Self-Deception and Redemption in the Book of Jonah



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The human tendency to deceit is explored in enormous depth in Tanach. In a range of narratives, Tanach probes the ethics and consequences of dishonesty in people's relationships with both loved ones and enemies. Less often noticed is Tanach's analysis of the ways in which people lie to themselves, and how redemption from self-deception is often the most essential catalyst for personal transformation.

Perhaps the most fascinating exploration of the power of self-deception is found in the Book of Jonah. In fact, one can read the whole story of Jonah as a reflection on the lies people tell themselves and the redemption that is achieved by overcoming them.

The fundamental concern of Jonah can perhaps be best understood by comparing it to another book in the biblical canon: the Book of Job. Both Jonah and Job are concerned with understanding divine justice from a philosophical perspective. Job's experiences of personal devastation lead him to desperately seek understanding of God's ways; as a religious person, he is plagued by the incomprehensibility of his suffering.

Jonah, too, is tormented by the inexplicable quality of God's judgment. However, whereas Job is troubled by the absence of God's mercy, Jonah is troubled by its presence.

Jonah expresses his bewilderment and anger at God's willingness to forgive the people of Nineveh. Toward the end of his book, we read:

And God saw their actions – that they had turned away from their cruel practices – and God relented from the evil He had spoken of bringing upon them, and brought it not. To Jonah, this was a cruel evil, and he raged against it.

And he prayed to the Lord: "Please, Lord, is this not just what I said while I was still in my own land? This is why I first fled toward Tarshish – because I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and relenting from evil. Now, Lord, please take my soul away from me, for death would be better than my life."

"Are you so enraged?" said the Lord.

Whereas Job is devastated by God's attribute of harsh judgment, Jonah is infuriated by His lovingkindness.

Significantly, each character not only expresses his question about God's justice, but embodies it. Whereas Job suffers a series of seemingly undeserved tragedies, Jonah is blessed with a series of seemingly undeserved kindnesses. Even after Jonah brazenly tries to escape God, he experiences endless divine mercy: God does not give up on Jonah as His prophet and goes so far as to save his life by sending a fish to swallow him and deliver him safely to complete his prophetic mission. Jonah vociferously and repeatedly challenges God's ways, and God responds with limitless patience and benevolence, culminating in His somewhat mysterious gift of a gourd plant to provide Jonah with shade.

Jonah rails against the mercy God shows Nineveh without realizing that he himself is equally a beneficiary of incomprehensible divine mercy. When he looks at his world, he sees the ways in which other people do not get the punishments they seem to deserve, but avoids recognizing that not only is the same true of him, but that he is showered with abundant, miraculous divine compassion.

Job, by contrast, embodies his question in a way that does not reflect self-deception. He questions the absence of God's mercy after having truly experienced a bleak lack of mercy; he deliberately challenges God about the suffering he has endured. Jonah's unwitting embodiment of his question reflects his lack of awareness of the ways in which he benefits from the mercy that he ostensibly rejects. In this manner, the Book of Jonah is an extended reflection on the ways in which people deceive themselves, remaining blind to inconsistencies that are obvious even to the casual observer.

The Book of Jonah is not primarily about the repentance of Nineveh; it ends not with the dramatic reversal of Nineveh's fortunes but with the story of the gourd and its aftermath. The book tells the story of Jonah's own development, as God persistently tries to break through Jonah's blind spots and steer him to an awareness of the power of divine forgiveness in his own life and in the world writ large.

In fact, the biblical text tells us that God sends the gourd to Jonah to protect him "*meraato*" (literally, "from his evil"). While many commentators and translators understand "*meraato*" as "from the brutal heat," it may be that the verse's language also means to convey that the experience of the gourd was intended to spur Jonah to overcome his own moral shortcomings. This reading is borne out by the language of the chapter as a whole, which repeatedly plays with the words *tov* (good) and *ra* (evil), using forms of the root *tov* five times and forms of the root *ra* four times in its 11 verses. In fact, these words are used even in contexts in which they seem not to be the most straightforward choice of vocabulary. For example, the word "*haheitav*," which comes from the word *tov* and is used to mean something along the lines of "is it indeed," appears twice in chapter four of Jonah and nowhere else in Tanach. This linguistic focus on the words "good" and "evil" imply that the events of the chapter are focused on broader questions of morality in Jonah's life.

Hashem draws on Jonah's distress over the destruction of his cherished plant to make vivid the tragedy that would have characterized the destruction of an entire city and its inhabitants:

And the Lord said, “You cared about that gourd plant, which you did not toil for and did not grow, which was born overnight and was lost overnight. Am I not to care for the great city of Nineveh, which has in it more than one hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right hands from their left, and so many animals?”

The comparison between Nineveh and the gourd seems ludicrous and itself reflects Jonah’s self-serving perspective, as his love for the plant is, of course, not altruistic but due to the benefit it provides him. Hashem’s willingness to overlook the contrast between Jonah’s self-interested love of the plant and Hashem’s benevolent love of human beings is another manifestation of His mercy to Jonah.

However, there may be an additional reason that God resorts to the gourd plant to convey His message to Jonah. People often deceive themselves because it would be too painful to be honest. In the case of Jonah, this means overlooking his own need for divine compassion as he objects to God’s mercy for Nineveh. Rather than demand that Jonah open his eyes to all the manifold ways that his existence is dependent on Hashem’s benevolence in the face of his own personal failures, Hashem steers Jonah to self-awareness through one contained experience of divine beneficence.

One might finish reading the Book of Jonah with the sense that Jonah still does not take Hashem’s words to heart, as Jonah does not respond to God’s closing words about the value of divine mercy. This silence may give the impression that Jonah continues to passively resist Hashem’s message to him. However, I think that one can just as convincingly draw the opposite conclusion.

Finally, at the end of his book, Jonah stops running away, mourning, and protesting, and instead gives God the last word. This may not be the fulfilling climax that we as readers hoped for, and Jonah can be contrasted with prophets such as Habakkuk, who begins his book by inveighing against God’s apparent injustice and concludes it with a psalm that wholeheartedly exalts God’s power and grandeur. Nonetheless, in the overarching scheme of the Book of Jonah, the prophet’s decision to accept God’s message without argument or avoidance represents a significant movement toward self-awareness and redemption.

Read this way, the Book of Jonah portrays a prophet who persistently deceives himself, resisting recognition of the ways that he benefits from the divine mercy that so troubles him when offered to others. I believe that this interpretation sheds light on the resonance of the book at this time of year, and particularly on Yom Kippur. Jonah reflects the sometimes stunning human capacity to lie to oneself when honesty is too painful, and the ways in which learning to tell oneself the truth can be a powerful step in personal growth. In inviting us to consider this fact of human nature, Jonah spurs us to consider our lives anew, removing the blinders we wear to our own inconsistencies and untruths.

Jonah's story depicts the prophet's self-deception with enormous, unvarnished honesty, as Hashem seeks to show Jonah a new lens on his own behavior and beliefs. As a whole, the book conveys the idea that the narratives we tell ourselves may close us off from genuine empathy and insight, and it is often through overcoming the narrowness and self-protective, partial truths of these narratives that we find redemption in our relationships with man and God. Jonah's journey to self-knowledge is halting and tortuous, as it is for many of us. Nonetheless, his ultimate willingness to open himself to God's words represents the transformation to which we aspire on Yom Kippur.

Notes: All Biblical translations are taken from the Magerman Edition of The English Koren Tanakh. I would like to thank my friend Devorah Wolf for her insights into the contrast between Jonah and Job.