

Kol Nidrei
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Sacramento, CA
September 21, 2007
Kol Nidrei

The annual arrival of Kol Nidrei feels like the visit of an old familiar friend. As the sun begins to set, one by one, we take the Torahs out of the ark, handing them to our past-presidents, we stand with the congregation as we hear it chanted, then we hear our voices resonate throughout the room as we read the prayer in unison. It is easy to imagine when the Chazzan chants this prayer, that the gates of heaven are slowly opening, allowing our Yom Kippur prayers to enter.

However, that is what I *feel* about the Kol Nidrei prayer. But it's not necessarily what I *think* about it. When I *think* about it, I understand the reluctance of generations of rabbis who were opposed to the inclusion of *this* prayer into our liturgy.

I want to take the time tonight to talk about the significance of the Kol Nidrei prayer and what it has meant, and can mean, to us. I come from the old school of Reform Judaism that believes that it is important not just to pray, but to understand what we are saying, and to bring ourselves to the prayers as well.

For centuries and across continents, the rabbis debated whether or not the Kol Nidrei should be part of the Yom Kippur service at all. Overwhelmingly, the rabbis of the medieval era through the 1800s were uncomfortable with the prayer. At one point the words were even omitted from the old Union Prayer Book, leaving only an indication as to where the prayer could be chanted.

They were concerned that the Kol Nidrei would be used as an excuse for people to recklessly make vows that they had no intention of keeping, and they worried it would make people unreliable witnesses in court, if they thought they could simply repent with Kol Nidrei. And the prayer has been used by anti-Semites to claim that Jews don't consider our oaths or promises to be binding.

As a result, some Jewish communities never adopted the ritual, and most Machzorim contain explanations and warnings about the Kol Nidrei. For instance, in the Conservative Movement's prayerbook, just prior to the Yom Kippur service, there is a section with explanations, beginning with a page long "Note on Kol Nidrei" where it states "Our words, and especially our promises, must be taken seriously; our integrity must be unquestioned."¹ Even in these modern times there remains a note of caution and concern about how we interpret Kol Nidre.

¹ P. 325, Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, The Rabbinical Assembly

However, this prayer marks one of the times in our history where the peoples will overrode the rabbis. The Kol Nidrei prayer is of such importance that Erev Yom Kippur has come to be known simply as "Kol Nidrei." Just as Princess Di was called the People's Princess, Kol Nidrei might be called the "peoples prayer."

Like the Kaddish, the Kol Nidre is recited in Aramaic, not in Hebrew. It is in Aramaic, because that was the language of the common Jew. Like us, most Jews did not speak Hebrew, but most understood Aramaic.

Both of these prayers were in Aramaic because they were of such emotional significance, that it was seen as important that the prayer be recited in a language that was understood by those who were offering it.

The Kol Nidre is also in Aramaic because it is less of a prayer and really a legal formula. Most Jewish legal literature, including the Ketubah, the marriage contract, is traditionally written in Aramaic. Some see the Kol Nidrei as a sort of spiritual disclaimer for the year to come. It says:

*"Let all our vows and oaths, all the promises we make and the obligations we incur to You, O God, between this Yom Kippur and the next, be null and void should we, after honest effort find ourselves unable to fulfill them. Then may we be absolved of them."*²

It is important to understand the context in which this prayer came into being. In these litigious times, we need to sign a written waiver or contract for just about everything. We feel like we can't trust someone unless we get it in writing. But for much of history two people could engage in a deal with a handshake and a word. The expression "my word is by bond" meant something.

When we swear on a bible, say the pledge of allegiance, take an oath of office, or say our marriage vows, we are committing ourselves not just to a belief, but to a course of action. There is a public trust and understanding that we will be held accountable for our words.

Judaism takes the idea of making oaths, or swearing, so seriously, that it is the subject of multiple passages in the Bible and the Talmud, and accounts for two out of the top 10 Commandments.

The third commandment is: "You shall not take the name of the Eternal your G-d in vain..." (Ex. 20:7), and what it is talking about is prohibitions against perjury, breaking or delaying the performance of vows or promises, and falsely or dishonestly using God's name when making oaths or vows.

And just in case the importance of what we say is not clear to us, or we forget that our words have an impact on others, the ninth commandment instructs: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." (Ex. 20:13) This prohibition reminds us that bearing

² p. 252, Gates of Repentance, CCAR

false witness is an offense against not only against our neighbor, but against society and God as well.

So how then can we have a prayer that frees us, as the Kol Nidre states, from “*all our vows and oaths, all the promises we make and the obligations... between this Yom Kippur and the next.*”

Does this mean, that the contracts we sign, the agreements that we enter into are meaningless? That we are not obligated to fulfill our word?

No. The Kol Nidre speaks ONLY of the vows and oaths that we make *with God*, not with each other. As the Torah and the Talmud makes clear we are not to take lightly the words we use or promises we make in relation to each other. They are sacred and binding.

The Kol Nidre refers *only* to those oaths, vows, promises, and resolutions, we make to God and to ourselves, and it cannot make void any vows that were taken voluntarily that involve other people, or their interests. (Bab. Talmud, Ned. 23b)

Our tradition teaches that for the sins we commit against our fellow humans, Yom Kippur does not atone. For that we need to make personal reconciliation between ourselves and those whom we have wronged.

But what about those sins we have committed against ourselves? The promises we made to ourselves that we did not keep? Or those actions that violated our beliefs, our principles, or our faith? For that we wait until the end of the High Holidays, until Yom Kippur, it is only after we have first taken care to make amends with one another, then we can turn to ourselves, to our God, and to Kol Nidrei.

The Kol Nidrei prayer developed out of people’s longings to be able to have a clear conscience, and to reconcile with their Maker. It enables us to look into the mirror again and face our own conscience.

Yom Kippur is about more than a physical fasting, a denial of the earthly pleasures. It is an opportunity to engage in a spiritual cleansing. The Kol Nidre has resonated over the centuries because it is a reminder to us that we have the opportunity to look at this upcoming year with a clean slate. Not unlike how many of us look at January 1, when most of us are quick to make resolutions – or oaths – to ourselves about how we will change in this upcoming year.

Kol Nidre is a reminder for us to try to be true to ourselves, and to try to get past our self deceptions, beyond the empty words and promises we make, and to make an honest effort to change.

Perhaps part of what I am uncomfortable with the Kol Nidrei is the legal sounding language of the prayer – that it sounds like a disclaimer to me, like the fine print on a

contract. In the High Holiday *machzor* edited by Rabbi Richard Levy, he offers a poetic interpretation of the Kol Nidrei that captures the spirit of the prayer.

All the vows on our lips,
The burdens in our hearts,
The pent-up regrets
About which we brooded and spoke
Through prayers without end
On last Atonement Day
Did not change our way of life,
Did not bring deliverance
In the year that has gone.
From mountain of fervor
We fell to common way
At the close of the fast

Will You hear our regret?
Will You open our prison,
Release us from shackles of habit?
Will You answer our prayers,
Forgive our wrongs,
Though we sin again and again?
In moments of weakness
We do not remember
Promises of Atonement Day
Look past forgetfulness,
Take only from our hearts;
Forgive us, pardon us.³

The sustaining power of the Kol Nidrei prayer is its ability to put into simple words our desire to live with integrity. It gives us words to remind our Creator to recognize we are but humans striving to live up to our potential, yearning to transform who we are in our hearts into who we are in the flesh.

We begin Yom Kippur with this simple heartfelt prayer, hoping that as we engage in the process of *teshuvah* from sundown tonight through sundown tomorrow, praying, yearning, for the spiritual baggage we carry to be lifted from our shoulders, so that we have the energy and the hope to continue this journey we are on.

We pray O God, that the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts that we utter between this Yom Kippur and the next, be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Ken Yehi Ratzon – May this be God's will.

³ pp. 247-248, On Wings of Awe: A Machzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Hillel