

Can Peace and Truth Live Together? The Challenge of Yonah ben Amittai

When I was seven years old, my mother taught me the importance of what we called “a little white lie.” It sounds like a strange phrase today. It meant not to tell the whole truth to protect someone else. We had driven from Kansas City to New York city to visit the family we had left when I was three. As far as I could remember, I was meeting my grandfather for the first time. He was in a nursing home. We had a lovely visit. I sang Hebrew songs for him. As it turned out, it was my last visit with him. Though he died five years later, the distance that separated us was never crossed again.

My mother told me when I saw my grandfather, “do not talk about your brother Stephen.” My grandfather did not know that his oldest grandson had died of leukemia two years before. At seven, I learned that sometimes you sacrifice the truth to prevent the pain that it might cause. Sometimes we forego a perfect truth to hold onto an imperfect peace.

The prophet Jonah would not have approved. His own name tells you how conflicted he was. Yonah ben Amittai, Yonah—meaning dove, the symbol of peace—ben Amittai—son of Amittai, a name derived from the Hebrew word Emet, truth. Yonah, the symbol of peace, raised by Emet, Truth. Jonah is a prophet who wants peace but is paralyzed as he holds on fiercely to his truth.

From the very first verse of the book, Jonah has it all figured out. He refuses God’s mission to call the people of Nineveh to repent. Because, thinks Jonah, if the people repent, then how can they be brought to justice?

No, Jonah cannot condone abandoning strict justice, even if that is God’s own will. If the people of Nineveh have sinned, well then, they ought to be punished. And Jonah has no interest in being part of the plan to forgive them, even should they repent. The truth of their actions demands retribution.

Yet Jonah knows no peace. A storm prevents him from escaping to the other end of the world. He urges the horrified sailors to throw him overboard, refusing to turn to God for aid. In a definitely unpeaceful outcome, he is saved from drowning by an enforced quarantine in the belly of a big fish.

At the lowest point, Jonah finally prays to God to end his suffering and in return agrees to go to Nineveh as instructed. But when the people heed his call and repent, does the prophet rejoice in his own success? No. Jonah remains defiantly hopeful that the city will be destroyed. Then his self-satisfied peace is disturbed by the blazing sun, and he wishes he were dead. Jonah, who wants peace is not capable of recognizing it. The urge for justice is too strong in him.

The problem of Jonah is not that he wants justice. The problem of Jonah is that he seeks a world of perfect consistency.

Blinded by that passion, he withdraws from every interaction, whether with the sailors on the ship or the people who are repenting in sackcloth and ashes.

Nevertheless, I have compassion for Jonah. He lives in that paradoxical condition that we all face from time to time. While we all uphold truth, justice, and peace, too often we are made to choose. Perfect justice makes no room for peace. We cannot build coalitions if we insist on total agreement. But can a world of peace bring justice? Does perfect peace mask the injustices of the world? Whether teaching our children that the world is not fair or deciding which cause to champion today, we are ever torn about what is right. How do we choose?

The Rabbis imagine that this tension was embedded in our very nature as human beings at the time of Creation:

When God was ready to create the first human, the ministering angels divided into two factions. One said, “Create!” and the other said, “Don’t create!” The angel of Kindness said, “Create them, because they do much kindness.” The angel of Truth said, “Don’t create them because they are full of lies.” Justice said, “Create them, for they act justly.” Peace said, “Don’t create them, since they are full of argument.” What did God do? God took Truth and threw it to the earth. The angels said to God, Master of the Universe, Why are you insulting Truth, the your own royal emblem? Raise Truth up from the earth! As it is written, “Truth will sprout from the earth.” (Psalms 85:12) Bereishit Rabba 1:8

Truth and kindness are at odds in this midrash, because being kind is not always the most truthful path. The Rabbis teach that we should tell every bride she is beautiful. To tell her otherwise would be unkind.

Justice and peace are in tension, say the Rabbis, because justice leads to arguments over what justice means for me and what justice means for you.

Humans, unlike angels, live in the ambiguity of multiple and often competing values. Yet sometimes, we do hold our ground, staunchly defending one quality over another.

The progressive Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire describes the hazards when we close ourselves “into ‘circles of certainty’ from which [we] cannot escape, [we] make our own truth. It is not the truth of men and women who struggle to build the future, running the risks involved in this very construction. Nor is it the truth of men and women who fight side by side and learn together how to build this future—which is not something given to be received by people, but rather something to be created by [people].” (As in “Truth will sprout from the earth.”)

Jonah chose truth and justice over peace because he did not understand that people are contradictory and complicated beings. Jonah could not allow for people to make mistakes and then regret their actions. And he could not admit a truth other than his own. Which means it was

not really truth at all. Truth became Jonah's shield against emotion, depriving him of empathy and blinding him to kindness.

Jonah chose truth and justice over peace because he did not want to believe that people can change. But we must believe that people can change. That is at the heart of Yom Kippur; it is a foundational teaching of Judaism. Because we believe that repentance is always an option, we have permission to reflect on our actions, to try to be better next time, to change.

Can peace and truth live together? Can justice and kindness co-exist? Yes. All day we have called out the thirteen divine attributes, which include justice and truth. But those words are mitigated by words of *chesed*, kindness, compassion, and forgiveness.

Justice alone is not enough. We must temper justice with Chesed, love, kindness. Justice comes with the messiness and contradictions of community. As Yehuda Kurtzer wisely taught in a study session at the Hartman Institute this summer, "the antidote to injustice is not a passion for justice. The antidote to injustice is a passion for *chesed*." When we care about others, justice becomes our shared aspiration. When we embrace our own frailty and the frailty of others, then we can begin the slow, steady process of creating a world of justice. We must build this world from love--*Olam chesed yibaneh*. Through *chesed*, we **lovingly embrace justice**, we **respectfully pursue truth**, and we **reach together toward peace**.

The Book of Jonah has no resolution to this problem. Instead it ends with a question. A question that only you can answer. God asks, "Should I not take pity on the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?" How will you answer?

*Rabbi Barbara Penzner
Temple Hillel B'nai Torah
Yom Kippur 5781
September 28, 2020*