

Kol Nidrei 2019/5780 - We Come Together

Before I begin, I just want to remind everyone that if you are ill, or pregnant or a nursing mother, you are forbidden to fast. Your health or the health of your baby comes first.

Every year, without fail, I am struck by these words, with which we begin our service:

בְּיִשְׁבֵּיבָה שֶׁל מַעֲלָה וּבְיִשְׁבֵּיבָה שֶׁל מַטָּה. עַל דְּעַת הַמְּקוֹם וְעַל דְּעַת הַקְּהָל. אָנוּ מִתִּירִין
לְהִתְפַּלֵּל עִם הָעֲבָרִימִים

The translation in our mahzor, is on page 16,

“With one voice, assembled Sages past and present declare:
All may pray as one on this night of repentance;
let none be excluded from our community of prayer

With one voice, God and congregation proclaim:
All may pray as one on this day of return;
Let all find a place in this sacred assembly.”

Well, as we find many times in our *Mahzor*, that’s not what the Hebrew says. It’s not a problem of a sense-for-sense versus a word-for-word translation. It’s an interpretive translation... that gets it wrong. A more accurate translation is, “In the Heavenly court and in the Earthly Court, with the knowledge of God and the knowledge of this community, we are granted permission to pray with sinners.”

It’s the same and its not. To me the Hebrew is simple, powerful, and spooky. Simple because the syntax is straight forward, without any “All may pray as one...” or “let none be...” or “let all find...” with its passive voice and conditional tense. There should nothing passive or conditional on Kol Nidre. According to our tradition, what is at stake, is life and death. The stakes are just too high for passivity. The Hebrew is more powerful because of the weight of the liturgical symbolism. With Chazanit Shayndel standing in the center, flanked on either side by the Torah scrolls we have created a beit

Kol Nidrei 2019/5780 - We Come Together

din, a rabbinic court of three, which in religious terms gives these words legal force. We have pronounced a *psak halacha*, a legal ruling, that lets us know that anyone who wishes to can pray here tonight. Member or not, no matter what your spiritual state, regardless how at peace you feel, or how distressed, how familiar or out of place.

Tonight we are all allowed to be here, even if we have never sat in a synagogue, even if we have not sat in a synagogue since our bar or bat mitzvah, even if we don't understand why we are here. And its spooky because God's presence is just a given... no questions asked. The heavenly court has been called into session, as has our earthly court. Heaven and earth are touching. To me that isn't the same as "With one voice, assembled Sages past and present declare..." or "With one voice, God and congregation proclaim..." No sages are mentioned. And certainly God and this congregation aren't declaring anything together. The translation is too pat, it's not spooky. It says almost the same thing, but in my opinion, by trying to play it safe, it says nothing at all.

For me this simple invocation is the key to understanding Yom Kippur. If Rosh Hashanah is the Day of Judgement, the day when we face our failings and our faults, when we admit that despite our best efforts we have fallen short, Yom Kippur is the day when we are told, "It doesn't matter. You are welcome here in all your flawed humanness. You know you are not capable of perfection, but you have come here tonight anyway and God accepts you as you are, and accept you as you are, because

Kol Nidrei 2019/5780 - We Come Together

you were created by God, in the Divine image. Your flaws make you who you are, and your attempt to grow beyond your flaws make you noble.

Everyone in this room is a sinner. Everyone in this room has transgressed: against God, against those we love the most, against those we ignore, against those who we have hurt intentionally and those we have hurt unintentionally, against ourselves. If we were not given permission to pray with sinners, none of us could sit in this room right now. What a simple, powerful, and radical idea. Everyone is welcome... without exception. No one is turned away. The lifeboat is not full. There is always room enough for all. Come as you are, because God accepts you as you are. And, if God does, how much the more so must we. Imagine if that was our societal norm. That everyone is welcome: no racism, no sexism, no hatred of the stranger, the weak, the mentally ill, the different. These words remind us that God is not a bigot.

What if we could remember these words every time we see someone that drives us crazy, that person in our life that we just can't stand. What if, before we lashed out, or repeated a pattern of self-destructive behavior that we can't seem to stop, we paused for just a second and invoked this heavenly and earthly court and said, "בִּישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַעְלָה וּבִישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַטָּה." What if we could remember what we are experiencing right now: Heaven and Earth touching, absolute acceptance, and we gave that person the same love and acceptance that we are promised in this moment.

Kol Nidrei 2019/5780 - We Come Together

I think a great deal about love. Love freely given and love denied. I think a great deal about the healing power of Divine Love and wonder what our world would be like if we reached out to one another in love rather than in fear and defensiveness. Fear is such weak armour after all. I remember when I was a child, how I was bathed in my parents' love. How secure and safe I felt. But I grew older. My father died too young and too soon and I went out into the world, without that love that shielded me like a blanket, like armor, like an embrace, and it caused me great suffering and I caused others to suffer. And now that I am old I have come to realize that I never lost that protective love. But that I have (I have always had) the ability to reweave that blanket with the love and care I show to others. With that realization I feel stronger and safer than I have felt in years. That is what those words mean to me tonight.

אָנוּ מִתְּיָרִין לְהִתְפַּלֵּל עִם הָעֹבְרִיִּים - We are allowed to pray with sinners. We are allowed to pray with sinners, because we are all sinners. This is the fundamental reality of our existence. We are, all of us, fundamentally flawed. Yet the message of Yom Kippur is that it doesn't matter. Or perhaps, more accurately, it matters completely. God receives us as we are. There was a Chasidic Rebbe named Reb Zusha of Anipoli, he was a disciple of the Magid of Mazrich. He was deeply revered, and deeply humble. On his deathbed he was crying and could not be consoled. His chasidim said to him, "Master, you are almost as wise as Moses and almost as kind as Abraham, so you are sure to be judged well in Heaven." Reb Zusha replied, "When I get to Heaven, they will not ask me "Why weren't you more like Moses?" or "Why weren't you more like Abraham?" They

Kol Nidrei 2019/5780 - We Come Together

will ask, "Why weren't you more like Zusha?" The meaning of the word *teshuvah* in Hebrew is not repentance, it is return. We know this to be true. How many times have we sensed, have we known that we have lost the sense of who we truly are. How the habitual behavior of our daily lives and the collected hurts, real or perceived, and the defense mechanisms we create to feel safe have obscured our real selves from ourselves. How many of us live with regret for something we wanted to do but did not, like writing a novel, marrying someone, taking a different career path? This is was the source of R' Zusha's grief on his deathbed. That he had not been more his true self.

On the Sunday morning of Erev Rosh Hashanah, just as I woke up there was a power outage. Suddenly in an instant I had to rethink everything I normally do, because my whole morning is based on electricity: making coffee, the spark that starts the gas burner on the stove, reading in the early morning. All simple and mundane tasks. But now I had to figure out how to do them a different way. I had to rethink how I do everything. Yom Kippur is like that power outage. It is a reminder to us to stop and rethink the way we live our lives. But not how we make coffee or cook breakfast, but rather, to reevaluate the essential core of how we go about our lives, our habits, and to return to our true selves. This idea of return to our true self, our essence as Divinely created and good is essential to Jewish thought and value. In the Torah portion we read on the Shabbat right before Rosh Hashanah, *parashat Nitzavim*, we read, "וְשָׁבַתְּ עַד-יְהוָה" אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלוֹ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-אָנֹכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם וּבְנִיךָ בְּכֹל-לְבַבְךָ

Kol Nidrei 2019/5780 - We Come Together

וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ: וְשָׁב יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת-שְׁבוּתֶךָ וְרַחֲמֶךָ וְשׂוּב וּקְבַצְךָ מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר הִפְיָצְךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
:שְׁמָהּ and you return to the LORD your God, and you and your children heed His
command with all your heart and soul, just as I enjoin upon you this day, Even if your
outcasts are at the ends of the world, from there the LORD your God will gather you,
from there He will fetch you.” This is the promise of Yom Kippur, of the prayer we just
recited. That we are allowed to pray with sinners. And there is this, tonight we do not
have to do this alone. If we are each, individually imperfect and flawed, striving to return
to our true selves, then perhaps together in our prayer and our we make something
more perfect, more complete, greater than our individual selves, greater than our
individual egos and points of view, a *kehillah kedoshah*, a sacred community that
supports us in our work of *teshuvah*, of return. What could be more important? Who
better than those of us here tonight? We are allowed to pray with sinners. What a gift!