

Kol Nidre intro

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It's a Fabbrangen tradition to have someone give some remarks about the Kol Nidre before we recite it.

I was starting to think about what to say last weekend – I know, early for me – and while I was sitting on my porch musing, I noticed my next-door neighbors starting to put up Halloween decorations – lights, and gravestones and spider webs and the like. Somehow, I found this disturbing – just too incongruous – and it got me thinking about the two holidays.

They do have some things in common – the sense of the turning of the season, for example. And both holidays now seem to require a month of preparation. And each has a sense of hauntedness. Indeed, the Kol Nidre chant may be the most haunting music ever composed. It makes me shiver every year.

But the differences between Yom Kippur and Halloween are more telling, and why I suddenly found their juxtaposition so off-putting.

Halloween has become such a major holiday in the U.S. precisely because it has become devoid of meaning. Our society seems to love to drain things of meaning, leaving us with mere entertainment. We can see this with words, too. Once powerful religious terms like “icon” and “awesome” have been appropriated and left empty.

Yom Kippur is an antidote to all this, it's very opposite. The thrust of Yom Kippur is to imbue everything with meaning – perhaps to a fault – down to our most ordinary actions. One purpose of the service is to foster a sense of meaning, to create a community of meaning.

This starts with the Kol Nidre itself – an ancient incantation that we could easily dismiss as mumbo-jumbo. But instead, year after year, we take it seriously; we work to make these archaic words speak to, and for us. We think about what the Kol Nidre might say about our vows, about the importance of promises, about our uncertainty about the future.

Even more remarkable perhaps is the metaphorical space we create for it. We declare that the Heavenly Court has given us permission to pray together. We construct a description that further heightens the stakes in what we're chanting.

It's a rather amazing passage – really, who are we to claim that we know the “Heavenly Court” and even G_d have given us permission? How do we know? How do we dare speak for them? I think the search for meaning gives us a kind of confidence, even as it puts us in mind of our vulnerabilities.

We maybe turn that confidence up one notch further at the end of the Kol Nidre section when we quote G_d – almost speak for G_d – as we say “Selachti kidvarecha,” “I have forgiven, as you have asked.”

The Kol Nidre expresses our fears and uncertainty, but nonetheless this moment of meaning is also a heady experience. We say we know G_d’s mind.

So as we prepare to recite the Kol Nidre, lets revel in our effort to impart, and extract meaning from the world, from our lives and even from this sometimes discomfiting ancient plea.

I want to close with a poem I found on-line that perhaps captures some of what makes the Kol Nidre meaningful to us. I’m going to read just portions of it. It’s by Rick Lupert.

I heard Kol Nidre on a violin tonight,
They should take all legal documents
And set them to music.

All vows –
This legal document
Written in unholy language

A pre-nuptial agreement
For our inevitable failing.

Forgive me this year

And last year and next

Forgive our promises
Our oaths, our vows, all vows
You made the whole world.

And this day and every day,
You knew this would happen.
Pardon me. Please.