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5780 – Kol Nidre is Ridiculous

Shana Tova.

Kol Nidre is, on its face, ridiculous.

I'm going to say that again, because it is, should be stunning, because you're all here, but Kol Nidre, in conception, and... execution, is completely ridiculous. In fact, for generations, the Rabbis tried to get rid of it! I want to describe to what Kol Nidre is from these Rabbis' point of view. We need to back up a little bit.

In Jewish law, we are deeply concerned with the rules of vows, of promises made in God's name, of nedarim. That's where Kol Nidre comes from. Once you make a vow, you must follow through on it. That's commandment number three. If you don't, you are liable for death from above. So, the Rabbis say you have to, unless you really can't, in which case, the Rabbis did devise a way out. You come to a Rabbinic court of at least three Rabbis to explain your situation, and basically, they give you an annulment for your vow, and you're okay. That is allowed.

But in order to make that allowed, one of the things they say is "en brera." But you can't do this proactively. You can't, for instance, say, "Every promise I'm about to make for the year to come is null and void." In other words, you can't do Kol Nidre. That's the entire basis of Kol Nidre. In fact, it's so problematic, there is a second version that says, "All of the vows I made last year are null and void." That's slightly better, because you cannot, undo vows you already made. But you need to go before a Rabbinic court of actual Rabbis. And in Kol Nidre, our court is the Torahs. Torahs are amazing, great, important things to read, but they are not in any sense of the term people! And they certainly aren't Rabbis.

So, what is going on? If Kol Nidre is, on its surface, not only against Jewish law, but logically ridiculous? If you, your child, your friend came to you and said, "Just FYI, you should trust nothing I say for the coming year," that would be unacceptable! And yet this moment in our liturgy holds such a prized, prized moment in the Jewish year. We wait for it. We build up to it. We say, "When are you going to get there for Kol Nidre? Who's going to be there with you?" We wait for the beautiful liturgy! It's the only full liturgy that I know of that has made it into a major motion picture. *The Jazz Singer* features the words of Kol Nidre. In fact, it might even be the most attended service of the entire year.

So, what's going on in this balancing act? I want to say that the point, at its core, what it gets at, is the part of our condition it reminds us of, is one of the sins that I think, today, we are even more prone to commit, which is the sin of being sure, of knowing we are right without a doubt. This manifests in lots of different ways. The most common, I find, is hitting the send button without waiting an hour, or until the following morning. I see a lot of nodding heads on that one. I'm willing to bet that you have either



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received or sent an email or text message that, if you had just waited a moment, a little bit of time, you might have realized that your righteous indignation was not quite the tone you needed for that moment.

And in fact, Yom Kippur as a whole, I think is designed to remind us, and give us strength and the stamina to have conviction but lack sureness. I want to give three examples in which Yom Kippur challenges us to think on this topic. The first are the story of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aaron who die suddenly at the instance of God. I want to talk about the entire concept of animal sacrifice, and what it might have been like to live in a world in which that was the way we prayed. And finally, I want to talk about not just Moses' anger, but Moses' righteous indignation, passionate rage.

Tomorrow morning our Torah portion begins after the death of Nadav and Avihu. These two characters are the first sons of Aaron, and the night before the tabernacle, the crowning glory of the new Jewish religion in the wilderness, is going to go into effect, the two of them bring a sacrifice that was not asked for. And because of it, God kills them. The Rabbis ask, "What did they do that was so terrible?" The answer given is that they got too full of themselves. Their position gave them such sureness that they were the greatest people to ever live that they refused to marry, because they thought no one was good enough for them. So then, they could not continue on the priesthood to the next generation.

There is a thing that happens when we are told we are important. Hopefully, everyone at some point in their life is told they are important. If not, I encourage you to find an avenue where you are the person that matters. And yet, there is a danger in that importance. There is a chance of thinking that you are the only one, the most important. Kol Nidre comes to remind us that we should lack sureness and give ourselves the chance to not know.

The second is animal sacrifice. As modern people, animal sacrifice is near-impossible for us to understand. We are so far removed from the slaughter of our animals that most of our kids have no concept that the plastic wrapped thing in piles in the supermarket came from a live animal. So, when the Torah tells us that you slice the throat and you sprinkle the blood and then you put it on the altar, and the smoke goes up, we have the vaguest of notions of what that might actually mean.

But one of the things that could happen in that moment... if you were the person who brought your animal, imagine spending your... and you are a shepherd. Your entire being, every aspect of your life, is to keep your herd safe. Keep them alive, keep them growing. And then you get your prized animal, the best one from the flock, and you bring it to the temple to be sacrificed. Imagine what that would do to your psyche. It is a reminder that everything you know is not all that is. How many of us have a job, a purpose, a calling, whatever it might be, that we throw our everything into? And it's easy to get caught up in the rewards of that, or the purpose, the focus of that.



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Animal sacrifices are there to remind us that to live in this world, hopefully it won't come to that, but we must be ready to sacrifice the thing we think is most important, because if we're not ready, we might wind up sacrificing the thing that actually is important. When our work consumes us, when it becomes our only driving focus, it's possible that we might forget that we are doing that work so our family could have a good life, and what our family needs for that good life is us. If we are so focused on gaining that promotion so that we can have a little bit more luxury in our life, we might forget that the point of that luxury is to have a better life. We might miss the chance to have a little more meaning. We read about sacrifice on Yom Kippur as a reminder to constantly question what is most important to ourselves.

I learned... the third one is really the hardest to deal with, and that is rage. Moses doesn't get to go into the land of Israel, because... He takes his message from God. God says, "Talk to the rock so that the water will flow for the people." And the people are just being terrible! These people, who he saved from generations of slavery, who he split the sea for, who he brought manna from heaven for, are whining like petulant children! And he's so furious with them, he says, "Fine! Take your rock!" And he screams at the rock and he smacks it with a stick! And the water comes, but God says, "You gave in to your anger, so you won't make it to salvation, to the promised land."

I want to tell you two other stories that have the same tough line, but a different way of looking at it. There's a famous writer who tells a story about her life, that she and her husband were on a vacation to reconnect, rekindle. And they went for a swim, and as they were swimming out to, like, a little island from the beach, and as they swim, he's getting farther and farther ahead, and she's like, "We're supposed to be doing this together," so she sort of pops her head above the waves and says, "Hey, honey, isn't it so great? I just love the chance to be together with you while we're swimming!" And he says, "Yeah, fine," and swims faster.

So, she swims up a little bit more, and she's like, really huffing and puffing, and then he gets a little bit faster. She says, "Hey, honey, I just love the fact that we're together! It's just such a nice bonding moment!" And he says, "Fine," and goes even faster, 'til finally he's on the beach on the island. They make it, the water's dripping off. She gets out of the water and she has worked herself up into a fury and says, "What is going on?! You know, I'm sorry that I don't fit into my bathing suit, that I'm not what you expected, that things aren't going the way they're supposed to!"

And he looks at her and says, "What are you talking about?" And she says, "Well, I tried twice to tell you, 'It's so great to be together!' Why are you just, going faster?" And he says, "Oh, honey. Last night, I had a dream that I drowned. And as soon as I got in the water, it came to me, and all I could think about was moving forward and getting past it. Of course, I want to be with you and spend time with you." In our moment of righteous anger, she was right! He wasn't paying attention to the what they were supposed to be doing! She missed what was going on for real with him.



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Another writer, Stephen Covey, tells a story about the subway. Things are peaceful. Everything's going well on their subway car when a family walks in, a dad and, uh, three kids. The three kids are just... it's mayhem. They're climbing on people, they're poking at things, they're touching things that aren't theirs, and the dad has leaned his head back and closed his eyes. And the kids are getting worse. So finally, this guy is feeling, like, "How dare he! The subway car was peaceful!" And sort of pokes the guy and says, "Sir, don't you think you should tell those kids to stop?" The dad opens his eyes, looks at the kids, and says, "Ugh, God, you're right. I probably should. It's just... We just left the hospital. Their mother just passed away." The man was right! The dad should have been doing it! It was not acceptable that the kids were doing it! But in the righteous passion, he was sure that he was right and there was nothing there.

There is a principle, a Jewish value, *dan l'kaf zechut*, that it's our job to judge the whole of a person favorably, to try and imagine the good reasons why the bad thing is happening, happened, happening before we confront, before we approach. How often do we miss the opportunity to live this value? Kol Nidre lives in this space. To say, "None of my vows will count," what I think we mean, what we...

The core thing that has made generations of Jews demand this prayer be the way we start Yom Kippur, the core principle is, "I'm going to mess up! I know I'm going to slip! I know it's going to happen, but maybe if I start out by reminding myself not to make the vow, not to be so sure, maybe this year I can do a little better. Maybe this year I cannot let my own importance make me lose sight of my place in the world. Maybe this year I cannot be so driven at my goal, so focused, that I miss the thing that actually is more important to me. Maybe this year, when I'm full of righteous anger, I can take a breath and try to imagine what else might be going on."

Yes, Kol Nidre is ridiculous, but frankly so are each and every one of us, and we need this prayer to remind us and challenges us to have a better year.

Shana Tova.