**Promotional Announcement**

Join Darel Grothaus and Hanan Schlesinger for a discussion of the themes of justice, compassion, forgiveness, empathy and relationship to the Other as they play themselves out in the biblical Book of Jonah which is part of both Jewish and Christian Scripture. It is read in synagogue on Yom Kippur, which falls this year on Monday September 28.  The two speakers will also talk about how the messages of the book are relevant to the Palestinian Israeli conflict.

**JONAH:**

**IS IT GOOD FOR YOU TO BE OBSESSED BY RAGE AND REVENGE?**

**Isn’t Jonah that silly story about a guy in the belly of a whale, picking seaweed out of his teeth?**

**Jonah’s message is anything but silly! It warns :**

* **Zeal for revenge triggers endless cycles of violent retribution.**
* **Fiery rage blinds us to possibilities for justice and reconciliation.**

**SETTING THE STAGE**

**Jonah’s story is told in two acts. Let’s set the stage by looking at the historic context and interpreting Jonah as a satirical cartoon.**

**Historic Context**

**For several hundred years, the peoples of Israel and Judah had suffered relentless brutality and humiliation from two successive empires, Assyria and Babylon.**

**Ninevah, capital Assyria, is singled out in Jonah:**

* **Ninevah invaded and destroyed the kingdom of Israel and deported its survivors.**
* **Nineveh--reveled in its grisly savagery. Cut out tongues of victims so they couldn’t scream when they were flayed alive. Chopped off heads and impaled them on stakes to warn against rebellion.**
* **“Never forget Ninevah!” A tribal memory that formed a collective identity of humiliated victims of barbaric oppression.**
* **“Never forget Ninevah!” A tribal memory that fueled each generations’ fiery rage and obsession with revenge against their current enemies—even though Ninevah had long passed from the world stage.**
* **“Never forget Ninevah!” The rallying cry of a people recruiting God to obliterate their evil enemies.**

**Interpreting Jonah as a Satirical Cartoon**

**The Jonah storyteller cleverly sought to reach revenge-obsessed hearts by using humor to get behind their concrete-hard defenses. He knew preaching from a soap box of moral condemnation would only intensify their resistance. Instead he created a satirical cartoon to push its listeners off balance—Jonah is presented as a moral caricature, a larger than life character, who behaves outrageously.**

ACT I

**“The word of the Lord comes to Jonah, and tells him to go to Nineveh and prophesy.” Why Jonah? There is nothing about Jonah that makes him a likely candidate for this mission.**

* **Mean and vindictive.**
* **Carelessly draws innocent people into life-threatening peril.**
* **Stubbornly self-destructive.**

**Yet mysteriously, the word of the Lord calls Jonah to prophesy at Nineveh.**

**“Preach that Nineveh’s wickedness is a stench in the nostrils of the Lord.”**

**Jonah is shocked!**

**“This is a suicide mission. Just this week, Nineveh’s king chopped off the head of our secretary of state who was trying to negotiate a truce. Stuck his head on a pole. Hell no! I’m not going!”**

**The Lord calmly replies, “Here’s 50 shekels. Rent a camel and get going to Nineveh!”**

**Jonah pushes back. He snarls, “Here’s the real reason I ain’t going to Nineveh: They deserve a nuclear strike as payback for what they did to us. But you, O Lord, you believe in mercy. If just a few of those butchers show any signs of repentance, you’ll save the whole damn city!”**

**The Lord quietly replies, “Jonah, you’re right. Now climb on that camel, and head up to Nineveh.”**

**But Jonah spins around, and runs in the opposite direction. Jonah is not just running away. The storyteller says, “Jonah is fleeing from the presence of the Lord.” To emphasize the point, he repeats it three times: “Jonah is fleeing from the presence of the Lord.”**

**Jonah’ rage was a barricade against the presence of compassion that reaches beyond revenge.**

**Next, we spot Jonah running down the pier at Joppa to catch a boat sailing for Tarshish on the east end of the Mediterranean--as far from Nineveh as Jonah could flee. Jonah buys his ticket; climbs down to the bottom of the ship; pulls a gunnysack over his head; and falls asleep—fleeing from the presence of the Lord.**

**A hurricane explodes over this little vessel. The storyteller sketches a humorous picture of the Lord standing between the ship and Tarshish, blowing hurricane gales to block the ship. The sailors panic and throw the cargo overboard to lighten the ship. When that doesn’t work, they drag all their idols onto the deck; and with desperate prayers try to find at least one god to calm the storm.**

**All the while, Jonah is snoring away in the bottom of the ship—oblivious to the peril he has brought on these innocent sailors.**

**In desperation, the captain shakes Jonah awake, screaming, “Why are you snoring away? We’ll all drown unless we find somebody’s god who can save us!”**

**The captain drags Jonah to an emergency meeting of the crew, shivering with fear and cold as the winds explode and mountaneous waves overwelm the little ship.**

**Jonah figures he’d better come clean, so he confesses, “I’m your guy. Throw me overboard, and this hurricane will go away.”**

**Then something incredible happens. If I had been one of those panicked sailors, I would have led a gang tackle; and heaved this jerk over the side.**

**Not so! Amazingly these sailors, whose lives Jonah had calously jeopardized, rushed to their oars, and rowed toward land to save themselves without sacrificing Jonah.**

**Think of it! Heathen sailors who know nothing of Jonah’s compassionate God are**

**doing their damndest to save this hardhearted stranger who brought them to the brink of a watery grave.**

**But their adrenalin was no match for the Lord’s huffing and puffing.**

* **Exhausted, they quit rowing, and pitch Jonah into the tempest.**

**We conclude Act I with Jonah marinating in the whale’s gastric juices, meditating on the warning: “It is dangerous to flee from the presence of the Lord whose mercy reaches far beyond revenge.”**

ACT II

**The storyteller doesn’t provide a clinical description of Jonah’s thrashing around in a whale’s innards for seventy-two hours. Instead, the story goes off in another direction. The story changes from narrative to psalm.**

**A psalm in which Jonah describes the spiritual dereliction of fleeing from compassion--but discovers he can’t outrun the Lord’s mercy:**

***“For you cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the waters closed over me. For I am cast out from your presence…But then I called to the Lord out of my distress, and you answered me. Out of the belly of death I cried, and you heard my voice.”***

**Just when it seems Jonah had fled beyond the boundary of the Lord’s compassion, he remembers God is merciful.**

**Imagine Jonah up to his neck in the whale’s gastric juices, confessing his dereliction, and shouting, “Deliverance belongs to the Lord!” The Lord gives the word and the whale vomits Jonah out on the dry land.**

**Hallelujah! One of the great conversion stories of all time!**

**Hold on! There’s more! The Lord doesn’t even give Jonah time to take a shower. He commands Jonah,” Go up to Nineveh and prophesy!”**

**This time Jonah doesn’t run away. He catches the next camel bound for Nineveh. As soon as he arrives, Jonah courageously preaches against that city’s grisly wickedness:**

* **“Repent from your terrorism or you will be invaded! Overthrown in forty days!”**

**What happens next is incredible! Those grisly Ninevhites:**

* **Rip off their blood-soaked clothes and put on gunny sacks.**
* **Smear their faces with ashes.**
* **Get down on their knees, confess their wickedness.**
* **Plead for God’s mercy!**

**This revival goes all the way to the top. Their sadistic king who decorates his palace with the peeled skins of his captives—**

* **He repents!**
* **Climbs down from his throne and crawls onto a big pile of ashes.**
* **Rips off his blood-soaked robe and puts on a gunny sack.**

**He tweets his confession to every household, including the animals, commanding them to purge themselves from their national obsession with violence and terrorism.**

**When the Lord sees what is happening in Nineveh; how this axis of evil has turned one hundred-eighty degrees from its wickedness:**

* **He has a change of heart.**
* **Spares Nineveh from nuclear retaliation.**

**Cue up “Amazing Grace.” Rejoice at this marvelous, miraculous manifestation of mercy.**

**But no, no, no! Don’t reach for your hymnal yet! The story of Jonah isn’t over.**

**Jonah is having a prayer meeting. He is fuming, “Lord, didn’t it happen just the way I predicted--if those terrorists show any sign of repentance, you’ll save the whole damn crowd! Remember all the savage things they have done to *your* people. They burned, raped, mutilated and murdered us--and now you are going to save these Ninehvites?**

* **Lord, if that’s your idea of living, I want to die!”**

**The Lord quietly replies, “Jonah, is it really good for you to be consumed with rage and vengeance?”**

**Jonah doesn’t answer the Lord’s question. Instead, he stalks off, ranting,**

* **“The Lord is soft on sin!”**
* **“If the Lord played moral hardball, he’d make the world safe from terrorists!”**

**Jonah hikes up to a bluff overlooking the city to wait and see what happens. Jonah mutters to himself,**

* **“Still thirty-nine days left on Nineveh’s probation.**
* **Those Ninevhites are so damned perverse; they’ll backslide.**
* **On the fortieth day, the Lord will be forced to launch a nuclear strike to incinerate those depraved butchers!”**

**It’s blistering hot in the desert. The Lord humors Jonah by causing a tall vine to spring up with wide leaves that shade Jonah from the searing sun. But Jonah’s comfort doesn’t last long. The next morning, the Lord sends a worm to attack the vine--and it wilts. The sun climbs into the sky, turns the desert into a furnace. The Lord causes a fierce wind to blow over Jonah, stinging his sun-scorched face with sand.**

**Although Jonah can barely lift his head, he is still enraged by vengeance. Jonah’s rage splatters all over the vine, because it has withered away. Through blistered lips, Jonah again asks the Lord’s permission to die.**

**The Lord, shakes his head in bewilderment, and tries to reason with Jonah:**

* **“Jonah, can’t you see your obsession with revenge has turned you into the mirror image of your oppressors?”**
* **“Jonah, the caldron of rage you constantly stoke has destroyed your moral discernment. You recklessly put innocent people at risk like those pagan sailors.”**
* **“Jonah, if you set out to rid the world of evil, where would you stop? Would any of my children escape alive after your last preemptive strike?”**
* **“Jonah, my beloved Jonah, my greatest fear is the self-destructive, suicidal demon that has captured your soul.**
* **Would you rather die than be healed of your rage and vengeance?”**

**EPILOGUE**

**I am moved by the Lord’s tender, pastoral appeal to Jonah, “Jonah, my beloved Jonah, your obsession with rage and vengeance has turned you into the mirror image of your oppressors? Is it good for you to be obsessed with rage and violence? It is killing you.”**

**JONAH AND THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT**

**You are much closer to the Palestinian/Israeli conflict than I; and have a clearer sense of how to structure the conversation so it is relevant to the situation. However, the Jonah story is archetypal. The archetypal dynamics are as relevant for understanding “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland and other conflicts as they are for Israel and Palestine. These archeypes raise universal issues. Here are several that occur to me:**

**Righteous Anger Hijacked by Rage and Revenge and Humiliation**

* **Righteous anger against oppression is legitimate. Acknowledged in Scripture as a faithful response to injustice. Indeed, righteous anger powers the quest for justice.**
* **Power imbalance between the oppressor and the oppressed and the oppressor’s humiliation of the oppressed fuels rage and revenge.**
* **How can righteous anger be maintained so it isn’t hijacked by rage and revenge?**

**Collective Identity of Humiliated Victims Morphs into Mirror Image of Their Oppressors**

* **For Jonah the issue was *not* Nineveh’s sadistic atrocities. They were real.**
* **For Jonah the focus was on the survivors who allowed their humiliation and suffering to change them into the mirror image of their oppressors.**

**Jonah Projected His “Shadow” onto the Other**

**Jonah projected onto his enemies the lethal shadows of rage, revenge and self-righteousness that he could not claim as his own.**

* **Jonah split those shadows off from himself. So he could live with the delusion of his moral purity.**
* **Centuries later, Jesus talked about this shadow business, when he warned about the danger of obsessing over a speck of sawdust in the eye of our enemy-- while ignoring the huge log stuck in our own eye. (Matthew 7:3)**

Blind Rage Misses Openings for Justice and Reconciliation

*“Why do you obsess over the speck of sawdust in your neighbor’s eye, but ignore the log sticking out of your own eye?” Jesus of Nazareth Matthew chp.7 vs. 3*

*“I hate God’s enemies with perfect passion. Why can’t God do the same?”*

*“You! Jonah!” Thomas J. Carisle*