

Kol Nidre Talk: Community, Compassion, and Karma

Christina Ager

Kol Nidre 5778

Tonight, we begin the final stage of the High Holy Day examination of our lives. Who have we been? Who do we want to be? How can we learn and grow and be “better” than last year? ...How can this year be different? I would like to offer up an alternative approach to tonight and the day of Yom Kippur...

I am, given my age, relatively new to Judaism. Still since my conversion, I’ve lived through thirty-some seasons of repentance...I welcome this time each year, to contemplate, to examine, to begin again. I love that our tradition gives us a weekly pause on Shabbat and this larger deeper pause of the High Holy Days; that built into the Jewish calendar is time to pause and ponder; to make amends and to make plans for our new selves going into this, our New Year. There are years when I am eager and excited to start a new chapter, to turn a page; to live into a change I am ready and waiting for. There are also years when I feel held captive to a pattern of behavior I seem unable to alter, even though I desperately want change. Times when I feel burdened by the need for a complete overhaul, the sort of “I REALLY need to get it together” Yom Kippur.

Here we are, facing Yom Kippur once again...facing ourselves, facing G-d once again. Where are we in our lives? Where are you in your journey to becoming who you want to be?

Hopefully, we have made our amends to others during the Ten Days of Repentance. We have asked for forgiveness, we have tidied up our emotional houses. Now as Yom Kippur approaches we turn even further inward ...we seek to engage deeply with ourselves and with G-d.

Rabbi Shoshana Gelfand writes, Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur are designed for radical change. They are designed to disrupt and disorient, and then to restart. This disruption and disorientation are designed to bring us to a place of change. Our lives are disrupted by jarring our sense of routine: We eat our evening meal well before sundown, we wear tallit- the only night of the year we do so... When we return home tonight our routines will be further disrupted by not eating, not bathing; the usual markers of our days are gone, suspended, replaced with liturgy and contemplation.

This disruption leads to disorientation. Fasting, not drinking, having nothing on our schedules but time, all this disorients. We get light-headed, tired, worn down.

Then the Restarting. We do not enter into this last day of Repentance slowly. Not the normal preambles as we work our way to the center of the service. Instead, we dive immediately into the dramatic prayer of Kol Nidre.

Disruption, disorientation, restarting... all designed to shake us up enough to want to try something new.

Then I had this thought...

What about being safe enough to want to try something new? Pause 2 seconds

This feels like a radical statement; for me personally, and for us as Jews.

We are told that on this night G-d moves from the seat of judgement to the seat of mercy. What if, instead of beating ourselves up on the way to transformation, we could stand with G-d and gaze down upon our small lives, lives so full of trying. What if I could hold myself with compassion, with love, with the thought, "Oh, dear human, you try so hard. Here, sit in this safe place and contemplate your beautiful life and how you might make it more beautiful."

For we have, most of us, beautiful lives...we love and are loved, many of us do work that brings peace or justice or knowledge into the world. We create beauty through art or music, with food or in gardens.

And we are beautiful souls...we love, we care for others, we strive to be better, gentler, more effective, less abrasive, or kinder...What if, on this day, we did not carry our lives as a burden? What if we did not think of ourselves or the last year as a series of mistakes to turn away from, but, rather contemplate a vision of ourselves we can turn toward?

This year, when studying for this talk, I learned a few important lessons that reinforce this compassionate approach to Kol Nidre. In the drama of Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur there are three main players with whom we and the liturgy interact: our community, ourselves, and G-d.

First, our community. Tonight we say the line, “We are permitted to pray with habitual sinners.” Rabbi David Teustch writes, *The Torah tells us none of us is so righteous that we have not transgressed (kol ha’am bishgagah)* and yet we are permitted to pray with the sinners. Obviously, we are both the sinner and the community standing beside the sinner. We belong to our community precisely because we are sinners, because we do miss the mark. Imagine for a moment someone who does not miss the mark, who never breaks a vow, never misspeaks, never falls... a perfect person...over time we would begin to doubt this person’s humanness. This perfection, this never falling down, it isn’t human.

Yet for many of us, some part of us believes we could be perfect, we should be perfect... We don’t want to accept falling short or falling down. We confuse falling with failing. In true Jewish style, there is only one letter difference between falling and failing. The L in falling is replaced with an I to become failing...when I am too attached to my falling, then falling becomes failing... otherwise it is simply a fall from which I can rise ...and yet, it is so easy to see ourselves as broken, as less than, because we do not live up to our greatest dreams, our highest ideals. Yet, this IS why we belong.

We belong precisely because we do fall down and need to get back up. The profoundness of this – that our nature, which is to strive and thus to miss the mark is exactly what makes us human. And as we stand together tonight and tomorrow, we are not just permitted to pray together, but we need to pray together. We need each other. There is a reason our prayers, our confessions are in the plural. I stand saying, Please, stand with me. Witness my life.” Can you stand and pray with me, even though I have made mistakes, missed the mark, perhaps even harmed you? And if you can stand with me and I can stand with you, then we have a chance to begin again. The Hebrew for forgiveness has the same root as the word for dancing_____. Thus forgiveness happens in the Buberian In-Between, in community. Community binds us and makes us stronger, it supports us in our ideals and in our everyday trials and joys.

Then we have ourselves. I have already hinted that perhaps this year we should take a different approach. That Kol Nidre is a night to accept our humanness; for our very humanness is woven into the fabric of the universe and into the fabric of this, the Holiest of Days. When we (inevitably) do not live up to our attempts to

turn, improve, to change we remain a part of the community – we belong precisely because failure and fragility are part of being human, they are not personal shortcomings or failings.

And on the other hand, our actions do have consequences...and making right what we have marred or damaged is critical.

We can make it right or at least, better. We can do te'shuvah, public and personal. Have we gotten in someone's way at work because we aren't fond of them? Then how can we help them succeed? Have we spoken ill of someone? Then we make sure to praise them near others to demonstrate our turning. Were we wasteful? How can we reduce our foot print. Overly self-critical? Be nicer to ourselves. Through these actions we can begin to right our personal universe, amend the harm we may have done, one small behavior at a time.

I also want to encourage us try differently ...not harder. Perhaps you too have desired a certain change for a number of years. Each year, even sometimes in great pain, we resolve, we try again. This year, how can we not simply reset the goal, but feel our way into a different approach? Perhaps, we could try staying present with ourselves even in the most challenging moments.

Maybe we don't need to know what our actions will be. Instead, we can simply try to become present to our situation, to our feelings in it, and we could pause, emulating this great pause of Yom Kippur. Maybe we could try to breathe and pause, feel and breathe. And then, move forward.

On this day we commit to the changes we will take on this year. Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum writes that in business the practice is to under-promise and over-deliver. Thus making your business and yourself look better. But on Yom Kippur we are asked to do the reverse...even knowing that we will not achieve all we desire or vow to, we are asked to "go big" with our aspirations. To set our goals high, to, in fact, over-promise **knowing** we will under-deliver. We know, G-d knows that we will not attain all we strive for ...Still, striving is as essentially human as falling down. We know we will not live up to our highest goals, but that is ok. We are seeing ahead to our best selves. Go for it, reach as high as you can and g-d and your community will be there to catch you. You will fall but you will get up, for that is also in our natures, the resiliency of our spirits.

Tonight and tomorrow we are asked to open up even as the gates are closing... even as we get disoriented, we are asked to be vulnerable, open to change, open to transformation. Awareness, seeing clearly, is the first step to change. But frequently, we banish ourselves from ourselves. We are afraid of what we may see...of who might be, or who we are not. Sometimes the sheer weight of our shame renders us unable to look upon ourselves.

One of the benefits of aging is becoming more comfortable with ourselves; living into the truth of **YES AND** vs either/or or good/bad. The truth of who we are is YES AND. The good and the difficult are both us. Yes, I am patient with children and pets, AND I am not patient with other drivers. Yes, I am tenacious AND I am also stubborn to my own and other's detriment. Yes AND. Our fallings do not undo our goodness. We are both, the good and the ugly. Rabbi Sandy Sasso writes that Kol Nidre is a mirror of our soul...we look inward in silence and see our reflection. This reminds me of a poem by Derek Wolcott: Love After Love

The time will come

When, with elation,

You will greet yourself arriving

At your own door, in your own mirror,

And each will smile at the other's welcome.

And say, sit here. Eat.

You will love again the stranger who was your self.

Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart

To itself, to the stranger who has loved you

All your life, whom you ignored

For another, who knows you by heart.

Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

The photographs, the desperate notes,

Peel your own image from the mirror.

Sit. Feast on your life.

On this day of abstaining, can we feast on our lives? Can we truly look and see who we are? What we have done that has been kind and giving, skillful and productive along with what we have done which is hurtful or harmful to ourselves or others. Can we list our strengths as easily as our faults? Can we see our complete self, reflected in the mirror of Kol Nidre?

Kol Nidre gives us permission to direct ourselves inward, to peer deeply and see the truth of ourselves...and the truth is, our sins are rarely unique. We are unkind or engage in gossip, we are short-tempered or too much of a doormat. We tell small lies, are mean to others or to ourselves. We are petty, greedy or cowardly.

To have the strength to look bravely into the mirror of Yom Kippur we must see beyond the guilt and shame of our past... to the truth of ourselves: We are still our whole beautiful selves, once again standing before what is sacred and declaring our intentions to do better, to be better. How amazing we are, we humans, that we keep aspiring, despite the depth of our pain, the exhaustion of our struggles?

Tonight and tomorrow we stand before what is sacred and confess our sins to G-d and the community. We ask for G-d's forgiveness and we ask to be different, to turn, to change. Here is the interesting thing about change...a change today, even a small one-degree turn toward a different path, that one degree over years and years... it can take us to a whole new place...[show the picture](#). We don't need radical change, just small changes steadily sought.

Now the third player, G-d. We are told that on Kol Nidre, God moves from the seat of judgement to the seat of mercy. Before we even ask, we are forgiven...for when we ask for forgiveness, G-d replies "you have been forgiven,". Not "I forgive you". You **have been** forgiven. We are not forgiven on the merits of our asking. Forgiveness exists before we ask, it simply is...it is part of the fabric of the universe. Which makes sense, if striving and falling are part of the cosmic order, how can some mechanism of restoration not exist?

But how do I understand this? Who or what am I asking for forgiveness? Who or what forgives? I am a person who believes in the beauty and majesty of the calculus of the universe. Who believes science is full of awe, miraculous and

powerful. I certainly don't believe in a bearded old white guy sitting like Abe Lincoln on some cloud passing judgement...I don't even believe in an embodied G-d. So, what does being forgiven mean?

Before preparing for this talk, I never knew this was the moment we are forgiven. Completely. A clean slate. I never knew there even was such a moment, and yet I find the idea transformative. Rashi says, tonight we *peel away the darkness that covers the core of our being, to reveal a core of lightness and being*. Rabbi Kedar calls the evening of Kol Nidre a *moment of grace*. "I have forgiven."

What is forgiveness? Is it a kind of karmic resetting, the scoreboard returning to zero? Can we accept the idea of a karmic resetting? Can we accept that for right now, for these few hours when we have been forgiven, our life's slate is clear, clean, that we really can start again? That all we have been carrying –the guilt, the anger, the jealousies and the shame can be put down. Can we feel that we exist in this very moment, at this very time -in a place of simple still being-ness, without judgement.

Let's take a moment and try it out. Close your eyes. Gather your pile, all that you are having trouble letting go of, can you feel how heavy it is? Can you feel how as you gather your worries and regrets that your breath gets shallow? How your jaw or chest or stomach gets tight? Hold them all, your worries, your shames, your regrets. Feel the weight of them. Now, imagine yourself laying down this burden. Place it on the ground behind you. Pat it if you need. Stand up slowly. Acknowledge the pile. Say sorry if you must. Then, turn, walk away. Do not look back, do not bend to pick it up again. Let it stay done. Breathe in deeply. Breathe the scent of being unburdened. (pause)

And from that place of simple being-ness... we can see more clearly how to move forward. Can we emulate the Divine and sit, as often as possible, in the Seat of Mercy, not judging?

Tonight, let us be thankful for our community. Let us be thankful that striving and falling and forgiveness are central to our humanity, woven into the fabric of our universe. Let us look deeply, and compassionately, at ourselves. Let us make some small change that orients us one or two degrees closer to the person we want to be...and may tomorrow be a blessing.

NOTES Not Used

Am I more than what I was? How should I relate to the Source of all I consume?

Three kinds of folks – folks who self-assess easier or better or more critical of self or others, or balanced ...last are a bit rare, although as I was writing this I was aware that simply avoiding being critical would help considerably...chuckle?

Paradox of land of Israel is paradox of the human spirit

Land of milk and honey or land which devours its inhabitants

Abundance and possibility or obstacle to evoke our fears

Spies ask forgiveness & it is granted

That Kol Nidre exists as a prayer said every year by millions of Jews is a great surprise.

– we are a nation of priests – evident in mere existence of the KN practice across the years it has been argued against and

And cognition, thinking, this is a place many of us live most of our lives. Many of us in this room, find living in our heads safer and more comforting than living in our hearts. We are thinkers, writers, doers...and so often, we need to suspend our feelings to 'get on with our lives.' As if our feelings are separate from our thoughts and actions.

To engage as deeply as we can with ourselves and with G-d.

How do we switch from an approach to Kol Nidre as a gift or an opportunity

Our feelings are often a great barometer of the truth, and when we get frightened or triggered it is so easy to shut out our feelings, to try to think our way out. Rabbi Eleazer says *the gates of tears are never locked*. We need to stay in touch with ourselves, with our feelings.