

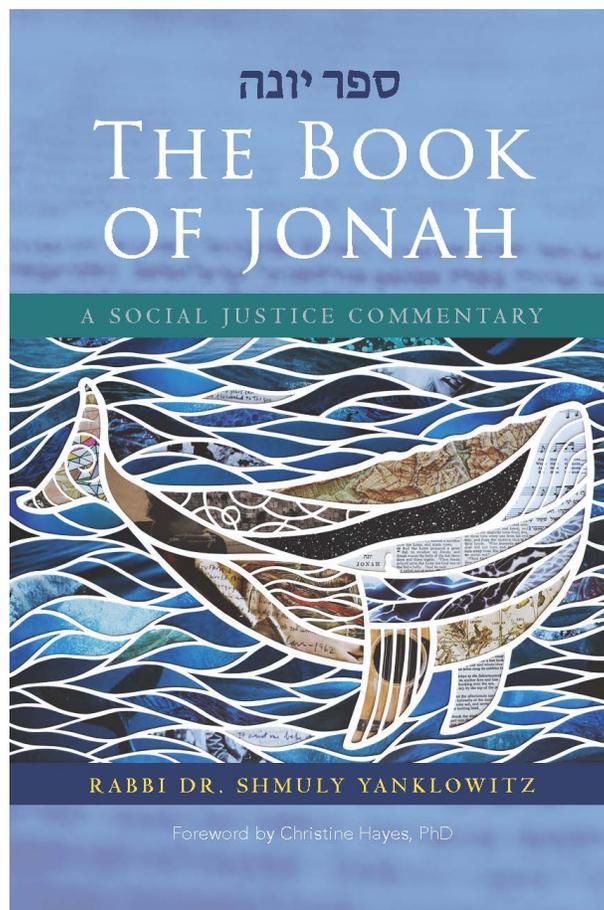
# *The Book of Jonah*

A SOCIAL JUSTICE COMMENTARY

*Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz*

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

by Rachael Pass, CCAR Press Rabbinic Intern



CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS

5780 NEW YORK 2020

# Introduction

This discussion guide examines six topics from Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz's *The Book of Jonah: A Social Justice Commentary*. Over the course of six sessions, facilitators and participants delve simultaneously into the biblical Book of Jonah, Rabbi Yanklowitz's social justice interpretation of that sacred text, and the learners' own lived experiences. Incorporated into each session are touchstone texts from the Book of Jonah and from *The Book of Jonah: A Social Justice Commentary*.

The sessions are divided as follows:

1. Personal Spirituality and Social Activism (focusing on Chapters 2, 6, 7, 14, 23)
2. A Theology of Activism (focusing on Chapters 3, 10, 11, 17, 20)
3. Sadness and Resilience (focusing on Chapters 5, 8, 19, 21)
4. The Prophetic Call in Ourselves (focusing on Chapters 1, 13, 16)
5. Truth, Tribalism, and Pluralism (focusing on Chapters 4, 15, 18, 22)
6. Moral Ambiguity and Compassion (focusing on Chapters 9, 12, 24, 25)

The discussion guide is aimed at synagogue adult education, for learners of all ages and all backgrounds. This curriculum is entirely reading-and-discussion based. While there are many texts and questions prepared for each session, the facilitator should use their best judgment in guiding the conversation based on learner interest and engagement.

The discussion guide is also appropriate for high school students, likely in synagogue Confirmation or post-Confirmation programs. As with the adults, teens will be asked to dig deep into personal spirituality, Jewish theology, and global social justice issues. To differentiate the teen learning experience from the adult curriculum, each session entails at least one hands-on activity, contained in a text box. While we do not expect that every single question from every session will be asked and answered, we do suggest incorporating these activities into each session for the teens. The activities are geared towards the teen audience, but can, of course, be used for the adult learners as well.

Facilitators are expected to have read both the Book of Jonah and *The Book of Jonah: A Social Justice Commentary*. Students are asked to read the Book of Jonah together during the first session.

## SESSION ONE

# Personal Spirituality and Social Activism

### THEME:

“The scariest endeavor is not external—changing the world—but internal—working to change ourselves” (Ch. 14).

### OPENING QUOTE:

The Eternal provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah; and Jonah remained in the fish’s belly three days and three nights. Jonah prayed to the Eternal his God from the belly of the fish. (Jonah 2:1)

### CONVERSATION GOALS:

In this session, we will explore our own spiritual journeys in addition to Jonah’s. We also will spend some time reading the entire Book of Jonah, looking for the specific moments in which Jonah undergoes changes, and then reflects on his life.

### FOCUS CHAPTERS:

Ch. 2, Ch. 6, Ch. 7, Ch. 14, Ch. 23

### CONVERSATION AND ACTIVITY GUIDE:

“To be a moral leader, one must lead a contemplative life of spiritual reflection, embrace darkness, and reject cynicism in favor of positivity. The cost of these ideals can be high, but the benefits are immense. And, for the organized soul, the benefits are eternal” (Ch. 19).

- This is, perhaps, Rabbi Yanklowitz’s central argument in *The Book of Jonah: A Social Justice Commentary*. How does he make this argument?
- Why is spiritual depth necessary for social activism?

### READING JONAH

In *chevruta* (“pairs”), read the entire Book of Jonah. Look specifically for the moments in which Jonah seems to reflect on his own spiritual condition, or when he seems to change in some way. Mark these moments to share them later.

- Which moments did you discover?
- What is Jonah’s spiritual journey throughout the text?
- How does Rabbi Yanklowitz describe this journey?

The time Jonah spends in the fish is essential for his spiritual development. Discuss the following quotation from the book: “Though we will never know what the fish symbolized for Jonah, we can look for the fish in our own lives. Was there a time where we were down and someone lifted us up? When we needed a place of refuge and someone sheltered us? When can we serve as the fish, the place of refuge, for someone else who is tossed overboard?” (Ch. 6).

- How does Rabbi Yanklowitz understand the symbolism of the fish in Jonah’s story?
- How does Rabbi Yanklowitz ask us to think about the fish in our own lives?

### **MAPPING OUR JOURNEYS**

Draw a map of your own spiritual journey. This can include religious lifecycle moments (such as your *bar/bat/brit mitzvah*), moments of spiritual reflection (a time in the woods where you felt connected to the universe), or communal events that affected you (praying *Havdalah* with your temple youth group). On this map, highlight the moments that Rabbi Yanklowitz would call your “fish” moments.

- What have been your own moments of, as Rabbi Yanklowitz describes it, “being in the fish”?
- How has your own spiritual journey unfolded throughout your own life?

“We have the capacity to improve the world while striving for spiritual fulfillment and further attachment to justice” (Ch. 23).

- Rabbi Yanklowitz highlights the connection between our spiritual lives and the work we do to enhance social justice in the world. How are these two connected?
- How does striving for spiritual fulfillment create a stronger engagement for social justice?
- We will close our conversation with a question raised by Rabbi Yanklowitz in Ch. 7: “What is it like to let go of the past and start to shape a new world?”

## SESSION TWO

# A Theology of Activism

### THEME:

“How does the eternal Divine interact with the delicate reality of human existence? Should not a God who proclaims Himself a protector of all therefore keep all from harm?” (Ch. 3).

### OPENING QUOTE:

“And God renounced the punishment God had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out” (Jonah 3:10).

### CONVERSATION GOALS:

In this session, we will be exploring the different descriptions of God that Rabbi Yanklowitz outlines in his book. Our goal is to dissect these different ways of understanding God and to discuss which one (if any) feels most relevant to us and our lives.

### FOCUS CHAPTERS:

Ch. 3, Ch. 10, Ch. 11, Ch. 17, Ch. 20

### CONVERSATION AND ACTIVITY GUIDE:

In *The Book of Jonah: A Social Justice Commentary*, Rabbi Yanklowitz describes three different theologies—“ways of understanding God.” We will examine these three theologies. Each time Rabbi Yanklowitz introduces one of those theologies, he begins with a question.

#### I. The first question that Rabbi Yanklowitz raises is about *theodicy* (“the question why bad things happen to good people”) in Ch. 3:

“[H]ow can we continue to believe in a benevolent and omnipotent God while so much suffering in the world still festers unattended? How does the eternal Divine interact with the delicate reality of human existence? Should not a God who proclaims Godself a protector of all therefore keep all from harm?” (Ch. 3).

- Rabbi Yanklowitz asks how we can believe in an all-good and all-powerful God while witnessing suffering in our world. What do you think?
- Is the God you believe in all-good? Is the God you believe in all-powerful?
- Is it possible for God to be both?

Rabbi Yanklowitz then answers these questions by saying, “We cannot explain why bad things happen to good people, but we can fight against it. We can structure society such that the most vulnerable are not left behind” (Ch. 3).

- If bad things continue to happen to good people, what does that possibly say about God’s omnipotence or goodness?
- What does this fact mean for *us* as humans and our task to make the world more just?

### **DEBATE**

Divide the students into two groups. Team one defends God as benevolent (all-good). Team two defends God as omnipotent (all-powerful). Look at the text of the biblical Book of Jonah: does the book provide at least one piece of evidence to defend each side?

## **2. Rabbi Yanklowitz raises the second theological question in Ch. 17:**

In Jonah 3:10, God renounces the punishment planned for the people of Nineveh. By renouncing this plan, it seems that God is changing God’s mind. Rabbi Yanklowitz asks us, “Is God changing and growing with us? Does God evolve, adapt with the times, and experience redemption? Is this an authentic Jewish theology? What does this mean for Jonah? And what does this mean for us?” (Ch. 17).

What does it mean that God changes God’s mind? Rabbi Yanklowitz suggests that, if God changes God’s mind, God also repents. This would mean that God does and will make mistakes, and then must repent for those mistakes, just like humans. He writes: “In a world where billions of people live in poverty, orphans are put into slavery, and widows are raped, one can relate only to a God who cries and suffers alongside us. The divine brokenness accompanies the journey of human brokenness, and together we heal” (Ch. 17).

- What does it mean to be “broken?”
- Do you think God and humanity are connected through our shared brokenness?
- What does it mean to heal together?

## DEBATE

Continue the debate in your two groups. Team one (the benevolent team) will be arguing that, in mercy, God changed God's mind. Team two (the omnipotent team) will be arguing that God never intended to destroy Nineveh to begin with. Each group will look in the Book of Jonah for one piece of evidence for their argument.

### 3. The last question that Rabbi Yanklowitz raises points toward a theology of interconnectedness. In Ch. 20, he writes:

“A theology of the *interconnectedness* of all souls offers great potential for our moral lives, suggesting a spiritual paradigm for universal love and solidarity. When we encounter another living being, we see how our existences are intertwined” (Ch. 20). Rabbi Yanklowitz bases his theology on the Chofetz Chayim's reading of the Book of Jonah, specifically in regard to the topic of reincarnation. Rabbi Yanklowitz writes: “Going beyond the abstract notion of rebirth, the halachist and writer known as the Chofetz Chayim (1839–1933, Russia and Poland) suggests that in the Book of Jonah is a hidden message about reincarnation: none of us can perfect ourselves in this life, which is why we need multiple attempts” (Ch. 20).

- Do you believe in reincarnation?
- Do you think this is a Jewish argument?

## DEBATE

Team one will argue that reincarnation and interconnectedness can be understood as a Jewish theology. Team two will argue that it cannot. Each team must use a source from the biblical Book of Jonah **and** a source from Ch. 20: “Gilgulim, a Jewish Theology of Reincarnation” to make their arguments.

After the debate is over, each student should share one sentence about what they think after hearing everyone's arguments throughout the lesson.

## SESSION THREE

# Sadness and Resilience

### THEME:

“The genius of Jonah’s designation as a prophet in the canon, however, is that despite his outer flaws, he demonstrates inner strength” (Ch. 19).

### OPENING QUOTE:

“Please, Eternal, take my life, for I would rather die than live.’ The Eternal replied, ‘Are you that deeply grieved?’” (Jonah 4:3–4).

### CONVERSATION GOALS:

In this lesson, we will be looking at Jonah’s struggles with failure and, as Rabbi Yanklowitz suggests, depression. This is not an easy conversation to have. It is a conversation that must be guided with the utmost intention. Working with teens, we cannot ignore the subject of depression, but we must be careful not to equate depression and sadness. Everyone feels sadness; not everyone has depression.

We are asking our participants in this session to be a bit vulnerable. We will be discussing sadness, failure, and resilience. The facilitator should be prepared to check in with students as this conversation progresses, and must be able to validate and also redirect if needed. Know that we can learn from Jonah’s, Rabbi Yanklowitz’s, and each others’ experiences.

### FOCUS CHAPTERS:

Ch. 5, Ch. 8, Ch. 19, Ch. 21

### CONVERSATION AND ACTIVITY GUIDE:

Throughout much of *The Book of Jonah: A Social Justice Commentary*, Rabbi Yanklowitz describes Jonah’s fear of failure, his lack of resilience, and his depression. We are analyzing these moments of Jonah’s story, trying to relate to Jonah’s experiences even if most of us do not have diagnosed depression. We all have experienced sadness and hardship; therefore, we can relate to Jonah’s experiences and learn from them.

Multiple times throughout the short Book of Jonah, we are confronted with Jonah's mental and emotional struggles. From the very beginning of the story, we see Jonah go to sleep rather than face the storm caused by his actions (Jonah 1:5), which Rabbi Yanklowitz suggests is a sign of Jonah's depression. In Jonah 1:12, Jonah instructs the sailors to heave him overboard, his first of three pleas to end his own life. Once swallowed by the fish, Jonah cries out to the Eternal from "my trouble" (Jonah 2:3), explicitly stating his feelings of loneliness and fear. After successfully prophesying to the people of Nineveh, Jonah asks God to end his life, saying "I would rather die than live" (Jonah 4:3), and repeats again this request after God sends and subsequently destroys the plant (Jonah 4:7-8).

Much of Rabbi Yanklowitz's discussion of Jonah's mental and emotional struggles is dedicated to his call for compassion for those who suffer: "The miracle of humanity is the capacity for compassion with those who suffer—a capacity which we should exercise to the best of our abilities" (Ch. 5).

- In your own lives, how have you shown compassion for those who suffer?
- Have there been times when you have received compassion from others?
- Is it easy to show compassion to others who suffer? Why? Why not?
- Are there specific examples from your life that come to mind?

"A midrash imagines that [the sailors] lower [Jonah] into the sea just a little to test the result of their lottery. When they lower Jonah into the water, the storm starts to subside, but when they raise him up, the storm returns immediately. They then try in vain to row furiously to get to dry land. It is Jonah who suggests that the shipmates throw him overboard (Jonah 1:12), which they eventually and hesitantly do (Jonah 1:15). Jonah seems to have given up on life entirely. How could he urge his own death when facing the goodwill of the sailors?" (Ch. 5).

- While compassion may be a feeling, it is expressed in actions.  
How do the sailors show their compassion?
- What emotions guide the sailors in their actions?
- In this midrash, is Jonah in any way demonstrating compassion?
- What ethical dilemma is Jonah facing at this moment?
- What obstacles must he overcome to make the decision he makes?

Following the moment the midrash describes, Jonah is thrown overboard and swallowed by the fish. This is Jonah's lowest moment, both emotionally and physically. Being inside that underwater creature is a metaphor for Jonah's inner turmoil. He is surrounded by darkness;

he is alone. The experience in the fish changes Jonah's life and, more importantly, changes Jonah's perception of himself. Those three days of complete loneliness and isolation bring him from a place of depression and sadness to a place of prayer, in which he demonstrates his readiness to complete the task at hand.

Rabbi Yanklowitz asks us: "What was it like for Jonah in the belly of the fish? How did this experience alter his perception of reality? Of humanity? What happened there that changed his perspective on life?" (Ch. 8).

### **WRITING A PRAYER**

When Jonah is at his lowest, literally and figuratively, he responds with a prayer. Jonah prays to God to save him from the fish, and God responds. Interestingly, the prayer Jonah recites is not particularly relevant to his exact state. In fact, most scholars believe that this was a prayerful poem that already existed before the book was written, and that Jonah (or the author of the Book of Jonah) dropped in at that moment of the story. Maybe at the very moment of despair, Jonah was unable to come up with the right words by himself.

When we are at our lowest, it can be hard to ask for help—from other people, from God, and from ourselves. Learning from Jonah's difficulties, we are going to write our own prayers and cries for help, so that we can say them to comfort ourselves and to cry to God for help when we feel low.

- What is it that you need when you are down?
- Write for yourself a prayer that you can return to in moments of need.

[If the students are emotionally mature and cohere as a group, they are welcome to share what they wrote with each other.]

The fact that Jonah turns to prayer in his "fish moment" (at his lowest emotional point) emphasizes the role that faith played in Jonah's life. In Ch. 19, Rabbi Yanklowitz writes: "Jonah seeks escape at sea, refuge on a ship, and isolation in a fish, unaware that what he most needed protection from was his own crisis of faith."

- Have you ever experienced a crisis of faith, or a situation from which you wanted to flee?
- How have you overcome that desire to run away?

Later in Ch. 19, Rabbi Yanklowitz provides one explanation of Jonah’s crisis of faith, as described by the fourteenth-century French Jewish thinker, Rashi:

“Rashi explains that when Jonah is in the belly of the great fish, he can peer out of the fish’s eyes. Though seemingly anatomically impossible, this action is rich in metaphor. The fish’s eyes are windows that peer only into the imperceptible depths of the unexplored sea. Thus, when Jonah looks out of the eyes of his captor, he peers into infinite blackness, vast oceans of potential. The belly of the fish is the sanctuary where Jonah discovers his true self. Like the traditional design of the synagogue, in which the sanctuary has at least one window to allow people to peer outside, the fish allows Jonah to pray, think, and exalt to the heavens—while not secluding himself, and instead looking out at the greater world to intertwine his inner and outer lives.”

- What balance does Jonah find by peering out of the eyes of the fish? How is he balancing the tension between his inner life and the world outside his safe, isolated fish belly?
- What are ways in which we can reach this balance—the balance of “looking out at the greater world” while staying in our own “sanctuaries”?

Ultimately, Jonah works through his own emotional needs. He responds to God’s call. Responding to this call can be hard: We recognize both our own needs and the needs of others.

- What helps you to balance your own needs with our obligation to take care for others?

### **TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF**

Make a list of activities that help you when you feel that responding to “God’s call” (or, perhaps, the needs of a friend) is just too much.

- What can you do when the task at hand seems too big and burdensome?
- What helps you to gain more energy?
- What is a good way to step back from the task?

## SESSION FOUR

# The Prophetic Call within Ourselves

### **THEME:**

“To be a prophet seems to almost require a willingness to stand up and speak truth to power, even Divine Power!” (Ch. 16).

### **OPENING QUOTE:**

“The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth” (Jonah 3:5).

### **CONVERSATION GOALS:**

In this session, we will explore definitions and functions of a prophet, and Jonah’s different prophetic roles. We will discuss how we can emulate Jonah, or what about Jonah we should try not to emulate. Finally, keeping in mind that we read the Book of Jonah on Yom Kippur, we will explore the question of what we, as individuals who strive to live righteously in this world, can learn from Jonah’s example.

### **FOCUS CHAPTERS:**

Ch. 1, Ch. 13, Ch. 16

### **CONVERSATION AND ACTIVITY GUIDE:**

At the end of our last session, we reflected on ways in which we can balance our own needs with our wish to make an impact on the world. We discussed the ways in which the task at hand—be it caring for a friend or ending global hunger—can sometimes feel daunting. Rabbi Yanklowitz opens *The Book of Jonah: A Social Justice Commentary* by recognizing this problem: sometimes, the task at hand feels impossible to accomplish, and sometimes, the tools that we have may actually not be sufficient.

He begins with the example of protest. He writes:

“To protest means to publicly declare that injustice and bigotry are unacceptable and that callousness must never be tolerated. Bearing witness and protesting are not just moral acts,

but also deeply religious ones. In the Jewish tradition, we are obligated at times to offer *tocheichah* ('reproof, rebuke') when others are acting unethically. The Book of Leviticus says, 'You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kin but incur no guilt on their account' (Leviticus 19:17) ... Even if protest produces neither an immediate result nor any measurable impact, we yet have a moral and religious mandate to protest against injustice." (Ch. 1)

- What does it mean to protest when you know that protesting may not cause any large-scale changes?
- Why does Rabbi Yanklowitz suggest that we *must* protest, even when protesting does not produce "any measurable impact"?

Rabbi Yanklowitz goes on to define different aspects and outcomes of protesting, the last of which is self-reflection: "In addition to protest as a private act, public rebuke, or prayer, protest is also a form of promoting self-growth. We remind ourselves of our priorities. We remind ourselves of our 'capacity for outrage,' a power often lost to the malaise of indifference" (Ch. 1).

- How can we act in prophetic ways?
- How can Rabbi Yanklowitz's definition of protest guide us?
- Rabbi Yanklowitz defines humans as agents for change. What are the different functions and aspects of protest he lists?

"Each of us might resemble Jonah a bit; we might be hiding from our responsibilities, we might feel anxious, angry, or confused. But we, too, are allowed to re-engage" (Ch. 13).

- How can we encourage ourselves to re-engage when we want to flee from our responsibility to do *tikkun olam*?
- What tools do the story of Jonah and Rabbi Yanklowitz give us to push ourselves forward?

"Although Jonah is the central figure of this book, we should not emulate him. Rather, we might emulate Abraham, who challenged a Divine decree when he thought it was misguided. We should challenge dogmas to find the truth, remembering that the best reason for studying our sacred texts is not to puzzle over troublesome passages or justify the behavior of another era, but to become motivated to act, today, in the true spirit of repairing our broken world" (Ch. 16).

## LEARNING FROM IMPERFECTION

Learning from flawed leaders is hard. On a large piece of paper, trace an outline of a person, and label the person “Jonah.” Fill in the outline with words or symbolic representations of characteristics of Jonah as a leader. For example, you could write “lonely” in his heart, or “flees responsibility” in his head. Take as much time as you need to exhaust the list of leadership qualities that Jonah has or does not have.

- What are Jonah’s flaws?
- How do or these flaws keep Jonah from succeeding as a prophetic leader—or not?

On smaller pieces of paper, each student will repeat the activity, but this time thinking of a leader or role model from their own lives.

- How does this person’s leadership inspire you in your own leadership?
- What are their flaws?
- How do they succeed?

Come back together as a group to discuss the differences between Jonah’s leadership and the leadership model from your own life.

- What can we learn from Jonah’s example?
- How can we learn from the leaders in our own lives?
- How can we learn both from the successes and flaws of people in leadership?

“Active commitment without self-reflection and intention is empty. Self-reflection and intention without active commitment are empty, too. When we see the world burning, we are not allowed to stand idly by. On Yom Kippur, we reaffirm our commitment to protect the dignity of life. However, we should renew this commitment every day of our lives. Jonah, in a moment of weakness, flees from his responsibility. Most of us would also be challenged by the responsibility to save countless souls. Most of us would flee not because of cowardice but because we feel overwhelmed and unprepared. Listening to the story of Jonah, we learn that we cannot wait for the day we will be ready. We have to act when we are called upon.” (Ch. 13)

By the end of Ch. 13, Rabbi Yanklowitz has made it clear that he sees each of us in a prophetic role: Whether or not we are literally called by God, as is Jonah, we each are called to better our world.

- What do you think of the notion that each of us may have a prophetic call?
- What might your prophetic call be?
- How can we live every day remembering that call?

In Ch. 16, Rabbi Yanklowitz introduces the concept of a “rebellious” prophet. He looks at Abraham, Moses, and Jonah as examples of prophets who rebelled against God. He writes, “While Abraham and Moses do all they can to save others, Jonah flees from his duty. Still, Abraham and Moses do not submit blindly to Divine command. Just like Jonah, they also feel empowered to challenge God’s judgment.”

- What are the respective ways in which Abraham, Moses, and Jonah rebel against God’s decree?
- In challenging God, Abraham and Moses both follow their own moral instincts, as opposed to God’s divine authority. When do we follow the “decrees” of those who have authority over us? When do we choose to “rebel against,” or challenge, that authority?
- How do we challenge those in power when we lack power?

## SESSION FIVE

# Truth, Tribalism, and Pluralism

### THEME:

“We need others, even those who are different and with whom we disagree, to help us understand the world around us” (Ch. 4).

### OPENING QUOTE:

“In their fright, the sailors cried out, each to his own god; and they flung the ship’s cargo overboard to make it lighter for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the vessel where he lay down and fell asleep” (Jonah 1:5).

### CONVERSATION GOALS:

In this session, we will look at the ways in which we are called to care for both the people within and beyond our own communities. God called Jonah to prophesy to a people *not* his own, and he struggled to do so. In this conversation, we will explore how we can branch out beyond our own communities to seek truth.

### FOCUS CHAPTERS:

Ch. 4, Ch. 15, Ch. 18, Ch. 22

### CONVERSATION AND ACTIVITY GUIDE:

In our last session, we looked at our own prophetic calls. Now, we are transitioning to how we interact with others in doing the sacred work of *tikkun olam*, “repairing the world.” In Ch. 4, Rabbi Yanklowitz quotes Maimonides (the Rambam): “I repeatedly return to one of Maimonides’s most beautiful teachings—his introduction to his work on Mishnah, Pirkei Avot, called ‘The Eight Chapters,’ in which he writes that one can ‘accept truth from wherever one may find it.’ Maimonides’s sentiment is noble and forward-thinking: there is not simply one source of knowledge, but many. Such a concept seems simple, but it holds a certain tension: How do we differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate sources of truth? What separates truth from lie?” (Ch. 4).

- How do you define truth?
- In the era of “fake news,” what does it mean to “seek truth”? What is your strategy to differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources of information?

- In Ch. 4, Rabbi Yanklowitz asks us to seek truth in pluralistic and interreligious settings. How open are you to truths from sources that are unknown to you? Can you give an example of a truth you learned from an unfamiliar source?

### **AGREE AND DISAGREE**

In Ch. 12, Rabbi Yanklowitz writes, “Yonah ben Amitai (Jonah, a ‘person of truth’) is just too committed to truth. He prioritizes principled truth over all other values. In Jewish thought, however, truth alone never outweighs mercy” (Ch. 12). Jonah’s name indicates his strong relationship to the concept of truth. In the following activity, we will be looking at our own relationship to the concept of truth, before returning to Jonah’s and Rabbi Yanklowitz’s. The facilitator will read the following statements, and students will respond to each statement by going to one of the four corners of the room, which will be marked “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree.” In their corners, students will have a moment to discuss the statements.

Following this discussion, one representative from each corner will share what their group discussed as to why they agree or disagree with each statement, and to what extent.

Facilitators should feel free to add to these statements and probe the conversation as needed.

1. There are absolute truths in the universe.
2. There are multiple truths, and it is up to us to discover which ones apply to us.
3. Truth is more important than mercy.
4. Judaism is the source of absolute religious truth.
5. Judaism is one source of religious truth.
6. If “my truth” conflicts with “your truth,” only one of us is holding the actual truth.

Rabbi Yanklowitz argues that “[w]e need others, even those who are different and with whom we disagree, to help us understand the world around us” (Ch. 4).

- How does disagreement with others help us understand ourselves better?
- What are specific examples of times when you disagreed with someone? Did the disagreement help you to solidify your own stance?

Rabbi Yanklowitz guides us to think about productive disagreement with others in interfaith encounters and conversions. “Valuing **religious pluralism** means accepting that one’s

religion is not an exclusive source of truth, and acknowledging that different truths exist in other religions and denominations within one's own religion" (Ch. 4).

- How can other religious traditions help us to encounter universal truths?
- How can other religious traditions help us understand Judaism?
- How can other religious traditions help us understand our individual beliefs?

"One of our most critical tasks is to create opportunities for young Jews and Muslims to regularly engage in dialogue" (Ch. 22).

- Acknowledging that dialogue is not enough, Rabbi Yanklowitz still argues that dialogue is a good starting point. How do we begin those dialogues?
- Why is it particularly important for Jews and Muslims to engage in dialogue together?
- What are ways in which Jewish and Muslim communities can benefit from working together?

"We are commanded to love our neighbor only once in the Torah, yet we are commanded by the Torah thirty-six times to love a stranger—something utterly more difficult. In the challenge of building such distant relationships, we can find opportunities for change and growth. The familiar determines who we are, the foreign who we might become. The tribal evokes nostalgic memory, while the universal inspires the visionary dream." (Ch. 15)

- Do you agree with Rabbi Yanklowitz's argument as to why we need to engage with others, specifically with those from different religious traditions?
- When he says, "The familiar determines who we are, the foreign who we might become," what does that mean? Do you agree?
- How does interacting with people who are different from us enable us to grow?

"In our shortsighted wishes to appease the immediate needs of our own communities, we ignore the needs of others" (Ch. 15). Ch. 18 suggests two ways in which this kind of extreme tribalism endangers our world—climate change and weapons of mass destruction. However, in Ch. 15, Rabbi Yanklowitz also suggests that there are benefits to tending to and supporting one's own community.

- How do we balance the tension between particularism and universalism?
- How might thinking only of our own community and its success blind us to global problems?
- How might thinking only of global problems blind us to problems in our own communities?

## SESSION SIX

# Moral Ambiguity and Compassion

### THEME:

“Change is difficult, but the compassion of others makes it easier” (Ch. 25).

### OPENING QUOTE:

“For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment” (Jonah 4:2).

### CONVERSATION GOALS:

As we explored in our previous session, Jonah himself is too committed to truth. According to Rabbi Yanklowitz, the remedy for that overzealous truth-seeking is compassion. In our final session, we will discuss how compassion can lead us out of society’s largest hardships and our own moral quandaries. We will explore compassion, both human and divine, in our own lives and in Jonah’s.

### FOCUS CHAPTERS:

Ch. 9, Ch. 12, Ch. 24, Ch. 25

### CONVERSATION AND ACTIVITY GUIDE:

In Ch. 9, Rabbi Yanklowitz introduces the concept of compassion by writing about dire cases of isolation and solitary confinement. He calls on us to have compassion for other humans, highlighting Jonah’s experience in the belly of the fish as a compassion-inspiring scene: While Jonah was in complete isolation, God had compassion upon him and gave him a second chance. Rabbi Yanklowitz writes, “Showing compassion towards those who may not deserve it is a moral conundrum, and advocating for their basic emotional needs can be a thankless task. Nevertheless, the Jewish mandate to protect the inherent dignity of all human beings, even those who have transgressed the laws of society and morality (e.g., the Ninevites), was as essential to Jonah’s prophetic mission as it is for us today. If we mistreat our enemies, we are no better as spiritual beings than they” (Ch. 9).

- Why does Rabbi Yanklowitz highlight compassion as necessary *especially* when someone might not deserve it?

- Do you believe that there are people who do not deserve compassion?
- Why do you think Judaism values human dignity so highly?
- What are examples from either your own life or from Jewish stories (texts or folk tales) that demonstrate the value given to human dignity?

“In Jewish thought, however, truth alone never outweighs mercy. Preserving peace, saving a life, and protecting another’s dignity outweigh truth, albeit cautiously and with trepidation. Jonah is so committed to truth that he even rebukes God for not being truthful enough ... God seemingly prioritizes compassion over truth.” (Ch. 12)

- What does it mean to prioritize compassion over truth?
- When in your own life have you put compassion over truth?
- What does it mean to believe in a God who chooses compassion over truth?

In Ch. 24, Rabbi Yanklowitz suggests that compassion is the necessary response to moral ambiguity, which means that in scenarios when we do not know what the most just or truest response is, we should always respond with compassion. We are asked to show compassion with Jonah, who multiple times flees from his responsibility and who asks for death after seeing God’s mercy on his enemies. As we discussed in Session Four, we can learn from our leaders even when their behavior is flawed. Rabbi Yanklowitz writes in Ch. 24: “It is vital to learn from ambiguous leaders because the human condition is riddled with paradox” and “...the actions (and reactions) of many Biblical figures are imperfect, because the Bible is not meant to display the perfection of the human being, but rather humanity’s divinely-inspired limitations.”

- How do we learn from Jonah’s lack of compassion towards the Ninevites?
- How do we learn from God’s compassion towards Jonah?

At the end of the Book of Jonah, God seems to admonish Jonah for his lack of compassion. God asks Jonah: “You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!” (Jonah 4:10–11).

- What do you make of this ending?
- Is this a satisfying conclusion to the Book of Jonah?

- The last time we hear God speak in the Book of Jonah is when God calls upon Jonah to be compassionate. Accordingly, how are we supposed to understand the role of compassion in this story?

### **WRITING OUR OWN CHAPTER FIVE**

In Ch. 25, Rabbi Yanklowitz writes, “As our travels and travails with Jonah come to a close, we still do not know Jonah’s fate. Does Jonah repent and completely submit to God’s will? Does he run away again? Does he move to Nineveh? Does he kill himself in despair? Is he righteous or a reprobate in a prophet’s robes? Is he full of fear or full of hatred? Is he humble or arrogant? We simply do not know. But perhaps we do not need to know. Perhaps it is not on us to arrive at a final judgment of Jonah and his deeds. What we learn is that Jonah is like us—complex.” Rabbi Yanklowitz suggests that the Book of Jonah is left intentionally unfinished. He suggests that perhaps it is up to each of us to write our own fifth chapter. Accordingly, we will spend some time writing our own fifth chapter of the Book of Jonah.

- What do you think happens between God and Jonah after God asked that last question?
- What happens to the Ninevites?
- What happens to the sailors?
- How might we use the concept of compassion to conclude this story?
- After the students have written their own endings to the Book of Jonah, have them share those with each other.
- What aspects of the story needed to be addressed?
- What elements of the story did you highlight in your conclusion?
- What are you taking away from the story of Jonah?
- What have you learned from Rabbi Yanklowitz’s social justice reading of the Book of Jonah?