

There are songs, pieces of music, that come with all of our memories attached to them. Just as smelling a scent can bring back memories so can hearing a piece of music. Years ago I heard “For Good” from the musical Wicked for the first time, and from then until now I cannot hear it without thinking of my childhood best friend. The lyrics:

I've heard it said
That people come into our lives for a reason
Bringing something we must learn
And we are led
To those who help us most to grow
If we let them
And we help them in return
Well, I don't know if I believe that's true
But I know I'm who I am today
Because I knew you...

These lyrics were not written for me but they have become a part of me. I believe each one of us has songs which pull at our heartstrings, both happy and sad. The music of Kol Nidre, the music of the High Holy Days plays a similar role in our lives. It reminds us that another year has come and gone. We pray throughout Yom Kippur that we may be blessed with more time through personal and communal reflection. We also acknowledge the places where we, as a community, have fallen short. Our prayers are written in the plural because while each individual has not committed each and every sin, someone has and we wish to grant them the anonymity to request forgiveness. But it is the music, the mournful tones, that help us reach the mental space to be reflective.

Not so very long ago, in places an ocean away from us today, many of our ancestors struggled with the central prayer of this evening. In order to understand their struggle, and our own, we

must look to the history of the recitation of Kol Nidre, the history of which stretches back many many years.

We do not know when the words of Kol Nidre were first composed, but we know it was known by the Geonic Period, approximately the seventh century until the eleventh century. The first important alteration to the prayer was made by Rashi's son-in-law, Meir ben Samuel, around the year 1100 CE in France. He changed the original phrase "from the last Day of Atonement until this one" to "from this Day of Atonement until the next." Thus the dispensation of the "Kol Nidre" was not as formerly *a posteriori* and concerned with unfulfilled obligations of the past year, but *a priori* and having reference to vows which one might not be able to fulfil or might forget to observe during the ensuing year. Meir ben Samuel likewise added the words "we do repent of them all" for according to the Law, real repentance is a condition of dispensation. He found support for his changes in the Talmud, specifically Nedarim 23b, which states that "Whoever wishes all the vows he may make throughout the year to be null and void shall come at the beginning of the year and say: 'May all the vows which I shall vow be annulled.'"

Yet, these changes would come to be used by anti-semites to prove that Jews were untrustworthy. For, "As early as 1240 Jehiel of Paris was obliged to defend the "Kol Nidre" against charges. It can not be denied that, according to the usual wording of the formula, an unscrupulous man might think that it offers a means of escape from the obligations and promises which he had assumed and made in regard to others."¹ Yet, rabbis and teachers have taught for centuries that Kol Nidre only grants dispensation from vows which "an individual voluntarily assumes for himself alone and in which no other persons or their interests are involved." No vow, promise, or oath, however, which concerns another person, a court of justice, or a community is implied in the "Kol Nidre."

Throughout the middle ages, Jewish scholars were against the tradition of reciting Kol Nidre. They had various reasons including the belief that it made people vow recklessly and therefore

¹ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/9443-kol-nidre>

caused more trouble than good. In 1844 a rabbinical conference was held in Brunswick, Germany and those in attendance decided “unanimously that the formula was not essential, and that the members of the convention should exert their influence toward securing its speedy abolition.”²

The decision of the conference was accepted by many congregations of western Europe and in all the American Reform congregations, which while retaining the melody substituted for the formula a German hymn or a Hebrew psalm, or changed the old text to the words, "May all the vows arise to thee which the sons of Israel vow unto thee, O Lord, . . . that they will return to thee with all their heart, and from this Day of Atonement until the next," etc. ...The principal factor which preserved the great religious authority of the "Kol Nidre" well into the nineteenth century, and which continually raises up new defenders for it, is doubtless its plaintive and appealing melody, which made a deep impression [on many].³

Yet, some rabbis did try to remove both the music and words of Kol Nidre altogether but they faced congregations throughout both Europe and America who refused to allow them to make these changes. The conflicts surrounding Kol Nidre continued well into the 20th century including a debate among Reform Rabbis about whether or not a Hebrew version of the prayer should be included in the Union Hymnal. Though today we rarely think about the idea of vows in the same way our ancestors did, we do still make vows in our lives. Rabbi Jackie Ellenson writes, “When we make vows, we put into speech our deepest fears and most profound hopes.”⁴ We vow to lose weight, to take more time for family, to stop yelling, to start speaking up. We also make choices, as Rabbi Ellenson continues, “...many of us make various commitments to do certain things or give up certain things that we cherish, in order to avert danger or bring about a

² <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/9443-kol-nidre>

³ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/9443-kol-nidre>

⁴ The Torah: A Women's Commentary," 1008-1009.

hoped-for future.”⁵ These can include not going for the promotion because we have family responsibilities such as children or aging parents. It includes worrying about putting oneself in danger either physically or financially. Kol Nidre grants us the freedom to say to ourselves that we will or will not do something, and if we choose to change our mind that God will not view our choice in a negative light.

The freedom to make vows is one not to be taken lightly. For so much of our history we were unable to make the choices of what to do and who to be. We are blessed in the United States to be able to act on our freedom, to be able to vow to make the world a better place and to act upon those vows. As we spend the next day in prayer, contemplation, and community may we take the opportunity to vow to ourselves that we will make this year a good year. A year of growth and compassion. A year of love and joy. Hardship may strike, and any moment may become a larger roadblock than we anticipated but vowing to improve ourselves and our community can still be something we each strive for in our lives.

May you take this teaching from the Talmud with you as inspiration:

If you save one life, it is as if you have saved the world

And may you each be well over the fast.

⁵ *ibid.*