

**Yom Kippur Mincha 5786**  
**“You Cared About the Plant” (Jonah 4:10)**  
**Rabbi Dara Frimmer**

This past spring, my kids and I had rescued a butterfly chrysalis that had attached to our garage door keypad, following the wisdom of the internet, had relocated it to our front porch with dental floss and a long branch...and there it hung, nestled in the thick limbs of a jade plant.

For two weeks we watched and waited. Every time we left or entered our house, we paused to examine the progress. It was like Nature had given us a chrysalis mezuzah, one that we desperately wanted to touch (but were cautioned not to) and then one night, right as we were coming home from taekwondo, it began to crack open. And we sat there on the porch, with a front row view, hearts filled with awe and wonder as the butterfly began to emerge.

At first, we could see a leg and then an antenna. It wriggled and squirmed. The girls refused to leave. I brought out their bowls of pasta and a cheese plate, and it was like a night at the Hollywood bowl.

The wriggling and squirming continued. The girls and I debated helping. Through the kitchen window my husband Michael yelled, “Don’t touch it.”



The girls were worried about the butterfly falling and made a parachute out of a single tissue that they were willing to hold under the chrysalis for as long as necessary...and through the window Michael yelled, “Don’t touch it.”

Eventually it was time for bed...the butterfly had still not emerged...and when I went outside at 10PM to check on its progress, the chrysalis was cracked open and empty, and for one fleeting moment, I thought, “We did it!” Until I looked down and saw the butterfly crumpled on the ground.

The girls were right: It fell, and we weren’t there to catch it.

And I was devastated. For myself. For the girls. For the way of the world.

And as I came back inside wondering how I would tell them in the morning, Maddie comes out of the bedroom, sees me by the door, and asks, “How’s the butterfly?” And I have to tell her, “I’m so sorry, my love, I don’t think it’s going to make it.”

And so, there we were, the two of us solemnly gathered on the porch at 10PM, looking at the butterfly, considering our power and our impotence, and Maddie sighs and says, "Mama, we really needed this one to work."

And that's when I thought of Jonah, chapter 4, and his heartbreak over the death of his plant.

Stay with me.

As you just heard (thank you, David Levine!), at the very end of the Book of Jonah, there is a bizarre moment when Jonah falls apart over the death of a plant.

He has arrived at Nineveh after begging God to choose someone else to carry God's message. Since God does not take no for an answer, Jonah arrives after a long journey through the water and the whale and effectively preaches the prophet's favorite message, "change-or-die," and it works. The people agree to change.

But instead of rejoicing, Jonah is devastated. *He did not want God to save them.* Forget compromise, compassion and concession. Jonah wanted the world to be a place of clarity, consistency, and control - reward the good and punish the bad. No exceptions.

As Jonah laments and grieves this perceived injustice, he takes a moment to rest in a hut (a sukkah) and God births a miraculous plant to give him shade and comfort. The moment is brief and beautiful - Jonah takes a breath and releases some of the sadness. And then, the very next day, God births a worm to destroy it. No more plant. No more shade. No more comfort.

Jonah's sadness is now replaced by rage. He is livid. Tormented.irate. "If this is the nature of life," he cries out, "then I'd rather die."

And God's response is swift:

"You cared about the plant, (says God) which YOU did not work for and which YOU did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight.

And should not I, God, 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 animals as well!"

In other words: You mourn this plant and grieve the loss of this shade and this moment of respite that you, Jonah, did not create and could not have predicted

or controlled...but you cannot mourn or empathize with an entire city I might have otherwise destroyed?

And, I've always thought, "Right on, God. Tell him how it is!"

Except this year, I feel like I *finally* understand Jonah's devastation. He just wanted something to go right in a world that was spinning off its axis. For something good, in the midst of the awful, to be sustained. For something solid NOT to break down, and for something full of potential not to disappoint.

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Now, most commentators take God's side (a wise move if you want to cover your bases) and the midrashim reflect the view that Jonah was spoiled and ungrateful and myopic and rigid. How could he not see the big picture and celebrate God's Grace and acknowledge the fallibility of all human beings and the NEED for a God who is forgiving to ensure we can survive? Someday, even the most righteous amongst us may need a God who is slow to anger and unending in graciousness.

But, to take Jonah's side for just a moment, maybe he *just needed something to go right*. Over the course of 4 chapters, Jonah's world had been turned upside down. He was forced to leave his home. To adjust everything he thought about how the world was supposed to work. In his attempt to hide, he is thrown overboard and swallowed by a whale.

*How many of us have been feeling similarly disoriented without even stepping foot off the shore?*

These days, it feels like the lines dividing good and evil are blurred and rewards and punishments are given out to the wrong people *despite what God and scripture and our ancestors promised*...and not just one day, or one week, it feels like months...maybe even years of trying to find our balance. To feel like we are stepping on solid ground.

And it would be nice, for just a moment, to catch our breath and believe that the world works - that the good are rewarded and the bad are punished. It would be nice, for just a day, to experience a world that is fair and predictable and orderly. You know what, I'll take just an afternoon of things working the way they should.

*It would be nice for something to go right.*

Maybe that was Jonah's plant. A beautiful plant that grew overnight, from the ground, as expected, and brought shade from the heat, as expected, and respite

from the pain...a balm for the soul. And, it came at just the right moment, as if on Divine command, announcing a change in the story -- a break from what had been -- and a promise that the future would be different. All of this, from one singular plant.

So, too, I think, with our chrysalis. One singular butterfly emerging, magnificently and majestically, might have been reassurance that the beauty and mystery of the world, despite its harsh environs, was still in play, despite the destruction all around us.

And then it died. The plant. The butterfly. The symbol of hope.

*We just wanted something to work.*

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There's a theory that the bizarre ending of Chapter 4 is not intentional - that there's a missing piece to the story. God's speech was actually much longer. God had more to say to Jonah about empathy and identity and forgiveness...but somehow, somewhere, we lost it.

Which gives us permission to wonder: *What else was God going to add?*

I wonder if God would have helped Jonah see past the plant to the fragile and fractured world around him:

You think you're upset about the plant, Jonah? (Says God) It's not the plant. It's the world on fire. It's awful human behavior. It's war and violence. It's unending suffering. It's the uncertainty that we can count on anything... But that's too much pain and suffering for most of us to hold, let alone attempt to change or understand. So, we block out the world, and focus on what's in front of us.

But the plant can help.

Sometimes, when we've exhausted ourselves and overstretched our capacity for awareness and empathy, we shut down. We harden. We turn inwards to only think of ourselves and our loss. But a moment like this, in which we reconnect to grief, when we can see the preciousness of life and the inevitability of death, in those moments when our hearts break, it also reminds us of our capacity to love. Not just ourselves or the object immediately in our view...but to love another. To love our neighbor.

*I wonder if God spoke to Jonah as a true **partner**, not just a prophet:*

Try to see what I see, Jonah, says God. I created this world. I created these people. I know their DNA. I know their fragility and their potential. It breaks my heart to see them suffer and all the ways they cause suffering for others. But, I'm not giving up. And you shouldn't either.

Take the emotional connection you feel for this singular plant, and pivot towards my people. There is an imperfect city in which you now reside that needs you to stay connected, no matter how much it breaks your heart. No matter how flawed its construction.

To live in this world is to live with the commandment to love your neighbor as you love yourself, not knowing if it is possible...and still striving to make it so.

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To love your neighbor might be one of the hardest commandments to follow - and, according to Rabbi Akiva and so many others, *also the most essential*.

I was thinking about this commandment as I mourned our butterfly. **So much easier to love the broken bug than the depraved, degenerate, debased and despised human.** So much simpler to mourn the comfort that might have come had it only worked, rather than turn to the world and grieve all the ways our world is not working out the way we need it to: for us, for our neighbors, for the strangers, for everyone.

*You think it's about the plant?* says God. It's not about the plant, but we can use the plant to begin again, right here, right now.

In this moment of heartbreak and grief, in this moment of rage and ferocity, in this space when we can turn from our individual pain and see the pain of the person next to us, the pain of a city that is desperately trying to survive, the pain of a world that feels rudderless...it is still possible, even now, to find our pathway towards healing and wholeness. To love your neighbor as you love yourself **EVEN** when it feels too hard and overwhelming.

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I shared this story a few months ago at a Shabbat service and afterwards, Shabbat regulars and longtime Isaiah members Paul and Karen Richter approached me, and Paul said: *"How many do you want?"*

Now, if you're confused by that question, don't worry, so was I.

“How many chrysalis do you want?” he said. “Do you want eggs? Caterpillars? We’ve got them all.”

And so it was that a few weeks later, the girls and I paid a visit to the Richters, the butterfly whisperers of Culver City, and we began again: with milkweed and caterpillars and a recycled CostCo salad container filled with hope.

I’m pleased to say, with excellent tutelage (including some lessons from Ted Stein and Lori Krop who may be single-handedly doubling the butterfly population in Cheviot/Rancho Park), the girls and I have *also* made many contributions to the Monarch Aviation Club.



Eleanor and Madeline have learned well, and are now excellent teachers for the neighborhood kids, teaching all there is to know about metamorphosis, including the heartbreak that comes from loving something (or someone) that is fragile and flawed. They are finding their way in a world that is broken and beautiful, discovering the partners and teachers who can guide them, and the words to describe, detail and delineate all that is holy.

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In Mishnah Berakhot 9:5, we learn that One is obligated to recite a blessing for the bad that befalls them, just as they recite a blessing for the good that befalls them, as it is stated: “And you shall love Adonai, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5).

This year, may it be that our moments of loss lead us towards love.  
That our pain points us towards purpose.  
May our heartache reveal the spaciousness of our heart, soul and might -  
That we may bring blessing and wholeness to all that is broken.

Kein Yehi Ratzon. May it be so.  
Shana Tova.