License to Dream: Kol Nidrei and the Theology of Aspiration

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This night is often called the holiest night of the year.

The chanting of Kol Nidrei, with its sublime and haunting melody, in the presence of the Torah scrolls dressed in white, is awe-inspiring. We all feel it. And in generation after generation, it has drawn even the most disconnected Jews to the synagogue to experience it.

Still, you might know that the Kol Nidrei prayer itself has been controversial for centuries. To understand why, all you need to do is read the English translation.

In short, Kol Nidrei is a declaration that all the promises we make from this Yom Kippur to the next should be considered null and void, as though we never made them in the first place.

It's puzzling, to be sure; even embarrassing: Why would we begin Yom Kippur by crossing our fingers, so to speak?

Surely this whole day ahead of us isn't meant to be some elaborate charade in which we vow to change and be better people without really meaning it, right?

Actually, in the Middle Ages and even into the modern period, some people did accuse us of just that. They said, "Jews can't be trusted to keep their word. And how do we know that? Because they say so proudly in their synagogues on the holiest night of their year!"

This is why some leading 19th-century German rabbis—from the founders of Reform Judaism to the father of Modern Orthodoxy—who wanted to build trusting relationships with their non-Jewish neighbors, actually removed Kol Nidrei from their Yom Kippur services altogether.

Early American Reform also excluded it from the old *Union Prayer Book*, but later reinstated it in the maroon *Gates of Repentance*—albeit with a critical addition to the English translation.[1]

This new version declared that our vows would be null and void "*should we, after honest effort*, find ourselves unable to fulfill them. *Then* may we be absolved of them."[2]

This is the Kol Nidrei I was raised with, and I'm guessing many of you were, too.

That's why it never occurred to me that Kol Nidrei meant we don't have to keep our promises.

I've always thought of it as a pledge that we will do our best to live up to our goals, and that if a year from now it turns out we didn't meet all of them, God will understand and forgive us.

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That may go without saying.

But what you might not know is that this was actually a major point of contention in the early struggles between Judaism and Christianity.

The Apostle Paul was a complex figure, and scholars continue to debate how to understand him properly.

Based on his writings, some Christians believed that Judaism did not leave any room for people to come up short in their obligations to God.

In their view, the God of Judaism expected full and absolute compliance with the Torah, and if you were unable in any way to do that, you would fall out of favor with God. In fact, since human beings are imperfect by nature and we will inevitably miss the mark sometimes, they believed that Judaism sets us up to fail.[3]

Of course, we see it differently.

And, I should note, modern progressive Christians like my good friend who's a Presbyterian minister no longer see Judaism that way, either.[4]

They share our view, which is: We acknowledge that it's not possible for any one person to fulfill every last demand of the Torah, but we don't see that as a *curse*.

We see it as a *gift*.

That's because, rather than looking at the Torah as an oppressive legal regime with impossible expectations, we see it as *aspirational*.

Meaning: We believe the Torah puts forth an *ideal*—a standard that we're supposed to *aim* for, but one that God knows is not fully attainable by human beings.

And that's precisely the point: Our obligation to God in the Covenant is not to fulfill the Torah's standard perfectly. It's to try our best every single day to rise higher and higher toward the ideal, even as we know we'll never quite get there in one lifetime.

Our quest to reach the ideal is what the German-Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen called an "infinite task"—the "infinite development of the human soul."[5] That's our spiritual duty—to God and to ourselves.

This may be why Kol Nidrei has survived all the efforts to get rid of it: Because, while the literal meaning of its words may be puzzling, coming to temple on Yom Kippur for Kol Nidrei is a poetic experience that *transcends* words.

The ritual juxtaposition is profound: The Torah scrolls, dressed majestically in white and held in awe before the congregation, symbolize the pure, divine ideal to which we aspire, while the Kol Nidrei prayer being recited acknowledges our inability to ever achieve it completely.

Though some have been troubled by this gap, Judaism has always seen it as fertile ground for holiness.

Because to live each day acutely aware of the tension between where we *are* and where we *ought* to be, to feel constantly *pulled* toward an ideal, and to respond to that pull by doing something tangible that will bring us a little bit closer to the ideal—that, for us, is the essence of spiritual living.

Kol Nidrei is how we affirm for ourselves what, in truth, God already has given—and that is, permission to be human.

And that's liberating.

It means that we can actively imagine the person we aspire to be and take risks to bring our best self into being. We can set audacious goals and make promises we fully intend to keep, and we don't have to be afraid of disappointing God if we come up short.

As long as we make an honest effort and genuinely do our best, then God, who is endlessly compassionate and forgiving, will have our back.

Because growth, not perfection, is what God wants from us.

Kol Nidrei is not a loophole to get away with making promises we don't intend to honor.

It's an invitation to dream about the seemingly impossible and go after it with all we've got.

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We, the Jewish people, are dreamers. It's in our spiritual DNA.

• Joseph dreamed about rising above his provincial life and above sibling rivalry and becoming a world-saving figure.

Along the way, he got himself thrown into a pit and left for dead, and though he made tremendous progress he never quite outgrew his youthful egotism. But his dogged pursuit of his vision led him to achieve heights he otherwise never would have if he'd given into his brothers and given up on his dreams.

• Jacob dreamed about rising above his fears and stepping out of his grandfather's shadow and becoming a heroic leader in his own right.

Though he never became a model family man or fully overcame his anxieties, had Jacob not followed his dream and found the courage to face his own demons, he never would have become Israel, the namesake of a people and a faith that would change the world.[6]

• And Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel points out that we, the Jewish people, dreamed for centuries about returning to the Land of Israel, from the time of the first exile in the sixth century BCE until the establishment of the modern state in 1948.

Even as a series of foreign empires ruled the Land and the vision seemed impossible, we continued to dream, convinced that we would get there someday.

This dream, says Heschel, "was uttered in our homes, in our sanctuaries, in our books, in our prayers. This continued, uninterrupted insistence, an intimate ingredient of Jewish consciousness, is at the core of Jewish history, a vital element of Jewish faith."[7]

To be sure, there's still a long way to go toward creating a state that embodies both the biblical vision of "a light to the nations" and the goals articulated in Israel's own Declaration of Independence.

But had we let go of our dream amidst the hardships of exile and the passage of time, the Jewish people today would not have a sovereign home and a safe haven anywhere in the world.

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Neither Joseph, nor Jacob, nor the State of Israel, nor *any of us* were or are perfect.

As human beings and human institutions, it's inevitable that we'll fail to live up to our ideals sometimes, even when we try our best.

But tonight is the holiest night of the year, and as Hermann Cohen put it, "the demand for holiness makes man the carrier of the spirit of holiness."[8]

Human is all we'll ever be, and it is only as human beings that we can grow and rise toward where we know we ought to be.

Our dreams are what propel us toward the ideal, and the impossibility of perfection is not an excuse to abandon our dreams.

The task is infinite. But Judaism does not want us to cower in fear of failure.

God has our back.

Kol Nidrei is our license to dream.

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[1] See Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Gates of Understanding 2: Appreciating the Days of Awe*, 117-118

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[2] *Gates of Repentance*, 252

[3] See Dennis Prager & Joseph Telushkin, *The Nine Questions People Ask About Judaism*, 79-80. The authors cite, among other verses, Paul's statements that "We could have been justified by the Law if the Law we were given had been capable of giving life, but it is not: scripture makes no exceptions when it says that sin is master everywhere…" (3:21-22) and "we conclude that a man is put right with God only through faith and not by doing what the law commands" (Romans 3:28). The translations of these verses are Prager & Telushkin's.

[4] My colleague and friend has explained to me that while some fundamentalist Christians may still accept—and share—this traditional understanding of Paul, more progressive Christians who are influenced by the insights of modern scholarship have come to understand Paul's view of Judaism as more nuanced and less harsh. So, just like different branches of Judaism interpret our sacred texts differently and we don't want to be painted with a broad brush, I want to be mindful that the same is also true of our Christian friends.

[5] Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, as quoted in: Frank, Leaman, and Manekin, eds., *The Jewish Philosophy Reader*, 437

[6] See Elie Wiesel's characterization of Jacob in his book *Messengers of God*

[7] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*, 55

[8] Hermann Cohen, ibid., 435