

# Kol Nidre 2014

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I have always been fascinated by the words we say before Kol Nidre, “In the heavenly court, and in the earthly court, with God’s assent and with the assent of this congregation, we are permitted to pray with those who have transgressed” (אנו מתירין להתפלל עם העבריינים) - *anu matirin l’hitpalel im ha avaryanim*). I’ve been intrigued because עבריינים (*avaryanim*) means sinners, those who have transgressed. An עובר (*oveir*) is one who has crossed the line by sinning, and has the same root as עיברי (*ivri*), in Hebrew, ע-ב-ר, (*ayin-bet-resh*) Abraham was the original Hebrew, the first עברי (*ivri*) when he “crossed over” into the Land Canaan. But it can also mean someone who completely crosses over, who leaves the community. In this sense scholars have suggested that עבריינים (*avaryanim*) doesn’t just mean sinners, it also means Iberians, the Jews of Spain, who were forced en masse to either leave Spain in 1492 or to convert to Catholicism if they wished to remain. We know the history that followed. Many Jews secretly remained Jewish while publicly presenting as Catholic. Many Jews had risen to high positions in the Spanish royal court, the government and even the Church. The Inquisition was instituted to purge Spain of heresy and Jews were persecuted and burned. Many fled first to Portugal, or to the Spanish colonies in the New World, or eventually to more tolerant Holland. It was in Holland that this prayer, the permission to pray with sinners developed a new moral force. This ancient formula allowed an

exiled and outcast community to return home to be reunited and to pray with their fellow Jews<sup>1</sup>. It was a prayer of welcome.

This summer Carla and I went to Spain. We spent most of our time in Madrid and Barcelona, but while we were in Madrid we took a day trip to Toledo, the old capital of Spain. We discovered Toledo had a Jewish quarter a *Juderia* so we decided to visit.

The history of the Jews of Toledo goes back to Roman times. Jews first lived in Toledo around 192 BCE. The Visigoths made Toledo their capital in 507 C.E. soon after they conquered Spain. It was an excellent strategic location, built on a hill and surrounded on three sides by the Tagus river. The Visigoths and all of Spain, converted to Catholicism in 586 C.E. In the early 8th Century, Toledo was conquered by the Moors and for four hundred years Muslims, Catholics, and Jews coexisted and prospered in Toledo during what we call “The Golden Age” of Spain, which may be the worlds most successful multi-ethnic and multi-religious society<sup>2</sup> until the United States.

In 1085 Alfonso VI “reconquered” Toledo as part of the *reconquista* and once again made it the capital of the Kingdom of Cordoba and later of all Spain. The Jews of Toledo continued to prosper. During the 12th and 13th

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<sup>1</sup> “I Have Sworn: The Power to Annul God’s Vows,” by Rachel Farbiarz and Ruth Messenger, from *All These Vows*, Larry Hoffman ed., Jewish Lights Publishing, (Woodstock, VT.) 2011, page 147

<sup>2</sup> *Toledo and Its Jewish Past* By Sarina Roffé,  
[http://www.americansephardifederation.org/PDF/articles/The\\_Jews\\_of\\_Toledor.pdf](http://www.americansephardifederation.org/PDF/articles/The_Jews_of_Toledor.pdf)

centuries they enjoyed equality before the law, communal autonomy, and royal favor. Supposedly, King Alfonso VIII loved a Jewish woman. Perhaps that was the reason; it is certainly a romantic one. Or perhaps the Jews, with their linguistic and personal connections throughout Spain, were essential for commerce and that is why they prospered.

Regardless, at its height in the late 1300's the Jewish community of Toledo had five Talmudic academies and ten synagogues. Toledo was home to King Alfonso VIII's tax collector Yosef ibn Shoshan, who built one of the community's main synagogues.<sup>3</sup> Some of the greatest rabbis in Jewish history lived and taught in Toledo, like R' Asher ben Yehiel (The Rosh) whose commentaries are still included in every volume of the Talmud or his son, Jacob ben Asher, (The Tur) whose code of Jewish law ארבת הטורים (*Arbat Ha Turim*) or in English, The Four Pillars, is still a critical rabbinic code. Of course there were times of trouble, anti-Jewish riots, the scourge of the Black Death, but the Jewish community of Toledo remained a seat of Jewish wealth, commerce, Torah scholarship and culture even in Christian times.<sup>4</sup>

In 1411, an itinerant preacher, Father Vincent Ferrer, came to Toledo and preached a sermon against the Jews in the main cathedral. He then led the enraged congregation out of the church across the short distance to the Jewish quarter, the *Juderia*, and attacked the community. He converted

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<sup>3</sup> ibed

<sup>4</sup> Toledo, The Jewish Virtual Library,

[http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud\\_0002\\_0020\\_0\\_19924.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0020_0_19924.html), 2008

Shoshan's synagogue into The Church of Santa Maria de la Blanca while those who followed him attacked the Jews, killed many, drove others out of the city into the countryside and stole whatever they could carry.<sup>5</sup> A few Jews remained until the final expulsion of 1492, but after these riots Toledo was for all purposes empty of Jews. Its 1,600 year history was effectively over.

Over the last twenty years Spain has done a great deal to resurrect the memory of its Jewish community. Three synagogues remain in Spain and two are in Toledo: Santa Maria de la Blanca and Il Transito. Both were desacralized and are no longer churches. Today they are national monuments of Spanish/Sephardic Jewish life. When Carla and I walked the streets of the Toledo *Juderia* it was quiet and peaceful. The sky was blue. The day was hot and the streets were filled with tourists. But I felt we were walking among ghosts.

The abandoned synagogues are beautiful. In Il Transito you can still see the delicate arabesque finishes on the high walls of the synagogue, a reminder of the Arab influence on Jewish life and, where the walls meet the ceiling, you can still read the the *Ashrei* prayer which was never erased: עשרי יושבי ביתך עוד יהללוך סלה (*Ashrei yoshvei veitecha, od yehallucha sela*), "Happy are those who dwell in Your house; they forever praise you!" It was hard to read that inscription and to remember all that followed and not be moved to tears. Santa Maria de la Blanca is a

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<sup>5</sup> ibed

beautiful, modest building, the interior divided by three sets of graceful columns and as the name suggests the interior is all white. You can visit the Sephardic museum and see the former homes of the wealthy, the powerful and the learned. And all of it, the Jews, their lives, and their creations are gone, forever.

The questions I have asked myself since our visit to Toledo are, what does it take to sustain a Jewish community? What does it take to sustain Jewish life? Talking about Toledo is a bit of a set-up. It is not really the appropriate lead-in to my question, because of course Toledo was destroyed by outsiders. The Jews there had no choice. They lived Jewish lives, they created great accomplishments in religious thought and in art and culture that live on to this day. They did not choose to stop being Jewish, they were forced to, or they were killed. Other Jewish communities great and small, important and insignificant, across time and space were also destroyed by outsiders. Today they reside only in the Jewish memory.

But we, the Jews of America, do have a choice and the question for us is profound: what does it take to sustain Jewish community? Or, perhaps another way to put this question on Kol Nidre is this: do we believe that we belong to something greater than ourselves. Is our Judaism an individual expression of faith or belief, or does being Jewish imply something greater: a commitment to a people, to a collective history, and to a

collective future? I think how we answer this question holds the key to whether we can sustain Jewish life in a free society.

The idea of Judaism as a religion is fairly new. It really first appeared in Europe in the early 19th Century with the granting of civil rights and citizenship to Jews in Western Europe. With that came the desire of Jews to become full participants in Western societies where citizenship, whether French, or American, or whatever, was the primary source of identity and religion was viewed as a private matter and a voluntary affirmation of faith. Thus you could have French, Polish, Italian, German or Irish Catholics, all members of the same faith, each practicing in a different way. All happy to kill each other if their countries went to war against one another.

But Jews were different, we did not fit into the traditional categories of religion in the West, which saw religion “as a sphere of life separate from all others, largely private, not public, voluntary and not compulsory.”<sup>6</sup> In the 1830’s Samson Rafael Hirsch, the founder of modern Orthodoxy wrote, “Judaism is not a religion, the synagogue is not a church, and the rabbi is not a priest. Judaism is not a mere adjunct to life: it comprises all of life. To be a Jew is not a mere part, it is the sum total of our task in life.”

We are a long way from that today. Part of the bargain of Jews receiving citizenship and civil rights is that we had to separate our national identity from our religious identity. Rather than being “just Jews,” we became

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<sup>6</sup> Batnitzky, “How Judaism Became a Religion” p 13

“hyphenated Jews.” So in America today being Jewish is a personal choice. For some being Jewish is a precious inheritance. For others it is a mere trifle. No one compels us from outside to be Jewish as was once the case. Today, we choose to be Jewish and many do not. Perhaps the better question is not how do we sustain a Jewish community, but why should we sustain a Jewish community? Why bother being Jewish at all? What is the point? Does the existence of the Jewish people matter?

Here I reach a point where I realize that I have no answers, at least no rational answers, no simple answers. I have no prescriptions or advice. I only have my questions and a burning feeling that they are absolutely essential. I have another feeling as well: that what we are doing right now matters and matters greatly. Kol Nidre, this service, the way we collectively admit our failure, as individuals, as a community, and as a people is hugely important. Even more important perhaps is our collective optimism, our belief in the possibility of forgiveness, our belief in the potential for change, our absolute faith that relationships, whether between human beings and God or between ourselves are the most important activity in which we, mortal creatures of flesh and blood, can be engaged.

For a moment, whether you believe in God or not, suspend your disbelief. Tonight and tomorrow we are engaged in a communal conversation with God. We are engaged in a dialogue with the Creator of all Existence about the most profound moral issues human beings face. Each year we return to synagogue to reaffirm that, despite our shortcomings, we will try once

again to do things better, to get things right, to answer the moral call of our prophets and our God to live lives of moral significance. We have been engaged in this conversation for as long as there has been a Jewish people. We have been engaged in this conversation in this particular way for over two millennia across time and across space, whether in Toledo, or Marrakesh, or Babylon, or Baghdad or Vilna, or Dubno, or Lodz, or Jerusalem, or Richmond, California.

This is my reason the Jewish people matter: that, not despite of all our flaws and failures, but because of them and because of our willingness to confront them fully and frequently we provide a sense of hope and purpose for human existence. Judaism claims that it is possible to be fully engaged in the world and not be fully of the world. That what we do and how we live matters, not for a heavenly future, but for here and now, on this earth, in this lifetime. Days like Yom Kippur help us mediate this path, help us walk this tightrope. The Jewish People, עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל, (*Am Yisrael*) is the body that sustains our spiritual task, which is this conversation. It is each generations job to do what they can to sustain this people to keep קְלַל יִשְׂרָאֵל (*Clal Yisrael*) the collective body of Israel alive so the conversation can continue.

That is my answer, at least this year. I don't share it because it is the right answer, rather I share it to ignite your questions and to ask you to seek out your answers. Because tonight is a night of introspection, of serious questions, and of self-examination. How do you view your Jewish identity?

As Jews we are tied to a particular history and a particular destiny. That is why the history of the Jews of Toledo matters. That is why we remember it and the countless other Jewish communities that came before, that have arisen, and then fallen. We are part of that history but with a particular twist: we, unlike them, have the freedom to choose who we will be and how we will live as Jews. The question is, what will we do with that freedom?

This synagogue is no architectural masterpiece, like Il Transito or Santa Maria de la Blanca. It will never be included in a book about important synagogue buildings. But tonight it is alive with Jews. Tonight is Kol Nidre. Tonight, when we are told that everything hangs in the balance, a modest building filled with Jews is much more important to the Jewish future than a museum. Even a museum that celebrates a glorious past, like that of Sephardic Spain, like the Toledo *Juderia* and its empty synagogues. I don't know what it will take, but I implore you tonight to ask these questions, to seek your answers, and to make a commitment to do one thing in the coming that will ensure that this building is never empty, that this Jewish community does not become a museum populated by ghosts. I urge you to find your reasons to help sustain our people in this time. Because everything hangs in the balance.