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Kol Nidre 2020\5781

What We Carry When All Bets Are Off

It is hard to find a comparison for Kol Nidre. This is the evening deemed the holiest of our year. In usual times, synagogues around the globe are the most crowded—you cannot get a seat. My wife, Louise, recalls childhood memories of her home congregation—admonitions to “come on time!” “No one will be allowed into the sanctuary once the Torah scrolls have been removed from the ark.”

Kol Nidre is simultaneously a world stripped bare and a world turned upside down—stripped bare because, in theory anyway, we have come to confess our sins to seek atonement, to dive into our deepest selves and search for our truest self.

It is a world turned upside down because it is so outside the norm. Everyone is present. When else does that happen? It is ritually upside down.

It is the only evening service of the year when we wear a tallit.

All the Torah scrolls are out of the ark yet none is read.

We hear an Aramaic prayer (not even Hebrew) three times yet not one word read in English.

The usual and customary, so to speak, are abandoned for this one evening.

On top of it all—this evening is not supposed to be happening—or not happening the way it is. The ultimate world turned upside down-ness of this evening is that the Kol Nidre prayer is not supposed to be in our liturgy.

This evening let me first elaborate just a bit about the history of the Kol Nidre prayer. I have said this on occasion before. The origin of this prayer is shrouded in complexity and mystery. There are very few extant sources to show the exact evolution of this unusual Aramaic prayer. The scholarly history unpacking the origin of the prayer admits to its lack of certainty. Suffice it to say in the late 9th century, in the oldest extant prayer text known as Seder Rav Amram composed by the Gaon -- or the rabbinic leader of Babylonian Jewry -- refers to the Kol Nidre as a “foolish custom.” Rabbi Amram objects to the prayer on legal and moral grounds. It is a prayer which annuls all oaths. Simply read the words in English from a straight translation:

“All personal vows we are to make, all personal oaths and pledges we take between this Yom Kippur and the next Yom Kippur, we publicly renounce. Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void, neither firm nor established. Let our personal vows, pledges and oaths, be considered neither vows, pledges nor oaths.”

How can any society or religion allow a public ritual which nullifies any oath that is taken for any business arrangement or courtroom proceeding? How can any society function with a self-created system of unreliability and the condoning of broken promises and unenforceable contracts? This is a world unhinged.

According to the records, Saadia Gaon, some fifty years after Amram, also objected to the prayer and sought its elimination, but failed due to its popularity with the people.

The source of the prayer’s popularity is hard to fathom for we moderns. Some claim that it was derived from the overwhelming belief at the time, that this “nullification of everything” blessing formula was effective in warding off demons who had sworn oaths to do harm. Whatever the case, it is clear that this is a prayer from a world with a different mind-set. We might call it religion as superstition.

By the Middle Ages, Kol Nidre continued to be a part of the liturgy. For the Jews of Europe it had become associated with the melody that we

all know so well today. That tune would prove to become pivotal in the prayer's staying power.

The rise of Reform Judaism in Germany in the late 18th century saw yet another attempt by the rabbis to eliminate the prayer. Reform Judaism, proud product of the Enlightenment, had no use for demons and/or irrational beliefs about voiding oaths and contracts. In 1817, the Reform congregation of Berlin eliminated the prayer. But as our friend and teacher Rabbi Hoffman writes:

“What the Reform rabbis did not count on is the power of music and the will of average congregants, who cared little about the theological or moral consequences of the KOL NIDREI'S words relative to their fondness for the traditional melody, which obviously spoke very deeply to them of the mood and message of Yom Kippur. Despite rabbinical protestations, cantors continued to sing KOL NIDREI, even when it did not appear in the prayerbooks. The rabbis tried to substitute alternative lyrics, such as psalms....but the cantors remained faithful to the old familiar words.....officially KOL NIDREI disappeared from most Reform liturgies, while, unofficially, it remained.” (Gates of Repentance Volume II)

The move to America did not change the fight to eliminate the prayer from Reform liturgy. Prayerbook committees filled with the greatest

rabbis of the land fought over whether to eliminate the prayer. We are living proof that none succeeded. This brings us to this moment — to a world unhinged.

Kol Nidre bespeaks a world that is unhinged from any predictability. It is a world that Rabbi Hoffman in conversation with me termed a world “where all bets are off.” There is nothing that one can rely on.

There is a haunting parallel in this ritually upside-down prayer and the world we are living in today — right now at this moment. Pandemic has turned our world upside down. Just consider the here and now.

Almost everything that we once saw as reliable is gone.

COVID-19 has totally changed our day to day habits. We are working from home. Our children are schooling from home. We don’t socialize the way we once did—no lunch dates with friends, no going to the same old hangouts, no stopping for a cup of coffee just because you want to take a break and for me—adding in a cookie from the display case at the last minute—just because I can’t resist. The way we used to work, socialize, eat, shop, school, gather and pray is, for now, gone.

The way we used to view our American democracy is gone for now also. The way we used to think that words of truth came from our leaders is

now gone. It is as if the words of Kol Nidre cancelling any word or oath were said on the inauguration platform in 2017.

We really are in Kol Nidreland—a world turned upside down- where all bets are off. We are in a world shorn of its mooring and we feel unsettled, daily.

So—the question is—how do we live when all bets are off? Where do we find Jewish wisdom to confront an “everything is up for grabs” world? I wonder if the words of author Christopher Isherwood could be true — “sometimes awful things have their own kind of beauty.” There is a truth in those words that can be simply too painful to bear. There is a depth of mystery here almost too great to plumb. We see this in art ranging from Picasso’s *Guernica* to Edward Albee’s *Whose Afraid of Virginia Wolf*.

Perhaps we can find that beauty if we remember that tonight is also a time when we probe into our deepest selves and search for our truest self. Kol Nidre suspends normality making room for deep introspection.

Do we have a Jewish religious answer to all of this, I have asked myself relentlessly for the past many months? Beyond working for social justice, what does our theology tell us on how to stay moored, how to not be exhausted, how to go on when nothing is as it should be?

As many of you know, I speak with my teacher, friend and mentor, Rabbi Hoffman regularly—and during this period of pandemic we have Zoomed weekly. As we were discussing these questions, I wrote down these words that came tumbling out of his mouth.

“Maybe theology isn’t a belief, maybe it is an act—but a certain kind of act. Theology is an act of faith.” And faith, as Rabbi Hoffman teaches it need not be a philosophical statement of belief in something.

We can be Jews of faith and not believe that God gave the Torah.

We can even be Jews of faith and wonder what **we** really believe when we read the Shma.

Faith is more complicated than we usually think—a concept that defies a single simple definition. Don’t turn simply to Websters or Google for a definition.

What if faith is a perspective on the future?

Rabbi Hoffman defines faith in much the same way Vaclev Have defines hope, when he says it is a “state of mind and not a state of the world, a dimension of the soul, an orientation of the spirit.” Rabbi Hoffman teaches, “Faith is being able to paint a picture of our world or tell a story about our life, in which there is a future worth living for.”

Faith is then expressed in acts. Faith acts make a claim on and paint a picture of a future worth living for, a future, for which in the moment, there is no necessary evidence. This is Havel's "orientation of the spirit."

I learned long ago from another great teacher, Rabbi Eugene Borowitz that "Action rather than belief is the primary expression of Jewish religious life."

When then, are these acts?

Faith acts are born from what philosophers call our moral space, what religious people call the soul, what Rabbi Hoffman has written is "the space deep down within each of us that constitutes our deepest self – our bedrock sense of who and what we are and what matters to us."

I am sitting near evidence of inherited faith acts here this evening near our computer.

We have Louise's grandparents and most likely great grandparents and who knows how long before that-Shabbat candlesticks and Hanukkah menorah from Europe.

A faith act is what you take with you when you have to leave home and never return.

When Jews, including many of our own ancestors—grandparents, great-grandparents were leaving Europe in droves in those pivotal years of the late 19th and early 20th century the years of Dreyfus, Kishinev pogroms, and rising anti-Semitism across Europe—what did they take with them? What did they carry? When their lives were up for grabs to such a degree that they were leaving villages and cities that their families had inhabited for one thousand years—what did they take? To borrow from an old television commercial—“Don’t leave home without it!” What did our past not leave home without?

The candelabras we use to light our lights on Shabbat. The candelabras we place in our windows each year at Hanukkah to advertise the miracle of the light. To tell the world—we are here!

We gain insight into any culture by seeing what people in that culture don’t leave home without.

Many of you have these or similar items in your homes. They are the symbols of acts of faith. When you are leaving behind all that is familiar, all that you know and set forth for the unknown, you take with you that which defines you—that which helps you know who you are. You take with you that which will “orient your spirit” as you journey.

Many of us have in our homes these heirlooms. Others of us have other, similar items. Our grandparents and great-grandparents were

leaving everything they knew for an unknown. They carried with them the ritual objects that painted their picture of the world. In leaving, they were also creating the story of their future. That is when an act becomes an act of faith. When we refuse to give in to pessimism and a narrative of a future that is lost and not worth acting for, we are entering and creating a world of faith.

This is why we say Zachreinu l'chayim—remember us, God, for life—we have a future to create. The time is now!

We now hold in our homes what our ancestors carried. Through their acts of faith, they have set for us a table that might guide us in a world adrift.

This is where we must begin because in our new reality, we have even lost our sense of time.

Just a few weeks into our Pandemic life, when we were already well into the routine of Zoom meeting after Zoom meeting for days on end, our executive director, Rachel Gross, sent me a cartoon that I am sure many of you saw:

“For those who have lost track, today is Blursday, the fortyteenth of Marilay.”

That kind of said it all. It somehow captured everything---the complete disorientation of life when you don't even know what day or time it is.

Abraham Joshua Heschel called Shabbat a palace in time. For us, I think for much of Micah, Shabbat has been both an anchor to keep track of where we are, as well as a life buoy, forming the very pattern of our lives. We are not animals in a wilderness for whom every day is the same. We may be in exile, but Shabbat affirms our humanity.

As we enter Yom Kippur, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, we pause to consider God's own original theological act — welcoming Shabbat.

The Shabbat table comes to us straight from the opening chapters of Genesis. If you are ever going to be trapped on a desert island for a stay—take these opening chapters. They are a survival guide.

In lighting our Shabbat candles, we bring ourselves back to the very beginning of our story when God said, “Let there be light.” That light symbolizes the sacred in the universe, what Vaclav Havel termed “transcendental,” the anchor of “deepest roots... of human responsibility.”

We scramble the order to turn to our beautiful challah. Here too, we find Genesis. “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your bread,”

Adam is told. If bread is human effort, it is also human ingenuity, and human genius. Bread symbolizes our human past's engagement with the planet on which we live. Just as the candlelight captures the sacred, the challah symbolizes human potential and accomplishment. We also have Genesis warning—"By the sweat of your brow..." Life is not easy. Creating a better future will not be without setback. For Cain and every future farmer, there were always periods of drought. That does not mean that we stop planting.

Finally—we have the fruit of the vine.

The secular philosopher Thomas Nagel gives us our reason for Kiddush—"Existence is something tremendous, and day-to-day life, however indispensable, seems an insufficient response to it, a failure of consciousness.... the religious temperament regards a merely human life as insufficient... It asks for something more encompassing...How can one bring into one's individual life a full recognition of one's relation to the universe as a whole?" (Thomas Nagel, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament*)

What more is there?

We make Kiddush in order to understand the possibility of our very humanity—the wonder of all that is.

When all bets are off, we sustain ourselves by holding fast to that which defines and sustains us through this wilderness of time. Our ancestors carried the Kol Nidre prayer — no matter how upside-down — because that melody had meaning to them. Our families carried the ritual objects that we have in our homes. Take them off the shelf and give them life. When we discover what we carry with us today, we uncover the faith of who we are and how we have the power to shape our lives and tell a deep and resonant human story that looks to the future.

The simple Friday evening acts of lighting candles, making Kiddush, and breaking bread in front of a computer looking at a screen full of faces can provide a framework for each of us. We discover how to go forward in a world where all bets are off.

As we sanctify time, we find our truest and best self.

Eternity utters a day!

In a world turned upside down we lift the cup and say “to life.”

May you be inscribed for a good and sweet year!