

Cynicism and Faith

What does *Kol Nidre*, this night of vows mean? We convene a *Beit Din* by gathering the presidents of our congregation and taking out the Torahs. Then with complete solemnity and haunting melody we repeat three times this ancient formula. With the deepest reverence, it seems that we are making vows and in the same breath annulling them. Has anyone else ever been confused by this evening?

As early as the 9th century, the purpose of this legalistic formula was debated. Some said it meant we were asking God to cancel all vows we made last year, but were not able to keep. We do not want to be held liable for them. Don't punish me for breaking those vows, we plead, they are now cancelled. Is this any way to begin a new year, whining about what we meant to do and excusing ourselves for our failure to meet those intentions?

Perhaps the only thing more questionable than looking backwards at the start of the year and asking to be let off the hook, is the other explanation of the Kol Nidre. In this interpretation we are pleading with God to not be held accountable for all the vows we will make in the upcoming year which we will not be able to keep.

Both this version which was adopted by the Sephardic community and the other interpretation that the Ashkenazim accepted beg the question why make any vows if looking backward or looking forward we ultimately do not want to be held responsible for our commitments.

Do our best intentions matter at all? By time the AARP membership cards start arriving in the mail, unsolicited I might add, we often have to pause before answering that question. (For those who don't know, these letters stand for the American Association of Retired People) As we begin to notice how often the font is too small or the lights too dim to read we start to perceive with alarming clarity the world we have created.

In spite of our best intentions, we see that the world's a mess and we are not much better. There is so much wrong – we are awash in wanton destruction, senseless violence, brazen injustice, and chilling indifference. And we, fragile humans that we are respond to this world we have made. Where to start? Let's look at just a few snapshots from this last year.

According to a Veterans Administration report released this March, for every soldier killed in combat, 25 veterans are dying by suicide. That's more than 7,000 veterans and service members killed each year, more than the total number of soldiers killed in Afghanistan and Iraq combined since these wars began. Kol Nidre, all these vows, we make with those who serve our country.

According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, every 9 seconds in the US a woman is assaulted or beaten. Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women—more than car accidents, muggings, and rapes combined. Around the world, at least 1 in every 3 women has been beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused during her lifetime. Most often, the abuser is a member of her own family. Every day in America, more than 3 women are murdered by their husbands or boyfriends. Kol Nidre, all these vows we make with our partners.

Nearly 15 million children in American live in poverty, in families supporting four and making less than \$22, 350 a year. 31 million children are growing up in households that earn less than \$43,500 a year in our country, the richest nation in the world.

This rising trend in child poverty means 42% of our nation's children are innocently facing the cruelty of poverty along with poor health prognosis, higher incidence of drug addiction, criminal record and teen pregnancies, low educational outcomes and decreased employment opportunities. Most of these children have one or more working parents who simply don't make enough money to raise them from these depths. Kol Nidre, all these vows we make with our children.

We gather tonight, facing the somber reality of the world we live in. We realize that these holy days are mostly over, nine of the ten days of awe gone by. For many of us, we could say the same for our own life span. Cynical though we may be, doubtful of any real change before it's all done and over, we showed up tonight, to cancel our vows, just in case. Just in case God is listening. Just in case any of this means anything. Just in case our vows and our best intentions for ourselves and our society really matter.

And if this ritual of renegeing on our vows is not enough to strain the limits of our skepticism, tomorrow we will read about a ritual that surely puts the whole thing over the top. A goat- yes, a goat will solve it all. Two goats will be chosen. On one goat, we'll place all our sins, all our broken vows on the head of a goat. Then we'll send the goat out into the wilderness. And we'll be done with all that- kol nidre- all our broken vows vanished. And the other goat, gets burnt on the altar for God. This whole ceremony will please the Lord so much that we will convince God to let us live another year.

If you're shaking your head at this point, feeling a bit more than perplexed, don't worry, you are in good company. In fact, a very rational man named Moses Maimonides wrote a book in the 12th century called *The Guide for the Perplexed*, in which amongst other things, he tried to make sense of this ancient Yom Kippur ritual. He wrote, in Arabic, which was translated into Hebrew and later into English as follows:

There is no doubt that sins cannot be carried like a burden, and taken off the shoulder of one being to be laid on that of another being. But these ceremonies are of a symbolic character, and serve to impress men with a certain idea, and to induce them to repent; as if to say, we have freed ourselves of our previous deeds, have cast them behind our backs, and removed them from us as far as possible.

This is a radical interpretation. Maimonides is saying that the point of this ritual wasn't to impress God, it was to impress the people. It was a play, a show that was put on once a year as an extended metaphor. Through its drama it thrust before the audience the question, What if?

What if in one fell swoop we really could get rid of all our broken vows, just like that. What if we could really start with a clean slate? What if we could as mature adults with all our knowledge and none of our baggage begin anew? What would we do then?

Can we overcome ourselves? Can we really act in ways that are not habitual or predictable? Could we rise above what we expect of humans behavior? Even after the Israelites experienced firsthand the Egyptian plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, the giving of the Ten

Commandments, the supply of manna in the wilderness and miracle after miracle, they were only momentarily impressed before going right back to their predictable patterns of grumbling, fighting amongst themselves, disobeying. Even witnessing divine miracles, and reaping the benefits of them, they could not get rid of their pessimism, anxiety, and fear.

Believing in God is not the central problem in faith. It is believing in human beings. In Maimonides radical interpretation of the scapegoat story, the central issue isn't "was God persuaded," and "what is God going to do now." It is "were the people convinced" and "what are we going to do."

I am convinced miracles happen. I see them all the time whenever people act, in ways that strain our ability to believe that what just happened actually happened. When a perfectly healthy woman volunteers to give her organ to a total stranger, for the chance that he might live, I have just witnessed a miracle. When a wheelchair bound youth meets the cruelty of his disease with grace and humor touching the life of thousands until the end of his short life, I believe in God. When a homeless man finds a wallet full of cash, and turns it over to the authorities because that is what he was taught to do, I have faith in humanity.

A while ago a friend was sharing a story with me about two people who through a series of twists and turns overcame much pain and tragedy in their lives and in the most unlikely way have now found each other and have found the courage to start anew. "Gosh," she said, "it almost makes you believe in God!" Then sheepishly she smiled, "well I mean..." I agree, it really is quite unbelievable what we human beings are capable of doing.

Sometimes it is easier to believe in a divine being, unseen and unknowable than it is to believe in human beings, with our visible flaws and our all too knowable behaviors. Especially these days, we seem to be resigned to a bleak outlook. Peggy Noonan captured this view precisely in a perceptive article she wrote in the wall Street Journal. She put it this way, "The biggest political change in my lifetime is that Americans no longer assume that their children will have it better than they did.... the country I was raised in was a country that had existed steadily, for almost two centuries, as a nation in which everyone thought-wherever they were from, whatever their circumstances – that their children would have better lives than they did. That was what kept people pulling their boots on in the morning after the first weary pause, my kids will have it better... Parents now fear something has stopped... our view of the future is now fundamentally pessimistic.

However, faith in humanity is a workable faith, even for the most hard headed cynic. Why? Because each of us is a small piece of humanity and we can always work on ourselves. We can break our habits, we can rise above our challenges, we can face our fears, we can mend and heal. We can set aside our needs and tend to the needs of others. We can share whatever we have regardless of how much it is. These are the miracles that strain our credibility.

The meaning of the Kol Nidre ritual is that its drama will trigger our desire for *teshuvah*. For if we really believed we could have a fresh start, who amongst us would not be motivated to try, even for one night, to strive for our highest ideals. But in the words of a man who understood the power of belief and its ability to transform lives, Nelson Mandela said "one cannot be prepared for something while secretly believing it will not happen."

This evening we take a running start at this leap of faith. There is the letting go of what we know and the willful flinging ourselves into the unknown. I guess that is why it is called a leap and that is what Kol Nidre really is. Collectively, we are lighter tonight as we approach this hurdle because we don't carry with us the burden of our vows. We are unencumbered with guilt over broken promises from the past and we carry no anxiety about any anticipated failures in the future. Not since the day we were born have we weighed this little.

Like a pole vaulter we start the approach towards this new year. Running we pick up momentum, we plant our pole and hurl ourselves over the top, clearing the bar of our expectations and landing safely on the other side in faith.

What ifwe ran so fast, what ifwe flew so high, what ifwe landed so softly... what if we believed we could do this, what if we had faith in ourselves?

To paraphrase Mandela- We ask ourselves who am I, to be so brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Such a tzadik, and mensch, Actually, who are you not to be?

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