

Jonah and the Wail

Topic

Yom Kippur, Torah, *Middot*

Grade Level(s)

5th – 12th

Big Ideas

The opportunity for *teshuvah* can make people more willing to acknowledge their failings and to attempt to do better.

Having compassion for others can be a way to motivate them to better themselves.

Learning Targets

Students will:

1. Understand how the concept of *rah̄amim* drives the narrative of Sefer Yonah
2. Compare and contrast God's and Jonah's approaches to *teshuvah*
3. Consider how the concepts *teshuvah*, *din*, *rah̄amim* apply to contemporary situations

Relevant Vocabulary

דִּין (<i>din</i>)	Judgement
רַחֲמִים (<i>rah̄amim</i>)	Compassion
סֵפֶר יוֹנָה (<i>Sefer Yonah</i>)	The Book of Jonah
תְּשׁוּבָה (<i>teshuvah</i>)	Repentance (from the root שׁ-ו-ב for "return")
שְׁמוֹת (<i>Shemot</i>)	The Book of Exodus
פָּסוּק (<i>pasuk</i>)	Verse
עֶשְׂרֵת יָמֵי תְּשׁוּבָה (<i>Aseret Yemei Teshuvah</i>)	The Ten Days of <i>Teshuvah</i> (the ten days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur)

Materials / Technology Needed

- A class plant
- *Sefer Yonah* (either in print or [digitally](#))
- Text of [Sefer Yonah 4:2](#) (included at end of document) and [Shemot 34:6 – 7](#)

Background for Teachers

While *Sefer Yonah* is multilayered in its thematic content, the concepts of *teshuvah* and God's *rah̄amim* are central to the book's narrative. This theme makes it an appropriate selection to read on Yom Kippur, when *Sefer Yonah* is traditionally read as part of the afternoon service.

The narrative begins with God commanding Jonah* to prophesy the destruction of the city of Nineveh to its inhabitants. A prophecy of doom is meant as a warning to the target of the prophecy. In other words, if the target does not do *teshuvah* and improve their ways, bad things will happen. However, the target has the opportunity to change their ways and forestall the prophecy (*Mishnah Torah, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 10:4*).

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Jonah was displeased by his call and fled to Tarshish, the opposite direction of Nineveh. After encounters with a group of righteous sailors and a giant fish, Jonah returned to hear the call of God a second time. This time, Jonah went to Nineveh. At this point, Jonah announced God's decree, the people of Nineveh repented, and God spared the city and its inhabitants. Following these events, Jonah was quite displeased.

The idea of God as merciful and compassionate is a central one during the days leading up to *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, when the 13 Attributes of God are traditionally recited on a daily basis (except for on Shabbat) until the end of Yom Kippur. The 13 Attributes originally come from Moses' description of God when God descends to let Moses see God (*Shemot* 34:6 – 7). These words, as recited by Jewish petitioners, can be seen as a way to remind God to be merciful and compassionate as the Jewish people seek to do *teshuvah*. The words were echoed by Jonah towards the end of his own narrative when he expressed that he knew what the result of prophesying to Nineveh would be since God is merciful and compassionate.

¹It is worth noting that the prophet's name recalls the dove that brought the olive branch to Noah after the end of the Great Flood (*Beresheet* 8:8 – 12). For further exploration of the connection between the flood narrative and *Sefer Yonah*, see Klitsner, Judy, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible*.

Prepare in Advance

Remember to read *Sefer Yonah* to review the narrative.

Description of Activities

1. Explain that there will be a class plant. Discuss some of the following issues:
 - a. What will learners need to do in order for the plant to thrive?
 - b. What do they think will happen if they leave the plant to its own devices? What about if they give it too much attention or water it too much?
 - c. Do all plants require the same attention? How can you know how best to take care of a plant? [Note that trial-and-error is a viable perspective here.]
2. Learners take in the narrative of *Sefer Yonah*. They can either read it themselves or they can hear it told to them.
 - a. If reading themselves, learners read *Sefer Yonah* for a basic understanding of the narrative without focusing too much on the details.
 - b. If learners have the narrative told to them, tell an exciting summary of *Sefer Yonah*. The main points that learners should come away with are:
 - i. God instructed Jonah to go to Nineveh to prophesize to the people that their wickedness will mean the destruction of Nineveh.
 - ii. Jonah got up and went in the opposite direction of Nineveh, boarding a ship to get as far away as he could. After a treacherous storm hit the boat, Jonah hid and then took responsibility for causing the storm. He instructed the sailors to throw him from the boat, which they did

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- reluctantly. God sent a big fish to swallow up Jonah and deliver him to safety, at which point Jonah prayed to God.
- iii. God instructed Jonah a second time to go to Nineveh, and this time Jonah got up to do what God asked. Jonah proclaimed to the people of Nineveh that their city would be destroyed in 30 days, which prompted the people to do *teshuvah*.
 - iv. Based on the people's *teshuvah*, God decided to not destroy the city.
 - v. Jonah became angry and prayed to God with disappointment that God was merciful and compassionate to Nineveh.
 - vi. Jonah left the city and sat down, and God caused a *kikayon* to grow to give him shade, which made Jonah happy.
 - vii. God then caused a worm to eat the plant and wind and sun to affect Jonah, so that Jonah asked to die.
 - viii. God asked Jonah if he was so upset about the plant, to which Jonah replied that he was. At this point, God asked Jonah why he was so concerned for a plant that he put no effort into nurturing while God should not be concerned about the 120,000 people of Nineveh?
3. Show *pasuk* 4:2. Emphasize the end of the *pasuk*, where Jonah points out God's attributes. Compare Jonah's description of God to Moses' description of God in *Shemot* 34:6 – 7. Learners should notice that Jonah uses similar language to what Moses used in 34:6.
 4. Explain that *Sefer Yonah* is traditionally read during the afternoon service on Yom Kippur. Explore with learners why they think *Sefer Yonah* is read on Yom Kippur.
 5. Discuss the final point that God made to Jonah. What point is God making to Jonah? Learners should understand that having *rahmanut* for people is important.
 6. Learners, either individually or in groups, consider how the narrative of Jonah might play out today with modern forms of communication. They can either use modern tools to take on the roles of Jonah and God or they can choose to use those tools on a modern situation that could call upon the themes of *teshuvah*, *din*, and *rahamim*.
 - a. Possible modern situations include:
 - i. Someone is stealing money from the *tzedakkah* box.
 - ii. A sports team, theater troupe, or youth group is causing embarrassment to their community because of the way they conduct themselves and treat others.
 - iii. A bully is caught harassing others through social media.
 - iv. Someone regularly hands in plagiarized work.
 - b. Learners create their campaigns. Possible tools include:
 - i. Social media
 - ii. Private communication (like texting, direct messaging, or face-to-face conversations)

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- iii. Traditional public displays (like billboards and television) to handle the situation.
 - iv. More advanced learners might take into account how they can incorporate both approaches into a single coherent approach, balancing when to be more forceful and when to be more compassionate.
 - v. More basic learners might take either Jonah or God's approach and create a campaign based on that single point of view.
7. Learners present their campaigns. Presentations should take into account:
- a. Why do they think each party would react the way they did?
 - b. Which response is more effective? Why?
 - c. How might the opportunity for *teshuvah* affect a person's response to being held accountable for their actions?
 - d. How is nurturing a person similar to nurturing a plant?
8. Remind learners about the plant. Ask learners why they think God used a plant to make God's point to Jonah?
- a. Take care of the plant over the course of the year. Learners record how often they water the plant, add soil, etc. They can do this either in a class notebook or a shared online document.
 - b. Learners keep their own journals about how they are nurturing relationships with other people.
 - c. Do periodic check-ins about the plant's health and what is working (and not working) to keep the plant healthy. Use those check-ins as an opportunity to discuss what is working and not working for learners in their personal development. (Remember that learners should share only if they feel comfortable.)

Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

For learners who need more assistance

- Learners create an image of people doing *teshuvah*.
- Learners present what they think it sounded like when Jonah gave his prophecy and when God forgave the people of Nineveh.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Learners explore how the 13 Attributes of God are used during the days leading up to and during *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*. They present their thoughts on how repeating the 13 Attributes might be effective.
- Learners examine the order of the 13 Attributes of God and assess why they are in that order. Learners could explain why this order makes sense to them, or they could reorder the 13 Attributes in the way that they think is most appropriate.

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Yonah 4:2	יונה ד: ג
<p>[Jonah] prayed to God and said, "Please God, isn't this what I said would happen when I was in my land? Therefore, I went beforehand to flee to Tarshish because I know that you are a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger and full of kindness and compassionate about evil.</p>	<p>וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל־יְיָ וַיֹּאמֶר אָנָּה יְיָ הֲלוֹאֲזֶה דִּבְרֵי עַד־הַיּוֹתֵי עַל־אֲדָמָתִי עַל־ כֵּן קִדְמָתִי לְבָרַח תִּרְשִׁישָׁה כִּי יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אַתָּה אֱלֹהִים רַחוּם אָרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חַסֵּד וְנָחֵם עַל־הָרָעָה:</p>