

Kol Nidrey

Deliberate Speech: A Disciplined Practice

This is the most attended night in synagogues all over the world.

Erev. Yom. Kippur.

The night we hear *Kol Nidrey*...

We have pondered and contemplated since Rosh Hashanah. Made a few apologies. Set a few goals.

We've eaten some honey cake.

And now, we fast...

We enter into Yom Kippur expressing our longing for the inner strength we need to make good on our promises for the New Year.

We know what we want in life, we just aren't yet 100% sure we can pull it off. There's work involved. We have new habits to learn, more self-discipline to exercise...

So we pray: Ancient words in Aramaic, that melody and how year after year it strikes just the right chord, a perfectly soul piercing vibrational frequency, *Kol Nidrey*...

May all the vows and oaths, the promises we make and the obligations we incur, between this *Yom Kippur* and the next...

(Did you happen to read the fine print on page 252?)

May the vows, oaths, promises, and obligations we utter...**be null and void** should we, after honest effort, find ourselves unable to full fill them.

We approach the most holy moment of the Jewish year, the final day of reckoning before the open gates, with a *legal formula* that essentially, and collectively, covers our *tuchasim* (note the plural declension) in the event of our failure to make the appropriate adjustments to our attitude and conduct.

Could we be more Jewish?

Our great, holy season of turning a new leaf and we insert an out-clause...

Or perhaps, the medieval rabbis who gifted us with this text, wish to remind us one more time, words are just words. The proof is in the pudding.

It is true that we make a lot of promises, we say a lot of things that we mean when we say them, but time, further reflection, and unfortunately sometimes, inertia, keep us from keeping our word.

We are supposed to emerge from Yom Kippur, tomorrow as the afternoon fades into evening, with a clean slate. Refreshed and renewed. Innocent as babes.

As Yom Kippur transitions us from our reflective state back into the world of words and deeds, the medieval rabbis caution us: Promises, promises... How many of them dissipate, deconstruct into good intentions, unrealized dreams.

Those medieval rabbis caution us: Talk is cheap. Words may be all we have to communicate our thoughts. But too many words get in the way. Too many promises go unfulfilled.

Worry not, my friends. I have the antidote. It's simple economics. If talk is cheap it means there are too many words in the market place.

Limit production, reduce output. Increase the value of what's out there. Be careful to treat words like they matter and say what needs to be said, and no more, so that additional output keeps the value of our word high.

Buddhists, I've encountered, call it practicing *deliberate speech*.

Deliberate speech:

Thinking before we speak.

Reflecting.

Weighing consequences.

Prioritizing.

Putting some ideas and dreams onto a shelf, from which they can be accessed at some point in the near or distant future. There are, after all, only so many hours and days...

Saying what we mean. Meaning what we say.

We, Jews, so blessed with the gift of gab...

People of the book.

So many lawyers among us.

So adept with our words, our medieval sages gifted us with *Kol Nidrey*, the ultimate out-clause.

Sh'ma koleynu...

Oh God, hear our prayers, hear my prayer...

But if I stray, if I repeat last year's mistakes, if I live my life on automatic pilot and come back next year with the same baggage...

Be kind. Remember I'm only human. I dream and I dream big. I meant it last year. I did. Really, I did.

It seems to me that we are all stuck on a treadmill in some area of our lives. We have internalized that there's always an out-clause and we allow ourselves to go a little numb. We say things and we make commitments that we mean to keep, but we don't.

We get caught up in the season of change. Autumn is all about the beautiful reds and yellows that seem to just appear one day. Then they fall away.

The message about the possibility of change each High Holy Day Season stirs us to recommit to the vision to which we cling, of our better selves. It's reassuring to know that if we don't change, if we don't keep all our promises, the planet will maintain its orbit around the sun and life as we know it will go on.

Sure we'll make the same mistakes again. We'll come back next year and renew our intentions. And so on, and so on...

Or perhaps, perhaps, this year, we could try a spiritual practice supplement. A formula developed by another faith tradition, but totally compatible in every way to Jewish sentiment, practice, and theology.

I once interviewed, Rabbi Arthur Waskow, a true patriarch in Jewish Renewal circles. I knew he had a fresh approach to interfaith dialogue and relations. So I asked him about it. I loved the way he explained it.

He said something like: You know, you wouldn't think twice about taking an iron supplement if you aren't getting enough iron from your diet. The same goes for protein or calcium.

So we could maintain our diet preferences, and take a supplement to improve our overall chemistry. Why couldn't we do the same with our spiritual and ritual chemistry? Practice meditation, intellectual prayer? Practice yoga, physical prayer?

How about as we fast from food this 24 hours of Yom Kippur, we consider a year-long fast...not from food, but from cheap talk and empty words.

Think about it. Refraining from filling empty space with empty words. Learning to say: not now, but perhaps later. Silence is OK. Sure it's a little awkward at first.

Supplementing our spiritual practice diet with a practice of deliberate speech.

Kol Nidray, rather than lulling us into complacency with an out-clause, could call us to take steps to make sure that the dreams and promises these High Holy Days stir in us, don't ferment into good intentions.

To hear the cautionary call of *Kol Nidrey*: Talk is cheap.

To increase the value of our words.

To weigh, prioritize, and make choices.

To initiate a practice of deliberate speech.

The High Holy Day season should move us through a process: *Rosh Hashanah* calls us to assess the past year and pass judgment.

During the Days of Awe, we apologize for our mistakes and we dream big for the coming year.

Erev Yom Kippur calls us to refine our ambition for the coming year. *Kol Nidrey* cautions us: Talk is cheap.

May we increase the value of our words, this year.

May we weigh, prioritize, and make choices about where to focus our attention and effort, this year.

May we say what we mean and mean what we say, this year.

Ken y'hi ratzon...