The Journey We Started Together

Rebbetzin Abby Lerner

E ach year we enter a packed shul, a little out of breath, a little too full, somewhat over-hydrated, and we find our seats. Everyone is in white sneakers looking somewhat strange with our finest Shabbat attire, all the men in tallitot. A hush falls over the crowd and we can’t believe that this is really it. The Torahs have left the aron and are lying before us, all clothed in white. We look down at the words, at the magical, spiritual, communal moment. You don’t want it to end – this confidence. You don’t want it to end – this moment.

And then… “Kol Nidrei.” The haunting melody, the repetition, the gradual crescendo as more and more people join in more loudly and with greater confidence. You don’t want it to end – this magical, spiritual, communal moment. You look down at the words, at the Aramaic text, at the English translation. What does this mean? The glory of the light of the tzadikim, the pathos of the sinners of history united over time – and now these words? They seem cold, dry, legal, meaningless – a contradiction to the very melody they are set to, the opposite of the sanctity of this moment.

Yet we can’t believe that this is really happening for those who are upright of heart. Perhaps, at this moment, we really are tzadikim – at least for these fleeting seconds on this holiest of days.

On Kol Nidrei night, G-d and the Jewish people are all wearing tallitot. The Scrolls are lying before us as we prepare again to receive the Torah, this time in purity. G-d and the Jewish people are all reciting the ancient formula of Hatarat Nedarim together. Kol Nidrei… Forgive us the folly of our words. “And Hashem said, ‘I forgive them as you requested.’” G-d walks back his promise to destroy the Jewish people.

We, Klal Yisrael, retract our shout to the Golden Calf, “This is your god.” The final, glorious spoken words of Yom Kippur are “אתה ה’ וה荃יקם.” Kol Nidrei has manifested its magical powers to set Klal Yisrael and G-d back on the journey we started together.

Rebbetzin Abby Lerner serves as the first National Director of Conversion Services for Geirus Policies and Standards, a network of conversion courts. Previously, she taught at Yeshiva University High School for Girls and served as the Rebbetzin of the Young Israel of Great Neck in New York. She and her husband recently made Aliyah.