

Ne'ilah Dvar Tefillah ~ Evan Zoldan, October 2011

Breaking the Cycle of Resolve and Regret

As we begin Ne'ilah, the concluding service of Yom Kippur, we sense the mood of the day start to shift. The very name, Ne'ilah, means closing, and it aptly describes the imagery and mood of the service. We imagine the closing of the gates of heaven; the closing of a great book in which our fate for the coming year is about to be sealed. Even the tunes our Chazan sings during Ne'ilah are especially ominous and foreboding. All of this combines to create a sense of urgency around Ne'ilah; as if to say: this is your last chance, whatever you have to say, you should probably say it now.

And this urgency, the anxiety it produces, seems particularly well-designed to encourage us to resolve to improve ourselves during the coming year; indeed, I doubt I am alone in using some of the waning moments of Ne'ilah to regret my failings of the past year and resolve that this year I will be better.

Although this urgency, this anxiety, that encourages us to make promises to ourselves, or to God, for the coming year, is deeply fostered by the design of the Ne'ilah service, it is in fact, quite problematic, for two reasons: one liturgical, and one practical.

First, this pressure to resolve to be a better person is in tension with the other bookend of the Yom Kippur service, Kol Nidre. During Kol Nidre yesterday, we disavowed the oaths and promises that we are likely to make this year. And here we are, barely twenty-four hours later, and many of us are already making the types of promises that we so solemnly rejected. Even if the promises that we make during Ne'ilah are not technically vows, it is hard not to see an inherent tension between the thrust of the two services.

Second, and perhaps even more problematic, is the fact that this cycle, of vowing and disavowing, of Resolve and Regret, may be the result of an evolutionary design that makes it extremely difficult for us to keep our resolutions despite our best intentions. Scientists describe that there is literally a different part of the brain that makes long term decisions than the part of the brain that makes immediate decisions – for example, when you resolve in the morning to go to the gym after work, one part of your brain makes this decision; but, at the end of the workday, when you decide to have an entire pizza on your couch instead, that is literally another part of your brain making this decision. In a way, then, the age-old imagery of an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other shoulder fighting over your conduct is not quite right; rather, the angel only makes decisions for later, and the devil is making decisions for right now. But, the two forces never really fight because they never actually interact.

Where does this leave us? If this description of our decision-making process is more or less accurate, then this Kol Nidre-Ne'ilah cycle of vowing and disavowing, of Resolve and Regret, may be inevitable, and the anxiety that we experience during Ne'ilah may be in some sense futile.

I want to suggest a possible way out of this Kol Nidre-Ne'ilah cycle of Resolve and Regret that takes into account the inherent limitations on our ability to stick with our resolutions to be better people and which finds support in the Yom Kippur liturgy.

Literature that describes the problem of the disconnect between our long-term and immediate decision-making offers, as an antidote, the idea of "pre-commitment," or "self-binding," which suggests that you are more likely to keep your resolve if you commit yourself to a future action by restricting your freedom now. Perhaps the most famous example of pre-commitment is the story of Ulysses in the

Odyssey. Ulysses, before he sailed past the Sirens, knew that he would be unable to resist their song when he heard it; he knew that he would sail toward the Sirens, where he and his shipmates would be killed. In order to protect himself from succumbing to the Sirens' song as they sailed past, Ulysses had his men bind him to the mast of his ship. Then, when he heard their song, when he was most tempted to break his resolve to steer clear of the Sirens, he would be unable to change course until his ship was safely out of danger. This was literally an act of "self-binding" – but the idea is applicable to any present choice that limits your future options, whether joining a club sport to encourage you to exercise, cutting up a credit card to prevent you from spending money this weekend, or agreeing to give a d'var torah to ensure that you will show up to shul on time. The key is that Ulysses' act of self-binding meant that he did not have to be strong at the moment of temptation – his heroism was his foresight, before temptation set in, to pre-commit himself to take the more responsible route.

The idea of pre-commitment, and the story of Ulysses, give us some insight into how the Rabbis who put together the Yom Kippur service might be suggesting that we overcome this cycle of Resolve and Regret.

This afternoon we read about the Avodah – the Priestly Service. As described in the liturgy, over the course of Yom Kippur, the High Priest engages in a series of rituals involving study, ritual ablutions, and sacrifices. At the end of his Service, he emerges, radiant and successful, to proclaim that the sins of Israel are forgiven. But, although he is ultimately successful, the High Priest is presented, not as superhuman, but, in fact, quite fallible. We read that he needs to be taught the Service by his elders; he needs to be admonished to perform it correctly; he even needs to be kept awake by an entourage of other priests so he does not fall asleep over the course of this crucial night. Yet, the High Priest, as described in the Yom Kippur liturgy, despite his flaws, is viewed as a successful character.

I suggest that the High Priest is successful, much like Ulysses, not because of superhuman force of will, but rather because he knows his weaknesses and surrounds himself with people to help him overcome them. He does not Resolve: “This year I vow to learn the Avodah by heart” or “this year I vow to stay up all night”; rather he succeeds because he brings a community of other priests and sages with him to support him. Similarly, Ulysses is successful not because he resists the Sirens’ song, but because he knows that he cannot resist the Sirens’ song alone. We refer to his act of pre-commitment as self-binding, but in fact, he does not bind himself: through foresight, he has his community, his shipmates, support his efforts because he knows, without them, he will fail.

Perhaps this is one of the central lessons of Yom Kippur – that if we are successful at improving ourselves, it is not due to sheer force of will, or even genuine resolutions, but rather from knowing the limitations of our will and having the foresight to lean on our community when we need to in order to help us achieve our goals.

As we begin Ne’ilah, and begin to feel the gravity of the closing service encourage us to resolve to improve ourselves during the coming year, I think that the models of the High Priest, and of Ulysses, can help us overcome the cycle of Resolve and Regret. Like the High Priest, like Ulysses, perhaps we can look to the strength of our community to help us shore up our own strength; and let our friends and loved ones help us do what we cannot do alone. Perhaps the best resolution we can make for this next year is to resolve to share our burdens, and fulfill our obligations, together as a community.