

Yom Kippur: Kol Nidrei:

Why New Year's Resolutions Fail:

Kol Nidrei Unlocked

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Yom Kippur begins with great enigma. As we usher in the holiest day on the Jewish calendar, we commence with what is perhaps one of the most controversial prayers in Jewish liturgy, the Kol Nidrei. Literally meaning “all vows,” Kol Nidrei is actually not a prayer at all – it is a declaration. It is a legal formula that annuls vows and the verbal commitments commonly made over the course of the year. We ask for all sorts of commitments to be released.

All vows, and things we
have made forbidden
on ourselves, and
oaths...

כָּל נִדְרֵי, וְאָסְרֵי, וְשְׁבוּעֵי... |

For those of us who have prayed through many a Yom Kippur, we might not even question this statement. Of course, as we head into a day of atonement, repentance, we must clear the air and clean our slate of the myriad of broken promises and unresolved commitments.

But if you break out of the “[Lullaby Effect](#),” if you allow yourself to think critically and indulge yourself in curiosity, you might find yourself faced with questions screaming to be asked. As for me, I was forced to question my assumptions when I learned a piece by Rav David Brofsky, “Kol Nidrei and the Repentance of Yom Kippur.” After reading it, I found myself questioning Kol Nidrei anew. After listing all sorts of promises, before discussing the notion of absolving them, Kol Nidrei states:

from this Yom Kippur
until next Yom Kippur

מִיּוֹם כְּפוּרִים זֶה עַד יוֹם
כְּפוּרִים הַבָּא

With these words, there is a shift. Suddenly the words are not reflective, but future oriented! May our future vows be *preemptively* absolved. This is troubling - why the future tense? How can we start the year with the mindset that our promises of tomorrow mean nothing?

From a sociological and psychological standpoint, keeping promises is a basic tenet of wellbeing. Commitment is a mechanism that fosters trust and cooperation between people. It helps us create bonds with one another. Studies show that broken promises affect not only our trust in each other, but can impact the promise-breaker as well, even threatening his or her sense of self-worth and identity.

And what is more - knowing that you are free to break your promise creates all kinds of conflicts. A 2009 scientific study “The Neural Circuitry of a Broken Promise” found that when subjects made commitments, knowing that they had permission to break them, their neural patterns actually predicted that they would break the promise, even before they did. In addition, the study found activation in certain parts of the brain, suggesting an emotional conflict before the promise was ever broken.

So, breaking promises is not great, but preemptively absolving your promises is even worse! How could we go into Yom Kippur with a statement like this?

Further, not coincidentally, Kol Nidrei is, historically speaking, a highly controversial piece. It has withstood centuries of opposition - both within Jewish tradition and by our external societies. Time and time again, Kol Nidrei was dangerously wielded

by oppressors who championed the piece as proof that Jews could not be trusted. Dating back to the Byzantine emperor Justinian I, and pervading European court systems years later, Jews were saddled with the "Jew's Oath" - a vilifying edict that Jews could not stand as reliable witnesses in Christian court. As recently as 60 years ago, Elizabeth Dilling's "The Jewish Religion: Its Influence Today" points to Kol Nidrei as a disparaging reflection of the supposed Jewish perspective on commitment.

Within our own tradition, debate ensued over the piece. How could we be so cavalier in shrugging off responsibilities? Would a technical declaration to absolve them even work halakhically speaking? How would it look to outsiders? The ninth century Rav Amram Gaon, who in fact recorded a version of Kol Nidrei in his own siddur, commented, "The holy academy sent word that this is a foolish custom and it is forbidden to practice it." Years later, even the esteemed R' Samson Raphael Hirsch once omitted Kol Nidrei (though he later recanted.)

What is fascinating is that the history of Kol Nidrei, the way it came to form - shifting tenses and all - is the key to unlocking its beauty. Kol Nidrei was not always written the way we see it in today's Ashkenaz machzorim. R' Amram Gaon's version was actually written in the past tense -- that all previous promises should be annulled. But just a few centuries later, the Tosafists pushed for Kol Nidrei to have a future orientation, to act as an anticipatory cancellation of vows. The custom ultimately settled with the version of one of the most prominent Tosafists, Rabbenu Tam, Rashi's grandson, which is the version commonly used by Ashkenazim today.

So back to our question. With all the historical controversy, all the psychological evidence, all the halakhic and hashkafic debate -- why Kol Nidrei? And even more, why a future-oriented Kol Nidrei that seems to tell us that our promises won't matter. That our word does not have to be our bond? Why go into Yom Kippur with such pessimism, and annul our vows even before we have a chance to try to fulfill them?

I would like to suggest that Kol Nidrei is NOT about permission to be Promise Breakers. It is about breaking us out of being Promise Makers. The Torah is actually "not a fan" (as my college students would say) of making promises. Numerous *pesukim* including some in Devarim (23:21-23). and Kohelet (5:1,4,6) discourage us from making vows we cannot keep. Clearly, the Torah takes issues with us breaking promises. It is no secret that, as flawed humans, we break all sorts of commitments to ourselves and others. Try googling "Why New Year's resolutions fail." The search results yield without exaggeration, almost 6 million results in less than ½ a second!

Needless to say, we frequently fail to live up to our resolutions. We can understand why the Torah would discourage empty promises. But here is the crazy thing. Even when we DO keep our promises, Chazal tell us it is still not ideal to have made them! In Nedarim 22a, Shmuel goes so far as to say, "Even when one fulfills his vow, he is called wicked." Someone who KEEPS a promise is considered wicked! Could it be because he never should have made it to begin with? That even when we keep our promises, in a way, we are failing ourselves?

I recently read a fascinating 2014 study called, "Worth Keeping but Not Exceeding: Asymmetric Consequences of Breaking Versus Exceeding Promises." The study first confirms what is probably obvious - someone breaking a promise is perceived negatively by his peers. However, the study goes further. It indicates that once a promise is fulfilled, the peer's evaluation flatlines. In other words, exceeding a promise - going above and beyond what you committed to - seems to have little effect on peer evaluation. The study concludes, "breaking one's promise is costly, but exceeding it does not appear worth the effort." All of this is to say is that resolutions, even when we manage to keep them, are limited. They can be helpful, but ultimately, they might hamper our willingness to strive for more. They do not actually change us.

Resolutions are a mechanism for dealing with our moral and spiritual challenges. But it cannot stop

there. Imagine a married couple. If I were to tell you that the sole reason they did not stray, that neither spouse had an affair, was because of their vow, their commitment, would not you think something was off? Wouldn't you want a couple to stay loyal to one another because their relationship is so precious, so enriching, that they are intrinsically motivated, even inspired, to protect its sanctity? Relying on vows and the adrenaline of willpower are tools, useful, but ultimately, if that is all there is, there is something missing.

Kol Nidrei is NOT about forgiving ourselves for being "total flakes" (another college term) and it is not about preemptively absolving our promises so that we can live with ourselves. Kol Nidrei is about approaching Yom Kippur with the statement that we strive for MORE than the bare minimum of a fulfilled promise.

The Yom Kippur liturgy is riddled with details that ask us to uproot our assumptions, repair our relationships - with one another, with God, with ourselves. The *tefillot* hold our hand through finding new paradigms and present us with the practicalities of change because true change IS practical. With all its controversy and its mystery, Kol Nidrei sets the stage for a Yom Kippur that is not about broken - or even fulfilled - promises, it is not about resolution, but rather deep and true revolution.