

## ***Kol Nidrei*: Challenge and Motives**

The melody is haunting. It stirs the soul into feeling a sense of awareness for who we are, where we are. *Kol Nidrei* is the pinnacle prayer of the Day of Atonement. It's so important; it is recited 3 times in order that everyone has a chance to hear it. At Congregation Gates of Heaven, we play it on the cello first. We chant its Aramaic/Hebrew formulation and then we read it in English. But thru-out the ages, rabbis have been skeptical of its power and usage. Their concerns were focused on asking forgiveness before committing acts; the prayer is written in the future tense. They were nervous of the use of Talmudic formulas to remove our commitment to vows that we might utter. Some feared that it would weaken Jewish resolve when confronted with antisemitism and forced conversions, thinking that a Jew could just convert and then ask for forgiveness. But that melody... so familiar, so symbolic of the season—it needed to be preserved.

Set aside the controversy and focus on what *Kol Nidrei* symbolizes. Standing in front of the open ark while our synagogue leaders are holding the Torah scrolls, each of us admits our vulnerability. Each of us admits our less-than-perfection. Each of us admits that we as individuals are a work in progress. That is the hidden majesty of this prayer—no one among us is perfect. Let us strive to be better, more righteous. Let's seek to not merely admitting our guilt, but to transform ourselves into a better version of the self. Rabbi Leo Baeck who led the Reform synagogue in Berlin in the 1930s wrote: "To seek is to strive for the good; to find God is to do good."

The prayer itself was written during the *Geonic* period in Judaism; somewhere between 580-1100 CE. It was probably written and utilized in a time when forced conversions were somewhat commonplace. The formula is based on a Talmudic understanding on what one can do when they utter a vow in error. In the *Sephardic mahzor*, it is written: "According to the holy *Zohar*, *Kol Nidre* is recited on Yom Kippur because, at times, the Heavenly judgment is handed down as an 'avowed decree' for which there can normally be no annulment. By reciting the *Kol Nidre* annulment of vows at this time, we are asking of God that God favors us by annulling any negative decrees of judgment that await us, even though we are undeserving of such annulment." Notice the dance

between need and worthiness--- that act of contrition and that vulnerability are essential for us to understand!!

In his book on *Kol Nidrei*, Rabbi Stuart Weinberg Gershon writes that an understanding of this prayer requires some background “Like a detective mystery, the study of *Kol Nidrei* has been a process of patiently putting together the pieces of a puzzle... 1. The mundane religious and magical role of vows in our tradition; 2. The folk understanding of formulas and incantations to keep demons and other spirits from enforcing these vows; 3. The Talmudic procedures for nullification of vows; 4. The linguistic and conceptual parallels between *Kol Nidrei* and the Babylonian magic bowl inscriptions.” All of this leads Weinberg-Gershon to conclude that this prayer belongs to us, the common folks who need that reassurance. That is why the prayer succeeded in remaining in our tradition, although rabbinic sages and prayer book authors questioned its authenticity as a true supplication worthy of being uttered on Yom Kippur.

For us, this prayer is ours. We recite it to set the stage for how the next day will unfold. What do we seek? In a folksy way, we voice our harsh decree of judgement. We yearn for reassurance that our goodness and righteous acts will not be overshadowed by our failings and faults. We seek support as we admit our vulnerability. Rabbi Murray Rothman of Temple Shalom of Newton, MA created a custom that the Torah scrolls did not have a cover during the High Holidays. He felt that the scrolls should reflect our willingness to be spiritually naked before God; truly vulnerable as we account for how we behaved and what we seek in the year ahead.

*Kol Nidrei* is for us to say. It is for us to feel. It is the gateway for our transformation as we let Yom Kippur unfold before us.

May we be sealed for blessing in the Book of Life.