

Kol Nidrei, Release and Renewal

By Michael Gottsegen

On the eve of Yom Kippur, Jews will come together to chant the *Kol Nidrei* prayer declaring null and void all vows, all commitments, all obligations that have been entered into in the past year. Lest we be judged severely by God for our failure to live up to the obligations we have voluntarily undertaken, we declare these obligations – and especially those that we have not met -- to be null and void.

This nullification of vows and obligations entails a profound paradox. We acknowledge our responsibility for all the commitments we have freely undertaken, but at the same time we admit our moral frailty and assert our right to be excused from our unmet – and unwanted -- obligations.

The ancients, and the Greeks in particular, had a weightier - indeed an awful - sense of responsibility. Once one made a vow or a contract or a commitment, one was forever bound to it and responsible for all the attendant consequences, whether one had given one's word rashly, or ignorantly, or on the basis of circumstances that had long since changed. The tragic hero of Greek drama was the victim of his choices which, once made, compelled him and the plot with a grim necessity. Thus it was that Agamemnon was forced to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia on account of an ill-timed vow, and Oedipus was doomed to suffer terribly for dark deeds done in utter ignorance.

Hermann Cohen, the great German-Jewish philosopher, writing about the Day of Atonement - and about man's need for atonement - observed that but for the forgiveness of sin (and the individual's belief that his own sins have been forgiven), he would surely despair of his moral capacity, become cynical and cease to strive to be or do good.

The *Kol Nidrei* proclamation does not itself refer to forgiveness of sin, but speaks of a related matter: the release from the commitments/vows/ obligations whose violation would count as sin. Thus on *Kol Nidrei* we exercise our freedom on behalf of our freedom – our freedom to choose, determine and re-determine our obligations and thus our moral identities.

Vows made, obligations undertaken – that we have failed to keep or meet -- have the same cumulative effect as sin, sapping the will to make new vows and to undertake new commitments. Living in the shadow of this growing heap of moral failure, there is an increasing risk that we will come to despair of ourselves and of our capacity for moral action. In time, the burden of unexpiated and seemingly inextinguishable guilt becomes so overwhelming that we may finally refuse to pledge ourselves at all lest we fail once again and be burdened all the more. Hence the power and importance of *Kol Nidrei*.

The practical upshot of this disavowal of our vows is not a freedom *from* obligations, but a freedom *for* obligations. The release that *Kol Nidrei* signifies is meant to be a prelude to recommitment and rededication, a prelude to a renewal of most of those selfsame obligations whose nullification we have just declared. But though it is the case that, typically and for the most part, we will renew and recommit, the freedom *not* to do so is real. Autonomy, as the basis of our moral and social life, is affirmed.

In our private lives, most of us are familiar with the process whereby the weight of our guilt is transformed into cynicism and a slackening of our will to endeavor. And we are also familiar with the uplifting and empowering effect that *Kol Nidrei*, and the atonement process more generally, can have by freeing us to work to revitalize the web of moral relations in which we live out our private and social lives. For instance, we might have promised our spouses and children last year that we would come home earlier from work, and that we would spend more time together. But as the year went on – perhaps even after a few days or weeks – our old patterns of behavior reasserted themselves, as did the familiar patterns of behavior on the part of our spouses and children. In time, as the year went on, we may have finally come to despair of the possibility of real change, becoming cynical and ceasing to try at all any more. But then when we were just about to succumb utterly to the force of old encrusted habit, Yom Kippur beckoned and on *Kol Nidrei* we were renewed and freed to renew our moral undertakings and to endeavor with a clear conscience and with the faith that we have the capacity to do better this time. And as the months passed we may have found – perhaps much to our surprise -- that we in fact did do better and did improve the quality of our relationships and our lives.

That *Kol Nidrei* and the atonement process might potentially have as positive and significant an impact on our public and political lives is, perhaps, less immediately apparent. For the quality of our public and common life depends, just as much as does the quality of our private and interpersonal life, upon our belief in our (collective) capacity to do better today than yesterday and better tomorrow than today. It depends upon our not succumbing to the apolitical cynicism that springs all too easily from a clear-eyed assessment of our collective political failures, lack of communal solidarity and hypocritical self-deceptions. It depends, in other words, upon our remaining hopeful about our political life and about the possibility of creating a better society through political means. The enemy of such hope is cynicism and despair -- not cynicism and despair about the system or the world, but cynicism and despair about ourselves and our neighbors since, ultimately, we are “the system” and, together with our fellow citizens, we comprise the world. And yet, such despair, and cynicism, and guilt are the almost inevitable by-products of the disappointment – in ourselves and in others – which politics necessarily brings to us.

Many of us have fought hard for a more equitable social and global political order, and have come to feel that our best efforts have made but little difference.

Many of us have supported and worked hard for political candidates who seemed to us to be so much better qualified than their opponents, only to see them defeated. Many of us have worked tirelessly on behalf of peace in the Middle East, only to find ourselves filled with despair today because we can find no partner on the other side. Such is the sad course of political life that eventually many of us will come to lose hope and faith and will be tempted to disengage from the process entirely. We may come increasingly to look upon political life and issues from afar, more as spectators than as citizens, making predictions from the sidelines rather than attempting to affect the outcome. Our guilt tends to grow, however, with our disengagement, and so too does our cynicism, as a defense against our guilt and as a justification for our disengagement.

Kol Nidrei – and the atonement process generally – can break this cycle of guilt, cynicism and withdrawal that tends ultimately to our individual and civic ruin. *Kol Nidrei* – and the atonement process as a whole -- cancels our debts, wipes the slate clean and permits us to start anew and afresh, renewed and refreshed. It gives us the wherewithal not to despair of ourselves and others. It helps us to disavow and repudiate the cynicism that otherwise awaits us.

How is this remarkable power to be explained? Let us rest content to describe it as a psychological miracle, and to thank God for it.