

KOL NIDREI 5777

As a child, I did not live in an observant home. Every year, at about this time, however, my mother would dress us in our very best outfits and say, “It’s erev YK and we need to go hear Kol Nidrei.” Actually, that ‘s not really true...what my mother would say is, “It’s erev YK and we need to go hear Kol Nidre.” Every year, as the cantor chanted that haunting melody, I would remember how powerful, how moving, how inspirational it was to hear Kol Nidre. As a college student and young woman, frequently the only Jewish related thing I did all year was to go and hear Kol Nidre. And for those few minutes every year, I was transported to some deep, inner, spiritual place. Those of us who are here tonight and heard Elaine lead the chant understand why KN is arguably the most famous, beloved, and emotionally powerful ritual in Judaism. The problem with Keddem’s rendition, however, is that in our goal to make prayer more accessible to all, we have translated the KN prayer using words that accurately reflect the original and that can be sung to the traditional melody. And so in addition to the mysterious sounding words Kol Nidrei...I have chanted along with the rest of you...All our vows, proscriptions, devotions, promises obligations, penalties, and oaths...Not very inspirational to me.

Last year, I chose to simply ignore this paradox, and go with the feelings that the melody stirred in me. This was not a bad decision and one I probably would have stayed with for years to come. The problem is that I was asked to give the drash this evening. Where else to start, but to look at the prayer and go from there. It probably won’t surprise you, but for a long time, I wasn’t quite sure where to actually go from there. Not only did I

have to write a drash, but I had to try to maintain my own deep spiritual feelings for this night....I certainly didn't want to let go of those.

I remembered hearing somewhere that the nullification of vows began with the Moranos who were forced to accept the ways of Christianity in order for their lives to be spared. Every year they would recite KN and know that they were being true to their Jewish roots. When trying to find a reference for this, I discovered that this was merely fiction...something we might wish was true, but there is no evidence to prove.

What I did discover, however, is quite interesting. Our ancestors conceived of the world as filled with supernatural beings: angels, demons, and spirits--all presided over by God. Some demons were beneficent and revealed to human beings the decrees of heaven. Others were merely mischievous, but most were malevolent. Thousand of demons inhabited the air, palm trees, and houses, and were the primary cause of both major disasters and daily inconveniences.

We moderns tend to think of words such as blessing, curse, vow, and oath in metaphoric terms. The sense that words once uttered have a life of their own and cannot be taken back is explained psychologically by our culture. But the ancients believed that the spoken word took on a metaphysical reality independent of human control. Vows, curses, blessings, and oaths attracted demons and other supernatural beings to carry out the content of the human utterance. Having set demons in motion, rash words could not be taken back. This is the context underlying the talmudic warning,"One should never

open his mouth to Satan.” Powerful weapons were needed to ward off these demons.

In addition to prayer, amulets, and incantations, the Jews believed themselves to possess another potent weapon against demons -- the study of Torah and the practice of mitzvot. Rabbis were expected to be adept at controlling demons and manipulating them to perform human bidding.

Jewish demonology is known principally through the study of the Babylonian Talmud. Since 1853, however, more than 100 magical incantations inscribed on earthenware bowls were discovered in Babylonia and at other sites in the Middle East. These incantation texts dating from the 4th to the 7th century CE were roughly contemporaneous with the formation of the Talmud. The incantation texts closely paralleled the structure and language of KN. They were written in the same style as a legal nullification of vows, the difference being that they nullified not vows but curses and spells. Many Aramaic terms used in KN had parallels in the incantations. Some of these incantations utilized the very words of KN! The authors of these incantations believed that the legal terminology for contracts, bills of divorce, and the nullification of vows in the human world had equal weight in the realm of demons. The language of KN, therefore, operated on two levels, the mundane and the magical.

So... one could postulate that the original function of the KN prayer was the annulment of curses or oaths that touch off evil forces in the community...its purpose was to give the community a fresh start by annulling the evil forces set in motion by destructive (even if unpremeditated) words. KN was meant

to protect us humans from the harm we do to ourselves and to each other through harsh words and thoughts!!!

Let us not be put off by our ancestor's literal belief in demons and evil spirits, curses and magic spells. These concepts have lost none of their metaphoric truth. Who among us has not spent a sleepless night haunted by the demons of regret and guilt? Have not many of us, sometime during the year been jealous of a colleague's good fortune or pleased at his or her misfortune? And how many of us have called the demons into our community by foolish or hurtful choices we have made?

KN magically bestows upon us a few moments of protected time to stop and reflect upon the meaning and direction of our lives. Our ancestors were not so primitive. We are not so advanced. Despite the centuries, their fears and ours, our hopes and theirs, remain the same.

KN grants us a new beginning, a fresh opportunity to bring blessings to our families, our colleagues, our community, and our planet. Let us--each of us--individually and collectively--agree to make the most of that opportunity in 5777.