On the Arvayanim

If I were to tell you that Yom Kippur is the day that our tradition gives us permission to be dishonest and to lie for the rest of the year, I assume you would argue that I am wrong. After all, is this not the holiest day of the year? The time when we are asked to come clean before God; to have the courage of acknowledge our sins, our failures, and our weaknesses and to ask God both for forgiveness and for a year of blessing in the Book of Life?

Yet in truth, we began the opening words of this awesome day with a declaration that any vow that we would make in the coming year should be fully annulled before God. And those words were not only said once; our Hazzan chanted them magnificently three times in a row when he sang the Kol Nidre to make sure there was no misunderstanding. And here I will quote from our Machzor: “All vows, oaths, pledges that we may make—from this Yom Kippur until next Yom Kippur—may they regarded as neither valid nor binding.” How is it possible that we could start the holiest day on the Jewish calendar by telling God: “Hey, don’t hold us to the things that we will say to you in the coming year?”

Are words not sacred in Jewish tradition? Do we not judge a person’s character by the extent to which a person keeps his or her word? Why, then, do we begin Yom Kippur with words that seem to absolve us from any responsibility for the integrity of our words?

It doesn’t make any sense; even an exhaustive search of Halakchic literature shows no legal precedent by which a community can cast off its religious vows with
a simple declaration of words. In fact, the rabbinic commentary on the words of Kol Nidre is mostly dismissive of the concept entirely. The vast majority of our Sages say that it is not permissible to proactively annul a religious vow. Rav Hai Gaon in the 8th century, among many other great rabbis, called Kol Nidre and the annulment of vows a Minhag Shtut, a stupid practice—an opinion that was widely agreed with throughout most of the Middle Ages.

So how do we still end up with Kol Nidre being chanted three times at the start of Yom Kippur hundreds of years later? I want to share with you two reasons: one quite simple; the other a bit more complicated. I bet many of you can guess the first reason it’s still here! Pause….That’s right—it’s the melody. Jewish communities simply loved the melody associated with the words of Kol Nidre too much to give it up. The emotion of the music carried far more sway than the legal discomfort of the Rabbis who opposed keeping it in. That’s the simple explanation.

But let me offer you a second explanation—one that is far more serious—and one that I hope is more relevant to each of us. This explanation is based on the historical meaning of the words we say right before we hear Kol Nidre: B’yeshiva shel ma’alah... “By the authority of the heavenly court and by the authority of this earthly court; with divine consent and with the consent of this congregation; we hereby declare it permissible to pray with the Arvayanim—with those who have transgressed.”

The literal translation of Avaryanim is indeed “those who have transgressed.” An obvious question immediately arises: don’t we already know this? If none of us had sinned, we would have no need for Yom Kippur! We are all Arvayanim—all
transgressors—are we not? So there must be another way of understanding *Arvayanim*.

Medieval Jewish scholars tell us that *Arvayanim* may have been a code word inserted to refer to those who were forced to practice their Judaism in secrecy. According to this theory, *Arvayanim* was the Hebrew word that described the “Iberians”—meaning the Spanish and the Portuguese. Why would we want to say that it is permissible to pray with the **Iberians** before the annulment of our vows?

The shortened version of the history goes like this: Jews had lived in Spain and Portugal since Roman times. They flourished under the tolerant rule of the Moors and continued to thrive as a Jewish community until Christianity rose to dominance and conquered Islamic rule over the Iberian Peninsula. At the time, the loss of Islamic rule would turn out to be a disaster for the Jewish people. In 1391, Christian clergy instigated a vicious anti-Jewish campaign that resulted in wide-spread riots and attacks on Jewish communities all over Spain. To save their lives, large numbers of Jews ended up professing their adherence to Christianity publicly, but privately practicing Judaism at great risk to their own lives. These secret Jews became known as Conversos. Those who continued to affirm their Jewish identities were eventually expelled from Spain in 1492 during the Inquisition.

These Conversos, these secret Jews—who risked their lives to maintain their Jewish identities surreptitiously, while publicly professing faith in Christianity lived in fear that their secret would be discovered. Some of these families would live as Conversos for more than a century—passing their secret identities down to their children. Yom Kippur was the day many of the Conversos were willing to risk
acknowledging their Jewish identities—the pull of the day was that great. The *Arvayanim* wanted to seek forgiveness from God on Yom Kippur despite their need to publicly profess their faith in Christianity. That is why scholars of Jewish history believe the Rabbis of that era added the words: *Anu matirim l'hitpallel im ha-arvayaneem*—it is permissible to pray with the Iberians—because they were forced to keep their Jewish identities in hiding for most of the year. The words of *Kol Nidre* would come to function as dispensation for those Conversos who were forced to profess adherence to a faith to which they did not ascribe.

On a deeper level, however, the *Arvayanim*—the Iberians—are much more than an interesting historical footnote. And the fact that the words of *Kol Nidre* are still found in the *Mahzor* gives us an opportunity to probe a more universal religious phenomenon—one that is very much at the heart of this Yom Kippur day. In this place and time, in this community, none of us are secret Jews. We proudly live our Jewish lives out in the open. Yet we are all, in one way or another, *Arvayanim*. *We come together for this Kol Nidre each bearing our own secrets. Think about it:* in what ways do we live our lives with a façade that masks the essence of who we really are? In what way do we live with secrets that we choose not to reveal? In what ways are parts of our own lives hidden from all public view because they are a source of pain, of embarrassment, of disappointment or because they are a source of shame?

My friends, we all have secrets. We all hold deep, dark truths that we can barely admit to ourselves, much less confess to others. All of us, to some extent, are *Arvayanim*—not all that we seem to be when we face the world. The next 25 hours—starting tonight through when the gates will close at *Neilah* tomorrow—now
starts the time to be real with ourselves. This is our time to come home. Yom Kippur offers us the opportunity to confess the truth of who we are and to know with certainty that God will hold and forgive us.

In my work as a rabbi for nearly three decades, I have been entrusted with many secrets. I have come to understand that are many, many people who carry within themselves a deep sense of secrecy. Time and again, I have encountered so many people whose lives have led them metaphorically to Iberia—those whose lives look one way on the outside but who have something very different going on inside.

Here is an example of a woman I will call Esther. By all accounts, Esther was the whole package. She appeared to live a charmed life. You know the type—brilliant career, adoring husband, perfect children, plenty of money, lots of friends. One day, Esther needed major surgery which was followed by intense post-operative pain. Like many people, Esther’s pain was treated in the hospital and she was discharged with a prescription for oxycontin. You know where this is going. Not only did the opioids relieve her pain, but they brought her to place of bliss she could not resist. She didn’t take them all the time, but slowly she started to need them more and more. When her prescription ran out, and her doctor saw no need to refill it, Esther managed to find a place online where she could have opioids prescribed no questions asked. When that avenue dried up, Esther was already trapped. She began looking for substitutes and spiraled down a path of addiction, trying desperately to keep all of this hidden behind the façade of her seemingly perfect life. Behind that façade, Esther’s world was falling apart. Her addiction was her Iberia.
Not all of our secrets are as scary and destructive as Esther’s. But we all have parts of ourselves that feel scary, painful and full of shame. We keep these things locked tightly away, not wanting to acknowledge them to ourselves, much less confess them to others. And here is the gift of Yom Kippur. Here is a time when we can turn inwards and confront the secrets we turn away from every other day of the year. We have permission to share our prayers with the Arvayanim; that is, we are permitted—even encouraged—to really be with—and to pray—for ourselves.

The pull of this day is primordial. It began as far back as the garden of Eden. “Ayeka? Where are you?” God asks Adam, as he and Eve attempt to hide. (Gen. 3:8-9). Rashi comments that God’s question is not about location; God already knows where they are. God is asking an existential condition: Not “where are you?” but rather, “who are you?” Yom Kippur is here to call us out of our hiding. Like Adam and Eve, we stand naked in God’s loving presence. Ultimately, there is no place to hide. “Ayeka?” God asks each one of us tonight. “Where are you?” What is hidden that asks to be revealed? What is silent and unseen that yearns to be witnessed? What is broken inside you that wants to be healed?

We come to Yom Kippur so that we can confess our sins and seek forgiveness. We rehearse our death so that we might move through this day to remind ourselves that life is short—too short to hide our secrets indefinitely. Yom Kippur is the day when we must reveal to ourselves those hurting places, the neglected spaces, the unclaimed aspects of ourselves that beg to be revealed. Of course, it is scary to reveal the truth of our secrets and of our vulnerabilities. But our fear need not stop us. Our fear need not stop us from showing up fully today and saying “Hineini.”
That is why we need this day so that we can remember it is not too late—it is never too late. We all have our closets. No matter our age or our stage in life, it is not too late to shine light on to those hidden places, to reveal those truths that seek to be witnessed, to heal the old wounds that keep us frightened and in pain. It is not too late—it is never too late—to show up fully, to answer God’s question, “Ayeka?” — “Where are you?” with “Hineini, “Here I am.” Yom Kippur takes this Garden of Eden story one step further. It reminds us of what happens after we say Heneini. We don’t say Heneini into a vacuum. Today, we say it before God.

On Yom Kippur we will recite the Vidui—the confession—five times. We will say: Al het sh’khatanu lifanekha:“For the sin we have done before You.” You, God, are our witness. Because of Your love for us, You, God, will not buy our justifications or participate in our excuses. You, God, will not let us hide, but You will instead peek gently under the mask, take us by the hand, and lead us into the light of truth, a realm in which ultimately nothing is hidden. And You, God, will not only call us out on our transgressions and our failures alone; but You, God also know our core goodness and our incorruptible light.

Anu matirin l’hitplel im Ha’Arvanim—You God, tell us it is permissible to pray with each other—because we are all Iberians. And we are called to do this work together, in shared ritual, as a community, so that we can be witnesses for each other. We say Hineini to one another. It is hard for most of us to believe that we don’t actually want to hide. It often feels like the safest thing to do. We assume it will be too hard, too vulnerable, too painful to stand in the whole truth, to show how hard life can be and how often we can get things wrong.
Until we find how liberating it is to admit the truth of who we are to ourselves—and to know we can be forgiven by God. In his poem *Love After Love*, Derek Wolcott writes: “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. Now is the time. The moment has arrived.”

At the end of the *Vidui*, after all of the confessions on this Yom Kippur day, here are the words that we will hear: *Vayomer adonai, slachti kidvarecha*. And the Lord said: I have forgiven! There is nothing that we must hide; no more secrets. No more running away from the truth. On Yom Kippur, we are forgiven. We are released from our facades. Tonight, we are finally free. We are asked—finally—to be at home in ourselves.

In the course of this New Year, may we say *Hineini* to ourselves, to one another, and to God. And in doing so, may our secrets be revealed, our burdens be eased, and our lives be experienced as the blessings that they were always intended to be. *Kein yi’he ratzon*—So may it be—*G’mar Hatima Tova*