

Even Our Enemies
Yom Kippur Afternoon 5774
September 14, 2013
Introduction to the Book of Jonah

So here is what I have learned about the city at the center of this strange and powerful book of Jonah: Nineveh was an ancient Assyrian city on the eastern bank of the Tigris River, and capital of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. It was the largest city in the world for some fifty years – which I actually did not know before earlier this week. But then there was a bitter civil war, and the city was sacked by a coalition of former subject peoples, the Medes, Persians, Babylonians, Chaldeans, Scythians and Cimmerians, in 612 BCE. Its ruins are across the river from the modern-day major city of Mosul, in the Ninawa Governorate of Iraq.

To be sacked by your former subjects – not only is that an echo of what is going on in Syria today, it is also a hint at the dangers of iron-fisted tyranny, and a reminder of the real responsibilities of rulers. Jonah may have saved this city from God's wrath; that does not mean the city was able to save itself.

At the peak of its power, at the height of its greatness, what was the Assyrian empire doing? Well, it was expanding in all directions. In the 720's BCE, the emperor Tiglath-Pileassar III invaded, conquered and put an end to the Northern Kingdom of Israel – possibly dispersing its population and giving rise to the legend of the Ten Lost Tribes. In 701 BCE Sennacherib laid siege to Jerusalem, and the city only survived as King Hezekiah built a tunnel to bring water into the walled city, a tunnel some of you have walked through.

So the city to which Jonah was sent, it was not exactly friendly territory. This was an implacable foe, these were our tormentors and oppressors. Some say that Jonah ran away because he feared for his own reputation: he would predict destruction and it would not come and he would be seen as a false prophet. Far more likely, he resisted the notion of helping save a people he saw as our enemy. And yet we learn: God cares about everyone. Our God, as Yul Brenner eventually learned, *is* God, meaning the God of everyone, the God of all. So, once again, the message from the Torah reading, applied here too: so should our concern extend to all of God's creatures.

The book of Jonah, in slightly abbreviated form, chanted partly in Hebrew by Rachel Robinson and then read in English by Jerry Silverman and Emma Bassin. The blessings will be chanted by Penina Meier-Silverman and Catherine Horowitz. The book of Jonah begins on pages 456 and 457.