

Kol Nidre: A Jewish Controversy and Unsolved Mystery

The initial musical piece of liturgy in our Yom Kippur observance has been so central for so many centuries that we name the entire service after it. Yet as beloved as it may be, *Kol Nidre* has perhaps hurt us more than helped us over the centuries.

Exhibit A: The top search result from a Googling of the phrase, “*Kol Nidre* translation.” The link leads to an anti-Jewish site that uses the *Kol Nidre* text as evidence that Jews are, and have always been, completely untrustworthy both in private and public life.

Here is the **translation of *Kol Nidre***: “All vows, prohibitions, oaths, consecrations, whether called 'ḳonam,' 'ḳonas,' or by any other name, which we may swear, consecrate, or prohibit upon ourselves – [from the last Yom Kippur until this Yom Kippur]*, and [from this Yom Kippur until the next Yom Kippur]** may it come upon us for good - regarding them all, we regret them henceforth. May they be deemed absolved, forgiven, annulled, and void, and made of no effect; they shall not bind us nor have power over us. Our vows shall not be valid vows; our prohibitions shall not be valid prohibitions; and our oaths shall not be valid oaths.”

*Notes: *Sephardic Jewish text, **Ashkenazi Jewish text (some communities use both)*

Is it any surprise that antisemites have used this very public prayer against us for much of our history? Is it really true that we pray each year that our word basically counts for nothing? And why has the hearing of this prayer arguably been considered the most powerfully moving communal moment of the Jewish year?

The Power of Kol Nidre

In 1913, secular German Jew Franz Rosenzweig was close to converting to Christianity as was common practice among his highly-educated compatriots. But on Erev Yom Kippur of that year, he stepped into a Berlin synagogue, heard the cantor’s rendition of *Kol Nidre*, and was transformed. He wrote to a friend: “After prolonged, and I believe thorough, self-examination, I have reversed my decision. I will remain a Jew.” He then went on to earn his place among the most prominent Jewish philosophers of the 20th century.

Remember the classic 1927 film, “The Jazz Singer?” Well, okay, how about the more heavily polyester-ed 1980 Neil Diamond version? In either case, in its dramatic conclusion, Al Jolson/Neil Diamond demonstrates to his father that he has become re-committed to Judaism through his stirring rendition of *Kol Nidre* at his father’s congregation. It is the strongest and most heart-tugging sign of Jewish commitment that Hollywood could produce – and, interestingly, a piece of music so powerful that it was featured in this, Hollywood’s first talking picture.

In both these cases and in the case of the Yom Kippurs of my youth in which many adults pulled out their kleenex shortly after the melody began, one cannot ignore the pull – on a conscious and sub-conscious, rational and emotional level – of this musical prayer.

Is our Word Really that Cheap?

But what about the prayer’s words? “Our vows shall not be valid vows?” (And although our Reform prayer book tries to render it more palatable by adding the phrase: “should we, after honest effort, find ourselves unable to fulfill them” this is a liberal, modern addition unrelated to the actual Aramaic text.)

We know that this prayer cannot be interpreted literally, as it violates central Jewish teachings throughout time. Our Torah instructs us:

“If a man takes a vow to G-d or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he shall not desecrate his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth he shall do.” (Numbers 30:3)

Not only does this apply to “contracts” between an individual and God, but any oath taken with others in mind cannot be nullified without their approval or without some kind of legal negotiation. Jewish sages over time affirm the sanctity of the oral vow in rabbinic writings and in binding Jewish Law Codes. In our Reform High Holy Day prayer book, we read this Talmudic teaching: “For transgressions against God, the Day of Atonement atones; but for transgressions of one human being against another, the Day of Atonement does not atone until they have made peace with one another.”

So if we really can't nullify oaths through the recitation of this prayer, why say it?

***Kol Nidre*: Unsolved Mystery**

We do not know the exact origin of this prayer, but, interestingly, it is first mentioned in the writings of Jewish leaders (approximately the 9th century) who argue against it! *Kol Nidre* has never received official approval from rabbinic scholars over the centuries. It remains rooted in Yom Kippur observance as a kind of folk revolution; the Jewish people overturning the desires of the most knowledgeable in their ranks. In this way, *Kol Nidre* can be seen as a real example of pop culture!

So we are left with this mystery: **why *Kol Nidre*??** Some possible responses:

- It relieves the anxiety of worshippers so that they may feel free to create resolutions for the year ahead without fearing reprisal if they end up not carrying them out.
- It is a way to begin this stark and intense Holy day with a sense of grace – feeling freed of the burden of having to “know it all/do it all” and turning some of our desire to control over to God.
- It is a reminder of how we are creatures more limited than we like to believe – our oaths are “as nothing” (this is in keeping with the theme of the entire day).
- It is the poetry and the plaintive music of the piece that contains subconscious, non-literal power over our souls.
- It is the entire ritual that moves the community: The ark open, congregation standing receptively, Torah scrolls in view, the three different versions of the musical piece, back-to-back, each one growing in volume and urgency.

As you hear our Beth Tikvah rendition of *Kol Nidre* this Yom Kippur, perhaps you can help solve this mystery, at least for yourself. What makes it so emotionally gripping? Wherein lies its sacred power? How does *Kol Nidre* speak to **you**?