KOL NIDRE 2021: Vows

A Jew was once late for an important meeting, and couldn’t find parking. Two times, three times, four times she circled the block. “Please, G-d, please! Find me a parking spot and I promise, I'll keep Shabbos! I promise, I’ll go to shul every Saturday. I even promise I’ll start keeping kosher!” At just that minute, a shaft of light breaks through the clouds illuminating a car pulling out right in front of her; she zips into the open spot, and says “Never mind, God! I found one myself!”

We make promises, we break promises.

This week our government and politicians are making us all sorts of promises, and we believe them, again and again, only to be surprised, again and again, when those promises aren’t kept.

So starting the holiest night of the year with a formula to get us out of our promises is a kind of strange opener. And yet year after year we come—on time yet!—to hear the haunting message three times: that our vows are not vows.

There is a strong Rabbinic preoccupation with annulling of vows, rooted in the Torah itself in the book of Numbers and in the idea that promises are inherently problematic. Massekhet Nedarim, the book of Talmud devoted entirely to the subject of vows, is actually focused on speculations of the various ways to “get out” of them rather than teaching how to make and keep them.

So we come tonight to seemingly revoke our promises. According to Jewish historians, Kol Nidre was written to invalidate only those oaths violently extracted from Jews during forced conversions. After the danger had passed, people forced out wanted to return to the Jewish community. But because of the seriousness with which the Jewish tradition views any vow, the Kol Nidrei legal formula was developed in order to absolve our ancestors, and us by extension, of vows made under duress.

Now the early Reform movement found that to be anachronistic, and worried that anti-Semites might take this recitation of the annulment of vows to mean Jews are untrustworthy, so they tried to do away with Kol Nidre altogether, but that didn’t work because there was an outcry, not from the Rabbis but from the laypeople, to leave it in.

I almost sided with those early reformers this year but for another reason, *not* because zoom and hybrid are so complicated. Honestly how many vows did the Heavenly Court really have to annul this year? COVID has been the great destroyer of promises. Really? How many guarantees could we make and how many could we keep? The Heavenly Court should be bored.

While promises may give us a feeling of control over the future, Covid has done way with that illusion of control.

So…Kol Nidre this year? Our vows are not vows.

It’s an Ashkenazi tradition to preface even the slightest, smallest hint of a promise, like “I’ll bring the wine” or “I’ll send that email in the morning” with the phrase “bli neder”—“I’m not making a vow-neder”—Kol Nidre.

Well this is the year of “bli neder.”

I’m not talking about making *commitments*—there will still thank Gd be engagements and weddings and new jobs and new homes and volunteering and other ways we can say “yes.” We can still have *goals*, and we can still *strive* and *yearn*.

I want to suggest that Kol Nidre tonight give us a communal forgiving— of ourselves, of each other, and the world at large— for the year of “I can’t promise you anything.”

Congregational trip to Israel this winter? Can’t promise. Back in person in time for an upcoming B. Mitzvah? Can’t promise. Will the US land border with Canada ever re-open? Can’t promise, will not promise, unable to promise.

And please note that Kol Nidre does not absolve us from *past promises* we *didn’t* keep, it absolves us from *future promises* we *cannot* keep. In the 11th century Rabbenu Tam— halachic authority Jacob ben Meir— made a radical change in the words, which did talk about last year’s vows. He changed them to read instead: mi yom kippurim zeh ad yom kippurim habah—from this Yom Kippur to the next. While intuitively it makes more sense to forgive us for broken promises last year, Rabbenu Tam gave us a gift. “I’ll dance at your wedding” “I’ll see you next week”…“I’ll take good care of you”— the probable fizzle of these promises hurts so much in this year of uncertainty. So Kol Nidre ends with:

בְּטֵלִין וּמְבֻטָּלִין,לָא שְׁרִירִין, וְלָא קַיָּמִין: forgiven, eradicated, not real, as if they had never been.

Kol Nidre in normal times teaches: don’t live a life of regret over the promises you won’t get to keep. Kol Nidre in COVID times teaches: don’t live a life of regret over the promises you won’t get to make.

Of course there still are human consequences of not keeping a promise, and Kol Nidre does not erase those. While God might understand if you go back on your word, people are not always so forgiving. In situations where your word was given and your presence or help or involvement was counted on, the effect is felt by others. Kol Nidre reminds us that everything we say, even as a hope, is heard by others as a pledge. If you are a parent, you know what I mean; you know when your kid asks “can I have a cookie? And you say “maybe later” and they say “Promise?” they’ve heard your unwilling contract. Kol Nidre reminds us that words matter, and like the handshakes of old that sealed a deal, when I say I will, I should. I know how hard that “I should” is this year. I know we are all doing our very best and the pandemic is working against us. I just don’t want the pandemic to stand in the way of trying.

And in Judaism, God also makes promises, but we must act upon them to fulfil them. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks makes an insightful comment, “God promised Abraham the land, but he had to first buy the field…God saved Noah from the Flood, but Noah had to make the ark. God gives us the strength to act, but we have to do the deed.” Kol Nidre reminds us that we can promise all we want, but our words become no words, our vows become no vows— nidranu la nidre—without actions behind them. In the words of Pirke Avot, “speak little but do much.” Kol Nidre does not annul the need to, in the words of Augustine: “pray as if everything depended on God but act as if everything depended on you.” I don’t want the pandemic to stand in the way of trying.

And there is one special, unique vow Kol Nidre will not annul this year. To the bored Heavenly Court I say tonight: one promise we ask you not to revoke, under any circumstances this year: the promise that we will do our part as Jews, and of citizens of this great country, to keep others safe in this time of pandemic. This week an extraordinary hard-hitting video, made by all the Orthodox Rabbis of Long Island, New York—from the modern embroidered kipa with a trim little beard to the black hat silver bearded head of the yeshiva—was circulated, saying in no uncertain terms that unless you medically cannot take it or you are under age, the vaccination is, in their words “a gift from God”, an obligation and a mitzvah: not a good deed, a commandment. There is no Kol Nidre that exempts us from the vow to save lives. To those who have the slightest hesitancy, who are still unsure, who haven’t gotten vaccinated yet though they can—talk to me. There are doctors in the congregation who will talk with you; there are psychologists and social workers in the congregation who will talk with you; you have a Rabbi who is reaching out to talk to you. Don’t promise me to keep kosher or come to shul every week, just promise me that, and I’ll pray a little harder—bli neder— for your next parking spot in downtown Toronto.

Gmar Tov.