

The Picture of Prayer: Kol Nidre, c. 1320 and 2010

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YOM KIPPUR BEGINS WITH A CEREMONY, NOT WITH a prayer. That ceremony, Kol Nidre, is a kind of ritualized court proceeding in which we annul all the vows we will make during the coming year. Kol Nidre is probably the single most famous piece in the entire Jewish liturgy — partly because it was immortalized in *The Jazz Singer* — but it is justifiably famous because it is so dramatic: We all stand, as it were, before the heavenly court, with two *sifrei Torah* [Torah scrolls] as our advocates and witnesses, and as the repeated Aramaic chant swells from a tremulous murmur to an insistent and loud pleading, the effect is a kind of stampede of sound that arouses us as much as we hope it awakens God to our prayers.

There is something very fitting about beginning Yom Kippur with a court ceremony like this. Even if Rosh Hashanah is the real Yom Ha-Din, the Day of Judgment, Yom Kippur is the day the gavel falls and the decision comes down. We hope that before it does, God changes His mind and accepts our acts of repentance and atonement. A ceremony annulling our vows is an appropriate beginning to this process. Perhaps Kol Nidre will even annul God's vow to punish those who deserve punishment according to the strict letter of the law.

Kol Nidre is also a problematic legal proceeding with a very checkered history. The heart of the problem lies in the vows to be annulled. Originally, these vows referred to those made in the past year, and this is where the trouble begins. According to halakhah, it is possible and legitimate to annul vows made in the past, but you have to do so either before a recognized judge or in a court of three sages; two Torah scrolls don't count. Such an annulment must also be

initiated by an individual, and that person needs to specify the precise vow he or she wishes to have annulled, and the reason for the request. You can't make a blanket automatic annulment of all your vows in general. An individual can't do this, and certainly not an entire community.

These difficulties led eventually to various changes in the ceremony; the one that we're most familiar with was changing the formula from annulling vows made in the past to annulling those that will be made in the coming year, vows not yet made. But this change was also problematic, particularly for theological reasons. First, if all vows are annulled in advance, what good are the vows? Moreover, if you're going to annul them in advance, why not simply not make them in the first place?

Furthermore — and this is in many ways the real crux of the problem of saying Kol Nidre at the onset of Yom Kippur — the vows to which Kol Nidre refers are specifically vows made between man and God, religious vows. These could be vows to offer sacrifices or to make gifts to the Temple or to a synagogue, but the vows at issue here are probably more like what we would call resolutions — New Year resolutions, as it were — like the promise *shelo echeteh od*, “that I will not continue to sin,” that we make at the end of the Amidah, in which we ask God to forgive our past sins and not punish us for them and help us not to repeat them in the future. But if these are the vows to which Kol Nidre refers, then the whole ceremony is even stranger. What is the sense of annulling our pledges at the very moment that we're about to make them?

Now these are all valid, perhaps even troubling, questions, and I have to admit that I don't have truly satisfactory answers to them, but I should say that they also seem to me to miss the point of Kol Nidre, and why it's so powerful a way to begin Yom Kippur. As even some medieval rabbis understood, Kol Nidre is really a *mock* legal ceremony: it's simply another way of asking God to forgive our transgressions and failures. What is most powerful about Kol Nidre is not its legal terminology, its words, but the ritual of the ceremony itself, the haunting melody of the chant, the drama of the proceeding as it moves from an inaudible murmur to a loud and insistent pleading. In fact, what's most powerful about Kol Nidre is everything *but* its words and contents. This is true even of its language, Aramaic. While Aramaic was the common spoken language of most Jews in the ancient Rabbinic period, by the time Kol Nidre became fully established as a prayer in the Middle Ages, Aramaic was an archaic, if not unintelligible, language to most Jews. But this very strangeness of its words, even

their unintelligibility, which is even more the case for us today, only adds to Kol Nidre's power and intensifies its dramatic impact.

In all these features — its ritualistic, ceremonial dramatic power; the foreignness of its language; and the communal nature of its recitation — in the way we all join together in its concluding loud chant — in all these qualities, Kol Nidre also seems to be a kind of paradigm for the role that prayer plays on Yom Kippur and how it works as a medium and instrument for what is the day's real subject — *kapparah*, “atonement,” and its prerequisite, *teshuvah*. We normally translate *teshuvah* as repentance and think of it as “returning,” which is what the word “repentance” literally means, as “seeking our way back” to some original state of innocence or religiosity. But *teshuvah* in fact is not so much *returning*, it seems to me, as “turning,” that is, changing — changing direction, as it were. The idea of *teshuvah* asserts our human capacity to change. It is in response to this ability and willingness to change that God also promises to change — that is, to alter His decree, the measure of justice, and thereby grant us *kapparah*. But what does prayer have to do with change or atonement? That is where Kol Nidre and others prayers like it that we say on Yom Kippur have something to teach us.

In its request to forgive our failures, to annul our unfulfilled or transgressed vows, Kol Nidre is actually very much like a *selichah*, the penitential poems or *piyyutim* traditionally recited during all the Amidot on Yom Kippur. These poems are among the most distinctive prayers of this season, and their essence, with which they repeatedly conclude, is the recitation of God's thirteen attributes, the so-called *brit shelosh esrei*, “the covenant of the thirteen,” that is chanted together much like the conclusion of Kol Nidre:

“The Lord, the Lord! God is gracious and compassionate, patient, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, assuring love for a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and granting pardon.”

This list of divine attributes, which explicitly emphasizes God's kindness and powers of forgiveness, is taken from the Torah, Exodus 34:6-7. The biblical passage immediately precedes the giving of the second set of the Ten Commandments. It takes place after God has punished the Israelites who worshipped the Golden Calf, after He has threatened not to accompany the children of Israel to the promised land, after Moses has sought to convince God to relent from his threats, and after God finally accedes to Moses' plea —

after all this, Moses asks that God make known to him His, God's, ways and to show him His presence. In response to this request, God promises to descend and pass before Moses and show him His glory (though He will hide His face from Moses). And then, after commanding Moses to carve the new tablets of stone and to ascend to Mount Sinai a second time, God descends and, as we're told in Exodus 34:5, God stood there with Moses, and proclaimed in the name of the Lord — *va-yikra be-sheim Adonai* — the *brit shelosh esrei*, the list of thirteen attributes. After this Moses bows down before God and prays that the Lord will go in Israel's midst even though they are a stiff-necked people. He adds, "Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own." (34:11) Which God thereupon does.

Now this passage is even more complicated than it first appears. For one thing, it is not exactly clear who proclaims the thirteen attributes. The verse says *va-yikra be-sheim Adonai*, but who's the proclaimer — God or Moses? The text is truly ambiguous; it could be either one. The Talmud offers a resolution to this ambiguity in the following way:

Said Rabbi Yohanan, Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say such a thing, but this verse teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, drew his robe [presumably, his tallit] around him like a *sheliach tzibbur* [a hazzan] and showed Moses the order of the *tefillah* [in other words, the thirteen attributes]. And He, God, said to Moses, 'Whenever Israel sins, let them carry out this service before me, and I will forgive them.' (B. ROSH HASHANAH 17B)

In other words, R. Yohanan resolves the ambiguity of *va-yikra* — who recited the *brit shelosh esrei*, God or Moses? — by having it both ways. First God recited it, and in the future so will Moses and Israel.

The midrash is shockingly anthropomorphic (or hazzanomorph). God literally becomes a *sheliach tzibbur* in order to teach Moses how to be one himself, so that he too, and after him the Jews, can recite the thirteen attributes so as to gain God's, forgiveness. But the anthropomorphism of this talmudic passage is only the beginning of the complications. If you compare the biblical passage to the *brit shelosh esrei*, you will notice something even more astonishing about the text of the thirteen attributes. What we chant is not a complete quotation of the verse. The *brit shelosh esrei* ends with the verb *ve-nakeih*, "granting us pardon" in Harlow's translation, but the biblical verse actually

continues, *ve-nakeih lo yenakeih*, which means “He does not grant pardon” or “remit punishment” but visits the iniquity of parents upon children, and children’s children upon the third and fourth generations. The word *ve-nakeih* that we recite is in fact only one half of a grammatical construction that, in its complete form, means exactly the opposite of what we say.

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Our chant of God’s thirteen attributes, in other words, is a radical example of midrash, one which completely reverses the original meaning of the verse. The rabbis rationalized this midrashic reading of the verse by explaining, “Yes, He pardons (*ve-nakeih*) — whom? the repentant, the one who does teshuvah — but He does not pardon (*lo yenakeih*) those who do not do teshuvah.” But this midrash is more than merely a clever obfuscation of the verse’s plain meaning. It is actually a kind of epitome of what prayer is, or what it seeks to accomplish. The Rabbis alter the verse in order to make God Himself alter — that is, change His decree so as to forgive us for our sins and not punish us as we deserve.

Historically, this idea of a God able to change was itself a somewhat radical development. It is not original to the Hebrew Bible’s God. In 1 Samuel 15:29, the prophet Samuel tells Saul, “The Eternal of Israel neither lies nor changes His plans, for He is not a man that he should renounce His plans.” That is, God doesn’t change. But according to some scholars, the Book of Jonah was written explicitly in order to teach the depressed and stubborn prophet (and others like him) that God *can* alter his decrees, forgive and spare sinners, and reverse his prophecies, even those against wicked people like the Ninevites. Eventually, of course, this idea of a God who can change His mind becomes fully assimilated into Jewish thought. Indeed, it becomes the very basis, the driving force, behind the idea of teshuvah: it is precisely because God can change His decrees that we too are motivated to change our ways and deeds.

Change, as we all know, is easier said than done. In fact, we virtually need God to change — or if not God Himself, directly, then some help from elsewhere, somehow. This kind of help, I would suggest, is what Kol Nidre

gives us — an atmosphere so powerful that it is irresistible, that carries you along so that, despite your own self, you change. We might call it a kind of inspiration to do teshuvah.

We are most familiar with this kind of inspiration through the music of the liturgy. But our Yom Kippur tradition can also make use of a visual form of inspiration. The 14th century South German Machzor (c. 1320), today known as the Leipzig Machzor because it belongs to the University Library of Leipzig, is one of about twenty such surviving *machzorim* [High Holiday prayerbooks]. It is a monumental book, about eighteen by twelve inches, and was meant as a display book, probably to be used by a *sheliach tzibbur* in a synagogue. As you can see from the page that follows, the Machzor is elaborately decorated and illustrated. Such illustrations in a Jewish prayerbook may come as a surprise but they are in fact quite common, particularly in Jewish books from Ashkenaz (Germany and Northern France); indeed, with their striking similarity to comparable illustrations found in contemporary Christian books, liturgical books in particular, these illustrations strongly evoke the larger gentile host culture in which the Jews of Ashkenaz lived. It is even possible that the artist of this machzor may have been a Christian who was commissioned by a Jewish scribe or his patron and given instructions as to what to paint.

On the next page is the Leipzig Machzor's page for Kol Nidre. Written in muscular square Hebrew letters (like the letters used in a Torah scroll), the prayer is framed within a Gothic gate with an elaborate flower-like crown and soaring sculptured towers at its top. The reproduction here is unfortunately in black and white, but it still reveals the exquisite decoration. It's a very color-coordinated Kol Nidre. Within the tympanum of the gate, the word *kol* is written in giant gold-leaf letters against a delicate filigreed blue background, and beneath it, hovering in the air in giant black letters, is the second word *nidre*, and below that, within the gate's space, the rest of the Aramaic text, written in a smaller script.

Beneath the columns supporting the gate are two fierce dragons, their tongues meeting in the middle somewhat playfully in a graceful fleur-de-lis, thereby completing the frame surrounding the entire prayer. These dragons are partly decorative, but they also probably represent forces of evil — powers of darkness, perhaps even our distracting thoughts.



The Hebrew word *drakon* was also the word for a snake, and these dragons, which frequently appear in Christian art of the period as well, typically symbolize Satanic forces, in the words of a recent scholar, “the apparently capricious and destructive forces of fate” that “seem to gnaw at the underpinning of faith.” What is less clear is what the dragons are doing on the page. Are the columns and the text of *Kol Nidre* between them suppressing the dragons, the forces of darkness, and holding them at bay? Or have these threatening “forces of fate” already been disarmed by the power of prayer and repentance and incorporated into God’s world where they now serve as the very foundations of the cosmos whose columns they support on their backs?

A decorated gate — in Hebrew, a *shaar* (the same word we use today for a title-page) — is a typical illustrative device in medieval books for marking the beginning of an important prayer or section, and it is certainly an appropriate illustration for *Kol Nidre*. But a gate is also an invitation for us readers to enter within. And on this page, there is even a leader for us to follow in entering. The most striking detail in this illustration, and perhaps the most difficult to see at first, is the spirited stag leaping within the filigreed blue panel inside the tympanum, almost about to latch upon the *lamed* of *kol*.

What is this deer with its great antlers doing in the picture, leaping upwards? Whom might it symbolize? The people of Israel? The community gathered together that evening in the synagogue to pray? Perhaps even the soul itself, the soul of the worshipper? *Ke-ayal taarog al afikei mayim, ken nafshi taarog eileikha Elokim*, “As the hind (or deer) pants after the water brooks, so my soul pants after You, O God” (Ps. 42:2), the Psalmist tells us. What more fitting image could illuminate *Kol Nidre* and inspire prayer? This leaping stag, I would like to suggest, is, in fact, an image of our selves, enlivened by the chant of *Kol Nidre*, panting and seeking after God. And it points us in the right direction, to enter the gate and its prayers within, to follow its lead in asking God for help to do *teshuvah*, to forgive our failures, and to accept our pleas. Even today — in 2010 — may this stag serve us as an inspiration and carry us through the gates of repentance.

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