

JONAH 5779

Rabbi Jonathan Blake

I never entertained the idea that I would be standing before you on the afternoon of Yom Kippur to introduce the Book of Jonah. Every summer, when I would approach our congregant and teacher Rabbi Aaron Panken with the invitation, he would humbly accept, and then warn me, “Just so you know, I’m accepting for this year, but I never know exactly where I may be next year.”

I never really took him seriously, and, more to the point, I never read into that statement anything other than a reasonable comment about the many demands on the schedule of the President of the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, one of the foremost Jewish leaders of our time.

Now, in hindsight, his disclaimer “I never know exactly where I may be next year” takes on new meaning. We are all missing our friend, his wisdom, his humor, his joy in teaching, his love of the Jewish tradition and the Jewish people and the human family. We are all with Lisa, Eli, Sam, and Aaron’s extended family in our prayers and memories on this Yom Kippur. And we are all still illuminated by his inextinguishable light, as a human being and as a guide on the often tortuous pathway of life.

May he rest peacefully. And may we continue to learn and study Torah in his name. Indeed, there could be no more poignant and potent way to perpetuate his life's work and his legacy.

And that, of course, is why I look to Jonah, this text that, here at WRT might as well be synonymous with Rabbi Aaron Panken—his ability to draw out new insights with each successive Yom Kippur was nothing short of astonishing. It almost became a game: what's Aaron going to say this year? So today, as Aaron would have, let us find something new in this ancient book.

I've been looking through the Book of Jonah, and I happened to notice that one word appears three times, and that is the Hebrew verb *livroach*, which means “to escape.”

It comes up twice in the first chapter and once in the fourth or final chapter, and each time it announces a central plot point: Jonah's attempt *to escape*—*livroach*—from God's command, to go to the sinful people of Nineveh with God's warning of impending doom. Jonah thought he could escape from God, which may be the ultimate fool's errand. God told him to go to Nineveh in the East; instead Jonah attempts to escape to what was the westernmost point in the known world.

The first time, the narrator tells us *Vayakom Yonah livroach Tarshisha*, that Jonah, upon hearing God's word, started to escape to Tarshish.¹

¹ Jonah 1:3.

Later in the chapter, when the sailors of the storm-tossed boat interrogate Jonah, he confesses his purpose, and we learn *Ki yad'u ha-anashim ki-mi-lifnei Adonai hu voreach*, that the men learned that he was escaping from God.² And finally, in the fourth chapter, after the Ninevites repent and God retracts the punishment, Jonah says in utter exasperation ... “*Al ken kidamti livroach Tarshisha*,” “This is the the reason I tried to escape to Tarshish in the first place!”³ — in other words, he’s upset that God’s prophecy of destruction will now *not* come true, and he would have been better off going to Tarshish.

According to the Rabbis, the Scripture cannot contain even one extraneous word, so any time a word is repeated, it must mean something.

So I’ve been thinking about this threefold mention of Jonah’s *escape*, and I’ve decided that it probably has something to say to us on this day of Atonement.

At the same time, over the last year or so, I’ve become something of an enthusiast on the subject of mechanical timepieces—watches in particular. Not quartz watches, in which a battery sends electricity to a sliver of mineral quartz crystal through an electronic circuit. The quartz crystal oscillates—that is, vibrates back and forth—at a precise frequency: exactly 32768 times each second, which

² Jonah 1:10.

³ Jonah 4:2.

makes quartz watches much more accurate than mechanical timepieces.

But, mechanical watches—whether the old-fashioned manual-wind kind, or the more modern automatic models, which translate the movements of your wrist into energy for the watch’s mainspring and therefore do not need to be wound, so long as they are worn regularly—well, these watches, while less precise, tend to be more desirable, more collectible, and more valuable, or at least more expensive.

In any case, it turns out that every mechanical watch features a part called the “escapement.” The escapement is the mechanism that transfers energy to the timekeeping element and allows the number of oscillations, those essential back-and-forth vibrations—to be counted. The escapement takes the energy supplied by a tightly wound mainspring and causes the watch’s gear train to advance or “escape” with that energy by a fixed amount, which in turn moves the clock’s hands forward at a steady rate. It’s not as accurate as a quartz watch, but a well-made escapement can keep time to within plus or minus a couple seconds a day, which is pretty amazing, when you remember that no electronic parts are used.

The escapement—this part that allows the energy held in the spring to *escape*, to be released steadily and thereby power the watch—can be thought of as the “beating heart” of the watch. Right now, I’m actually wearing a watch with a cutout in the dial

that reveals the escapement, so I can watch my little watch heart beating even as you are also counting the seconds until it's time to break the fast.

Escapements, it so happens, are used elsewhere as well. Manual typewriters used escapements to move the carriage as each typewriter key was pressed. The ancient Greeks used escapements to power the basins that would wash their clothes, and the medieval Chinese used liquid-driven escapements in water clocks. In a piano, the escapement is the mechanism that enables the hammer to fall back as soon as it has struck the string, so that the music won't get stuck on a single held note, and the next note can resound distinctly.

In all these settings, we see “escape” as a way of moving things forward—driving the action. The same is true of Jonah. Without Jonah's escape, there is no book of Jonah—had he not attempted to flee to Tarshish, had he dutifully headed off to Nineveh, there's no plot here.

It does seem to me that *escape* is an important theme to consider on Yom Kippur, because even as an escapement drives a watch, and Jonah's escape drives the story, so too does the theme of escape—and, critically, of *return*—drive these high holidays; indeed, it drives our human endeavors.

After all, what are these holidays but an invitation to return following escape? There is, in each of us, a Jonah—a part of us that wants to defy and deny the inevitable. Over the course of a Jewish year, we escape our plans and priorities and call it “procrastination.” We escape our responsibilities and relationships and only on the brink of estrangement do we sometimes recognize how distant we feel. Like Jonah, we escape our obligations to our fellow human beings, rationalizing that they’re not really like us, that they are “other.” We even attempt to escape the inevitable, hard realities of life—through emotional detachment, diversion and distraction, self-medication (they don’t call all of these “escapism” for nothing)—only to realize that, when it comes to reality, there really *is no escape*.

We are all called to the one and only life we are given. What has happened, what we must now endure, no one can change. We must meet what life gives us with courage and affirmation even when it is excruciating.

Meanwhile, the clock is ticking.

To this end, the Book of Job uses the verb *livroach* in a revealing way: “*My days fly swifter than a runner,*” says Job. “*They escape without seeing good.*”⁴

⁴ Job 9:25.

The beauty of the Jewish tradition, I think, is that it proposes a return for every escape, a way back home, no matter how far we've strayed. Jonah's escape was dramatic but short-lived. *Our* escape, enacted over the last year, from our truest selves, from our innermost divine spark—need not be irreversible. Yom Kippur says: Come home. You can always come home.

My watch—which is more charming than precise—says about ten minutes have elapsed since I started my talk. In that time, the escapement has been releasing all that energy to move these little hands forward. But for every push forward, there's also a momentary pause, when a tooth catches on a little pallet, returning the escapement to its “locked” state. That's what generates the characteristic constant “ticking” sound in a mechanical watch—think of the “60 Minutes” clock.

Escape, pause, and return—the energy that powers the story of Jonah also powers a watch, and above all, it powers our spiritual lives.

Escape, pause, and return—the dynamic that keeps us moving forward toward our best possible selves and a world made better—one tiny tick forward at a time.

