

Spiritual Direction with Yonah

PENINA ADELMAN

Spiritual direction encompasses a relationship between two people in which the “director” accompanies the “directee” in an exploration of his/her growing relationship with God. All spiritual directors go through formal training and are participants in spiritual direction themselves.

Session One

SD: (greeting Yonah at the door): Shalom and *barukh haba* — welcome to you, Yonah.

Y: Thank you. (pregnant pause) I’m here because I want help. I need to talk to someone. You see, I’m confused about why God keeps telling me things I’m supposed to say.

SD: God wants you to do something and you don’t want to. Is “God” what you call the Holy One or is there some other term?

Y: Uh, no, I mean, yes. I call Him “Abba” (father).

SD: Abba it is.

Y: And by the way, I’m not confused at all about what He wants from me. I knew exactly what he wanted the first time His word came to me. I just didn’t want to hear it.

SD: You didn’t want to hear it? Wow. People would give their eyeteeth to hear a word from God.

Y: That’s it. I don’t want to hear. I want to live as I have been, weaving nets for catching fish and selling them, sitting by the sea after I’m done for the day, kicking back, talking to my friends. I have no desire at all to deliver Abba’s word.

SD: Have you told him how you feel?

Y: I’ve tried to in my own way.

SD: What do you mean?

Y: Sometimes I’ve ignored His word; I’ve even run away. Other times, I explain to Him that I’m too tired, my eyes ache, my stomach aches, I need to eat something first, I’ll think about it, I’ll sleep on it, I’ll get someone else. In fact, I do know a woman who loves receiving the word; she’ll take it and sing it, dance it. She’ll shout it from a mountaintop; she’ll make a poem for others to recite. But please, Abba, stop telling me Your word! I don’t want it.

SD: Yet Abba does not give up on you.

Y: He never gives up; neither do all those who do His prophecy: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the rest. They keep broadcasting His word — even if there’s nobody listening, *especially* when nobody’s listening. I have no desire for Abba to tell me things he wants the people to know. Why doesn’t

He tell them Himself?

SD: Well, at Sinai the people freaked out at the base of the mountain because they did not want to see or hear Him directly. That’s when Moses stepped in.

Y: But I’m no Moses.

SD: But you are Yonah. Remember what Zusya learned? At the end of his life the question would not be: “Why weren’t you more like Moses or Abraham, but why weren’t you more like Zusya?” Forgive me, Zusya is after your time.

Y: No, Abba has told me about Zusya. That’s it — doesn’t He see that I just want to be Yonah, not a prophet? I’d rather sleep out the storm in the hold of the ship than be up on deck with the crew throwing things into the sea to lighten the load.

SD: Here’s something I would like to invite you to do before we meet next time. When Abba calls you again, be honest with Him. Try to imagine how it must feel to be in His shoes and receive no response from you.

Y: Okay, I’ll try that.

Session Two (one month later)

Y: I’ve been thinking about the name “Abba” and it’s not working for me anymore.

SD: How so?

Y: I’m not obeying Him as a son should with his *abba*. When I was a boy, I used to feel toward Him exactly as I did toward my own *abba* — a cross between fear and love. But now, Abba seems unpredictable. First He’s threatening to destroy the people of Nineveh; then they repent with a superhuman fervor and He forgives them. When I’m set to drown in the sea after the sailors have tossed me overboard, I end up inside a big fish’s belly. When I was in there, an overwhelming sense of gratitude came over me. I was crying and praying to Him, because even though I had not responded to His word, He had found me this fish and saved my life. I hadn’t cared about my life before that and suddenly, I realized I did care. I was thanking Abba for His mercy and *continued on next page*

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suddenly the fish spews me out and I am new. I see the land, the sea, the heavens, as if for the first time. I see creation is a miracle and how did I not see it before?

SD: Sometimes, it takes getting pushed right up against the face of death before the miracle of life becomes apparent. Could your sojourn in the fish's belly have been an act of love from Abba?

Y: (tears running down his cheeks) When I left the fish, it was so clear to me that all of this (stretches out his arms) is incredible. But that way of seeing left me shortly after. I couldn't sustain it. It's so new to let the feeling wash over me. I've been running away from it for so long. Now I want to experience more of it.

SD: So, for our next time together, I invite you to find a new word, one that expresses your changing relationship with Abba.

Session Three (one month later)

Y: I tried to do what you suggested and I

still haven't found the right name. I came up with name after name after name: "Great Empathizer," "My Challenger," "Watcher Over the World," and "Seed of All Ideas and Inclinations." But nothing works.

SD: So what will you do?

Y: I'm just going to say "You" or "He." I know it's a cop-out, but I don't want to spend any more time figuring out how to refer to God. He's been "Abba" my whole life; I could depend on that name. And now it's impossible to find a name that works.

SD: Is it perhaps unrealistic to expect that one name and one name only will be the right one? When Moses asked what name he should give to the Hebrews when they asked who sent him to take them out of Egypt, he was told to respond: "*Ehiyeh Asher Ehiyeh*," "I Will Be What I Will Be."

Y: You mean, I could ask Him what name He would like me to call Him? As simple as that?

SD: As simple as that. 

Why Jonah Resonates with Children

MAYA BERNSTEIN

A framed painting depicting Jonah inside the belly of a large fish, with the ship and its passengers on the fish's back and the raging waters all around, hung at the turning point of the stairwell in my parent's house. No matter the velocity of my inevitable charge up or down the stairs as a child, I never failed to notice that painting as I turned the corner. Over the years, I began to identify my moods by the pieces my eye would catch as I flew by. Some days, I was Jonah, trapped and caught inside the fish. Sometimes, I was as wild as the foaming waters. Other days, I was off balance, like the ship, teetering here and there. And still others, I was the fish — enormous, filling up space, and displacing all those around me.

Why does the book of Jonah resonate so deeply with children? Perhaps because Jonah is a child — a lost boy on a mission, forced to find himself on his journey. Responsibility? Terrifying; run away. Living up to your potential and making a difference in the world? Too frightening to risk it; better not to try. No shade when you're in the hot sun? *Kvetch!*

I sense that this story — of a person thrown overboard into the raging sea and then swallowed by a huge fish — is not particularly

frightening to children because it resonates intuitively with a child's imagined view of the world. Big animals loom close to our seemingly stable surfaces; they can jump out and eat us up at any point. And while the natural world appears to be secure, it can quickly turn supernatural, leaving us bewildered in its dizzy center as we attempt to make meaning of it all. Children never feel in control — not of themselves and not of the world around them. Jonah, too, is pulled and pushed, swallowed and burped up, by forces greater than himself. This is a child's experience of the world, and, perhaps, it is somehow comforting to children to have it validated.

The book of Jonah is traditionally read at the end of the afternoon service on Yom Kippur, a holiday difficult for children to connect with. The figure of Jonah is key to helping children understand some of the story's overarching themes; it is also a reminder that our most solemn and resonant thoughts are often pure and childlike at their core. Sometimes, life, or God, or other people, make demands of us that feel overwhelming. These moments are opportunities for growth. Sometimes, we evade them, though often we cannot. And when we face them, we may grow stronger and fuller, as

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