

On Local Responsibility

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“Messy,” “chaos,” “broken,” and “dysfunctional.” According to a July 2023 survey by the Pew Institute, nearly 80 percent of Americans express a negative sentiment when asked to describe politics in the United States. The top 15 cited words include those previously listed as well as more depressing descriptions such as the top two—“divisive” and “corrupt”—along with “disgrace” and the vivid expression “dumpster fire.” For those unfamiliar with this phrase, suffice it to say many can at the very least agree on something: this situation is not good.

For people across the political, racial, ethnic, and religious spectrums, regardless of where they live, it is hard not to see the brokenness of so much of society. The same Pew study also found that the most politically engaged people report feeling the highest levels of exhaustion and anger. The more people are involved, the more draining and upsetting the experience. Is anyone surprised? What are the options? Agree with the overwhelming majority that there are massive problems but disengage to avoid unpleasant feelings?

This essay does not aim to expand on the many troubles in society or to identify their varied causes. This essay endeavors to encourage people to take responsibility in small ways in local communities. Maybe it is possible to share the burden of some of those aforementioned adverse emotions and in the process

make things close to home a little brighter.

Looking at the modern world through the lens of Tanakh is not an attempt to redefine the holy texts or distill their divine meaning. Rather Tanakh can help provide eternal wisdom and guidance to confront today's colossal challenges. I see variations of my own struggles and challenges throughout Tanakh and find the narratives intensely helpful for the lessons and especially the knowledge that God has seen us through so much so many times.

The story of Jonah offers tremendous insight and inspiration when thinking about how to address, albeit reluctantly, societal problems. The task is unfathomable. We know this. On the best days it promises to be frustrating and exhausting. Literally no one wants to take this on. Who doesn't want to flee to Tarshish instead of face the mob in Nineveh? Yet, Jonah teaches us avoidance is worse. Problems follow us.

God calls to Jonah to go to Nineveh, a city whose tremendous greatness is referenced four times in the short book. Nineveh became the capital of Assyria and was home to 120,000 people as well as an untold number of animals. It held hundreds of years of history and cultural riches. It would later include the Royal Library of Ashurbanipal which contained among its vast collection of 30,000 tablets such treasures as the Epic of Gilgamesh, one of the oldest fairy tales in the world.

Despite its greatness as a city, Nineveh was a wicked society. God had planned to bring destruction there, but first summoned Jonah to proclaim judgement upon it. Jonah famously makes a run for it. Not only does Jonah not want to do the job God called him to do, he was initially willing to risk more than his own safety to avoid taking responsibility.

The story gets better with each retelling. Jonah boards a ship. God casts a powerful storm on the sea. The God-fearing sailors finally agree to toss Jonah overboard after trying in vain to row to shore. The whole while Jonah knows he was the cause of the storm. A monstrous fish the likes of which none of us can possibly imagine takes Jonah to an experience worse than death. At the depths of

the ocean, Jonah calls out to God in a prayer whose beautiful and inspired echoes we can hear in the book of Psalms. God instructs the fish to release Jonah on dry land. God commands Jonah a second time. Jonah went at once and proclaimed what God had said, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

That's it. Jonah had to deliver one simple but powerful message. The message traveled through the people and found its way to the king, inspiring belief, repentance, commitment to God, and an abandonment of evil ways and injustice. The people of Nineveh genuinely atoned, and God renounced the punishment that had been planned.

However, Jonah was not pleased. After completing his task of informing Nineveh of its impending doom, which led to the salvation of the great city, he was despondent. Rashi suggested Jonah knew Nineveh would repent and be saved and therefore might lead to Jonah being called a liar. This certainly could have been part of the explanation for Jonah's gloom. Is it possible this is also an illustration of the findings Pew would publish some 3,000 years later? The more engaged individuals report the greatest levels of exhaustion and anger. Who was more engaged than Jonah?

The only source of comfort and joy Jonah finds under the shade of a vine miraculously grown overnight. God then appoints a worm to destroy the beloved plant and the shade Jonah had quickly grown to love. God rebukes Jonah for mourning the loss of the plant, stating he did not grow the plant himself and therefore has no share in the sorrow. God further asks if Jonah thinks God should not take pity on a great city like Nineveh.

For anyone who has ever grown even the smallest plant, the experience can be a source of great joy. Especially true if the plant grows successfully. For anyone who has lost special plants to deer, garden rodents, or other pests, this loss can be downright painful. I remember too well the cabbages that disappeared seemingly overnight thanks to insidious cabbage worms and the many promising seedlings eviscerated by a wily groundhog. However, my family worked hard to plant and care for these lost crops. Our pain is justified!

What about Jonah? No offense to a glorious shade in the hot sun, but what about the great city God just saved? What about the responsibility Jonah attempted to run from and the reality that all he had to do was show up and say one thing that led to a great miracle? What about the glory to God? Then the short book is over, and we hear no more from Jonah.

Over and over, the Torah lays it out for us. God, family, community, nation, world. Take as much responsibility for the relationships and institutions closest to you and work toward your goals. What is the responsibility the Torah wants us to take? Which step do we take first? From Jonah, it is possible we learn the first step we don't take. We should not step away. We cannot avoid the problem. We have to do the work to show up, and perhaps we have to speak, but we might not have to say as much as we fear. When our work is done, we might feel exhausted, angry, and despondent. So, who wants to sign up and get involved?

What is happening in my small world that I am overlaying the narrative of Jonah? I live with my husband and our children in Teaneck, NJ. Teaneck has about 41,000 residents. Not quite Nineveh, but a great town in its own right. Due to countless circumstances, especially the pace and demands of life, many decent and upstanding citizens have simply not gotten involved in local matters. Less involvement begets less involvement. We paid our copious taxes faithfully but had little knowledge and even less oversight of where this money went.

In Teaneck, as it is in many towns, there are ample opportunities for individuals to step forward and get involved civically. It is sometimes as easy as signing onto a Zoom to watch a local town or board of education meeting to see what our tax dollars are funding. My husband Hayyim and I are grateful to have had opportunities to engage civically over the past few years. We hope to contribute to a high quality of life for all our neighbors and aspire to sanctify God with our actions. Our experiences have been steady streams of learning about numerous local issues, showing up to various meetings, and meeting all kinds of people. We also started sharing our experiences with friends and neighbors, encouraging others to get informed.

This was before the atrocities of October 7 and the ensuing aftermath. October 7 shone a blinding light on many problems in our town and as a result,

many concerned citizens have taken it upon themselves to engage, despite the very real exhaustion identified by Jonah and Pew. Particularly noteworthy is the recent election of a slate of three phenomenal, qualified men to the Teaneck Board of Education thanks to a massive turnout of Jewish voters organized by the newly formed Bergen County Jewish Action Committee. Since then, BCJAC volunteers have worked tirelessly to advocate for thoughtful Jewish civic engagement.

Dr. Jordan Peterson says, "Every responsibility you cede to others can be taken up by tyrants and used against you." While it might seem unlikely to escalate rapidly, it certainly can. The good news is things can turn around quickly if good people pay attention, stand up, show up, and say what needs to be said. Like it states in *Pirkei Avot* 2:21: "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it."