

## **Kol Nidre – From This Yom Kippur to Next Yom Kippur**

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When we stand on the side of a mountain, halfway through a hike, we have the choice of looking back over how far we have come, or looking forward to see how far we have yet to go.

Tonight on Yom Kippur eve we face the same choice.

It is a choice that confronts us not only personally but communally and in our prayers.

The prayer that gives its name to our service, the melody for which everyone has shown up tonight, the Kol Nidre, actually exists in two versions.

Both pray for release from our vows—but which vows?

Our new prayerbook, *Mishkan Hanefesh*, says, “*Miyom Kipurim zeh ad yom Kippurim habaah*—From this Day of Atonement until next Day of Atonement, may it find us well.” So it seems we are asking to be released from vows we have not yet made.

But if we look back in our history we will find versions of the Kol Nidre that talk about those vows we made from last Yom Kippur until today. Scholars believe that was the original version and was well known to the rabbis of the ninth century, though many didn’t like the custom. If we think about it, this early

version makes more sense. The vows for which we need release are the ones we have already made but failed to fulfill.

Tonight we think about the past year. During most years our thoughts would center on a review of where we have missed the mark and how we hope to improve. This year we are stunned by the sheer unpredictability of our lives. When we gathered last year at Sacred Heart Church we had expectations of the year to come, even worries and fears, but no one foresaw what we have experienced. We are coping for better or for worse, but for many our regrets are less focused on our own behavior, and more on what we have missed and on the state of the world. Yet events of this year, particularly our society's confrontation with racism and our fears about democracy, have brought home the message that we can't sit this one out, that what we do matters. This year when we confess our societal sins, the words will have special resonance.

For me, looking back this year is looking back not just on 5780 but also on all the years since I first came to Shir Hadash in 1990. The joys of a long rabbinate are people whose lives have come, after times of sadness or trouble, to a better place. The sorrows of a long rabbinate are those who were once such a vital part of our community, who are gone or who are no longer in the fullness of their strength. Over such a long span of time there are many things which seemed so important and are now mostly forgotten, and other things which I regret, whose importance I didn't appreciate or for which it seemed there just wasn't the bandwidth or energy at the time when they were needed.

There is a lot to call to mind, but then I remember Lot's wife, the one who looked back. Looking back has its downside. It can keep us stuck in place.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Rabbenu Tam, Rashi's grandson, changed the wording of the Kol Nidre formula to what is most commonly used today: having us look ahead and focus on the vows that we are yet to make in the year to come.

This version was very problematic as Jews in modernity began to participate in Western society. The Kol Nidre, this annulment of vows, was used by anti-Semites to prove that Jews couldn't be trusted; after all, we have already released ourselves from any promises we might make in the coming year. We know that was not what was meant—but it didn't matter when someone quoted the text.

Still, even given these complications, in some ways this version of Rabbenu Tam makes more sense. No matter how deep our repentance, how much soul-searching we engage in during the month of Elul and the Ten Days of Repentance, is there anyone who sits here tonight without knowing, in the back of their mind, that Yom Kippur will come again next year, and we will once again sit here with promises unkept, commitments unmet, and aspirations unfulfilled.

Ze'ev Falk captures that in his poem "Kol Nidre," in which he writes:

Last Yom Kippur failed to change our way of life  
or to bring our redemption during the year just ended.  
From the heights of our enthusiasm we returned to our mundane habits  
immediately after Neilah. . . .

and in our hour of weakness did not remember our declaration from last Yom Kippur.

If we are so fortunate as to live and thrive, we will make mistakes, we will hurt others, we will fail in some ways to rise to the opportunities and responsibilities that will confront us. As individuals, this forgiveness in advance can encourage some self-compassion. We are not alone in our failures. Striving for better should not be confused with striving to be perfect.

As a community, it may give us the courage to be a bit braver, a bit freer to step away from what we have always done, even if that means we may not do these new things as well. I am going to have to try some new things next year and I imagine that you will too.

Rabbi Alvin Fine was the senior rabbi of Congregation Emanu-El of San Francisco from 1948 to 1964. But his life was more complicated than that one fact might reveal. He fought in World War II and was awarded a Bronze Star, and then worked with the Joint Distribution Committee after the war to help survivors of the Holocaust. During his tenure as rabbi of Emanu-El, he faced a congregation that was divided on Zionism, which he championed, and that was nervous about his speaking out against Joe McCarthy, which he did anyway. His board was alarmed at what was viewed by some as a premature invitation to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to speak from his pulpit. And then, while he was still in his prime, a heart attack forced his retirement and he had to turn to other ways of making a difference in the community. A poem he wrote is frequently read at memorials,

and now that I have learned more about his life, the words seem more meaningful.

Reflecting on the many stages a person passes through in life, innocence and awareness, weakness and strength, offense and forgiveness, Rabbi Fine concludes:

From defeat to defeat to defeat, until looking backwards or ahead, we see that victory lies not at some high place along the way, but in having made the journey stage by stage, a sacred pilgrimage.

Looking backwards and ahead, as individuals and as a community.

May we find what we need most from the past to give us the strength and motivation that the future demands. May we recognize the value of the journey, *Mi yom kippurim hazeh ad yom kippurim habaah aleinu letovah*—From This Day of Atonement until Next Day of Atonement may it find us well. Help us O God to cherish the journey.