

Movies and Midrash

Popular Film and Jewish Religious Conversation

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Foreword by
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adoption of a critical stance.⁵⁵ Assuming an active, critically alert, open-minded set of watching and reading practices is the necessary first step to a Jewish Reel Theology. The next step is to bring the central themes of any given cultural work into conversation with Jewish text and Jewish thought, for as Emmanuel Levinas teaches, Torah study constitutes a “reading or study of a text that protects itself from the eventual idolatry of this very text, by renewing, through continual exegesis—the immutable letters and hearing breath of the living God in them.”⁵⁶

The Truman Show

Truth

If one of the preconditions of a Reel Theology is the development of a critical stance with respect to our ubiquitous screen culture, there are movies that dramatize that very issue. Peter Weir’s 1998 film *The Truman Show* opens with a close shot of Christof, the “creator” of the show within the film, who lauds the singular authenticity of its lead actor (Truman). Christof defends his “reality TV” creation by insisting that, as a culture, we have become “tired of actors giving up phony emotions,” tired of pyrotechnics and special effects. Truman, he argues, is an antidote to all of this cultural fakery. “While the world he inhabits is, in some respects, counterfeit,” Christof claims, “there is nothing fake about Truman himself”¹—a statement that is ostensibly true yet skirts the border of truth insofar as everything around Truman, all his assumptions about himself and his life, are, in fact, scripted and false. Learning how to watch *The Truman Show* entails a decoding of all this media fakery, even as one accepts that there is no true way to flee the superstructure of words and images that it represents.

Frequently, throughout this opening monologue close-up, especially when referring to the idea of phoniness, Christof looks up and to the left, an artistic affectation and obvious sign of duplicity. The entire opening montage show, featuring “testimony” about the truthfulness of the show from its principal actors, smacks of dishonesty and suggests the ways in which truth and reality are deliberately obscured within the tightly crafted and controlled world of images known as Seahaven.

Truman himself, however, knows nothing about these lies or the thousands of cameras, cast members, and people watching him the world over. Seen at first through a concealed camera in the bathroom medicine cabinet, boyishly playacting as a mountain climber who fears that he will

never reach the summit, Truman seems at best a lovable dupe. The women's cosmetic products strategically placed in the medicine cabinet that frames the screen attest to the truth he does not yet know: that his whole life is a vehicle for Christof's studio to sell things: clothes, cosmetics, furniture, kitchen implements, and Truman kitsch. The medicine cabinet screen suggests enclosure and limited possibilities. Yet Truman's adventure monologue, with its intimations of intrepid travel to faraway destinations—there are no mountains to scale in Seahaven!—also foreshadows the emotional, intellectual, and physical journey toward truth that Truman will eventually undertake over the course of the film. "Tell me something I don't already know," Truman says to himself as he playacts. To gain this new knowledge and make this journey, Truman must first wake up from his enforced innocence to experience a spark of consciousness and new knowledge. He must stop letting his wife, Meryl, mother him, as she does in this scene, calling up to Truman that he's going to be late. He must separate and individuate and begin to sense all on his own that something is not right in Seahaven.

Shortly thereafter, when Truman goes out to his car to leave for work, the next-door neighbor's dog jumps on him, a scene that is filmed from a low angle shot that makes Truman suddenly seem very tall and important; capable, perhaps, of great insight. Immediately following this, Truman sees a stage light plunge from the sky to the ground before him, a mock let-there-be-light moment that shows the limits of Christof's purported authority as creator and turns on a lamp of critical awareness within Truman.²



Figure 1.1. Truman Sees the Light.

Truman had formerly been given to clichéd speech ("That's the whole kit and caboodle!" "That's the whole ball of wax!") and limited by the phobias and obstacles set before him by Christof's script writers (who stage the drowning of his father to make him forever frightened of sea travel and spirit away his love interest, Lauren/Sylvia, before he can develop a real relationship with her). After the stage light falls, however, Truman gradually begins to discern the ersatz, production-set nature of his life in Seahaven. Before being dragged off of the set of Truman's life, Sylvia had attempted to inform Truman that everyone was watching him and that his whole life was a show. Her unique, sad eyes, symbolic of the possibility of individual vision, experience, and critical insight, haunt him as he continues to detect cracks in the veneer of his simulated, regulated, too-perfect life in Seahaven. Increasingly unhappy and suspicious, Truman makes various unsuccessful attempts to escape the island by plane, bus, car, and foot. His failed forays are filmed by the many cameras planted everywhere, accentuating the closely monitored and limited nature of his world. In one particularly desperate scene, Truman, having run into the forest by the nuclear power plant, is wrestled to the ground by several men in hazmat suits, a camera recording his subjection from a bird's-eye angle, as if from heaven above.

For a time, Truman's desperate quest for the truth is held at bay by Christof's decision to reunite Truman with his supposedly dead father. This plot turn is executed with the help of Truman's best friend, Marlon, who lies outright to Truman, with the words fed to him through an ear-piece by Christof. If there were some grand plot, Marlon says, he would have to be in on it, which of course, he is! During a subsequent call-in-show interlude, ironically called "Tru-talk," Sylvia calls in and denounces Christof as a liar and manipulator. Christof defends his actions on the grounds that Truman is better off anyway living in Seahaven than in the sick outside world. Seahaven is how the world truly ought to be. In fact, Christof claims, Truman's failure until this point to uncover the reality of his life proves that he actually "prefers his cell."

In the end, Christof's bogus claim is roundly refuted as Truman finally defies his longstanding sea phobia and takes a ship to the edge of the film set, having endured the final dramatic storm unleashed against him by Christof to deter him from his journey. Crashing into a wall of fake sky, Truman then climbs a set of stairs (as if to heaven) and exits the phony Seahaven world through a dark door leading to who knows where. Truman's journey of discovery reveals the sham nature of his media-generated reality and its would-be god, Christof.

Notably, throughout the film, Christof demonstrates much of what Judeo-Christian tradition has long taught about God: he is a creator; with his ubiquitous, providential camera-eyes, he is seemingly omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. In accordance with the God portraits of Genesis 1–3, he cues the sun and brings forth the rain and attempts to control his creature's access to knowledge.³ Like God in the book of Jonah, he summons a storm on the sea to force his way on his recalcitrant messenger. At times he is a punitive ruler; at others, he is paternal, even loving, stroking the image of Truman on the screen as a father would a son, cooing over memories of Truman as a young boy. The ever-formulaic nature of Truman's life and times in Seahaven as designed by its director-creator (reminiscent of the creation story in Genesis 1, which repeats the formula "and there was evening and there was morning" after each day of Creation) is perhaps best encapsulated by the cheery morning greeting Truman repeatedly offers his neighbors and audience: "If I don't see you, good afternoon, good evening and good night." Who, we wonder, fed Truman that hokey 1950s TV host line? And what does he himself live for? Does he have any chance of writing his own script or establishing core values of his own? Is he doomed forever to bend to the will of false God Christof and the idolatrous media world into which he was born?

In the last scene of the film, Truman stands by the dark doorway of the Seahaven set and listens as Christof reveals (by loudspeaker) his identity as the "creator of a television show" starring Truman himself. This moment by the door, in which Christof speaks to Truman, attempting to dissuade him from walking through that door, calls to mind Franz Kafka's famous parable "Before the Law,"⁴ in which a gatekeeper stands before the door and bars the man from the country from entering the Law—a multivalent symbol of power, freedom, truth, righteousness, and the great scheme of things; of God as lawgiver and the Ground of all Meaning. How does one gain access to any of these? How does one even attempt to comprehend these master narratives and construct a narrative of one's own?

Kafka's parable is somber and pessimistic. While the man from the country grows old and dwindles in darkness, light radiates from the door of the Law, to which the man will never gain entry. Ultimately Kafka's man from the country must bow and submit to this dark destiny, forever at a remove from the light.

In contrast, Truman stands before an open door. There is no radiance emanating from the other side, yet he embraces that dark unknown. The

final bow that Truman takes right before he exits stands not for obeisance but for rebellion against the cheery, blinding norms of Christof's determined, protected world. If sort-of-God Christof insists that because he has been providentially watching Truman his whole life—and besides, Truman is too afraid to act on his own—Truman ought not leave Seahaven, Truman implicitly says, I'd rather not see you or be seen by you any more, thank you very much. We, like the filmed audience within the film, cannot help cheering him on as he bravely walks right through that door and Sylvia rushes to greet him.

A modernist, Freudian reading of Truman's exit at the film's end might suggest that Truman has been cured of his religious neurosis and is now ready to live a healthy life, free of the pseudo-God. An existentialist reading might similarly suggest that he has learned to reject the religiously scripted or media-staged meanings previously made for him and is now ready to make meaning of his own.⁵

But is there really any way to find ultimate meaning outside words, signs, symbols, and images—that is, outside the realm of human language and image media? As a film, comprised of several shows within a show, about the need to be wary of the film and television, *The Truman Show* indicates, in frank terms, the extent to which we cannot, and perhaps should not, attempt to flee the superstructure of words, images, cameras, and screens that governs our sense of selfhood and freedom. We remain, in some sense, enclosed in the system, dependent on it to frame and communicate our values.

A postsecular, religious, "reely theological" reading of the film thus entails both a smashing of Christof-like idols and an affirmation of what God really is. From my text-centered, covenant-centered, Jewish vantage point, I maintain a belief that central to the uncovering of God in our lives is a recognition of the sacredness of words and our godly indwelling within language, for it is our ability to freely communicate, create, and relate in words, signs, and thought images, both to each other and to God, that identifies us as created *betzelem Elohim* (in the image of God).⁶ It is for this reason that the Torah imagines the creation of the world through a speech act; that Moses, the giver of the Torah, is repeatedly presented in the Bible as speaking *devarim* [words]; and that in Hebrew, the Ten Commandments are called *dibrot* and are engraved on two tablets, another form of graven image. As suggested by Truman's incipient relation with Sylvia, truth and God inhere in real, freely chosen relationships; in love

as expressed in symbols, words, and pictures, cut and pasted together and acknowledged with open eyes.

Nowadays, we are no longer as surprised by the idea of reality TV. What was mere fiction in that 1998 is very much our reality. For that reason, more than ever, we need to have a sense of where religion and God arise from our media-soaked existence. Where is our godly reality in this world of constant texts, Twitter, YouTube, and Web downloads? What structures in our lives allow us to identify eternal moments of significance in language, learning, human action, conversation, and relationships? And how can we fill our time not with noisy verbiage, but with the language of transcendence and truth? *The Truman Show*, in featuring a protagonist who is searching for personal truth in his media-fabricated world, helps facilitate this discussion. "We do not believe," says Jesuit minister Richard Leonard in *Movies That Matter*, "that God created us as playthings, brought into being for God's amusement . . . It is not accident that the name of Truman's escape boat is the Santa Maria—the ship that Columbus captained in 1492. We believe that God's greatest enjoyment is to be our companion as we explore the many horizons of the world, becoming the men and women God created us to be."⁷

Truth, God, and Humankind:
The Truman Show and the Book of Jonah

In the process of outlining the ways in which the *Truman Show's* Christof pretends to be God, I briefly referred above to the God of the biblical book of Jonah, a prophet who dared to escape the directive of God. I'd like to return now to the story of Jonah, this time drawing a more explicit analogy between the protagonists of both of these works, beginning with their names.

In marked contrast to the Hollywood-star names of his purported wife, mother, father, and best friend (Meryl, Angela, Kirk, and Marlon, respectively), Truman's name quite literally sets him apart as the lone True Man in his specious world. It is this name, assigned to him at birth by Christof, that defines Truman and eventually helps him to escape the control of his supposed Burbank family, that is, of Christof's studio. The biblical Jonah is similarly marked and defined by his name. We know nothing at all about the background of this oddball prophet other than his name, *Yonah ben Amittai*. Scholars have assigned various meanings

to his first name. Penina Galpaz-Feller links the name *Yonah* with the Hebrew root 737, which is associated elsewhere in the Bible (in Isaiah and Nahum) with mourning and lament, a reading that is supported by Jonah's recurrent death wish as well as his eventual doomsday prophecy to Nineveh.⁸ Bruce Vawter connects the name ironically to Nineveh, "sacred to the goddess Ishtar, whose fertility symbols were often a dove or a fish," linking Jonah, his escape attempts, and his ultimate fate to the very city he tries to avoid confronting.⁹ According to Aviva Zornberg, "Yonah, a dove, communicates something essential about him: elusive, always in flight."⁸ The name *Yonah* also links the book of Jonah with the Noah story, another biblical narrative that features a singular man, a sea voyage, a big storm, and the predicted annihilation of a whole civilization. In the biblical story of Noah, a *yonah* (dove) is sent out to ascertain whether the floodwaters have subsided, serving as a messenger or mediator between the sealed-off ark and the outside world.¹¹ Seahaven, in a sense, is Truman's ark; both *Yonah ben Amittai* and Truman, sharing aspects of the dove, are chosen to play roles and deliver messages beyond their sealed worlds that do not accord with their nature or their inchoate, inner sense of truth. Unbeknownst to him, Truman's whole life involves acting a part for an audience, and so his quest for truth involves exposing the lies of this role and finding a way out. "Was any of it real?" he asks Christof in their culminating conversation. "You were," contends Christof, "which is what made you so interesting to watch." But Christof is not granted the last word. Sylvia, watching this sequence, stares at the screen and says, "Please, God," appealing to a different sort of God, one who supports rather than thwarts the exercise of free will. Truman's final intoning of "If I don't see you, good afternoon, good evening, and good night," constitutes a final rejection of Christof's revelation of "reality" and the answer to Sylvia's prayer.

The biblical book of Jonah, of course, is a theological work that upholds rather than renounces God's truth, even as it allows God's messenger to express and work through a series of personal objections to it. In contrast to *The Truman Show*, where Truman's natural desire to explore and break out is systematically thwarted, and thus his escape marks the culmination of his maturation and emancipation, the escape attempt staged in the book of Jonah marks only the beginning of Jonah's journey toward understanding. Truman's story climaxes with his ascent up the soundstage steps and his exit through the door. Jonah's journey begins with a similar vocabulary of ascent, with the communication of

the word of the Lord (*devar-Adonai*) to Jonah that he “arise and go to Nineveh, that great city, for their wickedness has come up before Me.”² But Jonah insists on burrowing inward rather than venturing outward, on going down instead of up. Underscoring this choice, the Hebrew verb *vayeiresh* (and he went down) recurs several times in the first chapter of the book, as Jonah first goes down to Joppa to escape God’s bidding, descends into the ship bound for Tarshish (1:3), and descends even further into the innermost part of the ship as the God-sent tempest threatens to break the ship apart. Jonah then falls asleep (*vayeiradem*—a verb that plays on *vayeiresh* and suggests an even further decline). Truman also “goes down and sleeps” insofar as his escape to sea begins with a retreat to his basement, to his trunk childhood memorabilia and mementos of Sylvia. But this proves to be a feigned sleep, a ruse, using a plastic snowman and a tape-recorded snore, to facilitate his getaway at sea. And though Truman’s journey also includes a descent into the sea as Christof unleashes the storm on him, his quest ultimately entails an awakening, a heightening of critical consciousness. Whereas Truman’s quest entails an awakening and a heightening of critical consciousness, Jonah deadens his consciousness and goes under, so as to deny God’s bidding. In contrast to Truman, who wants to break out from the childish perfect world of Seahaven, Jonah rejects his prophetic errand to the broader world and seeks a haven of somnolence at sea.

Throughout the book of Jonah, reflecting Jonah’s resistance to God’s will and God’s counterresistance, certain words or roots appear and then reappear in opposing contexts or meanings. If God pursues Jonah and casts (*heitil*) a mighty wind onto the sea (*el hayam*, 1:4), Jonah counters by advising the God-fearing sailors to “cast me forth into the sea” (1:12; *hatiluni el hayam*). Jonah initially sets out to flee (1:3; *livroah*) by ship to Tarshish. In being thrown overboard, he hopes to abscond into the deepest depths of death, as if to flee responsibility by returning to the watery bars (*brihehah*) of the earth (2:7).

Compare this moment to Truman’s heroic call to whoever is controlling the storm over his boat: “You are going to have to kill me first!” Christof, determined to maintain ratings and control Truman at all costs, agrees to halt the storm over Truman’s boat only when it seems that Truman is dead. In the book of Jonah, however, God wants Jonah neither to escape nor to regress nor to die. As such, he appoints a fish to swallow Jonah up and prevent his ultimate descent, allowing him some time back

in the womb so that he can be reborn, this time with a willingness to do God’s will.

As for Jonah in the belly of the fish, he couldn’t be happier. He now has exactly what he wants: an enclosed world, cut off from all human responsibility, but without death, at least as long as he is not done in by the digestive juices in the guts of the big fish.

Canadian poet A. M. Klein captures this mood of escapist jubilation in the following rhyming, poetic depiction of Jonah’s happy lair in the belly of the whale:

Within the whale’s belly
 Good Jonah at home
 Ate fish made of jelly
 And drank frothy foam.¹³

Klein’s poem takes its singsong, rhyming, celebratory cues from Jonah’s Thanksgiving song from the belly of the fish, a paean to the God who answered his prayers that repeatedly refers to God’s “holy temple” (2:5, 2:8), suggesting that for Jonah, the fish’s belly is its own kind of long-sought, sacred sanctuary. To be sure, Klein’s rendition of Jonah’s life in the whale is more sensual and secular than Jonah’s prayer. In the fish’s belly, Klein’s Jonah has all of his aesthetic, romantic, and gustatory needs fulfilled, and he “roisters” with his mermaid until God summarily dishes him out onto the seashore. Still, if we chuckle at the idea of Jonah roistering and carousing in the whale’s belly, there is something equally funny about the biblical Jonah’s designation of the intestinal tract of the fish as a holy temple. Here is Jonah, the erstwhile fugitive, now trapped with no way out, nevertheless pledging to bring thanksgiving sacrifices. Just a little while ago, he yearned for nothing more than to go down and die, and now he praises God for raising him up. Only in being cocooned in the fish for three days with no hope of escape does Jonah find a way to thank and praise (if not apologize to) God and imagine living on, prompting God, of course, to direct the fish to spit Jonah up onto dry land.

“If Jonah wishes that much to die,” asks Elie Wiesel, “why does he cling to life? Why [later in the book] does he seek the coolness of the shade [of the gourd vine] when he should do nothing to avoid suffering? His is a peculiar combination of life-force and death wish. Which is more real?”¹⁴ Wiesel’s attempt here to grapple with the inconsistency

of Jonah's personality, to untangle the contradictions and discern what is "real," indirectly points to one of the central teachings of the book of Jonah, that is, the enduring truth of changeability and, by extension, the malleability of truth within the divine-human relationship. Things change in this book, Jonah's moods and aspirations among them. Words take on meanings and countermeanings, indicating that interpretation, intention, and decision are not fixed. Rather they change in response to the circumstances, something that Jonah does not entirely appreciate. In BT. Sanhedrin 89b, the rabbis call attention to the double meaning of the word *nehepakhet* and, as a consequence, the indeterminate meaning of the message that Jonah is told to deliver to the people of Nineveh: "Jonah was originally told that Nineveh would be turned [*nehepakhet*] but did not know whether for good or for evil.¹⁵ As Yvonne Sherwood observes, "the word that Jonah is given is a hinged word, a curse-blessing, a word that declines to fill its obvious referential responsibilities."¹⁶ Is it possible that the very contingency of God's message itself disturbed Jonah, that is, the impossibility of knowing, in advance, whether the people would be overthrown and destroyed or turned around, and therefore saved?

As readers, we share in this sense of indeterminacy, insofar as we are not initially apprised of the reasons behind Jonah's refusal to bring God's message to Nineveh. Left without an explicit motive, we might deduce on our own that Jonah escapes to Tarshish because of either compassion for Nineveh or a simple, selfish desire not to leave his comfort zone and get involved in the affairs of strangers.¹⁷ In chapter 4, however, we find out that Jonah's wish to escape the divine errand, and by extension to die, derives from his objection to God's willingness to forgive Nineveh should they repent. When the people of Nineveh enact their dramatic, universal turn toward God, and God stays the decree against them, Jonah complains bitterly to God:

Please, O LORD, was this not my word when I was still in my own land? This is why I hastened to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and abundant in mercy, repenting of evil. Now LORD, please take my life, for I would rather die than live. (4:2-3)¹⁸

The above list of God's attributes recalls a similar litany from Exodus 34:6—"The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to

anger, abounding in kindness and truth (*emet*)¹⁹—a list of divine attributes proclaimed in the wake of God's instruction to Moses to prepare a second set of tablets of the Law. By the logic of strict justice, which is how Jonah seems to define the world *emet*, God should have annihilated the Israelites in the desert as punishment for the sin of the Golden Calf, but God gives them a second chance as well as a second set of tablets to replace the ones Moses smashed. Yonah ben Amittai's reprise of Exodus 34:6 replaces *emet* with God's readiness to repent of evil, suggesting that truth and the acceptance of repentance are mutually exclusive. Himself notoriously inconsistent, given to contradictions, mood swings, and changes of heart, Jonah wants God to be completely Other and unchanging, to issue decrees that are immovable and immutable, even if facts change on the ground and the initial assessment no longer proves to be true. To him, Divine Truth needs to be a thing eternal and apart, forever unaffected by the ephemera and chimera of human behavior. Feeling like a false prophet or the servant of a mercurial God, Jonah calls for *moti* (my death), another canny wordplay. For Jonah, in the absence of what he considers divine *emet*, the only other available, inalterable truth is death.

But Jewish tradition represents *emet* in diverse ways, reflecting its many meanings and contexts. As Peter Ochs writes, "[i]n Hebrew Scripture, in rabbinic literature, and for most Jewish thinkers, truth is a characteristic of human relationships. Truth is fidelity to one's word, keeping promises, saying with the lips what one says in one's heart, bearing witness to what one has seen."²⁰ A word that includes the first, last, and middle letters of the Hebrew alphabet,²¹ *emet*, as an attribute of God, stands for an all-encompassing mode that accommodates the full range of experience and divine-human relationships. If human beings are willing to change and are created in the image of God, then it follows, in truth, that God would be willing to change and respond accordingly.

Note that God's earlier order to the fish to spit Jonah up onto dry land comes shortly after Jonah's reference, in his prayer from the belly of the fish, to those who maintain "empty folly," thereby forsaking "*hasdam*" (the compassion bestowed upon them). Often in the Bible, the words *hesed* and *emet* appear as a pair.²² Here Jonah not only rejects that pairing, but also connects *hesed* with *ya'azovu* (they shall forsake or give up), foreshadowing his own desire as elaborated in 4:2 to renounce *hesed* as contradictory to his own identity as *Ben Amittai*, "son of my truths." In setting Jonah back on dry land after a mere mention of the notion of *hesed* (even if in a negative context), God shows great forbearance, allowing Jonah a second chance to

bring the message to Nineveh and thereby internalize a lesson about the relationship between lovingkindness and truth. Jonah's outsized anger and repeated call for his own death, first in response to the dramatic repentance of the people of Nineveh and then to the shriveling up of the gourd plant, all suggest that for Jonah, this lesson does not go down easily.

In fact, at the end of the book of Jonah, we never really find out whether Jonah changes his own mind about the idea of God's *hesed ve'emet*. The book ends with a rhetorical question from God:

"You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should I not care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than twelve myriad persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well?" (4:10-11)²³

Does God really get the final word here? Does the absence here of a response from Jonah prove that he has finally acquiesced to God's view? Or does it represent a form of ongoing, silent protest? The open-endedness of the ending of the book of Jonah seems to suggest that even in this case, where God goes to great lengths and exerts considerable pressure to compel a prophet to convey a message, the prophet, indeed, the human being, is left with his own Free Will to decide whether or not to agree. Ultimately, human beings are free to choose God's way or the highway. The true God allows people to make such choices.

Clearly, there were those who found the ambiguous ending of the book of Jonah unsettling and wanted therefore to enclose the message of the book in a more predictable frame. The three extra verses from the end of the book of Micah that were added by the rabbis to the *haftarah* reading of Jonah on Yom Kippur afternoon clearly aim to resolve the uncertainty. *Titen emet leya'akov vehesed le'avraham*—"You will show truth to Jacob and lovingkindness to Abraham,"²⁴—reads the final verse of Micah (Micah 7:20), which closes the Yom Kippur *haftarah*. If Jonah ultimately refused to accept the coupling of *hesed* and *emet*, well, here it is for the congregation. That truth is associated here with the biblical Jacob, hardly the most straightforward man in his early life, shows that truth is not a monolith, but rather a multivalent, ever-burgeoning thing. People grow, learn, and change, and that is what God wants, even if Jonah—birdbrained, stubborn, and free—refuses to admit it.

There is a beautiful commentary in Midrash Yonah (sixteenth century) that imagines (despite the textual evidence to the contrary) that Jonah actually experienced a complete change of heart and confessed this to God. According to this midrash, which goes to great length to elaborate on the size of Nineveh, with its many markets, alleyways, courtyards, and houses and its many innocent children, the people of Nineveh repented so fully and radically that they went above and beyond to right all wrongs and return all formerly lost and stolen goods. In one case, a man who buys a ruined house from another man and finds a stash of gold hidden in the ruin tries to hand the gold over to the former owner of the ruin, but the former owner refuses to accept it, saying that the buyer is entitled to this treasure. The seller and the buyer take the matter to a judge, each of them renouncing the gold lest they accept something stolen to which they are not entitled and bring the wrath of God upon the world. In response, the judge decides to look back several generations into the history of this property and finds the proper inheritor. "It was about this very moment," Midrash Yonah says, "that David proclaimed, *Truth springs out of the earth*" [Psalms 85:12]. According to the midrash, God receives the repentant Ninevites' prayers right away and says, "I forgive." At the same time, Jonah falls on his face before the Holy One of Blessing and says, "Master of the Universe, forgive my sins and absolve my iniquity that I fled from You to the sea. For I did not know Your ways, and now I know the strength of your ways and your power, as it is written, *for I know that You are a gracious God, compassionate.*"²⁵ According to this midrash, the miraculous, newly found piety, magnanimity, and justice of the people of Nineveh ultimately provoke stubborn Jonah to change his mind about the relationship between repentance and truth, realizing that from repentance come even greater acts of compassion and justice. More than that, Jonah learns from the Ninevehites that he too must confess and reckon with his own mistakes. From their example, Jonah realizes that he can change his mind and still remain true to himself. He can admit before God that he was wrong and receive forgiveness. Jonah's former truths are deflated, and a new set of convictions forms in their stead.

It's So True That It's Funny/It's So Funny That It's True:
Jonah as Comedy

To be sure, the actual biblical text does not go nearly as far as the midrash in its description of the contrition of Nineveh. And it remains completely

mum about the possibility of Jonah changing his attitude. In fact, according to the text, Jonah is so sullen and serious about his principles and so immovably convinced that he is right that it's funny. Indeed, many scholars read the book of Jonah as a profoundly humorous book,²⁶ another feature that aligns it with *The Truman Show*. The comedy in *The Truman Show* derives in part from the distinctive screen personality of Jim Carrey, an actor whose performances are typically over-the-top but who nevertheless underplays these qualities in this film so as to allow Truman's sense of his phony surroundings—what Freud refers to in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* as the relationship between “bewilderment and enlightenment”²⁷—to slowly emerge. The rest of the comedy in *The Truman Show* comes from the exaggerated efforts and ridiculous gaffes made by those who work in Christof's studio as they try to maintain the show and the illusion of Truman's life and by the larger audience's unacknowledged, slavish loyalty to the show.

The comedy in the book of Jonah derives similarly from the interplay between understatement and exaggeration. At the beginning of the book, Jonah, like a comic, antiheroic straight man, doesn't say much. When God sends him to Nineveh, he simply runs in the other direction. When the ship begins to toss, he flees to the lower deck. Jonah's sullen understatement contrasts markedly with the extravagant action of everyone and everything around him: the remarkable fear of God demonstrated by the sailors, the hugeness of the fish that swallows Jonah up and of the city of Nineveh; the flamboyant show of repentance staged by the king of Nineveh, who commands everyone in the town, man and beast alike, to fast, don sack cloth, and “call mightily to God” (3:8).

As the book progresses, Jonah speaks up more and more, but in ways that only serve only to highlight his own, buffoonish recalcitrance and narrow-mindedness. He thanks God from the belly of the whale but does not apologize. He calls out to the people of Nineveh to prophesy their doom, only to mourn their salvation when it comes. He complains unto death about the death of a plant he has neither created nor tended. Will he ever learn? Jonah is a schlemiel prophet, one who does not want to fulfill his duty but cannot seem to escape. When he tries to fall asleep, someone wakes him up. When he tries to sink low into death, a fish scoops him up and then gives birth to him anew by spitting him back onto dry land. He is a cartoon prophet, flattened by God, but somehow, against his will, he always pops back to life. According to Rachel Adler,

“Jonah is a parody, burlesquing other Biblical stories and punning outrageously. It is also the most carnivalesque of biblical books, rich in monstrosities, curiosities, spectacles and monkeyshines.”²⁸ In Adler's view, the liturgical reading of this comic book on Yom Kippur afternoon, just as our spirits and blood sugar are waning, is meant to provoke us “to see in comic perspective the bodies we are so righteously afflicting and the spirits we are so assiduously burnishing.”²⁹ We cannot help laughing at Jonah's foibles, and as we erupt into laughter, some of the truths of our own Jonah-like evasiveness and our own antiheroic tendencies also burst out into the open.

All this brings to mind scholar John Morreall's observations about humor as a virtue. “In the comic frame of mind,” Morreall argues, “we get out of our mental ruts to think flexibly . . . The comic mind is always ready to consider another possible perspective. In this way, comic thinking fosters objectivity and rationality. We break free of thinking in the here and now and the real and the practical. Instead of seeing things from our own personal perspective, we can see them in the big picture.”³⁰

And so the book of Jonah, like *The Truman Show*, teaches that the truth can be funny. Moreover, even God—if not Christof, who rarely smiles!—can have a sense of humor. According to Meir Shalev,

God smiles in the face of Jonah's anger. The smile isn't described in words, but can be read between the lines. “Are you really angry?” He asks the furious prophet, and the reader can read these words out loud to prove that they cannot be said without a faint mocking smile. If I am right, that is, if God smiled when he said these words, it is God's first smile, the first, last, and only smile in the Bible.³¹

If all this is so, perhaps the best way to classify the book of Jonah is as religious comedy. One of the aims of comedy, and indeed of religious life, is to reveal hidden truths. Comedy opens a window to the limitations of human knowledge, as does religion. Both comedy and religion expose cracks in our smug veneer and assault our sense of superiority. They both also allow for surprising moments of reprieve, for salvation in the face of assumed doom. Late in the day on Yom Kippur, lightheaded and tired, we read the book of Jonah and discover these giddy truths. We imagine a God who smiles and forgives Jonah, a prophet who laments God's *hesed*

even as he enjoys it amply himself.³² We laugh at Jonah and at ourselves, at our own intolerance and hypocrisy, trusting God to untangle the truth of it all. Like Truman at the end of *The Truman Show*, we stand at the top of those heavenly steps and smile at God's open door.

Magnolia

Confession and Redemption

In *Visible Fictions*, John Ellis outlines the difference between the images projected by television as opposed to cinema: "It is a characteristic of broadcast TV," writes Ellis, "that the viewer is larger than the image: the opposite of cinema. It seems to be a convention also that the TV image is looked down on, rather than up to as in cinema . . . There is no surrounding darkness, no anonymity of the fellow viewers, no large image, no lack of movement amongst the spectators, no rapt attention."¹ In *The Truman Show*, specific attention is given to the spectatorship of Truman's fans, who at times watch in rapt attention and at other times fall asleep in front of the screen. As a TV image, Truman's life in Seahaven is elevated and idealized but also treated casually, as merely another channel to watch. Truman is looked up at by the patrons in a bar, who view his brightly colored life from a TV suspended from the ceiling, but not in the sense of being a model for behavior. He is the subject of prurient but also passing interest, a life to be eavesdropped on until the show finally comes to an end and channels are changed for the sake of finding some other way to pass the time.

In Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999),² another film that also unfolds in Burbank, California, the lesser, devalued, casual TV images that flit across the screen help convey the sense of diminished humanity and morality, not just on-screen but off-screen as well. Whereas *The Truman Show* (the show within the movie) conjures up an "idyllic" Seahaven, *Magnolia*, released only one year after *The Truman Show*, focuses on all that is sordid about life in Burbank. Everyone and everything around