



The Jewish High Holy Days

Lesson Two:

Jonah, God's Reluctant Prophet

Lesson Objectives

Through the study of the book of Jonah, we will be reminded of encouraging truths about God—and the reasons Jewish people read this story at *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement:

- If God can forgive Jonah and the Ninevites, He can forgive us. No one is beyond the reach of His compassion.
- God rules mightily over the land, sea, creatures, and peoples of the world.
- God has plans for each of us and desires our obedience to His plan.
- Even when we stumble and sin, if we turn to God, He is quick to forgive.
- God desires that we be just as forgiving and compassionate as He is.

Key Bible Verse

“When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.” Jonah 3:10

Before You Begin

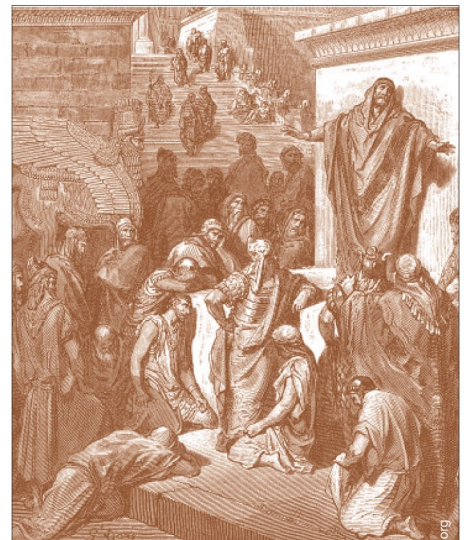
Though there are many fascinating themes in the book of Jonah, for Jews it is primarily about repentance and redemption. This is why they read it every year at *Yom Kippur*, the Jewish Day of Atonement.

They see Jonah's story as a reminder that we can never flee from God and His judgment, and as an affirmation that He seeks our repentance and longs to forgive us and shower us with His love.

Yom Kippur is important because it is the holiest day on the Jewish calendar and it marks the culmination of the High Holy Days, which begins with *Rosh Hashanah* (the Jewish New Year).

Jews see *Yom Kippur* as their final opportunity of the year to repent of their sins. To focus on this important task, they fast from food and water, engage in intense soul-searching, and spend much of the day in the synagogue beseeching God for forgiveness. They prepare for this day with a *mikvah*, or ritual bath of purification, and with

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An illustration of Jonah and the Ninevites.

extra acts of charity, all in an attempt to help atone for their sins throughout the year.

It is with this heightened awareness of our fallen nature—of the punishment we deserve and our desperate need for God’s mercy—that Jews hear the story of Jonah on *Yom Kippur*.

Who is Jonah? He is a reluctant prophet who runs from God’s clear directive to go to Nineveh and preach His truth. He’s a defiant believer who wants mercy for himself but not for the people of Nineveh, and admits to his boat-mates that he worships “*the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the land*” (1:9) even as he’s trying to flee from God in a wooden ship.

He’s a forgetful man who—even after he’s miraculously saved from the seas, the storms, and the sea creature—has the audacity to get angry with the God who rescued him.

And in all these unsavory qualities we find ourselves—sinful, broken, selfish, disobedient, and desperately in need of God’s forgiveness. Biblical scholars disagree on who Jonah was, when the book was written, and who wrote it, creating an ambiguity that makes it all the easier for us to identify with this cautionary tale.

The book of Jonah makes us painfully aware of our need for atonement and all the more grateful for a God who, as Jonah reminds us, is a “*gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity*” (4:2).

Jonah Chapter 1: The Runaway Prophet

- 1. This story begins with “*the word of the LORD*” coming to Jonah. How does this phrase set the context for the story?

- 2. According to 2 Kings 14:25, what other prophecy did Jonah make?

- 3. What did Jonah hope to accomplish by running away from God? (see Jonah 4:2) What does this reveal about his faith in God and his feelings toward others, specifically the people of Nineveh?

- 4. Jonah is unwilling to preach God’s word to the Ninevites, yet he’s willing to let the strangers on the boat throw him into the raging sea to calm the storm. Why does he have this vastly different attitude toward these different groups of people? What lesson can we learn here?

- 5. How do both Jonah’s disobedience and his godly sacrifice impact the people around him? How have your acts of disobedience or sacrifice affected others?

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Pause and pray for forgiveness for your disobedience, standing firm in the confidence of 1 John 1:9. And offer a prayer of commitment to live a life of sacrificial faith that draws others to God (Matthew 5:16).

Jonah Chapter 2: Desperate Prayers

6. What words does Jonah use to describe his surroundings under the sea and inside the whale? How does he respond to his dire situation? How does he say God responds to him? (See vv. 2 and 6)

7. What did it take for Jonah to finally turn to God instead of running from him? What does verse 7 tell us about the seriousness of Jonah's condition inside the fish? What does verse 4 tell us about his outlook?

8. Jonah makes a vow to obey God. Read Ecclesiastes 5:4–5 and describe how seriously God takes our vows to Him.

9. How does God respond to Jonah's change of heart?

Jonah Chapter 3: Second Chances

10. What is different about God's call to Jonah in 3:2 as compared to 1:2? What is different about Jonah's response?

11. Throughout the book of Jonah, Nineveh is called a "great city" (1:1, 3:2, 4:11). What message was God trying to get across to Jonah? Why was Nineveh's repentance so important to God?

12. How was Jonah able to reach people he did not really care about?

13. How do the Ninevites respond to Jonah's message from God? What does verse 9 reveal about the depth of the understanding God gave to the king of Nineveh and his nobles?

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14. What attribute of our great God makes it possible for the Ninevites to be spared? What lesson does this teach us about the possibility of repentance and goodness among people who seem irredeemable?

Jonah 4: Man's Anger, God's Compassion

15. What is Jonah's response to God's compassion toward the Ninevites? Why does he want to die?

16. How does God respond to Jonah? Between God's question—*"Have you any right to be angry?"* (v. 4)—and His object lesson with the vine and the worm, what lesson is He trying to teach Jonah? What lesson do you take away from this story?

17. What wonderful truths about God does Jonah affirm even as he expresses his anger?

18. Jonah's attitude toward God varies widely from chapter to chapter in this book. Describe the ways his feelings fluctuate from chapters one to four.

19. List the many ways God shows compassion throughout the book of Jonah. List the many ways God has shown His compassion to you.

Extra Credit

We have seen that Jonah tried to flee from his calling to deliver God's message to Nineveh. All of us have a calling to fulfill. The first step is to understand that God has His hand on our lives. Once we realize this, we must be diligent in carrying out our responsibilities to God, our family, our job, and our community. Write down God's calling for your life and think about the ways in which you are obeying or running from that call.

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A Christian Reflection

It is easy for us to forget that God is a God of love. As humans, we often want judgment carried out right away—especially when we feel we are the victim! But we must yield our desires to God’s wisdom and justice, being careful to remember that we too often stand in need of His forgiveness and compassion when we are in the wrong. What do you learn about God’s compassion and the compassion He desires from His people in these verses?

Verse	Message
Psalm 103:13	
Isaiah 30:18	
Lamentations 3:22	
Mark 1:41	
Ephesians 4:32	

SOURCES

Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, *How Firm A Foundation*, Paraclete Press, Brewster, Massachusetts, 1997.

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