

Here we are in the home stretch of Yom Kippur. After nearly a full day of praying, of reflecting, of introspecting we have just a little more time for the transformative work we have been doing together.

And what do we do with that time?

We read a story about a giant whale that swallows Jonah after he tries to avoid delivering God's message to the people of Ninveh. It's a powerful story with great imagery. I have loved it ever since I was a kid. But of all the things we could be reading now, why is this the one the ancient rabbis picked? Wouldn't it have made more sense to read one of the countless stories in which God forgives the Israelites for their shortcomings?

There are two classical explanations for why we read this story.

The first is that the story reminds us that there is no fleeing from God, from confronting the things we don't want to. Jonah tries to run away from God, but he is caught. The message is that in these last few hours of Yom Kippur we want to emphasize that we too cannot hide.

But is that really what we need to be hearing now? Who in this room is even trying to escape? We're here, despite being tired, and hungry, and maybe even a little bored, precisely because we are here to confront things we don't the rest of the year.

I like the second classical explanation for why we read Jonah a bit more. It says that we read the story because it tells us how everyone gets a second chance. In the story, the people of Ninveh have angered God. Jonah eventually delivers the message that they should repent. And they do. God then forgives them. The lesson is that we too are worthy of being forgiven once we work hard at making amends.

It's a nice explanation, but it just doesn't fit that well with the arc of the story. The people of Ninveh play barely a supporting role in the book of Jonah. The focus, not surprisingly, is on Jonah. Even more, the story doesn't end after the people of Ninveh repent and God forgives them. It continues for a whole other chapter.

It is in that fourth and final chapter that I think we can find the real lesson of Jonah.

After the people of Ninveh repent, Jonah vents his deep frustration at God: Why did you forgive them? They are such terrible people? This is exactly why I tried to run away from this mission in the first place!

God doesn't tell Jonah that he should be quiet. Or even that his anger is unacceptable. Instead, God asks Jonah the same simple, but piercing question two times: Is your anger good for you?

The implied answer is obvious. Jonah's anger is not good for him at all. Letting go of it -- letting go of the very anger that led Jonah to run away in the first place -- is precisely what the story is all about. It is where the story begins and it is where the story ends.

So if the story is about letting go of anger. Why is that a message we need to hear now?

Yom Kippur is all about making amends. We forgive those who have hurt us. We ask for forgiveness from those we have hurt. And we also forgive ourselves for not being the people we wished we had been.

By this point of the day, we have hopefully done all of that already. The work that is left for

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us to do is to try to make sure that we don't repeat the same mistakes in the future. And the thing that causes us to make more painful mistakes than anything else is our anger.

It is when we are angry that we lash out against others. It is when we are angry that we have the hardest time forgiving. It is when we are angry that we approach the world as a place of despair and resentment rather than hope.

Jonah comes to teach us that now is the time to let go of our anger. It has served its purpose. It has motivated us to action. But now is the time to let go.

We may still have hurt feelings. We may continue to feel sad. Not all wounds will heal on this holiday.

But we have the choice of staying angry about those painful feelings or letting the anger subside.

As the sun moves its way across the sky to rest for the night, may we let our anger rest with it. May the transformative work we have done here together help us let go not only of the things we are not proud of, but also of the anger that led us there.