JONAH

In a few minutes we read the book of Jonah. This is a very curious book. I will even go so far as to say a comical interlude ( with moral teachings)in our day –long vigil with T’shuvah. Let’s look at the book of Jonah through the lens of Pardas- the garden of interpretation.

First-the P’shat. Jonah, the son of Ammittai (which may be a word-play on the word Emet-truth) is told by God (probably in a dream) to go to Nineveh, the great city and tell the people to repent or the city would be overthrown. Jonah does not want to go to Nineveh as God asks and books passage on a ship heading for Tarshish. But God sends a big storm and the sailors figure out that the storm is because of Jonah. The sailors are unable to bring the boat ashore and reluctantly cast Jonah overboard. The sea calms down and the sailors offer sacrifice to God. Now Jonah is in the sea and is swallowed by a “dag gadol”, a big fish which some say is a whale (picture Marvin and Dory in Finding Nemo). Jonah stays in the whale for 3 days. He calls out to God from “ the belly of Sheol “ repents and says he will do what God asks. God commands the fish to spew him out. God once more tells Jonah to go to Nineveh- and this time he does. He does not mince words but declares the shortest prophesy ever declaring: ”Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown”. The king , the people – even the animals repent and the city is saved. But Jonah is not happy about this. He thinks that the wicked should be punished. He leaves the city and builds a booth-a sukkah -sits under a “kikayon” vine which shades him from the sun. He is content but God sends a worm that destroys the vine and Jonas is uncomfortable in the sun to the extent that he says-“ I would rather die than live”. God asks him (.rather plaintively I might add)-“you cared more about the plant which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left and many beasts as well!”

And so ends the book of Jonah.

Now let’s skip Remez for now and go to D’rash. What are some of the explanations for this story?

First-Who is Jonah? He is a prophet from the tribe of Zebulum who are the sea -farers according to Jaccob’s blessing. He lives in the northern kingdom. According to Midrash he received 3 prohesies-the first was that the borders of the northern kingdom of Israel would be restored which occurred making him a local hero.

Second, he prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem (because of the evil ways of the Jews) which did not happen at that time( but did happen as we know) So he was labeled a false prophet. The third time is described in detail in the book of Jonah. It is explained that Jonah did not want to save Nineveh because he could not save Jerusalem. He also knew (not sure how) that Nineveh, which is in Assyria would destroy the Northern Kingdom. If Nineveh were destroyed, Israel would be saved. It is said that he loved Israel so much that he was willing to go against God’s command.

Second- Who is the great fish? There are different twists to this part of the story. Is the great fish Leviathan? Is it Leviathan who is created on the fifth day and waits for 2000 years to appear in the Jonah story? Another midrash suggests that Leviathan was sent to eat the big fish but is thwarted by Jonah who vows to kill Leviathan at the end of days. (This is getting a bit much for me.) There is also a story that the fish was male and had a lot of room in his belly-Jonah was comfortable there. This fish took Jonah on a journey –He saw the stone of the Akedah, the parting of the Red Sea, the depths of Sheol, the foundation stone of the world, the pillars upon which Jerusalem was built and others. So God sent a pregnant female, who had little room in her belly. This caused Jonah to be uncomfortable and finally cry out to God and promise to fulfill the vow. So the fish spews him out onto dry land.

Third- What is the kirkayon plant? This is the only time this is mentioned in the Tanach. It may have been a ricinus plant, which is a castor bean plant. An interesting fact about the castor bean plant according the Guiness World Record is that it is the most poisonous plant in the world. But the plant only lasts a day because it is eaten by a worm. Jonah is not only hot from the sun but also has lost his hair in the belly of the fish and was bothered by heat and swarms of insects. The kirkayon plant represents the uncertainty of life- here today, gone tomorrow.

Fourth-Why forty days until destruction of Nineveh. Well obvious ones are the reference to the flood and also to the years of wandering in the desert. Not so obvious and yet a connector to Yom Kippur is that the Midrash states that Jonah delivers the prophesy on Rosh Hodesh Elul and that 40 days hence is- you guessed it- Erev YK.

Now onto Remez. For this I will briefly discuss the themes of the story.

First-Strict Justice verses Mercy. Jonah wants Nineveh destroyed because it is full of sinners. According to one midrash, Nineveh, the great city represents the world. We all know that the world is what it is- No details needed here. But I am reminded of 2 stories- One is the story of the palace where Avraham comes across a palace which is burning and wonders who the king could be and why he lets his palace burn? Of course the King is God and the burning palace represents all the terrible things humanity has done in the world . When Avraham demands why God does not fix it, God replies that only humans can fix what is broken. Another story occurs in heaven King Manashe , the wicked king who has led the Jews astray, is about to die and repent on his deathbed. The angels know that if God hears his confession he will be forgiven so they lock the gates of heaven to block the confession. But God pierces a hole under his chair, the Throne of Glory, hears Manashe’s confession and grants forgiveness. The angels are furious but God explains – this is my nature – this is what I do.

Second-Judaism and the world. Jonah did not want Nineveh to survive for 2 reasons- First, if the inhabitants of Nineveh repented that would make the Jews in Jerusalem look bad because they were also sinners and were not heeding the call to repent. Second if Nineveh were destroyed then the power of Assyria would be diminished and perhaps the northern kingdom would not be destroyed. But God exists in the present moment and what was needed was to save Nineveh no matter what the future would bring for Judaism. Jonah realizes that he cannot change the course of action because he does not know the future and his duty is to the present moment. God admonishes him-All of the inhabitants of the world even the cattle, which represent not only the animal kingdom but our base instincts are granted God’s mercy and Chesed. When the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and the Egyptions perished, the angles rejoiced. But God silenced them. Are they not my people too?

Third: Jonah’s plight and flight mirror our own lives. Jonah goes down, down, down and down( down to Yaffa, down to the ship, down to sleep, down into Sheol) before he is able to face his responsibility. The Vilna Gaon tells us that Jonah’s journey is one that we all must take. Sometimes it is easier to run away than to face the fabric of our lives. We are afraid to take on the tasks that require –let’s face it- lifelong work. YK is a time when we cannot hide from who we are or what we have done. We are generously given the opportunity once more to face up to the challenge of being human. To learn to integrate the strength of our right hand- Chazah v’Amatz with our left hand –Chesed V’Rachamim. But I must add that even though Jonah’s journey is difficult it is an ADVENTURE.

Which brings me to the last part of interpretation- Sod- the secrets. There are esoteric interpretations of battles of End of Days and death and resurrection but I’m not going to go there. Here’s what I think:

1.We read Jonah on Mincha YK because we need something that is going to WAKE US UP. We have been practicing our V’dui all morning and part of the afternoon. We are almost in a stupor. Now is the time to begin to PAY ATTENTION. Soon we will enter N’ilah and conclude this daylong rehearsal of death. It is time to begin to think about how to live. What better way than to hear a story of vivid imagination about stormy seas and near-death experiences, mystical fish, journeys in a time machine to great moments in our Jewish story, the salvation of a people even though they are not perfect.

And lastly, Jonah is about Kvetching. Sometimes we just need to complain before we take on the sorrows of living. The Rebbe Nachman of Bretzlov has a wonderful spiritual practice for this. It is called Hitbaddidut and here is how you do it. Go outside- it does not have to be deep in the forest- and begin to talk OUTLOUD to God. Complain, rail against condition of the world-whatever comes to mind- Even if you do not know what to say- Say” I don’t know what to say “and keep saying it until perhaps- or perhaps not something arises. Do this for at least 10-15 minutes. You may be amazed at what happens. R. Nachman says:”It is very good to pouryou’re your thoughts before God like a child pleading before his father. God calls us His Children as it is written in D’varim (14:1) “You are children to God.” Therefore it is good to express your thoughts and troubles to God like a child complaining and pestering his father.” Perhaps you can try this at our next prayer break.

And so I leave you with 3 thoughts from the book of Jonah.

1. WAKE UP
2. PAY ATTENTION
3. Talk to God OUTLOUD.

Thank you for taking this journey with me today.

G’mar Hatimah Tovah.