

“A Job of Work to Do”

A sermon for the High Holy Days

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There are stories so old and so strong that the need to be told over and over again. That’s why every faith tradition repeats an old, strong story at each turning point over the course of the year. We gather today as the Days of Awe draw to a close. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, begins this evening at sundown. For the last ten days all around the world Jewish communities have been celebrating the New Year. The Days of Awe begin with Rosh Hashanah the traditional text for

which is the Binding of Isaac. It tells of Abraham and Isaac, of Sarah's silence and of God's terrible demand. Among the many questions that it raises, is one which you and I should never have to ask. Is it possible to love God more than life itself? We might imagine we it's a story from another time, from a time when blood sacrifice was still commonplace. But we would be deluding ourselves. Such stories are timeless and if you doubt blood sacrifice is still an all too human practice, then think about the fact that in the Congo since 1998 over 5.4 million

people have died by violence or by easily preventable disease
and that each and every one of them was somebody's child.

That's what the old strong stories do, they make us think.

They change our minds. They invite us to try on the masks of

God, to embrace and to beware new ways of being. Informed

by Abraham and Isaac then we are commanded in these Days

of Awe to ask ourselves how we intend to change in order to

lead more just and loving lives. What is broken within and

among us that needs to be mended? What is broken beyond us

that calls us up out of ourselves? Though any day can be a day

to make amends, Jews set aside the Days of Awe particularly for that purpose. We all have work to do. Best get to it we are supposed to be done by tomorrow.

The old strong story tied to Yom Kippur is a little gem buried in the back of the Bible called The Book of Jonah. In some ways Jonah is the antithesis of Abraham. While Abraham stands for abject obedience Jonah's reluctance is legendary. While Abraham leaves home and hearth behind because he hears God's call, Jonah hears that self-same voice and tries to run and hide. There is something of each of them in all of us.

Each of us has touched the strength of faith above all fear and each of us has tried to run away. Each of us has kept faith with those we love even when we didn't like them very much and each of us has severed the ties that bind believing love couldn't be salvaged.

The Book of Jonah dates from the 4th century before the common-era. Like Micah, Jeremiah and the other older prophets, Jonah hears the voice of God. "Go to the great city of Nineveh, go now and denounce it, for its wickedness stares me in the face." Unlike his fellow prophets though, when Jonah

heard the voice of God he turned away. He didn't want to do the job. In fact he ran away. He boarded a ship bound for Tarshish as far from Nineveh as it was possible to go. On Jonah's map Nineveh was at one end of the world and Tarshish at the other. But the Lord let loose a hurricane and you know what happened then. There are times when we don't get to turn down the job. When he found himself in Nineveh Jonah realized he had no choice. So he did what he told to do. He did the job. Despite his reticence somehow he summoned the authority needed to convince the King of the Ninevites that

God was serious about punishing them for their wicked ways.

Once convinced the scriptures says “he rose from his throne, stripped off his robes of state, put on sackcloth and sat down in the ashes. “ Now it was God who was convinced. The text continues: “God saw what they did, and how they abandoned their wicked ways, and God repented and did not bring upon them the disaster God had threatened.”

Jonah was furious. Here he had finally accepted God’s call to do a job he didn’t even want to do and now he’s getting no support from his boss. We’ve all been there. And like Jonah,

we've all lost track of what really matters most. The Orthodox Jewish poet Yehuda Amichai, fought with the British in World War Two, with the Palmach in the Israeli War of Independence and with the Israeli Army from 1956-1973. He was well acquainted with doing work he didn't want to do. He knew the cruelties of war. He knew the delirium and danger of self-righteousness.

From the place where we are right

flowers will never grow

in the spring.

The place where we are right

is hard and trampled

like a yard.

But doubts and loves

dig up the world

I like a mole, a plow.

And a whisper will be heard in the place

where the ruined

house once stood.

Sometimes those doubts and loves that loosen the soil inspire us to leave. Sometimes the work we do becomes so lifeless and so disconnected from what really matters that we risk it all and walk away. Sometimes what lacks life is less the work than it is the state of mind with which approach it. Knowing the difference is important. When the real problem is our state of mind changing jobs will just help us to avoid the inward change required. Sometimes finding true vocation calls more for a

change of heart than for a different job. Jonah did the job he had to do. But the fact that by his intervention the Ninevites and all their flocks were saved brought him no joy, no satisfaction. He wanted to be right. He wanted so badly to be right that in his rage he cut himself off from God's love.

“He was alone,” she says, and does

not say, just as I am, “soloing.”

What a world, a great man half

her age comes to my mother

in sleep to give her the gift

of song, which- shaking the tears

away- she passes on to me, for now

I can hear the music of the world

In the silence and that word:

soloing. What a world- when I

arrived the great bowl of mountains

was hidden in a cloud of exhaust,

the sea spread out like a carpet

of oil, the roses I had brought

from Fresno browned on the seat

beside me, and I could have

turned back and lost the music.

I beg of you, do not turn back. There is no place for us to hide.

As seasons circle round again, as each new love renews the last,

we know, you and I don't we how to turn with the turning of

the year. At least for now our work is clear. We are here to

embody God's love. We are here to make things right, to mend

what is broken within and among and beyond us, to forgive
where we can and to commit ourselves anew to the long hard
work of reconciliation. No running away, only today and its
grave demand for love.

Shalom, Amen and once again, shalom.