

G'mar Tov to all of you. On this Yizkor morning, may we all be comforted in the wake of our losses and be sealed for a happy New Year. I'd like to start with a simple poll of the congregation. How many of you have been on a cruise within the past two years?

Well, as you all know, most cruises are very enjoyable experiences. However, a small minority of these voyages do end up being horrible.

There are all sorts of things that can go wrong on a cruise. Some ships run aground like the Costa Concordia off the coast of Italy in 2012. On others, like the Balmoral in Portland, Oregon this year, hundreds of passengers come down with norovirus, and if you don't know what norovirus is, you're lucky.

Then there are the ships that get caught in hurricane force winds like the Anthem of the Seas this year that had some of our own members onboard.

There are still others that don't get caught in storms but have to change course in order to avoid bad weather. For instance, this past week the Carnival Pride was supposed to go from Baltimore to the Caribbean.

Because of Hurricane Matthew, the Carnival Pride had to change its itinerary and go from Baltimore to New York instead. What a great cruise that must have been, Baltimore to New York. Basically a longer version of the Staten Island Ferry!

This afternoon, we will read the Book of Jonah as we do at every Yom Kippur Minha. I would like you to consider that the Book of Jonah is about a very sad cruise, a voyage of mourning and loss. The story is a metaphor for the mourning process. Jonah's cruise, therefore, is a good thing to talk about on a day when Yizkor is recited.

By tracing Jonah's life before, during, and after his cruise, we can glean some important lessons about Jewish mourning and memory.

The story begins when God tells Jonah, the son of Amittai, to preach to the megacity of Nineveh, a sinful, hedonistic place that the Holy One has decided to give just one more chance to repent and save itself.

The problem, according to the midrash, is that Jonah is dissatisfied with his job as a prophet, and prophecy is indeed a miserable job with lousy benefits. Jonah had already served as a prophet in Jerusalem, where he warned its residents that the end was near. But God decided to spare the city, and the people of Jerusalem said to Jonah, "See? The end is not near, and you're a liar!"

So Jonah does not want to be humiliated all over again in Nineveh. It was bad enough to be humiliated in Jerusalem, his people's capital. He knows it would be even worse to suffer such embarrassment far from home in Nineveh, what we now call Mosul in Iraq.

It was if the rabbi of a big fancy synagogue in New York City were fired and sent to be some kind of wandering, interfaith preacher in New Orleans or Las Vegas. Jonah saw this assignment as a demotion and wanted no part of it.

Moreover, Jonah apparently holds the gentiles in low regard and views them as trailer trash unworthy of his attention or God's mercy. He's about to learn how wrong that attitude is.

Jonah reacts to his demotion as though a loved one had died. He withdraws from his friends and family and runs away. This would be a normal reaction for many people. Getting fired can indeed cause a kind of mourning even though no one has died in the physical sense.

This kind of mourning can also occur in response to a divorce or the end of a long-term relationship. In Jonah's head, both of these things happened. He lost his cushy job as a prophet to the Jews and, as a result, he felt that God had abandoned him.

Jonah figures that this would be a good time to take a vacation and he runs away to Yaffo to catch a boat to Tarshish, a place in Lebanon that is now called Tyre or Tsur in Hebrew and Arabic. Tarshish was the Newark Airport of their world, a huge harbor from whence you could go anywhere in the known world.

This is odd, because Jonah as a prophet surely knows that you can't run away from God. Be that as it may, Jonah pays his fare, boards the cruise ship, and they sail off into the Mediterranean Sea, just like hundreds of cruises ships do today. But just as happened to the Anthem of the Seas, Jonah's cruise ship hits a violent storm.

They didn't have life jackets or lifeboats, so the people onboard did the only thing that made sense to them, which was to panic and throw the cargo overboard. It's not clear to me that ditching the cargo would make them any less likely to sink, but people don't always think clearly in an emergency situation.

Jonah, just like a mourner, had no interest in what is going on around him. He slinks away and goes below deck to the cargo hold to go to sleep. We're probably supposed to notice that the only reason there was room for Jonah to sleep in the cargo hold was that the passengers had thrown all the contents overboard.

I see this chronic sleepiness attack mourners all the time. Many people have told me how exhausting shivah is. Mourners just want to go to sleep, even in the middle of the day. They get sick and tired of all the chit-chat and small talk, which

is exactly why you're not supposed to start a conversation with a mourner. Instead, you're supposed to sit in silence and wait to be recognized.

Meanwhile, up on deck, the other cruise passengers are all praying to their gods that the storm will let up. The midrash says that the passengers came from all seventy nations of the world, each with their own idol in hand.

The captain of the ship wakes Jonah up and says, "Why are you sleeping so soundly? Get up and pray to your god!" Jonah, of course, knows full well that he and God are not exactly on speaking terms because he is a fugitive.

Many of you enjoy some time in the casino when you go on your cruises. Jonah also goes to a casino of sorts on his ship, but there was only one table game and no slots. The game was, "Let's draw lots and decide whose fault this storm is." It doesn't sound like a lot of fun, and Jonah knew that the House always wins, just like it does today.

When Jonah loses the bet and the lot lands on him, the other passengers ask Jonah, "Where have you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you?"

Jonah the mourner utters the fateful words, "I am a Hebrew." "Ivri Anokhi." Mourning, as tiring as it is, also brings out the Jew in us. Time and time again, I have seen how mourning has caused people to reconnect with the Jewish people. I have seen how mourning causes people to experience the closeness and support of minyan on a regular basis.

When I was young, arrogant, and foolish, I didn't understand what mourning was, and since, thank God, I have not experienced it personally, I still don't know what it is. But back then, I really didn't get it. I didn't understand why someone who

never comes to shul ordinarily would all of the sudden be a regular even after the period of Kaddish. It didn't make sense to me.

With the benefit of age and maturity, and definitely more age than maturity, I now see that mourners are simply following the natural progression of things.

Mourning is *supposed* to make you more spiritual and even more religious. It's only when you've lost someone precious that you realize what life is all about, what is really important.

Let's go back to Jonah and his cruise of a lifetime. On the cruises you go on, people generally don't get thrown into the water. I saw a case of that on Dateline NBC or 48 Hours, but that's not usually how it works. Of course, we know that's exactly what happened to Jonah, and he literally asked for it.

Jonah said, "Heave me overboard, and the sea will calm down for you; for I know that this terrible storm came upon you on my account." Jonah's fellow passengers, all non-Jews, initially didn't want to give him the heave-ho, but the storm left them no choice.

Those of you who have been on a cruise to Alaska or perhaps the North Atlantic have enjoyed the wonder of whale watching. Jonah also went whale watching, up close and personal. God sends a whale, or a big fish to be exact, to swallow Jonah and save him from drowning. While he's inside the whale's belly, Jonah prays fervently, much as Hannah did in the Haftarah on the first day of Rosh Hashanah.

Imagine what it would be like to be inside a whale. I suppose it would be like being trapped inside a giant jar of herring or gefilte fish. Fortunately, our Sages had a more creative spirit when they described what Jonah experienced inside the whale.

The midrash describes the inside of the whale as a house of God. Rabbi Tarphon said, “He entered its mouth like a man walking into a great synagogue. The two eyes of the fish were like radiant glass windows. Rabbi Meir said that a precious jewel hung in the belly of the fish radiating to Jonah like the midday sun, showing him everything in the sea and the depths of the earth.”

Jonah, the man who was in mourning for his job now finds comfort inside a beautiful synagogue which is inside a whale. And a synagogue does have that effect on Jews. That’s what this building is for. It’s a place to find comfort, a place to pray, meditate, and study; a place to imagine the future and remember the past.

Of course, one can pray anywhere, even on a cruise ship thousands of miles from the nearest port. Many of you have told me that you have enjoyed the Shabbat services on your cruises. Indeed, there are a lot of mostly retired rabbis who run those services in exchange for free passage on the ship.

Once, one of you told me about how the ship provided one room for Shabbat services but didn’t understand that there would be Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews. An argument broke out about the type of service, and in the end, the Reform insisted on being Orthodox about being Reform.

Even on a cruise ship, there are always two synagogues, the one I go to and the one I would never set foot in.

Jonah finishes his prayer inside the whale synagogue and agrees to go to Nineveh and preach to its citizens. The whale vomits Jonah onto the land. I have to say, that sounds messy, I hope he had access to a bath and a change of clothes.

Jonah tells the Ninevites that God is going to destroy their city on account of their sins, and he sits back and waits for the fire and brimstone to fall. He is devastated when he sees that the people of the Nineveh take him seriously and repent, even forcing their animals to wear sackcloth.

God is moved by their remorse and spares the city, once again making Jonah look like a fool. Jonah's mourning, which abated a little while he was in the whale's belly, now comes back at full force with one important difference. Before, Jonah was sad. Now, he's angry.

For many, this is the normal path of mourning. The process starts with shock and withdrawal and then proceeds to crying and sadness. Then sleepiness and exhaustion take over and then, depending on the circumstances, mourners often get angry.

Mourners get angry at God for taking their loved one away. They get angry at themselves for missed opportunities, for thinking that they had more time when they did not.

Jonah is so upset that he begs God to take his life. He cries out, "Please, God, take my life from me; for I would rather die than live." God responds, "Are you really that angry?"

Jonah leaves the city and sets up a booth from which he can look and see if God will change his mind and destroy Nineveh after all. He's clearly enraged and bitter and hoping to see the city burn to the ground.

God comforts the angry Jonah with a plant to provide him some shade in the desert heat. The plant delights Jonah and distracts him from his pain. But then God sends a hot wind to kill the plant, sending Jonah back into his world of despair.

This also mirrors the normal path of mourning. We do not stay in one emotional state the whole time. People in mourning have told me that after the shiva, they'll feel fine one day and miserable the next, or that they'll feel great and then a sound or a smell that reminds them of the past will set them off. All 100% normal, that is what is supposed to happen.

Jonah is so angry about the lousy plant and God uses his anger as a teachable moment. God says, "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 hand."

In other words, God is telling Jonah that he has to learn to look at the big picture. Rather than cry over this plant, God wants Jonah to understand that there is a big picture in which death is a sad but inevitable part of life and existence.

In the halachic sense of ritual and the recitation of kaddish, we say that mourning ends after thirty days or eleven months minus a day depending on the circumstance.

But the reality is that mourning ends at a different point for different people. For those who have lost a loved one to dementia, the mourning period may feel very short because it seems like the person died long ago. For those who have lost a child, the mourning never seems to end.

For cases in the middle of those two extremes, the mourning ends when the mourner is able to see the big picture in the way that Jonah did. When a mourner can see that the loss of a loved one fits into God's plan for the universe, the bitter sadness and grief can turn into the sweetness of memory.

Mourning is a cruise. It's not a cruise that anyone wants to go on, but eventually, we all have to get onboard. The captain of the ship, God, tells us to pray in the midst of our stormy life.

The cruises that we actually go on often provide a mixture of a sweet and sour memories. The ports of call were beautiful, the food was only so-so, or the accommodations were not so hot but the entertainment was fantastic. The whole cruise was kind of sh'vakh, but the price was amazing.

A metaphorical cruise of mourning, whether it's thirty days or a full year, works in the same way. Mourning is supposed to leave us with a mixture of beautiful and painful memories. We remember the agony of losing a loved one, but we also remember the love that we enjoyed with that person.

We feel the emptiness of loneliness, but the synagogue and your Jewish community can help you through that time.

Whomever we remember today, let us pray for God's comfort, for it is the Holy One who comforts all those who mourn in Zion and Jerusalem. We continue with the Yizkor service.