

Jonah and the Whale

or

How to Be Born Again

By

RABBI DR. HERBERT M. BAUMGARD

A Sermon Delivered At

BETH AM

SOUTH MIAMI, FLORIDA

KOL NIDRE, 5726-1965

YOU all are familiar with the story in the Second Book of Samuel which concerns King David and his handsome son, Absalom. Readers of this story have wondered why it is that Absalom assembles a great army and attempts to replace his father as King of Israel. The Bible tells us that Absalom almost succeeded in this revolt, and, yet, when David is informed that Absalom is killed in the critical battle, he openly wept and cried out, "Oh my son, Absalom! Would that I had died in thy stead, oh, Absalom, my son, my son!"

If we assume that David was a concerned and loving father to all of his children, then, we can interpret David's grief as a generous expression of a loving father; but we get a different insight into David's remorse when we consider the reverse possibility. As leader of a growing nation, as commanding officer of the Army of Israel, as the father of many sons, it is highly probable that David was seldom home, and when he was home, the narrative indicates that he spent what little time he had with Solomon, the favorite son of Bathshiva. If a son revolts against a father so completely as did Absalom, there is usually some deep reason for it. If we could peer into the emotions King David experienced upon hearing of his son's death, we might learn that he was thinking, "If only I had treated him differently; but now that he is dead, it is no longer possible for me to convince him that I really loved him." Perhaps, the King's remorse was so deep because the finality of his son's death had robbed David of the opportunity to atone for his sins of omission. If we look closely at the words expressed by the King upon hearing of his son's death, *they have the sound of a love expressed too late.*

I gained some insight into David's extreme grief, when a member of the congregation phoned me several years ago to ask, "Rabbi, can I come to your office. It's very serious." I urged him to come immediately. Upon his arrival, the man, who was in his late 40's, promptly said, "Rabbi, I have come here to cry." Whereupon, he proceeded to cry with the desperation that only a man unaccustomed to crying can manifest. When he became more calm, he said, "Rabbi, my father has just died; but I am not crying out of love for him. I am crying because my father never gave me any love, and now that he is gone, I know that I shall never have a father's love." Here we have the situation of David and Absalom in reverse. David cried, probably, because death had deprived him of the chance to give of his love to a son he had neglected. The congregant in my office cried because the death of his father had robbed him of any chance of receiving a father's love. Death is cruel in that way. It closes the book on opportunities to act, forever.

Some of you may remember the wonderful, musical, "Carousel". I saw it on Broadway three times. "Carousel" is the story of a strong, handsome young man who is very much in love with his wife and daughter, but who is unable to demonstrate that love. No matter what he tries to do, he always seems to be yelling at them or hitting them. When he makes a fumbling attempt at a robbery to obtain some money for his daughter, Billy, as the hero is called, fails utterly and is so ashamed of himself that he commits suicide. The play would have us believe that when Billy gets to Heaven, the Caretaker of that realm agrees to let him return to earth that he might perform one deed, the deed he would like most to do, or the deed he felt he had most neglected. The hero asks for the privilege of descending to Earth so that he could tell his daughter that he loved her, something that he had never been able to express, even though it was the strongest emotion in his heart. How wonderful it would be if we could return from the Valley of the Shadow to correct our wrongs and to fulfill the deeds we had neglected to perform! But we know that the tale of "Carousel" is a child's tale. This kind of return is not possible. The only chance we ever have of correcting a wrong, or of performing a deed, is *now*, while we are yet alive, and while the objects of our love and concern are yet alive.

In the light of this wisdom, let us take a look at the Scripture which we are bidden to read every Yom Kippur. The traditional reading on Yom Kippur afternoon is from the Book of Jonah, which we will read here in Beth Am, tomorrow. Like many books of the Bible, the Book of Jonah is an allegory, that is, the importance of the book is in its message, rather than in its historicity. The Book begins by telling us that God asked the prophet Jonah to visit the wicked city of Ninevah and to announce that if the people would not repent and change their ways, then, God would cause their own evil to be reversed upon them. Instead of doing as God asked, Jonah slyly arranged to take a ship bound for another town. The Scripture reads, "And Jonah rose up to flee from the presence of the Lord . . .".

Is Flight the Answer?

We can begin to see that Jonah is "Everyman". That is to say, we *all* try to escape from "the voice of the Lord". We all try to run away from conscience which demands that we take steps to prevent men from preying upon each other. We all try to escape our human responsibility.

Let us return to the allegory. When the ship Jonah boards gets out to sea, a storm arises. The sailors, realizing that their lives are in danger, attempt to make the ship safer by throwing overboard their expensive cargo. The sailors represent so many of us who live merely for expensive acquisitions, but in time of trouble and storm, we begin to realize that our material possessions are not the chief things in life. Indeed, we may realize that their very presence can be a handicap, and we are ready to surrender them if only our health and lives are secure.

The sailors are better than Jonah, however; they are busily at work, trying to save the ship, but Jonah goes below decks and curls up to sleep. He is not even a participant in the attempt to save the ship. He lets the others do all the work while he ignores the call to duty. You may know some people like this.

When the sailors learn that Jonah is trying to escape an order of God, they understand that the storm is God's way of preventing Jonah from escaping his responsibility. Accordingly, the sailors throw Jonah into the sea, and we are told that the storm abates. The sailors are saved, but the suffering is just beginning for Jonah. He is promptly swallowed up by Leviathan, the Whale, literally, "a Great Fish". The book informs us that Jonah lived for three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, and, then, at God's command, he is spit up on the dry land.

If we have no insight, we can regard this story as just another fish story, but if we understand that the ancient Hebrews always had a moral to their stories, we can learn a great deal from this one. When Jonah found himself imprisoned in the midst of Leviathan, he understood that he was dead, yet, somehow, alive. Like Billy, the hero of "Carousel", Jonah began to think of all the deeds he had left undone, of all the things he would like to do, if only he had the chance. So Jonah prays, as the text tells us, "out of the belly of the netherworld". He prays for the chance to return to Earth that he might atone for his past errors. God heeds his prayer, we are told, and Jonah is resurrected.

The book of Jonah is not taken literally by most Jews. Hundreds of years after the Book was written, the authors of the New Testament looked back to Jonah as a precedent in writing that Jesus was dead three days before he was resurrected. The Christians came, ultimately, to believe that this was literally true about Jesus. The Jews have generally considered the Book of Jonah as a kind of allegory. It is placed in our Bible to teach us that the person who flees from his moral responsibility makes for his own death as a human being. To be alive, in the human sense, means to grow continuously in the ability to give of oneself. When we exist merely to get and to spend, to eat and to sleep, we gradually lose our power to give and to grow, and we become mere animals. We may remain physically alive, but we are spiritually dead.

On the Threshold of Death

The message of the Book of Jonah is the message of Yom Kippur. He who flees from the problems at hand and from the need to reach out to his fellows is swallowed up by sin and spiritual death. Our Holy Day Prayer-book reminds us of the sins which we have committed "openly or in secret"; it speaks of "the sins which we have done through stubbornness"; it describes "the hurt we have caused by angry words, the wrongs we have

committed by refusing to act when we had the power to do so." Our Prayer-book reminds us of the deaf ear we have turned to the cry for charity, of the exploitation of our neighbors, of the neglect of our families. On Yom Kippur we are reminded that as much as we may think that we can run away from our humanity, our flight is in vain. Surely, we must face God today as Jonah faced him from the deck of his would-be escape ship! We are caught in our guilt, and we are at sea in a violent storm. Surely, we stand *this moment* on the verge of spiritual death, not because God wishes to destroy us, but because we have been set on destroying ourselves in every way that counts. We have been busy, slowly severing ourselves from the land of the living.

The authors of the Book of Jonah had much more in mind than the mere telling of a story. They wanted you to imagine that you, like Jonah, were in the belly of the netherworld, dead, yet, still a little alive. They wanted you to make the decision to be reborn spiritually. They wanted you to think of all the potential good that you do *not* perform. They wanted you to think of all the potential love that you do *not* give. They wanted you to determine that you would give of these things if only you could have a second chance. Imagine yourself to be imprisoned in that place where you could not reach out to your loved ones. Would you not cry out with King David, "Oh, Absalom, my son, my son. How I have neglected you! O, Stephen, my son, and Helen, my daughter, and Sarah, my wife, would that I had the chance now to show you that I love you!" If we were, indeed, facing death tonight, how we could sympathize with that congregant who came to my office to cry, because the possibility of a father's love had forever been denied to him. If we were indeed to die this night, how we would yearn, like the hero of "Carousel" to return to Earth, if only for the privilege of performing one deed, the deed most precious in our eyes, the deed most undone. Think a minute; in your case, *what would that deed be?*

The weight of our sins weighs us down to the netherworld, into the belly of Leviathan. We are all sinners, even the best of us. Yes, we are like Jonah, and his fate is our fate. Like him *we yearn to change*, and we cry out, "save us, O Lord, for we would be saved". In our moment of despair let the words of another Prophet comfort us. "Thus saith the Lord, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but I desire that he turn from his evil way and live". Again spoke the Prophet "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow". If Jonah can be resurrected, so can we. We are all guilty, but we are no more guilty than Jonah. Jonah received another chance, because this was God's will. Fighting one's way back to spiritual life may be difficult, but it can be done, and we may be assured of God's help. This is the "business" we are to transact on this day of the spirit, this Day of Atonement. We are here to make a trade — old sins for new goals! Spiritual death — for life!