

Kol Nidre – 5780
“Our Vows, Our Torah, Our Love”
October 8, 2019

Once there was a man named Don who was filled with doubts. Doubts about his work. Doubts about his family. Doubts about his life. Doubts about everything.

So, one Yom Kippur, in a fit a of desperation, he started making vows: I WILL be more attentive to my kids. I WILL be more loving to my wife, Doris. I WILL give more to my job. I WILL visit my parents more. I WILL take time to exercise. I WILL lose weight. I WILL find time to meditate. I WILL better control my temper. I WILL spend less time looking at my phone. I WILL breathe more deeply and enjoy the life that I have.

Ten vows. He thought that was great. He liked the tie to the Ten Commandments.

Don wrote them down on a card and put it in his jacket. He felt the card would remind him of his vows. It would keep him from straying from his newfound resolve.

And, it worked. For a while. Right after Yom Kippur he shared his vows with Doris. He was so excited! She heard him out. She knew that he was expecting a ringing endorsement from her and she did not want to disappoint him. She knew how much he had been suffering from his doubts the last few years.

So, despite her own doubts, Doris looked Don straight in the eye and said, “It sounds terrific. Let me know what I can do to support you.”

The very next day, after Don got home from work, he kissed Doris with a tenderness that surprised her. Don found his children and sat down with every one of them and listened to what they had done that day. After dinner, he announced, “I’m going to the gym. And, by the way, I’ll be up early tomorrow to watch the sunrise, sitting on my new meditation pillow.” And off he went.

Doris and the kids marveled at Don, wondering what had gotten in to him. Later that night, in bed, Doris asked him, “Honey, what’s going on? I love what you’re trying to do, but it seems to have come out of nowhere.”

Don took a moment to think and then gave her a direct answer. “I realized that I’m going to die. Not tonight or tomorrow, but soon enough. As the Rabbi said so many times, ‘Life is short and you’re dead for a really long time.’ When I reach the end, I want to be able to say, ‘Well, I wasn’t perfect, but I sure did try!’”

Doris gave him a big hug and said, “I’m in your corner, Don. But I have to say it sounds like a lot to take on at once.”

Most of you can guess how things turned out. Don gave it his best, but the outside world began to overwhelm his Yom Kippur vows. Business trips sapped his will to exercise. Family events ate away at his diet. The kids' busy lives made daily heart-to-hearts impossible.

Between work and home, he did not see his parents more. And Doris? She watched him flail. She knew he wasn't going to invest more of himself in their relationship either. It's a good thing she loves him so much anyway. Sigh. You get the picture.

Don is like so many of us. It doesn't matter who we are. It doesn't matter if we're in shul every week or twice a year. We all want more from our lives. But we constantly over-promise and under-deliver to ourselves.

All of us came into this room tonight painfully aware of our shortcomings. We don't need a prayer book to tell us just how badly we have missed the mark.

We want so much to do better next year than this past one. Tonight we all seek repentance and forgiveness, meaning and purpose, and the resolve to do better.

Frankly, Don's plan doesn't sound so bad. It's just not in the cards for most of us. It's not realistic. It's just so hard to change, really change, despite our best intentions.

Our Kol Nidre prayer itself reflects this harsh truth. It reads in part:

*All vows, resolves and commitments...sworn promises and oaths
that we promise and swear to God and take upon
ourselves from this Yom Kippur until the next...we regret them and
for all of them we repent. Let all of them be discarded and forgiven
abolished and undone...*

Kol Nidre knows Don. It understands that he will make promises, lofty promises about changing for the better. And, it knows that despite his desire, he will fall short.

Kol Nidre knows us, too. It knows we are probably going to fall short next year, as well. So, is this service, this painful soul-searching mere play, or worse, a sham?

I do not think so. I believe that once a year we must refuse to sugar-coat our flaws and shortcomings. This one night a year demands radical honesty. This night we confront our failures without cutting ourselves slack.

Even though Kol Nidre has a release clause from future vows it demands a painful honesty, if we do it right. Otherwise it is not Kol Nidre at all. Then, it is a sham.

How can you and I not be honest with each other this night? About our past. About what we have done in our relationship? About our triumphs and our failures?

This is the 32nd time I have stood before you, sharing in this no-holds-barred ritual. And this will be the last time I speak to you from my heart for Kol Nidre. On this Kol Nidre night I would like to share the promises we have kept, not those we have broken.

Such vows we have made for the last 32 years!

On our first Yom Kippur, I promised you that I would give you all of my heart, my mind and the work of my hands. You promised that you would give me your trust, though you had been hurt terribly in the past.

I promised you that I would not make over the congregation in the first year. You promised to listen to my ideas and to take them seriously, well, some of them. And we moved, sometimes glacially, into the world of sacred relationships grounded in Jewish values and teaching.

I promised I wouldn't change all the music. One Shabbat I did offer 3 new tunes in one night and there were calls for my head. You promised to open your hearts and ears to new melodies. In 1990 we brought Debbie Friedman here for the 18th anniversary of her landmark work, "Sing Unto God." We assembled a choir of 50 singers who had a blast with Debbie and this room was filled to the brim.

When the weekend was over, some wanted to go back to the old music. I gently suggested, "Well, you have this choir..." And we never looked back. The inter-generational choir of Temple Sinai is in its 30th year, having become part of the fabric of our community with their joyous soul singing.

I promised that I would find a way to care for you, insofar as possible, the way I cared for the 75 households of my previous congregation in Wisconsin. You promised to bear with me as we grew and grew and I didn't always have every one of your names committed to memory.

I promised that we would live up to the challenge of Liberal Judaism, which asks us to honestly meld together the truths of modernity and our tradition. We take the challenges of Torah and Tradition seriously, not literally. You have welcomed these efforts. We have embraced Hebrew, study and prayer. We have stood tall and proud in our support of interfaith families, LGBTQ Jews and their partners. We have stood together in the forefront of social justice issues locally, nationally and abroad.

Just last year I asked us to plant a garden. You responded and we have now donated more than 200 pounds of fresh vegetables to the Squirrel Hill Food Pantry. I asked us to make more of our own food for shiva homes and oneg Shabbats. You responded by taking part in marathon cooking and baking sessions which have stuffed our freezers full.

I asked you to trust me with your kids, both youngsters and teens. You did. I have led around 850 bat and bar mitzvah services with you. I have confirmed more than 650 of your 10th graders. I have named hundreds of your babies. I have married 200 of your children and named dozens of their kids. I have tried to repay the trust you placed in me for your most precious ones.

You asked me to take care of you when you and yours were ill and more so when they died. I have led more than 900 funerals and shivas here. I have never stinted on being present for you and giving you my constant caring.

I asked you to embrace my family, which you have done without stint and with open arms. Barbara found her voice and her place here in this community. She works more than ½ time in the Surgical division at Shadyside Hospital, but she still has found time to be a leader in the Women of Temple Sinai, the IG Choir and the Women of Reform Judaism nationally. All while raising Micah, Avi and David. I am in awe of the gifts she has given to all of us here. Thank you for caring for my children and my beloved partner.

What else could I possibly vow this night, this last night of Kol Nidre together? What could I vow that could be fulfilled, given that I will not be here for the next year's Kol Nidre?

I vow to leave you with my most sincere Torah. I leave my Sinai Torah to you and I pray you accept it and take it to heart. This Torah is in 5 parts, just like our scroll.

I leave you a Torah of **Kindness**. When I arrived here in 1988, hurt and anger had hardened hearts and sharpened tongues. People felt free to criticize others harshly. They called each other names and worse. We have made our mistakes here over the years and have not always lived up to the Torah of kindness, but I have never stopped preaching it and trying to live up to it in my own words and deeds. May the Torah of *Rachmoness*, compassion, guide the Sinai family for years and years to come.

I am leaving you a Torah of **Authenticity**. No more does our Sinai family look to the easiest way to live Jewish lives. Easy is not authentic. Easy is not what our parents and grandparents gave us. They gave us Torah and tradition, Hebrew and people-hood, ethics and faith. I have tried to teach every class, lead every retreat, daven every service with these in mind. Ki lekach tov na-tati lachem al ta-a-zo-vu! For a good heritage I, God, have given you – do not forsake it! This Torah

teaches that you must *do* Jewish, not just think or feel it. If you do not do Jewish, Shabbat, holidays and experiences, then there will be no Judaism for you or your children or grandchildren.

I leave you the Torah of **Tikkun Olam**. If you come to my office, you will see a handmade sign titled “Jews For Dreamers,” as well as commemorations from the Muslim and Jewish organizations. I believe in taking care of our fellow citizens. I believe in taking care of our people, our Jewish family, as well.

I believe that we are commanded by God not “to stand idly by the blood of our neighbor,” (Leviticus 19) and as well as instructed that “we must not hide” (Deuteronomy 24) from the troubles of those around us. No matter what suffering we see, we are required to engage our hands to easing it. May this Torah move you in years to come to make this world more peaceful and just.

I leave you the Torah of **Caring**. I am so moved every time I go to a shiva home and someone from Sinai is already there, moving chairs, putting out cookies, being a quiet support to a family in grief. I kvell when people at Charles Morris stop me in the hall to tell me how much they enjoyed the Sinai Singers on Shabbat afternoon. I tear up when I see the caring delivery bags set out each Friday, to be delivered to our people before Shabbat. I am overcome with emotion when I look out and see the interfaith families who have created such incredible connections here, but more importantly with each other.

Speaking words of caring is important, but it is meaningless without caring acts. Over these last 32 years we have together completed tens of thousands of caring acts. May this Torah to guide you and this entire congregation into the future.

Lastly, I leave you a Torah of **Love**. I love you for embracing me. I love you for accepting my leadership despite blunders and mistakes too many to count. I love you for every child that has jumped into my arms on a Sunday morning or Shabbat evening. I love you for every one of you who asked about me and my family when I was trying to care for you.

I love you for helping to raise my children, Micah, Avi and David, into mensches. And I love you for sharing honest differences without harming each other with words or threatening our relationship. I love you for letting me wear jeans to Shabbat minyan and for allowing me to sing with my guitar at the drop of a hat. And I pray with all of my heart, may this Torah of love outlast any sign of my physical presence after I take my leave next June.

Thirty-two years! Who would believe it? It has gone by so fast. Now, thirty two in Hebrew counting is Lamed-Bet, which spells **Lev**, which means heart. From my heart to yours.

Sigh. Next June. Not now. We still have almost 9 months of Torah to share. Let us share kindness, authenticity, acts of tikkun olam and caring as well as love for each other while we have the chance. On my calendar this year I am dedicating 72 slots of 45 minutes for you to arrange to see me on your own. Call Nancy Conaway, my assistant. Come in and we'll talk of times we shared, resolve conflicts that still fester. Come in and we'll talk about your neshama, your soul. Come in and exchange smiles, embraces and tears. Come in and just be together.

I love this community. More than anything, I want you to love this community as well. Not just me, this sacred family of Temple Sinai. Led by incredible leaders like Rabbi Keren Gorban and Cantor Berman. Led by incomparable staff and supported by all of you. If you wish to honor me after I am gone, love this community, its people and all that it stands for.

So, one last time - here is my Torah for you: **Kindness, Authenticity, Tikkun Olam, Caring and Love.**

Promises. Vows. Made. Kept. Despite Kol Nidre giving us an out, we have kept our promises of mind, heart and soul.

Serving you, serving the Temple Sinai sacred family, has been the singular honor of my life.

I am forever changed by you and I pray you have been touched by me and my heart for the good. My Lev. My heart.

Promises. Vows. Made. Kept. In faith. In love. Love. Lev. Love. Lev. Love.