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LIFE & WORKIDEASSESSAY

The Meaning of a Yom Kippur Prayer

Kol Nidrei, one of the most awe-inspiring and misunderstood parts of Jewish liturgy, dramatizes the power of repentance



By Meir Soloveichik

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Sunday, Sept. 25, marks the beginning of one of the most important periods of the Jewish calendar. Rosh Hashana, the New Year, begins Sunday night, followed 10 days later by Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Many Jews who do not attend synagogue regularly make sure to be present for the evening prayer service that marks the start of Yom Kippur, when worshipers recite Kol Nidrei, perhaps the most famous passage in Jewish liturgy—and one of the least understood.

At first sight Kol Nidrei (also known as Kal Nidrei), which roughly translates to “all vows,” may seem technical and prosaic, entirely out of place for the holiest day of the Jewish year. One common version reads: “All vows, prohibitions, bans, oaths, restrictions, penalties and oaths of dedication, that we will utter and swear, and take upon ourselves, from this Day of Atonement until the next Day of Atonement, to come in goodness; all these [vows] I regret; let all of them be discarded and forgiven, abolished and undone; they are not valid and they are not binding.” As mundane as this may seem, by acknowledging the human temptation to take vows we will later regret, this legal formula offers an important message about the power of regret to foster lasting change in our lives.

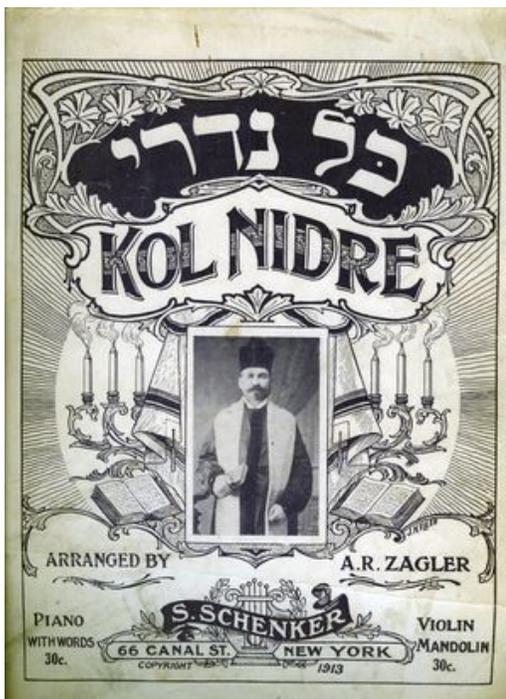
The Bible declares that human speech has enormous power and that

The Bible declares that human speech has enormous power and that vows made to God must be fulfilled: “If a man vow a vow unto the Lord, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth” (Numbers 30:2). Such a vow could bind the speaker to do something admirable, such as bringing a gift to the Temple in Jerusalem, the ancient center of Jewish rites. But vows could also

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be taken impetuously. In a fit of pique, you could bind yourself to a vow with adverse effects for your entire life.

Rabbinic tradition declares that a vow to God can be dissolved by a Jewish court in exigent circumstances, including profound regret that the vow was ever taken. The renowned 20th-century Talmudist Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explained that the logic is linked to the efficacy of repentance. In Judaism, the possibility of repentance is based on the idea that, in the words of the great medieval philosopher Maimonides, “Free will is given to every person.” Freedom is what allows human beings to sin, but it is also what allows us to change. In repentance, Maimonides reflects, the penitent proclaims, “I am now another individual and am no longer the same person who committed these misdeeds.” Regret reflects the fact that we are responsible for our actions, but it also bespeaks the capacity to create better versions of ourselves.



The seriousness of vows, and also the possibility of their dissolution, led to the development of Kol Nidrei in the 8th or 9th century. As the Day of Atonement approached, many Jews were aware that they might have impetuously uttered vows for which God would call them to account. They therefore gathered in the synagogue right before the onset of the holiday to seek the dissolution of these vows, publicly declaring that all vows taken in the past year should be dissolved. The origin of this tradition among the Jewish masses, rather than from the rabbis, explains why the words of Kol Nidrei are not in Hebrew but Aramaic, the vernacular language spoken by Jews in the Near East at the time. The liturgy evolved to explicitly state the reason why the dissolution was called for: “all these [vows] I regret.”

Unlike most liturgical innovations in Jewish history, Kol Nidrei was often opposed by the rabbis who led these Jewish communities. Abolishing vows outside the usual courtroom setting, they argued, was misguided. Other rabbis insisted that it would be efficacious only if the focus was on future vows uttered in the year to come, an argument that shaped the version of Kol Nidrei commonly used by American Jews today, while other traditions continue to use a version that refers to vows taken in the previous year.

Rabbis also worried that the public ritual of Kol Nidrei could be twisted into an anti-Semitic calumny: that Jews could not be trusted to remain true to their financial arrangements and promises. They were right to be worried, for enemies of Judaism did exactly that. Medieval rabbis were summoned to the courts of kings and accused, in public debate, of communal dishonesty. Jewish sages responded to such charges by explaining, accurately and honestly, that legal dissolution of vows applied only to promises to God and that agreements with human beings could not be dissolved.

In this, too, the rules of vows paralleled the concept of repentance, for rabbinic tradition makes clear that repentance before God does not undo misdeeds against another human being. Only attempts at reparation, and

forgiveness from those wronged, can make up for such sins.

Despite potential PR problems and rabbinic concerns, Kol Nidrei endured, and today the prayer's traditional melody is synonymous with the awe-inspiring onset of the Day of Atonement. No other piece of Jewish liturgy combines in so elemental a fashion the notions of human fallibility and freedom, which together comprise the foundation of repentance and the Day of Atonement itself. "All these I regret": This is the essence of Kol Nidrei. And if regret, sincerely expressed, can help to heal the past by undoing the effect of words irresponsibly uttered, then there is reason to hope that past misdeeds can be healed as well.

For this reason, Kol Nidrei speaks profoundly to our own time. In the age of the internet, every impetuous posting, every misguided tweet, every regretted utterance survives forever, and often no amount of regret is sufficient to undo the stain on someone's reputation. Kol Nidrei reminds us to cancel mistakes, rather than people, accepting genuine regret and embracing the possibility of change and growth. After centuries of debate, the future of Kol Nidrei in Jewish liturgy is secure, but its lessons need to be learned once again.

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