

YOM KIPPUR SERMON
PROMISES, PROMISES
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Dr. Erica Brown tells the following story: “It was late afternoon, close to the start of Yom Kippur. Congregants in white began to crowd around the entrance of the synagogue: ‘Rabbi why are you standing in front of the doors? We can’t get in.’ Everyone was anxious to find a seat and begin the service.

‘I’m sorry. We’re full,’ responded the Rabbi. ‘There is no room in the sanctuary for you.’ ‘Rabbi, that’s not possible. We’re all standing out here. I can see through the glass,’ said one of the elders, ‘that not one person is in the building.’

‘Trust me. It’s full,’ the Rabbi reported. ‘It’s so full of promises and vows you made and never kept that there is no room for anything else, even for you.’”

No prayer is more well-known and yet more misunderstood than Kol Nidre. In fact, it gives its name to the evening of Yom Kippur. We simply call it Kol Nidre Night. Yet, in reality the prayer of Kol Nidre is not really a prayer at all. It is patterned after a legal formula and though we are all attached to its tune and its solemnity, its history is extremely complex, its words rather obtuse and the paragraph is extremely difficult to comprehend, especially as it begins the holiest day of the Jewish year.

In a book published in August, edited by Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, entitled “*All These Vows – Kol Nidre*”, he writes: “The practice of Kol Nidre arose in response to the seriousness with which Rabbinic law treats oaths and vows.” From the point of view of legal formulas it is a form of Hatarat Nedarim, the annulment of vows, which enabled the wholesale nullification of all vows made in a given period of time. Although many legal authorities voiced strong opposition to this purpose for Kol Nidre, the common will of the people, the vox populi, in Solomon Schechter’s terms, Catholic Israel, prevailed and Kol Nidre by the 11th Century had become part of the Yom Kippur service in most communities.

Hoffman quotes a number of scholars who believe that Kol Nidre is connected to the ancient belief in the power of magical adjuration – the act of making a spirit or demon swear that it will harm someone. The Babylonians of late antiquity used magic bowls that were believed to undo the oath that the demons had been forced to make, thereby undoing also the damage they promised to cause. The formulas on these bowls are remarkably similar to the formula we find in Kol Nidre. Whether this is indeed the actual genesis of the origin of Kol Nidre or whether it has to do with Hatarat Nedarim, makes little difference at this point. It has been sanctified in Jewish tradition and gives its name to this evening.

Moshe Benovitz, in his scholarly book on Kol Nidre, suggests that as the High Holy Days is a season for repentance, the Rabbis wanted the community to enter Yom

Kippur with a clean slate and a pure heart. We are not expected to take advantage of Kol Nidre by renegeing on oaths or vows, but instead to measure well the effect of our words and our promises.

Thus, as we gather here for Kol Nidre, its history makes certain that we take seriously the importance of words, oaths, vows and promises. Our words are not to be taken lightly. Should we fail to act upon them others will see us as less than trustworthy. Our pledges must mean something and the content of the Kol Nidre prayer impresses upon us the sanctity of the promises we make and the oaths that we might vow.

I would like to suggest this evening that we take very seriously three types of promises: Promises to ourselves, promises to others, and promises to God. Only if we can live up to these promises does Kol Nidre and the entire day of Yom Kippur bring us a sense of sanctity in word, thought and deed.

Very often as we prepare for a new year, either on the Jewish or secular calendar, we will promise to ourselves that we will be better people in the coming year. We will lose weight, start an exercise program, take hold of our temper and not let it get the best of us, control our drinking problem and not place ourselves in danger, we will end our bad habits. We swear we will not again abuse our spouse, our children, people at work, physically, sexually, verbally or emotionally. We will learn from our mistakes. Yes, it is appropriate to set goals for ourselves at this time of year, but we must attempt to live up to those goals. Words alone are not enough, whether we follow through on these words and promises is really the key.

Why is it that we don't often keep those promises to ourselves? Some suggest that it has to do with our own sense of self-worth. Often we set expectations of others that we simply don't have of ourselves. Many times we are easier on ourselves than on others because we simply don't take our faults seriously. Other times we are our own worst critics. Yom Kippur comes to remind us that each of us has foibles, weaknesses and challenges. None of us is perfect, yet, through repentance we can both renew and better ourselves. This should not be taken lightly. It is not a simple task to look critically at our lives and promise ourselves that we will do better. New Year's resolutions are not really serious. Repentance is. Only if we walk the walk do our promises become actualized.

We are all familiar with the commandment in the Book of Leviticus, Chapter 19, which states: "Love your fellow as yourself." Some commentators suggest that you can't love another until you love yourself. It may be difficult to love ourselves and, if it is, we must try harder to be worthy of that love. This should be our first promise this Yom Kippur. To grow as human beings, to promise to learn from our mistakes, to take a good look in the mirror and promise to work on our weaknesses and become better people.

Martin Buber taught us that all life is relationship. How we treat one another tells a great deal about us and our values. In the Tabernacle in the desert, and later in the

Temple in Jerusalem, there were two cherubs, golden figures with the face of a baby and wings extended heavenward which adorned the Ark cover and protected the tablets of the law. They seem to have their origin in artifacts from the ancient Near East, but the Rabbinic sages recognized that these cherubs are described as facing each other even as their wings are extended heavenward. It was from the space between the two cherubim that the Divine voice was heard. Commentators suggested that the cherubs represent two human individuals. When two people face each other, when they love each other in a way that reflects the love of the Divine presence for the Nation of Israel, that is a true loving relationship.

When Bryna and I were in South Korea in 2000, when I was president of the Rabbinical Assembly, we bought a pair of Korean wedding ducks. These are miniature wooden ducks representing the bride and the groom. After the wedding, they are placed somewhere in the couple's house and their position tells of the couple's marital state. Nose to nose means the relationship is good, tail to tail means they are probably having a tiff. Looking deep into the eyes of another human being is the only way to truly relate to them. Our promises this year should encompass an oath to relate to other human beings in that way.

Many times as we begin a new year we vow to treat the other with greater kindness. We promise that our words and our deeds will reach out with caring compassion to another human being, whether that person be part of our family or simply a stranger. Unfortunately, in the heat of battle, we say things that we then recognize we should not have uttered. In our day and age with instant communication literally at our fingertips we need to learn the lesson well. There is no one in this sanctuary today who does not regret that they did not use the delete button at least once. With e-mail and texting, social networks and immediate access to the people around the globe, we need to be even more careful with our words, for once they emanate either from either our hands or our mouths and hurt another human being, we devalue ourselves and God's image in this world.

The Jewish Council on Public Affairs has issued a call for civility in our society. In a statement that has been widely disseminated they write: "In American society, especially in our diverse Jewish community, we value robust and vigorous debate about pressing issues. Such debate is one of the greatest features of our democracy and one of the hallmarks of our people... and yet today, the expression of views is often an uncivil, highly unpleasant experience. Community events and public discussions are often interrupted by raised voices, personal insults and outrageous charges." Using as proof texts Jewish sources on the importance of guarding our tongues and uttering appropriate words, the statement then states: "As a community, we must commit ourselves and ask others to open their hearts and minds to healthy, respectful dialogue based on our love for our neighbors and our people. We therefore agree to treat others with decency and honor and to set ourselves as models for civil discourse, even when we disagree with each other."

It is sad that JCPA had to resort to this type of statement and disseminate it throughout the Jewish community and beyond. And yet, we know that civil discourse is something that both here in America, and sometimes especially among our own people, is definitely lacking. I cringe as I realize that it will be another year on the calendar for the election cycle to complete itself. Negative campaigning has become the basis of media publicity and common discourse. We have seen the level of incivility of one to another escalate as people don't respect one another and simply dismiss the other in ad hominem attacks. This statement is a necessary wake call to all of us. Disagree with one another, that is most assuredly the Jewish way, but do so with respect and in an appropriate manner.

We are taught not to judge another person until we are in their place. As human beings, created in the image of God, we owe another the respect we desire for ourselves. Kol Nidre reminds us to keep our promises of treating another human being in a manner which expresses a kind and gentle nature. We must learn to be more civil in our dialogue and more understanding in our disagreements with others. We should follow the model of the cherubs and the Korean wedding ducks and look into the eyes of another human being and work on having proper relationships with all.

The third type of promises on Yom Kippur are promises to God. We tend to bargain with God all the time. Most of the time we make those promises during times of fear and suffering. We are prepared to offer God our best only when it seems to serve our own purposes. On Yom Kippur we come to the Synagogue to recognize that our promises to God of repentance, of following God's teachings and of being partners with God, is something that we must take seriously and not simply leave to the moment when we find ourselves in the depths of despair.

Senator Joe Lieberman has just authored a book entitled "*The Gift of Rest: Rediscovering the Beauty of the Sabbath.*" It is an ode to Shabbat and the keeping of the day of rest. As an observant Jew he has kept his traditional practice in his role as a representative of the people in both the State legislature and the Senate, as well as on the campaign trail.

In describing his family's devotion to Jewish tradition, he tells the story of his Grandfather, Joseph Manger, after whom Senator Lieberman was named. Joseph Manger was in the soda business in Stamford, Connecticut and like many Jewish immigrants of his time, decided supporting his family ruled out giving up that day of work on Saturday. While he had been a religiously observant man in Europe he found it impossible to live up to this high dictate of his faith and still make a living in America. In 1922, he finally reached a time when he felt he could stop working on Shabbat. "I will never break Shabbos again," he told his wife and children. Lieberman says that his Grandfather was so pleased and proud that when Shabbat morning came he went to the Synagogue to pray and returned home for a festive lunch meal. During the meal he complained to his wife of pain in his arm.

Lieberman's Grandfather agreed to see the doctor between the afternoon and evening prayers of that day. He walked to shul for the afternoon service, crossed the street and smiled broadly as he and the family happily wished each other "a good Shabbos." They never saw him alive again. Following the afternoon service, on his way to the doctor's office, he crossed the street and was struck by a bicycle and thrown onto some trolley tracks, badly hitting his head. Lieberman writes that maybe that was the cause of his death or maybe the pain in his arm was a symptom of an impending heart attack. In any case, he ended that Shabbat, the last of his life and the first he was ever to observe in America in the hospital where he died later that night. Lieberman writes: "He had said he would never break Shabbat again and, of course, he never did."

It did not quite work out the way Joseph Manger had planned it, but Lieberman sees the story as a legacy that he has received from his Grandfather of the importance of offering promises to God and following through on them. He is, of course, saddened that his Grandfather was not granted more time to enjoy other Shabbatot, but is proud his Grandfather lived up to the promise he had uttered.

We come over the course of Yom Kippur day to offer promises to God. We will be better people. We will be more observant of Jewish rituals. We will attempt to make the world a better place. Yet, are we truly sincere in our words and willing to carry through with our actions? Promises to God should not be taken lightly, we should weigh heavily our words and follow through on them.

We offer promises all the time, not always taking our words very seriously. Kol Nidre reminds us that is not how it should be. Actually, it does so in an odd way. In the original text of Kol Nidre, the vows and oaths that were to be regretted were those of the past. However, the text that is now in front of us states that all the "promises that we vow or promise to ourselves and to God from this Yom Kippur to the next, may it approach us for good, we hereby retract." Perhaps the author knew well that we are human and flawed. Even with the best of intentions, our promises fall short – to ourselves, to each other and to God. By placing the time period into the future, it already recognizes that we will continue to make mistakes, that our promises may not be as sincere as we think they are, and that we have a real challenge ahead of us.

I would like to believe that we can do better and that we will. I would like to believe that we can make promises to ourselves, to each other and to God which we will follow through on. I would like to believe that even though we may be fallible human beings we know the goals for which we must strive and the values we must live by. I would like to believe that using our words we can create a kinder, more compassionate and caring world. I would like to believe that we can live up to all those promises during the coming year.

Perhaps by next Yom Kippur the sanctuary will have room for us as well because we will have fulfilled our promises and our vows, removed some of our sins, and taken responsibility for our deeds and actions.