**Jonah and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day**

**Rabbi Thomas M. Alpert**

**Temple Etz Chaim, Franklin, Massachusetts**

**Kol Nidre**

**October 11, 2016; *10 Tishrei 5777***

It happened once that there was a king who had a precious ruby. He loved that ruby and enjoyed taking it out of its vault just to look at it. Once a year, he would display it in the palace, and people would flock to admire its beauty.

And why shouldn’t they? The ruby was perfect in every way. First, it weighed almost five carats. It was just the right shade of red. It was expertly cut. Finally, it had absolutely no blemishes.

That is, until one day. The king himself was looking at the ruby when he heard a noise. It distracted him briefly, but long enough for him to drop the ruby. It hit the ground, and he heard an awful sound. When he picked up the gem, his worst fears were confirmed: the ruby now had not only a blemish but a genuine, unmistakable scratch.

The king was devastated. He called in the royal jeweler, but she could only say that the ruby was marred forever. The king would not accept that answer. He put a call for an expert jeweler. They came from far and near, but none of them could repair the most precious gem in the kingdom.

Finally, one day, a little old jeweler appeared. He made an unusual request.

“Let me take this ruby into a workspace. Leave me alone with just food and drink and this ruby for six days, and then I will return the ruby to you.”

“Will it be perfect again?” the king demanded.

The old jeweler answered, “You’ll have to trust me.”

Professionals regarded this man as eccentric but brilliant. So, the royal jeweler advised the monarch to allow him to do as he asked, and the king agreed.

He started on Saturday night, right after Shabbat. On the following Friday afternoon, he emerged with a bag in his hand. The king could barely restrain himself. “Can I look at it?” he asked. “Is it perfect?”

“See for yourself,” the jeweler answered, handing the bag to the king. The king took the ruby out, and he gasped. Above the scar in the gem, the jeweler had carved an exquisite rose, and the scar stood as its stem.

Then the king realized that the jewel was no longer perfect. It was more than that. It was unique.

If we were to accept the King James translation of the Torah, we would think that we should strive for perfection. That translation tells us, “Thou shalt be perfect with the Lord thy God.” But the word that is translated as “perfect” here is *tamim.* And that word has other meanings as well. The Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh,* the standard Jewish translation of the Bible, translates *tamim* as “wholehearted”: “You must be wholehearted with Adonai your God.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

“Perfect” and “wholehearted”: these are not just two alternative translations of a verse in Deuteronomy. These words describe two opposite ways of living. That is the argument made by research professor Dr. Brené Brown in her book *The Gifts of Imperfection.[[2]](#footnote-2)* Seeking to be perfect dooms us to failure and, what’s worse, to feeling like a failure. It presents us with an impossible goal and then punishes us for not reaching it. At the same time, it allows us to take the easy way out, because, after all, we can’t reach perfection, so why even try?

On the other hand, living a wholehearted life means, in her telling, “engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness.”[[3]](#footnote-3) It means recognizing that we have gifts and skills, and then demanding that we use those gifts and skills to make ourselves and our world better. It requires us to see ourselves as worthy enough to struggle and humble enough to recognize that the struggle will never completely succeed. It requires us to reject the path of Jonah.

We will hear the story of Jonah as our Haftarah tomorrow afternoon. If you can’t wait until then, here’s the executive summary. God tells Jonah to go to the great and wicked city of Nineveh. Instead, Jonah flees to Jaffa and sets out on a ship bound for Tarshish to avoid God’s summons. Predictably, this doesn’t work. God sends a storm, and the only way to calm it is for the sailors to throw Jonah overboard. God appoints a big fish to swallow him, and he stays in the fish’s belly for three days. Then, the fish spews him out, and Jonah goes to Nineveh and warns the inhabitants that they will be punished for their evil ways.

The inhabitants all repent, and God decides not to punish them. This puts Jonah in a rotten mood. He then goes to watch what will happen to the city. God sends a gourd to cover Jonah with shade. But then God sends a worm to eat the gourd and stills the wind, so that there is no relief from the hot sun. This just adds to Jonah’s anger. Finally, God says, “You pitied the gourd, which you neither worked for nor grew, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. Should I, then, not have compassion for the great city of Nineveh, a place of more than a hundred and twenty thousand human beings, unable to tell their right hand from their left, and many beasts.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Jonah is a perfectionist. He has no room for repentance. Nineveh is wicked. It has done wrong. It deserves to be overthrown. Jonah would have been thrilled to tell Nineveh of its fate and then watch with satisfaction as that fate came to pass. But he realized that wasn’t the job that God was offering him. That’s why he complains to God after the judgment is reversed: “Please, Adonai! Is this not what I said when I was still in my own country? This is why I fled to Tarshish to begin with. For I knew You are a gracious and compassionate God, endlessly patient and abounding in steadfast love, ready to repent of evil. And now, Adonai, please, take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Jonah is ashamed that he has failed in his mission, and this failure makes him want to give up.

Brené Brown doesn’t talk about Jonah, but she would recognize him. She would understand his shame as the flip side of his perfectionism. She defines shame as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.”[[6]](#footnote-6) We’ve all been there. I look at myself in the mirror and think this part or that part or the other part isn’t the way it should be, the way I see in the magazines – and somehow, it’s my fault; I’m not as good as I should be. You give that presentation at work, and you know that you messed it up, and what did you expect anyway, considering who you are? I’m working up to the deadline again; if I were the person I should be, I’d have done all this long ago. I fall short, and I feel lousy, and I certainly don’t let anyone else know my secret. I just want to give up, as Jonah wanted to give up.

Brown says that we all experience shame, but that we can also develop what she calls “shame resilience.” As she writes, “Shame needs three things to grow out of control in our lives: secrecy, silence, and judgment. When something shaming happens and we keep it locked up, it festers and grows. It consumes us. We need to share our experience. Shame happens between people, and it heals between people.”[[7]](#footnote-7) We learn to control shame by telling our story, by sharing our experiences with someone with whom we feel connected.

Except in a purely transactional way, Jonah doesn’t talk to anyone in this story except for God. He doesn’t connect. And in not connecting, he misses the central part of life, the part that is messy and imperfect and essential.

One of my favorite books is *The Little Prince.* And my favorite chapter in that book is the story of the Prince and the fox. The prince is a little boy from a distant planet. When he arrives on earth, he meets a fox. The fox asks the prince to tame him. When the prince asks what the fox means, he answers, “It is an act too often neglected. It means to establish ties.”

The prince says, “’I want to, very much. But I have not much time. I have friends to discover, and a great many things to understand.’

“’One only understands the things one tames,’ said the fox. ‘Men have no more time to understand anything. They buy things all ready made at the shops. But there is no shop anywhere where one can buy friendship, and so men have no friends any more. If you want a friend, tame me.’”[[8]](#footnote-8)

We need to tame each other, to establish ties, to cultivate friendships. Our friends are the people to whom we can tell our stories, the ones to talk with when shame starts to overtake us. They are the ones who keep us from being Jonah.

Brown calls shame “the birthplace of perfectionism.” As she writes, “Perfectionism is *not* about healthy achievement and growth. Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame. It’s a shield.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

That shield can’t fully protect us. Sooner or later, it falls, and we are hurt. Brown writes about this, too:

The most powerful emotions that we experience have very sharp points, like the tip of a thorn. When they prick us, they cause discomfort and even pain. Just the anticipation or fear of these feelings can trigger intolerable vulnerability in us. We know it’s coming. For many of us, our first response to [the] vulnerability and pain of these sharp points is not to lean into discomfort and feel our way through but rather to make it go away. We do that by numbing and taking the edge off the pain with whatever provides the quickest relief. We can anesthetize with a whole bunch of stuff, including alcohol, drugs, food, sex, relationships, money, work, caretaking, gambling, staying busy, affairs, chaos, shopping, planning, perfectionism, constant change, and the Internet.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Jonah didn’t have the Internet, but he had his own way of numbing. When the storm comes upon the ship, everyone is terrified; everyone, that is, except for Jonah, who, in the words of the Book, goes “down into the hold, the lower deck of the vessel, and he lay down and fell into a deep sleep. And the captain approached him and said to him, ‘What are you doing sound asleep? Get up! Call to your god. Perhaps the god will be kind to us, and we will not perish.’”

While Jonah goes down to the bottom of the ship and tries to forget about everything, the sailors are working. They throw cargo overboard to lighten the ship. They pray to their gods. They cast lots to see who has caused the storm, and the lot falls on Jonah. In response, Jonah tries a more radical version of numbing himself. He advises the sailors to throw him overboard. But the sailors don’t do so immediately. As the text says, they “rowed hard to return to the dry land, but they could not do it, for the sea was raging more and more fiercely around them. And they called out to Adonai, saying: ‘Please, Adonai, please do not let us perish because of the life of this man. And do not hold us guilty of shedding innocent blood. For You, Adonai, that which You desired, You have brought about.’” Only then do they throw Jonah into the sea, and only then does it stop raging. [[11]](#footnote-11)

We can all be Jonah. Numbing yourself isn’t just for addicts; addiction is the extreme version of this characteristic human behavior. Those who aren’t addicted find our own ways of sleeping through difficulties.

But the problem with sleeping through storms is that it makes it easier to sleep through beautiful fall days. As Brown puts it, “There is a full spectrum of human emotions, and when we numb the dark, we numb the light.” Indeed, living with our imperfections makes us appreciate joy and beauty and love. In the words of Leonard Cohen, “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

There is an alternative to numbing. If we can all be Jonah, we can also all be the sailors. Recall that Brown sees the antidote to perfectionism in wholehearted living. Wholehearted living requires courage, compassion, and connection in our everyday lives. But none of these come easily. The theologian Mary Daly says, “Courage is like – it’s a habitus, a habit, a virtue. You get it by courageous acts. It’s like you learn to swim by swimming. You learn to courage by couraging.”[[12]](#footnote-12) That’s what the sailors do. They act. They do the hard work. They throw, they row, they even do the hard work of praying to a God not their own. Living a wholehearted life isn’t easy, but it can be done, if we will work on it.

Jonah is willing to give up, because he thinks he has no choice. He won’t use his skills as a prophet if it doesn’t fit his ideal of what a perfect prophet is. He feels powerless. Of this, Brown writes, “Powerlessness’ is dangerous. For most of us, the inability to effect change is a desperate feeling.” We need to find agency, we need to believe that we have the power to effect change.[[13]](#footnote-13)

When Jonah gets to Nineveh and starts preaching, he may not believe that he can effect change, but the Ninevites do. They proclaim a fast and put on the mourning clothes of sackcloth and ashes. And, the text says, “God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways.”[[14]](#footnote-14) And God decides not to overthrow the city.

“God saw what they did.” As one modern commentator has written, “In penitence, deeds have greater weight than words. Accordingly it is not written that God heard their prayers but that He saw their deeds.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Powerlessness is indeed dangerous. And the only way to counteract it is to exercise power, to do something. It isn’t easy. Like courage, it requires practice. But if the greatly wicked city of Nineveh could do it, there’s hope for all of us.

Jonah is a perfectionist. He is certain that he is right. He complains about the injustice God has done to him in sending him to Nineveh and making him a laughingstock – in his own eyes – when his prophecy doesn’t come true. He also complains about the gourd that God sends to shade him. He knows that he is right.

But he has it wrong. His problem is that he lacks faith. Brown says that the author Anne Lamott wrote a line that “cracked open my heart.” This is the line: “The opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty.” Brown herself defines faith as “a place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

We find it hard to have faith. We want to know the answers, we want to be sure. But sometimes we can’t be sure. Sometimes, we have to understand that uncertainty too is part of the human condition. It’s not perfect, but it’s the world we need to live in. Faith makes that possible.

We can’t have perfection. The ruby will get its scratches, and it will develop more as time goes on. We can, though, learn to make the imperfections beautiful. It takes work. That is our job. I’d like to close with a sentence that Brené Brown quotes from the writer Anna Quindlen, “The thing that is really hard, and really amazing is giving up on being perfect and beginning the hard work of becoming yourself.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Tomorrow night, we will leave this place of prayer and reflection. When we do, may you, may I go out and begin the hard work of becoming ourselves.

*Kein y’hi ratzon,* be this God’s will.

1. Deut. 18:13. *Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden Publ., 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid.,* p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jonah 4:10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jonah 4:2-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Brown, *Gifts,* p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid.,* p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *The Little Prince,* tr. Katherine Woods (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1943), pp. 46-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Brown, *Gifts,* pp. 55, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid.,* p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jonah 1:5-6, 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Brown, *Gifts,* pp. 72, 61, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid.,* pp. 65-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Jonah 3:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Uriel Simon, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Jonah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Pub. Soc’y, 1999), commentary on 3:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Brown, *Gifts,* pp. 90-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Ibid.,* p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)