

Kol Nidrei 5774

Just imagine the scene. The election is over. The new Prime Minister makes his first public address. He surrounds himself with the most eminent of the party leadership. He has them hold the ancient symbols of his Office. And there, assembled in front of the Parliament he says.

Here, in front of God and man; I stand with rogues and with villains. Every election pledge that I made I renounce. Every vow, commitment, policy statement and costing, my manifesto, even when I said "Watch my lips" I annul. Let each be forgotten, each null and void, unbinding and unsworn...

... on this the Holiest day of the year.

So jarring is the dissonance that at different times and in different communities the Kol Nidrei prayer has been dropped. How could it be that the most solemn annual gathering of our people open with words which paint us as transgressors and disavow each and every solemn undertaking?

In 1240 the Jews of Paris were forced to defend the allegation that the Kol Nidrei prayer indicated a fundamentally corrupt faith. In many European countries oaths by Jews were considered inherently suspect or defective. Special forms of affirmation such as the "Oath More Judaico" were introduced whenever a Jew was required to swear. In 1857 the Russian government requires that Machzorim include a disclaimer, explaining that the words of Kol Nidrei had no legal effect. In the world of the internet anti-Semites aplenty find the Kol Nidrei a very good place to start.

For example: (<http://renew.com/general45/kol.htm>)

"The Jazz Singer," the first talkie with Al Jolson, describes the great devotion that Jews have for this "prayer." Jolson plays a cantor's son who tries to break away from Jewish tradition but who in the end is drawn back to it, finally agreeing to sing the Kol Nidrei on the great day. It is ironic that Hollywood's first motion picture with sound should have dealt with this explosive subject, even if the words were sung in Hebrew.

Can any person or people with this mentality be trusted?

The Kol Nidrei mentality is the underlying cause for all the anti-Jewish reaction by normal people down through the ages. Have we ever heard a renunciation of this "prayer" by any Jew - orthodox, reform or otherwise? In fact, how many of us are even aware of this subversive practice, this license to lie, which is glorified in a holy ritual every year?

Every Jew in a position of power, from Paul Wolfowitz to your judge, doctor or teacher, should be questioned on this subject. Jewish judges should be asked to recuse themselves on this grounds automatically. Only in this positive but defensive manner can we at this late date begin to take charge of our lives by denouncing the lie of "anti-Semitism" and confronting those whose practices are based on deception.

Remember the motto of Israel's elite organization, the Mossad: "By way of deception thou shalt make war."

It is not only the anti-Semites who have grappled with Kol Nidrei. In the 8th century Rav Natronai Gaon called reciting Kol Nidrei a foolish custom which should be abandoned – on the basis that it was senseless – what do we make of a solemn statement by someone that his solemn statements are meaningless? The Talmud itself invalidates all public statements attempting to undo obligations undertaken in good faith. In the 16th century, Rabbi Mordechai Jaffe, the Levush, who headed the Prague Yeshiva at the time the Jews were expelled, dismissed the prayer as “idle twitter”. Clearly we were tweeting five centuries before anyone else – and just as foolishly.

While we may have been raised with stories that the prayer originated with letting Maranno conversos to Christianity back into the synagogues – the Kol Nidrei prayer originates in the 7th or 8th centuries. It has periodically been edited and refined with changes of tense. Some 19th century synagogues dropped the prayer on principle but so loved the tune that they retained it. The joke might be on them. Scholars of music, have identified the haunting melody as Catholic in its origin.

The original purpose of the prayer was not to cheapen our words but to highlight them. How often we say things without proper consideration and leave people misled or disappointed. In Jewish tradition where God’s name was invoked a commitment was made from which one might not resile.

One of the most tragic Haftoras, reminiscent of the tale of King Midas, is the story of Yiftach / Jephtha. Jephtha was a judge of Israel who was battling the Ammonites. Contingent on his victory, he pledged that he would sacrifice as a burned offering the first thing that came through his front door on his return home. His young daughter, his only child rushed out to greet him. With heavy heart. But feeling himself to have no way out, Jephtha made good on his promise.

There is an adage that religious doctrine often gets in the way of God. We might dismiss Jephtha as a crank or a fanatic who is missing the bigger picture. However, halacha does not let us play fast and loose. A pledge is a pledge; wherever possible vows and oaths should be avoided. Even a repeated pattern in religious activity can establish a binding minhag. If I perform some extra meritorious mitzvah three consecutive times, I am now bound to adhere to this elevated spiritual state. Even the mere unexpressed intention to give an amount of money to Tzeddaka establishes a commitment. Not between you and the unknowing beneficiary – but between you and God.

Absent a mechanism to release the debt one must honour one’s commitments or one must remain forever dishonourable.

Fifteen hundred years ago, Kol Nidrei originated as a gesture towards the good intentions we might have but that we hadn’t fulfilled. It wasn’t to help us welch on extravagant boasts or contracts entered into without due care. It most certainly was nothing to do with oaths in courts or obligations in civil law. Fifteen hundred years ago the sages were concerned at the thought that we might stand before God on Yom Kippur, beating our breasts, mouthing contrition for our several shortcomings - but actually oblivious to our track record of poor delivery despite the best intentions. As we pledge before God that we shall do better this year we must not mar our entreaty with the stigma of past pledges abandoned.

In the Early Middle ages a change of tense shifted the emphasis from last year’s promises to the promises we would make in the year ahead – the spell-like incantation “De-Ishtabana u’de’acharimna” is the Aramaic future tense “I will swear and I will foreswear.” Rather than come

before God and say, “Sorry, I wasn’t the person I represented myself to be” we stand before God and acknowledge that despite our shortcomings, it is actually in our nature, and we would actually like to be better. We would. We may not succeed in the year ahead. We might not maintain the piety that accompanies twenty five hours of fasting. But we don’t want God to look upon us as full of empty promise. Although we are human, although we are fickle, in our hearts there is good.

In our hearts there is good.

What might we become? Who might we be?

In one sense Yom Kippur enables us to wipe the spiritual slate clean and become a tabula rasa – an empty tablet. When the Levush was writing about “idle twitter” an empty tablet was a framed piece of wax or a blackboard, heated or repainted and restored to a pristine and unblemished state. Now of course it is an Apple or Samsung device. The Tabula Rasa of 2013 means hitting the “Factory Reset” button and then when it says “Warning: all your data, your files and cached preferences will be deleted” you hit confirm. It’s new and unclogged just like the day you unwrapped it.

The tshuva process is the reset and format process. Our sins that formally stared God in the face is now not encrypted, not relabelled, not redesignated in a memory cache. It is gone. Simply not there.

But Yom Kippur goes a step beyond the factory reset. When I reset my iPhone 5 it doesn’t become an iPhone 5s. With a tabula rasa reset it doesn’t have more memory or more features. It is still the same device.

Not so Yom Kippur.

Tshuva is an upgrade. According to Maimonides I am spiritually fortified by the transition from “despicable sinner last night” to “man beloved by God the following morning”. For now I can reach higher, I can hope for and I can attain so much more.

I can attain so much more... It takes a little courage and a little confidence...

There’s a point where we learn to swim with floaties and our parent or coach tries to persuade us – “take them off, you’ll swim much better.” “Don’t be silly,” we all replied. “They hold me up in the water. Without them I’ll go under!” It’s only when the floaties come off we discover that we’re more agile in the water without them. They were a psychological crutch – but they held us back.

In our day to day lives we wear all sorts of floaties – whether it is the comfort snacks or persistent checking of emails or our Facebook status to check we’re still alive. In fact they sometimes hold us back. But like all bad habits we can’t imagine ourselves without them. Our spiritual health suffers too. We might think we are fine just as we are, can’t imagine turning the phone off over Shabbat or not answering it at the Friday night table. We might think that our world and our social lives would implode if we were more careful about kashrut and didn’t eat anything and everything everywhere. We might think that our lives depend on whatever it is we do when we might be in shul or at a class or giving just a little more time to our Jewish lives or the Jewish community. But the truth is we are buoyed up by floaties and could swim much better without.

Just like the swimming coach encouraged you, you don't need to let all the air out on both arms all at once. But a little less artificial support and a little more Jewish effort you can swim faster and farther and over time it will become natural and right.

When you let the Rabbi keep Shabbat for you or you let the Rabbi keep Yom tov for you or the Rabbi keep Kashrut for you – I become your floatie. When you let the shul run services for you, or classes for you but you jest “The Great is the Shul I belong to and don't go to” the shul is your Jewish floatie. It keeps a part of your Jewish life in Sydney or in the city going – the volunteers who do attend minyanim keep them going – but how much richer that Judaism would be if you kept it going. If it could keep you going...

In an unfortunate homonym for cryptic crossword fans, when **apart** is one word it means two things that are separated. When **a part** is two words it means something that belongs. Over the next year I would love everyone to become more a part of the shul. More belonging. More integrated. Less apart from...

It has been fabulous watching the children's services grow over the last few years. At the helm were Rabbi Garber and Mandy and now Rabbi Richter. Over seventy children over Rosh Hashana. Thirty some Shabbat mornings, increased participation in the shul services, too. It has only happened because parents and grandparents have played a part and come on in.

The women's discussion group has been once a month running for a year. We've now had a couple of members give divrei Torah from the pulpit. On first night Selichot, joint with North Shore, we had around 150 participants for a delightful evening of education and prayer. It was wonderful to bring our communities together. There have also been some fabulous partnership events with other community organisations; the discussion with Archbishop Jensen, the evening with the ACO, Diane Levy on parenting, Penina and Ronen Neuwirth on religion and politics in Israel, David Pelcovitz on stress, dinners with community groups in conjunction with the Board of Deputies – and week by week by week our synagogue tours and our women's auxiliary, volunteers in the library and the museum.

It's happening when people play a part. When they choose to make the time and help us grow. Sometimes it is personally fulfilling. Sometimes it is quite exhausting – but it makes us function and it inspires new life and new ideas.

I urge you to please be a part.

I urge you contribute financially on the pledge cards – 25% will go to The Great Synagogue and 75% to support much needed Jewish education through Academy BJE. The Jewish education and the services we provide equip our families to feel more a part and less alienated. Your pledge is not covered by the Kol Nidrei prayer. We expect you to honour it. And I respectfully ask for your generosity.

Today is exactly 388 years to the day since Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, a former Chief Rabbi of Prague, was captured in Jerusalem with fifteen other rabbis and scholars and ransomed by the Pasha Ibn Farouk for an extortionate sum. Rabbi Horowitz is incidentally the great ancestor of Simon Horry, well known to many of us, a friend, a long time Great Synagogue member and a regular at our

weekday services. Rabbi Horowitz was a great scholar, a builder and an activist. His kidnapping was a tragedy and a hefty ransom was raised.

Rabbi Horowitz' celebrated commentary on the Torah ends citing a passage of Talmud (Shabbat 89a). Moses on his deathbed ascends to heaven and sees God putting the crowns on the letters of the Sefer Torah. He looks on silently, perhaps confused. God challenges him – "Have you no manners? Don't you at least say Shalom to me?"

Moses answers, is it right for a servant to initiate the greeting and interrupt his Master? God retorts, Haya Lecha Le-azrayni – "well then, you should at least offered your support in my work."

Moses is standing there letting God get on with it. Perhaps he thought he wasn't worthy to interrupt or to offer a hand. Who are we to interfere in God's world?

But God says Haya Lecha Le-Azrayni. "Lend me a hand. Don't be shy. Don't be stand offish. Don't be apart. Come in closer, belong... and play a part."

On Kol Nidrei we know that we are optimists. We want to give. We want to be better. On Yom Kippur, if we do it all properly we can erase our past faults and reset to a pristine fresh start. But that's all we can hope for if we are apart from God.

What might we become? Who might we be?

We can be a partner with God and a part of a far better world.

I wish you and all your families a Shana Tova u'Gemar Chatima Tova...