

# Drasha on Yonah for Yom Kippur 5785

by Yossi Fendel

*If you would like to follow along, this D'rasha will be commenting on Yonah Chapter 1, verses 4-6.*

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“AAAAAH, WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE!”

Yoskeh was the captain of the Bore'ach, a merchant ship that had made its way across the Mediterranean and back many times under his command. He had seen his share of storms, and this was indeed an impressive one. The masts were groaning with an otherworldly howl under the stress of the violent winds, and the deck had become so slippery and moved so erratically that the only way to get across it was to crawl on one's belly.

Yoskeh had enough experience at the helm to know that once a tempest like this caught hold of the ship, there wasn't much that could be done to help. But there **was** something that could be done to make things worse.

Panic. And as luck would have it, this particular crew of the Bore'ach were very skilled at panicking.

“THIS IS IT! WE'RE DONE FOR!” the sailors screamed.

“Now hang on,” Yoskeh called above their shouts in a confident tone that was loud enough to be heard amid the crashing waves but still just a hair below full-volume, so as to project a sense of security. “We're going to get through this.”

“NO WE'RE NOT! THIS IS THE END! MAN THE LIFEBOATS! THERE ARE NO LIFEBOATS! WHY AREN'T THERE ANY LIFEBOATS? WHO BUILDS A MERCHANT SHIP WITHOUT LIFEBOATS?!?”

“Take a breath!” Yoskeh's voice also started to quaver a bit. “This storm is strong, but it **will** pass.”

“OH MY GOD, THE MAST!”

Indeed the main ship's mast had stopped groaning and instead gave a crack that could have been mistaken for a thunderclap. The entire top half of the mast plummeted overboard into the sea.

Things were not looking good. The sailors were scattering to and fro in disarray. But Yoskeh suddenly had an idea.

“What did you just say?” he asked the sailors.

The sailors looked around at each other. “Um... that we're all going to die?”

“No,” Yoskeh said, “after that.”

“Um... who builds a ship without lifeboats?”

“**After** that,” Yoskeh said, “just now, what did you say?”

“Oh my God, the mast?”

“Yes, that’s it! You prayed to your god! Do it again!”

The men looked at each other. Was Yoskeh serious? “Hey captain, the prayer didn’t work - the mast broke.” one of the sailors pointed out.

“No,” insisted Yoskeh, “it absolutely did work! The broken mast didn’t hit any of us! It didn’t even hit the ship at all, but fell harmlessly into the water! Now pray! Everyone!”

And somehow, the crew listened.

The storm still tossed the Bore’ach just as furiously as it had before, but things strangely started to seem a little calmer. The sailors no longer were frantically screaming or slipping across the deck, but were instead at their posts, intoning supplications and chants and songs of praise to the gods they were familiar with.

...

Friends, we are in the midst of quite a storm, aren’t we? Threats to our people - the threat to those in our homeland and threats to our people scattered around the world, in America - and especially the threat here in Berkeley - is terrifying. Threats of nature’s disruption to our ability to live in comfort - from a 95-degree heat wave during the Yamim Noraim in Berkeley to a vicious hurricane season on the other side of the country - are terrifying. Threats of a breakdown in our Republic caused by unprecedented levels of partisan extremism are terrifying.

We can start by not making it worse. As we travel through this storm of galactic proportions, we do well to heed the instruction written on the cover of our galaxy’s most notable guide for travelers:

Don’t Panic.

And fortunately our tradition comes with a state-of-the-art panic-avoidance system:

*T’fillah*. Prayer.

Pray to God in your way. Pray in song. Pray in silence. Pray while walking. Pray while sitting. Pray with others. Pray alone.

We will endure the storm, and T’fillah will help see us through.

...

Meanwhile, back on the Bore’ach...

The crew were beginning to lose patience with their prayers. Yes, they were breathing easier, and their heartbeats had dropped to more comfortable levels. But the ship was still being heaved dramatically in all directions, and the cold rain pounded the sailors' skin mercilessly.

"Captain," one brave nearby sailor spoke up, "you've been at sea longer than any of us. Surely there's something we can do! The prayer was helpful, and I know my God has listened to my pleas and will do what she can to help, but don't we have a role to play also?"

Yoskeh had been mulling this over himself during his own prayer. In his experience, most storms just need to be ridden out. Hold on tight, make sure that you aren't tossed overboard, and wait. But this storm seemed different - stronger, yes, but also more tenacious. Every time Yoskeh's gut told him that things were about to calm down... well, they wouldn't. Yoskeh was starting to feel a little antsy, and was not surprised that his crew did also.

"What sort of role are you thinking about playing?" Yoskeh asked the brave sailor. "What do you imagine there is for us to do in the face of such terrifying power?"

"You're the captain!" protested the sailor. "Aren't there any tangible, concrete steps you can think of that I can take to ensure that our precious cargo makes it to Tarshish?"

Yoskeh suddenly had another idea.

"What did you just say?" he asked the sailor.

"Um... that my God will do what she can to help?"

"No," Yoskeh said, "**after** that."

"Steps we can take to ensure the cargo reaches Tarshish?"

"Yes, that's it! The cargo! Toss it overboard! The metals, the spices, the jewelry, the kitchenwares, all of it!"

The men looked at each other. Was Yoskeh serious? "Um... captain? You hired us to get this cargo to Tarshish. That is actually our entire job here."

"No, it isn't!" responded the captain. "Circumstances have changed. Your jobs have accordingly changed. Our mission is no longer to deliver this cargo. Our mission is to **survive this storm**. Keep the ship light, help it to hold together, help us to make it through.

And somehow, the crew listened. They began to unburden the Bore'ach of her cargo.

What good is a silver kettle if we end up capsizing? Into the sea it went. What good is a barrel of Za'atar if we end up capsizing? Into the sea it went. With every heave-ho of precious treasure into the sea, the ship became a little more bare and their mission of survival became a little more clear.

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Friends, we are in the midst of quite a storm, aren't we? It is entirely natural to wonder how we'll manage to make it through with all of our treasure intact.

Spoiler alert - we won't.

Before the storm, we could focus on maintaining and enhancing our personal cargo in a way that just no longer makes sense during a storm. Our mission has changed. Cargo has a way of weighing down ships - that includes ships like friendship, worship, citizenship - the very ships that we need to ferry us safely through this storm.

And fortunately our tradition comes with a state-of-the-art cargo-unloading system:

*Tzedakah*. Donation.

Donate to those who are most vulnerable in this storm. Donate to those who are working to mitigate the storm's impact. Donate to those who are already making preparations for how we will rebuild after the storm.

We will endure the storm, and Tzedakah will help see us through.

...

Meanwhile, back on the Bore'ach...

Yonah had always wanted to take a trip overseas like this, and it was even better than he had anticipated it could be!

As the Bore'ach sailed smoothly westward over the calm, warm waters of the Mediterranean, Yonah looked over the rail and marveled at the schools of colorful fish swimming in the water, occasionally joined by a pod of dolphins playfully jumping alongside the boat as if in competition.

The food aboard the Bore'ach was heavenly. Meats and fish were prepared with vegetables and exotic spices that he had never experienced back in Israel, and always left him completely satisfied and yet paradoxically eager for the next meal.

The smiling crew went about their jobs contentedly, confident in their abilities and satisfied with their assignments. In between tasks they taught each other folksongs and games from their various peoples to pass the time.

And Yoskeh, the captain - such a wonderful human being! Genuinely interested in Yonah's well-being, Yoskeh had done everything to put Yonah's mind at ease and make this journey away from God's presence as relaxing and blissful as it could be.

"Ah," thought Yonah, "here comes Yoskeh now. I wonder what new delights he has in store for me."

Yoskeh approached Yonah, and said two words to him, loudly and repeatedly.

"Wake up!" "Wake up!"

And somehow, Yonah listened and woke up from his dream.

In the darkened ship's hold at the bottom of the Bore'ach, Yonah began to return to reality. Yonah began to return from the pleasure cruise of his imagination to the storm-tossed ship. Yonah began to return to acknowledging his responsibility in this situation. Yonah began to return to his dedication to doing the right thing.

...

Friends, we are in the midst of quite a storm, aren't we? Some of us are having trouble sleeping. I know I am. I envy Yonah's ability to disappear down into the ship's hold and dream of more pleasant circumstances.

But I also know that I don't belong down in the ship's hold. None of us belong in the dark. We belong up on deck, fully aware of our dire circumstances, aware of those around us, aware of the storm.

And fortunately our tradition comes with a state-of-the-art awareness system:

*T'shuvah*. Return.

Return to our community. Return to our traditions. Return to our homeland. Return to our responsibilities. Return to our children. Return to our parents. Return to ourselves.

Return to God.

We will endure the storm, and T'shuvah will help see us through.

...

T'fillah. Tzedakah. T'shuvah.

Pray. Donate. Return.

And I'll add one more - *Tikvah*. Hope. As embodied by the hope shown by Yoskeh, the captain of the Bore'ach, in the midst of a raging storm not unlike the one we find ourselves in today:

אוֹלַי יִתְעַשֶׂת הָאֱלֹהִים לָנוּ וְלֹא נֵאבָד

"Perhaps God will take note of us and we will not be lost."