

## Yom Kippur Torah, Haftarah, and Jonah Introductions

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### Yom Kippur Morning: Nitzavim

At Shir Hadash, we celebrate wedding anniversaries at services, typically 25<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup>, with a special blessing, but the custom of coming up for an aliyah and *mi sheberach* blessing on these occasions is much older. However, what we don't see traditionally in Judaism is renewal of wedding vows. The traditional view is either you meant it when you originally said *haray at*, and then it is still binding, or you didn't mean it, and saying it again will not avail.

And yet this morning's Torah portion is about a renewal of vows of sorts. The next generation, those born in the desert, are preparing to enter the Promised Land, and before they do, Moses gathers them all together again, to enter into this covenant, this vow with God. At Sinai they already committed: *Naaseh ve Nishmah*—we will do and we will hear. So what's the necessity for this second go-around?

We might think it's because they are a new generation not present at Sinai, but the text insists that this oath is binding on all generations into the future, those present here today and those not present, so we can assume they were part of the previous commitment as well.

It is also interesting that we are reading this on Yom Kippur morning, when last night we began the service with the Kol Nidre, releasing ourselves from oaths,

vows, and seven different Aramaic words for verbal commitments. And in case we didn't get the point, Kol Nidre not only begins by negating our vows, it also ends with dramatic words that echo this disruption.

If you have been to a Jewish wedding you might have heard the rabbi read the Ketubah, or at least a little bit from the beginning and then the end. Every Ketubah, whether traditional or contemporary, ends with the words *vehakol Sharir Ve Kayam*—and all this is binding and established. But Kol Nidre ends the opposite way—*lo shiriri ve lo kayamim*—they are not binding and they are not established.

What's going on?

It is prudent in real life to promise little and deliver a lot. Abraham provides us with this model in welcoming guests, and the Rabbis comment on it in *Pirke Avot*.

But maybe sometimes we need to do the opposite: to set high standards even with the realization that we may not be able to meet them. The release of the Kol Nidre gives us the ability to aspire higher, without fear of failure, and our Torah portion this morning provides the meat on the bones of those aspirations.

Recognizing that we may not meet all of our goals this coming year, the Torah portion guides us to aim high and set out vision beyond what we have already achieved.

### **Yom Kippur Morning: Isaiah**

Unlike many Haftarah portions that are difficult to understand and require quite a bit of historical context, the section chosen for this morning's reading speaks

directly and forthrightly. It is not one of the readings that is read only in Reform circles, but is the traditional reading for Yom Kippur morning, across all the denominations. It comes in striking contrast to the traditional Yom Kippur morning reading about the sacrifices and offerings that the High Priest would bring, when animal sacrifice was still practiced; but in our context as well, it provides a counterpoint to the Torah portion.

The Torah portion commands us to love God and keep God's commandments, and now the prophet will tell us what that means. Outward displays of religiosity are meaningless, the prophet insists, unless accompanied by right action. Our true contrition on this day will be expressed not only in prayer and fasting but in our actions to relieve the suffering of others, with a particular emphasis on those wronged by the legal system, "by unlocking the shackles of injustice, undoing the fetters of bondage, letting the oppressed go free."

Doing these things is not only good and right but is necessary for there to be renewal for us as individuals and as a society.

### **Yom Kippur Afternoon: Jonah**

The Book of Jonah would have worked better as an inspirational text for Yom Kippur afternoon had it concluded with the end of Chapter 3. Not only would it have been just that little bit shorter—Chapter 4 isn't actually that long—but it would have stated its case, without confusion.

Jonah is called by God to act as a prophet but instead flees. Caught by God, he then repents in the belly of the whale and fulfills his mission. The people of Nineveh, hearing his words, repent as well, and God forgives them—and we all live happily ever after.

But that isn't where the story ends. Instead we meet Jonah the day after, and he is dissatisfied with God's decision to save Nineveh and is unwilling to learn from God's mercy towards him in providing the shade plant. He feels no empathy with "the 120,000 children who don't yet know their right hand from their left, not to mention all the many animals".

Rabbi Avi Strausberg suggests that this strange ending comes about because our tradition is afraid we will walk away with the wrong message. The Book of Jonah is not meant to arouse our righteous indignation and desire to be sure that the wicked are punished. Instead we are meant to contrast the insightful sea captain and humble king of Nineveh, who each in their own way argue with Jonah, in favor of taking a chance in an uncertain world.

The sea captain urges Jonah to get up and pray, as maybe, just maybe, "*ulai,*" your God will take mercy on you. It's not a sure thing, he says, but you can't give up on that possibility and just bury yourself in sleep.

Similarly, the king has heard the words, "Forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed." But for him this leads not to despair, but to hope: There are yet 40 days to change the evil decree.

It is only Jonah who is unwilling to exert himself if a good outcome is only an unlikely possibility.

There are so many times in life when we are called upon to act, where it's hard and the outcome is not guaranteed. We are held back by the concern that maybe we won't succeed and therefore our work will be in vain. But we are to go forth today, remembering that Jonah is not the hero of his own book, but the antihero. We can see where Jonah's thinking leads him—nowhere—and chose instead the path of the sea captain and the king and our tradition. As long as there is life, there is hope. We are called the people who are captives of hope, and so we must act whenever there is any chance that our actions will help.