

## **Kol Nidre 5770 Love and Loss**

(Sing) ***Kol Nidre... 7 words (each time)***. I've made some promises I haven't kept. Like I promised myself (for whatever reason) I wouldn't cry when I buried my sister and my mother..... but I cried.

(Sing) ***Kol Nidre***. I've made some promises I don't intend to keep. Like I promise I will not cry when I think of grandchildren growing up thousands of miles away that I will very seldom see..... But I'll cry.

(Sing) ***Kol Nidre***. We make some promises we can't keep. Like we'll always protect our children from all harm, from hurt and fear and frustration and injury.....

(***Sing***) ***Kol Nidre***. We make some promises we'd better keep. Like promises of love for our spouses and our kids and our God.

(***Sing***) ***Kol Nidre***. But there is only one promise that will be kept by all of us for all time: that, **if we do have love, then we will have loss.**

Kol Nidre ostensibly is about making, breaking, and keeping promises. No one really knows the history of this formula—it isn't a prayer because it doesn't even mention God's name, and it isn't a petition because it doesn't ask for anything. It is a declaration, and to tell you the truth, it's not a very uplifting or soaring set of words. It's written in Aramaic -- not even Hebrew; and we really don't know for sure when it was written or why it was written. Perhaps it was to absolve the Spanish Marranos who were living as Christians in public but Jews in private; perhaps it was to remove impediments earlier generations of Jews felt to repentance by forgiving in advance any rash vows we might make. But the words don't move us, really. Let's

be honest -- it's the tune of Kol Nidre, the melody that keeps us coming back and stirs us and moves us and makes us cry and tells us something about ourselves. I've read that, even in the most classical of Reform synagogues in the early nineteenth century where the chanting of Kol Nidre was abolished, the organ would play the tradition melody as worshippers entered the sanctuary. Why so moving? Why so intensely "grabbing us" that we stop what we're doing, even if it's cooking in our kitchens when the classical music station plays it, and we find ourselves standing in awesome silence, holding our breaths until it is over? Why do we respond to even Johnny Mathis or Perry Como singing it (thanks to everyone who sent me the YouTube web-link!) – Because if they were chanting any other prayer, we'd wonder why they even did it!

Why? Because the tune of Kol Nidre is the tune of loss and of heartbreak. We relate to that tune deep down in our *kishkes* because each of us knows loss and heartbreak. The tune comes on suddenly, and abruptly -- like loss and heartbreak. We come in to the sanctuary, we sit down, we stand back up, we haven't got time to think about it and the sound pierces us from the very first note. It goes down deep, even deeper than the sound of tomorrow's triumphant shofar blast at the end of the Holy Day, because it touches the place within us that has known promises broken, and promises unfulfilled. It almost hurts us to hear it because, in its mournful first notes, we hear ourselves crying over our losses, over spouses and parents and siblings now gone; over children grown up too fast or having alienated themselves from us; relationships ended; opportunities wasted, words unspoken,

angry goodbyes, goodbyes never said. It almost makes me cry to hear it, every year, because I look out over this congregation and I see some of you crying, and I feel what you are feeling and I know that I cannot mend your heart or mine in a sermon or a song or even a prayer, as much as I would dearly want to do so.

**(Sing) Kol Nidre (7 words):** It is the pain of impermanence we hear. Change is the symbol of a fact everyone has to come to grips with: everything changes, everything passes, time is slipping through our fingers and we cannot stop it. That is why the words/song from Ecclesiastes, “Turn, turn, turn,” means so much to me. Like the opening notes of Kol Nidre, this knowledge of “a time for everything” came on too suddenly to me, I wasn’t ready, and I was caught off guard. I thought I was prepared, but I was surprised and shocked when it came. No, we’re not prepared.

Rabbi Alan Lew was a wonderful Conservative rabbi whose spiritual search took him deep into Buddhism before he returned to his Judaism and eventually became the rabbi of Beth Sholom Synagogue in San Francisco. He did a masterful job of combining the compatible elements of these two religious traditions. Alas he died, much too young, earlier this year. In his moving and inspiring book, (show it) **This Is REAL and You are Totally Unprepared** – how is that for a title that grabs you? – he gives a beautiful teaching on the pre-Kol Nidre formula -- in which two witnesses flank the Torah, and we declare that it is permissible to pray together with “avaryonim.” Our prayer book translates this phrase as “sinner” from the root ‘avar”

“to transgress.” But the root “avar” also means “to cross” or “to pass over”. The very Hebrew word for Jew- Ivri - is the one who crossed over. We are the “avaryonim” -- the ones passing over, passing through. From one portal to the next. From love to loss and back again to love. Our lives are a constant passage, and we cannot hold them back, however we might wish, even for one moment.

Rabbi Lew writes, “We try to hold on as hard as we can, we try to hold on to the moment, we try to hold on to our strength and our youth, we try to hold on to each other, but we may as well try to hold back the waves of the sea...”

Yet the melody of the prayer does resemble the waves. (SING)  
va'chamei, v'konamei, v'kinuyei, v'kinusei: there is a change of direction. The music rises, it lifts, and it is quietly joyous, hopeful and strong. Rabbi Lew continues, “...there is a kind of rising emotion, a heroic, even a defiant persistence...Kol Nidre expresses all this... because of this impermanence, this heartbreak, the soul expresses itself, expresses its singular one-time gift, leaps out of the water with joy...”

If we didn't know sorrow, we wouldn't recognize joy. When we realize that we have but one chance, one leap to make, we rise to the occasion and find our way out of the heartbreak that is the human condition. When we understand — in the depths of our being — that love and loss go hand in hand, that the opening sad notes end in an optimistic crescendo — we can then hear the sound of heartbreak and it doesn't destroy us.

Maybe some of us here tonight had the proverbial “perfect year.” You’ve had a new baby or gotten married or landed a new job, even in this difficult economy, or you’ve found a new love. For you Kol Nidre rises as a song of power, of fulfillment and satisfaction. You’ve crossed a threshold too and your joy holds up everyone else as a kind of hammock of happiness. But some of us here tonight, probably more of us, had a year of loss. You’ve lost someone you loved, you had a relationship fail, your job has gotten worse or someone in your family is ill. You are worried about your health or your money or your past or your future. Kol Nidre reaches out a hand that says “trust in healing.” “Reach out to the community for support.” “This too shall pass.”

Robert Fulghum, who I quoted on RH, also writes, “Crossing these thresholds is a rite of passage. Revival is a lifelong ritual. Nothing about being human amazes me more than this capacity for revival. How dull and meaningless and hopeless life can seem--only to become exciting, vibrant, and filled with hope the next day...All our exits may become entrances. Daily, we redeem ourselves in unspoken rituals of renewal...Whatever the name, however large or small the act, the urge to reassemble the fragments of our lives into a whole is the same.”

Kol Nidre is not only the tune of heartbreak, then. (SING)  
[va’chamei, v’konamei, v’kinuyei, v’kinusei](#): it is the tune of reassembling, the tune of finding new purpose, the tune of mending and repairing and climbing up a mountain to see over the fences that

once kept us back. It is the tune of ascending, coming up for air, freeing ourselves from the past when the past holds us back. It is a leap.

So we “avaryonim” can leap over. The word “avar” has an additional meaning, then, -- to enter. What new lands can we enter when we cross those thresholds? When we let go of the past? When we let go of past regrets, of all the “could haves” and “should haves.” What new peace can we enter when we let go of the grudges and hurts; the “he said” and “she said”? “The 10 years ago you did...” We then enter a new place when we find a way to build from our loss. When our letting go is a positive thing. When we “**avar**”, cross over, from that loss into new ways of loving.

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Yom Kippur is, I think, in some sense, an attempt to naturalize impermanence and indeed, death. Yom Kippur reminds us that death is as natural as life. It awakens us to the reality that some of us will be here next year but some of us will not. Why must we be reminded of this grim reality?

Most of the Jewish year is about celebrating life. Acknowledging death might seem to us to be the opposite of celebrating life but I don't think it is. Acknowledging death is actually essential to celebrating life.

Rabbi Lew also tells a story about Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite. Maybe you've heard it. One day his older brother died, and a newspaper got the story wrong and printed Alfred's obituary instead. Alfred opened the paper that morning and he had the

unusual experience of reading his own obituary. “Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday,” the obituary began. Alfred threw down the paper. “That’s not how I want to be remembered,” he said. Right then and there he decided to use his wealth to establish the Nobel prizes, rewarding people for bettering the world, for bringing works of beauty into it, and for making attempts at fostering peace.

Another very different story: There was a man who found the cocoon of a butterfly. One day a small opening appeared. He sat and watched the butterfly for several hours as it struggled to force its body through that little hole. Then it seemed to stop making any progress. It appeared as if it had gotten as far as it could, and it could go no further. So the man decided to help the butterfly. He took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bit of the cocoon. The butterfly then emerged easily. But it had a swollen body and small, shriveled wings. The man continued to watch the butterfly because he expected that, at any moment, the wings would enlarge and expand to be able to support the body, which would contract in time. Neither happened. In fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around with a swollen body and shriveled wings. It never was able to fly.

In his kindness, the man did not understand that the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the tiny opening was God's way of forcing fluid from its body into its wings so that it would be ready for flight once it exited its cocoon. It couldn't be helped to do this. The

process cannot be speeded up. We pass through those cocoons all by ourselves, and only then we take flight.

And I think of this story as I help congregants dealing with parents suffering with Alzheimer's – people will sometimes say “we actually lost him years before we lost him.” First unable to recognize loved ones, then slowly losing all power of speech, movement, coordination, confined to wheelchair, unable to feed himself, yes, a person can be gone years before he or she dies. It is somehow comforting to me to think of such a person squeezing through the very narrow hole his or her life had become, the soul eventually flying heavenward as it was released. And that is why in Judaism we mark a death, this loss we feel with an act of affirmation, of tikkun olam, with a donation to whatever charity we find meaningful as opposed to transitory flowers or elaborate caskets that simply are marks of human vanity, soon to be lowered into the ground.

Yes, we try to make sense of our losses in any way we can, even though so many of these losses make absolutely no sense at all. We love the way Kol Nidre concludes because the notes get stronger and stronger and in the end it is as if the whole community is affirming --

Yes! love and loss go hand in hand.

Yes! we grieve and we celebrate.

Yes! we'll take it all, the whole package.

Separation, letting go, giving away: these are themes that run through the Torah. In the book of Genesis, which we will begin anew in just a few short days, God creates the world from an act of separation: light from darkness, water from water, water from land. Life is born from separation. When God began to call a people that first call to Abram was to leave his father's country and house. Abram lets go, in order to build a new life. That new life is what he gives us, the Jews who follow after him. He let go to enter a new life. We follow his example in equally meaningful ways.

And as for love, we never fully lose it. Safe within our hearts are the little children who have grown up, the parents who have died, the relationships which ended so we could move on to better ones, the experiences we've accumulated that give our lives a rich history. When you fly a kite, and it is high in the air, you can no longer see the string. But you can feel its tug all the same, and the tug keeps you connected to both the unseen string and the kite. A Hasidic disciple once asked another Rebbe's disciple, "Have your teachers left any writings as a heritage?" "Yes," said the other. The first asked, "Are they printed or are they still in manuscript?" "Neither," replied the other. "They are inscribed in the hearts of the disciples." We are disciples of all that life has given us, and its teachings are inscribed on our hearts.

Milton Steinberg called this "holding tight with open arms." It's often considered to be the most moving sermon ever given..... Kol Nidre moves us so deeply, I think, because it reminds us we have to hold

tight to life but with open arms. So, as Carl Sandburg wrote,

Gather the stars if you wish it so.

Gather the songs and keep them.

Gather the faces of women.

Gather for keeping years and years.

And then . . .

Loosen your hands, let go and say goodbye.

Let the stars and songs go.

Let the faces and years go.

Loosen your hands and say goodbye.

**So, “Shana Tova.” We pray that we may be inscribed and sealed  
for a good year.... both in God’s book of life and the lives of  
those around us.**