

Rabbi Jim Kaufman, Yom Kippur Afternoon, Jonah 2017

So here comes Jonah again...let's read the first 8 verses together:

Jonah 1:1-8

¹ The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

³ But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.

⁴ Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up. ⁵ All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship.

But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. ⁶ The captain went to him and said, “How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish.”

⁷ Then the sailors said to each other, “Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity.” They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah. ⁸ So they asked him, “Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?”

Let's stop there. You know the rest. Jonah volunteers to be thrown overboard, doesn't drown but is swallowed by a big fish, coughed up on dryland and he finally finds his way to Nineveh. But the King has ordered the city to repent. The city does and God withdraws the threat of extinction. Jonah resents the Ninevites and God for what seems to him an inconvenient and unnecessary trip.

That's it. Storms... drastic changes in climate. Not new to us. Hurricanes in Texas, Florida, Mexico and Haiti, tragic threats to our physical lives.

Charlottesville: another kind of storm... frightening threat to our moral lives. But there is another storm in our country, and it is powerful, pervasive, and it is long brewing.

But back to our Jonah story: Two examples of inglorious human behavior...the first: the sailors drive to find blame; and, the second: the prophet Jonah unwilling to be a prophet.

The first inglorious behavior: the sailors' should not have expended their limited time and energy in trying to find blame... it would have been wiser to find other ways to survive the storm. But alas, they, like us, are human with the instinct to defend oneself by pointing the finger in a direction other than to the self, and then becoming immediately suspicious, distrustful of others: You see after the cargo was dumped the sailors turned their attention to the most vulnerable, the stranger in their midst and went down to wake him up. With suspicion and I'd say prejudice, he is deposed: "Who are you? Where do you come from? What is your country? Who are your people?" Those who search for blame are usually and expeditiously in search of a scapegoat.

And ancient Torah practice, Leviticus 16: the Jewish high priest lays upon a goat the sins of the people and casts this innocent goat out to the wilderness". Adam in the Garden blames his wife Eve and the snake for his behavior. How easily you and I become just like the sailors and Adam, impotent to do anything but point the finger at vulnerable scapegoats or just anyone, and with finger pointing distrust and division are borne.

When we enter the blame game we are immediately off-ramped from the high road whose path builds trust, to a blame driven dead end low road where the human instinct for bias and prejudice thrive and when modeled by leaders and not controlled by followers, the blame game devolves into pervasive distrust and overt, sometimes violent hate.

And that is exactly where America finds itself today. We live in a stormy country that lives overt hatred and division in every corner, in our politics, in our neighborhoods, in our schools. And at the core is a devastating distrust of people and institutions.

In 1976 a University of Chicago survey learned that 50% of the American public believed that most people and institutions cannot be trusted. Same survey last year, up to 67% said “most people and institutions cannot be trusted”. And what of our American melting pot? Since 1954, we had made steady progress integrating our schools...but since the 1990’s our neighborhoods and schools are more segregated than ever. The distrust that weakens and divides us in this country began long before this past election. Some historians mark the beginning with the assassination of John Kennedy, then Martin Luther King, continuing to 9/11. Division and distrust have been insidious forces for decades.

In the preamble to our Constitution we declare that we strive to be a more perfect union...admitting therefore we are not perfect but we need to keep striving to be so, leaders and followers, those with power and those with the power of the vote and the voice. Yet we bemoan our inability to work together, not just in Washington, but all over the country.

So, like the sailors, drowning in storm of distrust, and desperately searching for a person or institution to blame...we then employ the second inglorious behavior, Jonah’s. We bail, run from our responsibility, we give up and are either too lazy, too scared or too frustrated. We off-ramp ourselves. Though there was a great surge in activism before and after the election, researchers and organizers see signs of diminishing interest due to a normalizing effect and fatigue. The fires ignited last November have begun to self-extinguish.

Which is why we must: Resist!

Now don’t get nervous..this is not a rally. Resist does not mean to enter the blame game and point the finger at “them.” Resist means: don’t get off-ramped...don’t get distracted; MLK daily fought this natural and understandable tendency to be fatigued in long complicated struggles, so he constantly reminded us: “keep your eyes on that prize and hold on” and point the finger at yourself and at your prize, your goal.

Charlottesville! Painful and tragic. As a Jew, I’m hurt and I’m angry. But there are currently 917 active hate groups in America. Don’t let a single one off-ramp you, cause you to avert your eyes, force you to change course. Don’t let them or our leaders derail you or fatigue you.

One of my Passover Haggadahs ends with a reading that concludes that just as the Passover story does not depend on Moses, we should not look to our leaders for liberation..but rather to ourselves; you and I, we depend on the government, the police, the army to save us from nature's storms. But we are the only antidote for moral and ethical decay....for now all our leaders have joined the sailors. Those who spend most of their time promoting "us vs. them", deriding and vilifying each other and dividing us... pointing their fingers at someone else or even more accurately, "poking each other in the eye". This storm needs us, you and me, whether your political affiliation is red or blue, purple or beige...our founders wanted us to "check" each other, but ultimately to work together.

On Sept 10, we held the first ever San Fernando Valley Interfaith Solidarity March. TBH and our Caring Across Generations Faith Based Alliance helped to organize it. In the planning, it was decided to tell everyone to make placards with positive, solution based inscriptions. We told plaque makers to resist getting off-ramped, devolving into finger pointing recriminations. The march was not a protest but rather Jews, Christians, Muslims, Sikhs Bahai and other faith communities marching in support of what unifies us:

- narrowing the tense, growing and unjust chasm between rich and poor in our country.
- protecting immigrants because we were once immigrants, because it's right to do because we need each other.
- guaranteeing that the length of your life and health of your life is not defined by your bank account.
- fixing a criminal industrial complex driven by bail bond greed and a re-enslavement of people of color and little means.
- and yes...issues of race always have and always will demand open, honest, on-going dialogue and the nurturing of cross cultural relationships, getting to know each other, working together will counter our ever present biases bred by our animalistic xenophobia.

And of course the most obvious mission: to perfect our union. In 1776, total Caucasian control with people of color totally subjugated. In 2017 we know we are incredibly diverse...a racial, religious, social rainbow and we know that it should be truly self-evident that all people are created equal. But for too many leaders and too many followers, it is still not self-evident. The real resist is working together to make this truth self-evident.

We are in the midst of a category 5 social political stormbut bridle your drive to find blame and work to reverse the rapidly declining trust in American life by keeping your eyes on the prize, stay on the solution based highway...the high road, and you will find new hope in people, new energy to fight the fatigue, and a new trust in our democratic way of life. Cynicism will give way to optimism. Fatigue will give way to energizing hope.

It seems that each generation must recommit itself to the task of improving our imperfect union. That time for us is now. But the fear is great. The sailors feared what the stranger in their midst could do to them. Jonah feared to go to Nineveh in the first place, and we are fearful that what has happened in the recent past is the beginning of a permanently divided and therefore declining America. Rome ended, so can America despite the fact that every speech ends with” And may God bless America.”

Divine intervention won't help because the only guarantor of a moral, just and effective America is us, human beings. Yes Rome ended and so could we...if we let the fear in these stormy times wear us down and immobilize us.... but...*kol haoloam culo gesher tzar m'od, v'haikar, lo l'fachaid clal*. Our tradition instructs: “all of life is a narrow bridge (with danger always close at either side) and the important thing vhaikar, is not to be afraid” but I like my translation: “v' haikar, the important thing is not to be too afraid.” Fear, when threatened is normal. But the tough work...the big resist, is preventing ourselves from being immobilized and worse, entering the blame game, bailing out and getting off-ramped.

Yes...Point the finger, not at them, but at yourself and say:

As an American I have work to do, and I will survive the storm by working with anyone to find solutions because I am the foundation of the American democratic experiment.

As a Jew, I have work to do, and I will survive the storm by “not standing idly by”, not by being bullied into silence, we've heard Charlottesville words before and we've committed to our own words: never again.

Don't be like the sailors: stop blaming, stop wasting time finger pointing and don't be like Jonah, and get up, get out, and get to work. Rabbi Sarah gave you that directive on Rosh Hashanah...remember to sign the Brit Olam...and also join her and others on the TBH Seekers of Justice Task Force.

And open your email and respond to just one of the myriad of emails you daily receive seeking your participation. And with every step forward, no matter how small or how fearfully hesitant, you will make your contribution to an America that can become, only if we, not God, but we the people, yes we the people, forge a better, maybe even a more perfect union for everyone. Let your actions tomorrow become the Amen for these words today.