

Kol Nidrei 5780

Temple Emanu-El of Haverhill, MA

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It's Kol Nidrei tonight. We fill our mouths with words as we try to empty our hearts of wrong. We pour out words, to God, to one another, crying "we have missed the mark, we have done wrong, we have hurt our friends, we have hurt ourselves, we have been inattentive to You." In our acrostic "Ashamnu," we beat our breasts because we used language poorly. Our hands are weighted down with all of the words in our machzorim, our prayerbooks.

But tonight, the Kol Nidrei prayer challenges us to subvert the strength of words. Chanting this prayer, we release ourselves from the power of words to bind and compel; we say that the strongest speech-acts that we've performed, shall have no power over us. Kol Nidrei's hold on us is, indeed, beyond its words. When early Reform clergy tried, in a brief and unsuccessful bid, to replace Kol Nidrei's text with Psalm 130, fearing that it painted Jews as untrustworthy, they were careful to retain the original melody, because as founding Reconstructionist Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan wrote, "It strikes the chords both of tragedy and of hope with such inevitable truth that once heard it never ceases to haunt us thereafter."

We usually consider Kol Nidrei to release us from personal **liability** for our words: that thing that I meant to do but couldn't, I'm no longer responsible for. That hasty curse I snapped out, I didn't really want harm to that person. Tonight, let's consider Kol Nidrei a different kind of release from words. What would our own prayers look like and sound like if we released ourselves from the obligation to use the words printed in our prayerbooks?

Just eight days ago we heard the Song of Chanah in our Rosh Hashanah Haftarah: Chanah, who pours out her heart to God, moving her lips but voicing nothing. The rabbis honour Chanah as our first model of spontaneous prayer. But when Eli the priest first sees her, he does not expect to see anyone praying in this way. He scolds her for supposedly being drunk. Prayer without set words is risky business, especially to those of us who are

halakhically minded - observant of Jewish rabbinic law. If we don't use the words in the prayerbook, how do we know we're getting it right? Praying without a script can feel like getting into your own car and letting someone else take the wheel. The controls you are used to have been taken away. You have to trust your relationship with that other driver, that they'll get you there. Your heart may travel up half a foot in the process. My mother Jacquie, for instance, gasped and clutched the dashboard every single time my foot hit the brake, when she was teaching me how to drive. Zichronah livracha.

What can Jewish prayer look like if when we pray even our central prayers - the Amidah, the Kaddish, the Sh'ma - we don't use a siddur, a prayerbook, as our starting point? Kol Nidrei invites us to return to "the land of your soul," in Shlomo Carlebach's famous words; "Return again, return again, return to the land of your soul." So what's the landscape of our souls? How do we pray? What, for each one of us, feels like a prayer experience in which we truly connect with something sacred?

Each one of us has our own reasons for prayer. Prayer creates a connection with our family - the "zikaron" or memory of which Rosh Hashanah speaks so powerfully. It may be what the people we know and love (and their parents, and their parents, and their parents) brought us up doing. It may be Just What Jews Do. Prayer can be a cry to God from the depths of despair or the giddy heights of joy - look, Divine, look what this world You made has done to me! Conservative halakhist Blu Greenberg writes that "**Prayer calls forth a generosity of the human spirit.**"² Prayer may be a request to the Source of Blessing - I need health, for myself, for a loved one, and nobody else can give it; I need courage; I need companionship.

I believe that we pray to connect. We pray to bridge the small but daunting space between ourselves and the power that makes the atoms dance. We pray because as humans, we are made for relationship, and because we have the courage to reach out even when we don't comprehend all of what we're reaching towards.

Words are our quickest tool for affirming and building relationship. But

sometimes printed or memorized words fail us. Prayer does not.

I picked up my first Anne of Green Gables book when I was nine years old. The awkward, bookish girl who's a glutton for words - the bigger the better - was an instant "kindred spirit." Lucy Maude Montgomery's second heroine, Emily Byrd Starr, is a writer whose writing has a counterpoint: a rare **wordless**, mysterious moment, which she calls "the flash."

"It had always seemed to Emily, ever since she could remember, that she was very, very near to a world of wonderful beauty. Between it and herself hung only a thin curtain; she could never draw the curtain aside — but sometimes, just for a moment, a wind fluttered it and then it was as if she caught a glimpse of the enchanting realm beyond — only a glimpse — and heard a note of unearthly music.

This moment came rarely — went swiftly, leaving her breathless with the inexpressible delight of it...And always when the flash came to her Emily felt that life was a wonderful, mysterious thing of persistent beauty."³

There have been times in my life when I have felt something like "the flash," when the world becomes suddenly so vivid and beautiful that it's almost too much to bear. Perhaps you have too. The first time I ever prayed spontaneously as an adult was ten years ago, almost to the day. I was standing in high meadow grass on the eastern side of Glacier National Park, looking down at Wild Goose Island, at once buffeted and supported by the wind, feasting my eyes on the mountains stretching up and back before me and the sparkling blue water below. I felt a shout of joy well up inside me, and when I opened my mouth, I found myself yelling into the wind, "Hey, God! You did really good here!" I'd never had any kind of desire to talk to God like that before - no siddur, no Hebrew, just reacting to what was in my heart at the moment. It was shocking and overwhelming, and I spent the rest of the two-month road trip unpacking that experience.

But, of course, prayer doesn't always feel like that! Sometimes connection to the Divine force in the world is like the slow drip of a soaker hose in summer, love gradually changing the texture of the ground beneath it. Sometimes it's the sudden awareness of loss, that hits us like a punch in the gut, and we call out to that ever-listening Ear for support and comfort. Some-

times it's finding strength we didn't know we had, just when we need it.

How do we reach for these feelings through sight, smell, taste, touch, and the words our own hearts come up with? How do we make space in our awareness for "the flash," for the slow buildup of connection, for noticing God's hand where we didn't see it before?

Jewish prayer traditions offer us some alternatives to the siddur, and this year we'll try out a few of them together. Tonight, I want to share one particular mode of Jewish prayer with you: the practice of **hitbod'dut**, developed by the Chassidic master Rebbe Nachman of Breslav.

Hitbod'dut literally means "making oneself alone." It refers to a practice of deeply listening to ourselves and God, often in nature; often alone, though it can be practiced in a room with others (for example, by wrapping oneself in a tallit during prayer so as to concentrate better). Hitbod'dut is becoming aware of ourselves, our bodies, trying to clear even more space inside ourselves for the Holy Blessed One to use (or leave fallow). A person practicing hitbod'dut may use words as they pray, but in whatever language they usually speak, and informally. One talks with God in a conversational way, like talking to a beloved friend or parent. Sometimes one meditates on God's presence so intensely that everything else (including oneself) disappears; this is called bitul, nullification. Sometimes, as Rebbe Nachman recommends, one practices a silent scream.

The medieval philosopher Bachya Ibn Pakuda wrote that one who is "employed in those duties in which both the heart and the body are involved, such as prayer and praising God, blessed be They, should empty himself of all matters appertaining to this world or the next and should empty his heart of every distracting thought, after first cleansing himself."⁴

In Glacier, I practiced hitbod'dut in that place and I didn't know it. During cantorial school at Hebrew College, I was part of a "walking minyan." We wrapped up with tallit and t'fillin in the mornings, then crossed the road to the Chestnut Hill Reservation. Some mornings were so cold that our breath hung in the air, and the leaves crunched underfoot. With some gentle direction from whomever was leading minyan that morning, we found our own

spots in the woods, we prayed, and then we came back together. I remember one tree I used to visit - its bark alternately smooth and knotty under my fingertips, its trunk a strong support when I wanted to sit down and feel the ground under me. Last Saturday morning here at Temple Emanu-El, we sat outside for the beginning of our Shabbat service. We let the sunlight pour over us until its dazzle blotted the words from our pages, and warmed our skin and our hearts. The sights and sounds around us helped shape our liturgy. We'll try it again - and perhaps with fewer words next time.

So this year, I invite you to take this heter, permission, offered by the words of Kol Nidrei. Try putting down your book - at any moment in prayer, even for long stretches of our services. We'll do it together. Look. Listen. Smell. Taste. Feel. Are there moments of prayer that emerge as you stretch in the morning? As you watch the sky? As you hug your kids? As you eat a delicious meal? As you make art? Where in the images of your own life, do you find a need and a practice of prayer?

The world is our siddur, our prayerbook, my friends. And even the holiest of words do not bound it.

G'mar tov - may we be written and sealed for good, this year, and then lift our own fates up off of that page.

Notes

1. Statement by Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, 1927, as quoted in Soclof, Adam "The Case Against Kol Nidre," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, September 25th, 2012. <https://www.jta.org/2012/09/25/default/the-case-against-kol-nidre>
2. Greenberg, Blu *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983; pp.137-138
3. Montgomery, Lucy Maud *Emily of New Moon* New York: Frederick A.

Stokes, 1923. Chapter 1, "The House in the Hollow."

4. Ibn Pakuda, Bachya, Duties of the Heart 8:3; as quoted in Harlow, Rabbi Jules "Beyond Prayer Words," originally published in *Hadassah: Pray Tell* by Jewish Lights and posted with permission on *My Jewish Learning* <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/beyond-prayer-words/>