

GET UP AND GO TO NINEVEH
קום לד אלנינוה

I Will Not Take "but" For an Answer!

Torah Musing- Jonah 1:2



Rabbi Malchah

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Langston Hughes, the poet laureate and great American writer, created Jesse Semple¹, a popular and iconic character who personified working class black America. In one of Semple's well known exchanges, he answers his antagonist's remarks about the pace of civil rights advances for Black America. Semple said that the USA states that it desires to expand civil rights however there is always an added 'but.' The government says "*but* it is not the time," "*but* we have to take it slowly," "*but* we don't want to upset white citizens," and on it goes. Semple, tiring of the "*but*s," answers, "*I will not take but for an answer.*"² In conversations with family, friends and colleagues I too often hear the proverbial *but*. They say "I want to write an academic article *but* I don't write well." "I want to publish *but* I have not examined every single source or delved into the deepest research in the field." "I want to co-teach a course *but* I am not good enough." "I want to go back to school, *but* I don't have the time or the money." Jesse B. Semple and the book of Jonah have much to say to those who are paralyzed by the "but" mentality.

Jonah is called to travel to Nineveh, the capital of the powerful Assyrian³ state to proclaim God's judgment. He is reluctant to go and instead elects to flee to Tarshish.⁴ After being thrown overboard and swallowed by a large fish, he goes to Nineveh and speaks the words of judgement as he was instructed. The Ninevites repent and the people are saved. Jonah had to overcome a series of "buts" in his journey from Gath-Hepher⁵ to Tarshish and then to Nineveh:

1. *But* Jonah was anxious. Jonah had to go the Assyria, the most powerful country in the 8th century BCE, so naturally he was anxious. Despite the assurance that the mission was God sanctioned, anxiety takes over and he flees.⁶ His anxiety spreads to those surrounding him.⁷

2. *But* Jonah had to hit rock bottom. During his escape he has a series of

physical and spiritual descents. He went *down* (וַיֵּרַד) to Joppa⁸. He went *down* to the port.⁹ He went *down* (וַיֵּרַד) to the ship. He went *down* (יָרַד) into the hull of the ship.¹⁰ He fell into a deep sleep.¹¹ He went *down* (וַיִּטְלֶהוּ, אֶל-הַיָּם) into the depths of the sea.¹² He went *down* (לְבֶלֶעַ אֶת-יֹנָה) into the belly of the fish.¹³ Jonah descends to his physical and moral rock bottom.

3. *But acknowledge your help and your life experiences.* Although Jonah is at a low ebb, he none-the-less remembers to acknowledge that help is available and prays. Jonah had considerable knowledge of Psalms because from memory he assembled and recites a patchwork of the book of Psalms¹⁴ and is thus rescued from his dire circumstance.¹⁵ Jonah is now ready to begin his physical and spiritual ascent.

4. *But take advantage of the second chance* and get to work. Jonah ascends from his pit and is afforded a new opportunity to accomplish the mission.¹⁶ He goes to up to Nineveh, proclaims the message and the King and his subjects repent! His message to Nineveh is very brief but he gets the job done!

Everyone has a figurative Nineveh or things that you seek to escape or perhaps reluctant to accomplish. Do not let anxiety, fear or failure to seize past opportunities beset you. Even if you hit rock bottom, as did Jonah, use your experiences to pull yourself up. James Clear¹⁷ states it well:

"Finish something. Anything. Stop researching, planning, and preparing to do the work and just do the work. It doesn't matter how good or how bad it is. You don't need to set the world on fire with your first try. You just need to prove to yourself that you have what it takes to produce something. There are no artists, athletes, entrepreneurs, or scientists who became great by half-finished their work. Stop debating what you should make and just make something."

God told Jonah "Get up and go to Nineveh"¹⁸ and you should get up and go to your Nineveh. Stop all of the *buts*! God did not accept *but* for an answer from Jonah and neither should you accept "*buts*" from yourself. קום לך אל-נינוה Get Up and Go to Nineveh and as you prepare for the trip, follow Jesse B. Simple's adage and say,

I Will Not Take *But* For An Answer.

שבת שלום מביתנו לביתך
Shabbat Shalom From Our House to Your House

Rabbi Malchah

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Endnotes

- ¹ Jesse B. Semple is also known as Simple. If you are not familiar with Langston's Jesse B. Semple character, I would advise that you begin with the collection "The Best of Semple.
- ² The Early Simple Stories_2002, Missouri.
- ³ Assyria is known have particularly cruel and ruthless leaders.
- ⁴ Nineveh is east of Israel and Tarshish is to the far west. Jonah fled in the opposite direction
- ⁵ Gath-Hepher is a territory in Zebulun, Israel.
- ⁶ Jonah 1:1-3
- ⁷ Jonah 1:5 ("and the mariners were afraid."
- ⁸ Jonah 1:3 From his location he had to go down to reach Joppa.
- ⁹ Jonah 1:3
- ¹⁰ Jonah 1:5
- ¹¹ Jonah 1:5
- ¹² Jonah 1:15
- ¹³ Jonah 2:1
- ¹⁴ See Jonah 2:1-10. Jonah's prayer is a patchwork of verses taken from Psalms -- see **v.3** and cf. Psalms. 18.7; 30.3; 118.5; 120.1; 130.1, 2; **v.4** and cf. Psalms. 42.8; **v.5** and cf. Psalms. 31.23; **v.6** and cf. Psalms. 18.5–6 and 69.2; **v.7** and cf. Psalms. 30.4 and 71.20; **v.8a** and cf. Psalms. 142.4 and 143.4; **v.8b** and cf. Psalms 5.8; 18.7 and 88.3; **v.9** and cf. Psalms. 31.7; **v.10a** and cf. Psalms. 42.5; 50.14, 23 and 66.13; **v.10b** and cf. Ps. 3.9.
- ¹⁵ Jonah 2:11
- ¹⁶ Jonah 3:1-5
- ¹⁷ James Clear is the bestselling author of Atomic Habits: An Easy and Effective Way to. Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones. Penguin Random House 2018.
- ¹⁸ Jonah 1:2