

PURPOSE IN A PANDEMIC

FINDING PURPOSE IN THE UNPRECEDENTED CIRCUMSTANCES OF THIS MOMENT

TORAH BLESSING

DISCUSSING THE SERMON:

Source Texts:

Rabbi Buchdahl outlines three steps needed to birth a new world: Break, Breathe, Push. This three-part text study will delve into sources related to each category referenced in the sermon.

Break

Moses knew that the Israelites had damaged their connection with God by making the golden calf, and he defended them from God's anger. Still, when he came down the mountain, he broke the tablets that God had given him on Sinai. Rabbi Buchdahl suggests that this dramatic act was necessary to force the Israelites to acknowledge what they had done.

Exodus 32:19-20

(19) As soon as Moses came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, he became enraged; and he hurled the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain. (20) He took the calf that they had made and burned it; he ground it to powder and strewed it upon the water and so made the Israelites drink it.

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר קָרַב אֶל־הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיֵּרָא אֶת־
הָעֵגֶל וּמַחֲלֵת וַיִּסְרֹאֲף מִלִּשָׁה וַיִּשְׁלֶךְ מִיָּדוֹ
[מִיָּדָיו] אֶת־הַלְּחֹת וַיִּשְׁבֵּר אֹתָם תַּחַת הַהָר:
וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הָעֵגֶל אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ וַיִּשְׂרֹף בָּאֵשׁ
וַיִּטְחֵן עַד אֲשֶׁר־דָּק וַיִּזְרֶה עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם וַיִּשְׁק
אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What do you make of verse 20? What do you think the motivation and effect of this action was for Moses and the Israelites?
- What dramatic moments of breaking have you witnessed this year? Do you believe those moments revealed existent problems or new ones?
- Breaking the tablets, even if strategic, is connected explicitly to Moses' rage. Do breaking moments always stem from anger, or are there other feelings that might contribute to them?

Breathe

Rabbi Buchdahl refers to the story of Jonah, who struggled to breathe as waves crashed down upon him. The whale provided a respite, and even though Jonah experienced his deepest low within the belly of the fish, by being given time to breathe he was also able to focus on what mattered and turn himself around. Jonah expressed his experience in the prayer he composed from the belly of the whale:

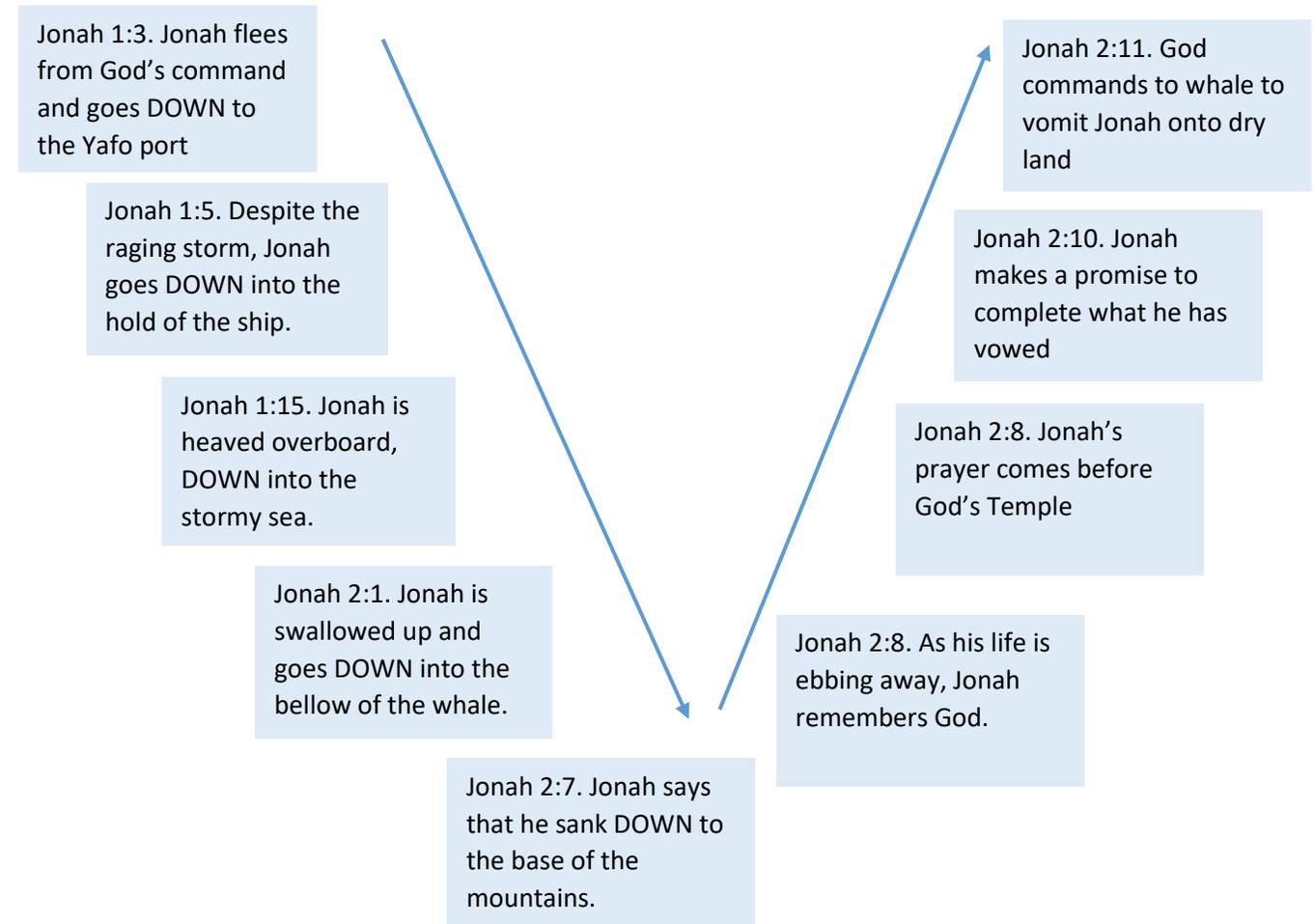
(2) Jonah prayed to the LORD his God from the belly of the fish. (3) He said: In my trouble I called to the LORD, And He answered me; From the belly of Sheol

וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל יוֹנָה אֶל־יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו מִמְעַי הַדָּגָה:

I cried out, And You heard my voice. (4) You cast me into the depths, Into the heart of the sea, The floods engulfed me; All Your breakers and billows Swept over me. (5) I thought I was driven away Out of Your sight: Would I ever gaze again Upon Your holy Temple? (6) The waters closed in over me, The deep engulfed me. Weeds twined around my head. (7) I sank to the base of the mountains; The bars of the earth closed upon me forever. Yet You brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God! (8) When my life was ebbing away, I called the LORD to mind; And my prayer came before You, Into Your holy Temple. (9) They who cling to empty folly Forsake their own welfare, (10) But I, with loud thanksgiving, Will sacrifice to You; What I have vowed I will perform. Deliverance is the LORD's! (11) The LORD commanded the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon dry land.

גויאמר קראתי מצרה לי אל-יהוה ויענני
מבטן שאול שועתי שמעת קולי:
דוּתְשִׁיכֵנִי מִצּוֹלָה בַלְבָב יַמַּיִם וְנִהַר יִסְבְּבֵנִי
כָּל-מִשְׁבָּרֶיךָ וְגִלְיָךְ עָלַי עָבְרוּ:
הוֹאֲנִי אֲמַרְתִּי נִגְרַשְׁתִּי מִנְּגֻד עֵינֶיךָ אֶדְ אוֹסִיף
לְהֵבִיט אֶל-הַיֵּבֶל קְדֹשְׁךָ:
וְאִפְפוּנֵי מַיִם עַד-נֹפֶשׁ תְּהוּם יִסְבְּבֵנִי סוּף תִּבּוֹשׁ
לְרֹאשִׁי:
זִלְקָצֵי הַרִים יְרֹדְתִי הָאָרֶץ בְּרַתִּיהָ בְּעַדִּי
לְעוֹלָם וּתְעַל מִשְׁחַת תֵּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי:
חִבְהֵתְעַטְרָךְ עָלַי נִפְשִׁי אֶת-יְהוָה זִכַּרְתִּי וּתְבֹא
אֵלֶיךָ תִּפְלְתִי אֶל-הַיֵּבֶל קְדֹשְׁךָ:
טָמְשָׁמְרִים הִבְלִי-שָׁוְא חֲסָדָם יַעֲזֹבוּ:
יִנְאֲנִי בְּקוֹל תּוֹדָה אֲזַבְּחָה-לְךָ אֲשֶׁר נִדְרַתִּי
אֲשַׁלְמָה יִשׁוּעָתָה לִיהוָה: (ס)
יֵאנִיאֲמַר יְהוָה לִדְג וַיִּקָּא אֶת-יֹנָה אֶל-הַיַּבְשָׁה:

In addition to a written version, it helps to see Jonah's journey visually:



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What does Jonah's prayer suggest about whether and how a person can make meaning in lonely and difficult times?
- (b) What have been your low points over this past year? What personal, national, or global events have caused your spirits to fall?
- (c) How have you created breathing room for yourself to reflect and shift your thinking? Is there a person, value, belief, or action that you connect to that buoys you back up when you are feeling low?

Push

Rabbi Buchdahl uses a description of exhaustion while giving birth to describe our current moment. She quotes Isaiah 37:3

They said to him, "Thus said Hezekiah: This day is a day of distress, of chastisement, and of disgrace. The babes have reached the birthstool, but the strength to give birth is lacking.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו כֹּה אָמַר חֲזַקְיָהוּ יוֹם־
צָרָה וְתוֹכַחַת וּנְאֻצָּה הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה כִּי בָאוּ
בָנִים עַד־מִשְׁבֵּר וְלֹא אֵין לִלְדָה:

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Do you connect to this birthing metaphor? What about giving birth feels similar to making it through the moment that we are living in right now?
- (b) Have you felt a lack of strength in critical moments over the past few months? What do you do in response to that feeling?
- (c) Rabbi Buchdahl says that "our tradition is midwifing us" because we as Jews have been here before facing moments of challenge and crisis. How does Jewish tradition give you guidance at this difficult time?
- (d) If you were to "midwife" another person through this crisis, what would you say to them to inspire strength?