



Yamim Noraim Tefillot



KOL NIDREI

The Journey We Started Together

Rebbetzin Abby Lerner

Each 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, also clothed in white.

“Light is planted for the righteous and happiness 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.

על דעת המקום ועל דעת הקהל בישיבה של מעלה ובישיבה של מטה, אנו מתירין להפליג עם העבריינים, “With the consent of the Almighty, and consent of this congregation, in a convocation of the heavenly court, and a convocation of the lower court, we hereby grant permission to pray with transgressors.” Our shul has solemnly been turned into a heavenly and earthly courtroom as we invite all sinners to join the service where we will all be judged.

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.

Yom Kippur is *Matan Torah* – a re-enactment of the tragic, failed first attempt on the 17th of Tammuz. G-d says to Moshe: “They have made themselves a molten calf, prostrated themselves to it and sacrificed to it and they said, “This is your god, oh Israel who brought you out of the land of Egypt.” (Shemot 32:8) What is G-d's response to this? “And now [Moshe] desist from Me. Let My anger flare up against them and I shall annihilate them; and I shall make you a great nation.” (Ibid 32:10).

איש כי ידר נדר לה' או השבע שבועה... לא יחל דברו, “When a man makes a promise to Hashem or swears... he may not profane his words” (Bamidbar 30:3). Our words are sacred. Rabbi Yehuda explains that the words “he may not profane his words” imply that while the speaker himself may not reverse his unwise oath by himself, others can help him do so. This is the basis for the laws of “*Hatarat Nedarim*,” the annulment of vows (Chagiga 10a).

“And Moshe sought the face of Hashem, his G-d.” (Shemot 32:11) In the wake of the Golden Calf and G-d's desire to annihilate the Jewish people, Moshe turns to G-d and, with the same word used to describe the reversal of *nedarim*, beseeches Him until the promise to annihilate is undone (Brachot 32a). This was an act of *Hatarat Nedarim*; Hashem “reconsidered” what He had said He would do.

Throughout the Yom Kippur prayers, we recite, over and over again, the 13 Attributes of Mercy. G-d proclaimed these famous words in response to Moshe's prayer for the Jewish people after the sin of the Golden Calf. Rabbi Yochanan teaches that G-d himself was cloaked in a *tallit* as a *Ba'al Tefillah*

as He taught Moshe the 13 Attributes of Mercy, to teach us that when the Jewish people sin, the *Ba'al Tefillah*, similarly cloaked, should recite the 13 Attributes to achieve atonement for them (Rosh Hashanah 17b).

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 “ה' האלקים.” *Kol Nidrei* has manifested its magical powers to set *Klal Yisrael* and G-d back on the journey we started together.



Jews Praying in the Synagogue on Yom Kippur by Polish Jewish artist Maurycy Gottlieb, 1878

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