

JONAH



Prayer. Merciful God, slow to anger, rich in clemency, loathe to punish, fill our minds with your Spirit of Compassion. Grant us understanding and courage in the struggle for justice. Grace us with concern and care for our enemies that we might stay on your road of peace. Amen.

“Repentant and Unrepentant Prayer ”

**HAMAS:** Old Testament violence  
defined as abusive exploitation of the weak by the strong

It was the second time that Martin Luther King, Jr. and civil rights activists had tried to cross the bridge which led out of Selma and onto the road to Birmingham. The first time armed police had prevented them from doing so by setting up a road block and brutally attacking the unarmed marchers when they refused to turn back. Fear, blood, and screams mixed with violent sounds of gun shots, stomping horses, and the sick thumping of clubs. Outrage and courageous determination brought hundreds back to the bridge the next day. Armed police blocked the road again, but instead of attacking they stepped to the side of the road. In response, rather than crossing over and through as planned, King knelt down and prayed. When he arose, instead of going forward he turned around and headed back to town. Confusion trailed in his wake as he walked through the disbelieving protestors. Only the Lord knew why he chose to end the march. But some thought he feared a trap that would block them in, prevent retreat, and, if cornered, cause pent up anger and hatred of the police to impulsively rear its head as violent retaliation by the marchers.

Fear and anger. Self psychologists who study human growth and development teach that the first emotion that an infant experiences after birth is fear: fear that freezes when the warm hug of mother's womb is gone; fear that startles when that first rush of cold air hits tender lungs; fear that hurts when hunger pains. Newborn fear is the instinctual kind that is essential for survival. It alerts the body to threatening forces. It leads to the development of another emotion that is also good for survival, anger. The emotion of anger is nothing more than fear taken up a notch and matured so that it can activate a bodily response to eminent danger. Fighting and fleeing are the only two behavioral options that fear and anger can think of when dealing with danger. The good news for us however, is that we are not instinctually bound. As we grow into the fullness of our humanity

we have the innate ability to develop a third response to life threatening situations. Specifically, in our struggle with HAMAS we can learn compassionate engagement (active non-violent resistance).

A few years back the Dahli Lama shared some exciting results that have emerged from studies on the relationship between religion and science that suggest a way to mature our brains for third option behavior. He wrote: 'One of the neuro-science brain studies showed that people who meditated about 20 minutes a day had larger neuron growth in the frontal lobe of their brains (the part that assesses and integrates the bigger picture, mediates impulse control, does what we commonly speak of as "higher brain" functioning, and is activated during meditation and prayer)'. In the Buddhist tradition one way this higher brain functioning is developed is through a greeting ritual. Instead of 'hell-o', 'hey', 'hi dude', or 'what's up?' people put their hands to heart center, bow to the other, and say 'Namaste' (which means I honor the light of God in you). Before marching forward, Rev. Dr. King, Jr. fell on his knees and prayed. After arising, mindful of the bigger picture of God's love and concern for the lives of both police and marchers, he chose to save the march for another day.

The book of Jonah is an extended meditation on the Jewish struggle with HAMAS. In this whale of a tale no one has yet developed the higher brain functioning of compassionate engagement with evil doers. Everyone is acting out of fear and anger. God fears that people in Nineveh have turned into violent beasts instead of compassionate human beings. God is angry at their abuse and exploitation of the weak. The prophet Jonah is afraid to go and tell the beasts in Nineveh that they are wickedly bad. He is angry at God for making him the messenger that these people will surely kill. The king is afraid of weakness and vulnerability. In light of this red alert situation, I'm thinking that the primary question on the author's mind was: 'How should we, as children of faith in Israel's God, pray in our struggle with HAMAS?' Keeping true to Jewish spirituality, the book gives no answers. It does however, explore the life giving possibilities of repentant prayer as opposed to the life diminishing effects of unrepentant prayer.

In Jonah 3:7-8 repentant prayer is described in the pagan king's decree to the evil doing citizens of Nineveh "Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish." Here it is suggested that 'we-are-sorry' praying can be effective in mediating the fight or flight response. By calming fear of the life taking threat and by disarming the anger that mobilizes an impulsive action, the brain has an opportunity to pause and do some hard re-wiring for a compassionate engagement response. Repentant prayer gives our survival brain a time-out rest. It graces us with a moment to stop profiling, to imagine being in the evil doer's shoes, to look for the good rather than the bad in the hardest of hearts, and to think about what's best for the well being of all. Jesus said: "Pray for your enemies. Do good to those who would harm you."

The unrepentant prayer comes from Jonah. Out of my distress I called you, O Lord, but you did not answer me, I refused to preach repentance to the Ninevites, but you forced me. When I sailed away in the opposite direction, you hurled a violent wind at me. Your monster swallowed me and returned me to your path. Repentance. I would not preach in Nineveh, rather I cursed them, "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed." But you did not listen to me, You listened to the people of Nineveh as they sat in ashes covered with sackcloth. I am angry because you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger, rich in clemency, loathe to punish. If you will not destroy Nineveh then give me death. It is better for me to die than to see my enemy live. Jonah's is a pouting prayer that kept him forever stewing in his lower brain energies of fear and anger. His meditation suggests that unrepentant praying is useless in the learning of compassionate engagement . . . because it goes against the compassionate heart of God. There is, however, something good that his stubborn prayer does for me. It causes me to give serious consideration to the question: 'Is being trapped by my resentments, prejudices, hate, and the need to do vengeance the way I really want to end up?'