

YK5782 Kol Nidrei

Not Binary

While tonight is *Erev Yom Kippur*, it is more popularly called *Kol Nidrei*, named for the passage we sing at the beginning of the service. Why is this sacred service known by one passage? Is it because its message is clear and universally respected? After all, *Kol Nidrei* is recited three times: sung in a haunting melody while the congregation stands and Rabbis and lay leaders hold *Sifrei Torah*. The Torah scrolls held by leaders creates a *Beit Din*, a court by which we give each other permission to annul vows and to pray together no matter how far one has transgressed. Nevertheless, the development and acceptance of the *Kol Nidrei* passage has been controversial throughout the ages and still is.

Technically, *Kol Nidrei* is not a prayer. It does not contain a direct mention of God and it makes no reference to repentance. Rather, it is a legal formula, dating back at least to the 9th century, that seeks to cancel our vows both past and future. Following the Talmudic tradition, early versions of *Kol Nidrei* were in Hebrew and recited before Rosh HaShanah and not Yom Kippur. Over time, Aramaic replaced the Hebrew and it was moved to Yom Kippur to align with the themes of forgiveness and repentance.

Let's look again at the text that we have today:

Kol Nidrei, All vows - - - that we promise and swear to God, and take upon ourselves from this Yom Kippur to the next Yom Kippur, may it find us well: we regret them and repent. Let them all be discarded and forgiven, abolished and undone; they are not valid and they are not binding. Our vows shall not be vows; our resolves shall not be resolves; and our oaths - - they shall not be oaths.

As we read and listen to the words, it becomes quite easy to guess that *Kol Nidrei* did not enter our liturgical lore without serious debate. Some of Judaism's

greatest rabbinic sages opposed the inclusion of *Kol Nidrei* and when they couldn't eliminate it they tried to change it. For the most part, they failed. So, what was/is their problem with it?

For starters, the Torah and Talmud emphasize the importance of keeping our word. We are commanded not to make a vow if we cannot keep it.

אִישׁ כִּי־יִדַּר נָדַר לַיהוָה אִוְיָה־שָׁבַע שְׁבַע־שָׁבָע לְאָסֵר אָסֵר עַל־נַפְשׁוֹ לֹא יַחַל דְּבָרוֹ כְּכֹל־הֵי־צֶאֱמַר מִפִּי יַעֲשֶׂה :

If a person makes a vow to God or takes an oath imposing a personal obligation, the person shall not break the pledge; one must carry out all that has crossed one's lips. (Numbers 30:3)

In addition, the Talmud contains not one, but two tractates devoted to the importance of not making vows and, if you do make a vow, making sure to honor and live up to them. The original *Kol Nidrei* as it was found in the earliest prayer book of Rav Amram, a 9th century Babylonian Gaon (sage), spoke about cancelling vows from last Yom Kippur to this one. It's important to note that though he included it in his book, Rav Amram objected to the practice, calling it a "*minhag shtut*." Still, it persisted.

Rabbeinu Tam, a 12th century rabbinic scholar and the grandson of Rashi, insisted that the wording of *Kol Nidrei* reflect future vows only. His version greatly influenced many (but not all) current versions. Some traditional versions refer to vows both past and future.

Rabbeinu Tam believed that framing the passage in the future elevated the message, making it a noble plea for indulgence in case of a moment of future weakness. It was an acknowledgement that a person might make a rash promise or vow that was impossible to keep.

While many commentators accepted his reasoning, it still presents a troubling ethical dilemma. Does reciting *Kol Nidrei* mean that a person has the right to break his/her word?

Apologists are quick to insist that this nullification of vows only deals with promises concerning a personal vow. It has no effect on vows imposed by the courts or other individuals. That is, I can swear that I will not watch television this year but discover that this vow is too hard for me to live up to. But if I swear to fulfill an obligation to another person, or if I pledge to fulfill an obligation to a court of law, then *Kol Nidrei* does not cancel that oath.

The controversy of *Kol Nidrei* caused many to recommend eliminating it from the *Machzor*, the High Holy Days prayer book. Indeed, early Reform Judaism did just that. However, since 1978 when Gates of Repentance was published, *Kol Nidrei* has been included. It has been suggested that the popularity of the music of *Kol Nidrei* prevented its elimination. That may be the case, but it is certainly possible to keep the melody and alter the text. Regardless, *Kol Nidrei*, with all of its ambivalence, remains the beloved beginning of our Day of Atonement.

Ambivalence, having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something, need not be disconcerting. Indeed, ambivalence can arise from the acknowledgement that human beings are not binary creatures. Our thoughts, our perspectives, and the choices we make cannot be neatly categorized as “good” or “bad.” We are complex beings, created, as the sages poetically described it, with a *Yetzer Tov* and a *Yetzer HaRa*, both a good and an evil inclination, with our thoughts and actions reflecting the interaction of both.

In the Talmud (*Yoma* 69b) it is written that on a certain occasion, the sages wanted to rid themselves of the Evil Inclination, so they ordered the community to fast and pray for three days. Whereupon the *Yetzer HaRa* surrendered. One of the rabbis warned them that if they destroyed the *Yetzer HaRa* the entire world would perish. Nevertheless, they imprisoned the Evil Inclination for three days. Afterwards, they searched throughout the land and no one could find anything new, not even a fresh egg. The midrashic collection called *Beresheet Rabba* amplifies that teaching, noting that without the *Yetzer HaRa* marriages would not

take place, children would not be conceived, and houses would not be built. That is, our lustful, competitive, egotistic, and even greedy desires are a part of our complex package of qualities.

Each person possess different perspectives and often conflicting opinions. Think about yourself. Inconsistent? Sure. Unpredictable? Absolutely! Capable of thoughts and actions that are generous and kind one minute and selfish and mean the next? Yes, this too we admit. Our conflicting and competing feelings, perceptions, and reactions are in tension. How well we manage that tension is what determines our character.

That tension can even be traced to the peculiar design of our brain. Specifically, it is played out in the interaction between our right brain and left brain. In Iain McGilchrist's magisterial book The Master and His Emissary, The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World, he lays out the essential differences between the brain's two hemispheres.

At the risk of gross simplification, the left hemisphere is the seat of language and systematic thought. It perceives the world in a linear fashion. The right hemisphere, which is larger, perceives the broader context; it pays attention to the Other, whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves. McGilchrist offers an important caveat: ideally the two hemispheres are not in competition. Rather, they are necessary complements and partners.

Unfortunately, certain eras, like ours, favor one over the other. Modern society too often treats apparent inconsistency as a sign of error or intellectual incompetence. Ambiguity is no longer considered a strength, a quality that embraces complexity and nuance. Rather, the modern tendency is to determine the absolute "truth," identifying it as something simple and straight forward.

McGilchrist presents scientific findings that place the preference for linear thinking and straight lines in the brain's left hemisphere. It is the seat of language and mathematics. It tries to unpack the world and understand it through formulas and exact measurements with the self as the constant reference point. As essential as those skills are, we know that there are no straight lines in the natural world. Space itself is curved. Reducing the world to simple, straight, and linear descriptions leads to distortion. Placing oneself at the center or the starting point of those descriptions is a formula for egomania.

Cognition in the right hemisphere is not a process of something coming into being through a sequence. Rather, the right hemisphere sees and considers a much broader spectrum. Things are understood within a context: the whole and not the atomized part.

There is a Kabbalistic expression of these two contrasting, but not mutually exclusive perspectives. *Mochin d'gadlut* is the expansive mind, one that sees the big picture (one that McGilchrist would assign to the right hemisphere). On the other hand is *Mochin d'katnut*, the narrow mind that sees the world through the prism of the self: "Is it good for me; is it useful, can I benefit from it; does it matter to me?"

The narrow mind sees the world as binary: I and thou, us and them, up and down, good and evil. The expansive mind sees in the larger frame of non-duality. As Rabbi Rami Shapiro expresses: "To the narrow mind everything is other; to the spacious [expansive] mind everything is one." Indeed, his take on Rabbinic literature like *Pirkei Avot* is that the great aim of Jewish thought is to help us see beyond our narrow self-focus in order to perceive the interconnectedness, the Oneness of life. It is a unity that understands that God is One, the One from which all exists. Not one being over there. (For that is how the narrow, linear mind sees. "I'm here so the Other must be over there.") Rather, the expansive mind sees all as interconnected; all is in a relationship.

Instead of mine verses yours, the expansive, non-binary sees ours. Nothing is separate from God. Rather, all is of God.

McGilchrist traces the rise and fall of eras that have been dominated by right-hemisphere thinking and those in which left-hemisphere think is favored. He fears that our current pre-occupation with the linear, reducing all to the measurable mathematic, signals a dehumanizing tendency. He concludes that the triumph of left-brain will lead to alienation versus engagement, abstraction versus incarnation, the categorical versus the unique, and the part versus the whole.

We have certainly witnessed evidence of this left-brain, binary thinking. It has now become common to divide people into hard categories. Politically, some aim to divide us into Left wing, Right wing, Conservative, and Liberal. As if one cannot have a more complex political or social ideology. The terms Left and Right themselves are reflective of a narrow mind. The damage of these forced and imposed categories has contributed to the breakdown of governance in Washington, where partisanship rules and those brave few who dare to venture across party lines are vilified. And it has extended to our personal relationships: friendships broken because of the narrow focus of “if you are not with me you are against me.”

We see the narrow mind triumph as well in those who wish to divide all into categories of race, as if a human being can be understood simply by looking at the color of his or her skin. And we see it with gender and sexuality. Again, how narrow-minded it is to define a person because of their sex or with whom they fall in love?

The point being is that the world is not binary. We are being manipulated by those who stand to profit (either monetarily or by acquiring power, or both) by dividing people, categorizing people, demonizing people, and creating an “us versus them” culture.

Instead of dividing ourselves into smaller and smaller groups, atomizing the community, and reducing a complex person to a statistic, modern Judaism embraces the expansive mind’s appreciation of the ambivalent!

Like *Kol Nidrei*, a person is filled with contradictions. That it simultaneously address the past and future is no problem; don’t we all? Isn’t it natural to be both reflective (nostalgic even) and eager to experience what is next in store? That *Kol Nidrei* expresses regret for past errors and anticipates future errors is not a contradiction. Rather, it is true to our life experiences.

We say with contrite hearts, “*Al chet shechatanu lifanekha, We have sinned before You,*” knowing that we will not be perfect in the year to come. But this admission is not a sign of cynicism or defeatism. Rather, it is an awareness of the complexity of our being, the complexity of life, and the determination to do our best without pretensions or false promises.

This year has begun, much like last year, with uncertainty in the face of a prolonged pandemic. Of all the things that we have learned, perhaps the most valuable is that nothing in life is predictable. There are no straight lines. We have learned to creatively address new challenges. And we have learned to embrace the ambivalent because so-called certainty is false. We have learned to roll with the punches. We have learned the futility of becoming frustrated over things we cannot control. No matter how much we plan, no matter what technology we put in place, when Comcast goes down, the broadcast is over!

In this coming year, let us strive to keep opening our minds to a broader perspective. There is no use seeking someone to blame for our disappointments.

Yes, life is complex, but it is not complicated. Live, learn, grow, and experience this marvelous gift of life with an open heart, an open mind, and a joyful spirit. In doing so, we are wowed by the complexity of life, not overwhelmed by it; we become appreciative of life's ambiguities and not frustrated by them.

With a slight adjustment of perspective and attitude, a shift to the brain's right-hemisphere, we begin to see those around us not as "others" but as "brothers and sisters." Even reduced to tiny squares on a screen, we have learned to connect with subtle expressions on a person's face and to take delight in the thoughts they share.

On this night of *Kol Nidrei*, when we consider that our words and thoughts, our promises and hopes carry with them dimensions of feelings and meaning that transcend a simple and linear definition, we can be more understanding and forgiving of others and ourselves.

Ken Yehi Ratzon, May it be so.