Shalom.

Today’s Haftarah reading, the book of Yonah, begins with God telling Yonah, “Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgement upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me.” Yonah, however, does not go to Nineveh to deliver this message to its morally corrupt people. Instead, he boards a ship going to Tarshish. Then, a huge storm comes and threatens the safety of the ship. After Yonah recognizes the storm as a sign from God, he jumps off in order to save the other sailors. He is then swallowed by a great fish, where he remains for three days and three nights. He prays for God to let him out, and the fish lets him out on the shores of Nineveh. There, he says to the people of Nineveh, “forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” The people of Nineveh, everyone from the livestock to the king, repent, and God does not punish them.

But, why were they going to be punished in the first place? They were “wicked,” yes, but what does that mean? Unlike the people of Nineveh, the sailors on the boat with Yonah were not described as evil or deserving of punishment, even though they were not Hebrews. This shows that, even in the Tanakh, being a non-Hebrew in and of itself is not a good enough reason to be punished by God. In fact, the sailors were good people; even after it became clear that Yonah was the reason for the storm, they tried everything they could to avoid having  to jump overboard. When he did eventually jump overboard, they prayed for forgiveness and made a sacrifice. They were even described as fearing God.

If they were not Hebrews, though, what does it mean to fear God? In her book *Studies in Devarim*, Nehama Leibowitz, a 20th century Torah scholar, lists four times in the Torah where the expression “to fear God” is used.

The first, in Bereishit 20:11, Avraham is telling Avimelech why he claimed  Sarah as his sister, when she was really his wife. He says, “because I thought, surely *the fear of God* is not in this place,” meaning that he thought that Avimelech would have killed Avraham in order to take Sarah as his wife if Avimelech had thought that Avraham and Sarah were married.

The next one, in Bereishit 42:18, Joseph imprisons all but one of his brothers, telling that one to go and get Benjamin, so that they can prove that they are not lying that he exists. He then changes his mind, and lets all of the brothers except one free, and tells them to find Benjamin, saying, “Do this, and live, *for I fear God*.”

The third example is from Shemot 1:17. Here, Pharaoh commands midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill the Hebrew baby boys as soon as they are born. However, the story continues by saying. “*But the midwives feared God* and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them.”

Lastly, in Devarim 25:17-18, Moshe recounts the Israelites’ battle with Amalek, saying, “Remember what Amalek did to you on the way, when you went out of Egypt, how he happened upon you on the way and cut off all the stragglers at your rear, when you were faint and weary, and *he did not fear God*.”

What is the similarity between these pesukim? They all involve issues of morality. In these situations, the phrase ‘to fear God’ does not mean literally fearing God. It means having a sense of morality. Even though Avimelech was not a Hebrew, he still feared God, meaning that he would not have killed Avraham in order to marry Sarah. This was not because he had a fear of the God that Avraham worshipped, but that he knew right from wrong. The same thing goes with the midwives. Even though, by most interpretations, they weren't Hebrews, they still were described as God-fearing, because they were ethical people.

Nehama Leibowitz uses this to show why we are commanded to wipe out the memory of

Amalek. The Amalekites were the only people in this list who were described as not being God-fearing. Therefore, they were not moral people. The Amalek can be described as more of an idea than an actual people. The Amalek represent everything that does not fear God. They have no sense of right and wrong. That is why, in Nehama Leibowitz’s opinion, it is acceptable to be commanded to wipe out their memory. While it is hard for many people, myself included, to buy into the idea that wiping out an entire nation could ever be a good thing, it is much easier to buy into the idea that ridding the world of all amorality. is a good thing.

This is the difference between the people of Nineveh and the sailors on the ship. The sailors, while they did not pray to the same God as Jonah, still feared God, while the people of Nineveh did not. The people of Nineveh were not just people who did not believe in God, which would not matter; they were people who did not fear God.

So, if they were such horrible people, then why were they forgiven at all? Did they only repent when told of possible consequences? Or did they repent because they felt it was the right, or moral, thing to do? The answers to these questions may lie in a more unexpected source than a scholarly book of Torah study: NBC’s *The Good Place*.

*The Good Place* is a sitcom about a woman, Eleanor, who is placed in heaven, or, as it is called, “the good place,” even though she does not belong there, and it is surprisingly relevant to this holiday. After learning that she was placed in the good place by mistake, Eleanor seeks help from Chidi, who was a professor of ethics and moral philosophy when he was alive. However, his help does not have much effect on how good of a person Eleanor is, at first. The reason for this is clear: Eleanor does not actually want to become better or to do good things; she simply wants to avoid being found out and sent to the bad place. With her motivation ultimately rooted in selfishness, her good person score does not increase.

It seems that the people of Nineveh are the same way. It seems that the only reason they repent is to avoid God’s punishment. However, viewing repentance as the method to avoid God’s punishment ignores the main part of the message of *The Good Place*. Eleanor does learn from Chidi’s lessons, even if it does take a few episodes. Eleanor recognizes that she has done things wrongly, and admits to them. She puts her amorality behind her, and commits to doing better. When she is put in situations where she could make the same mistakes, she chooses not to make them, not because she is seeking to avoid punishment, but simply because she wants to be a better person.

Incidentally, those are the steps to doing teshuva. Eleanor shows that she, and by extension, everyone, is capable of change. By doing teshuva, she is able to call into question the entire way that the afterlife is run. To many characters, it no longer makes sense to send people to the bad place, when they could simply learn to be a good person instead.

The people of Nineveh were like Eleanor. When they learned that they were wrong, they were able to change their ways, no matter how horrible they were before. Simply put, the people of Nineveh were morally corrupt who deserved to be sent to the bad place. However, they were still able to do teshuva, and earn their spot in the good place.

Gamar chatima tova.