


on it from the perspective of someone hearing the story of Jonah, listening in on Jonah's conversation with God, in the synagogue on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, as the Day of Atonement begins to draw toward a close.

Over and over again on Yom Kippur, we have recited the thirteen attributes that God revealed to Moses after acceding to Moses' appeal not to destroy the people (see Exodus 32:14 and compare with Jonah 3:10). Those who recite *selichot* prayers have been calling out these same attributes over and over for weeks before Yom Kippur. We come to *minchah* on Yom Kippur, and an astonishing thing happens. On every fast day, we read the Torah during the afternoon prayer service. The portion that we read is the very story of Moses' intercession to God in the episode of the Golden Calf and of the revelation of God's attributes to Moses. But on *this* fast day, when we have spent weeks examining our lives and preparing to appeal to God's mercy, at that same moment in the *minchah* service, we read of Jonah questioning the very attributes that we have been celebrating and by means of which we have been crying out for forgiveness.

While the Yom Kippur liturgy is punctuated by the recitation of the thirteen attributes of God, the focus of the day and of the days and weeks leading up to the day is on us. Where have we gone astray? In what ways have we not lived up to who we ought to be? How can we do better in our quest to fulfill God's will for our lives? Yom Kippur is a day that prom-

ises atonement. We enter the day assured of God's capacity to forgive, but we may be less sure of our capacity to transform our own lives. We stand again, year after year, examining who we are and where we are going, and perhaps we are not so sure that *teshuvah* (repentance) is possible after all. Shifting our gaze from the attributes of God that we affirm to our own all-too-human qualities, we might wonder whether we can fulfill our side of the narrative of repentance and forgiveness.

Jonah's words give voice to our doubts about our own capacity to deserve forgiveness, our own ability to reshape our lives.

As we near the end of our annual journey of repentance, we listen in as Jonah questions God's attributes of mercy. Jonah's words give voice to our doubts about our own capacity to deserve forgiveness, our own ability to reshape our lives. Like the people of Nineveh, we do fast and we do cry out to God and we do determine to turn from our bad ways. But perhaps, like Jonah, we are not convinced that, in *truth*, we have managed to transform bad into good. The book concludes as God gets the final word: God has compassion on all of God's creatures. We are assured of God's compassion, but we have also acknowledged within our liturgy, if only for a brief moment during the afternoon prayers, the frailty of our own capacity to live the lives we are called to lead. 



On Prophecy and Democracy

ARYEH COHEN

The prophets were not democrats. Addressing a gathering of citizens petitioning their elected leaders for the redress of grievances, I have sometimes felt as though I were channeling Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. or Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Especially if I was “in the zone,” the exact words would flow through me and I would feel a direct and deep connection with the people I was talking to, and, at the same time, I would be able to focus the right amount of anger at the people I was talking about. I suspect that when King and Heschel were “in the zone,” they felt that they were channeling Isaiah or Amos. It is anybody's guess who Amos and Isaiah thought

they were channeling. This, however, is not democracy. The use of words and rhetoric in a manner moving and poetic in order to focus the righteous rage of citizens on the sources of injustice is not democracy. It may, at times, be one aspect of a democratic culture.

Democracy, like prophecy, is not “one.” Bringing democracy back to its basics — the *demos*, the people — reminds us that democracy is a gathering together. Democracy is the organizing of residents — both documented citizens and those undocumented who could be construed as citizens by dint of fulfilling the functions of citizenship (as the political *continued on next page*

Aryeh Cohen, a *Sh'ma* Advisory Board member, lives in Los Angeles with his partner, Andrea Hodos and their children, Shachar and Oryah. He teaches Talmud at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University; davens at the Shtibl Minyan; and writes about Talmud, justice, Shabbat, and gender, among other topics. The author of *Justice in the City: Toward a Community of Obligation* (Academic Studies Press), Cohen blogs at justice-in-the-city.com.

philosopher Jeffrey Stout has taught) — in order to debate, discuss, and inquire after the needs of the society (the *polis*), and to arrive at an agreed-upon course of action. In our representative democracy, this course of action is then brought to elected representatives, those sworn to perform the will of the people; elected representatives are thus obligated to recognize that the power they wield is power in service to the will of the people. The people convey a

While the power of prophets is important, it must be the responsibility of democracy to set policy and seek solutions.


course of action to their elected representatives who then bring it to the assembly of representatives who, as the voice of many groups of people, debate, discuss, and decide on a joint course of action. It is this plodding pursuit of solutions that is at the heart of the democratic movement.

The need for a prophetic voice comes when the democratic movement stalls or becomes unhinged — when the representatives of the people no longer wield their power in service, but rather mistake themselves for their agency and wield power for interests that undermine the democratic process. When the poor are ignored, the homeless unsheltered, the sick untended, when power gathers itself in gilded mansions and votes are not distributed evenly — then, the moment for a prophetic voice is ripe: Then it is time to announce for all to hear that “Sodom has reappeared, that Jerusalem, once a city where righteousness dwelt, now houses murderers.” (Isaiah 1)

Prophecy, however, bears its own dangers, for while democracy is, at least theo-

retically, based in dialogue and therefore self-correcting, prophecy is based in righteous indignation, which is itself grounded in knowledge of “the truth.” This problem extends as far back as the time when there were prophets. The challenge of discerning whether prophet and prophecy are true or false was known to the people in the age of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and it is known today. The problem was also ignored in the age of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and it is ignored in our age. It is often the prophecies of comfort (whether personal or political) that ring true while the prophets of rancor and rage ring false. And while sometimes the prophets of comfort and convenience are right, usually it is the prophets of rancor and rage who are closer to the truth.

So how is one to decide between the voices? In our day, the prophetic voice declares that the Land of Israel is connected to the people Israel in an unbroken bond; what if the next generation of prophets divine that now is the time to rebuild the Temple? How is one to decide? And how is one to decide when one prophetic voice claims that any god that is mine but not yours is an idol, while another prophetic voice declares that my god is not your god?

This, then, is the crux. While the power of prophets is important — perhaps indispensable — in confronting not only the unbridled power of governments or corporations, but also corruption and its handmaiden, wealth, it must be the responsibility of democracy, basic democracy, to set policy and seek solutions. *Vox populi vox dei*/the voice of the people is the voice of God — in its plodding complexity and procedural inefficiencies — that is the only path we have from here to justice. 

Jonah and Jesus

YVONNE SHERWOOD

A few years ago, I wrote a book on the “afterlives” of the book of Jonah. I wanted to explore how this tiny little book survived, and expanded exponentially, in Judaism, Christianity, and the cultural mythologies of the West. According to midrash, when God gave the Torah, God gave it in the form of wheat with which we could make flour, and flax with which we would make garments. People have made complex garments and recipes: Some are delicious and others are in poor taste; some recipes are common, such

as challah or gefilte fish,¹ and others are hidden away in side-street restaurants, known only, these days, to academic specialists. I set out to collect some of these lesser-known recipes; I also wanted to study and respond to certain mainstream Christian interpretations of the Bible that I considered quite distasteful.

Jonah tempted me because it struck me as a real misfit among the prophetic books: a playful book with only a one-line oracle. Everything is exaggerated, as if the words were attempting to be a verbal equivalent of cartoon