**Central Reform Temple**

**Kol Nidre – 2023**

**Kol Nidre – All Our Vows**

We call this the Kol Nidre service though it is actually the name of just one prayer. Kol Nidre literally means ‘All our Vows’ and goes on to say that all our vows should be annulled in the coming year and that we should be forgiven all our sins. And in fact that one prayer is not a prayer at all. It is actually a legal formula of *hatarat hanedarim* – annulment of vows and accompanies a ritual that we performed tonight of removing all the scrolls of the Torah from the ark and standing before you all as in a court of law. The Kol Nidre is in Aramaic – the language used in ancient Palestine and kept alive in the written pages of the Talmud. It is the language of legal documents such as the ketubah – the marriage contract. The vows it refers to are the promises, commitments, habits or oaths that we might make each year, like: I’ll never talk to you again…or I promise I will stay off carbs…or I am never helping anyone else out ever again.

Ancient Judaism looked down on these oaths and disapproved of people making them in haste particularly if they involved God’s intervention like ‘With God’s help I will make good on my investments this year’ or God, I promise I will be a perfect husband this year’ or ‘If my wife is fully healed, I will come to synagogue to pray to God every week’. The Bible had already criticized the Israelite leader Jepthah who, in the book of Judges, vows that he would sacrifice to God the first thing that came out of his house on return from a victorious war. Only to witness his daughter rush out to meet him.

A legal formula called Kol Nidre arose in the 9th Century as a way to absolve people of these vows and discourage them from making any more. By the 13th century in Germany, it became the opening ritual for the evening of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year in the Jewish calendar. It was accompanied by a traditional prayer stating that with the permission of the heavenly court on high, all the Jews assembled in prayer on Yom Kippur would be absolved of all the vows they made, those in the past year and those that would be made in the year ahead.

By the 16th century, the famous Ashkenazi melody that we heard tonight sung was being used and of course it was this Jewish piece of chazzanut that Max Bruch used to compose the composition for ‘cello that we heard tonight. It was composed in Liverpool in 1880 by Max Bruch who was a Protestant Christian composer and seemed to have gained his knowledge of the melody from the chief Cantor in Berlin, Abraham Jacob Lichtenstein. Kol Nidre becomes universally famous in the first talking movie picture, the Jazz Singer where Al Jolson sings it as a moving tribute to his elderly father and reassures the movie going public that the 2nd generation of immigrant Jewish Americans will keep Jewish traditions alive despite their assimilation. It is said of the melody that it has a plaintive element that evokes the suffering of our people in the past. It has a penitential element which expresses our deepest yearnings and it has a triumphant element that expresses our highest hopes. To that can be added the nostalgic element that each of us here remembers their experience with the Kol Nidre prayer with parents and grandparents in childhood synagogues.

You can begin to see a moral dilemma here that has been picked up by many commentators over the generations. If vows, oaths, legal commitments made by Jews can be annulled each year, then of what worth is the value of a Jewish contract in business or in relationship. This moral problem is exactly why Ancient Judaism was disapproving of Jews making vows in the first place. If a Jew swore to a Roman, he would sell him good wine but then annulled his oath with Kol Nidre, who was to trust him? In the Paris disputation of 1240, the Jews found the need to defend themselves against this accusation that the Kol Nidre prayer was a get out clause for all Jewish oaths. In the 1850s the Russian Czarist Government decreed that every Jewish High Holyday prayerbook provide an explanation that Kol Nidre would not remove Jews from their legal obligations.

Although Kol Nidre was written long before the Spanish Inquisition, we can imagine what it must have been like for Jews who had been forcibly converted to Christianity in 15th Century Spain to creep into synagogue on the night of Yom Kippur and listen to the Kol Nidre absolving them of the vows and oaths they made in their conversions so that other Jews would not look upon them as sinners in their midst.

It was at Kol Nidre in 1935 in Germany that a rabbi finally reacted to the unfounded and antisemitic accusations made against Jews down the centuries. Rabbi Leo Baeck, the leader of German Jewry issued a statement to be read in every German synagogue on Kol Nidre 1935 following the promulgation of the Nuremberg Race Laws denying Jews citizenship and rights in the Third Reich. He wrote:

“In this hour all Israel stands before God, the judge and the forgiver. In his presence, let us examine our ways, our deeds and what we have failed to do. Where we have transgressed, let us openly confess we have sinned. With the same fevour with which we confess our sins, do we in indignation and abhorrence express our contempt for the lies concerning us and the defamation of our religion and its testimonies. Who made known to the world the mystery of the One God? Who imparted to the world the purity of right conduct? Who taught the world respect for all humanity created in the image of God? Who spoke of the Commandment to do Social Justice. In all this we see the Hebrew Prophets of old. It is still growing in our Judaism today. With these facts, we repel the insults flung at us”.

Despite these dangerous accusations, Kol Nidre remained a treasured and favorite prayer and a marker for the beginning of the whole Yom Kippur day. When the Reform Movement was established in Germany, the prayer’s meaning was changed in its translation as we have it in our prayerbook tonight. So the Aramaic and the English do not actually correspond. For now, the prayer reflects the idea that the vows that we make be affirmed in the year ahead. We say ‘ All the vows on our lips, the burdens in our hearts, the pent-up regrets about which we brooded and spoke through prayers without end on last Atonement Day, we now recall….Take only from our vows, our best efforts at fulfilling them.’

Essentially the Kol Nidre is about the power of words – words to heal, words to hurt. Words have great power and creative energy. After all, God used words to create the world, as it says in Genesis, ‘And God said, Let there be light’. The Hebrew phrase for the 10 Commandments is Aseret Dibrot – literally the Ten Words. The two most important Divine interventions Creation and Revelation, remind us of the power of words. Words create realities, but realities can be hopeful or harmful. We use words to justify our actions even when we know they are wrong. We weave our life stories with words, the stories we tell ourselves how great we are or how miserable we are. Kol Nidre reminds us of the way we use words everyday. It gives us permission to take our words back, to say sorry, to return to a place of silence to reconsider the words we should use. We will have a lot of good intentions over the next 24 hours and we will say a lot of words to encourage and influence us. Let us consider them all wisely so that in due course they become the ways that we are able to return to our best selves.

Rabbi Harold Kushner who died this past year wrote a new version of Kol Nidre for the next rendition of this great prayer – Here is some of what he wrote:

All vows, promises and commitments made in Your presence

May we be given the strength to keep them.

Our vows to ourselves, commitments to self -discipline

Our commitments made to loved ones and friends

Our pledges to worthwhile causes

The Promises we made to study and to worship

Promises made in Synagogue by the young and the idealists

Our marriage vows – made they endure

O God, we meant the promises we made

Even as we mean the vows we silently make tonight

From this Yom Kippur to the next.