

City of Man

Scott Mintzer

Over my head the birds of prey are wheeling in crazy circles. Do you see them? They will have to wait, since I am not dead yet, though it won't be long. God, is it hot. He has summoned a potent wind to blow the clouds away, so that the bare sun beats down upon my head. And when it has finished the birds will come, and then the sun will bleach my bones, just as it has bleached my anger. Let it end, then, in this barren spot, in sight of the city that was my undoing, if that's what he wants. I've been expecting it every day.

I could try to save myself, but I no longer have the strength to move, nor the will. If I were given a flask of water I would not drink it. I have played my part dutifully, but now I am finished. I will not let him taunt me any longer, the way he did with the vine; and his speech does not frighten me the way it once did, though it was never really dramatic — no booming from the heavens, no burning-bush ventriloquism, just a cool, eerie voice cutting through me like an oar through cold water, coming from inside my own head.

"Are you angry about the vine?" he asked, as though he expected from me singing and dancing.

"I'll be angry about it until I die," I said. The heat had not yet taken its hold on me.

"You bemoan the loss of one little plant, even though you did nothing to make it grow, and it lived for only a single day. So should I not feel sorry for Nineveh, a city of 120,000 people too ignorant to know left from right, and all their livestock?" And why should I care about Nineveh?, I nearly cried out. Did that city ever shelter me from the sun? Did the vine cause me to be humiliated, or force me to endure a nightmare that still invades my sleep every night, with that awful stench in my nostrils? But I did not say these things; there would have been no purpose. Someone had to bear the brunt of his will. It was meant for me.

“Jonah,” he said days ago, the second time. I froze; my heart started racing. “I’ll give you one more chance. Get up and go to Nineveh, and tell them that in forty days their city will be overthrown. And let them know who told you so.” He stopped then, before I could ask him to clarify, to tell me how to say it, or what to do if they didn’t listen. My head ached and my muscles were sore; but after what he did to me the first time I didn’t dare protest. I brushed the sand off my clothes and started off.

It took three days to get to Nineveh, since I had no ass to carry me. Without a traveling companion I had many idle hours to ponder my charge, but no answers for solace. Why not just destroy Nineveh, instead of forewarning it? And why send me as the messenger? I am no orator, no zealot. I am pale and thin and do not cut an impressive figure. I slouch. My father Amittai used to tell me so all the time. “Look at Jeshah, how proudly he stands up! Look at Maganon! That’s a man! Not like you; you carry yourself like a little whelp. Maybe I should make you carry some heavier loads. Then you’ll stand up straighter!” And I would rub some soot from the fire onto my skin to make it seem darker; and I would slouch down even further.

My father forged iron, and had an ironworker’s muscles. My brother Maganon worked the fire with him, and grew even taller and broader than my father. When I had to beat the white-hot pieces with a hammer he would laugh. Jeshah, my younger brother, didn’t care much for the work, but instead became a soldier, serving in the king’s army with great pride. He quickly rose to command a great number of men, and was known for his exceptional bravery. When he was killed in battle, several years ago, my father tore his clothes and wept for days. I did not weep. As children, when the three of us would bring in the great mound of coals that fed the fire, Jeshah would take half the coals I had brought and put them in his pile, so that it looked like he had carried twice as many as I had. Then Amittai would berate me, and sometimes beat me with a staff. So I did not cry for Jeshah.

I tried farming, but the crops planted great welts on my pale skin and made me itch. I did some carpentry, but my hands could only with great effort guide the nails in straight. For a time I was a herdsman, but I had no head for animals; when I tried to gather them they inevitably scattered, and it took me twice as long as anyone else to bring them back in after grazing. I did odd jobs of whatever kind were available to earn a meager living, and when they didn’t pay enough I gambled, and when none could be found I begged.

Always I wished that I could be a sailor, since I loved the sea. I had seen it only twice in my childhood, when we had traveled to the port city of Joppa, a full day’s journey, so that my father could buy goods from the ships’ merchants. I was mesmerized. It stretched so far that it seemed anything could be found in it. It made a sound as soothing as a lullaby. The air was cool, and even the smells were different. It was so unlike my home. When I got older, and the hard times came, the times between the odd jobs, when the summer’s heat was too much to bear, or when clouds seemed to gather over my thoughts, I would take some days to travel to Joppa and stare out at the ships. There, I thought, one might be happy. One might make a new start. But I knew

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nothing of sailing, nor had I anyone to teach me. Then too, I was afraid of ruining this dream, as I had everything else. And what I feared came to pass; the sea is ruined for me now.

I crossed through a range of hills on the way to Nineveh, and a dry riverbed, and then miles of wasteland, too sere even for grass, too pebbly to be called a desert, just caked dirt and rocks and twisted bushes, land like a giant scab. I shivered in spite of the heat thinking of what I had to do, of how ridiculous I would appear. They would laugh at me, ignore me, or worse, punish me for my impudence by slaying me straight away. I thought of running away again, but that was impossible; he might devise something even worse for me than he did the first time. And it came back to me then: the endless echoes, the slime-covered walls over which I tumbled endlessly. The darkness so black I hallucinated for hours. And always that hideous smell. It got so bad I had to kneel on the parched earth with my hands over my temples and wait for it to pass, thinking: it will get me. Sometime soon, it will get me. But then it passed, and I continued on, having no choice.

When I reached Nineveh it was like nothing I had ever seen: street after teeming street, people and animals by the thousands and tens of thousands, cackling, moaning, and bleating. Offal and excrement lined the roads. Gamblers goaded cocks to fighting in hidden corners. Merchants

haggled. Women of comfort proffered themselves. Cripples begged for alms and were taunted by drunks and idlers. The king's men stood by, laughing at the human circus. There was so much noise, so much chaos that I could scarcely think. How could I even begin to deliver my message? And to whom? Distracted, I ducked into a nearby inn and ordered a glass of mead. But God would not let me tarry, and made the mead bitter so that I spit it out as soon as it touched my tongue. "Not used to our feisty Ninevan mead?" the innkeeper said. He was a jolly fat man, and hairy as Esau. "We make it strong. You must not be from around here."

"I'm not," I told him.

"So what brings you to our tranquil little city?"

"I'm supposed to deliver a message."

"And what message is that?"

I looked down at my glass. "In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed."

The innkeeper burst out laughing, and all his little hairs shook in unison with his big belly. But then the laughter slowly drained from his face. He was staring at me, or maybe at a point over my shoulder, as though he were seeing something that had not previously been apparent. His eyes widened a little, and his mouth hung open. "Who sent you?"

"The God of the Hebrews," I said, a bit bewildered.

At that moment another customer entered the inn. Seeing the look on the innkeeper's face, he said, "What's gotten into you?"

"Tell him," the innkeeper said, barely above a whisper. So I did.

The new customer reacted exactly as had the innkeeper. "Destroyed?" he said. "We are doomed, then! All doomed!" The innkeeper began fervently praying, while the other man ran out into the street. I followed him. "We're all doomed!" he cried. "The Hebrew God will destroy us in forty days! This man says so!" All around the people looked at me; beggars stopped begging, merchants stopped selling, even the livestock turned to face me. So I made my proclamation again. There were a few titters, but then the same thing happened; they saw something in me, and they began weeping, falling to their knees and crying aloud. I stood in amazement. Never had I had such an effect on anyone. I started calling my message out again, and again, so that the ones nearby who hadn't heard yet would hear. And they listened. To me! Soon half the city was prostrate with lamentation. "We're done for!" they cried. "Save us! Can you intercede for us with your God? You have his ear!"

"I was sent only to warn you," I told them. "I can't do more." But they continued to carry on, pleading, as though they did not believe that. And I didn't want them to.

The innkeeper gave me a room and boarded me for free, perhaps thinking that God would spare him. For three days I was the most notorious man in Nineveh, broadcasting as loudly as my lungs would let me. Women and children came to their doors to hear me as I passed; men stopped their work to hear my voice. "It's true!" some of them would cry. "The rumor is true!" They hung on my every word, every gesture, as though I were imbued with some force that had been lacking in me before. Oh, that my brothers could have been there to see it! And my father, who threatened me with heavy loads! I could have shown him the heaviest load.

The King of Nineveh arrived in the center of town with his retinue and made a proclamation of his own. He had eschewed his royal robe in favor of a plain sack, and there were ashes sprinkled on his head. "Everyone in this kingdom is to fast," he said. "No food and no water for anyone, including the animals. And every person and animal in Nineveh is to dress as I do now, in sackcloth and ashes, and everyone should beg God for mercy! All our evil and ugliness and violence have made him angry, but if we repent now, as much as we can, who knows? Maybe he will be appeased enough to spare us."

Oh, how they wailed and lamented then! The noise was so loud I had to cover my ears. And they did the other things the king had ordered too. Little children cried with hunger. The dogs and horses kept shaking themselves off, sending clouds of ash flying everywhere, so that coughing mixed with the wailing and weeping. They begged God for mercy, all of them, dressed in their drab sacks, looking like ghosts, a city full of specters — except me. I was the only one not insubstantial, the only one with any weight. They pleaded with me to help them. My words had laid low even a king, had made him a king of beggars, of shadows. I slept the sleep of the contented.

And rested so until one early morning when, still in bed, his voice echoed again through my skull. "Jonah," he said. My hands clutched the pallet on which I had been sleeping. "I'm satisfied. Nineveh will be spared."

My father Amittai used to change his mind like that. Once he told me that he was taking me to Joppa with him the next morning, to help him bring back a load of goods from the merchants there. It was strange, I thought, for him to take only one of us, and stranger still that he should pick me. But

I wasn't about to quibble, and that night I could hardly get to sleep from the excitement. In the morning, after I had awakened at the first swell of dawn's light to load my pack for the trip, my father announced that he was bringing Maganon with him instead of me. "He is the oldest," he said. "And besides, he can carry more." When he came back he said my slouching had gotten worse in his absence, and that he would pummel me until it improved.

Lying with my fists clenched on a straw mattress in a strange hostel deep in a cramped corner of the city of Nineveh, three days' journey from my home, a place I had never gone nor contemplated going, where each person awaited my every word yet nobody knew who I was, I spoke to God as I had not done before. "Why did you bring me here?" I said. "Did I not ask why you needed to force me from my home to be your messenger? Did I not say, when I was back home, that you would just end up forgiving Nineveh anyway, because you are compassionate and merciful? Now it seems that you are compassionate and merciful to everyone but me. You would not forgive me before, and now I will not even be able to show my face here, since you will have made me a laughingstock. Thanks to you I would be better off dead, and I've been waiting for just that, so you may as well slay me right now."

"Are you angry about this?" he said.

I pulled the hood of my cloak down over my face and left the city before anyone awakened.

So I came here, to this barren spot in sight of the city, pausing to look over my shoulder every so often, maybe to see how any place could have so thoroughly damned me, maybe because I hoped to be turned into a pillar of salt. I could not go back to the place where I was born and I could not stay, and so I built my little shelter from a few twigs and the cloak on my back, and I sat facing the city, thinking: who knows? He might change his mind again. And after growing a wonderful vine beside me, sheltering me from the sun and planting hope in my chest, he did change his mind; for the next morning a worm had chewed through the vine and it had collapsed. And then he sent the wind to blow away my booth, and my cloak with it, and that is how I came to be here, on this scar of the earth, with the pitiless sun beating down on my prone body, dying. It is about time. I don't know what took him this long.

My thoughts, like the rest of me, have no home. Over there behind those walls are thousands of callous and hopeful and desperate people in this

city of man; here there is one person; up there is a god. None of these things seem to have anything to do with each other. There are animals of different species who coexist in the wilderness in perfect ignorance, who practically rub haunches but never alter a step or give a sidelong glance, being neither predator nor prey to one another, and so it should be between God and man. Because if a creature is neither your predator nor your prey, then to toy with him is only for sport, and sport is cruel.

It must have seemed sporting then, in the beginning, the first time God set his eyes on me, and spoke with the voice of awe to a pitiful sometime shepherd trying vainly to roust a group of stubborn ewes. "Jonah," he said, and I dropped my staff, sensing something ominous in the tone, in the inflection of the "o." I saw no one around, and had the brief thought that one of the sheep had taken on this voice to get back at me. I knelt down to pick up my shepherd's crook. "Jonah," he said again, "get up and go to Nineveh. Tell them that because of their evil, the Lord will destroy their city within forty days."

For a moment, several moments, I don't know how long exactly, I was unable to speak. When I tried to answer I felt as though I were talking to myself, since the voice had not come from outside, but from within my own head. "But Nineveh is very far," I said. "And how will I tell them? And why me?"

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For an answer I heard the bleating of sheep in the pasture, and the rustling of grass. I tried distractedly to gather my woolly charges, thinking: this must be a mistake. I have been mistaken for a prophet. Could he have meant this? No, he could not have; it wasn't

possible. The grass was standing up unusually straight, like the hair on my arms. It wasn't possible. The clouds seemed to swell and grow larger, and then I was no longer in myself, I was up above watching me as I ran this way and that, trying to move the sheep back to the pen while the sheep moved any way but the way I wanted them to, watching me look up at the sky as though to ask myself for help, or to continue the conversation that had prematurely ended, watching me stagger over to an old tree with a great trunk and gnarled branches that looked big enough to support the whole world on its thick roots, and then my throat began to close and my breath came in short gasps, and I dropped my staff and ran.

I had no idea where I was running. After several minutes I stopped; my breathing came easier, and the sheep's soft cries were faint in the distance, and a great chasm seemed to separate me from them. I could see them, barely, looking a little stunned at this turn of events but still complacent. I turned around and kept walking in the direction I had run. It was morning, and when the sun broke through the swollen clouds it made a long shadow that paved the way before me. I passed between two ranges of low hills into a small valley, and I realized that I was on the route to Joppa, the route I had taken with my father and brothers many years before. After the hills came a river, and a great plain; and just before nightfall I reached the city. The next day I went down to the shore and found a ship about to sail.

"Where is it you're going?" the captain asked. He was an older man but still sinewy, with a gray beard that looked tough as gristle.

"What's your destination?"

"Tarshish."

"Then that's where I'm going."

He looked me over like a man placing a bet. "What are you running from?"

"From God," I told him. He stared at me for a moment, and then the firm line of his mouth softened just a trace, and he nodded his head. He took the fare I offered him and led me down to the hold of the ship, to an old pile of rags in the corner. And there, like a child who has just been through a great fright, I fell quickly into a thick and restful sleep.

I dreamt I was being rocked in my mother's arms; I couldn't move, could barely see anything around me but her beaming face, and she loved me anyway. I was dreaming still when the captain shook me awake. "Get up," he said. "Start praying to your God before we all wind up dead." The dream receded from my consciousness, and I realized that it was the boat itself that was rocking. I followed the captain up the stairs as the rocking became more and more violent, and I saw that a great storm was blowing, with waves so fierce they lapped up onto the deck. Some of the sails had been shredded by the punishing winds, and the ship tipped so precariously that it seemed in danger of capsizing. The men were running around, shouting. "We'll be torn to bits!"

"The prayer's not helping!"

"We've got to draw lots!" one kept saying. "To see who's responsible!" He convinced the others, and the captain ordered everyone to draw, his eyes on me the whole time. One by one gray stones emerged from the sack, until I reached my hand in; the one that appeared between my fingers was red as fresh blood.

"It's him!" somebody yelled. "What did you do?"

"He tried to run from his God," the captain said, "but he did not run far enough."

"It's my fault," I told them. "I'm a Hebrew, and this is the doing of my God." A lump welled in my throat, and tears in my eyes. "Throw me into the sea, and he'll stop the storm and spare you."

"Row hard!" the captain ordered, and they did, while he glared up at the sky covered with gray clouds as impervious as boulders, as though he were trying to outwill the powers of heaven themselves, as though something gave him the right to this challenge.

But the ship was tossed by the churning waters, and the boards of the deck issued the creaking sounds of wood close to snapping, and it was not long before he turned to me, rueful and downcast. "It's no use," he said. "If we keep at this we'll all go down." So I laid myself on the deck, and four men lifted me, one by each limb, and carried me to the railing at the ship's edge, where the wind was so potent they could barely keep from being flung overboard. "Please, God, spare us!" they cried. "Don't punish us for this man's sins!"

I closed my eyes and thought of nothing, and a preternatural calm came over me, and I was not afraid. I heard them counting, and then I was flying through the air, and then I was enveloped by the cool water; I couldn't help thrashing my arms for a moment, but then I abandoned myself to it and opened my eyes. Everything was smeared; everything shimmered. Little pieces of things floated slowly by, plants and tiny creatures and sea dust, and nothing of the world I had known before was visible, and I was moving downward, waiting to need a breath, content. Then in the distance a dark shape appeared, coming forward, looming larger and larger, heading directly

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for me. I waved my arms, but the more I struggled the less I moved, and from the dark shape a circle of deeper darkness emerged and came upon me, and I drew a watery breath and felt the end was at hand. And as it pulled me inward there was a great rush of current, and a sound like the screaming of souls in Gehenna, and then everything went black.

I tumbled wildly over some kind of surface, rolling upside down, sideways, and right-side-up again, until I came to rest on my back, and I coughed and spluttered and gagged up the sea water that had filled my insides, and then I lay still. The darkness surrounding me was perfect and impenetrable. It was very hot, and the air was thick and

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damp. A great wind whistled by, with the sound of air through a giant cavern. I became aware of a powerful smell in my nostrils, a horrible smell, like the odor of fish but deeper and more rank. I tried to run from it, but the ground seemed to buckle and ripple beneath my feet like the movement of muscles; then there was a great lurch, like the movement of a ship, and I fell once again onto the soft, slick ground. And that was when I realized that some giant creature of the sea had engulfed me, and that here in its belly I would remain.

I screamed, over and over again, till my muscles went limp and my lungs were emptied of breath. I may have cried, but the air was so pregnant with moisture that I could not feel tears on my cheeks. I beat against the walls of my fleshy prison with my fists, but that only disturbed the great fish and made him toss and jostle. I searched madly for an exit, and in vain, since not a single ray of light penetrated that place. It would have been easier to find a morsel of gold in a sand dune. I was exhausted, I wanted to lie down and rest, but the hideous smell was a constant punishment, insinuating itself into my head, impelling me to escape, to free myself to drown in the sea, be torn to pieces by enormous teeth, to die anywhere but here. And at the realization that I would die here I felt death fast approaching, its fiery grip on my chest, my heart beating furiously, my hands shaking, my soul floating upward and hovering over my poor wracked body, and then it seemed that my lungs really were empty of breath, and as I surrendered my consciousness I recall a brief feeling of relief. I do not know how much time passed, but when

I awoke a thin layer of slime had covered me, and the stench seemed doubly potent, and it was clear that I had not escaped at all.

I know that I cried then, great wracking sobs that seemed to agitate the great fish, almost as though he felt sorry for me. And I screamed again, hurling invective into the sopping air, wailing in pain. "Why?! Why did you do this to me?!" I cried. But the walls seemed to soak up my words like water droplets, leaving behind only silence. And I do not know what happened next; hours may have gone by, or weeks. Without light there is no time, and when you cannot open your eyes to the light of day it is difficult to distinguish waking from sleep, so some of the things I remember may have been dreams. There were great rushes of water that soaked me, and sudden turns that threw me up against the behemoth's ribs. Sometimes I thought I tasted my own blood. I felt myself being pelted by small fish, but the sensation awakened me, so I may have been asleep. I have one memory that was certainly a dream: I was a baby in my mother's womb, nestled in the warm wetness of her body, and when I looked down there was a shaft of light the width of a finger, and I was about to be delivered into the light, but then I opened my eyes into the enveloping darkness, and the light was extinguished, and I tried to return to sleep but I could not get it back.

Do you know what I ate in there? Things you would not have touched: slick crawling creatures with spines, stringy weeds that resisted my teeth, tough scaly things, slippery morsels that slid down my throat without even being chewed, as if they had a death wish. They made me gag, but it was hard to taste them because of the overwhelming smell. I tried not to breathe through my nose, but the smell seeped in through my palate anyway. I was nauseated all the time, and the nausea fought with the hunger, and both of them with the sweat that seemed to drip from me constantly, as though I were truly a forsaken man, and even the water knew enough to abandon my doomed body. My head filled with fever; I dropped to the ground and trembled, like a man having a fit. I tried to choke myself with my own hands. I tried to die. And I wept, for my own accursed fate, and for the injustice of everything. And when I finished weeping I did something that I had not done since I was a child: I fell to my knees and I prayed.

I call to you in my gravest time, O God,
I call to you from the depths of Hell,
and you hear my voice.

Though it was you that cast me into the deep ocean,
and the water flooded around me,
and the waves passed over my head,
and I thought I had been thrown from your sight,
I look to you once again.

I said this. My throat tightened, my voice cracked. I had begun to see things that could not have been real: glowing colored lights in the darkness, the crackling of a fire at sunset. Tiny hands grabbed at my ankles. Insects crawled through my veins. Death was fast approaching, and I was dissolving. What else could I have done?

The waters had engulfed me, body and soul;
the weeds were wrapped around my head.
I sank to the bottom of the ocean,
Where the sea-floor closed over me forever.
But you will lift me from this pit,
O Lord my God.

I said this. And why not? Don't people branded with hot irons confess to all manner of invented crimes, cover themselves with guilt, just to stop the pain? Don't men at the point of a sword fall to blubbery idiocy, debase themselves completely, all in vain appeal to mercy? I will not apologize. You would have done the same.

My soul shrinks within me,
But I remember you, O Lord;
and my prayer reaches you.

Those who persist in vanity lie to themselves,
and forsake their own mercy.
But I will sacrifice to you, and give thanks.
I swear it.
Salvation is of the Lord.

There was a great upheaval then, and my floating tomb surged upward (I was adept at sensing the direction of movement now, after days in total darkness), though I wondered if this wasn't just one final hallucination, or if perhaps the time had truly arrived, and the stinking fish was delivering me to heaven directly. Then he jerked and heaved and I was pitched to the floor on my back, rolling. There was a great rush of salty water, and the muscles underneath me buckled, and then I was hurtling forward like an

arrow through dark ocean, and then my eyes were splashed with brightness, my skin with cool air, and I was lying, crumpled, in damp sand that had molded into the contours of my body. When my eyes finally adjusted to the light and I was able to look behind me I saw only the telltale concentric ripples in the undulating water. I lay back on the sand and slept. When I awoke the first thing I heard was the voice of the Lord commanding me to go.

God, is it hot. And if you want me to die here, beneath the punishing sun, within sight of the city that was my undoing, then you will make it so; I do not doubt it. I was angry, but as the heat builds within my body, O Lord, and the strength founders in my limbs, I realize that it has been given to me to be the repository of your wrath. If not me, then it would have been someone else who was sent to Nineveh, someone else to endure the terror and the folly, the doubt and ridicule; someone more worthy than I, and less deserving. I bore the brunt of my father's scorn, so my brothers could go on to greatness, and so now have you made me the object of yours. And if my story is passed on from one generation to the next, or written down in some great tome, then someday those who read it might say: "We should be grateful to Jonah, who absorbed God's anger, and was punished when it could have been any of us." But it must be a lonely and solemn existence for you, O God, since there are no other gods to share it with, and perhaps that is why you spend your time dallying with the likes of us, who wish only to be left in peaceful sorrow. We are sorry creatures, Lord, doubting and anxious and trepid and confused; you know this, since it was you that created us. So you will know, then, that when my poor fellow creatures read my tale and speak your name dutifully and with awe, that it will be tinged not with adoration, but with fear.



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