



## Yom Kippur: The Belly of the Whale

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Everyone has that moment in their life when they ask themselves, “How did I get here? How do I get out of here? Then what do I do?”

In [Joseph Campbell's](#) book [The Hero with a Thousand Faces](#), Campbell lays out the universal story of the hero's journey. After a hesitant beginning, some progress and setbacks, the hero finds him or herself at the low point of the journey. Campbell calls this stage “In the Belly of the Whale,” obviously named for the situation in which Jonah finds himself after he has been thrown into the sea to save the ship from being destroyed. Jonah finds himself in the dark depths of a huge fish swimming in the sea. One can imagine that he asked himself, “How did I get here? How do I get out of here? Then what do I do?”

It is fitting that we read the book of Jonah on Yom Kippur afternoon. By that time, everyone in the room has been avoiding food and drink for almost 24 hours. The full grip of the fast takes hold: the legs get heavy, the head spins, and misery sets in. Deep in the depths of Yom Kippur, we each sit in the belly of the whale asking ourselves, “How did I get here? How do I get out of here? Then what do I do?”

On Yom Kippur, each of us is the hero on his or her journey. Like Jonah, when God comes calling (perhaps through the voice of the shofar?), some of us run as far away as possible from our responsibility. Yom Kippur comes to remind us that no matter how far we might run, we can never truly avoid responsibility. We must turn to face ourselves, own our mistakes and learn from them. “How did I get here? How do I get out of here? Then what do I do?”

One might think that we should each spend Yom Kippur sitting in a dark room all alone without any connection to the world beyond those four walls. We may each be on a hero's journey, but we make the journey all together. The Jewish people are the hero with a thousand faces. We turn to face ourselves and own our mistakes together: *ashamnu*, *bagadnu*, *gazalnu*, **we** have sinned, **we** have been deceitful, **we** have stolen. All of our sins are listed in the plural. Not only can we not avoid the responsibility for our own mistakes, but we as a people have to embrace the mistakes that we let others make.

Once the final shofar blows at the end of Yom Kippur, and we emerge from The Day, then what? Have we been transformed by the experience? If the answer is no, then we probably should add a second day of Yom Kippur and try again. If the answer is yes, even in some small way, then we have succeeded. Then the question is, “What does the

new me do that I would not have done yesterday?" We need to complete our annual hero's journey and come home, changed for the better.

G'mar Hatimah Tovah! May you be sealed in the Book of Life for a Good Year!  
Rabbi Pepperstone

**AS A FAMILY:**

1. Read the Book of Jonah, either from a Hebrew Bible or a children's edition. Talk about why Jonah ran away from his responsibilities, and how he later decided to face them.
2. Discuss the growth and changes in your family over the past year. What do you think your family will be like in one year? Make some family goals and keep track throughout the year of how you work towards those goals.
3. Talk about the Yom Kippur fast and how it makes you feel as you move through the different stages of the day. Some children get worried when parents don't eat, and talking about it can allay some of their concerns.

**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT [YOM KIPPUR'S](#) TORAH AND HAFTARAH READINGS, ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:**

1. What does Aaron wear on the first Yom Kippur?
2. What two animals do the people give Aaron for the day?
3. One of the animals is sacrificed to help cleanse the Mishkan. What does Aaron do with the other animal?
4. How is the original Yom Kippur ritual like Tashlich? How is it different than Tashlich?
5. If shofar blowing is the main mitzvah for Rosh Hashanah, what is the main mitzvah for Yom Kippur?
6. Where does Jonah go when God calls him to go to Nineveh?
7. What happens to the sailors and the boat after Jonah is thrown off of the boat?
8. What does Jonah say to the people of Nineveh?
9. What is their reaction to Jonah's words? Does their reaction surprise you?
10. Why was Jonah angry at God and why did he run away at first?
11. What is the moral of the story of Jonah?