

Sermon Yom Kippur Day

Wake from your slumber!

I know for many of us the highlight of Yom Kippur is not the prayers or even the music (apologies, Cantor). It's not my sermon – it's not even the most excellent study sessions we offer. For many of us the highlight is listening to our own, Jackie Rose, read the book of Jonah in her beautiful strong Hebrew. When we read the book of Jonah, it's usually around four o'clock on Yom Kippur afternoon; it's the sleepest part of the day. The pangs of hunger are gnawing at us and our head is throbbing with a coffee withdrawal headache. We have sat in these chairs for hours. More than anything else, we crave not repentance, but a nap.

And then Jackie, in your beautiful Hebrew, you stand before us and say the opening words of the book of Jonah, *Vayehi dvar Adonai el yonah-koom lech el ninve*. Get up, The Lord said to Jonah, *koom* - wake up. Wake up Jonah - The irony is that just like us; Jonah is a man who craves nothing more than a good nap. Jonah is summoned by God to go to the wicked city of Nineveh and proclaim to it that its days of reckoning have come. But Jonah flees God and makes his way down to the port of Jaffa where he books passage on a boat bound for Spain, but a storm comes upon the ocean. While the sailors are busy trying to save the lives of everyone on board - throwing cargo overboard and praying to their God, the Torah tells us that Jonah goes below and takes a nap.

The Torah states the sailors were frightened, cried out each to his own God, and flung the ship's cargo into the sea to lighten the load. *Ve yonah yarad el yarketei hasefina vayeradam* - But Jonah had gone down into the hold, the lower deck of the vessel, laid down and fell into a deep sleep. The sea is raging, the ship is tossing, people are in mortal danger - working together to save themselves and Jonah is asleep. The captain of the ship goes down to the hold where Jonah is sleeping and there he says the single most important line of the entire story- Maybe the single most important line of these entire High Holydays.

He says, "Why are you sleeping? Get up! *Mah lecha nirdam*. Koom! Wake up you sleeper" the same words that God uses to call to Jonah at the beginning of the story. "Koom! Get up -wake up!" But Jonah is the prophet who would rather sleep through his mission in life. He would rather confront the storm and the tossing of the seas by slumbering through it all - and so he went down to the lowest part of the ship and went to sleep.

One thousand years ago, a Spanish Rabbi named, Yehudah ibn Bilam from Seville, a kabbalist a mystic, said that the story of Jonah sleeping in the bottom of the ship as the storm rages around him is in fact our story - It's not about Jonah, it's about us. For you see many of us sleep through life - We sleep as life rages around us. Many of us treat our relationships, our life's purpose, and our attempts to be better than we are as if we are simply sleeping through it all. And

when the captain says to Jonah - wake up - he is speaking to us, trying to shake us awake. Rabbi Yehuda ibn Bilam wrote this poem 1000 years ago based on the story of Jonah. The poem reads:

You-
Mortal creature-
What are you doing fast asleep?
Wake up - call out with great pleading.
Pour out your heart get on with your life.
Ask forgiveness.
From the Holy One - master of all the world.

I came across this poem in Jerusalem this summer. I laminated it, placed it in my wallet, and carry it with me now everywhere I go to remind myself that too often I have slept through life. Like Jonah, when faced with storm, when faced with challenge, when confronted with difficult choices, I have too often preferred to escape to the furthestmost place and to slumber - hoping the storm will simply go away. I confess to you, I have slumbered my way through many of my relationships - relationships with my children, my family, my friends, and my colleagues. They take work and effort and demand of you that you devote time to them, nurture them, and cultivate them.

The columnist, Anna Quindlen, wrote: 'Get a life in which you are not alone. Find people you love and who love you. And remember that love and friendship are not leisure activities - Its work. I am still a student, she writes, learning how to be more human.'

So tonight, as Yom Kippur ends, I ask you send an email or text, write a letter, call somebody - kiss your kids, share your bagel - hug a loved one. Be a good friend to others - show up, listen, and try to laugh. Making and keeping friends, caring for loved ones and showing them attention, is hard work - it takes time. But if we sleep through this work, if we are Jonah in the bowels of the ship slumbering away through life, what then do we do on a cold winter night when we are sad, or lonely, or broke? Or when we get back the chest x-ray or the pathology report and it doesn't look so good? It's cold comfort to wake from a long solitary nap and find that in fact you are solitary. That's exactly what happened to Jonah - The man who craves a solitary nap in a dark place who refuses to join with the sailors in their plight eventually finds himself alone in the darkest of places in the belly of the whale at the bottom of the sea. And he then cries out to God, I don't want to be here. He says in chapter 3,

I called out to the Lord in my distress.
I cry out to you from the belly of the lowermost place.
Hear my voice o God.
Rise up my life from the pit.

The Zohar, the book of the Jewish mysticism, says that the whale represents Jonah's fear. Jonah who craves being alone and asleep finds that too much *alone-ness can lead to loneliness*. Koom - wake up – says the story of Jonah. Don't slumber through your relationships. Jonah is commanded by God to bring the possibility of a better life to the inhabitants of Nineveh and yet he chooses sleep - Why are we here on this earth if not to make the world around us a better place?

The reverend, Rick Warren, in his famous book the purpose driven life writes, 'How you treat other people, not your wealth or accomplishments is the most enduring impact you can leave on earth.' The psychologist, William James, wrote, 'The best use of life is to spend it for something that outlasts us.' Anna Quindlen says, 'Get a life in which you are generous. Realize that life is glorious and that you have no business taking it for granted. Care so deeply about its goodness that you want to spread it around. Take the money you would have spent on beers in a bar and give it to charity. Volunteer in a soup kitchen. Tutor a child. All of us, she says, want to do well in life, but if we do not do good too - doing well will never be enough.'

There are so many opportunities each day to do well, to do good, to make the world around us a better place. Don't sleep through it; don't be like Jonah, who when given the chance to help the sailors save their little world he goes to sleep. Koom, wake up. Tonight, after Yom Kippur, after you've written your email or sent your text or shared your bagel or hugged a child, ask yourself this question tonight. If people asked your friends or family or co-workers - the people closest to you this question - about you - What is the driving force of your life - Would you like the answer they would give about you? If the response to that question is no - then it's time to wake up.

At the end of the book, Jonah is angry that a plant that gave him shade dies. And God says Jonah, 'you care about the plant that gave you shade but you didn't care about people? *Hasta al ha kikayon*, God says, you care about a plant? If people who knew you were asked what motivated you what energized you? Would you like the answer? If not – *koom*, wake up.'

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik taught that Judaism believes that a person has the ability to take their fate in their hands and to mold it into destiny to shape their life in the manner they choose into a life of freedom, meaning and joy. Have I done the hard work necessary to shape my life to become the person I wish to be? Or have I chosen to sleep. My teacher, Donniel Hartman, says no one can comfortably sit on the middle rung of a ladder; you are either going up or down. So ask yourself, which direction am I going in life? Anna Quindlen writes – 'It's so easy to waste our lives-our days, our hours our minutes. It is so easy to take life for granted, but life is short - remember that too. This is not a dress rehearsal she writes - Today is the only guarantee you get.' So if it is your desire to change your life, to live differently, then this is not the time to seek out the bottom of the

ship and go to sleep. There will come a time of eternal slumber and by then it will be too late.'

The Rabbis of ancient times wrote in tractate Sukkot of the Talmud - The place my heart wants me to go my feet are taking me there all the time. If there is a place you want to go in life then pick up your feet and go. Max Lucado has written, 'God does not promise the absence of struggle and abundance of strength - Changing your life is hard ascending the ladder is frightening But so is languishing in the belly of the whale.'

You know Jonah has a last name. In verse one; we learn it is *Jonah Ben Ammittai - Jonah the son of truth.*

My teacher, Micah Goodman, says that the name is meant to be ironic. Jonah is the son of truth who can't see the truth - who has a place to go a mission to perform people to help and a life of meaning to live and he recognizes none of it. He is the son of truth who prefers to sleep through the truth - which is why not once but twice he is told to wake up.

Long ago, the philosopher Moses Maimonides said that the sound of the shofar is like an alarm meant to wake us and to confront the truth of our lives. He writes in his book Mishneh Torah, that the shofar calls to us and says: 'Awake you sleepers from your sleep. Arouse you slumbers from your slumber and ponder your life; remember your creator and return to God. Do not be like those who miss the truth in pursuit of shadows and waste their years seeking meaningless things. Look well to your souls and consider your deeds.'

Friends, we will all have one more opportunity to hear the sound of the shofar to hear the alarm of our soul. In a few brief hours at neilah, as the gates begin to close we will hear one louder, *tekiah gedolah*. So tonight, listening to the alarm, perhaps this is the year we will finally ask ourselves, as the captain asked Jonah, *Ma lecha nirdam?* What are we doing fast asleep?