

**Mysteries of the Machzor with Liturgist Alden Solovy**  
**A Map of *Kol Nidre*'s Poetic Structure and Rhetorical Pattern**

	Multiple Sources		Rabbi Noa Kushner <sup>1</sup> / Stages	Dr. Ellen M. Umansky <sup>2</sup>
<b>Preamble</b> Ps 97:11	On this night we sense ourselves in the presence of the light of the first day of creation. <sup>3</sup> <i>Kol Nidre</i> 's preamble teaches us the spiritual principle of aspiration. <sup>4</sup>			
<b>Invoke Courts</b>	Any fast that does not include the participation of some of the sinners of the Jewish people is not a fast. <sup>5</sup> Normally separate realms become one: the heavenly court and the earthly court, the consent of God and the consent of the community, ourselves distinguished (supposedly) from habitual sinners. <sup>6</sup>		Stage 1: "I am not guilty like those people, but I can still pray with them." <i>Kol Nidre</i> begins the service. The first three lines place us, without any preparation, before a heavenly court... In a cunning move, without requiring a single admission of personal guilt, <i>Kol Nidre</i> focuses our attention on the possibility of wrongdoing among us.	
<b>Annulment</b>	What is for many one of Yom Kippur's highlights is, in most of its present formulations, a less than coherent legal formula of questionable efficacy. Its inclusion in our liturgy owes more to the mood it creates of generally erasing the errors of the past and beginning anew than it does to its halakhic importance. <sup>7</sup>		Stage 2: "I'm not guilty now, but I might be in the future." Envisioning the future as sure to include our own mistakes, not just those of others, we arrive at the irrefutable conclusion that we do more than sit among the guilty; we are the guilty—this is part of being human."	
<b>Forgiveness</b> Num. 15:26	The legalistic focus is entirely replaced with an emphasis on forgiveness. <sup>8</sup>	Numbers 15:26 is the biblical guarantee that God will pardon sins done unwittingly. <sup>9</sup>	Stage 3: "Forgive Us." Three pieces of Torah that make up "the response" are quick and to the point. It's as if the prayer wants to convey the immediate reward we can expect from an admission of our guilt.	We are guaranteed forgiveness...
<b>Prayer</b> Num. 14:19		This is the God for whom we say <i>Kol Nidre</i> . The God who begs for human meddling into divine affairs, who beckons us to stanch the flow of promised destructions. <sup>10</sup>		...but we must ask for it...
<b>Forgiveness</b> Num. 14:20		There was nothing to fear after all; there was and is only divine forgiveness. <sup>11</sup>		...to have it granted.
<b>Rejoicing</b> <i>Sheheciyanu</i>	The <i>Sheheciyanu</i> is normally a powerful, yet simple, acclamation... In the context of <i>Kol Nidre</i> it is a moment of grace, where we capture the insight that the way of the past year need not be our way forward from this moment on. <sup>12</sup>			

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Noa Kushner, "The Room with No Back, Only Forward," from *Prayers of Awe: All These Vows*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD (Jewish Lights, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Dr. Ellen M. Umansky, "Ritualizing *Kol Nidre*: The Power of Three."

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Koren Yom Kippur Machzor* (Koren, 2014), p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., Rabbi Karyn Kedar "The Sound and Pageantry."

<sup>5</sup> Talmud Bavli, Keritot 6b. Translation from Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/Keritot.6b?lang=bi>

<sup>6</sup> Op cit., L. Hoffman, Rabbi David Stern, "Night Vision: A Gift of Sacred Uncertainty."

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Dr. Eliezer Diamond, "*Kol Nidre*: A Halakhic History and Analysis."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Rabbi Aaron Panken, PhD, "Courting Inversion: *Kol Nidre* as a Legal Drama."

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, "*Kol Nidre*: Translation and Commentary."

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., Rachel Farbiarz, "Woe is Me that I Have Sworn."

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., Rabbi Noa Kushner, "The Room with No Back, Only Forward."

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., Rabbi Karyn Kedar "The Sound and Pageantry."

## Rhetorical Pattern

**Dr. Reuven Kimelman**<sup>13</sup>

The consequentiality of words is reinforced by the poetics of *Kol Nidre*. It can be divided into five [poetic] units... The linkage of sounds creates a rhetorical pattern where a sound of one unit gets repeated in the next unit tying unit one to two, two to three, three to four, and four to five. This creates a staircase crescendo effect that goes back one step only to jump forward two steps.

### **Source sheet prepared by Alden Solovy**

Alden Solovy spreads joy and excitement for prayer. An American Israeli liturgist, poet, and educator, Alden is the Liturgist-in-Residence for the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. His writing was transformed by multiple tragedies, marked in 2009 by the sudden death of his wife from catastrophic brain injury. His teaching spans from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem to synagogues throughout North America, as well as Leo Baeck College in London and Limmud Conferences in the U.S., Canada, and the UK. He is the author of five books, three from CCAR Press: [This Joyous Soul: A New Voice for Ancient Yearnings](#), [This Grateful Heart: Psalms and Prayers for a New Day](#), and [This Precious Life: Encountering the Divine with Poetry and Prayer](#). Alden's work is anthologized in 15 volumes from Jewish and non-Jewish publishers. He writes for Ritualwell, RavBlog and the *Times of Israel*, and is a three-time winner of the Peter Lisagor Award for Exemplary Journalism. Find his latest work at [ToBendLight.com](#). In 2012, Alden made aliyah to Jerusalem. He can be reached at [asolovy54@gmail.com](mailto:asolovy54@gmail.com).

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., Dr. Reuven Kimelman, "Is *Kol Nidre* Typical?" This article details the specific sound patterns and the flow through the units.