Adapted from a Russian-language unit by Dana Pulver

Introduction (3 minutes)

Facilitator’s Note: The unit is presented as a 75-minute session, but if time constraints necessitate a 60-minute unit, omit Part 4, or use Part 4 in lieu of the concluding art activity. This unit explores the lesser-known journeys described in the story of Jonah, rather than looking at repentance, which is often the central teaching focus. However, if you wish to explore the journey of repentance or the significance of the people of Nineveh, feel free to include that in your discussion. You can also choose to open up conversations about personal experiences like immigration or spiritual journeys.

Welcome to the Global Day of Jewish Learning!

Today we will travel with Jonah, whose story and extraordinary journey you may have encountered before. In this exploration, however, we will also take a close look at the journeys of some lesser-known characters in the Book of Jonah. We will read interpretations from commentators, look at artistic depictions of the story, and find ways to connect the story with our own experiences.

By traveling along with these other characters we will see how journeys can happen in many forms — physical and spiritual — and how an individual’s journey can have consequences for the journeys of others.

Have participants ask themselves:

1. Think of a journey you have been on that has changed you in some way. In what ways did you change?
2. Did that journey have an effect on people you met along the way?

Keep these questions and your answers in mind as we learn today.

Part One: Jonah On the Run (15 minutes)


1 The word of the Lord was with Jonah son of Amitai, saying: 2 Rise, go to Nineveh, the great city, and proclaim against it, as their evildoing has arisen before Me. 3 Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from before the Lord, he went down to Jaffa, and found a ship bound for Tarshish; he paid its fare, and he went down into it, to come with them to Tarshish from before the Lord. 4 But the Lord cast a great wind upon the sea, and there was a great storm in the sea, and the ship was about to be wrecked.
Ask:

1. Jonah is asked by God to journey to Nineveh to give them a prophecy, but Jonah chooses to board a ship to Tarshish instead. Why do you think Jonah fled?
2. Verse 3 gives a detailed descriptions of Jonah’s flight. What are some of the verbs used? How do the verbs relate to each other, and enliven the sense of motion in Jonah’s actions?
3. What do you learn about Jonah’s state of mind from all of this movement?

The Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer offers us an interesting rationale for Jonah’s decision to flee. Compiled between the 1st and 8th centuries CE, Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer (“The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer”) is a work of explanations and stories about Bible.

Ask a participant to read Text #2 aloud.


On the fifth day Jonah fled before his God. Why did he flee? Because on the first occasion when God sent him to restore the border of Israel, his words were fulfilled, as it is said, “And he restored the border of Israel from the entering in of Hamath” (II Kings 14:25). On the second occasion God sent him to Jerusalem to (prophesy that He would) destroy it. But the Holy One, blessed be He, did according to the abundance of His tender mercy and repented of the evil (decree), and He did not destroy it; thereupon they called him a lying prophet. On the third occasion God sent him against Nineveh to destroy it. Jonah argued with himself, saying, I know that the nations are nigh to repentance, now they will repent and the Holy One, blessed be He, will direct his anger against Israel. And is it not enough for me that Israel should call me a lying prophet; but shall also the nations of the world (do likewise)?

Ask:

1. According to Text #2, what are two reasons why Jonah decided to flee?
2. What might be some other repercussions of making “false” prophecies?
3. In light of this commentary, do you empathize with Jonah and his decision to flee? Why or why not?

The Midrash refers to II Kings 14:25, when Jonah was the prophet responsible for warning the King of Samaria to cease his oppression of the Israelites or face the wrath of God. According to the Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, the king did as he was warned, and so God did not have to punish the Samarians. Therefore, it seemed that Jonah’s prophecy was false — there was no “wrath” to prove that Jonah’s warning was real. The Midrash suggests that, because he’d been called a “lying prophet” in the past, Jonah would rather take his chances at sea than endure the shame of making another prophecy that does not come true.

When Jonah flees, God sends a great storm to threaten him, but what happens next affects more than just Jonah.
Part Two: A Journey with the Sailors  (15 minutes)

There are others aboard the ship — the sailors — and their journey is about to get much more complicated.

Ask two or three participants to read Text #3 aloud.


The sailors were afraid, and each man cried out to his god, and they cast the articles that were on the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. but Jonah descended to the hold of the ship, and he lay down, and fell asleep.

The captain approached him and said to him: what is it with you that you have fallen asleep? arise, call to your God; perhaps God will reconsider with regard to us, and we will not perish.

Each man said to his counterpart: let us cast lots, that we may discover due to whom this misfortune is upon us. They cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah.

He said to them: I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, God of the heavens, who made the sea and the dry land.

The men feared with great fear, and they said to him: what is this that you have done, for the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he told them.

They said to him: what shall we do to you, that the sea will calm from upon us, as the sea continually grew stormier. He said to them: Lift me and cast me into the sea, and the sea will calm from upon you, as I know that it is due to me that this great storm is upon you.

The sailors rowed to return to dry land, but they could not, for the sea continually grew stormier upon them.

They called to the Lord and they said: Please Lord, please let us not perish for this man's life, and do not put upon us innocent blood, for you, lord, have done as you desired. They lifted Jonah and cast him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.

The men feared the Lord with great fear; and they slaughtered an offering to the Lord, and took vows.

Ask:

1. Why do you think Jonah avoids telling the sailors and the captain that he was the reason for the storm?
2. What were the first steps the sailors took to calm the sea? Why do you think they hesitated to throw Jonah overboard?
In Text #4, Let’s return to the *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, and this time look at his commentary about how the sailors wish to avoid throwing Jonah overboard, even though they are in danger.

**Read Text #4 aloud.**

**Text #4: Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 10.6, “The History of Jonah”.** Translated by Gerald Friedlander.

They took him [Jonah] (and cast him into the sea) up to his knee-joints, and the sea-storm abated. They took him up again to themselves and the sea became agitated again against them. They cast him in (again) up to his neck, and the sea-storm abated. Once more they lifted him up in their midst and the sea was again agitated against them, until they cast him in entirely and forthwith the sea-storm abated, as it is said, “So they took up Jonah, and cast him forth into the sea: and the sea ceased from her raging.”

**Ask:**

1. How does the Midrash describe the process of throwing Jonah into the raging sea?
2. Why do you think the Midrash emphasizes the sailors’ reluctance to kill Jonah to save themselves?
3. Does your understanding of the story of Jonah change when you look more closely at the effect his journey has on the lives of the sailors? How and why?

The Midrash shows the sailors’ fear and hesitation in sending Jonah to a watery end. They start by just dipping him up to his knees in the water; when the storm stops raging they pull him back up, which starts the storm again. They test the effect and find that the only way to stop the storm is really to throw him completely in. While the sailors demonstrate an interest in not harming Jonah, Jonah does not try to act on his own behalf, as if he’s just willing to drown rather than intercede with God.

**Part Three: A Journey With the Fish** (15 minutes)

You might think that this is where Jonah meets his fate, but Jonah does not drown when he is tossed overboard. Instead, he is swallowed by an enormous fish! Let’s return to the Book of Jonah to see what happens next, and to meet another character whose journey is of interest to us.


1 The Lord appointed a great fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the innards of the fish for three days and three nights. 2 Jonah prayed to the Lord, his God, from the innards of the fish...11 The Lord told the fish, and it spewed Jonah onto the dry land.
The Book of Jonah does not include any words spoken by the fish that comes to swallow Jonah. Yet the fish plays an important role in what happens next. In Text #6, the *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* proposes what the fish might have said or might have been doing. Let’s read his description of the fish together in *chavruta*.

Ask participants to read Text #6 and discuss the questions together in *chavruta*.

Chavruta is partnered learning. Learning with a friend or two allows you to share ideas and insights with one another as you read and discuss texts together.


The fish said to Jonah, Dost thou not know that my day had arrived to be devoured in the midst of Leviathan’s mouth? Jonah replied, Take me beside it, and I will deliver thee and myself from its mouth. It brought him next to the Leviathan. (Jonah) said to the Leviathan, On thy account have I descended to see thy abode in the sea, for, moreover, in the future will I descend and put a rope in thy tongue, and I will bring thee up and prepare thee for the great feast of the righteous...(Jonah) said to it (i.e. the fish), Behold, I have saved thee from the mouth of Leviathan, show me what is in the sea and in the depths.

Ask:

1. What are the events Text #6 is describing?
2. What, if anything, surprises you about this text?
3. How do the journeys of the fish and Jonah intersect? What impact do they have on each other?

According to the *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, the fish is destined to be eaten by an even larger beast: the Leviathan. Since he is currently inside the smaller fish, Jonah is hesitant to have his new travelling companion eaten, as that will spell disaster for himself. So he promises his fish to save them both from the hungry Leviathan. Jonah scares the Leviathan with a prophecy of being cooked and eaten at a feast. In exchange for being saved, the fish takes him on a tour of the deep sea.

Thinking about the fish as a character with a speaking role within the Book of Jonah offers us another perspective and journey to explore. Jonah’s journey puts him on a path to intersect with this fish, who has a life and a history of its own. Jonah’s travels have a direct impact on the life of the fish. However you may look at it, the fish and Jonah are on the same path for a time, and their days together change the course of the story.
Part Four: Transformation? (15 minutes)

It is interesting to note that the experience of being inside the fish is what changes Jonah’s path and behavior, in a way that his encounter with the sailors and the storm on the ship did not. What is it, exactly, that changed? When the fish vomits Jonah up onto dry land, God instructs Jonah — again — to go to Nineveh, and Jonah finally does.

When Jonah reaches Nineveh and gives his prophecy (Jonah 3), the people of Nineveh change their ways and God spares them from His destruction. At this point, one might think the story of Jonah is over. However, the Book of Jonah continues (Jonah 4) with a description of Jonah after his great task is complete. This description of his behavior and his attitude reveal whether or not Jonah’s spiritual journey took him as far as his physical journey.

Ask a participant to read Text #7 aloud.


1 Jonah was displeased with great displeasure and he was upset. 2 He prayed to the Lord, and said: Please, Lord, is this not what I had said while I was in my own land? Because of this I initially fled to Tarshish, as I knew that You are God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in kindness, and reconsidering of harm. 3 Now, Lord, please take my life from me, as my death is better than my life. 4 The Lord said: Are you truly so upset?

Ask:

1. Why is Jonah upset? What insights into Jonah’s character do his emotions at the point in the story provide?
2. Do you think Jonah’s journey has changed or transformed him? How and why?

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz delves deeper into Jonah’s response to completing his mission. One of the leading scholars of this century, Rabbi Steinsaltz is best known for his commentaries on the Bible and Talmud, and for his work on Jewish mysticism.

Ask a participant to read Text #8 aloud.


...Jonah’s morose response to the success of his mission is rather surprising. Whereas other prophets of catastrophe expressed pain and misery when their harsh prophecies came to pass, Jonah is upset by the annulment of his prophecy. One might consider Jonah’s dismay to be an extension of his initial decision to flee from his prophetic mission, a decision motivated by his frustration with the tragic lot of the prophet, whose very success causes him to be mocked.
Ironically, while the book of Jonah deals with repentance, and demonstrates the power of repentance through the actions of Nineveh’s people, it is ultimately the prophet Jonah who does not transform. Even after he accepts God’s decree and proclaims to the people of Nineveh what is demanded of him, his character and his personal stance remain unchanged.

**Ask:**

1. Rabbi Steinsaltz challenges us to consider that “it is ultimately the prophet Jonah who does not transform.” Does this surprise you? Do you agree or disagree?
2. If Jonah has changed behavior but has not changed his heart and mind, is that really a transformation? Has he really changed as a person?
3. Think of a challenging journey you went on. How did it transform you? Have you been on a challenging journey that left you unchanged? How and why?

Jonah’s behavior and attitude towards the situation make it clear that he has not let go of his fear of being called a false prophet. Despite all the challenges of his voyage, and despite his near-death experiences, his concern is for his reputation, and that does not change over the course of the story.

**Conclusion (10 minutes)**

**Activity: Interpreting Jonah Through Art**

Art can be a form of Midrash, and is a way we can show how a story is understood in different ways. There is something about being swallowed and spat out by a fish that captures the imagination — we see in different generations of art, and among our own interpretations, a fascination with the idea of Jonah in the belly of the fish. Let us look at how the journeys of the various characters come together, by looking at some works of art depicting the story of Jonah.

One is from 14th century Persia. The second is from the Northern Renaissance period by Flemish artist Jan Brueghel the Elder, a master painter and contemporary of Reubens. The third is a 20th century work by Eugene Abeshaus. He was a “Refusenik”, a Jew in the Soviet Union who was seeking the opportunity to emigrate, who in 1976 received governmental permission to go to Israel.
Take a close look at each of the paintings. Ask:

1. Eugene Abeshaus paints the moment of his Jonah arriving in Haifa. What might the fish represent in this case? What might Jonah’s experience inside the fish have been? What do you think Jonah’s feelings are, standing in the port?
2. There is an angel present in the Persian painting. What do you think that angel signifies?
3. In your opinion, which traits of the fish did Brueghel depict? What could the fish be a metaphor for? Does it have its own separate path, or is it a mere reflection of Jonah’s journey?
4. How are the paintings of Jonah similar and different from one another?
5. In considering the paintings as a form of commentary on the story, what insights have you gained into the journeys we have discussed today?

Just as the artists brought their experiences to their portrayal of the story of Jonah, in our conversation today we connected our own experiences with the various characters’ journeys. We discovered new ways of understanding the story of Jonah, through characters who are not traditionally considered the center of the tale. Each of the characters in the story have intersecting journeys. Contrasting them informs our understanding of each character, the story of Jonah, and journeys, in our own lives.
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Part Two: A Journey with the Sailors


The sailors feared God, each man of them, and they each cried to his god. Each man also threw his cargo overboard into the sea, and lowered the anchors. Each man also said to his fellow, ‘Come, let us cast lots. I, in the name of my lord, can tell you what this storm is about. For I am the one who told you about it, and my words came true. I can tell you what this storm is all about, and how we can turn it around.’ The sailors cast lots and the lots fell upon Jonah. So they each said to him, ‘Tell us what this storm is all about. We want to know what it is about. We want to know how we can turn it around. We want to know how we can save our lives.’

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5 The sailors were afraid, and each man cried out to his god, and they cast the articles that were on the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. But Jonah descended to the hold of the ship, and he lay down, and fell asleep. 6 The captain approached him and said to him: What is it with you that you have fallen asleep? Arise, call to your God; perhaps God will reconsider with regard to us, and we will not perish. 7 Each man said to his counterpart: Let us cast lots, that we may discover due to whom this misfortune is upon us. They cast lots, and the lot fell upon Jonah. 8 They said to him: Please tell us, due to whom is this misfortune upon us? What is your labor and from where do you come? What is your country and from what people are you?

9 He said to them: I am a Hebrew; and I fear the Lord, God of the heavens, who made the sea and the dry land. 10 The men feared with great fear, and they said to him: What is this that you have done, for the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he told them. 11 They said to him: What shall we do to you, that the sea will calm from upon us, as the sea continually grew stormier. 12 He said to them: Lift me and cast me into the sea, and the sea will calm from upon you, as I know that it is due to me that this great storm is upon you. 13 The men rowed to return to dry land, but they could not, for the sea continually grew stormier upon them. 14 They called to the Lord and they said: Please Lord, please let us not perish for this man's life, and do not put upon us innocent blood, for you, Lord, have done as You desired. 15 They lifted Jonah and cast him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging. 16 The men feared the Lord with great fear; and they slaughtered an offering to the Lord, and took vows.

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Text #8: Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz. *Note on Jonah 4, The Steinsaltz Tanakh*.

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