

## Our Word, Our Bond, Our Selves: Understanding Kol Nidrei

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*All vows and oaths we take, all promises and obligations we make to God between this Yom Kippur and the next we hereby publicly retract in the event that we should forget them, and hereby declare our intention to be absolved of them.*

– Kol Nidrei

Thus reads the simple declaration that draws Jews (on time!) to this standing room only service, dressed in our holiday best, crowds spilling into the hallway, as we gather in solemnity, anticipation and not a small amount of trepidation on Erev Yom Kippur. We come to hear and recite the dramatic, plaintive words and crescendoing melody of Kol Nidrei ( “All Vows”), a brief 53 word Aramaic chant that is not technically part of the Yom Kippur service, and not even universally recited as part of the High Holy Days liturgical aggregation, yet seems to have acquired deeper, more spiritual meaning than its brevity and austerity might imply.

*One who wishes that none of his vows should have effect all year should stand at the beginning of the year and say "All vows that I will make this year will be null..."* – Talmud Nedarim 23b

The ceremony begins as two Torah scrolls are removed from the ark by prominent members of the community. The Chazan, flanked by these two “witnesses” as in a Bet Din or religious court, then begins to chant, first softly and tentatively, then more strongly and more confidently, and finally with full-throated authority, three times in all. This quasi-legal ceremony must be done, as in a religious court, during the light of day, before the onset of Yom Kippur – religious courts may not operate on Shabbat; how much more so on Yom Kippur, known as Shabbat Shabbaton, the Sabbath of Sabbaths.

Though Kol Nidrei forms the centerpiece of, and lends its name to, the Erev-Yom Kippur service, it is not really a prayer, beseeching God for guidance, assistance or salvation. Rather, it is a highly specialized and specific proclamation that serves to nullify all (and only) *personal* vows, that is, those made to oneself, in front of God, and to God. It expresses our desire, and indeed, need, to purify ourselves of unfulfilled commitments, vows and oaths before we can enter the sphere of Yom Kippur and its service of repentance and renewal. At the same time, this brief ceremony *ushers in* Yom Kippur, and, with its undertones of regret, expectation, and promise of personal betterment, helps to set the emotional and spiritual stage for 25 hours of fasting, tefillot and introspection; the beginning of the culmination of the Yomim Noraim (Days of Awe).

The original concept for the ritual may have derived from pleadings for atonement in Leviticus (chanted by the Kohanim). However the earliest *texts* of the Kol Nidrei declaration date from the middle ages, and are found as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century in Seder Rav Amram Gaon. Several versions evolved. The Rabbis who recognized and responded to the historical, psychological and

spiritual need of the Jewish people to absolve themselves of unfulfilled obligations and rashly uttered oaths, formed and refined this ceremony, and helped to propel it to a prominent place in the Holiday liturgy. While Kol Nidrei may also have been used by 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish and Portuguese Marranos to renounce forced conversions during the Inquisition, the evidence is not clear, and the tradition had roots that obviously predated this period by several centuries. Whether apocryphal or not, however, this beautiful story of the Marranos' faith has inspired Jews throughout the centuries.

Controversy over the Kol Nidre recitation erupted almost immediately after it was incorporated into the liturgy, as some rabbinic authorities decried the annulment of vows in a procedure that did not conform to a Halachic format for "atonement". That ritual, which relates to wrongs occurring *between* men and must be made directly to the person who is wronged, requires that the wronged individual accept the apology of the penitent, and that the penitent express genuine teshuva and kavana, or regret and sincerity. Kol Nidrei, by contrast, nullifies only personal vows that an individual might make to God, such as "I will never smoke another cigarette again!" or "I commit to give Tzedakah every week!"

Other sages criticized a process that seemed blithely dismissive of the Biblical admonition:

*If a man takes a vow to God 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 30:2

The Kol Nidrei wording itself became the subject of a machlokes (Halachic dispute), as it was originally applied to retrospective nullification – effective for vows taken during the past year (in the Babylonian tradition) – and has come to be used for the prospective nullification of vows taken in the coming year, with an *implication* of disavowal for the prior year (European tradition). The reasons for the change seem subtle and somewhat obscure, but appear also related to the idea that one cannot give oneself dispensation for *past* wrongs without the proper Halachic procedure. This textual modification first appears in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, promoted by Rav Shmuel ben Meir (the Roshbam, Rashi's son-in-law) and Rav Yaacov ben Meir (Rabbeinu Tam, Rashi's grandson).

But the issue of most fundamental political and historical import involves the common misconception among some Jews and non-Jews that Kol Nidrei serves to void *all* vows, whether between man and his fellow, man and civil society, *or* man and God. This unfortunate fallacy has led to accusations against Jews of deceitfulness and lack of trustworthiness, and sadly, has become another justification for anti-Semitism. Over the centuries some communities even required Jews to make an extra, special vow in court to ensure that their testimony was truthful, while other judges refused to allow Jews to make any warranties at all, considering them useless. Evidence of this perverse rationale can still be found on anti-Semitic web sites. To this day, because of concern for such misapprehension, the traditional Kol Nidrei is not recited by all congregations (many Reform and some Sephardic services exclude it).

These misconceptions are entirely unfounded. Our absolute responsibility for the vows we make to our fellow man was established early in the tradition:

*'Of all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord' (Leviticus 16:30) — for transgressions as between man and the Omnipresent the Day of Atonement procures atonement; but for transgressions as between man and his fellow man, the Day of Atonement does not procure atonement until he has made peace with his fellow. — Mishnah Yoma 8:9*

The underlying essence of Kol Nidrei is acceptance of responsibility for our words, as much as we take responsibility for our thoughts and our actions. This theme can be found in other Biblical and Talmudic prohibitions regarding speech, including the negative mitzvah against Loshon Hora (evil speech), prohibitions against deception and dishonesty in business dealings, and other admonitions against thoughtless, irresponsible, or hurtful speech.

*They said: He who exacted punishment from the generation of the Flood (Genesis 7) and the generation of the Dispersion (Genesis 11) will exact punishment from him who does not stand by his word. —Mishnah Bava Metzia 4:2*

The Torah teaches that vows, oaths, declarations and verbal commitments are serious and can have serious, even disastrous consequences. They are not to be made or taken lightly. Whether we are communicating with ourselves, our neighbors, or God, words are important. They both express and represent our hearts. Just as we choose, weigh and measure our daily actions according to Jewish ethics and Halacha, so we must take care of how, why, and what we speak. And on Erev Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, when we use our tefillot to verbally plead our case before God, we want to be sure to present, and to warrant, to ourselves and to God, the mindful and heartfelt sincerity of our teshuva. On all days, but especially on this day, God is listening.