

Book of Jonah Reading/Discussion Guide

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Sefer Yonah / ספר יונה / the Book of Jonah is a bit of a mysterious text. It's one of the shortest books in the whole *Tanach* (acronym for the Torah, *Nevi'im*/Prophets, and *Ketuvim*/Writings). Unlike most prophetic texts, Jonah is a narrative; a story. It follows a reluctant prophet as he tries to run away from God, gets tossed overboard from his getaway ship, spends three days in deep prayer in the belly of a fish, and then successfully turns the people of one of the world's largest cities away from their sinful ways and towards God.

Biblical scholars have called it everything from a parable to a satire. Beyond its fantastical plotline: How could the most reluctant of God's prophets also be the most successful? Where other prophets were famously shunned, ignored, and exiled, Jonah—once he gets over his own heebie-jeebies—is immediately heeded.

The Book of Jonah is read on the afternoon of *Yom Kippur*. Perhaps this is because of the theme of repentance that represents a narrative thread throughout the text. Other possibilities include the idea that human beings cannot possibly know how or why God works the way They do, or the idea that sometimes the universalist Divine vision of the world runs roughly up against our own particularist tendencies. No matter how you slice it, it's a thought-provoking and invigorating text.

On the next page, you will find a ten-second summary of each of the four chapters, plus some discussion questions and activities for you and your Community Members to explore.

Chapter 1

Summary:

God tells Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh and tell them to stop being evil. Jonah runs away, boarding a ship headed in the opposite direction. God rocks the boat in a storm and Jonah comes clean to his extremely cool shipmates. They chuck him overboard. The seas calm.

Questions & Activities:

- Read Chapter 1 and summarize it with a haiku or limerick.
- Why do you think Jonah turned tail and ran away from his Divine calling? What would you do if you heard a heavenly voice instructing you to go to New York City and “proclaim judgment upon it” (v. 2)
- Why do the sailors (v. 13-15) not immediately heed Jonah’s advice to throw him overboard?

Chapter 2

Summary:

God sends a huge fish to swallow Jonah. He sits in its belly for three days and where he repents through a beautiful poetic prayer.

Questions & Activities:

- What is the theme of Jonah’s prayer? Does he even ask for forgiveness?
- What do you think the fish was thinking this whole time?
- Write a few lines of your own prayer that you could read when you feel sent overboard.

Chapter 3

Summary:

God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh and do the thing. Jonah says, “Nineveh will be destroyed in forty days!” The people immediately cease their wicked ways, repent, and turn to God who, in Their mercy, forgives everyone.

Questions & Activities:

- Jonah does not tell the people to turn from their wickedness—he just pronounces judgment. Why? (There is no right answer—this is open ended)
- Verses 7 and 8 explicitly mention that animals will be included in the atonement ritual (and then in chapter 4, they are included in God’s forgiveness!). Why the emphasis on animals as part of the network of sin and forgiveness?

Chapter 4

Summary:

Jonah is grumpy and is like “Dude, you made me a liar - I said Nineveh would be destroyed and it’s not!” God teaches Jonah a lesson about justice and mercy for humans and animals. The end.

Questions & Activities:

- God compares Nineveh, a great city, to a plant that grows, withers, and dies all in one day. What’s God getting at there? Is Nineveh like a plant?
- The text seems to end in the middle of a paragraph. Write a verse or two that offer a satisfying conclusion to the narrative.