

## **Kol Nidre: When Words Matter and When They Don't**

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I must have offered the standard spiel on Kol Nidre a hundred times at least over the years. The words are utterly uninspiring, a medieval legal formula about release from vows. The reason this arcane Aramaic text dominates the eve of the holiest day on the Jewish calendar—we call this “The Kol Nidre” service—has little to do with the words. The music deeply and perfectly expresses the mood of regret and of yearning for a better tomorrow that Yom Kippur is all about.

True enough, as far as it goes. But a new book on *Kol Nidre* partially written and partially edited by one of Cantor Ruben's fellow professors at the Hebrew Union College in New York, Worship Professor Lawrence Hoffman (whom some of you will remember; he has spoken here) delves more deeply into the history, and provides a wonderful array of thoughtful reactions to *Kol Nidre*'s themes as well as its music.

Jewish Musicology Professor Mark Kliggman (another of Cantor Ruben's colleagues) reports that the *Kol Nidre* melody we Ashkenazic Jews employ probably dates back at least to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, possibly even to the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century. But the first discussions of *Kol Nidre* are found in the works of the Geons—basically chief rabbis of Sephardic Jewry—who exercised their spiritual authority in Bagdad. Three renowned *geonim* condemned the use of Kol Nidre in the 9<sup>th</sup> century! 12 centuries later lay people still love it, and rabbis still struggle with it!

I still believe the main secret of the Kol Nidre's powerful effect on us is the music. But the math is the math; history is history! If Kol Nidre was already too popular for chief rabbis to eliminate in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the 16<sup>th</sup> century melody cannot be the reason. It seems to have begun as a formula for cancelling out rashly made vows that people had no hope of fulfilling (things like, “I swear I'll pay you back, or may God strike me dead!” or “As God is my witness, I'll never again look lustfully at another woman besides you, my dear!” In our secular world, Dr. Hoffman explains, we do not believe God enforces such vows at all. But pre-moderns did believe that, and that Yom Kippur was the *Yom HaDin*, the day of judgement!

It was but a short logical step, but a giant theological scandal, to extend that concept to cancelling vows which might be offered *in the future*. Lots of rabbis were, and are, appalled at the idea that you could cover yourself in advance for foolish and maybe even hurtful oaths which you might utter in the year to come. These were pious folk. They were not looking for an escape clause so they would not have to pay their debts. They wanted forgiveness for the foolish things they might say. God should understand, please, that we are only human! Jewish law has never allowed Jews to wiggle out of contracts or other agreements if they had recited Kol Nidre the year before. But that, significantly, is how antisemites read it.

So rabbis of later generations still hated this prayer. And people still loved it. So who listens to rabbis?! And once the melody was added, marvelously capturing ... not the legality, but

the mood: “Oy, do we screw up. Be patient with us, God!,” how was such a beloved piece of liturgy ever to be done away with?!

I do not want to do away with it, either. But in fact earlier generations of Reform rabbis, before we took our turn to greater traditionalism, tried time and again to omit the words. Why not sing a psalm to the same melody?! Or just play it on the cello?! The editors of The Union Prayer Book, v. 2, with which some of us grew up, fought over this bitterly—and ended up, on the one hand, not printing the words of the Kol Nidre in the book, and, on the other hand, indicating “The Kol Nidre Chant” (should be sung here). Had they left it out, they knew, they would have the same problem as the Geonim in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Congregations would sing it, anyway!

One Hebrew Union College professor wrote a new text beginning with the same first few words! Sounds like a great solution to me! But even Reform Jews can get pretty traditional when it comes to centuries-old prayers. Don’t print it, was the consensus answer, but when you sing it, sing it “right.” In our current *Sha’arei T’shuvah* we do print Kol Nidre . . . but we fudge the translation to make it mean not what the Aramaic actually says, but what we think it ought to say—“annul our vows, God, if we have really tried to fulfill them but just couldn’t.” Which brings me back to where we started: nobody pays attention to the medieval Aramaic words, anyway. It is about the music.

So why should I bother you with this tonight? Three reasons: First of all, to provide a lesson about Jewish history in general and the nature of Reform Judaism in particular. We do struggle, we modernists, to enunciate a faith in which moderns can believe. And that is not just our modern *mishugas*; the 9<sup>th</sup> century Geonim and many an Orthodox Jewish leader between then and now, would have agreed.

Second, I think we will appreciate and cherish our faith more if we understand how it works. Worship—not the abstract ideas and ideals of Judaism, but prayers both private and, especially, public, the pouring forth of our hearts to God—is a manifestation of spirituality. *Kol Nidre* is about the music because worship is about spirituality, about, that is, our emotional reaction primarily, and our rational assent secondarily.

And third, I share this because I wish I had time to share lots of the spiritual ruminations, the modern midrash, if you will, that Dr. Hoffman provides in this new book about *Kol Nidre*. There *are* ways, it turns out, to get a spiritual uplift from the themes of *Kol Nidre* as well as from the music. I will only take your time for two brief examples, both by women—and perhaps that is significant when you are used to hearing a male perspective most of the time:

Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso of Indianapolis, one of the world’s first women rabbis, incidentally, and some of you will know her as a renowned author of Jewish children’s books, writes that the Kol Nidre, with its theme of broken promises, is the mirror into which we look as we begin our Yom Kippur meditations to see who we really are. She writes:

And who are we really? We make promises with every good intention, and we break them without intending. We give our word and mean it, and take it back without meaning to. We plan to do good and we do—sometimes; but we also do harm without intent. Sometimes we act like fools; sometimes we are hypocrites.

We come together on Kol Nidre, and we admit it. We tell the truth. We hold up the mirror and look into it. We make no pretense. We wear no masks. We admit that we are not all that we hope to be. Once a year we acknowledge that we are not always at our best. We are altruistic *and* selfish, kind *and* unkind. We forgive and forget *and* we hold grudges and resent. We excuse ourselves *and* blame others. We think we can gain control of things. But still we fail. And for once, we do not manufacture excuses.... (pp. 202-3)

Just how important are words, and consistency and follow-through? Rabbi Ruth Durchslag, who is also a clinical psychologist in Chicago and the founder of a Jewish meditation center, suggests that our lives are too full of words. On the one hand when we not only think something, but promise it out loud, we are more apt to follow through. Judaism is very language oriented. “Only when we say words of blessing,” she writes, “(not when we just *think* them), do we actually change our way of being in the world.... By shifting our verbal relationship to the world, the world shifts. Like God in Genesis, verbally proclaiming reality can make it so.”

As a psychologist, on the other hand, Rabbi Durchslag has learned that people use words “to divert and deceive” as much as to reveal or create. So, she says,

As a meditator I go each day to a place of quiet to seek my truth. It is not easy: our minds want to fill us with chatter and distract us from the silence that is foreign and frightening. But when I finally achieve silence, the lens of my life shifts. Dead ends open onto paths of possibility, and “no” softens into “yes.” From a place of silence, my pronouncements may seem hollow and harsh. I regret commitments I have made or see a way to make commitments that I had not seen before. Often, from this place, I wish I could take my words back. *Kol Nidre* gives me permission to do just that.

Rabbi Durchslag concludes:

This year, the haunting melody of *Kol Nidre* will remind me to honor not just my voice, but my silence.

Words mean everything.

Words mean nothing.

Both are true.

Amen.