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Dis-avowing: Leaning into Uncertainties

Gmar Hatimah Tovah, may we all be inscribed in the Book of Life for a year of growing health and safety, peace and stability.

Tonight we began our service with a solemn ceremony of uncertain meaning, Kol Nidre. Kol Nidre means "All Vows." We released ourselves from vows. Versions of this prayer look backwards at vows we took during the past year, and other versions look forward to vows we may take during the year ahead. Over the centuries this prayer, in both its forms, has led to confusion. Are we undoing, reneging on, promises we have made or will make to one another? Does this apply to business dealings? "Can the word of a Jew be trusted? They undo their vows?" Jewish leaders from ancient times through today have tried to remove Kol Nidre from the erev Yom Kippur service, and they have failed. The familiar, stirring music, the power of standing together to recite a legal formula, have overwhelmed the logic of any concerns about the prayer's words.

One key to understanding Kol Nidre may be found in a classic ritual that takes place in the days and weeks leading up to Yom Kippur. The ritual is called

Seder Hatarat Nedarim – a practice to release a person from vows. My late father told me that he would participate in this ritual with his fellow students at the Mir Yeshivah in Lithuania during the 1930s. Students would gather in groups of threes. They would rotate, one student facing the two others and the first would list out their own obligations, their vows, their identity commitments. I am a liberal. I only read non-fiction. I am a loyal child. I am a husband. I am a Jew. I am a Patriots fan. I prefer white meat. I always wear my clothing one size too big. I believe that "they" are out to get me. I get triggered whenever you bring that up. I hate waiting in line. I drive carpool on Thursdays. I know the truth.

By some definitions in Judaism, a "vow" is also any precedent you set and repeat three times. "Since you hosted Thanksgiving dinner three years in a row, the family has a right to expect you to host again."

Our statements of identity are, in fact, a series of vows, of promises about how I have behaved in the past and how I expect to behave in the future. After reciting those commitments, the two students facing you say a simple formula: "Mutarim Lakh," "You are released," "you can be different." All of a sudden, that which seemed like second nature is revealed to be a choice. What <u>has been</u>, need not be what will be.

Once you hear those words, as we all did when we recited the Kol Nidre prayer this evening, we are faced with three choices for each part of our identity. We can reject, revise, or renew. That to which we have become habituated, or obligations that we may resent, are exposed now to be choices. Choose: do you want to drive carpool?

There are some things we have been doing that need to stop. Habits of anger. Behaviors that hurt myself or others. For those items we need to think about what help we need to take them off the list. On Yom Kippur we promise to seek that help.

There are some things we have been doing that we are likely to re-affirm, even if we think of some of those patterns of commitment as chores: taking kids or parents to appointments; grocery shopping; driving carpool. The people we lunch with, play cards with, go on trips with, call to check in with. But Kol Nidre asks us to enter the new year re-affirming those relationships that bring satisfaction and comfort, even if they are imperfect. Tonight we <u>own</u> those commitments, and accept even the imperfect ones.

I want to think with you about the gray areas, those things about ourselves that we want to adjust, to revise. For me, this past year included some small changes. When my mother died, following an old Jewish folk tradition, I did not

shave for a month. When the month was over, I wanted to put that sign of deep mourning behind me, so for the first time in my memory, certainly for decades, I shaved completely. Suddenly, I was no longer a rabbi with a beard.

A month ago, I went clothes shopping with my daughter Sam and her friend Connor. We went to stores that I have never entered before and bought clothing that fit me. Since high school, my identity was as someone who bought loose fitting clothing, thin or heavy I shopped at the Gap. At 66 I opened myself to an image adjustment. Facial hair, style of clothing, small insignificant things. But what felt truly different was experiencing the feeling of breaking familiar patterns, seeing myself as someone who didn't have to hold fast to a familiar self image.

For decades in the rabbinate, I taught my communities about the abiding importance of the Musaf Amidah. The Musaf Amidah was, in fact, the topic of my senior sermon at the Jewish Theological Seminary where I argued in favor of the traditional language before my professors, some of whom edited the prayer books that made the changes to which I objected. But since COVID, I have seen the need to tighten the flow of our service and make it more accessible to those on line and in the sanctuary. These past years, we no longer recite the traditional musaf Amidah. I was not wrong 40 years ago; I took a position that I believed in. Now the world changed, people's needs – as I perceived them, were different,

and so I endorsed a change for our communal practice. Again, not momentous, but I experienced relinquishing a conviction. A blessing: God make my words sweet for when I have to eat them.

Bearded or clean shaven, loose or fitted clothing, striking the right balance between liturgical traditionalism or innovation. These kinds of small changes can be places where you get stuck. Sometimes the consequences are not benign. The message of Kol Nidre is, "don't get stuck."

Tonight, I want to suggest one very small change we can consider making this year, something that will cost us nothing, and require no change in our work or family. I want to propose that we all step away from being sure we are right. Rather than believe we know the truth, in conversation, present what you understand, and remain open to other possibilities. Approach conversations with humility. This year, I want to absorb the lesson of a poem by the late Israeli poet Yehudah Amichai, "The Place Where We Are Right."

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right

Is hard and trampled

Like a yard.

But doubts and loves

Dig up the world

Like a mole, a plow.

And a whisper will be heard in the place

Where the ruined

House once stood.

The place where we assert that we have the truth, the place where we are right, becomes in this poem a literal physical space, and on that spot nothing grows, because after stamping one's foot for so long on this same ground, it is too hard for anything to break through. But real love, expressed in self-reflection and humility, the willingness to doubt our certainties, gives us a possibility of hope, a whisper, in the place where the house was ruined. This place of stubborn conviction can be our own homes. Insisting too firmly on our own truths can ruin our homes or our houses of worship. The Hebrew for "ruined House" also recalls the Temple in Jerusalem, God's house, destroyed by extremists with a strong

sense of being right. Amichai represents doubts and love as having a common power to aerate hard places. Humility and love go together, they open up a crack in our hardened selves to make room for growth, for life.

Writing in the New York Times this year, Jane Coaston discussed the problem we have with change, as a result of how awful we are at admitting when we are wrong. She begins with these words, "In my life, I have frequently been wrong." How true. How many times have we predicted, with certainty, the outcome of an election or of a sporting event, and it turns out we were wrong. How often have we been in the car and offered driving directions, sure we were right, and we were wrong. Or when we remembered an event in our shared past or a name of an old friend, or the rules of a card game, and we were wrong. We have all had that experience, and yet, we consider these moments flukes, anomalies, and we continue to speak with authority and certainty.

Tonight, I want to propose that we state our memory, or our perspective, or our opinion, or our prediction, but that we do so with modesty. "I sometimes misremember, but I think . . ." "To the best of my knowledge . . ." "From my experience, I think . . . " And mean it. Allow yourself to admit of the possibility that someone else may be right.

We live in a world where politicians are praised for sticking with their past opinions. Those who do not are mocked as "flip-floppers." But I am certain that I feel better about politicians, and rabbis, who admit their mistakes and talk about how they have changed their minds.

From the perspective of Jewish religion and culture, I have another argument to offer as to why we should hedge our bets and voice our opinions with moderation. Judaism rarely offers a single perspective on the topics that most concern us. Rather, Judaism offers multiple perspectives and asks us to hold alternative views in mind. Let me offer some examples, and see if it can point us towards more aerated and less hardened paths during the year ahead.

Tomorrow's torah reading comes from the book of Leviticus and it tells us in great detail how the sacrifices were to be offered on Yom Kippur. The offerings on the altar in the Temple are presented as the key to making things right with God and guaranteeing a good year ahead. Then in the haftorah we read Isaiah's critique of ritual formalism. What use are sacrifices if they are offered without our ensuring justice for the weakest in society, the poor, the widow and the orphan? We need ritual, and we need social justice. Both are important. Those who say that it is all about following the prescribed rules and those who say it is

all about helping others, both miss something important. Judaism insists that we balance following ritual rules and behaving with justice.

As we look at Israel and take our stand on the conflict between Israel and her neighbors, some of us emphasize the importance of being self protective. How can Israel make peace with the Palestinians in the West Bank when the government there is corrupt and when Israel's sworn enemy Hamas controls civil society in the Gaza Strip? How can Israel take risks for peace when its sworn enemy Iran is on the verge of acquiring weapons of mass destruction that can reach Tel Aviv? Others take a different point of view. How can the Jewish state occupy another people without giving them full rights? How can Israel set up road blocks that cut off families from schools or health care?

Is our primary directive to protect ourselves or to make sure that we never treat others the way we were treated by our enemies in the past? One group of us follow the message of Purim – in every generation enemies will rise to destroy us. One group of us follows the message of Passover – you were slaves in Egypt; never treat anyone else the way Pharaoh treated the Hebrews. Both are authentic Jewish positions. Our task is to hold both in mind as decisions are made, and as we formulate our opinions.

The prayer ALEYNU, which ends each service, has two paragraphs. The first proclaims the uniqueness of the Jewish people, the second offers a universal image of a world where everyone acknowledges a common humanity.

One final example, Conservative Judaism tries to follow a path of adherence to tradition and adaptation. Our bumper sticker is "Tradition and Change." More tellingly, a few years ago, the movement's committee on Jewish law and standards ruled that a question of law might generate multiple answers. Members of the committee sometimes vote yes on competing and contradictory responses to a pressing question. Not that both are true; but both might be necessary. Teaneck NJ is not the same as Canton MA is not the same as Haifa, Israel is not the same as Los Angeles, CA. This does not make Conservative Judaism incoherent; it gives the movement the flexibility to adapt and to accept regionalism as a norm.

By saying that there is no single, timeless, truth, we are not saying that there are no values that need to be affirmed with vigor. We can call out racism or anti-semitism, violence or sexism, with clarity. But we need to add the modesty that comes from recognizing our own role in preserving systems of privilege and our own failures to speak out when people express racist attitudes

or make an anti-semitic remark. Things are always more complicated than they might seem at first glance.

This year, as we think about Kol Nidre and hatarat nedarim, the annulling of vows, we might focus on this one area: what would it mean to hold our opinions more lightly, to recognize that other sides might have something to teach us, and that truth can emerge from holding multiple points of view and not from a simple declaration from "the place where I am right." The Hebrew word for truth EMETH testifies to this message. The word has three letters: Aleph, the first letter of the alphabet, Tav, the last letter of the alphabet and Mem the middle letter. First, last and middle all compose truth, left and center alone does not work.

I want to end with a practical suggestion. For many years my family spent a week every summer at the National Havurah Committee summer institute. In the middle of the week, we would have a gathering to debate a current issue facing the Jewish community, usually an issue that divided even the Havurah communities. To ensure civility in the debate, any speaker at a given moment held a teddy bear and recognized the next speaker by passing them the bear. This accomplished two things: first, it created a moment of transition from one speaker to the next, a sense of order. Second, it is really hard to speak with too

much force, authority or anger when you are holding a teddy bear. You are reminded of your vulnerability, and the time in life when nothing seems certain.

Another, perhaps less awkward version of this ritual is that when you and someone else are arguing, when one person has finished, they say, “I have spoken my piece,” in Hebrew “debarti” and then the other person or people say, “I hear you” in Hebrew “shamati.”

Teshuvah, which means, “return,” can be seen as a return to innocence as openness, away from extremes, away from certainty, away from a single truth. We have our preferences and our experiences and our ways of doing things, but so do other people. As we review who we are over the next 24 hours and who we might be, let us collectively take on a new approach to how we engage with one another, in our families, in our workplaces, out in the world. In this way, maybe, we can generate change around us and help our nation and our world on the path of return, away from polarization and towards community.

To everyone, gmar hatimah tovah, may we all be written and sealed in the book of life, health, generosity of spirit and broader perspectives during the year ahead.