

“Fleeing From God”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

In the book of Jonah, God assigns Jonah a prophetic mission. Jonah flees but finally proclaims God’s word to the pagan city of Nineveh, which repents. Why would God choose someone who would flee to be a prophet? And why would God forgive the city of Nineveh, known for its corruption and wickedness?

A clever and poignant answer to the first question is that God chose Jonah because Jonah only ran from God once. Most of us spend our lives running from God constantly, evading the responsibility that comes with faith.

Why was Nineveh forgiven? The Rabbis explain that the book of Jonah does not say that God saw their “sackcloth and fasting,” but rather that “they turned from their evil way.” (Jonah 3:10) Repentance is not a function of intentions or outward symbols, but of actions.

What is true of Jonah and of Nineveh is true of us all: genuine faith is enacted faith. Belief that does not change behavior is empty, even illusory. In the beginning, wrote the poet Goethe, was the deed. A mitzvah is the starting point; the means by which we seek to improve the world and to elevate our souls. Absent goodness, all else — however disguised by surface piety — is fleeing from the presence of God.