Jonah: The Dynamics of Compassion



In this essay, I want to make two rather strange suggestions. One concerns the question of *rachamim*—compassion, as both a human and a divine disposition. In the scene of *rachamim*—which includes the possibility of forgiveness—helplessness, I suggest, plays an important role. Maternal compassion, for instance, is stirred by the total dependency of the infant. When my first baby was born, I had the powerful experience of suddenly seeing everyone I met as having once been a baby! As though a new vein of fundamental truth about human life had become manifest. As never before, I knew about *rachamim*.

I also want to explore the idea that the book of Jonah, which centers on the question of *rachamim* and, also, of helplessness, is not, in the end, a narrative at all. It seems to me to defy basic requirements of conventional narrative. Rather, it is a poetic text, with the resonance, the apparent incoherence, the hallucinatory quality of the imagery of poetry. Perhaps, in some ways, like the book of Job.

The Biblical Story

The book of Jonah is one of the great texts in the literature of loneliness. The man Jonah appears with little historical context. He is a man whom God addresses with a sudden mission: “Rise up and go to Nineveh….” (1:1).[1] Like the protagonist of a Kafka parable, Jonah is immediately assailed by the anxiety of a call, which he immediately resists: “He rose up to flee from God’s presence.” Anxiety is the starting-point of the text.

Anxiety is expressed in silence. Jonah has no response to the divine call. His silence persists until he is again assailed by God, this time in the form of a great storm at sea. His only response this time is to lie prostrate in the ship's hold and fall into a stupor—*Va-yeradam*—"He fell sleep" (1:5). The word contains within it the word *yarad*, he went down. Three times already he has "gone down," regressed, away from God's presence, into a state of embryonic despair. Only when challenged by the ship's captain does he speak—and then, to ask for death: "Lift me up and throw me into the sea…" (1:12).

A lonely human being, silent, seeking the silence of the womb and the grave. So begins the narrative. But from that point, nothing essentially changes. At the end of the book, he is, even more explicitly, asking for death: "And now, O God, please take my life from me, for my death is better than my life!" (4:3). And again, after the gourd has withered, "He begged for death, saying, My death is better than my life" (4:8). His death-wish is a constant throughout the text. In the end, God asks him His final impassioned question to which Jonah has, within the frame of the narrative, no answer:

"You looked with compassion upon the gourd, over which you did not labour nor did you nurture it, which appeared overnight and vanished overnight. And should I not look with compassion upon Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than twelve myriad human beings who do not know their right hand from their left, and many cattle?" (4:10-11).

God sets up a kind of psychodrama, in which the gourd, growing and dying, plays its role in the intimate confrontation between Himself and Jonah.

The divine question remains ringing in our ears, echoing perhaps God's opening call to Jonah which also remained unanswered as Jonah fled from his mission. The book is framed with human silence, avoidance. Even when Jonah does break his silence and pray to God, once for salvation from the belly of the great fish, on the other occasion for death, these prayers ultimately change nothing in his sensibility. What is the arc described in this most enigmatic of narratives? In a sense, Jonah remains true to his original silence—his original flight—in the face of God's calls.

Jonah encounters two challenges to his flight, one by the ship's captain and one by God. In both cases, he chooses death. The captain speaks for the helpless human situation of all on board the ship. Jonah is the only one who does not do the natural human thing—to pray, "each to his own god." He alone responds to his situation in silence, stupor, denial. *Mah lecha nirdam*? asks the mystified captain. "How can you be sleeping?" (1:6). This is a question about the kind of human being who turns his back on his own existential position in the world. In the elaboration of the midrash, the captain says, "Here we are, standing between death and life, and you are asleep!"[2]

Jonah's answer is consistent with his starting-point. Asking the sailors to throw him into the sea, he acts out the implications of his original flight from God's presence. To stand in the traumatic space between death and life, the human existential position, is unbearable to him. Instead of standing, he flees.

Consistent to the end, when he faces his second challenge, God's final question about compassion, he again, within the frame of the story, remains silent. This, of course, is the choice of the narrator—a deliberate provocation to the reader who has a right to expect a resolution of the enigmas of the narrative. If we read this closing line of the text as a rhetorical question, do we assume that Jonah finally assents to God's argument? This seems a large assumption after we have traveled so far with Jonah's nay-saying. Rather, God's question remains a lingering, true question, which implicates the reader in a drama, whose outline remains shadowy.

One of the issues in the text is prayer. Jonah's flight is, radically, a refusal to pray—to stand in the human place and to cry out to his God. What is so unbearable to him about the posture of prayer?

It is striking that even when he, officially, does seem to be praying, from the belly of the whale, for instance, his words are framed in the past tense. Essentially, he is remembering his past crisis in the sea, when God delivered him from drowning. The prayer of gratitude is, it seems, the only prayer that he can contemplate. Now, in his present moment in the belly of the whale, he avoids addressing the immediate angst of his situation. This is not "crying out to God." In this sense, he is still evading the radical question of human helplessness in the presence of God.

On the other occasion when he prays, in Ch. 4, as we have seen, he twice reiterates his death wish. Here, he cannot tolerate God's forgiveness of the evil city of Nineveh. His prayer includes a recitation of his version of the 13 Attributes of God, emphasizing the attribute of divine compassion. But he inflects this sacred passage in order to justify the whole story of his flight: "Please, O God, was this not what I said while I was still in my own country? This was why I fled, ahead of time, to Tarshish! For I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, full of lovingkindness, renouncing punishment!" (4:2).

The irony for the reader is manifest. This biblical passage forms the central thread of the liturgy on Yom Kippur—the very day when the book of Jonah is read. Repeatedly, the community cries out these words—as prayer—in order to activate the Attributes, here and now. But Jonah recites them in order to deplore them. He is possessed by a rage of knowing righteousness: "I know that You are a gracious and compassionate God …." For him, such compassion is outrageous. A rational, meaningful world can only be based on *din* (law), on the principle of justice, of just deserts, of transparent dealings.

Jonah always already knows that God is a God of compassion. But his knowledge is strangely inert, or even perverse. It is used to explain his flight, his refusal to stand in prayer, even as he stands in prayer. He will not seek compassion: He prays to a different music.

And then, at the very end, God appeals to Jonah on the issue of compassion, of prayer, of the human situation. What is he to make of a God who points to a gourd and a worm as the ground of meaning? How does his minor drama of vulnerability—an overheated human being, subject to the attacks of sun, worm, and wind – becomes a script for divine forgiveness? God's analogy between Jonah's gourd and the precarious fate of Nineveh works by a "softer" logic than the one that Jonah prefers. What would it mean for Jonah to allow himself to be transformed by the imaginative challenge that God has proposed?

Now, God uses the word *chasta*—"Ýou have looked with compassion." This is a synonym for *rachamim* (compassion), but with the specific nuance of a certain quality of gaze. It is associated with the eyes, with a way of looking with compassion, care, and regret at all forms of life. By its very nature, life, even vegetable life, is endangered, vulnerable, volatile. Subject to compassion. Jonah has seen the gourd, an ordinary plant, as bearing the force of divine compassion, when it shaded him from the glare of the sun. He has experienced—suddenly, irrationally —"great joy" in the gift that God has "provided" for him, as well as great anger at its loss.[3] Ironically, through the medium of a small, short-lived plant, his inner world has become enlarged and enlivened. Both elements of his experience become components of God's word—*chasta* ("You have looked with compassion.").

Implicitly, God tells him: "I have seen in you that gaze of one who has discovered the value and the beauty of what is usually overlooked." That compassionate eye encompasses in its gaze the pity and the sorrow for the vulnerability of all life. On the basis of such a knowledge—personal, caring, intentional—Jonah may surrender to the more expansive, prior gaze of the Creator.

What does God want of Jonah? Something that cannot be demanded, that can only be evoked. A generous gaze, a softening of the rigid posture of one for whom *din* is everything. An ability to relinquish a false self. A new way of being, rather than of doing, that will allow him to stand in the spaces between states, a sense of God as an environment that makes it possible for him to surrender.

The Psychoanalytic Story: Surrender

Here, I turn to an essay by Emmanuel Ghent for a psychoanalytic perspective.[4] The surrender that Ghent describes is different from submission. It involves a yearning to be truly seen. Its goal is transformation; frozen parts of the self yearn to be recognized. Where submission suggests defeat, surrender reaches out to transcendence. It conveys liberation, the relaxing of defensive barriers.

One of the things I like about this essay is that Ghent is exploratory about his use of the word, surrender. Although it is central to his argument, he is not sure it is the right word for what he has in mind. In this way, he enacts the practice of surrender, the tentativeness that must put clinical precision always just out of reach in any human language. He brings in associations from other languages.

The best writers on the inner life, it seems to me, work like this, by use of associations and symbolism, to express the inexpressible. They are poets and mystics. In mystical literature, the state of surrender that Ghent describes as reaching out to transcendence has its primal reality in the symbolism of the womb (*rechem*, the root of *rachamim,* means "womb"); or of the infant at the breast.

In fact, it is fascinating to notice a midrashic tradition that reads the "many cattle" of Nineveh— the final words of the book—as a metaphor for precisely that suckling relationship of mother and young—helplessness, absolute need, and satisfaction.

In one source, the king of Nineveh separates men and women, pure animals from impure, mother and young. The young see their mothers' breasts and want to suck, while the mothers see their young and want to give suck; and they weep.[5] In this scene of alienation, something in the organic structure of creation is disrupted. Those who need each other are divided.

Donald Winnicott remarks, "All philosophers were once babies." This primal scene of mother and child becomes iconic. The awareness of this core-experience in oneself and in all human life changes one's perspective on the constitutive helplessness of human existence.

In a similar midrash, the king of Nineveh challenges God: If you do not have compassion for us, we will not allow these mothers and their young to satisfy their basic need![6] This becomes the argument that God makes to Jonah in His parting words: You know the passion in compassion for the doomed gourd, how can I resist that passion for My creation?

The act of suckling blurs the boundaries between self and other. Winnicott claims that, in fantasy, the infant takes from the breast that is part of the infant, while the mother gives milk to the infant who is part of herself. Here is the space between self and other that is bridged by imagination. Winnicott calls this "potential space." From this space grows all human experience of the world. The ways that human beings imagine God create whole bodies of religious thought. The starting point is the total helplessness of the isolated human being, who needs the mother to make connection imaginable.

In a provocative essay, Adam Phillips argues that this helplessness is not something to be outgrown. In fact, in some sense, it only intensifies in the course of a life. This is not to be deplored; on one level, it is to be celebrated. What is dependence good for? "Without it, there is no frustration, and no possibility of the experience of satisfaction."[7] Rather than resenting one's helplessness, one may learn to "grow into [it] partly by becoming aware of it." Like breathing, hunger too can be imagined as somehow sustaining us. Like our dependence on our bodies, with their urgencies and limitations—and their necessity.

Where would God be in such a picture? For Phillips, God becomes the fantasy savior of human beings from their own helplessness. In a secular, disenchanted world, morality is found in the presence of other human beings, who—like the mother—satisfy one's human hunger. Helplessness draws out help from others. As Freud put it, "the original helplessness of human beings is thus the primal source of all moral motives" (121). The (m)other is assailed by the infant's screams and brought to imagine her need. Need and obligation go together, and a world of moral considerations comes into being. Empathic satisfaction, rather than divine salvation, is Freud's key to the ethical realm. Helplessness becomes a strength; and a God who is imagined as *lacking helplessness* has no place in the world.

If we accept Freud and Phillips's challenge, we can point to mystical traditions where God is indeed imagined as satisfying, rather than protecting, as compassionate, rather than omnipotent, and as capable of crying as any human father. The God who leaves Jonah with the question of His compassion for sheer animal life is concerned, deeply enmeshed in the world of the crying mother animal and its young. This God does not lack helplessness, when compassion comes into question.

The deep connection between the act of suckling and the idea of compassion emerges in passages in the Talmud where the root of the word *rachamim* (compassion) is used to refer to the suckling act. Will a cow suckle the young of another cow? The visceral experience of one who has compassion is colored by the animal intimacy which is the ground of the word.[8]

The word *chanun*, too—which is paired with *rachum* among the divine attributes, and is usually translated as "gracious"—occurs powerfully in the context of a specific legal situation in the book of Exodus. If one takes a debtor's basic clothing as mortgage on his debt, one must return it by sunset: "For it is his covering, it is his skin's sole clothing. In what shall he lie down? And it will be if he cries out to Me, I shall listen to him – for I am *chanun* – gracious!" (22:26)

As against all the hard-edged reasons for holding on to the mortgage, which is, after all, the only assurance the creditor has that his money will be returned, there is the simple helpless gesture of the question: *In what shall he lie down?* And the even more simple statement of God's subjectivity: *I am gracious.*

Chanun can be translated as *gratuitous c*ompassion. This is an *unstoried* compassion, it is just the way things are: When the destitute cry out, God listens. As against the demands of *din,* the undeniable rights of the creditor, God answers, "I am gracious—in *rachamim* I created my world" (Mechilta). Without *rachamim,* there could not have been a world. "God saw that the world could not continue to exist on the strength of law, so He partnered law with compassion" (BR). Unadulterated law means destruction. The destruction of the Temple is understood to have been caused by devotees of law.

The notion of the *partnership* of law and compassion is a difficult one. In terms of the debtor's clothing, compassion overrides law: the garment is returned to the debtor. The principle is clear: "Just as He is compassionate, so you be compassionate." This is not a partnership of values; compassion wins out, as God's foundational attribute.

Another way of putting the relationship between law and compassion might be to say that law is backed by many stories, cases that clarify discriminations; while compassion is uncompromising, based on an iconic reference to God's character as creator. In this sense, it is unstoried, it has little to say in its own defence. It represents an alternative perspective on the world.

Divine compassion involves a blurring of boundaries, an *imaginative* way of looking at the world. R. Nahman declares that in creating the world, God's wish was to "reveal His *rachmanut."*[9] A radical tension existed: on the one hand, in order for there to be a world at all, God had to retract His infinite being (*tzimtzum);* on the other hand, the dynamics of the world are constituted by divine *rachamim* and the helplessness of the creatures who call it forth. What I am calling helplessness can be imagined as the wound of finitude, of the absence of God.

This is R. Nahman's great paradox: Without God, nothing can exist; yet without God's withdrawal, nothing can exist. At the heart of His world there is the *challal panui*—the evacuated space, which, he says, is humanly impossible to grasp. At the very margin between God's presence and absence, *rachamim* becomes necessary.

In reading *Jonah,* we recognize the human experience of finitude which we have called helplessness; and the divine compassion which Jonah rejects. Why he rejects it can be explained in many ways. For our purposes, we have suggested that both helplessness and compassion are simply intolerable to his vision of reality. But there are many stories one might tell by way of explanation, some of them told in midrashic traditions. Compassion, however, has no stories. From its perspective, resistance is, at heart, a kind of *cruelty*, a refusal to soften towards the divinity that offers transfiguration, the newly imaginative gaze.[10]

God presents Himself to Jonah as one who is involved in the dynamics of *rachamim.* He too knows the pain of intimate attachment, its frustrations and its yearning to be recognized. Because He knows this, He can empathize with the helpless creature who inhabits "*My* world." At least as far as the imagery can bear, He holds within His compassionate gaze the mother's desire to feed and the infant's desire to be fed.

The Ethnographic Story

Here is a story about animals, about a mother and a baby, and about *rachamim* and the resistance to it. Because there is resistance, there can be a story. It is called *The Weeping Camel:* an ethnographic film about a group of Mongol nomads in the Gobi Desert. One of their camels gives birth to a white camel, which she refuses to suckle. The women of the tribe bring the young camel to her but she rears away, kicks out. This causes great distress to the women and to the whole tribe. If the baby camel dies, this will, of course, mean serious financial loss. More than this, one senses, something will have gone awry with the world, with the organism of the tribal culture. As if the resistant camel disrupts the flow that sustains this community in all its tranquil rhythms.

It is decided to send two young children on a donkey through the Gobi Desert to seek out a music teacher from the nearest town. After a difficult journey, the children find the music teacher and bring him back to their encampment. There, he plays his stringed instrument close to the belly of the mother camel and her young is again brought to her. She stretches her neck to the horizon at what one can only describe as a yearning angle and begins to suckle. A tear can be seen falling from her eye. The general sense of relief is palpable—not only economic relief but a spiritual release as the balance of the world is restored.

Everything begins to flow again—tears, milk, music. A sense of surrender as the milk lets down and a resistance melts away. The intimacy of the moment is loosened into the life of the tribe. A metaphysical moment in the poetics of the film.

Questions have been raised about the film's authenticity. What appears as a dramatic instant of breakdown that is followed by another instant when the world is re-tuned is, in effect, constructed by the filmmakers, who have spent many months waiting for this moment, in the knowledge that such events are often observed. The camel's tears have also been critiqued, on the grounds of sentimentality, or of projecting human emotion on the otherness of animal life. But even as we acknowledge the possible artifice in the film's construction, the film retains its force *as* a poetic creation, if not as a documentary record.

This is a story about a creature who creates havoc in her world, breaking the categories of the society that has to find a compassionate way of respecting her helpless flight. The animal body becomes an emblem for the human helplessness of the tribe. What releases her is the expansive power of music. The world opens again to sensation. But these scenes imply the horror of breakdown, the depth of unexpressed sadness in the life of the tribe, who at first try to force the situation.

Here is a form of *challal panui*—a world evacuated by God, with creaking mechanisms and a general helplessness. The musician enters, playing against the mother body, with accompanying voices of male and female singers. The world comes to rights, a primal *rachamim* prevails, the camel surrenders.

Poetic Justice

The book of Jonah, too, is a poetic creation. It begins with the moment of rupture, Jonah's flight. No back-story, no explanatory history. As though to close in on something essential about the life of a human being who cannot find a place between contrary states. To stand in the space between death and life, between God's absence and His presence, the death-wish and the great joy of the gourd's shade—Jonah flees compulsively from that space. As though the disorder, the helplessness is who he is.

The rest of the book leads him through many situations in which his dependence on God is impressed on him while his death-wish remains, even in his prayers for salvation. The moment when it ends defeats all the redemptive gestures of conventional narrative. Cutting the story before any resolution is achieved, the author is refusing us the *rachamim* of closure. This is a kind of narrative cruelty. It compels us to recognize that this is not, in any real sense, a meaningful narrative at all.

It is striking that the midrash provides compensations—stories of before and after, that preserve the text from incoherence. Jonah is given a prior history, as is the king of Nineveh; Nineveh is given a future that justifies Jonah's flight. But *Jonah*, as a literary artifact, chooses as its scene the space-between. Here, the moment of shade offered by a gourd is the occasion for great joy; the worm and the wind and the withered gourd throws our hero back into his melancholy. But God appeals to that very helplessness as the ground for empathy with all who cry out for *rachamim*. To that in Jonah that can surrender to the dynamic of rachamim in his own experience.

"Even if a sharp sword is at his neck, a person should not hold himself back from *rachamim*."[11] Despair is not a barrier to *rachamim*. The gift that God offers Jonah at the end of this non-narrative is the gift of *rachamim*—of the capacity, the capaciousness, that gives him a place in that vital organism in which God plays a central role: "One who has compassion on others himself receives compassion. 'He will give you compassion and He will look with compassion upon you from heaven' (Deut. 13)."[12] This kind of justice is *poetic* justice: One who absorbs the divine gift of *rachamim*—of the compassionate gaze upon all creatures—by that very measure feels that gaze upon himself.

Wonderfully, the Talmud complicates the biblical verse. It is not repetitive ("He will give you compassion and have compassion upon you"); the gift of *rachamim* is the capacity to be in a state of *rachamim for others*—which then opens one to the divine flow of compassion for one's own life. What comes first, the giving, or the taking? Obviously, the giving to others. But that too is a divine gift: prior to the practices of compassion comes a sense of the divine origin of that flow without which the world cannot be sustained.

This kind of circular reasoning will not lead to narrative closure. God's final words, unanswered in the narrative, take their place as an eternal appeal to the imaginative lives of those who read this poetic text, particularly on the Day of Atonement, which is the Day of *Rachamim*. They return us to prayer, to that difficult standing in the presence of God.

Avivah Zornberg is the author of six books. Her most recent book is The Hidden Order of Intimacy: Reflections on Leviticus*. She teaches at Matan and Beit Avi Chai in Jerusalem.*

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[1] Some scholars connect his name with that of the prophet, Jonah, who appears in 2 Kings, 14: 25-26.

[2] Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, 10.

[3] The word *va-yiman* occurs several times in the text: God *prepared* the great fish, the gourd, the worm, the wind, for their specific moment in time. Radak translates it as *hizmin l'fi sha'ah,* which underlines the sense of the right *time*. Divine intentionality enters the story, a theological perspective that subtly conveys the notion of a prior reality, shadowing the apparent contingency of events. A creative imagination is shaping the record.

[4] Ghent, "Masochism, Submission, Surrender" (1990).

[5] Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, 43.

[6] B. Ta'anit 16a.

[7] Adam Phillips, "Freud's Helplessness," in *The Joy of Secularism*, ed. George Levine, 132.

[8] B. Bechorot 24a. The cow will suckle the stranger’s calf if she has already suckled her own young.

[9] Likkutei Moharan I: 64.

[10] See Rambam, Hilchot Taaniyot and Hilchot Evel, 13. He sets up a tension between two refusals; one is stupidity, the other is cruelty. Practices such as repentance and mourning must find the right balance between the disenchanted recognition of “the way of the world” (cruelty) and an exaggerated piety (stupidity). In the space between opposing values, one rational and generalized, the other personal and intentional, the Jew finds a place to stand.

[11] B. Brachot 10a.

[12] B. Shabbat 151b.