

Mysteries of the Machzor with Liturgist Alden Solovy
Mystic Doorway
Kol Nidre Source Sheet

1. Introduction to Kol Nidre

Kol Nidre is a ritualized Aramaic legal formula for annulling vows, with no mention of God.¹ Traditionally, it is said before sunset, before the holy day begins; the congregation stands; and it is traditionally sung three times, successively increasing in volume. The leader is joined by two others, holding *sefrei Torah*, simulating a three-person *beit din*, court of law. The line -- *Vayomer Adonai, salachti kidvarekha* – is sung three times.

2. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD²

Kol Nidre is an Aramaic legal formula that covers all its bases by listing the various biblical and Rabbinic terms likely to be used for making vows or oaths of any sort.

3. Rabbi Jonathan Magonet, PhD³

Kol Nidre is another of those Jewish prayers of puzzling origin, controversial content (not just for Jews), and tremendous mystique.

4. Talmud Bavli, Pesachim 54a⁴

Repentance was created before the world was created, as it is written: “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God,” and it is written immediately afterward: “You return man to contrition; and You say: Repent, children of man” (Psalms 90:2–3).

The Language and the Music

5. Dr. Eliezer Diamond⁵

Like any thorough legal formula, *Kol Nidre* lists all the possible types of oaths and vows that a person might make so as to be sure to include them in the annulment process. Each term has its own enormously complex legal history.

6. Dr. Reuven Kimelman⁶

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. The concordance of sound enhances the poem’s auditory impact through a complex crisscrossing of alliteration and assonance... By spanning the vocal range from simple cantillation to full musical figuration with timely sighs and sobs, emotions are brought to a pitch. The incantatory melody spooks us into confronting the year that just slipped through our fingers.

¹ The opening uses the mystical name *HaMakom*. The closing uses the name *Adonai* (Num 14:20).

² Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, “Morality, Meaning, and the Ritual Search for the Sacred,” from *Prayers of Awe: All These Vows*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD (Jewish Lights, 2012).

³ Ibid., Rabbi Jonathan Magonet, PhD, “What if Cleverness is Foolishness and Righteousness and Illusion?”

⁴ Translation from Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/Pesachim.54a?lang=bi>. This Gemara is also in Nedarim 39b. Both claim that seven phenomena were created before the world was created: Torah, repentance, the Garden of Eden, Gehenna, the Throne of Glory, the Temple, and the name of the Messiah.

⁵ Ibid., Dr. Eliezer Diamond, “*Kol Nidre*: A Halakhic History and Analysis.”

⁶ Op cit. L. Hoffman, Dr. Reuven Kimelman, “Is *Kol Nidre* Typical?”

7. **Rabbi Andrew Goldstein, PhD**⁷

The real power of the *Kol Nidre* belongs not to the words, but to the music. It seems to invoke the past, present, and future of our people and of our own personal lives.

8. **Emotional Elements: Rabbi John Desmond Rayner and Rabbi Andrew Goldstein**

It has a *plaintive* element which evokes the suffering of our people in ages past... It has a *penitential* element which expresses our deepest yearnings to be released from the burden of past failures... It has a *jubilant, triumphant* element which comes out in its finale. It expresses our highest hopes.⁸ I would add a fourth element: *nostalgia*, for all the memories of past Yom Kippur Eves and for those with whom we spend them.⁹

9. **Dr. Annette M. Boeckler**¹⁰

This melody triggers memories: of the year just past, of people who have died, of eras long gone, of martyrs through the ages... The *Kol Nidre* melody can also evoke uncertainty of the future and make the listener shiver. Yearnings, fears, and sorrows deep down within are set free. For many Jews, *Kol Nidre* provides the sound of atonement that is the core experience of Yom Kippur.

Reflections

10. **Rabbi Janet R. Marder**¹¹

Kol Nidre is not an absolution but a vote of no confidence. It presupposes that we cannot be trusted: we make vows and fail to fulfill them, we make the wrong vows, we are inconstant, faithless, hapless. [It] is prefaced by a declaration that we are permitted to pray with sinners. Who else is there to pray with?

11. **Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD**¹²

Like no other holiday, Yom Kippur puts us in touch with the sacred; and like no other prayer, *Kol Nidre* puts us in touch with Yom Kippur.

12. **Commentary, *Divrei Mishkan Hanefesh***¹³

The point of Yom Kippur is not to convince a judgmental Deity to pardon us, so much as it is our acceptance of a loving and compassionate God already offering forgiveness. The work of the day, then, is not asking for forgiveness, but planning out a course of repentance and renewal.

⁷ Ibid., Rabbi Andrew Goldstein, PhD, "Memories of the Past, Guidelines for the Future."

⁸ Rabbi John Desmond Rayner, "The Magic of the *Kol Nidre*," a sermon given at South London Liberal Jewish Synagogue, Erev Yom Kippur, Sept. 22, 1996, quoted by Rabbi Andrew Goldstein, PhD, in op cit., L. Hoffman.

⁹ Op cit., L. Hoffman, Rabbi Andrew Goldstein, "Memories of the Past, Guidelines for the Future."

¹⁰ Ibid., Dr. Annette M. Boeckler, "The Magic of the Moment: *Kol Nidre* in Progressive Judaism."

¹¹ Ibid., Katherine Madsen, "A Vote of No Confidence."

¹² Ibid., Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, "Morality, Meaning, and the Ritual Search for the Sacred."

¹³ Commentary, Yom Kippur Evening Service, *Divrei Mishkan Hanefesh: A Guide to the CCAR Machzor* (CCAR Press, 2016), p. 40.

13. Dr. Erica Brown¹⁴

Kol Nidre, like the other prayers we recite on the day, is an emotional anchor, a centerpiece of prayer for an entire day given over to considering the instability of change: what we actually accomplished, but what might easily disappear; and what we wish we had accomplished, but failed at, in the year gone by.

14. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks¹⁵

On this night of nights we sense ourselves in the presence of the light of the first day of creation—not physical light, for the sun and stars were not created until the fourth day, but a spiritual light that God reserved for the righteous in generations to come.

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.

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¹⁴ Op cit., L. Hoffman, Dr. Erica Brown, "Filling the Void."

¹⁵ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Koren Yom Kippur Machzor* (Koren, 2014), p. 1355.