

## MY NAME IS YONA

I see so much of my work and myself in the story of Yonah. In him, I recognize the very human limitation that exists within each of us: the tendency to narrow our vision, sometimes stubbornly, and our sense of empathy. It's easy to judge and look down upon Yonah for his constriction. And yet, isn't he all of us? I draw inspiration from the fact that the God we encounter in the book of Yonah teaches the prophet and us that to find compassion for and expand our empathy toward others, is in fact divine.

Yona Shem-Tov is the executive director of Encounter (encounterprograms.org).

creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts. There go the ships: There is that leviathan, whom thou hast made to play therein." This notion is again celebrated in the following talmudic account of God's daily schedule: "Rab Judah said in the name of Rab: 'The day consists of twelve hours; during the first three hours, the Holy One, blessed be He, is occupying Himself with the Torah; during the second three, He sits in judgment on the whole world, and when He sees that the world is so guilty as to deserve destruction, He transfers Himself from the seat of Justice to the seat of Mercy; during the third quarter, He is feeding the whole world, from the horned buffalo to the brood of vermin; and during the fourth quarter He is sporting with the leviathan,' as it is said: 'There is leviathan, whom Thou hast formed

to sport therewith." (BT, Avodah Zarah 3b)

The same leviathan, God's playful pet, is portrayed very differently in other places. Isaiah (Chapter 27:1) promises, as part of his apocalyptic vision, that "In that day, God, with his sore and great and strong sword, shall punish leviathan the piercing serpent, even leviathan that crooked serpent; and He shall slay the dragon that is in the sea." Psalm 74:14 describes this vengeance even more graphically: "Thou breakest the heads of leviathan in pieces, and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness." The book of Job, apart from its wonderfully written poetic depiction of the mighty leviathan, offers a couple of explanations for the fish's inevitable violent defeat. First, God must slay leviathan to prove that God is mighty enough to do so. But less arbitrary is the notion that leviathan, which represents hubris — creation's rebellious pride — must be suppressed by the Creator in order for the world to exist. (Chapters 41-42)

And what is to be done with the slain sea monster? In Job (41:6), we read that perhaps "the companions [will] make a banquet of him." The rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud (Baba Bathra, 74a-75a) elaborate, and among many beautifully told tales, we find rabbis encountering sea monsters, a banquet, and the distribution of leviathan's remains among the merchants and peddlers of Jerusalem. Further, it is taught that God will "in time to come, make a tabernacle for the righteous from the skin of leviathan; for it is said: 'Canst thou fill tabernacles with his skin' ... The rest will be spread by the Holy One, blessed be God, upon the walls of Jerusalem, and its splendor will shine from one end of the world to the other; as it is said: 'And nations shall walk at thy light, and kings at the brightness of thy rising."

It is only ironic that it is us, the true rebellious creatures, kings over all the children of pride, that senselessly slaughter the great giants of the deep and push them to the brink of extinction.

## MY NAME IS YONAH

People with the name "Yonah" have a message to offer: Mine is "Love the Jewish people, rejoice in Judaism, and protect the earth that God gave us."

Rabbi Yonah Bookstein is the executive director of Jewlicious (Jewliciousfestival.com) and author of the forthcoming book Prayers for Israel.

## **Discussion**

- 1. We read the book of Yonah each year during minchah on Yom Kippur. What do we learn anew in that yearly accounting of the story?
- 2. How might we construct a personal practice of gratitude? How is gratitude connected to the recitation of blessings?
- 3. What do we learn about the complex role of the prophet from reading Yonah?
- 4. The story is mythic in proportion and fabulous in imagination. How do we understand it in terms of rational thought, free will, and the capacity to make choices?
- 5. Is there a cost to withholding forgiveness? And if so, what is it?