

Contents

Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	xv
Note to Readers	xix
<hr/>	
1 Our Names and Identities: Who Are We?	1
<hr/>	
2 Understanding the Other: Who Are They?	5
<hr/>	
3 Coming to Terms with Violence: What Is Evil?	10
<hr/>	
4 Appreciating Context: What Makes Jonah Run?	15
<hr/>	
5 Descent and Salvation: How Low Can You Go?	20
<hr/>	
6 Overcoming Uncertainty: How Should I Act?	24
<hr/>	
7 Redirecting Lives: Which Way Does the Wind Blow?	29
<hr/>	
8 Our Faith and Theirs: How Do We View Other Religions?	33
<hr/>	
9 Overcoming Despair: Why Does He Sleep So Deeply?	38
<hr/>	
10 Fate and Free Will: What Path Will We Follow?	42
<hr/>	
11 What We Really Know: Does Knowledge Lead to Virtue?	46
<hr/>	
12 I Am a Jew: How Do We Describe Our Identity?	50
<hr/>	
13 Narrative Imagery: How Can We Understand Our Story?	54
<hr/>	
14 Fear and Awe: What Makes Us Tremble?	57
<hr/>	
15 Troubled Waters: How Can We Calm the Sea?	61
<hr/>	
16 The Winning Team: What Do We Need from Other People?	66
<hr/>	
17 The Giants Win the Pennant: How Can We Differentiate between the Possible and the Impossible?	70

18	The Buck Stops Here: Can We Accept Responsibility?	74
19	The Scientific Method: How Can We Solve Our Problems One Step at a Time?	79
20	Human Kindness: How Can We Serve God through Simple Acts?	83
21	A Rickety Ladder: How Do We Understand the Suffering of the Innocent?	88
22	Telling Our Story: What Swallowed Jonah, a Fish or a Whale?	93
23	Nothing Left to Lose: When Do We Turn to God?	97
24	Happy Thanksgiving: Why Should We Care about Other People?	101
25	Strong Waves and Big Rocks: What Overwhelms Us?	105
26	I Once Was Lost, but Now I'm Found: How Can We Grow?	109
27	Feeling Trapped: Is There a Way Out?	112
28	Recovering from a Perfect Storm: From Where Does Our Hope Come?	116
29	Seeking Community: How Can We Overcome Isolation?	121
30	Don't Look Back: How Can We Avoid the Traps of the Past?	125
31	The Power of the Public Pledge: Which Promises Will We Keep?	130
32	The Hands of God: How Can We Experience the Presence of the Divine?	134
33	Genuine Forgiveness: Who Deserves a Second Chance?	138
34	Good Guys and Bad Guys: When Can We Accept the Other?	143
35	<i>Hineini</i> : How Do We Respond When Called?	147
36	The Freedom to Choose: Can We Respond to a Warning?	151

37	Who, What, Why, and When: Can We Ask the Probing Questions?	155
38	Letting the Current Carry Me: How Do We Respond to Reality?	159
39	Telling Tall Tales: How Do We Sort Out the Truth?	163
40	Controlling Our Inclinations: Can We Change Our Evil Ways?	167
41	The Fred Bob Principle: What Circumstances Will Lead to Success?	171
42	Bringing Water to Our Lives: Do We Appreciate Those Who Help Us?	176
43	Seeing Evil: Can We Recognize Our Own Flaws?	180
44	Playing a Part: How Do We Shape the Narrative of Our Lives?	185
45	Getting Lost: How Do We Regain Our Path?	190
46	Narcissism: What Is Our Place in the World?	194
47	Connecting the Dots: How Can We Make Sense of Our Lives?	198
48	The Kikayon: What Can We Learn from a Plant?	203
49	Time, Time, Time: How Do We View the Length of Our Lives?	208
50	Facing Challenges: How Do We Use Our Strengths to Overcome Our Weaknesses?	212
51	I Want to Be Big: Can We Learn Patience?	216
52	Brief Moments: What Makes an Enduring Impact?	220
53	Communities of Meaning: How Can We Create Connections?	224

Preface

When I was a child, I heard the story of Jonah as a story about God. It was presented to me as an entertaining tale teaching that God's power extends to all corners of the earth. I now see it as a story about Jonah. As an adult I am drawn to this story because I feel that I know Jonah. He is not a heroic knight of faith like Abraham. When God calls Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, Abraham gets up early in the morning and goes, but when God calls Jonah, Jonah runs away. I don't know anybody who is like Abraham. I know lots of people who are like Jonah.

I am drawn to the book of Jonah not only because I know many like him but also because Jonah receives a second chance. After God caused the fish to spew Jonah back onto dry land, God could have said to him, "I forgive you for fleeing. Now go home. I will send another, more dependable prophet to Nineveh. Perhaps Elijah is available for this mission." But God doesn't dismiss Jonah; God gives him another opportunity. This is deep forgiveness, forgiveness with renewed trust. God fully accepts Jonah's repentance. God sees Jonah as fit for the mission of carrying the Divine word to Nineveh.

We always want a second chance. We'd like everybody we have wronged to give *us* another opportunity, but are we willing to give *others* a second chance? Not simply forgiving the people who wronged us, but trusting them again in circumstances in which they had previously disappointed us. This is a serious challenge. Will we trust the person who mismanaged the money to handle the finances again? Will we trust the person who was less than loyal to be our friend again? The situations occur in each of our lives, at work, with our friends and our families. God's full forgiveness of Jonah is a model for us.

Humor plays a key role in my life, and I'm pleased to see exaggeration and humor in the story of Jonah: the size of Nineveh, the extent of the repentance of the Ninevites, the animals of Nineveh putting

on sackcloth, the storm, and Jonah in the belly of the big fish. The humor draws us into the story. And if we look more closely, we will find profound lessons that can help us understand our lives. I hope that this book will provide an opportunity for you to look at challenges you face from new perspectives and examine the meaning of your life as you reflect upon the meaning of Jonah and his story.

Introduction

In Pirke Avot 5:26 Ben Bag Bag famously teaches, “Turn it, turn it, for it contains everything. Look into it, grow old and worn over it, and never move away from it, for you will find no better portion than it.” While most people take these words to describe the Torah, for me they describe the book of Jonah. In this short book of the Bible, we can find answers to the most important questions that people ask: Who am I? Why am I here? What provides meaning to my life?

This book is a journey through the Jonah story, verse by verse, with some of the great Bible commentators—Rashi, Abraham Ibn Ezra, David Kimchi, Isaac Abarbanel, and the Malbim—other biblical and rabbinic sources, and my own comments, drawn from personal anecdotes, literature, history, and popular culture. If you are unfamiliar with the commentators I cite, let me introduce you to them.

The Commentators

RASHI

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040–1105) is better known by the acronym Rashi. He spent most of his life in Troyes, in the Champagne area of northern France. He studied in Worms in the yeshiva of Rabbi Yaakov ben Yakar, and then in Mainz with Rabbi Yitzhak ben Yehudah. He returned to Troyes, where he established his own yeshiva. Rashi wrote a commentary on the entire Hebrew Bible and on the entire Talmud. For most scholars, completing either one of these projects would be considered a life’s work. In addition to his scholarship, Rashi earned his living as a wine merchant.

Rashi’s commentary to the Hebrew Bible provides the foundation for ongoing conversation about its meaning. Rashi’s commentary on Jonah is much shorter than the later commentaries; he does not comment on each verse and does not launch into long theological arguments, as later commentators do.

In his commentary on Jonah, Rashi draws upon chapter 10 of *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, a ninth-century collection of midrash. He often refers to the Targum, a translation of the Bible into Aramaic, the everyday spoken language of the rabbinic period. And so the Aramaic translation is helpful to Rashi in clarifying the meaning of difficult phrases, and he shares with his readers how the author of the Targum understood the word. The Talmudic tradition attributes the authorship of the Targum to the books of the prophets to Jonathan ben Uzziel. It is therefore called Targum Yonaton.

ABRAHAM IBN EZRA

Abrahami Ibn Ezra's life (ca. 1092–1167) bridged the Muslim and Christian worlds. He was born in Muslim Spain and moved to Christian Italy in the middle of his life, fleeing the fundamentalist Almohades dynasty. He brought learning previously published in Arabic to the Christian world. In his commentary he draws on the Geonim and others who lived in the Arabic-speaking lands.

In addition to his commentary on the books of the Hebrew Bible, Ibn Ezra wrote about Hebrew grammar, philosophy, astronomy, and poetry. He is rigorous in his analysis, making use of a careful reading of the grammar of individual words. He avoids fanciful midrashic interpretation, and his comments are often terse. He expects much from his readers. Of all the commentators contained in this volume, he requires the most explanation. In his brief comments Ibn Ezra often presents important theological ideas.

RABBI DAVID KIMCHI

Rabbi David Kimchi (1160–1235) is known by the Hebrew acronym RaDaK. He was born in Narbonne, which is in the southeastern corner of what is now France. During Kimchi's life the Catalan dynasty of Barcelona ruled this area, called Provence. The Kimchi family came to Christian Narbonne from the Muslim-controlled portion of Spain, fleeing the fundamentalist Almohades dynasty.

David Kimchi was part of a scholarly family. His father, Rabbi

Joseph Kimchi, and his brother, Rabbi Moses Kimchi, were both noted Bible commentators. He quotes his father in his commentary to the book of Jonah. David Kimchi was an important scholar of Hebrew grammar and wrote *Michlol*, an early comprehensive study of it.

One could describe Kimchi's commentary as psychological. He examines Jonah's inner process, telling us what Jonah must have been thinking as events in his story unfolded, using what might be described as Jonah's "voice-over." We will see this particularly as Jonah prays from the belly of the big fish.

In Pirke Avot 3:17 Rabbi Eliezer ben Azariah teaches, "Ein Kemach Ein Torah—where there is no flour there is no Torah," meaning when people do not have food to eat they cannot study. Kimchi's students adapted this text to say, "Ein Kimchi Ein Torah—when there is no Kimchi there is no Torah."

DON ISAAC ABARBANEL

Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508) was a financier, an advisor to royalty, a philosopher, and a Bible commentator. He was a prominent leader of the Jewish community of Portugal and Spain during the difficult times of the expulsion of the Jews from those countries.

His approach differs from the earlier commentators in content, structure, and style. He does not delve into the grammar issues explored by Ibn Ezra and Kimchi, but rather focuses on the narrative line of the text.

Abarbanel explains his ideas fully. He does not depend on his readers to bring as much background or to read as "actively" as do the earlier commentators. He writes in long, complex sentences and draws on rabbinic sources. He refers to *Seder Olam*, an early rabbinic chronology, and quotes from Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer. He refers to Abraham Ibn Ezra as "My Teacher," whether he is agreeing or disagreeing with him and also cites David Kimchi's commentary.

MALBIM

Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Michel (1809–79), widely known as the

Malbim, lived in Eastern and Central Europe. He was a staunch defender of traditional Judaism in the modern age, often clashing with community leaders who wished to modernize Jewish worship and religious life. Born in Volochisk, Russia, and educated in Warsaw, he was rabbi in Wreschen (Prussia), Kempen (Prussia), Kherson (Ukraine), and Moghilev (Belarus). His most prominent position was as chief rabbi of Bucharest.

Between 1845 and 1870, the Malbim wrote a commentary on the entire Hebrew Bible, the first such effort to do so since the Middle Ages. In his commentary on the book of Jonah we will see his resistance to modernist tendencies. The Malbim takes the midrash seriously.

I

Our Names and Identities

Who Are We?

And the word of the Eternal came to Jonah son of Amitai. —JONAH 1:1

The most basic question a person can ask us is “Who are you?” In response we might identify ourselves by profession, family ties, accomplishments, location, lineage, and affiliations. But our first response generally is to introduce ourselves with our name.

According to a midrash, “There are three names by which a person is called: one that his father and mother call him, one that other people call him, and one that he earns for himself. The best of all is the one that he earns for himself” (*Tanhuma, Parshat Vayak’hel*).

I am Steve Bob. My mother calls me Steven. My congregants call me Rabbi Bob. Three people call me Dad. To seven people I am Grandpa. Many of my friends call me Simcha.

Simcha is my given Hebrew name, after my mother’s father. Simcha means joy, and it is a perfect name for me. I am as positive and happy a person as exists. Simcha is the name my parents gave me, and it is a name I earn every day. A famous phrase applies to me: “He is just like his name (*kain k’mo shmo hu*).”

This phrase comes from the Bible. Nabal’s wife, Abigail, explains his character to King David: “He is just what his name says” (I Samuel 25:25).

In the Bible, as in other literature, the characters’ names often tell us a lot about them. The main character in our story also resembles his name.

Jonah in the original Hebrew is Yonah. A person who does not know Hebrew will miss a full understanding of our prophet’s name. *Yonah* means “dove,” and the word is used in the Noah story in Gen-

esis 8. In that story, Noah sends the dove three times to look for land. Once it comes back with nothing. The second time it comes back with a “plucked-off olive leaf” (Genesis 8:11). The third time it does not return. The dove represents the possibility of a new beginning. From its first venture, the dove returns, having failed to find land. The dove succeeds on its second try. Our Yonah also succeeds only on his second try.

The story of Nineveh and the Noah story of the flood both involve a group of people who have become so evil that God decides to destroy them. Both stories involve trips over the water in boats, which is rare in Hebrew Bible stories. The other prominent example is the basket into which Yocheved places Moses in the Nile, and that narrative, like both the Jonah story and the Noah story, is a story of redemption.

The text tells us that Jonah is ben Amittai, the son of Amittai. *Amittai* derives from the Hebrew word *emet*, which means truth. Jonah then is the son of truth. Abarbanel says, “And because people always believe in the truth of his words he is called Ben Amittai,” the son of truth. Is Jonah really a person of truth? He only reveals his story to the sailors when they cast lots and the lot falls on him. Generally he hides from the truth or denies it, as we will see most fully in chapter 4 of Jonah. Ben Amittai, indeed, is an ironic name for Jonah.

Since I was a child I have been amused by ironic names. Curly Howard was the bald member of the Three Stooges. Curly Neal was the bald member of the Harlem Globetrotters. Tiny Mills was a huge wrestler. And Jonah, the son of truth, is a liar.

What do we know about Jonah as the story begins? The book opens, “And the word of the Eternal came to Jonah son of (ben) Amittai.” The biblical text does not introduce Jonah or provide us with any background about who Jonah is or why God is speaking to him. Does God regularly speak to Jonah? Is this the first time God has spoken to him? What name/s has Jonah earned before the events described in his biblical book?

Ibn Ezra and Kimchi provide context by drawing our attention to

the other mention of Jonah in the Bible. From them we learn that Jonah was already an active prophet before his story begins. Ibn Ezra says, “This is the prophet who prophesied to the king, Jeroboam ben Yoash, as is written about him, [the promise] that the Eternal had made through His servant, the prophet Jonah son of Amitai from Gat-hepher” (2 Kings 14:25).

Kimchi explains that “Gat-hepher was the name of his city.” And it is in the portion [of the Land of Israel] of Zebulun as it is written [in Joshua’s division of the Land of Israel, “The third lot emerged for the Zebulunites] . . . to Gat-hepher, to Eth-kazin” (Joshua 19:10–13). These comments tell us where and when Jonah lived.

Abarbanel provides a fuller backstory for Jonah by turning to midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 98:11). The prophet Elijah revives a widow’s son who has recently died (1 Kings 17:19–22.) The biblical text does not include the name of the boy, but the midrash imagines that he is actually the young Jonah.

Abarbanel turns to another story of an unnamed biblical character. According to 2 Kings 9:1–3, the prophet Elisha appoints an unnamed person to anoint Yehu to be the ruler of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Then the prophet Elisha summoned one of the disciples of the prophets and said to him, “Tie up your skirts, and take along this flask of oil and go to Ramoth-gilead. . . . Go and see Jehu son of Jehoshaphat. . . . Then take the flask of oil and pour some on his head, and say, ‘Thus said, the Eternal: I anoint you king over Israel.’” In the midrash, rabbis identify this messenger as Jonah. Abarbanel, drawing on the midrash, knows that this unnamed prophet is Jonah. Abarbanel writes, “When the prophet Elisha will place upon him the task to prophesy and will send him to anoint Yehu ben Namshi.”

So for Abarbanel, Jonah has a special relationship with God before the events described in the book of Jonah. And Jonah has a connection to God’s main representatives of that time and that place, the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Jonah’s very existence is due to a miracle performed by Elijah. Elijah stands out among all of God’s servants in the Hebrew Bible. He alone avoids death, for when Elijah’s time

on earth concludes, God sends a chariot of fire to carry him away. Elisha, Elijah's apprentice and successor, regards Jonah as an appropriate agent to carry out God's will in anointing Yehu, a task originally assigned by God to Elijah (1 Kings 19:16).

Abarbanel's explanation of Jonah's background would cause one to believe that Jonah has been and would continue to be a loyal servant of God. He offers no explanation for Jonah's disobedience to the Divine will. Rabbi Simeon said, "There are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of kingship. But the crown of a good name excels them" (Pirke Avot 4:17). Abarbanel portrays Jonah as earning this crown of a good name. But this is not how most people imagine him; most see him as the prophet who defied God, ran away, and was swallowed by a big fish.

As we continue to read the narrative with the commentators, we will come to understand that their portrayal of Jonah varies greatly from the popular image. Some defend Jonah as a flawed prophet who has a legitimate reason for his misdeeds. Abarbanel goes further and considers Jonah a hero, willing to sacrifice his own life in order to save the lives of the people of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

The Hebrew poet Zelda's best-known poem, *L'Chol Ish Yeish Shaim*, develops the theme stated in the midrash mentioned at the beginning of this chapter: we each have many names. Our identity comes from within and without. Zelda begins her poem: "Every person has a name / that God gave him / and which his father and mother gave him" and "Every person has a name / which his sins gave him, / and which his longing gave him."

The central figure in our story received the name Yonah ben Ammittai from his parents and the name "prophet" from God when God called on him to carry the Divine message to the Israelites and to the Ninevites. As we follow the thread of the story, we will examine the meanings found by others who have studied this story over the centuries. And as we read, we will discover who Jonah is and perhaps who we are.

Understanding the Other

Who Are They?

Go at once to Nineveh. —JONAH 1:2

Why does God send Jonah to deliver a message to the residents of a non-Israelite city? All the other biblical prophets are sent by God to speak to the people of Judah or Israel. What's more, Nineveh is not just any non-Israelite city; it is the capital of the Assyrian Empire, the enemy of Israel and Judah.

Nineveh raises broader questions: How do we view people different from ourselves? How do we as Jews look at non-Jews? Do we view non-Jews as hostile to Jews?

Many Jews see the “other” as the “threatening foreign other”; they look at the world mainly through the prism of the Holocaust and two thousand years of Jewish suffering. Some evaluate all events as “good for the Jews or bad for the Jews.” While we may see our neighbors as gentiles, or the more pejorative Goyim, non-Jews do not think of themselves as non-Jews. Viewing members of the general population as “non-Jews” places us at the center of the human solar system, with the rest of humanity revolving around us.

In their comments about the phrase “Go at once to Nineveh,” Abarbanel and Malbim present a human history that is centered on Jewish people. For them the Assyrian Empire is a supporting actor, because as they see it, the purpose of Jonah’s mission to Nineveh is to prepare the Assyrian Empire for the role it will play in the destruction of the ten northern tribes in the Kingdom of Israel. Malbim explicitly says that this process of prophecy and repentance is not for the benefit of the Ninevites.

In his novel *Sirens of Titan*, Kurt Vonnegut tells of Salo, from

the planet Tralfamadoria, who is stuck on Titan, a moon of Saturn, waiting for a replacement part for his spaceship. The Tralfamadorians manipulate human history to send messages to Salo. The Tralfamadorians cause Earthlings to build major structures that Salo can see through his telescope on Titan. These accomplishments of humanity spell out messages in the Tralfamadorian language. Stonehenge spells out “Replacement part being rushed with all possible speed.” The Great Wall of China says, “Be patient. We haven’t forgotten you.” As Vonnegut suggests that these immense human projects were not actually constructed for earthly purposes, so the commentators suggest that the Assyrian campaign of conquest was not to meet Assyrian goals.

Abarbanel writes:

It had been directed that because of their sins, the Kingdom of Israel, Samaria and her daughters would be destroyed by the hands of Assyria. Therefore the Blessed One tries to save Assyria from the evil that has been designated to come upon them as a result of their violence so that He will save Assyria from annihilation. And Assyria will become the instrument of the anger of the Holy One of Blessing to destroy [the Northern Kingdom of] Israel as it is written, “Ha! Assyria the rod of My anger [In whose hand, as a staff, is My fury!] I send him against an ungodly nation, I charge him against a people that provokes Me, / To take its spoil and seize its booty / And to make it a thing trampled / Like the mire of the street” (Isaiah 10:5). And because of this the Holy One of Blessing wants to straighten out Nineveh, the capital city of the Kingdom of Assyria. And this is the reason that he sent Jonah to proclaim upon it.

Malbim writes:

So that they [the Ninevites] will return in repentance. The mission of Jonah was not for the benefit of the people of Nineveh. For we have not found [another case in which] the Eternal sent a

prophet from Israel to cause idolaters to return in repentance. . . . Rather [God's] concern for Nineveh is [really out of concern] for Israel. After [Jonah's prophecy] Assyria will be prepared to be a rod of the Eternal's anger to punish Israel who have obligated who deserve punishment themselves to God. The Eternal wants to cause the Assyrians to return in repentance so that they will be ready to fulfill His decree on Israel. And so that the cynic will not ask why did [God choose the] faithless [Assyrians] to uproot [the Israelites, it would seem to be] evil [people] destroying those more righteous than themselves. The Eternal wanted to demonstrate that Assyria possesses greater merit than Israel. For they hearken to the words of the prophet and repent. And Israel stiffens their necks [to avoid] hearkening [to the call of the] prophets.

In contrast to Abarbanel and Malbim, Kimchi does not present the Assyrians as bit players in the story of Israel. Kimchi sees the purpose of God sending Jonah to Nineveh as a teaching opportunity. He suggests that God has a message for the Israelites, a message for the Ninevites, and a message for all of humanity.

The message for the Israelites:

We are able to explain that it was written to be a moral lesson to Israel. Behold a foreign nation that is not a part of Israel was close to repentance and the first time that a prophet rebuked them they turned to a complete repentance from evil. And what about Israel, whom the prophets rebuke from dawn until dark, and still they do not turn from their evil?

The message for the Ninevites:

And also to make known to Nineveh the great wonder which the God, Who is Blessed, performed that Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights and lived.

The message for all of humanity:

And also to teach that the God, Who is Blessed, is merciful to

those who repent from any nation and grants them mercy even more so when they are many. [The last verse of the book of Jonah (4:11) explains that Nineveh contains 120,000 people.]

Ibn Ezra also does not accept this view of the Assyrians as incidental players. His reading of the text expresses an important theological position that we would not expect to find in a twelfth-century source. Through a creative interpretation of the text, Ibn Ezra sees the Ninevites at the center of their own story: “For there [in chapter 3 of the book of Jonah] we find the verse ‘It was a large city to God.’” Ibn Ezra uses this verse to explain the verse here in chapter 1. Both verses describe Nineveh as “a great city” (*ir gedola*). The difference between them is that in chapter 3 the words “to God” (*Lailohim*) are added. Ibn Ezra asks why the text uses the words “to God” to describe Nineveh. Could the text not simply have described Nineveh as a “great city” without including “to God”? Ibn Ezra concludes that these words are in the text to tell us “that they [the Ninevites] already feared the Eternal from before” the time of Jonah. He contends that the Ninevites were not idol worshipping polytheists but rather monotheists who worshipped the Eternal.

Ibn Ezra continues to seek a clear understanding of this passage from the third chapter: “And it is written, ‘All the nations are as naught in His sight. [He counts them as less than nothing]’ (Isaiah 40:17). And there is no concern if they were many.” This verse from Isaiah teaches that God does not care about the number of nonbelievers, for “He counts them as less than nothing.” Therefore the fact that here God describes Nineveh as a large city and in Jonah 4:11 God specifically says that Nineveh is “that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons” demonstrates that the inhabitants were not in the category of “All the nations,” not pagans. Following the Isaiah verse, if they were pagans, God would not count them. And to Ibn Ezra, the fact that God counts them as many proves that they had a prior relationship with God.

Ibn Ezra here argues that “a great city to God” does not describe the size of Nineveh but rather its importance to God:

And the explanation [of the Hebrew word] *Lailohim* is that they had been fearers of the Eternal in earlier days. Only now in the days of Jonah did they begin to do evil. If they had not originally been people of the Eternal, a prophet would not have been sent to them. And here we saw a complete repentance with nothing like it. And we do not find it written that they broke the altars of Baal or cut down idols.

If they had been idol worshippers turning for the first time to the worship of the One God, their complete repentance would have included the destruction of the places of idol worship. Chapter 3 includes a detailed description of the steps the people of Nineveh took to repent from their evil. There is no mention of destroying altars to idols. So Ibn Ezra concludes, “From this we can learn that they were not idol worshippers.” They were worshippers of the same One God worshipped by the Israelites.

Why does God send Jonah to deliver a message to the residents of this non-Israelite city? According to Ibn Ezra, they merit God’s attention and a visit from God’s prophet because of their long-term, ongoing connection to God.

How to approach religions other than our own is a key question of our time. Do we sometimes look at “others” as threatening? Can we accept that people of other religious communities can be in a proper relationship with the same One God we serve, even though they use different images and tell different stories about that God’s connection to humanity?

Many of us in the twenty-first century are ready to embrace religious pluralism. Finding a foundation for this approach in Ibn Ezra’s twelfth-century commentary should strengthen our confidence in this view. Rather than placing the Jewish people at the center of the human solar system, we can imagine the Jewish people as one of the peoples in orbit around the One God at the center of all that exists.

Coming to Terms with Violence

What Is Evil?

For their wickedness has come before Me. —JONAH 1:2

The text does not explain this wickedness (*rah*) that has drawn God's attention to Nineveh. What have the Ninevites done to cause God to take note of their behavior? We cannot say that God is angry at the Ninevites for worshipping idols. Idol worship would not have been a unique sin on the part of the Ninevites because all of the Israelites' neighbors worshipped idols. But we can be certain that these undefined crimes of the Ninevites were severe. This is only the third time in the Bible in which the evil of a people moves God to speak of destroying them. The others are the generation of Noah and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Kimchi writes, “We [can] learn [from this verse] that the God, Who is Blessed, takes note of sins of the nations of the world when their evil grows in violence (*chamas*).” *Chamas* is not a synonym for *rah*. It is a technical term for a specific category of evil. The Torah uses *chamas* to describe the evil of the generation of Noah and of the people of Sodom.

Kimchi continues, “And so it is in the generation of Noah and in the people of Sodom. And the violence destroys the community. And God, Who is Blessed, is concerned about all the communities in the world.” In both of these cases God takes note of the sins of non-Israelites. God punishes the humanity of Noah’s time by wiping them out. God rains fire down upon Sodom and Gomorrah. Here God designates the residents of Nineveh for the same fate. According to Kimchi, God becomes concerned about the sins of the other nations when they rise in severity and cross the *chamas* threshold.

One big difference between the Bible's description of Jonah's time and of Noah's time is that in the Jonah story God sends a prophet to warn the people, thereby giving them a second chance. The lack of prophetic warning to the Noah's generation bothered the ancient rabbis; they imagined that Noah himself warned the people, as in this midrash on "Make yourself an ark of gopher wood" (Genesis 6:14):

Rabbi Huna said in the name of Rabbi Yosi: For one hundred and twenty years, God kept warning the generation of the flood in the hope that they would repent from their sins. When they did not repent, He said to Noah, "Make thee an ark of gopher wood." Noah proceeded to plant gopher trees. When asked, "What are these gopher trees for?" Noah would reply, "God is about to bring a flood upon the world, and He told me to make an ark, that I and my family might escape." The people mocked and ridiculed him. In the meantime the gopher kept growing.

When again they asked, "What are you doing?" he gave the same answer. Finally when the trees had grown to maturity he cut the gopher trees down and sawed them into planks. Again the people asked, "What are you doing?" Noah again explained to the people about the coming flood. During the years that it took Noah to build the ark people asked, "What are you doing?" Noah again explained to the people about the coming flood. When the people still did not repent, God brought the flood upon them. At last when they realized that they were about to perish, they tried to break into the ark. What did God do then? He surrounded it with lions. (*Tanhuma, Pashat Noach*)

In this midrash by Rabbi Huna, quoting Rabbi Yosi, God uses Noah as a prophet to warn the people of his generation repeatedly for many years of the coming consequence of their sinful, violent ways. Rabbi Yosi has Noah taking his time building the ark in order to provide as much time as possible to warn the people. Rather than having Noah cut down already grown trees, Rabbi Yosi has Noah

begin the ark by planting slow growing cedar trees and waiting for them to reach maturity.

Despite all of Noah's warnings, the people do not repent, and God destroys them. Here in our story, Jonah speaks four words of prophecy once, the people fully repent, and God forgives them. The difference is not in the message or the messenger but in the sinners. The people of Nineveh are different from the generation of the flood.

The flood story features truly evil people. In contrast, the Ninevites are good people who perform evil acts, and such people can reform. But truly evil people are beyond saving because they have lost the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. The generation of the flood ignored Noah. The people of Nineveh harkened to the warning delivered by Jonah.

In the media we see stories of athletes cheating by using performance-enhancing drugs, business people taking advantage of insider information, and religious leaders and coaches sexually abusing young people. Are these totally evil people who cannot distinguish right from wrong? These stories challenge our confidence in our fellow human beings. We want to make sense out of how normal people can perform evil acts. We do not want to think that humans are inherently evil.

We can think of many examples in popular culture that wrestle with this question of evil. We like the "honorable" gangsters and outlaws, like the Corleone family, Pretty Boy Floyd, and Robin Hood. They live by a code of honor. While the mobsters' code may not be exactly like medieval chivalry, it does set clear limits to define right and wrong.

This is not the *chamas*, the rampant violence of the generation of the flood. Some people who have committed crimes can turn a corner and redeem themselves. It can be difficult, but it does happen. I have seen it.

In recent years we have witnessed violent acts with no regard to any code of behavior. Individuals have taken powerful weapons into schools or and movie theaters to shoot as many people as they can.

They view their victims as objects rather than as human beings. This is *chamas*, the crime of the generation of the flood. These shooters have lost all sense of the “other” as having any value. They cannot respond to Noah’s prophecy.

While some people in our midst may be so far gone that they have lost their sense of right and wrong, most people on the wrong path are not that far gone. They can still turn their lives around. They can still benefit from hearing the voice of the prophet reminding them, calling them to return. It is not too late for them. We will see that the people of Nineveh have not totally lost their sense of right and wrong. When Jonah points out their sins, they can hear his voice and change their lives. The challenge for us is to distinguish in our lives between those people who can be saved and those who are beyond saving.

In my work as a rabbi I have encountered people in both groups. When I was a young rabbi, I innocently believed I could save everybody. A young man of the congregation presented as a bit odd, not dangerous but a bit unusual. Often he would visit the synagogue to “meditate.” He would sit in the lobby and softly chant. Some of the members of staff wanted me to tell him to go away. I argued that the synagogue provided a safe haven for this odd but harmless young man.

One day he came to my office, clearly aggravated. He told me that the police were after him. I called a member of the congregation who was a lawyer and asked him to help. He spoke to the police, and the police agreed to rescind the arrest order if the young man would check himself into a mental health facility. He did so, and he avoided arrest. After the arrest order was rescinded, he checked out of the hospital. Later I learned more details about the incident that had led to the arrest order. That morning, when he had gone to the hospital for treatment, he had opened his pants and exposed himself to staff and patients. I had helped him avoid facing the consequences of his actions. That day I learned the term *enabler*. Now I know that when things appear to be odd, they usually are. I have learned to

focus my energies on aiding people who I can actually help grow and change, rather than letting myself get entangled in the shenanigans of people seeking to avoid the consequences of their actions.

The generation of the flood had descended to *chamas*. No amount of prophecy could save them. The people of Nineveh were doing *rah*, wickedness, but could still be saved. We face the challenge of distinguishing between *rah* and *chamas* in the world in which we live. We should not allow ourselves to get caught up in the lives of those who have descended to the level of *chamas*. We cannot help them. We should devote ourselves to helping the people struggling with *rah*. They still have an opportunity to change.