

סֵדֶר כָּל נְדָרֵי

Seder Kol Nidrei · Release from Vows

מבוא
Mavo

כָּל נְדָרֵי
Kol Nidrei

וְנִסְלַח
V'nislach

סֵלַח נָא
S'lach Na

Opening the Ark, Opening Ourselves

Yom Kippur: the Jewish people's Festival of the Soul and *Kol Nidrei* its sacred portal — a night of deep emotions, a night, as the Psalmist wrote, to “rejoice with trembling.”

We rejoice at the sound of *Kol Nidrei* — rhythmic words of release from vows, oaths, and promises to God we fail to keep.

We tremble at the melody. Music of spiritual amazement, it fills us with awe as we stand before God and Torah.

We rejoice that we stand together, strengthened by community in this hour of shared weakness and humility.

We tremble — for tonight we confess our flaws, admit our imperfection, and acknowledge a Power far beyond our understanding.

We rejoice that we commit ourselves to great endeavors because we feel so deeply and think so nobly.

We tremble — for we find that our ideals are far greater than our ability; our promises surpass our might.

We rejoice in the freedom that is *Kol Nidrei's* true gift: the freedom to begin a new year without fear of failure, to aspire to be God's image in the world.

We tremble because we are mortal;
we rejoice in our gratitude for life.

We rejoice with trembling, and enter *Kol Nidrei* to face our humanity.

REJOICE WITH TREMBLING, Psalm 2:11.

AS THE CONGREGATION RISES, the holy ark (*aron hakodesh*) is opened in preparation for removing the Torah scrolls and reciting *Kol Nidrei*. This act symbolically sets the stage for the *t'shuvah*-work that will occupy us for the next twenty-four hours. We have no access to Torah's wisdom and truth until the ark is opened. So also, a searching moral assessment depends on opening the self: stripping away disguises and self-deception, disclosing secrets, exploring shadowy corners of the psyche in the clear light of truth. Our success in this labor depends, as well, on opening ourselves sincerely to the words of prayer and teaching we will encounter throughout the holy day.

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RABBI LEIZER SURVIVED the death camps and returned to his hometown, Czenstochow, Poland. For years following the Shoah, he roamed the streets playing a hand organ. At regular intervals, amid the numerous tunes he played, he would intentionally play *Kol Nidrei*. As he did so, he would look into the eyes of the children who walked by, looking for a hint of recognition. In this way, he was able to bring many children back in contact with their people.

For us, too, *Kol Nidrei* is a moment of recognition—
a sound that brings us back to our people.

KOL NIDREI: a chant that begins in a whisper and rises to a cry.
On this night of promises remembered,
each soul in solitude communes with the Soul of the universe.

God, from this Day of Atonement to the next—
may we reach it in peace—
all Israel makes these vows:
to turn from wrong, dishonesty, and greed,
to walk in the path of justice and right.

Yet we know our weakness—how prone we are to fail:
help us to keep our word;
help us to act with humility and integrity.
We seek pardon and forgiveness.
We seek Your radiance and light.

Or zarua latzadik;

ulyishrei-lev simchah.

Light is sown for the righteous,
radiance and joy for the pure of heart.

Bishivah shel malah,

uvishivah shel matah —

al daat hamakom

v'al daat hakahal:

anu matirin l'hitpaleil

im haavaryanim.

With one voice, assembled Sages past and present declare:
all may pray as one on this night of repentance;
let none be excluded from our community of prayer.

With one voice, God and congregation proclaim:
all may pray as one on this day of return;
let all find a place in this sacred assembly.

אֹר זָרַע לְצַדִּיק,
וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל לֵב שִׂמְחָה.

בִּישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַעְלָה
וּבִישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַטָּה,
עַל דַּעַת הַמָּקוֹם
וְעַל דַּעַת הַקְּהָל,
אָנוּ מִתִּירִין לְהִתְפַּלֵּל
עִם הָעֲבָרִימִים.

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LIGHT IS SOWN FOR THE RIGHTEOUS אֹר זָרַע לְצַדִּיק. This verse (Psalm 97:11) offers the beautiful image of light sown like a seed in the dark earth, to burst forth only in the distant future. According to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888), the verse promises “that evil cannot last forever in this world, that the future belongs to the righteous, and that with every human act of intervention against evil the sovereignty of God . . . is brought one step nearer.” Even as we acknowledge the reality of human sin, we celebrate the inevitable blossoming of good.

WITH ONE VOICE בִּישִׁיבָה שֶׁל מַעְלָה. In our imaginations we stand before the Heavenly Court and the assembled Sages of Israel; while, in our synagogues, we also create the sense of a solemn legal proceeding, our leaders standing at attention, holding the scrolls of the Torah before the gathered community.

ALL MAY PRAY AS ONE אָנוּ מִתִּירִין לְהִתְפַּלֵּל. The traditional text grants permission to “pray with the *avaryanim* (transgressors),” for no true community excludes those who have stumbled and fallen. Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg, a 13th-century sage, inserted these lines in the liturgy, basing himself on the Talmudic statement (*K'ritot* 6b) that “a public fast that does not include the sinners of Israel is no fast.” All of us are *avaryanim*; none of us is unworthy to join with others in prayer.

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Reflections on Kol Nidrei

IN ITS EMPHASIS on humility, *Kol Nidrei* provides a corrective to the toxic certainties of polarized discourse. What if we approached each other with the humility to recognize that our most confident convictions will always be qualified by the limits of our own knowledge and understanding? In its haunting melody and strangely legalistic language, we begin to sense the twilight truth: our high horses too often stumble, and our soapboxes stand on shaky ground. *Kol Nidrei* grants us the gift of sacred uncertainty: the chance to begin this new year with a sense of what we do not know, rather than a narrow certainty about what we do. It's what Buddhists call "beginner's mind." What if every time I were ready to proclaim some self-evident truth, I allowed *Kol Nidrei* to whisper in my ear, "Says who?"

—Rabbi David Stern (b. 1961)

AS A LEGAL ENACTMENT (the annulling of vows), *Kol Nidrei* is recited in the presence of the Torah scrolls and of a *Beit Din*, a Jewish court, traditionally composed of three scholars. In many communities, congregational leaders hold the scrolls, flanking the person who chants *Kol Nidrei*. This symbolic gesture also recalls how Moses lifted his hands and offered prayers for the people, flanked by two loyal companions: "Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set" (Exodus 17:12). In the same way, the synagogue's lay leaders uphold the Torah, offering strength and support to the rabbi and cantor as together they serve the congregation.

IT IS CUSTOMARY to clothe the Torah scrolls in white during the High Holy Days, and to clothe ourselves in white garments from *Erev Kol Nidrei* through the end of Yom Kippur. White refers not to purity and unblemished perfection but to forgiveness, as Scripture says: *Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow* (Isaiah 1:18).

Kol Nidrei

Kol nidrei — ve-esarei, vacharamei,

v'konamei, v'chinuyei,

v'kinusei, ushvuot —

dindarna ud-ishtabana,

ud-acharimna,

v'daasarna al nafshatana,

miyom kipurim zeh

ad yom kipurim haba, aleinu l'tovah:

kulhon icharatna v'hon;

kulhon y'hon sharan,

sh'vikin, sh'vitin,

b'teilin, umvutalin —

la sh'ririn v'la kayamin.

Nidrana la nidrei;

ve-esarana la esarei;

ushvuatana — la sh'vuot.

כָּל נִדְרֵי וְאֶסְרֵי וְחַרְמֵי,

וְקֹנָמֵי וְכִנּוּיֵי,

וְקִנּוּסֵי וְשְׁבוּעוֹת,

דִּנְדָרְנָא וְדִאֲשַׁתְּבַעְנָא,

וְדִאֲחַרְמֵימָנָא,

וְדִאֲסַרְנָא עַל נַפְשַׁתְנָא,

מִיּוֹם כִּפּוּרִים זֶה

עַד יוֹם כִּפּוּרִים הַבָּא עָלֵינוּ לְטוֹבָה:

כְּלִהוֹן אֲחַרְטָנָא בְּהוֹן,

כְּלִהוֹן יְהוֹן שְׁרָן,

שְׁבִיקִין שְׁבִיתִין,

בְּטֵלִין וּמְבַטְלִין,

לֹא שְׁרִירִין וְלֹא קַיָּמִין.

נִדְרָנָא לֹא נִדְרֵי,

וְאֶסְרָנָא לֹא אֶסְרֵי,

וְשְׁבוּעַתְנָא לֹא שְׁבוּעוֹת.

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All vows —

resolves and commitments, vows of abstinence and terms of obligation,
sworn promises and oaths of dedication —

that we promise and swear to God, and take upon ourselves

from this Day of Atonement until next Day of Atonement, may it find us well:

we regret them and for all of them we repent.

Let all of them be discarded and forgiven, abolished and undone;

they are not valid and they are not binding.

Our vows shall not be vows; our resolves shall not be resolves;

and our oaths — they shall not be oaths.

THAT WE PROMISE AND SWEAR TO GOD, AND TAKE UPON OURSELVES. The medieval authority Rabbeinu Tam (Rashi's grandson, ca. 1100–1171) declared that *Kol Nidrei* applies only to personal vows made on one's own initiative — that is, obligations a person undertakes in relation to God. This principle is derived from the phrase *v'daasarna al nafshatana* (which we take upon ourselves). This annulment of vows has nothing to do with our obligations to other human beings.

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LET OUR SPEECH be pure and our promises sincere.

Let our spoken words

—every vow and every oath—

be honest and well-intentioned.

Let our words cause no pain, bring no harm,

and never lead to shame, distrust, or fear.

And if, after honest effort,

we are unable to fulfill a promise, a vow, or an oath,

may we be released from its obligation

and forgiven for our failure.

Let our speech be pure and our promises sincere.

GIVE US the strength to keep our promises—

the sacred vows of partners in marriage,

the promises of love and care between parents and children,

the promises of duty between citizens and country,

the oaths of doctors, the sacred trust of teachers.

Give us the strength to keep our promises

to our friends and colleagues,

to those who live with us and depend on us,

to those who work for us and those for whom we work,

to those who pray with us and those for whom we pray,

to those we love and those we serve.

Give us the courage to keep our promises—

to ourselves, to one another,

and to future generations.

ALL VOWS כָּל גְּדֵרֵי (facing page). The custom of reciting *Kol Nidrei* three times, gradually increasing in volume, is first recorded in *Machzor Vitry* (France, 12th century): “The first time the prayer leader must utter it very softly, like one who hesitates to enter the Sovereign’s palace to request a favor; the second time somewhat louder; and the third time more loudly still, as one who is accustomed to dwell in the palace and approach the Sovereign as a friend.” Thus, with each repetition we express growing confidence in our relationship with the One who offers us the gift of renewal.

*V'nislach l'chol-adat b'nei Yisrael,
v'lager hagar b'tocham —
ki l'chol-haam bishgagah.*

All shall be forgiven —
the entire community of Israel,
and the stranger who lives in their midst —
for all have gone astray in error.

וְנִסְלַח לְכָל־עֲדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל,
וְלַגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם,
כִּי לְכָל־הָעָם בִּשְׁגָגָה.

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*“S'lach na laavon haam hazeh
k'godel chasdecha,
v'chaasher nasata laam hazeh
miMitzrayim v'ad heinah.”*

Moses prayed to God:
“As You have been faithful to this people ever since Egypt,
please forgive their failings now,
in keeping with Your boundless love.”

סְלַח־נָא לְעוֹן הָעָם הַזֶּה
בְּגֹדֶל חַסְדֶּךָ,
וְכַאֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאֵתָה לָעָם הַזֶּה
מִמִּצְרַיִם וְעַד־הַנֵּה.

*V'sham ne-emar:
Vayomer Adonai: “Salachti, kidvarecha.”*

And God responded: “I forgive, as you have asked.”

וְשָׁם נֹאמַר:
וַיֹּאמֶר יי: סְלַח־תִּי כְדַבְּרְךָ.

ALL SHALL BE FORGIVEN וְנִסְלַח, Numbers 15:26.
AS YOU HAVE BEEN FAITHFUL נָא סְלַח, Numbers 14:19.
AND GOD RESPONDED וַיֹּאמֶר יי, Numbers 14:20.

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KOL NIDREI

My neighbor's roses are blooming, blooming;
their perfume spills past me and into the street.
The world gives us so much
without being asked.

But again and again
we break our promises to it:
we breathe, eat, sleep away
the glittering nights, spend
the tapestried days.

These broken promises,
let them be forgotten.
Our sworn oaths, unswear.
They drop noiseless on the earth,
become the earth.

PRAYER FROM THE HEART

I bow.
I face the ground.
I fall before the Most High.
Farther than heaven's heaven are You,
nearer to me than the flesh on my bones. . . .
What have I to offer You but my spirit?

How shall I lift my eyes to You?
How can my tongue give praise?

The signs of Your love are countless,
as are my sins: more numerous than the sands of the sea.
So guide me toward the right path,
my teacher, my keeper of faith—source of all that I know.

When my heart speaks I hear the words myself.
And You—may You hear me, too.

KOL NIDREI. By Nan Cohen (b. 1968).

PRAYER FROM THE HEART. By Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164), adapted.