

Kol Nidre Sermon- 5772

We are everything and we are nothing: Creating and Choosing Our Personal Journey

Shabbat Shalom. Gemar Hatimah Tovah. The time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur demands from each of us that we ask forgiveness from those persons who we have wronged or may have wronged.

Therefore, tonight, I ask for Seliha, I ask for forgiveness from those assembled here who I may have hurt over the past year. Perhaps it might have been a phone call that was not timely returned, or a moment when I was too busy and did not give full attention to you, or did not hear what you were saying, or hard words I uttered that should not have been said.

As we go forward into a new year, I will do my best to be there for you.

Helen Keller was once asked if there was anything worse than losing one's sight. After a moment's thought, she replied, "Yes, losing your vision."

Kol Nidre, Erev Yom Kippur is certainly not a night for lack of vision. Kol Nidre is the night when we Jews acknowledge that our lives are rescued and understood by God because of our insistence upon personal accountability. Tonight, our conversation and journey with God is an inward one, and it is we who choose what that conversation and journey will look like.

We take many journeys in our lifetimes, but perhaps none is more decisive all year long than the one we begin this evening: The Journey Inwards, "choosing our destiny."

I recently came across the story of Keith Clark. I am sure most of us will not recognize the name, but some of us will probably remember how this musician literally blew his most notable performance. You see, Keith Clark was the bugler who botched the playing of "Taps" at President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's funeral. It was a severely cold day in Washington D.C., which means a bad day for a brass player. And to make matters worse, he was standing right beside the firing squad whose three volleys made Clark temporarily deaf just when he was to play those

best known twenty-four notes in the entire musical repertoire. And on the sixth note, Sergeant Clark fluttered off key for the entire civilized world to hear. There was no place to hide.

It was a moment of naked and poignant human imperfection which somehow came to express the depth of grief and emotion of that day. The recognition of our imperfection goes to the very heart of our Yom Kippur journey inwards, as we come before God "as we are." We, too, have "sounded some incorrect notes," and we know it.

The melody of Kol Nidre recited earlier this evening, reaches the deepest recesses of our hearts and souls. Hearing the first few notes of the Kol Nidre prayer is often enough to send shivers down our spines. It is a drama we all know so well.

On Kol Nidre night we stand in front of the ark, we stand before the Torah scrolls which are taken from the ark. And for just a few minutes, as we stand before them, those very Torah scrolls serve as a *bet din*, a court of judgment, eyeing us all, examining the sincerity of our journey inwards in search of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Tradition prescribes the words of Kol Nidre three times. The ninth century prayer book, *Mahzor Vitrey*, explains it in this fashion. The first time Kol Nidre is chanted is likened to a person who is awestruck at being admitted to the palace of the king or queen in order to ask for a favor, and who is afraid of coming too close to the royal personnel.

The second time is likened to a person who is not as afraid, moving closer to be in the presence of royalty.

And finally, the third time is likened to one who is at home and accustomed to being a member of the royal household. Yes, more than any other time, tonight's journey inwards presupposes our confrontation, our meeting with our God.

Kol Nidre night provides us with the opportunity to ask God for forgiveness, but there is a much more compelling reason we are here and a significant question to be addressed on this night of our soul's inward journey.

Kol Nidre night provides each of us with the opportunity to look within and ask “Who am I?” The Talmud teaches that we are to have two pieces of paper in our pockets at all times. In one pocket, we are supposed to have words that read, “*Bishvili Nivra HaOlam* – The World was created FOR ME.” In the other pocket, we are supposed to have words that read, “*Ani Afar Va’Eyfer* – I am like the dust of the earth.” Why? (PAUSE) Why does the Talmud ask of us to make these two statements a central part of our lives EVERY DAY? Because Judaism teaches that we must balance life. There are times when we are to be humble and there are times when yes, it is ok to have an ego. There are times when we are to celebrate and feel that the world was created only for us and there are times when we are supposed to feel that our value is that of the dust of the earth.

Tonight, my friends, we learn about maintaining that balance. I have asked our ushers to pass out cards, one for each member of our community. (PAUSE AS THEY BEGIN DOING SO). On one side of the card is the first Talmudic statement, the world was created for me. On the other side of the card is the second Talmudic statement, I am like the dust of the earth. Please, put it in your pocket tonight. And when we arrive at home, let us take our card and put it in a place where we will look for it regularly. The Talmud challenges and expects us to create this balance in our lives with both teachings, both statements. So let us begin that balance tonight.

In his autobiography, *The Ragman's Son*, actor Kirk Douglas tells us how, once while driving to Palm Springs, he offered a lift to a young sailor who was hitchhiking. When the fellow got into the car and recognized the famous driver, the sailor exclaimed in shock, pointing at the driver: “Hey! Do you know who you are?”

That's the question that we need to ask ourselves. Do we? Do we know who we are? Do we know that we have the potential of creating a healthy and spiritual balance for ourselves, a place where selfishness and selflessness can go hand in hand?

Behind the pretenses and the posturing, the multitude of deceptions, small and large, the lies we tell to others and the ones we tell ourselves, there is that secret person we really are.

The well known play, "Death of a Salesman" concludes with Arthur Miller's thoughtful lines: "He had all the wrong dreams. . . . He never knew who he was." Kol Nidre is the night when the masks come off, and we admit to ourselves who we really are.

Arturo Toscanini was a world-renowned conductor, holding himself and his fellow musicians to demanding standards. Once, after a grueling and highly unsatisfactory rehearsal with the cellist, the great Gregor Piatagorsky, Toscanini managed to reduce his colleague to quivering tears, repeating to the cellist:

"You are no good. I am no good."

This nonstop derogation continued to the last minute when the conductor led the trembling soloist to the stage, at which point Toscanini observed:

"We are no good, but others are not as good as us.
Come on, let's do our best."

And here, I would suggest, is the profound paradox which lies at the heart of our Judaism: Even when we admit "we are no good," when we say we are like the dust of the earth, we still claim our dignity and demonstrate our strength, not our weakness.

Not so long ago, I came across a book entitled: *Self-Esteem in Ten Days*. Now, really, do we imagine self-esteem to be something akin to the technique of serving a tennis ball? Isn't self-esteem a product of what we are made of, not how we pose or position ourselves? I hate to hear people say, "He hasn't found himself or she hasn't found herself." Selves are not discovered. Selves are constructed.

There's nothing healthier for us all than Kol Nidre when we take an honest look at who we are. Someone once admitted, "You know Rabbi, deep down I'm really shallow." Well, I think we all are at times.

Everyone makes mistakes. Good, well meaning people can and do spend years of selfish attention to personal needs and benefits. Some may be friends and acquaintances; some may be in our places of work; some are the very people we purport to love and with whom we live under the same roof. And yes, some are even us!

At times we can all be so harsh, so critical and so judgmental. At times we become forgetful of all the love and devotion we have received, love and devotion that is often undeserved. At times we overreact when what is needed is calm and deliberate action.

Everyone ought to have a right to mess up on occasion. I'm not talking ax murderers, mind you. But sometimes, we're going to be let down by those whom we expect to always do the right thing. And sometimes, others are going to be let down by the mistakes that we will make.

Kol Nidre calls us tonight to each take a journey inside our own soul. Kol Nidre beckons and urges us to repair those disconnects, person to person, which in our arrogance and haste to judge, have become obstacles in our relationships and dealings with others.

Writer and columnist Mark Jacobson and his wife Nancy invested three months taking their three children, 16, 12, and 9, around the world. They wrote a book called; *12,000 Miles in the Nick of Time: A Semi-Dysfunctional Family Circumnavigates The Globe*. It all began because these parents despaired that this was the only way they could rescue their children from becoming, in their words, and I quote: "prisoners of the idiot culture, which seemed a terrible waste of perfectly fine DNA." Unquote.

The book's content is average, but its message is so crucial: The journey inwards. Apparently Mark Jacobson had had a poor relationship with his father. He tells how his father once built a sailboat called the "*L'hayim*" and he would take Mark sailing. But the boat was far too heavy to maneuver and they just sat on the Long Island Sound with nothing to say to each other. Mark remembers that they went

out many times, yet were never able to get any closer. There was always that space between them.

Years later, when alone with his father's casket, Mark, looking down at his father, tearfully admitted: "Even now, with him in that coffin, the space between us seems impossibly huge...were the two of us lazy or were we afraid? Was it chemical, something between the two of us that didn't mix? Or were we simply too busy to even care?"

Mark Jacobson concludes with the realization that relationships are brittle. How foolish that we husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, parents and children, grandparents and extended family often grow complacent with that space between us, as did Jacobson and his father.

So, tonight we have made a reservation and our lives are booked; we are engaged in an inward journey tonight and tomorrow until the Shofar sounds at the end of *Ne'ilah*. Fasting, my friends, is not the hard part of this journey. Sitting and standing for extended periods of time is also not the hard part. No, my friends. It is opening ourselves to being both vulnerable and reachable. That is the hard part. That is always the hardest part on Yom Kippur!

You know, my friends, scholars and historians still debate the origin of the words of our Kol Nidre prayer. It is unclear whether the Kol Nidre prayer was written by Spanish marranos who secretly gathered on this night to repent for their forced conversions, or was it written by one individual sitting in a place of freedom expressing humility and the desire to take off a mask and start over. It's a fascinating, if endless, subject for historians and liturgists, but it really doesn't make any difference tonight.

Here is what does:

The Yom Kippur liturgy's power exceeds any literal translation of its words. And on the wings of Kol Nidre and its beloved melody, we have arrived here tonight, right now, to the very courtyard of our Creator.

Bolder, and utterly assured of God's love and mercy, we know with a timeless assurance that we only have to enter and call out to God our personal prayers of forgiveness as we begin our journey inward tonight. We must have the attitude and feeling of being at home tonight in the presence of God.

Tonight, all of us are at home! Tonight we proclaim, Dear God, we are home! Tonight, we focus on the Talmud's teaching, balancing and appreciating being at the center of the universe and at the same time understanding that there is much more far beyond who are and what our value is. Tonight, we ask God to see us for who we are and to cleanse us with divine love. Tonight, we ask God to support us as we continue on our journey through life. Amen.