

KOL NIDREI 5770

"Reconstructing the meaning of Kol Nidre"

- Rabbi Johanna Hershenson

Lewis Black, an American comedian, referred to this prayer, Kol Nidre, in his 2005 book, Nothing Sacred: "There are things about the Jewish religion that I carry with me to this day. Chief among them is Yom Kippur, or the Day of Atonement, as it's so *happily* called. It had a profound effect on my innocent young mind. The service opens with the organ playing *Kol Nidre*, one of the spookiest pieces of music ever written. You hear it and literally are surprised bats and [other frightening nocturnal beasts] aren't flying around."

If the melody associated with the prayer was not haunting enough, its content particularly taken out of context, doesn't exactly inspire all the inner strength and courage we summoned on Rosh Hashanah and committed to realize in this New Year.

All personal vows we are likely to make, all personal oaths and pledges we are likely to take from one Yom Kippur to the next, we publicly renounce. Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void, neither firm nor established. Let our personal vows, pledges and oaths be considered neither vows nor pledges nor oaths.

I'm quite certain that the Kol Nidre is not a protective out-clause for false promises, spiritual or moral laziness, or apathy. Still, a literal reading doesn't fare well for the promises we were called upon to make just last week during Rosh Hashanah.

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The editors of our American Reform *machzor* were clearly as uncomfortable with the prayer as I am. They gift us with a politically correct version, inserting the phrase "should we after honest effort, find ourselves unable to fulfill them" as a necessary antecedent to the out-clause. It is a valiant and accessible effort on the part of the editors of Gates of Repentance to be sure. Unfortunately the problem with the gloss-over is that it protects those of us who don't understand the Aramaic from facing the truth of the prayer. The truth of the prayer is that we are released from all our oaths, promises, and vows each and every Yom Kippur.

In the year 1240, an apostate, a Jew who converted to Christianity and then testified to the Church against Judaism, claimed that the Talmudic texts that underlie the *Kol Nidre* prayer is exactly why you can't ever trust the word of a Jew.

The great Talmudist of that time, Yechiel of Paris, successfully defended Judaism and thus saved Jewish souls from either an early demise or forced conversion. He taught the *halachah*, the Jewish legal understanding, that *Kol Nidre* only releases individuals from oaths and promises made privately with God.

Communal promises, like the covenantal relationship between the Jewish people and God, or the feudal relationship between the Jewish community and either the church or local nobles, not to mention our responsibilities to one another as human beings, cannot be undone by the *Kol Nidre* prayer or any similar formulation offered in the Talmud. While Yechiel of Paris convinced church and local authorities that their agreements with the Jewish community could not be undone, unfortunately he could not save 24 cartloads of Talmud manuscripts burnt as a result of the apostate's claim.

Well, today there are no specific agreements between the Jewish community and local authorities because, thank God, we live freely as individual residents and citizens with the same rights and responsibilities as any other New Zealander. The government is not concerned with either the prayer or its legal and literary origins.

Kol Nidre does not give us permission to forsake our covenantal relationship with God. Keeping the Sabbath, dietary restrictions, observing fast days, studying are not obligations from which our violation is *halachically* (legally) protected by the formula.

Finally, *Kol Nidre*, does not release us from promises or oaths we make with other people. It does not create refuge for cheating on our spouses, stealing from our neighbours, or violating the humanity of any other person.

So, what are we to do with the prayer? What are the promises, oaths, and vows we make individually, privately with God? Can we look deeply at ourselves or between the lines of the liturgy and imagine what other purpose could there be for annually reciting a formula of release from vows, oaths, and promises?

When I look deeply within I see that I don't always live up to the universal ideals and values I claim are important and worth practicing all the time. My walk simply doesn't always match my talk. No matter how hard I try, no matter how deeply I mean it when I say it, there are mistakes I just keep on repeating over and over and over again.

Just this week I heard myself respond to an apology from my youngest daughter, "If I had a dollar for every time you said sorry, I'd be rich." I am quite

certain I heard my parents say that, only I think they were satisfied with a nickel. Inflation, I guess.

The good news is that I didn't mind sounding like my parents. I admit I had a good laugh over the recurring behaviors for which I catch myself saying "sorry" again and again. More humbling than being no different than my parents is definitely realizing I'm no different than my pipsqueak little kid.

The rabbis teach us that every human being is born with two *yetzers*, two basic fundamental drives. One drive is called *yetzer hatov* and the other, *yetzer hara*.

Yetzer hatov is our inclination to BE *btzelem elohim*, in the image of the divine source of all being. We give life and we affirm life. We are kind and generous, we take responsibility for our actions and we are satisfied with what we have.

Yetzer hara is our inclination to imitate *sh'virat kelim*, vessels cracked and broken. Despite our yearning to be good, we are prone to corruption, misuse of power, and abuse of reputation.

Recently I heard Cornell West, a progressive theologian from Princeton University heavily influenced by the social gospel movement in Christianity, comment on our very familiar Levitical teaching, "Love your neighbour as yourself." He said, "The best we can do is love our crooked neighbours with our own crooked hearts."

We are perfect, *btzelem elohim*, AND we are damaged, *sh'virat kelim*. We know we are perfect because even in the midst of the harshness of evil conduct and the brokenness of human relationships, we experience love. Not just despite pain and suffering, brutality and indifference, but enmeshed in our very grief, fear, and desire to preserve ourselves, LOVE exists. It's not always easy to find. But anyone who's come through any difficulty, and I don't know who hasn't, knows that LOVE exists. We can't see it or feel it or rely on it all the time. But it does spring up in an unexpected phone call, locked eyes, and a hug.

We know we are damaged because no matter how hard we try, no matter how decent we are most of the time, still we hurt one another and still we neglect one another. Still we are impatient and still selfish.

Kol Nidre isn't permission to be these ugly things. It's an acknowledgement that we are broken vessels, just as we are the beauty and grace that reflects *tzelem elohim*, our inherent divinity.

Failure is as much a part of our being as success. In fact, our success is often rooted in what we learn from failure. The challenge is not to avoid failing, but to fail better and in a more dignified manner.

Our ownership of wrongdoing and non-doing actually moves us a step forward in our journeys of becoming the people we want to be. When we first and foremost declare the God's honest truth, we didn't always do what we said we would, we come clean. Now we have permission and space to examine the where's and why's of our broken promises about the kind of people we choose to be and draw new conclusions and develop new strategies. Maybe this year we'll get closer. And next year a little closer.

Besides abundant case law on binding and non-binding agreements, the Talmud offers us: *Lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor v'lo ata ben chorin l'hibatel mimena* - It's not up to you (alone) to finish the job, but neither are you free to ignore the work.

The melody *Kol Nidre* is etched deeply in the soul memory of every Jew who ever heard it. It's blatant matter of fact-ness about the reality of our own words and ideals unrealized reminds us how easy it is to delude ourselves and that we do it all the time.

Year after year we formulate private promises and aspirations about noble qualities we can't and don't fulfill all the time. Knowing - coming to terms with how cheap our words unrealized really are, be they a dollar or a nickel, ought to push us further and harder in our efforts to be better, kinder, more loving and more courageous, more satisfied with what we have and more driven to do the work of a meaningful and purpose driven life in the coming year.

It's nice to know that the opportunity will arise again next year. I don't know about you, but in my experience with myself, I'll be needing a reminder again. Same time next year is good a time as any other.