
Starting Kol Nidre

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EVERY YOM KIPPUR AN OLD WOMAN WOULD TRAVEL A GREAT DISTANCE TO PRAY WITH THE CONGREGATION OF THE GREAT HASIDIC REBBE, LEVI YITZHAK OF BERDITCHEV. ONE YEAR IT HAPPENED THAT SHE WAS DELAYED. When she reached the house of prayer, night had already fallen. The woman was filled with sorrow, for she was certain that the service must already be over.

Meanwhile, inside, the whole congregation had been assembled for some time, ready to begin Kol Nidre. But the Rebbe waited, and then waited some more. The congregation of course waited too, growing more and more astonished. How could the Rebbe delay the start of prayer so long? After all, one must begin to recite Kol Nidre before sunset.

At long last, the woman rushed in. She looked around her, and realized that the Rebbe had not yet recited Kol Nidre. A great joy came upon her and she called out: “Lord of the World, what is in my power to wish you in return? I wish you might know as much joy from your children as I have known here tonight.”

And in that moment—even while she was speaking—an hour of perfect grace descended upon the world.*

I’VE ALWAYS LOOKED FORWARD TO THE MOMENTS BEFORE KOL NIDRE. PEOPLE stream into the available seats, laughter and greetings burst forth, excitement mingles with anticipatory dread. There is a sense of approaching a climax in the High Holiday season, a sense that what has gone before was just a warmup for what is about to happen. A magical tension envelopes the room.

* Adapted from Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters* (Schocken Books, New York, 1947)

The first act of the Kol Nidre service is to convene a *bet din*, a religious tribunal. Two members of the congregation serve as officiants on the tribunal. Holding Torah scrolls, they flank the *hazzan* or reader, who serves as the third officiant. The reader calls to order both heavenly and earthly assemblies. And then the familiar and haunting melody of Kol Nidre begins.

Once the service gets underway, I am always struck by how quickly Kol Nidre comes and goes. It feels almost as if we need to get Kol Nidre out of the way before we can begin the rest of Yom Kippur.

But what is it that we are getting out of the way?

The Kol Nidre prayer clears away our vows, annuls our oaths. I must admit I have considerable difficulty relating to this notion. Each year, we read that Kol Nidre cannot abrogate our obligations to other people. Instead, Kol Nidre governs only those vows between a person and God. What is the point then of Kol Nidre? I don't make vows to God.

Except sometimes.

Such as when my father became ill some years ago. And in my childhood, when my grandmother was sick and dying, I remember promising all that was in my power to give, to make the world go back to "normal."

I believe I am not alone in this. At those dreaded times when someone we love becomes very ill, a very primal element emerges. Then, like our ancestors, we moderns are quite ready to bargain with the universe. We vow that we will do almost anything to make that person healthy again.

These are vows that we ask Kol Nidre to negate. The problem with these vows uttered in moments of crisis is not that they are too difficult to follow through. The reason we need to annul them in advance is that if our lives had been in balance at the time, we wouldn't have made such promises. At extreme moments, we would do anything to make the world work the way we want. We would seize control of our fates, even at the cost of distorting our lives.

THERE ARE EVERYDAY PARALLELS TO SUCH MOMENTS OF EXTREME CRISIS, situations where we want something that we don't have, something that we are relatively powerless to get for ourselves.

For the most part, these things we so desperately desire are perfectly worthwhile. But not having them causes them to loom very large in our minds, too large. And the longer we have been wanting them, the more we can't believe we

don't have them yet, the more they come to define our goals, to take over our dreams.

Things like getting a job, or the promotion we have worked so hard for, or enough money to buy a house. The wish that this year our talents will be recognized, that we will finish the dissertation, that the business will break even.

Or the wish that our parents will love us and approve of us, that our child will shape up, that we will find love in a relationship, that we will have the strength to leave a relationship, that we will regain the joy in our marriage that we once had, that we will conceive a child.

These desires are a little bit like vows—because we want them so much, because we promise ourselves we *should* have them and we *will* get them for ourselves this year...because we measure ourselves by whether we have got them yet...because we promise ourselves that when we get them, our lives will be complete...because we are trying so hard and we still can't make them happen.

THE KOL NIDRE PRAYER CONTAINS MANY SYNONYMS FOR TAKING VOWS: *DI-N'DARNA u-d'ish-tevana u-d'aharimna v'di-asarna al nafshatana*. Each Aramaic verb ends in *na*, the suffix for the word *we*, as if to stress: the vows that *we* have vowed, that *we* have promised, that *we* have sworn, the promises that *we* have bound upon our own souls. For me this emphasizes how much the binding of our souls is of our own doing.

The long confessional in the Yom Kippur liturgy that we recite numerous times over the course of the day makes it very clear that there are actions for which we bear responsibility. There are standards of behavior, of kindness and compassion, of justice and altruism, that we—as a community and as individuals—have not managed to meet. And we must resolve to do better next year.

But as for those deficiencies that we lay upon ourselves, the things we want that are not entirely within our control, the small and large failures that we carry around, Kol Nidre tells us to acknowledge what they are and then lay them down. They are the offerings of our souls. They are the bonds across our hearts that we must clear away before we can begin to pray, before we can stand, fully whole, in our own eyes and in the eyes of the community...because one of us, perhaps each of us, has the ability to call forth upon the world an hour of perfect grace.

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