

Dancing From Kol Nidrei

All vows, prohibitions, oaths, consecrations ... that we may vow, swear, consecrate, or prohibit upon ourselves - [from the last Yom Kippur until this Yom Kippur, and] from this Yom Kippur until the next Yom Kippur... regarding them all, we regret them henceforth. They all will be permitted, abandoned, cancelled, null and void, without power and without standing. Our vows shall not be valid vows; our prohibitions shall not be valid prohibitions; and our oaths shall not be valid oaths.

-Kol Nidrei Prayer

What an odd way to begin the holiest day of the year. How is it possible that we kick off Yom Kippur by renouncing vows, oaths and promises? And is this really possible - am I truly free from all my obligations? Are my lifelong commitments for naught? The inherent duties that I have accepted and undertaken in my life as a son, a father, a husband, a friend - have they all become null and void? Shall I do as this prayer says and bid farewell to every serious commitment that I have ever made?

*Pay my respects to Grace and Virtue
Send my condolences to Good
Give my regards to Soul and Romance
They always did the best they could*

*And so long to Devotion
You taught me everything I know
Wave goodbye, wish me well
You've gotta let me go
-The Killers*

The issue becomes more acute when you consider that Judaism is based on a vow. The covenant that the Jewish people accepted at Mount Sinai was akin to marriage between God and His people. We have been bound by the promise of Na'aseh VeNishma, "We shall do and we shall listen" ever since. So how in heavens name (literally) can we begin Yom Kippur with an annulment of everything sacred?

There are two types of people who are exempt from vows. They are excused from all obligations and have no commitments to anybody else. The Infant and the Dead. A newborn child is obligated to no one. He or she totally receives without any expectation of return. There are no promises he has to fulfill, no places she needs to be, no people who are counting on him. She does not owe anything to anyone and we all know this is so. The same can be said for the Dead, they too are completely and finally exempt from any promise or obligation or expectation. They are done and gone and no longer owe us anything.

And so the question remains - of what purpose is the Kol Nidrei declaration? Is it to have me view myself as irresponsible as an infant? Or is it perhaps that I should see myself as so far beyond caring for anything in this world; so completely disconnected from it to the same degree that the dead are from life?

Maybe indeed that is the point. Maybe Kol Nidrei teaches us that we need to go into Yom Kippur with a temporary sense of disconnection; that we should suspend ourselves, if but for a moment, from everything we are tied to. Imagine if we were to do that, imagine if we would throw it all off. What would our lives look like? What would we be doing? What would be different? What baggage would we rid ourselves from?

Every one of us has many obligations and has made many commitments in the course of our lifetime. Yom Kippur comes along and gives us the opportunity to reassess them; to keep the good ones and perhaps reconsider others. Must I really follow the NFL this year? For what purpose? Does it really enhance my life that I need to rearrange my Sundays to accommodate the games or maybe I ought to rearrange the NFL to accommodate my family? Maybe I should annul my vows to fashion, or checking facebook first thing in the morning, or to the myriad of apps and games on my iPhone - is Candy Crush perhaps crushing my life? Must I be addicted to Game of Thrones or Suits? Must I forever give so much weight to other people's opinions of me - people I hardly even care about, or to so many other things in life that I have simply accepted as givens through habit and that have now become attached and part of me as if I have vowed myself to them forever?

Yom Kippur is a gift from the Almighty that gives us the chance to rethink every obligation, every promise, every vow we have made - actively or passively through habit - and to rid ourselves of the useless ones that consume our time and our lives. Yom Kippur is the chance to sum up the courage to cut ourselves away from any and all futile obligations that do not provide us with the meaningful life we all seek.

*And sometimes I get nervous
When I see an open door
Close your eyes, clear your heart...
Cut the cord*

If we accept the message of Kol Nidrei and Yom Kippur, we will find our lives so much lighter and happier. We will effortlessly dance through life without the shackles of useless commitments and obligations to false gods and endless desires that weigh us down, day in and day out. Kol Nidrei is that opportunity, Yom Kippur is that chance...it comes once a year - don't let it slip through your fingers.

*And I'm on my knees
Looking for the answer
Are we human?
Or are we dancer?*