn from Jonah that **we should give thanks even when we find ourselves in a precarious situation.** Hillel said, "Don't say, 'When I have free time I will study Torah,' because you may never have free time." (Avot 2:5) Our lives are a roller coaster, careening up and down and from side to side. We don't often get a chance to prepare for the next big thing life is going to throw at us. Even if we're still in the belly of the fish, as it were, we can still take a moment to be grateful that we have moved past yesterday's crisis.

Jonah teaches us to **give others second chances.** God gives Jonah a second chance. Shouldn't you do the same? Jonah didn't exactly repent willingly. Shouldn't you give those who have wronged you a second, or third, or umpteenth chance? I'm not suggesting that you let someone hurt you, over and over again. But maybe it is worthwhile to periodically try to restore the relationship with the sibling, the parent, the child, or the friend from whom we have been

disconnected.

Jonah teaches us that **sometimes, what you do is more important than how you do it.** Sometimes we wait for the perfect moment to reconcile. We rehearse the perfect words. The moment might not come. You might mess up the words. It doesn't matter. Part of teshuvah is making ourselves vulnerable, to open up the possibility of restoration.

The book of Jonah teaches that **as long as you live, it is always possible to do teshuvah.** Rabbi Eliezer teaches, "Repent one day before you die." (Avot 2:15) It is never too late. On the other hand, since the knowledge of the moment of our death is hidden from us, it is also never too early.

The final lesson that we learn from Jonah is that **some people choose to never change.** This is Jonah. For him, the book is a tragedy. We all know people who are stuck in negative pathways. Please, don't be one of them; but have compassion when you come across someone who appears to be.

Just as we are thankful that we can celebrate Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in the midst of our community, we pray that the miners are able to celebrate Christmas and New Year reunited with their families, friends, and loved ones. May we - and they - be written and sealed into the book of life, health, prosperity, and happiness in the year 5771. Amen.