



# THE BOOK OF JONAH

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*It's the classic story of Jonah and the great fish, retold in synagogues every year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Jonah doesn't want to do what God tells him, and tries to run away – but ultimately he learns there's no real way to run from your responsibilities.*

## JEWISH CONCEPTS

The account of the prophet Jonah's mission to Nineveh and his encounter with the big fish is found in the *Tanakh* (Jewish Bible) in a book bearing his name. The prophets of ancient Israel were people whom God called upon to convey important messages to the nation. A commonly held notion is that the role of a prophet is to tell the future. Indeed, there are many accounts in the Bible of prophets revealing events that were to come upon the nation of Israel. However, another purpose of the ancient prophets was to awaken people to problems within society, call them to return to just and righteous living, and warn of the consequences if they refused to change their ways. This was the nature of the message that Jonah was to deliver to Nineveh.

The Book of Jonah is traditionally read on the afternoon of *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement. This day is the culmination of a season of self-reflection in the Jewish calendar; on it, one prays for forgiveness for errors of the past year, and considers how to change for the better in the coming year. This process is known as *teshuvah*, which literally means "to return." It is fitting that we read the Book of Jonah on this day because of the intense desire that the people of Nineveh had to repent and change their ways.

## USING THIS BOOK AT HOME

You might start family conversations using these topics:

- Discuss Jonah's response to God's direction for him to go to Nineveh. What would you have done if you were Jonah? Have you ever been asked to do something that you didn't want to do or were afraid to do? Did you decide to face up to the responsibility, or did you find a way to avoid it? How did you feel about your decision afterward? What do you think is the best choice in a situation like that?
- Talk about the meaning of *teshuvah*: to return. When someone repents, what do you think they are returning to? Think of a time in your life in which you became aware of a habit you wanted to change. Did you decide to stop and replace it with something positive, or continue on with what you were doing? What was the result? Have you ever helped someone else see that they were doing something wrong? What was their response to you, and what did they decide to do?