

כל נדרי –

*All the vows, the renunciations, bans, the oaths, pledges, the formulas of obligation, the promises we make to God, or to ourselves from this Yom Kippur to the next - we hereby retract. May they all be undone, repealed, cancelled, voided, annulled, regarded as invalid, as non-binding.*

We have we been chanting these words for at least 1,400 years. What are we trying to say and why do we take the *sifrei torah* out of the ark, symbolically setting up a court - and essentially declare: **I am not keeping the promises and oaths, I don't want to be held accountable for all the obligations and pledges.** Back in the 9th Century, the leaders of the Babylonian kehilla did *not* look kindly upon this communal announcement that we are not bound by our oaths. In the 12th Century, one of our French sages, Rabbenu Tam, cleverly tinkered with the words a bit so that we *now* say - God, don't hold me accountable for *future* promises I might undertake in the coming year...Look, I know there are lawyers, judges, legal scholars with us here tonight, and they should all be raising red flags: *what are we saying here tonight, and how might it reflect upon our integrity?!*

Even though the words are on shaky legal ground, even though the rabbis were no fans of Kol Nidre, the members of congregations certainly were, and Kol Nidre clearly has been inducted into the cross-cultural Hall of Fame. Go to youtube and you'll find Johnny Mathis, Jacqueline de Pre`, Neil Diamond, Perry Como, Barbara Streisand, to name just a few, all soulfully interpreting Kol Nidre. I am told that the great Paul Robeson sang it. But Kol Nidre's power goes far deeper than youtube.

Let's reach back for a moment into a terrible darkness...

*Pain and fear kept us awake. A cloudless sky, thickly set with glittering stars, looked in upon our grief-filled prison. The moon shone through the window. Its light was dazzling that night and gave the pale wasted faces of the prisoners a ghostly appearance. It was as if all the life had ebbed out of them. I shuddered with dread, for it suddenly occurred to me that I was the only living man among the corpses.*

*All at once the oppressive silence was broken by a mournful tune. It was the plaintive notes of the ancient Kol Nidre prayer. I raised myself up to see whence it came. There, close to the wall, the moonlight caught the uplifted face of an old man , who, in self-forgetful, pious absorption, was singing softly to himself.*

*His prayer brought the ghostly group of seemingly insensible human beings back to life. Little by little, they all roused themselves and all eyes were fixed on the moonlight-flooded face. We sat up very quietly, so as not to disturb the old man, and he did not notice that we were listening...*

*When at last he was silent, there was exaltation among us, an exaltation which people can experience when they have fallen as low as we had fallen and then, through the mystic power of a deathless prayer, have awakened once more to the world of the spirit.*

These are the taken from the memory of Leon Szalet, a survivor of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. **How did this ancient jumble of legal fiction awaken the walking dead?** Much as it is tempting to speculate that these ancient words brought God's presence into this cauldron of despair, I am not entirely sure. *Tonight I say to you that it wasn't really the words.* In this unholy killing ground, God's face was in total eclipse. Psalm 27 was surely broken, as God was *not* hiding His children safely in His shrine in their day of peril; they were *not* holding their heads high above their foes. So how could it possibly be that here in the depths of Egypt, in the furnace of Sachsenhausen - that the softly paying old man's faith had hauled the broken spirits up from the pit of misery, breathing a new spirit into these dry bones?

Kol Nidre: Let me share some contemporary Torah from Merle Feld, a poet, playwright, activist, and spiritual teacher. She writes:

*I am grateful for this, a moment of truth, grateful to stand before You in judgment.  
You know me as a liar and I am flooded with relief to have my darkest self exposed at last.  
Every day I break my vows – to be the dutiful child, selfless parent, responsible citizen of the world.*

*No one sees, no one knows, how often I take the easy way, I let myself off the hook, give myself the benefit of the doubt – every day, every day.*

*On this day, this one day, I stand before You naked, without disguise, without embellishment, naked, shivering, ridiculous.*

*I implore You – let me try again.*

*Amen to that, I say.* Some honest words, something beyond another eye-rolling, all-too-clever legal fiction we have tucked up beneath our rabbinic sleeves. Kol Nidre could be our annual moment of clarity: *we lie to ourselves and to each others*, not because we mean to be vicious, but because we fall short, we run out of gas, we make excuses, we get lazy, we quietly give ourselves permission to let people down, we settle for mediocrity. And once a year, we call ourselves out, and, hopefully, we ponder the possibility – no, not the possibility, *the moral necessity* of reaching higher in the new year.

I say to you, that we cannot take comfort in a declaration that invites us to ignore our promises. We reclaim our humanity by aiming higher even if we might fall short.

*Tonight I say to you that falling short is not the sin.*

The real transgression lies in succumbing to a numbness, a callousness toward cries for help . The terrible sin is cruel budgetary belt-tightening around the necks of our vulnerable brothers and sisters while cynically giving our wealthy neighbors another free pass in terms of shouldering the burdens of the community, of the village, of the nation. On Yom Kippur, when we consider oaths and obligations, we must ask: How can we bestow breath-taking wealth to a privileged minority and ignores the urgent needs of a growing underclass?

A slice of Talmud about *us and them*...We read in tractate Sanhedrin:

*"Therefore people were created unique, in order to proclaim the greatness of the Holy One. For if a person strikes many coins from one mold, they are all exactly alike. But though the King of kings, the Holy One, has fashioned every person in the stamp of the first human, not a single one of them is exactly like another."*

Fast forward to 2005; Donovan Webster, author of an intriguing book called *Meeting the Family*, participated in the National Geographic Society's Genographic Project by swabbing his cheek. He wanted a closer look at the long trek undertaken by his Y chromosome. Before this juncture in his life, Webster held certain assumptions about his personal Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Once he examined his world at the level of DNA, his ideas about family were radically altered. Based upon the discoveries of the last 50 years, we know that each strand of our DNA contains some 3.2 billion individual sites for the constituent nucleotides - enough to to combine for a possible 10 to the three billionths power, virtually guaranteeing that each human who has walked the earth is unique. *The Holy One created each human in the in the stamp of the first earthling, and yet - not a single human is exactly like another.*

Our Holiday Machzor includes a reading whose gist is that all of us descended from one Adam and Eve so that we wouldn't stake our pathetic claims of superior ancestry against those of our rivals. Science is leading us all back to an ancient Adam and Eve. Webster's DNA united him with click-talking Hadzabe bushmen in Tanzania, and to Lebanese Arabs, tribal Uzbecks, and Spanish Basques. His blood, our blood ties him and us to many peoples far away, and underneath it all – family.

Why is DNA important on Yom Kippur? Because the torah of DNA rejects the treacherous path of *us and them*. Because we have been charged by our tradition not to stand upon the blood of our fellow. Because the torah urges us not to ignore our kin. *Human beings are our family.*

I say to you that tonight's Kol Nidre must be a communal petition imploring God to grant us a second chance *not* to drop the ball because we're expecting others to get it done. A second chance to bring food to the blue bins in shul regularly, as a reminder that we have no more time for playing "*us and them*" – in the coming year we must cast away the possibility of taking our stocked pantries and freezers for granted while a quarter of our city scrounges for food. Please bring food to shul, we will regularly take leftover food from the shul kitchen, we share food with hungry people downtown as an ethical obligation to open our hand and open our hearts, a sacred opportunity, a mitzvah, a ritual of commitment to the poor people who struggle in our city, as a statement of hope that our collective efforts will bear fruit.

Kol Nidre in this new year – A second chance to carve authentic spiritual grooves into our lives – through study, through supporting a minyan, through meditation, through fixing the world - could be in Memphis, could be in Israel, could be about helping us bring medicines to peasants in the mountains of Nicaragua, could be at a nearby animal shelter, could be by tutoring or mentoring a kid who needs guidance and love.

I have to tell you about one of our kin, a handsome little guy, named Luca Andrew Ciraldo. A long and winding road led me to his door on the 10th floor of La Bonheur this past Monday. I learned about him through Caring Bridge a few months ago, through journal entries written by Nicholas and Rachel, his mom and dad. They belong to a little shul in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Luca has liver cancer. He has completed four rounds of chemo, and there are two more ahead. He is a beautiful little boy who fiercely clutches a wooden train as his father or mother reads to him about Thomas the Tank Engine. Luca has traveled a rough road since June, when we arrived at St. Jude. And through it all, he is quite a trooper. All of you know how important St. Jude and La Bonheur and other hospitals are. Tonight I ask you to pray for strength and healing for Luca and for his mom and dad and all his loving family.

*On this Kol Nidre night I pray that we call ourselves out for being less than honest. I say to you that it's not about being released from obligation. It is about keeping faith, about **embracing** our obligations. It is about digging deeper to find our inner strength, to practice kindness and to keep fixing, to feed our family, to dress the wounds, to lift the broken spirits. **I say to you that these matters are urgent.** All of us – omitting none – everyone you know, everyone you don't know, are in it together. Time is short. *There is no us and them. They are our kin.* שנה טובה*