

INCARCERATION

## Text Study: Jonah and Solitary Confinement

### Facilitator Goals

1. Increase participants' awareness of solitary confinement as a human rights issue.
2. Build empathy for people held in solitary confinement.
3. Use lessons from solitary confinement as an exegetical tool for better understanding Jonah's anger in chapter 4.

### Background

An estimated 80,000 -100,000 people are held in long-term solitary confinement in the United States. Solitary (known by a variety of terms, including SHU, for secure or segregated housing unit) is not a punishment handed down by a court; rather, it is an administrative status ordered by prison authorities, often in response to a violation of prison rules. Despite the widespread perception that solitary is reserved for the most violent prisoners, the majority of those placed in solitary have committed non-violent offenses, such as refusing to return a cafeteria tray, flooding their cells with sink water, or even attempting suicide. Some land in solitary after being accused of gang affiliation. Solitary is sometimes used to protect prisoners vulnerable to attack—this includes juveniles sentenced to an adult facility, people with non-conventional gender expression, or even Jews. Prisoners in solitary generally remain alone in their cells for 23 hours a day, with one hour of exercise—also alone. They do not have access to many benefits that other prisoners enjoy, including educational programs, opportunities to work, reasonable mental health care, or contact visits with family, and are permitted very few phone calls.

T'ruah's work on solitary confinement grew out of our decade-long campaign against torture; mental health professionals commonly view solitary as a form of mental torture. We also recognize that solitary confinement is but one aspect of the much larger issue of mass incarceration, a system that both violates the human rights of many individuals, and also has severe moral, social, economic, and safety implications for our entire society.

For more information, visit <http://www.truah.org/incarceration>

Based in part on Margo Schlanger's article "In the Story of Jonah, An Urgent Lesson About the Dangers of Solitary Confinement," *Tablet*, 9/11/2013

# Text Study: Jonah and Solitary Confinement

**1** Close your eyes. Imagine that you are Jonah in the belly of the fish.  
 What do you see? What do you smell? What do you feel? What thoughts come into your mind?  
 What are your hopes and fears?

**2** Review the second chapter of Jonah, his prayer to God from the belly of the whale. What words or images jump out at you? How do these compare to your own meditation on life inside the fish? How does this prayer show Jonah to be feeling?

**3** **The Zohar, the great Kabbalistic midrash, expands on Jonah's experience in the fish's belly as follows:**

...Certainly this fish was appointed for Jonah, to protect him from the other fish of the sea, to be hidden within in. When he entered it, Jonah saw an open space in its belly like a great hall, and the fish's two eyes shone like the sun; a precious stone was also in the belly to give him light, and he saw all that was in the sea and its depths.

You may challenge and say, if so, why does the text say, "I called out from my narrow place" (Jonah 2:3)? [When he said that] he did not have all this space. Rather, when the fish showed him all that was in the sea and its depths, it certainly died, for it could not tolerate [Jonah for] three days. As Rabbi Elazar taught: when Jonah saw all this expanse he was happy. The Holy Blessed One said: what more do you require—for this did I put you here?!

What did [God] do? He killed the fish, and all the rest of the sea's fish surrounded it, this one biting from this side and this one biting from that. When Jonah saw he was in this narrow strait, immediately, "Jonah prayed to the ETERNAL." (Zohar 2:48a, translation by T'ruah)

ודאי ההוא דג הוא הוה מנה ליונה, לנטרא ליה מן שאר נוני ימא ויהוי גניז בגויה. וכיון דאעליה בגויה, חמא יונה במעוי פותיא דאתר ימא (נ"א פותיא דאתר דמעוי) כמו היכלא רברבא, ותרין עינוי דההוא נונא דנהרין כשמשא, ואבן טבא הוה במעוי דנהיר ליה, והוה חמי כל מה די בימא ובתהומוי.

ואי תימא, אי הכי מאי דכתיב, (יונה ב ג) קראתי מצרה לי, הא לא אתחזי דכל האי רווחא הוה ליה, אלא ודאי כיון דאחמי ליה ההוא נונא כל מה די בימא ובתהומוי מית, דלא יכיל תלת יומין למסבל, כדין עקת ליה ליונה, דאמר רבי אלעזר, כיון דחמא יונה כל ההוא רווחא הוה חדי, אמר קודשא בריך הוא ומה תבעי יתיר, להא אעילנא לך הכא,

מה עבד קטל לההוא נונא ומית, וכל שאר נוני ימא הוו סחרי סחרניה דההוא נונא, דא נשיך ליה מהאי גיסא ודא נשיך ליה מהאי גיסא, כדין חמא יונה גרמוי בעקו, מיד ויתפלל יונה אל ה'.

## Discussion Questions

1. The Zohar wonders whether the fish was wide "like a great hall" or very narrow, and also imagines Jonah looking into the vast depths of the sea. In what ways does the experience of being in a wide space differ from the experience of being in a narrow space? How do you think Jonah might have experienced the contrast between narrowness and great depth?
2. Think of a time when you felt entirely alone. What was the situation? Why did you feel so alone? In what ways was your experience and your reaction similar to or different from that of Jonah?
3. What does Jonah experience after God kills the big fish? What feelings does this description elicit in you?

## 4

**Now compare the Zohar's accounts to the following testimony<sup>493</sup> from Cesar Francisco Villa, who was held in California's Pelican Bay State Prison Security Housing Unit (SHU, aka solitary) for 11 years:**

There's a definite split in personality when good turns to evil. The darkness that looms above is thick, heavy, and suffocating. A snap so sharp, the echo is deafening. A sound so loud you expect to find blood leaking from your ears at the bleakest moment.

The waking is the most traumatic. From the moment your bare feet graze the rugged stone floor, your face begins to sag, knuckles tighten—flashing pale in the pitch of early morning. The slightest slip in a quiet dawn can set a SHU personality into a tailspin: If the sink water is not warm enough, the toilet flushes too loud, the drop of a soap dish, a cup. . . . In an instant you bare teeth, shake with rage. Your heart hammers against ribs, lodges in your throat. You are capable of killing anything at this moment. Flash attack; a beating, any violent outburst that will release rage.

This would be the time it's best to hold rigid. Take a deep breath. Try to convince yourself there's an ounce of good left in you. This is not a portrait you wish anyone to see. And then a gull screeches passing outside—another tailspin and you're checking your ears for blood.

And this is a good day...

The truth is we're all broken in our own way. We've been undone, unwound. The inside of our plastic skulls—raked and routed. A composition of cracks and fissures where nothing will ever be the same again.

### Discussion Questions

1. What words, phrases or images jump out at you from this testimony? What surprises, frightens, or confuses you?
2. How does Cesar's description of solitary confinement compare to the Zohar's description of Jonah's experience? What is similar? What is different?
3. Look back at the fourth chapter of Jonah, where Jonah seems to have two odd temper tantrums—one after God says Nineveh will be spared and one after the gourd that has been providing him shade withers and dies. In what ways does Jonah's response parallel or differ from Cesar's description of his own emotional response to solitary?
4. What effect does solitary confinement seem to have on Jonah? How might this experience have influenced his later actions?
5. In the late eighteenth century, solitary confinement was created as a means of inspiring people to reflect and repent. Does this punishment seem to have this effect on Jonah? On Cesar?

<sup>493</sup> Quoted in Schlanger, originally published by Solitary Watch:

<http://solitarywatch.com/2013/03/16/voices-from-solitary-where-cold-quiet-and-emptiness-come-together/#more-8120>

**5**

**Contemplate this rabbinic saying from midrash *Vayikra Rabbah* 7:2, a medieval rabbinic commentary on Leviticus:**

Rabbi Alexandri said: An ordinary person who uses broken vessels is ashamed, but all of the Holy Blessed One's vessels are broken, as it says in Psalm (34:?), "God is close to the broken-hearted."

א"ר אלכסנדרי ההדיוט הזה אם משמש הוא בכלים שבורים גנאי הוא לו אבל הקב"ה כלי תשמישו שבורים שנאמר (שם /תהלים/ לד) קרוב ה' לנשברי לב.

**Discussion Questions**

1. How did God demonstrate being close to Jonah when Jonah was broken-hearted?
2. How do you imagine God might be close to Cesar when he feels broken?
3. Does God feel close to you when you feel broken? How or how not?

**6**

**Our tradition teaches us to use the prayers of our righteous ancestors as models for our own prayers. We close our study together by praying with Jonah, caught in the fish's belly, and with all those caught up unjustly in our nation's prison system:**

From a narrow tightness we call to the ETERNAL, and God answers; from the belly of death we cry out and You hear our voice.

Our brothers and sisters have been cast into the depths of solitary confinement; so many waves and breakers have buffeted and drowned them.

We, too, feel their pain, and the impact this injustice has on our entire society.

They are cast out from the public eye, but we will not let them be forgotten.

Though they go down to the deepest pit, the ETERNAL our God will help us raise them up, help us cast down a system that does not serve justice.

When our souls grow faint at the awful magnitude of the task before us, we remember God; our prayers come into God's innermost sanctuary, and they are beloved,

For salvation belongs to God.