



Kol Nidre

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At sunset this evening Jews around the world will begin the holiest day of their religious calendar with kol nidre. Kol nidre is a liturgical melody that begins the first of several worship services on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the final day of the Jewish High Holy Days. During the ten days leading up to Yom Kippur Jews are to have sought atonement from people they have wronged in the past year. They are taught to seek out and apologize for past misdeeds, and encouraged to turn away from failings that do not bring life. On the last day of the High Holy Days, Yom Kippur, Jews gather once again to begin a 25 hour fast and the holiest day of the Jewish year.

The kol nidre liturgical melody is so powerful that the first service of Yom Kippur is referred to as Kol Nidre. Jews, who only attend temple one time a year, find their way to services on this day. During the service congregants pray to God for forgiveness as individuals and as a community.

The first time I heard kol nidre it was during a Kol Nidre service. I don't remember what the rabbis said that day. I don't remember what I was wearing. I don't remember anything but the kol nidre, so beautiful, haunting, and powerful that it left me in tears for reasons I still do not understand. At the end of the service I turned to my friend, tears streaming down my face and asked "What was that music?" That music is kol nidre.

In preparing for this sermon I was interested to discover that kol nidre is not a prayer and it does not mention God. Interesting beginning for a text that ushers in the holiest day of the Jewish year. The text of kol nidre was created over 2,000 years ago. The place of origin is unclear, perhaps Babylon (during the Babylonian captivity beginning in 586 B. C. E.) or maybe Palestine.

Kol nidre means “all vows,” and the text is about vows. There are many translations with variations. To give you the general idea of the text, one translation reads

All vows, prohibitive vows, oaths, vows of dedication, *konam*-vows, *konas*-vows, and equivalent terms that we have vowed, sworn, declared, and imposed upon ourselves from this day of atonement until the next day of atonement, may it come upon us for good. Regarding them all, we regret them. Let them all be released, forgiven, erased, null and void. They are not valid nor are they in force. Our vows are not vows. Our prohibitive vows are not prohibitive vows. Our oaths are not oaths.¹

In many ways it is the oddest text. It sounds more like a legal document clearing up confusion. How can this be one of the most recognizable and beloved Jewish liturgies?

In his book *Kol Nidrei: It's Origins, Development, and Significance*, Stuart Weinberg Gershon explains how kol nidre earned its importance over time. The oldest versions of this text are deeply influenced by both folk religion and the polytheistic religion of the ancient Near East. Recent archeological excavations have unearthed bowls in ancient Babylon with phrases and words similar to those used in the modern day kol nidre. These bowls appear to have been used to nullify curses and charms. Which takes us back to an original understanding of vows in the ancient world.

In the ancient Middle Eastern world vows related to objects – something was given - and oaths related to words. Vows were often given in special places like the temple. The Hebrew Scriptures mentions three kinds of vows: dedications, prohibitions, and special Nazarite vows. Dedications were special gifts to God (such as animal sacrifice) or a promise (If you do X I will do Y – in the Hebrew Scriptures many vows are made between people and God). Prohibitions were vows involving abstinence from something, and Nazarite vows dedicated one to God with several other stipulations.

Punishments for breaking vows were deeply feared. The ancient world, even within monotheistic Judaism (and the great struggle to make it monotheistic instead of polytheistic) also contained folk religion and folk religion fears demons. The Hebrews and eventually Jews believed in demons. For example, “Lilit,” who today often goes by the name of “Lilith” was believed to be a

¹Stuart Weinberg Gershon, *Kol Nidrei: It's Origins, Development, and Significance* (1994), ix.

female demon in Jewish demonology. In the ancient world people believed that those who broke vows were punished by demons and their curses. They also believed that vows and vow making attracted demons, and too many unfulfilled vows could bring disaster down upon not only a person, but an entire community. Vows created ritual impurity. This is the reason for those earthenware bowls, protective objects to prevent any past, present, or future punishment for broken vows.

Remember too that in 586 B. C. E. the Southern Tribes of Israel were defeated and forced into exile in Babylon, where they remained for several generations before their release and eventual return. During the conquest of Jerusalem the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, a shocking and demoralizing event for the Hebrews who might have feared that unfulfilled vows had brought curses down upon their people. Remember there is also this tradition of a scapegoat” within Judaism, that the goat carries the sins of the people away. The people must remain ritually pure. There is a question as to whether or not Yom Kippur was first created centuries ago to remove demons from the community.

Add to this the Jewish exile in Babylon, a country with a polytheistic religion and extensive demonology, and by the time the Hebrews, now Jews, returned to Jerusalem, they were deeply concerned about vows (explain Hebrew to Jew). The Babylonian exile is also the first time the Jews as we know them today began to collect their stories and faith into the Hebrew Scriptures (before that they were oral stories). Exile makes you collect your thoughts. During exile the rabbis re-ordered the Hebrew people, wrote down stories of their faith, and also began creating the Babylonian Talmud. The text of the kol nidre is assembled at this time from various versions and sources, and it bears the marks of this exile and survival.

This is why, as strange and almost silly as the text sounds today, it is so vital, and a link to the exile and creation of Judaism 2,500 years ago. Over time many of the rabbis began to dislike the kol nidre. In fact the kol nidre has been argued about for over 2,000 years. In general the rabbis disliked it, and the people brought it back. It seemed superstitious to many rabbis and other scholars, which in a way it is. If you believe in God as the one God, and a great God, why do you need extra protection from other divinity? Certainly the people confused it. The kol nidre became a combination magical spell, vow, protection, and incantation for many people who were at the same time devout Jews.

Over the century scholars and rabbis argued in depth over the kol nidre, and wrote about it often. They couldn't even agree if it belonged in prayer books. They also amended it to suit the needs of the time. There was a ruling in the Medieval period of Judaism that the kol nidre vows were the vows that people could only impose on themselves. Other versions of the kol nidre were created to add God to the incantation and make it into a prayer for absolution. Over time there developed an Ashkenazi (Jews of Germany and France) version that was different in text and melody from the Sephardic version (Jews of Portugal and Spain).

Interestingly, Christians knew about the kol nidre and what is said, and they used it as a tool against the Jews. The existence of kol nidre was given as a reason to distrust Jews – they were vow breakers, it said so right there in the kol nidre and any vow they made for any reason, personal or business, could be broken. This is what many European governments believed, and they used it to restrict, humiliate, and punish Jews.

By the time the Enlightenment came along in the late 1700's, Jews who embraced the Enlightenment and reason were deeply embarrassed by the kol nidre. Both Orthodox groups (who thought it was polytheistic) and Reform groups (who thought it was irrational) removed it from their prayer books.

Rabbi Isaac M. Wise of Cincinnati [deeply immersed in reasoned religion, and the founder of Reform Judaism in America, and friend to minister of this congregation] wrote of the kol nidre

[It] has given rise to so many false accusations, and of which there is no mention in the Talmud, as it has a foothold whatever in the Bible. Sensible men ought to know that formulas of that kind are out of date and place, and ought to be dropped.

Now here is the power though of liturgy and music. Even though the kol nidre words were removed for almost 100 years, the people begged to keep the melody and to just alter the words to appropriate levels of approval for the time. The Ashkenazi melody of the kol nidre came from Medieval European and Jewish folk tunes, and the people loved it and they still do. It is the same music that has been heard for perhaps 1,000 years with the Ashkenazi kol nidre.

The remarkable thing is that once again kol nidre would not die. One rabbi noted "I thoroughly disagree with the theology expressed in the kol nidre . . .

However . . . kol nidre has a certain emotional force that no other song can convey to our people.”² In 1978 kol nidre returned to Reform Judaism in the liturgical prayer book *Gates of Repentance* where it has remained for the last 30 years, unusual text and all.

In explaining kol nidre, its power, and return Gershon writes

Let us not be put off by our ancestors’ literal belief in demons and evil spirits, curses and magic spells. These concepts have lost none of their metaphoric truth. Are we also not haunted at midnight by the demons of regret and guilt? Have we not brought a curse upon ourselves by the consequences of our misdeeds and foolish choices? Does not kol nidre magically bestow upon us a few moments of protected time to stop and reflect upon the meaning and direction of our lives? Our ancestors were not so primitive. We are not so advanced. Despite the centuries, their fears and ours, our hopes and theirs, remain the same.³

If we choose to take everything literally, kol nidre makes no sense. But an insistent literal translation robs us of our human experience which is literal, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. Kol nidre has survived these thousands of years because it is a vehicle for human self examination. The addition of music in the Middle Ages solidified this role. Who here has not failed? Not wondered about broken promises and hopes? Who here has not realized too late that a mistake was made, someone or something done wrong to others or self? Kol nidre is a vehicle to let in these thoughts and feelings, and hopefully, creates then the space for change, a turning of behavior towards life, which is the entire purpose of the High Holy Days.

Source for the sermon - Stuart Weinberg Gershon, *Kol Nidrei: It’s Origins, Development, and Significance* (1994).

²Gershon, 108.

³Gershon, 141.