

## Jonah Drama

### Memorial Service for the Prophet Jonah

Rabbi:

Good afternoon, ladies and gentleman and welcome to this memorial service for Jonah Ben Amitai. As you know he died unexpectedly just over a week ago, while in Nineveh meeting with the Jewish exile community there and attending the quarterly board meeting of the Ben Amitai Children's Home, which he founded. His funeral in his hometown of Gat-Hepher in the Galilee was private, at the family's request, but there was nothing private about the shock that passed through all of Israel & Judah as news of his death spread through the land. Your presence today confirms the unique place he occupied in our hearts. He was a prophet who will not soon be forgotten.

For us he was a prophet but for his beloved wife, his children, and grandchildren, he was a dear husband, father, and "Grandpa". Through a week of mourning they have shed many tears. We want them to know that we weep with them, and pray they will soon regain the ability to see that the sun still shines and that life's sweetness abides.

There were many people who wanted to speak today. Thanks to their cooperation and flexibility, we will hear from among them four speakers who can share with us insights on Jonah from his personal and professional life, and who can speak on behalf of the Jewish Community here at home and on behalf of the people and royal house of Nineveh.

I'll confine myself to some general remarks and then introduce our speakers as their turns come.

## Jonah Drama

Jonah was born 63 years ago in Gat-Hepher. As was typical of the area his family had a small farm and some goats and sheep, and Jonah spent much of his childhood helping out on that farm. His father was a pious man, and uncomfortable with the religious deviations and social decadence of so much of that region. When the Assyrian onslaught swept over Galilee and ended the reign of the Kings of Israel, his father saw it as God's punishment for Israel's sins. Jonah shared his father's views, but added to them his own outrage at the cruelty of the Assyrian attack, the harsh exile of Israel's leaders, and the smug self-righteousness of the Assyrian soldiers whom the occupation authority settled around Gat Hepher and throughout Israel. Israel deserved to be punished, but Assyrian cruelty, Jonah felt, was unconscionable.

Jonah's first prophetic mission was to warn those occupiers of God's wrath. Though they continued to prosper, Jonah waited for their punishment, which he was sure would come. He continued to prophesy against them, and against Israelite idol worshippers as well.

In his late teens, Jonah married and he and his wife built a comfortable home in Gat-Hepher for a family that soon grew to four children. We'll hear from Jonah's oldest daughter in a few minutes. Then the message from God came – You all know the details – it has been told and retold many times by our tellers of tales over the last four decades. "Go to Nineveh" God said. "Give them forty days and then - - destruction!" "Gladly" Jonah thought, "I'd love to see them destroyed." "But why not right away?" Jonah wondered. "Why forty days? Oh no, could it be that God wants to give them time to repent?" To preach destruction and then not have it come was to be mocked again, as he had been by the Assyrians in Galilee, as a false prophet of doom. This he could not take. To see them get off the hook- escape the punishment they deserved - that would be intolerable. Jonah refused to go. God wanted him to head northeast. Jonah boarded a boat and went west. We all know what happened next – a storm at sea – the

## Jonah Drama

incredible journey in the belly of a whale – and then Nineveh where, as Jonah feared, it all went wrong. Jonah gave them the message from God, they repented and he was furious.

The most widely read account of Jonah's journey to Nineveh ends there – Jonah despondent, and chastised by God, while to Jonah's dismay Nineveh endured. It's an unflattering portrait of a man who knew nothing about mercy, even when he himself benefited from it. It ends with Jonah sweating in the summer sun, while the withered gourd that sheltered him lay at his feet. Jonah is distressed, we're told, at the death of that vine, but would have rejoiced if the city of Nineveh had been reduced to rubble and all its people had died. The last word is God's, Who tries to make Jonah feel some compassion for all the simple folk whose deaths Jonah so desired. It's a powerful story, but as an account of Jonah's life and beliefs it's deeply flawed, for that life went on for almost forty more years. A fuller telling of Jonah's story has yet to be written – but it can be heard and we will hear it today.

We are fortunate to have with us Ms. Bel Shazzer of Nineveh, who will tell us what happened then. She is our best informed eyewitness to Jonah's transformation and to his remarkable evolution from an implacable enemy of Nineveh to its devoted friend. Also with us today, representing the King and people of Nineveh, will be Mr. Asher Banipol of the Assyria-Israel Friendship League.

Over the next almost four decades of his life, Jonah traveled often, from the Galilee to Nineveh to Jerusalem, building bridges of goodwill between the people of those lands who have known so much conflict and enmity. He has become Israel's foremost teacher of the theology of repentance, a leader of the Society of Prophets, and a teacher to both prophet and priest. His annual Yom Kippur lectures have become a highlight on the religious calendar of Jerusalem.

## Jonah Drama

Rabbi:

Mr. Asher Banipol of the Assyria-Israel Friendship League will be our first speaker-

### **ASHER BANIPOL**

My Friends,

I will not shock you, I hope, or appear disrespectful to the memory of my dear friend, Jonah, if I begin by acknowledging that in Nineveh, where I live, the name Jonah Ben Amitai is surrounded with controversy. Ever since he came to us as a prophet of doom and spoke of our imminent destruction there have been many who cannot forgive him. "He wanted us destroyed" they shout. "He didn't care about us at all!" and they were right – he did want Nineveh destroyed. "Evil should be punished," he said – "not forgiven!" Fortunately, the Great God in Heaven, who cares for all people, was more merciful. When our great king, long may he rule, took Jonah seriously and turned to God for mercy and God relented, Jonah was furious! And for this, some people in Nineveh curse him. But Jonah changed and for all the years since, he has been a great friend of Nineveh. Many times he has said how glad he was that Nineveh was spared. He has been a frequent visitor to our city, and a close confidant of our king, as well as patron of the Ben Amitai Children's Home, which bears his family name. It is ironic that some in Nineveh cannot forgive Jonah – they refuse to see that they are as harsh and unforgiving as he was when he first came to prophesy against us. But Jonah learned to forgive, while those few who are still angry with him have learned nothing.

On behalf of the King, and the People of Assyria and the grateful citizens of Nineveh, our capital, we extend our deepest condolences to you, Mrs. Bet Amitai and to your children for your loss.

## Jonah Drama

Rabbi:

Our next speaker will be Mr. Nathan Navi, President of *Ozen v'Peh*, the Israeli Society of Prophets, a scholar of prophecy, and one of the foremost chroniclers of Jonah's career.

### **NATHAN NAVI**

Thank you, rabbi.

Mr. Ben Amitai, our former President, was one of the most distinguished prophets ever to carry God's word to the people of Israel and to her neighbors. Mr. Ben Amitai's career as a prophet, as we have heard, began when he was a young man in the Galilee conveying God's word to Israelites and Assyrians both, preaching against the apostasy of the former, the idolatry of the latter, and the debauchery of both. He transmitted God's word with force and with accuracy, and as he grew older, his voice grew in conviction and clarity. In his early years, he thought the role of the prophet was to be only a recorder and a repeater of the divine word. Later, he came to understand that a prophet must also hear the yearning in God's voice, the message behind the voice, calling out for reconciliation like a parent who cries every day that her straying children might come back to her.

Ben Amitai's ears and heart were opened by his experiences in Nineveh. He grew to become not just a prophet, but a teacher of prophecy to those who came after him. From him they learned to truly speak the word of God. Every prophet in Israel wore sackcloth when we first learned of his death. We mourn him still.

## Jonah Drama

Rabbi –

As I mentioned, and as you know, Jonah Ben Amitai's Yom Kippur Lectures were a central event of the religious year, as much anticipated by all the pilgrims gathering here as the water drawing festival of Succot and the great *Hoshanot* ending the festival season on the Temple Mount.

The hundreds within hearing of his voice and the thousands to whom his teachings were passed from hillside to hillside came to a new understanding of Yom Kippur, thanks to him. No longer was it only a day to cleanse and prepare the Temple and priesthood in anticipation of Succot's harvest festivities and prayers for rain. Now it became a day that cleansed all of us – each alone and all together – for every future day of our lives, so that we may be worthy of all the goodness we continually harvest from God's open and abundant hand.

We want to offer now, before our next speaker, a musical selection in honor of Jonah Ben Amitai. It is *Hashiveinu*, a prayer that sings his message of repentance and reconciliation with God. It will be sung for us by ....., soloist with the Levitical choir, (who invites you to join in singing with him/her).

Hashivenu

## Jonah Drama

Rabbi:

Our next speaker will be Ms. Bel Shazzar, proprietress of the Hilltop Vista Bed and Breakfast in Nineveh. From her front lawn, one could look down over the city. It was there that Jonah sat, shaded by the ample leaves of a gourd vine. The partial telling of Jonah's story, which is so widely read today, stops unfortunately, lamentably, with the death of that gourd and does not go on to tell us about Jonah transformed. That piece of the story Bel Shazzar is uniquely able to tell. She was there. She helped make it happen.

### **BEL SHAZZAR**

Thank you, Rabbi –

I often joked with Jonah that he would have saved himself a lot of distress if he had just sat under one of those nice umbrellas I have on my front lawn instead of sitting under that darn gourd.

But he liked it. The gourd appealed to him. That's where he sat. When it died and he got so upset I said to him, "Honey, I've had gourds like that die on me all summer long. There's some kinda worm gets to 'em. Kills 'em off quick, 'fore you can even say "goodbye." They're here one moment, all withered up the next. But he was sooo upset – pranced around – stomped – and seemed to be talking, arguing with someone –

"With God", he said.

" 'Dumb people'," he kept on saying, "Is that what You think those sinners were. 'Don't know right from left! ' Dumb People', my eye!"

But that's what they were, most of 'em, just a bunch of simpletons. Always looking for a party. Every time you went into Nineveh, and I tried not to go in

## Jonah Drama

too often, there'd be music and dancin' – a little drugs – a little sex...Sometimes it got outa hand- and they didn't care a whole lot about the poor people among 'em, that's for sure. It didn't surprise me that God would be unhappy with 'em. It didn't surprise me a whole lot that He'd forgive 'em either.

I said to Jonah: "Man, you got to get to know those folks. They ain't so bad. Go on down into the town. See what they're like. You might end up happy they ain't all dead. Heck, Jonah," I said, "if God was gonna wipe out Nineveh, He'd wipe me out too, and little Mikey here." - Mikey was my 3 year old back then – Jonah really liked him. "We're part of Nineveh, too, This whole hilltop is part of the town".

Well, that kinda shook him up. He'd never really met a Nineveh person before – not really to talk to. When he first came to town, he just walked right through, shouting: "Forty days and you're gonna be destroyed" over and over. Nose all up in the air. Just walking and shouting, and kinda happy about it.

Never occurred to him that the people might take him seriously – really believe him – and get scared. But, they did. They opened their eyes. Looked at the mess all around them, and said, " Hey, we gotta clean this up. This town's a disgrace". So, they closed the porn shops, got rid of the drugs – and started taking care of each other. The king led it all – came outa the palace – gave money for soup kitchens, shelters too. Nowadays, we still got music in Nineveh, we're a happy place – and a lot nicer to live in. And Jonah did that. He made it happen, but he wasn't happy about it. Not in the beginning.

I sent him down into the town early on to see what he'd done and to meet the people. So that's what he did. The first day, when he came back, he was quieter. I said to him, "What'd ya see?" He said, "well – it wasn't as bad as I imagined. Seems what I said to them about their doom really got to them, scared them."



## Jonah Drama

Over the next few weeks, he kept going back down there, made some friends. He started helping out at the king's new soup kitchen feeding some of those poor folks. One day I heard him out in the garden. He was praying. "Thank you, God" he said, "for Your mercy for not punishing *me* for being so stubborn, for not punishing *me* for running away and for my not hearing Your love for Nineveh in the words of warning You gave me to deliver. Thank You, God, for forgiving them"

"You know, Bel" Jonah said to me one day, " I was really stupid, I forgot that God loves us all - Israel, Assyria, even those war mongers in Babylon. God loves us all – and when you love, you forgive."

Jonah always stayed with me when he visited Nineveh, and he brought his wife and lovely children to my B & B, too. My heart goes out to all of them. Jonah was a lovely man- and a lovely husband and father too – and he was a wonderful friend. I'll miss him something awful. Thank you.

## Jonah Drama

Rabbi:

Sara Bat Yonah is Jonah's oldest daughter – a teacher and therapist. She will speak, representing her dear mother and her brothers and sisters.

### **SARA BAT YONAH**

On behalf of my mother and brothers and sister I want to thank all of you for showing up today. We are moved and grateful. Your presence shows the regard you had for my father. I want to assure you that we who are members of his family had that same high regard for him. My father was a good man, a serious man, and a loving husband and father.

When we were younger, he was a different man than he was after his return from his fateful journey to Nineveh. I want to honor both the man he was as well as the man he later became.

In our youth, Dad could be very strict. He could be a lot of fun, too. He had a great sense of humor, and loved to play with us. He spent a lot of time with us. Yes, he had rules and was very serious about those rules, but we didn't mind. We preferred our dad, with all his rules, to other kids' dads who were more easy-going, but paid them less attention.

Dad was fair. He had the same rules for everyone. When we played games, it didn't matter if you were his kid or someone else's kid. He just wanted you to play by the rules and do what was right. The same at home – we had our chores, and our deadlines, and we were supposed to follow them. If we didn't, Dad had his punishments, too. We always knew Dad loved us, and that he really believed the only way things could work out was if everyone followed the rules the way they were supposed to, and accepted their punishment when they didn't.

## Jonah Drama

After he came back from Nineveh, Dad changed. He had mellowed. He was more able to shrug things off, and recognized that sometimes there were reasons rules couldn't be followed. Before Nineveh, "I'm sorry" never used to work with Dad. After Nineveh it did. We used to kid him about becoming a softy. He'd just laugh and say something we didn't understand at the time about how a gourd taught him to be forgiving. Before that gourd, if you mentioned Nineveh in front of Dad he'd spit and say, "They should all be destroyed!" Afterwards, when Nineveh came up, he'd just smile and say, "Lots of nice people there." "They're just like us," he'd say. "We're all God's children." Before Nineveh, Dad's favorite holiday was Passover, especially when it came to telling about the ten plagues. After Nineveh, it was Yom Kippur. "The Gates of Repentance," he'd say, "are always open."

Thank you all for coming. We'll miss you Dad.

## Jonah Drama

### Rabbi's Closing Comment:

Friends, I want to thank all four of our speakers for their moving remarks. They have each contributed to our appreciation of this wonderful man and added to our understanding of his remarkable life. I'm not a member of the Society of Prophets, but I want to make a prediction – The story of Jonah Ben Amitai's life is an extraordinary story and I predict it will not soon be forgotten. Centuries from now, I think we Judeans will still gather and tell how this Prophet of Doom learned to balance justice with love and forgiveness.

He taught us to trust in God's love – and that's a story we'll want to tell over and over again

This concludes our memorial service. We thank all of you for being here.

This script is offered to anyone who can use it. There is no fee.

However, users of this script should acknowledge the author:

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