

INCARCERATION

## What Jonah Teaches Us About Repentance

By Rabbi Avi Killip

Jonah wants strict justice. The instinct is understandable, perhaps even universal. He sees people who have sinned and wants them to pay for their crimes. God, however, has a radically different idea of how to address those who transgress: *teshuvah*, the insistence that everyone can change, even the worst sinners.

This debate between God and Jonah continues to play out today in our American prison system. The punitive system touts a Jonah-like demand for a type of justice in which crimes are punished and sinners suffer. In the past 20 years, the U.S. prison system has sought ever-stricter punishments through increases in mandatory minimum sentencing.<sup>494</sup> These increases have led to a system of greater incarceration in overcrowded prisons. Overcrowding has led to fewer resources per prisoner and more violence within prisons — including the increased use of solitary confinement as punishment. In many states, those who have been imprisoned for a felony, for any amount of time, lose (even once they've been released from prison) the right to government subsidies, including access to public housing, food stamps, and student aid, as well as the right to vote.<sup>495</sup>

We often feel that prisoners earned their fates. We can tell ourselves that many of the people in prison are dangerous criminals who have committed horrendous crimes. Jonah believes that people should get what they deserve, and sometimes we do, too.

God, however, teaches Jonah about *teshuvah* and the opportunity to begin the process of change from any starting point. In the words of the Rambam, “Nothing can stand in the way of *teshuvah*.” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:14) God is open to *teshuvah* from any person, at any time, for any sin. No matter how hard it might be for us to trust that a criminal can change, the book of Jonah reminds us of God’s patience, forgiveness, and healing. Each year, we devote an entire season to reminding ourselves that *teshuvah* is real, possible, and necessary for ourselves. Are we willing to protect this right for others?

Many of us are unaware of the current state of the American prison system. Like Jonah, we refuse to “go to Ninveh.” Like Jonah, we must hear God’s call, rise to the task, and take responsibility to ensure that all people, including prisoners, have the opportunity to change.

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494 See “Why Mass Incarceration Matters: Rethinking Crisis, Decline, and Transformation in Postwar American History” by Heather Ann Thompson, *The Journal of American History* 97 (Dec. 2010).

495 See *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander for details about these hardships.