



Meaningful Sermons “Words from the Heart

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

Enter the Heart”

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ABSTRACT

Are you trapped by your habits or patterns? Do you ever feel stuck in old routines that are not allowing you to forge ahead despite all your good intentions and best efforts? Are you ever your own “worst enemy?”

But then comes Yom Kippur and offers us a way out.

Seems strange – doesn’t it? – to begin Yom Kippur with *Kol Nidrei*, renouncing all vows that we might have made. On this holiest day of the year – the day which we spend asking God to forgive us for all transgressions – we start out by breaking former promises. How can that be?

That may have made sense during the Inquisition, when Jews were forced to pledge allegiance to Christianity, but how did it make sense for the centuries before and since? How does it make sense to us now? A moving story told by Elie Wiesel takes us back to *Tisha B’Av* 1492, and reveals the power of *Kol Nidrei* in 2010.

By renouncing “all vows” we are declaring our commitment to break the bonds that keep us from traveling on the journey within, the knots that bind us from opening ourselves to the Yom Kippur experience and entering our personal “Holy of Holies.”

KOL NIDREI: THE KEY TO FREEING YOURSELF

1. Are All Mortals Creatures of Habit?

Are you trapped by your habits or patterns? Are you stuck in your old routines that do not allow you to forge ahead despite all your good intentions and best efforts? Are you ever your own “worst enemy?”

We are all mortals. And as mortals, how can we hope to ever transcend our own inherent limits and parameters, our past mistakes and blind spots? Aren't we creatures of habit – victims of our own pasts?

Yom Kippur categorically and unequivocally answers “no” to all these questions.

2. On the Shoulders of Giants

We have come together today to accomplish a mighty feat – to transcend our mortal flaws, to defy our human habits and win forgiveness from God, not just for our personal transgressions of the past year, but for all the members of our community and for all of the Jewish people and human race. We have come together to celebrate our vulnerability together with our immortality. As we pray, voices which have recited these prayers in centuries past, echo in the halls of the universe. The voices of the holy and the voices of the sinners. Voices of the great and voices of the small. Voices of giants and voices of midgets. Today we join their voices.

As we do so, we may feel inadequate for the task. We may feel unprepared or unworthy. Yet, despite any weakness we may feel, we should have the confidence that we have tremendous strength nevertheless.

The cumulative good deeds of the past generations give us that strength. The challenges that our ancestors overcame, the good that they did – all that lives on forever. It is our inheritance.

We might be midgets but we stand on the shoulders of giants. Although we are puny, we can see even farther than the giants, because we are

standing on the shoulders of the past generations.

We are asked to do only that which we are capable of. We do not have to be like the giants of the past. We just have to do what is in our power – stand on their shoulders. When we do so, we lay claim to everything that they achieved plus we add our own small part. And that small part added to their great deeds might just be enough to tip the scales for us all.

3. Traditions Lost and Found

It is said that some nine generations ago, the Baal Shem Tov – the mystic who was the founder of the Hassidic Movement in the 18th century – would go to a special place in the forest before the start of the High Holidays. There he would light a fire in a special way, and he would say a special prayer. As a result, the entire world would be blessed.

In the next generation, his successors knew the location of the special place in the forest, and they knew how to light the fire, but they forgot the prayers. So, instead, they would pray, “Whatever the Baal Shem Tov achieved here, we should achieve.”

The next generation knew the location of the special place, but forgot the rest. So they stood in the forest and said, “Whatever the Baal Shem Tov achieved here, we should achieve.”

The next generations – including our own – forgot even the location. So what do we do? We tell the story.

An inspirational story is like a song. It lifts us up and transports us to a new, higher place. It moves us to act, to make the world a better place, and, as a result, the world is blessed. All because of what we had been inspired to do.

4. A Story to Tell

I, too, have a story to tell. It is a true story, originally told by the great Holocaust writer, Eli Wiesel, though it has nothing to do with the Holocaust and happened long before he was awarded the Nobel Prize. He told this story on the occasion of being honored by the King of Spain with a humanitarian award.¹

It happened many years ago during his first trip to Spain. Touring around, he found himself in the city of Saragossa where a Spaniard volunteered to be his tour guide and show him the sights. In the course of strolling around, the Spaniard discovered Wiesel's linguistic skills, in particular that he could read and speak Hebrew fluently. It was then that he invited him home.

There, the Spaniard produced a yellowed parchment and told Wiesel that it had been in his family for generations. He asked Wiesel if perhaps it was written in Hebrew. Wiesel picked it up, looked at it ... and his hands started trembling. The document was dated in the year 1492, on the 9th day of the Hebrew month of Av, *Tisha B'Av*, the worst date in Jewish history, when so many calamities befell the Jewish people, and the very day when the Jews were forced by the Inquisition to leave Spain. (Coincidentally or not, the next day Columbus sailed for America).

The document - which Wiesel read silently to himself - said:

"I, Moshe ben Avraham, forced to break all ties with my people and my faith, leave these lines to the children of my children and to theirs, in order that on the day when Israel will be able to walk again, its head held high under the sun, without fear and without remorse, they will know where their roots lie."

Wiesel's eyes filled with tears. Seeing Wiesel's emotional reaction, the Spaniard demanded to know what he had just read. Wiesel did not know how to reply. Instead, he offered to buy the document. The Spaniard refused, insulted. But Wiesel insisted, "Name any price." Yet

¹ The story is also included in the collection Legends of Our Time.

the man would not. It was too important a family heirloom he claimed. Finally, he shouted: "Tell me what it says!" And so Wiesel did. He said, "It says that you are a Jew."

The man was in shock. It was not good or pleasant news to him. Yet, there was the document which his family had preserved for so many generations, not knowing exactly what it said or signified.

When he recovered from the shock, the Spaniard asked Wiesel to tell him about the Jews, and that Wiesel did. He told him of Jewish history, of the amazing Jewish contribution to civilization, of the giants of Jewish scholarship. He left the man amazed.

Years passed. And then on a visit to Jerusalem, Wiesel found himself accosted by a passerby. Famous by then and uncomfortable with public attention, he tried to hurry on, but the man stopped him with one word: "Saragossa."

And so their acquaintance was renewed. And the Spaniard – now an Israeli – told him that he had a new name. He said it was ... Moshe ben Avraham.

5. Praying with Transgressors

Why do I tell you this story tonight?

Because of the words which traditionally have been recited at the outset of tonight's prayer service: "We hereby permit praying with transgressors."

These words were added to the beginning of the Yom Kippur prayer service five hundred years ago at the time of the forced conversion of Spanish Jewry.² At that time hundreds of thousands of Jews – unable to withstand the tortures brought upon them by resistance – succumbed to conversion.³ They became *anusim*, as forced converts are known in Hebrew, or *marranos* ("pigs") as they are known in Spanish. But many

² The Book of Our Heritage" by Elihu Kitov, p. 100.

³ Origins of the Inquisition by Ben Zion Netanyahu, p. 159 and p. 1095.

of them did not convert in their hearts. Though they publicly accepted Christianity, on the night of Yom Kippur they would risk their lives to pray in secret with other Jews, who said, “We hereby permit praying with these transgressors.”⁴

Can you imagine the emotions? Can you imagine the sobbing as *Kol Nidrei* began? Can you imagine how they must have felt saying, “All vows ... that we have vowed ... we regret having made them ... Our vows shall no longer be vows, and our prohibitions shall no longer be prohibited, and our oaths shall no longer be oaths.”

6. Cancelling Vows

Now, unlike the pronouncement about praying with transgressors that precedes it, the *Kol Nidrei* prayer does not date from this time. It is much older than that. Jews have been reciting *Kol Nidrei* for centuries before the Inquisition and for centuries since. *Kol Nidrei* means “All Vows” and its classic text, repeated three times, is a renunciation of all oaths and vows.

Why? And why still today? Since none of us gathered here have been forced to convert to an alien religion earlier this year, we have to ask what does this have to do with us? What does this haunting chant – which never fails to move everyone who hears it – mean to us?

It seems strange – doesn’t it? – to begin Yom Kippur this way. On this holiest day of the year – the day which we spend asking God to forgive us for all transgressions – we start out by breaking former promises.

But *Kol Nidrei* is not that. In fact, *Kol Nidrei* is the gate through which we enter the holiest day of the year.

A *neder* is not just a vow or promise that we vocalize to another person. It is a word that denotes all commitments, attachments and ties that bind us.

⁴ Crash Course in Jewish History by Ken Spiro, pp. 265-270.

7. Breaking the Ties that Bind

By renouncing “all vows” we are declaring our commitment to break the bonds that keep us from traveling on the journey within, the knots that keep us from opening ourselves to the Yom Kippur experience.

Obviously, this does not mean forsaking healthy commitments and responsibilities – it means forsaking those attachments that limit us, that entangle and entrap us.

So many people are inspired and motivated to go on a spiritual journey that they actually pack their bags – literally or metaphorically – and set out on their way. But after a while they end up coming right back to where they started, repeating the same old destructive patterns.

Good intentions are pure and real. When you decide to leave, you really want to get some place. But you have so many things weighing you down. So the key to meaningful change is not so much knowing how to get to a new place, it’s knowing how to unload the past – break the ties that bind – so that they don’t hamper your future.

That is, in essence, the focus of *Kol Nidrei*. It is a perfect prayer with which to begin Yom Kippur because unless you free yourself from such traps you cannot travel inward. With a ball and chain attached to you, you are not going to get very far.

Kol Nidrei is repeated three times to correspond to vows of speech, vows of deed, and vows of thought:

All vows and self imposed prohibitions ... we regret having made them. May they all be permitted, forgiven, eradicated and nullified, and may they not be valid or exist any longer. Our vows shall no longer be vows, and our prohibitions shall no longer be prohibited, and our oaths shall no longer be oaths.

8. Vidui, the Confession Prayer

In addition to the *Kol Nidrei*, there is another special prayer that we recite tonight – *Vidui*, the Confession Prayer. And I'd like to say a few words about that.

But before I do, I am reminded of the fellow who last year showed up at a synagogue – not here, of course ... someplace else, thank God.

The guard at the door asked to see his ticket but he had none. "Sorry," the guard said, "I cannot let you in." But the fellow insisted. "I have an important message for David Goldstein!" "Oh, okay," said the guard. "In that case you can go in. But don't let me catch you praying!"

The *Vidui* prayer is meant to be an intimate moment when we acknowledge our wrongdoings before God. Now, of course, God knows all the mysteries of the universe and He certainly knows every secret of every human being, including our wrongdoings. So why do we have to tell Him what He already knows?

Verbally admitting a wrong is the first essential step of *teshuvah* or "repentance," which in Judaism is understood as reconnecting with our own soul and returning to God.

On Yom Kippur we recite two types of *Vidui* (confession). The first is called *Ashamnu* ("We are guilty") and the second is called *Al Chet* ("For the sin"). Each is followed by a litany of wrongs. But a sin in Hebrew is not understood just as a transgression but as a *disconnection*. Just as the word for "commandment" (*mitzvah*) means "connection," so the word for "transgression" (*aveirah*) means the opposite – "disconnection" or "displacement."

When we sin, we actually displace and disconnect ourselves from our own true self. A sin, therefore, is not committed just against God, it is committed against the self. *Teshuvah* (repentance) – which requires a confession or acknowledgment of this – is the process of realigning and returning to our real self, our divine soul.

In the Yom Kippur service, sins are expressed in the plural, not only to save individuals from embarrassment, but so that the congregation as a whole might attain true atonement. We cannot confess only for ourselves, rather we have to ask forgiveness for all our fellows who sin. As the great 16th century Kabbalist, the Ari, said, "Confession is written in plural, because all of the Nation of Israel is considered like one body, and every person is a limb in that body. So we confess to all the sins of all the parts of our body."

Al Chet is a list of categories of sins that are the most common. Many relate to our misuse of speech and having the wrong type of thoughts or attitude. Some have to do with more concrete Torah commandments. But all relate to our lives. Of course, we should not feel limited to confess only the list of sins printed in the prayer book, we should mention any specific sins we may have committed.

9. Personal Holy of Holies

The confession brings us to a pure place within the soul. To the Holy of Holies within.

Before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the pinnacle of the Yom Kippur service was the moment when the High Priest (*Kohen Gadol*) would enter the Holy of Holies.

This was the only time of the year that anyone could enter this holiest of inner sanctums and only the High Priest was permitted to do so, and only for a short duration.

It was such an intense moment that if the High Priest was not completely pure – if he had committed a transgression for which he had not previously atoned – he would die immediately.

This was because the Holy of Holies was a place so pure that even one blemish was intolerable. It was like the eye membrane, which is so sensitive, it cannot tolerate even one small grain of sand, not even its own eyelash. The Holy of Holies was like that. It was the most sensitive, purest place in existence.

If the High Priest died, the other priests would have to pull his body out by a rope that had been previously attached to him. But if he succeeded in his mission to obtain God's forgiveness for the Jewish people, he emerged radiating a special glow that is vividly described in traditional Yom Kippur liturgy.

Today we have no High Priest and no Temple. But the Holy of Holies still exists – in the depths of our own souls. On Yom Kippur we attempt to reach that purest part of ourselves and to connect with God there.

We might now be able to stay in that pure place for a long time. It might be only a few minutes. For, as we know, the most special experiences last only a moment.

May all of us gathered here reach that pinnacle within and walk out glowing. May that glow last and spread, and become “a light unto” our families, our community, our nation and the world. Amen.