

For years, I was addicted to coffee. I blamed my job. I was working for Hillel at the University of Pennsylvania and three-quarters of my time was spent drinking coffee with unaffiliated and unengaged Jews. I did that for two years. That's a lot of coffee.

Most of the students I didn't know very well and the majority of the conversations started the same way – after some basic schmoozing and attempts at Jewish geography – “you're from New York? You know...” I noticed a trend - the student would shift in his seat and say, “Uh, Rabbi, I have to tell you...I'm not very religious. I'm more of a cultural Jew. Just want to let you know.” “Okay...” They'd usually relax a bit, as if some big weight had been lifted off their chest, and then I'd say, “So, how are you defining 'religious'?” They'd pause - “Well, I don't know. I don't really believe in God, I don't keep a lot of rules, like kosher or Shabbat. I celebrate the holidays – we always have this big Passover dinner at my house, and I'm proud to be Jewish, but, like the Torah and all those stories, I just don't believe they're real. So, yeah, I'm a cultural Jew.”

We're suffering from an illness. It attacks us when we're young, usually in preschool. It grabs hold of us and does such a good job of blending into the fabric of our lives that we actually start to rely on it as we get older. And the older we get, the harder it is for us to battle this illness. Before we know it, we've passed it on to our children and the illness grows stronger. There's a whole generation being raised with this illness. Don't go to WebMD to look for its name and symptoms – self-diagnosis...never a good idea. According to JewMD, this illness is called Pediatric Judaism. The symptoms include: lack in knowing the difference between 'religious' and 'cultural' Judaism; blanket statements about Jewish practices and beliefs...with little personal insight; belief that the significance and application of Torah stories relies on whether or not the Torah was written by God; and a general fatigue towards applying Jewish values and concepts in daily life. Here's the good news...there's a cure!

Today, we're going to use a kid-friendly story which is famous for its role in perpetuating the spread of Pediatric Judaism...in order to reverse its effect. The story of Jonah. It's read every Yom Kippur afternoon. It's short, only four chapters; about a guy named Jonah who runs away from God, gets thrown overboard by a bunch of sailors, gets swallowed by a big fish (not a whale), and then gets spit out three days later and goes to a city where he tells everyone to repent and be better people...and amazingly, they do. The end. As adults, when we're still telling that same old version, it's Pediatric Judaism.

There happen to be four fundamental Jewish truths in the story of Jonah. When we read Jonah as a kid's story, we miss them entirely. We read Jonah on Yom Kippur because we're supposed to re-examine these truths every year. Each chapter of Jonah highlights one of these truths.

Chapter 1

The word of God came to Jonah son of Amittai: Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me. Jonah, however, started out to flee to Tarshish from the LORD's service.

In 722 BCE – that's hundreds of years before even the *first* Temple was destroyed in Jerusalem - the Assyrians, a people known for their cruelty, destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and exiled its entire Jewish population. They raided Jerusalem, humiliated its king, and stole the people of Israel's treasures. The center of the Assyrian kingdom was Nineveh. For an Israelite, Nineveh was the enemy, the center of evil, the heart of darkness.

So why would Jonah want to save Nineveh? And why would he go to his peoples' archenemy and tell them that if they change their ways, everything will be okay? They deserved to be destroyed for all they did. They deserved to have the full force of God's wrath brought down on them like the fires that consumed Sodom and Gemorrah! And so instead of heading to Nineveh, Jonah heads to Tarshish – opposite direction. He wants to get as far away from God's plan as possible. Because God's plan stinks.

But God's plan introduces the first truth – our God is a universal God, not just a God of the Jewish people. Our God looks out for the whole world, not just our own interests. And if our God looks out for the entire world, then we need to as well... Think about the formula we use whenever we start any blessing - *Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam* – “Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, ruler of the universe...” We don't say, “Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, ruler of the Jews...” As Rabbi Harold Schulweis states, “To believe in ‘God the Creator of the universe’ means that nothing in this world, that no people in this world, is foreign to our concerns. Because of our belief in God, the whole world is relevant to us.” Jonah was a Jewish prophet, a loyalist, a staunch defender of the Jewish people, but he forgot that a Jewish prophet does not. only. defend. Jewish interests. A prophetic call is to declare justice and care for all the world's inhabitants.

And Chapter 1 continues...

Jonah went down to Jaffa and found a ship going to Tarshish...But God cast a mighty wind upon the sea...Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the vessel where he lay down and fell asleep. The captain went over to him and cried out, “How can you be sleeping so soundly! Up, call upon your god!”

Sometimes, things seem so bad in this world that all we want to do is curl up in a ball and go to sleep; to escape it all. Jonah had a case of moral fatigue. But unfortunately, being Jewish...means moral fatigue isn't an option.

Jews, basically, have to be like super heroes. A Jew created Superman, Spiderman, Batman, Captain America, the Hulk, and the Fantastic Four.¹ We're supposed to go out there and fight the Lex Luthers, the Jokers, the Ahmadinejads, the Abu Bakr al Baghdadis, the drug lords, slum lords, sex traffickers, racists, bigots, the corrupt, unethical, and unjust.

Our God is a universal God...and our mission is a universal mission.

Chapter 2

God provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah; and Jonah remained in the fish's belly three days and three nights. Jonah prayed to God from the belly of the fish.

He entered a place that is neither here nor there, a liminal place. Think of an airport – a place we only use to get from one place to another. For Jonah, this liminal place was somewhere between life and death and after three days in this state, he realized that the only way out was through prayer. The second fundamental truth of Judaism is that prayer is essential.

The most ancient tool for dealing with life...is prayer. Pediatric Judaism leads you to believe that prayer requires a belief in God; that it must be done in a language you don't understand; or that

¹ <http://www.jspace.com/news/articles/comic-book-heroes-and-the-jewish-people-who-created-them/11090>

it's only done because you believe it will lead to some miraculous change in status – from sickness to health, from poverty to wealth; or that prayer is for suckers and fundamentalists.

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “Prayer clarifies our hopes and intentions. It helps us discover our true aspirations, the pangs we ignore, the longings we forget. It is an act of self-purification, a quarantine for the soul. It gives us the opportunity to be honest, to say what we believe, and to stand for what we say.”²

Tefillah, the Hebrew word for prayer, comes from the verb *Hitpalel*³, whose root word literally means, “to judge oneself.” Prayer is a step out of our active lives, even for a minute. To judge oneself. It's an attempt to gain true clarity about ourselves; about our ego, our relationship to the world around us and to our greater purpose. It's our moment for self-assessment, our spiritual WebMD, the *only* kind of self-diagnosis we should attempt. It's our way to access Commandment #1⁴ – we are not the center of the world and the world does not revolve around us.

It's okay to pray for the things that matter to you right now. You can ask for things. You can offer thanks. You can plead. You can lament...Just try it. One minute a day... of uninterrupted...distraction-free prayer can make a big difference. Just try it.

Chapter 3

The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it what I tell you.”...Jonah started out and made his way into the city the distance of one day's walk, and proclaimed: “Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”

He was probably thinking, “In forty days, you'll all be wiped out and destroyed. You've treated my people terribly and you're going to pay.” When we read the newspaper, watch TV, learn about all the terrible things people do to each other, there's a part of us that wants to say, ‘Don't let them get away with it! He should get what he deserves; she should pay for what she said to me; they need to experience the full extent of the law.’ We have an innate sense of justice; an instinctual outrage at unfairness and believe that in order to make the world safe for good people, that they have to be protected from the bad guys. But Rabbi Harold Kushner teaches, “Sometimes, justice is just a self-righteous label we paste on the all-too-human desire to get even with someone who has hurt us...When that happens, it's not justice; it's revenge.”⁵

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes...“By decree of the king and his nobles: No man or beast — of flock or herd — shall taste anything!...They shall be covered with sackcloth...and shall cry mightily to God. Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty...” God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them.

When the Assyrian king hears from this little Jewish guy that they're all supposed to repent or risk being destroyed, the king orders everyone to fast and put on sackcloth...even the animals! This section is the most obvious connection to Yom Kippur because it's the most exaggerated example of the third fundamental truth of Judaism - We believe in second chances. Even the king of our

² Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *I Asked for Wonder: A Spiritual Anthology*. New York: Crossroad, 2004. pg. 24

³ the verb ‘to pray’

⁴ refer to Rosh Hashanah sermon 5775 about the Ten Commandments

⁵ Rabbi Harold Kushner sermon entitled, “Clint Eastwood's Commentary on Jonah”

enemy can change his ways. Even the seemingly lowest of the low can be rehabilitated. Even monsters can be tamed.

So according to this, we should forgive Hitler? No, wait - don't get this confused with forgiveness. This fundamental truth is about the capacity to change, not about the need to forgive everyone regardless of what they've done. This is directed towards our own capacity to do evil, to say terrible things. Even your internal monsters and demons can be tamed, can be changed. You can be better. Change is possible.

There's a passage in the Talmud in which a student asks his teacher: "Does God pray? And if so, whom does He pray to, and what does He pray for?" And the teacher answers: "Yes, God prays every day. He prays: May it be My will that My capacity for kindness overcome My sense of justice."⁶

The third fundamental truth teaches us that our thirst for justice must remain strong, but our capacity for kindness must be stronger.

Chapter 4

This was a great evil to Jonah, and he was angry...Now Jonah had left the city and found a place east of the city...God provided a plant, which grew up over Jonah, to provide shade for his head...Jonah was very happy about the plant. But the next day at dawn God provided a worm, which attacked the plant so that it withered...Jonah begged for death, saying, "I would rather die than live." Then the LORD said: "You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?!"

Jonah's a pretty flawed character. Here's a prophet who would rather die than see people repent and change their ways, who cares more about a little plant than the hundreds of thousands of humans and animals that live in Nineveh. Throughout the book, he tries to run away from God and his responsibility, as if moral conscience was geographically limited. But the Jewish conscience has no boundaries - our responsibility is to all of humanity. But the piece of Jonah that makes him a truly Jewish character...he's willing to argue with God. That's our fourth foundational truth - we are a people willing and able to argue with God, to challenge fate, and even to change it. We are a people of moral conscience.

That's why we love to argue. That's why we question everything about everything. Think about the story of Sodom and Gemorrah. God tells Abraham that He's going to destroy the cities because there are no righteous people. But Abraham isn't willing to stand idly by. "Will You indeed sweep away the innocent along with the wicked?" Abraham asks God. "Suppose there are 50 innocent in the city - will You indeed sweep away the place, and not spare it for the sake of the 50 innocent who are in its midst?"⁷ God agrees. "Let's just say they're 45 righteous people, is that good enough?" God agrees. Abraham keeps going, all the way down to 10 innocent people. Unfortunately, the cities were full of terrible people, but that's not the point. The point is that this is the first of many instances in which our tradition calls out to us, "Speak up! Don't be scared to

⁶ Talmud, Brachot 7a

⁷ Gen. 18:24

challenge the norm, don't be scared to challenge anyone, even God!" A bold statement from our tradition and one I'm very proud of.

The modern Hebrew word for 'conscience' is *matzpun* – it comes from the word for 'hiddenness'. And the word *matzpen*, from the same root, means 'compass'. So in our tradition, conscience is the hidden inner compass that guides our lives and must be searched for and recovered repeatedly.⁸

This fourth fundamental truth offers the most effective antidote to Pediatric Judaism. Questioning requires thinking, reflecting, re-defining, re-discovering, re-framing, and re-learning.

To review - Four chapters, four fundamental truths:

Chapter 1 - our God is a universal God, caring for all, and so we must.

Chapter 2 - prayer is effective and essential.

Chapter 3 - we believe in second chances.

Chapter 4 - Jewish conscience requires that we question and argue with God and challenge the ways of the world.

Not all of my conversations in the coffee shops around the University of Pennsylvania were plagued with Pediatric Judaism. One student - Zack Rosen – he was the star of the basketball team, a natural leader, smart guy, charismatic. Not much of a Jewish background, he went to an Episcopal high school, didn't feel much connection to Judaism, but the summer before I met him he had gone to Israel to play in the Maccabiah games. That piqued his interest. We had some great conversations about life, love, and how to find meaning in Judaism.

The problem with defining ourselves as 'cultural Jews' is that we're implying that none of the values, lessons, or depth of our tradition have any place in our daily lives. Judaism isn't supposed to be just in the synagogue, just during services...during the High Holydays. It's supposed to inform everything we do; the decisions we make; the way we see and act in the world.

One conversation I had with Zack – it was summertime and he was on campus to take classes and prep for the next basketball season. He had just read *The Last Lecture*, by Randy Pausch, and it made him think about the concept of time and how much he, and all his friends, wasted it on things like video games and messing around instead of on the things that really mattered. He said, "I wish I could just tell people that they need to get their priorities straight." I had an idea. Two months later, he was standing at the podium, in front of about 900 students and community members, giving the sermon on Kol Nidre.

That's what I'm talking about. Learning that Jonah, and other Bible stories, are more than just kid's stories...learning that we must remember and act according to the four fundamental truths we're reminded of each Yom Kippur – that has the capacity to reverse the effects and squelch the spread of Pediatric Judaism.

1. Our God is a universal God.
2. Prayer is effective and essential.
3. We believe in second chances.

⁸ Schulweis, Harold. *Conscience: The Duty to Obey and the Duty to Disobey*. Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2008. pg. 5

4. Jewish conscience requires that we question and argue.

Give me a call. E-mail me (rabbijoel@templeisaiah.com). I know a great place nearby where we can sit down, talk, and even have a cup of coffee.

Gmar chatimah tova – “may you be inscribed in the book of life for good this year.”