



Jewish Secular Community
of Cleveland

KOL NIDRE CELEBRATION

Zoom Edition

9/14/20

Reader (1): Yom Kippur ends the celebration of the New Year. In the past, Yom Kippur has been a holiday observed only in synagogues. On this evening of Yom Kippur we come together – friends, families, neighbors – united by a common need and a common bond. Our need at this season is to renew our lives – to go forward into the new year stronger, wiser, kinder than we were before. Our bond is the kinship of our shared humanity and our common love for Judaism and the family of Israel.

On this day it is fitting to honor the thousands of years of Jewish history as we observe an ancient and sacred tradition in a new and special way. Tradition imbues us this day with an atmosphere of dread and foreboding. We choose to temper that mood with the warmth and beauty that are also intrinsic to the history of our people.

If this is a day of remembrance, it is also a day of renewal. If this is a time for atonement, it is also a time for hope. If this is the season to assess our worth as individuals, it is also appropriate at this season to reaffirm our kinship with the international Jewish family.

Community: We, as secular Jews, want to remember and celebrate the ancient traditions of the High Holidays.

Reader (1): A tradition of Yom Kippur is the Kol Nidre, recited at the beginning of the evening service. Few of us are aware that the Kol Nidre, whose author and date of origin are unknown, is a legal formula and not a traditional prayer.

Reader (1): We often associate the history of Yom Kippur with the Middle Ages. It is likely that the utter solemnity and sorrow, now inherent in the traditional observance of Yom Kippur, developed during the Spanish Inquisition. During this time, many of the Jews who appeared to have converted had actually remained tied to their Jewish identities.

Reader (1): On Yom Kippur, these “secret Jews” or conversos, rejoined their people in stealth and fear. They pleaded to be forgiven and released from all unfulfilled vows to God made during the past year and for appearing to have turned away from Judaism.

The recital of the legal formula, known as the Kol Nidre, often brought relief to the tormented consciences of Jews who, under duress, made vows to accept another faith.

Reader (1): Judaism always recognized and taught that the Kol Nidre cannot release anyone from a judicial oath or from any promise, contract, or obligation between individuals. Injustices between one individual and another are not forgiven until amends have been made for the wrong.

- Reader (1): The underlying motives of the Kol Nidre, the sincere longing for a clear conscience, the release from the feeling of guilt, the recognition of the sacredness of the promised word, and the desire to be absolved from vows which could not be carried out, still possess significance for us today.
- Reader (1): Through the words and the melody of the Kol Nidre, the Jew expressed his deepest feelings and emotions. Its melodic line, majestic and yet plaintive, has continuously fascinated composers of modern times, Jews and non-Jews alike. Beethoven, for instance, introduced the theme into one of his last great quartets in C# minor, Opus 131. Max Bruch adapted it for the cello with orchestral accompaniment. Leo Tolstoy was deeply affected by the Kol Nidre music. He described it as the saddest, yet the most uplifting, of all the melodies he knew, and "one that echoes the story of the great martyrdom of a grief-stricken nation."

PLAYING OF THE KOL NIDRE

- Reader (2) Most holidays are either joyous or sad. But there are other holidays whose moods are serious and thoughtful. These are the times when we look inside ourselves and when we examine the world. These are the times when we think about what we have been doing with our lives.
- Community: Once each year, a Jew stands back from the round of ordinary days and says:
- Reader (2): Let us ask ourselves hard questions,
for this is the time for truth.
- Community: How much time did we waste
in the year that is now done?
- Reader (2): Did we fill our days with life,
or were they dull and empty?
- Community: Was there real companionship within our family,
or was there a living together and a growing apart?
- Reader (2): Was there love inside our home,
or was the affection left unsaid?
- Community: How was it with our friends?
Were we there when they needed us or not?
- Reader (2): The kind deed -- did we perform it or postpone it?
The unnecessary gibe -- did we say it or hold it back?

Community: Did we live by false values?
Did we deceive others?
Did we deceive ourselves?

Reader (2): Were we sensitive to the rights and feelings of those who worked with us?

Community: Did we acquire only possessions,
or did we acquire new insights as well?

Reader (2): Did we fear what the crowd would say
and keep quiet when we should have spoken out?

Community: Did we mind only our own business,
or did we feel the heartbreak of others?

Reader (2): Did we live right,
and if not, have we learned, and will we change?

Reader (3): Every person is granted free will. If one desires to incline towards the good way and be righteous, one has the power to do so; and if one desires to incline towards the unrighteous way and be a wicked person, one has the power to do so.

Since the power of doing good or evil is in our own hands, and since all the wicked deeds which we have committed have been committed with our full consciousness, it befits us to turn in penitence and to forsake our evil deeds, the power of doing so being still in our hands.

Moses Maimonides

Community: The new year is a time not only for personal salvation, but also for communal stock-taking, a time for society to purge itself of injustice and inequities.

Reader (3): This is not a modern concept or a secularist viewpoint alone. In the New Year morning service at a synagogue, the reading from the ancient prophet Isaiah tells us:

Is *this* the fast I have chosen?
The day for people to afflict their souls?
Is it to bow down our heads as bulrushes
And to spread sackcloth and ashes under us?

Will you call *this* a fast?

No, *this* is the fast that I have chosen:
To loosen the fetters of evil,
To undo the bonds of the yoke
And to let the oppressed go free;
To break every yoke.
It is to give your bread to the hungry
And to bring the outcast poor into your home.
When you see the naked, that you cover them
And not hide yourself from your own flesh.

Is not *this* the fast that I have chosen?

- Reader (3): As Rosh Hashanah is the celebration of a new year, as Passover is the celebration of freedom, Yom Kippur is the most serious community acknowledgment of the presence of our frailty and error. It calls attention to the human condition of inner turmoil and the wish and striving for inner peace and harmony.
- Reader (3): We seek forgiveness from ourselves as well as our neighbors. We seek to soften the bite of our conscience while knowing we have made mistakes. We strive to live so as not to wrong our friends, family, and community.
- Reader (3): If we can live at peace with ourselves, we shall be at peace with others. We recognize our imperfections, strive for inner harmony, and forgive ourselves and others for the inevitable wrongdoing.
- Reader (3): As a secularist, I accept the humanization of Yom Kippur without the symbolic harshness of an angry God exacting a punishing fast. I meet with my friends to share the sense of mutual responsibility for ourselves and each other to live together in peace, good will, and the hope for a better tomorrow.

- Reader (4): **In Our Hands**
In whom can we place our belief? – ourselves.
In whom can we set the soul aglow? – ourselves.
Who has the power to assuage guilt
And to end the reasons for guilt?
We do – we ourselves – we of human heart and spirit.

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To whom should we give our first applause?
In whose inner being lies the power to exalt our humanness?
Let us give ourselves the first applause.
Let us reach into our inner selves
And find that which we call righteousness.
For it is not found in the heavens or beyond the mountain.
It is found here, inside our inner human depths;
It waits there for us to seek it out.

Can we give an accounting of our souls?
Do we dare – to ourselves?
What will we find
In the recesses of our minds?
And in the echoes of our past?
We have the power and the choice
To narrow the abyss
Between the thought of good
And the deed of good.
Can we find the will?

We can, and we shall!

Jerald Bain, Secular Jewish Association, Toronto

FORGIVENESS

Reader (5): **TO MY FRIENDS**

Forgive me . . . if I ignored you when you sought my help.

Forgive me . . . if I insisted on helping you when you neither wanted nor needed my help.

Forgive me . . . if I allowed a misunderstanding to fester.

Forgive me . . . if I took advantage of your friendship, your good nature.

Community: **TO MY FAMILY**

Forgive me . . . if I tried to impose my values and interests upon you.

Forgive me . . . if I failed to respect your privacy.

Forgive me . . . if I exploited your vulnerabilities.

Forgive me . . . if I deliberately irritated you.

Forgive me . . . if I did not try to understand.

Forgive me . . . if I ignored your strengths and criticized your weaknesses.

Forgive me . . . if I treated you carelessly.

Forgive me . . . if I became angry when you tried to help me.

Forgive me . . . if I took you for granted.

Reader (5): **TO MY PARENTS**

Forgive me . . . if I seemed indifferent to your love.

Forgive me . . . if I demanded too much of you.

Forgive me . . . if I failed to listen when you sought to communicate.

Forgive me . . . if I failed to keep my promises.

Forgive me . . . if I was absent when you needed me.

Forgive me . . . if I did not allow you the freedom you, too, need.

Forgive me . . . if I took you for granted.

Community: **TO MY FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS**

Forgive me . . . if I laughed at your expense.

Forgive me . . . if I criticized without full knowledge.

Forgive me . . . if I judged you at your worst and expected you to judge me at my best.

Forgive me . . . if I did not keep my word.

Forgive me . . . if I defended evil through silence or cowardice.

Forgive me . . . if I lacked the courage of my convictions.

Forgive me . . . if I forgot our common humanity.

Reader (5): Yom Kippur is the day of self-forgiveness. Our harshest judge is not to be found among family or friends; it is our own conscience. Self-forgiveness is necessary in order to deal more effectively with the future.

Community: (Silent Reading)

TO MYSELF

If I lied to myself, settled for less than my best effort, wasted my time in frivolous activity, sacrificed my values for the sake of convenience, I need the forgiveness most difficult to achieve -- my own.

POETRY AND PROSE READINGS FROM COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Reader (6): Another tradition of the New Year is the ceremony of Yizkor, remembrance. The origin of Yizkor was the near genocidal massacre of Jews in the Rhine Valley during the Crusades beginning in 1096 and continuing for 250 years through the pogroms during the Black Death plagues. The ceremony consisted of reading aloud the names of all the victims who had died at the hands of the Crusaders and mobs, or in mass suicides to avoid forced conversion.

Reader (6): The "Memorial Books" drawn up in those days eventually contained thousands of names. Today, they would contain at least six million more. If we were to add the names of all victims of racism in our time, they would amount to tens of millions and would include people from every corner of the earth, including Southeast Asia, Latin America, and all of the Middle East. Even now, in the 21st century, we find ourselves rapidly adding names.

LIGHT YIZKOR CANDLE

REMARKS ABOUT A FAMILY MEMBER OR FRIEND WHO HAS PASSED AWAY

Reader (6): On this day dedicated to examining our past so that we may enjoy a happier tomorrow, we affirm our faith in the future. We have no illusions about the dangers that threaten the world. We know too well the power of human wickedness. Yet, we still believe that tomorrow can be better than today.

Reader (6): This belief is among humanity's most ancient hopes. At a time when most of the human family lived in isolated villages and strangers were assumed to be enemies, some dreamed that the entire world would one day be united in friendship. At a time when most were in bondage, some predicted that the time would come when all would be free. At a time when ignorance and poverty robbed human beings of dignity, some knew that eventually humanity would redeem itself from suffering.

Community: The vision of a good, peaceful, prosperous world is not yet realized, but we can help it emerge if we hold fast to the ancient promise:

A world released from sorrow to joy.
The bowed head shall be raised, the bent back made straight.

Those who dragged their chains shall dance and sing.
Violence will give way to goodness, the land be cleansed of tyrants, and the prophet's word redeemed:

Peace shall rule the Earth!

Reader (6): Truth is the sole possession of no nation; it is the product of no ethnic passion. It is the gift *of* all people *to* all people. We extend our homage to human greatness regardless of its source and pay with affection the debt of gratitude. Neither race nor tribal custom can obscure the oneness of humanity in pursuit of fulfillment. Neither the lust of war nor the pain of cruelty can sever the bonds of identity that tie all people together in the unity of common need and shared dreams.

Reader (6): Why have we observed this secular Yom Kippur?

It is a fact that for many generations it was a day which the entire people dedicated itself to repentance, prayer, and the service of the heart. It presented a possibility to spiritually sensitive people to make their inner reckoning on the loftiest plane.

I ask: Is this day for us merely a heritage from the past, a remnant of antiquity? Do we not really need such a day, especially as part of the national culture we are creating? If this day ceases to be what it has been – if it becomes an ordinary day like all others – this will represent a great national and human loss, a spiritual disaster from which none of us, neither the people as a whole nor we, its individual children, can ever recover!

A. D. Gordon

A.D. Gordon was a Labor Zionist pioneer in the kibbutz movement in Israel.

Community: We say we have a dream -- a world of love, of justice, of understanding, a world of plenty and of peace, a world where people are not afraid of one another. This dream has been with our people for over 4,000 years. It has given us strength and hope for the future.

Therefore, we dedicate ourselves to act, not merely speak out; to encompass the struggles of all the oppressed as our own; to make real and viable the social conscience that we have gleaned from our Jewish heritage.

When we meet again next year at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we must know that we have fought for those ideals to which we have dedicated ourselves.

SHOFAR

GUT YOMTOV!