



## HIGH HOLIDAYS

Yom Kippur - Kol Nidrei

Marriage Bonds, Kol Nidrei Bonds, and The Greatest Love Story Ever Told

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## MARRIAGE BONDS, KOL NIDREI BONDS, AND THE GREATEST LOVE STORY EVER TOLD

### ABSTRACT

Two holocaust survivors were one of ten couples competing for the “World’s Greatest Love Stories.” In 2011, *Live! With Regis and Kelly*, a nationally syndicated TV show, ran a competition where the audience voted on whose love story was the greatest.

Howard and Nechama Kleinberg’s miraculous story of survival and home building helps demonstrate how the secret to a beautiful and loving marriage is found in Yom Kippur.

Yuma, literally meaning “the day,” is the Talmudic tractate that discusses Yom Kippur. The first Mishnah opens with what seems to be a counterintuitive law: Seven days prior to Yom Kippur the High Priest separates from his home, wife and family. On the holiest day of the year, why is the High Priest obligated to leave and separate from the ones he loves the most?

More perplexing: from this very law we learn that the High Priest is obligated by divine decree to be married to perform the service. How is it that from the very law that commands separation from one’s spouse we learn that the High Priest must be married?

Why does the entire, Yuma, “day,” referring to the holiest day of the year, open not with love and marriage and holiness, but separation from the one the High Priest loves most?

How does this embody the holiest day, Yom Kippur? And how does this embody the holiest institution, marriage?

The secret to a happy and everlasting marriage is found in the answer to this dichotomy.

### 1. The Holiest Day of the Year

Tonight begins the holiest and most awesome day of the year: Yom Kippur. No other day is embedded in our consciousness like Yom Kippur does. Jews from all backgrounds, even those that do not attend synagogue throughout the year, make an effort to be at the Kol Nidrei service.

Did you know that the first song ever sung in the first ever Hollywood sound film was Kol Nidrei? It was sung by Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer*, a 1927 film based upon Samson Raphaelson's 1921 short story "The Day of Atonement."

Uncannily, like Yom Kippur itself, *The Jazz Singer* is a visual and verbal parable of the Jewish experience in America. Its story is a paradigm of the Jewish dream in conflict with American reality; its characters exemplify the clash between Old World values and New World ambition.

But what makes Yom Kippur so holy and so powerful?

There are certainly many factors, but the one that stands out most is that on this day, after 80 days of pleading with G-d to forgive the people for their grave sin of building the golden calf, Moses finally prevails, as we will proclaim three times right after *Kol Nidrei: Vayomer Hashem Solachti K'Dvorecho* – And G-d said: I have forgiven them in accordance with your word.<sup>1</sup>

On Yom Kippur, after these 80 challenging days, Moses descended from Mount Sinai with the Second Tablets in hand.

Yom Kippur is thus the holiest day of the year because it gave birth to hope and forgiveness. Imagine what life would be like if we imperfect mortals would not have the ability to repair, heal and reconcile after we made mistakes?

Moses opened the door of hope and forgiveness for us, so that each year on Yom Kippur we have the capacity to atone and correct our betrayals and indiscretions; to repent for our crimes and transgressions and to rebuild and mend our strained relationships.

## 2. The Love of Yom Kippur

But it's even more than that.

Yom Kippur is the story of love – not just plain love, but the greatest love of all: Love reclaimed after it was seemingly lost. Yom Kippur teaches us that even if our love was betrayed, even if it was done deliberately, we can find reach reconciliation (as in the building of the golden calf), and discover an even deeper love than the original one.

Yom Kippur is therefore referred to as "His wedding day," *yom chasunoso, zeh mattan Torah*<sup>2</sup>, because on this day was the giving of the Torah – the second tablets.

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 14:20. See Radal on Pirkei d'Rebbe Eliezer ch. 46. Commentaries to Shemot Rabba 51:4.

<sup>2</sup> Song of Songs 3:11. Mishne Taanit 26b.

But this poses a fundamental question: If Yom Kippur is about the building and rebuilding of a loving relationship between man and G-d, and all human relationships evolve from the relationship between us and the divine, why then are we prohibited from having relationships on Yom Kippur? And why do we not preform marriages on this holiest of days?

The answer to this question can be derived from a moving and miraculous story of love borne out of the holocaust – teaching us the secret to a happy and everlasting marriage, which itself is the secret of Yom Kippur.

But let us first review the paradox we seem to find about the connection of Yom Kippur with love and marriage.

### 3. The Paradox of Marriage

Yuma, literally meaning “the day,” is the name of the Talmudic tractate that discusses Yom Kippur. Yuma opens<sup>3</sup> with what seems to be a counterintuitive law: Seven days prior to Yom Kippur the High Priest separates from his home, which refers to his wife and family ... as it states: *And atone for himself and for his household (beito)*<sup>4</sup> – household refers to his wife (*beito zu ishto*).

This is actually very symmetrical with Kol Nidrei, which speaks of separating oneself from all bonds, commitment, and oaths.

On the holiest day of the year, why is the High Priest obligated to leave the ones he loves the most? Why do we begin the holiest day by absolving our oaths, separating ourselves from our bonds, and distancing ourselves from our commitments?

More perplexing: from this very law we learn that in order for the High Priest to perform his Temple service, he is obligated by divine decree to be married. How is it that from the very law that commands separation from his spouse we learn that the High Priest must be married?!

Why does the entire, Yuma, “day,” referring to the holiest day of the year, open not with love and marriage and holiness, but separation from the one the High Priest loves most?

To bolster the question, later on in the tractate Yuma, the Talmud states<sup>5</sup>: Upon the conclusion of the High Priest’s Yom Kippur service, they would sanctify his arms and legs, remove his golden clothes and bring him his own personal clothing. Then a progression would accom-

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3 2a.

4 Leviticus 16:7.

5 Yuma 70a.

pany him to his home, where he would make a festive celebration for his wife and family for peacefully exiting the Holy.

The Yom Kippur service revolves around the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest. Only one day a year, one person, the High Priest, could go into the Holy of Holies. And yet, the Kohen Gadol's entire Yom Kippur begins and ends with his wife – first he must leave his wife, then he must return to her in peace and celebration.

How do we explain these two extremes? Why does the Kohen Gadol have to be married to perform the service? Why does he have to leave his wife a week before Yom Kippur – indeed, why is the first law in Yuma? – and why then return in peace to his wife right after performing the holy service?

On one hand it seems that Judaism celebrates marriage, and the man who holds the highest position, the High Priest, must be married. On the other hand, it appears that Judaism demands asceticism on this holiest day of the year. And then yet again, on the very same day, after the service, the High Priest celebrates returning home to his wife and family!

These two seemingly antithetical elements on Yom Kippur – love and abstinence – are even more broadly reflected in the abovementioned enigma of Yom Kippur being both the “wedding day,” as well as a day when we abstain from marriage and intimacy.

#### 4. What is Marriage?

These questions will be resolved by examining the word the Torah uses from which we derive both the High Priest's abstinence and marriage – *And atone for himself and for his household (beito)*. Since the verse is talking about the Kohen Gadol's wife (*beito zu ishto*, as the Mishne explains) why is she called *beito*, “his home,” and not explicitly *ishto*, “his wife”?<sup>6</sup>

The reason for using the word “home” (or “household”) – better than the word “wife” – is because “home” captures the true essence of a marriage. A marriage isn't only a matrimony and union between husband and wife; it isn't only about a relationship between two people; it is about building something greater and more transcendent than both of them – establishing an eternal edifice, which will house the divine. In marriage, the spouses partner in constructing a “mishkan,” a holy sanctuary, both physically and spiritually.

This does not in any way negate the vital importance of the personal relationship. On the contrary: it elevates the relationship to a completely new dimension; a relationship that builds a piece of eternity in this impermanent world.

<sup>6</sup> For the following, see Likkutei Sichot vol. 17, pp. 172-181; vol. 32, 106-11.

Building a “home” – a *dirah b’tachtonim* – is the purpose of all existence and the mission for which each of us was sent to this world. G-d desired to have dwelling place in this lowest of worlds.<sup>7</sup> And each couple does that in microcosm by building their home in a sacred marriage.

A house, a *bayit*, is the one single word that best encompasses a soul’s mission here on earth. My mission, your mission, our mission is to build a home, a divine home in our personal lives, and a collective divine home, a Beit Hamikdash, a holy home for G-d.

Thus, marriage distilled into one word is: *bayit, beito*, his home. As we say in the Sheva Brachot: *Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the universe, who created man in His image, in the image of His likeness He fashioned his form, and prepared for him from his own self an everlasting edifice – a binyan adei ad – Blessed are You L-rd, Creator of man.* The very creation of a human being is synonymous with “building an everlasting edifice,” a home. Indeed, as the Talmud states<sup>8</sup>: “Any person that does not have a home is not a person.”

This is why the verse calls the High Priest’s wife his *bayit*, to highlight the essence of marriage.

## 5. Building A Home

Once we understand the deeper meaning of marriage, that it isn’t only about a relationship between husband and wife, but about building a home, we come to realize that marriage has two elements to it: 1) The actual relationship and closeness between husband and wife. 2) The foundational element of the marriage, which transcends and infuses them both with the transcendent dimension of their marriage – their home.

The home too consists of similar two components: 1) The physical home, where the couple and family dwell. 2) The spirit – the foundation and fundamental values of the home – which holds up, and upon which rests the entire home life.

I submit that therein lays the secret to building better marriages. Many marriages and homes today have the first element. But it is the second one that is most lacking. Integrate into your marriage the “home” element, and the marriage is far more likely to thrive.

Now we will understand the two diametric opposite components reflected in in Yom Kippur, the “marriage day”:

Judaism teaches us a marriage – a home – which makes a person complete and fulfills the purpose of existence – must have both 1) a practical, tangible and material side. A *dirah b’tachtonim*

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<sup>7</sup> Tanchuma Nasso 16. Tanya chapter 36.

<sup>8</sup> Yevamos 63a cf. Tosafot ad loc; see also Likkutei Sichot vol. 17, p. 176 fn. #28.



—a home in the material world. And 2) a spiritual side. The home should shine with holiness and divinity.

A successful marriage consists of a working and viable day-to-day practical reality. It isn't a philosophical or abstract concept. It is real, a very real reality in this empirical world, with all its obligations and chores. That's why a home is called **real** estate. It is very **real**; it consists of fixed property. Real estate is rooted in the Latin "realis," which means existing and true.

That is why the High Priest, who personified and epitomized the divine plan to create a divine dwelling in this world, had to be married and have a home (*beito*) to concretize and manifest the highest ideal and purpose in real life. Otherwise the high ideal never becomes real. If The Kohen Gadol remains a bachelor and does not build a home (*beito zu ishto*), it is a direct contradiction to his purpose for being, and he cannot fulfill the purpose of creation.

On the other hand, a marriage is not just the relationship and the tangible elements; it is about building a home. And every home must have a foundation – a type of nuclear reactor, a core essence, a transcendent *Yechida* upon which everything stands. The foundation and spirit of the home holds up, drives and energizes the very real and practical endeavor.

Yom Kippur is the "marriage day" because on this holiest of days the essential connection between G-d and the people is established. And when you are placing the foundation, you do not engage in the manifestation of the relationship and the material components of the home.

Just as we don't live in the foundation, only in the floors built upon it, so too on Yom Kippur – when Moses regained G-d's loving essential and foundational connection with the people (after the betrayal of the golden calf) – we don't engage in physical relations; we humbly commit to the essential core connection. Think of it like this: when recharging the batteries at the core power station, we don't use them until after they are charged.

This is the ineffable Name and untouchable Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies, the core, which ensures that the edifice remains eternal and everlasting, and that it never remains just a building.

All year round, even the Kohen Gadol himself cannot walk into holiest place in the world. A place that is beyond this world, yet powers this world. The Holy of Holies is the soul of all existence, but one that cannot be touched all year round.

*Acabas b'shana* – once a year, and only once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Kohen Gadol must begin to enter the Holy of Holies, to remind and reconnect himself and his family and all of Israel to the core heart and soul of existence.

So how does he begin? By separating from the second, implementation side of the marriage and home. When one is busy building the foundation of an everlasting edifice, and enter the Holy of Holies, one cannot be engaged in mundane activities. Conversely, when one is involved with the daily minutia of existence, one cannot enter the Holy of Holies. The High Priest must therefore separate himself from his house, his wife, his purpose in this world to walk into something beyond this world, upon which the entire world rests.

But here lays the key: the separation from his family is *for* his family – as the verse states: *And atone for himself and for his household*. He isn't separating **from** his wife, he is separating **for** his wife. He isn't separating **from** his home and family, he is separating **for** his home and family. He isn't separating **from** his purpose in building a divine world, he is separating **for** his purpose in building his divine world. The separation therefore is not a separation, but establishing a deeper connection!

In order to manifest the essence of the *bayit*, the home, the love, he must remove himself – in order to connect on the core level. This is Yom Kippur: by not eating, wearing leather shoes, having family relations, we aren't removing ourselves **from** our obligations, we are removing ourselves **for** our obligations. We aren't separating **from** the world, we are separating **for** the world.

And this is demonstrated in the conclusion of Yom Kippur: Upon the conclusion of the High Priest's Yom Kippur service, they would sanctify his arms and legs, remove his golden clothes and bring him his own personal clothing. Then a progression would accompany him to his home, where he would make a festive celebration for his wife and family for peacefully exiting the Holy.

The entire purpose of Kol Nidrei, of separating from our preconceived commitments, is precisely to return in peace, to walk out of the Holy of Holies and infuse its power into our daily lives.

## 6. The Greatest Love Story (story)

Let me share with you a touching story, which captures the Yom Kippur “marriage day” – the essence of true love and marriage in Judaism.

Howard Kleinberg was born in Starachowice, a small town in central Poland, the youngest of 10 children. His first encounter with fate came when he was 3, in 1928, when an uncle tried to get the family visas that would allow them to immigrate to the United States. Unfortunately, the doors to the States were closed, so he went to Toronto and obtained permission for the



Kleinbergs to come to Canada. When the family got to Warsaw, though, there had been an outbreak of typhus. Canadian immigration officials were screening potential immigrants for the disease. Because Howard's father was of slight build and under the weight limit, they told his mother that she could come with the children, but that Mr. Kleinberg could join them later. Not wanting to leave her husband, Mrs. Kleinberg opted to send the four oldest children by themselves. She would go later, with the rest of the family, she thought.

World War II broke out. Separated from his family, the teenage Howard Kleinberg spent the last two years of the war going from one concentration camp to another, including Auschwitz and Mathausen, eventually arriving in Bergen-Belsen. The war was coming to an end, and even though much of the work ceased in Bergen-Belsen, the prisoners were starved, ill, broken, and many returned to their Creator in the yards of the camp.

One of the young Kleinberg's jobs was to take blankets and drag corpses into a pile. As his own health deteriorated, he could no longer bear to stand. Alone, broken, he lay down among the bodies, waiting to die.

On April 15, 1945, Howard Kleinberg struggled to breathe as he lay on a pile of corpses. Although the camp didn't have gas chambers, more than 50,000 prisoners died there from a lack of food and medical care.

Unbeknownst to Howard, that very day British troops liberated the camp. 16-year-old Nechema "Nancy" Baum, another Jewish prisoner at the camp, was walking by the piles of the holy of holies that were destroyed by the Germans, may their names be erased. Suddenly, she saw a body move.

Nancy and another woman carried Howard into a nearby abandoned barracks and nursed him back from death over a two-week period.

During the third week, in an attempt to save himself, a delirious and still-shattered Howard crawled from the bunk bed and out the door. An hour later, he was discovered by British soldiers in the streets and taken to a military hospital, where he recovered for the next six months.

Two years later, in May 1947, Howard immigrated to Toronto, where his four eldest siblings had moved prior to the war. Of a family of a two loving parents and ten loving siblings, he and those siblings were the only to survive.

A little while later, as the Maker of the world works in mysterious ways, Nancy moved to Toronto as well. Through word-of-mouth in the city's still-growing Jewish community, many of them survivors, Howard heard that Nancy, the woman who saved his life, was living in Toronto.

One day, Howard showed up at Nancy's doorstep with flowers in hand.

"I felt this would be the right thing to do when I went over to visit the girl that saved my life," said Howard. "She opens the door and there's this beautiful blonde girl. I was awestruck but I had nothing, no money, no parents, no future, nothing as all to offer her."

Three years later, the couple got married in a Toronto synagogue with a big 400-person wedding.

"I knew she was 'the one' from her background," said Howard. "How many girls nowadays, go up the street, seeing someone lying the ground and bring them to life? This in itself was good enough for me to know she's the right person for me. And I didn't make a mistake."

Nancy said her cousin advised her to marry Howard.

"I've went out with other boys, but she said if I married him, I would have a good life," she said. "He has a good personality and nice character. I felt like it was *besbert* – it was meant to be."

In 2011, the Kleinbergs appeared on *Live! With Regis and Kelly* to compete for the title of "World's Greatest Love Stories." While they didn't win the contest, the couple feels lucky to see their family flourish with four children, 11 grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

As part of their prize, the Kleinbergs won a dinner party for their entire family at 398 West, a kosher fine-dining restaurant in North Toronto; a professional photographer to document the night; and \$3,000 in cash.

Howard could barely describe his feelings in the rushed interview following his live television appearance.

"But thank G-d we are here. We have a wonderful life, and I would advise each one that once you get married, make sure that you don't argue with your wife, that you love her, that you take care of her, and you'll live a happy life."

"They took on the attitude of moving forward," said their daughter Marla, 54. "You can reflect on what you had, but you need to build and go forward and I think that's what my parents have done. That's really what is inspiring."

This year, the Kleinbergs, separated at Bergen-Belsen and reunited in Toronto two years later, will celebrate their 68th anniversary with their children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

## 7. More than a Marriage

This great love story shows us in real life the true meaning of marriage – the ultimate “wedding day” of Yom Kippur:

Nancy was much more than a wife to Howard; she was his home. Together they build something far greater than a personal connection. They built eternity – an eternal edifice.

It sometimes takes hardships to reveal the power of the underlying eternal foundation of a marriage as a home. When things are going relatively well, we may not have to dig deeper and appreciate the forces that create eternity. Think of it like living in a solid building: We live on the floors above the foundation, and don't always appreciate the solid foundation upon which those beautiful floors rest. However, when our lives are shaken and the floors above give way – as in the difficulties faced by the Kleinbergs – the power of the foundation becomes glaringly obvious.

In fact, it is the temporary distance that Howard and Nancy experienced over the years since she had saved him which allows us to appreciate the depth of their connection.

As it was on the first Yom Kippur “wedding day,” with Moses descending with the second tablets – which revealed the deepest love between G-d and the Jewish People, after their initial distance due to the sin of the golden calf

This teaches us that all relationships – even those that may presently not be challenged – need both the foundation and the expression of love.

Yom Kippur thus offers us – surprisingly – the secret to building and sustaining powerful and empowering marriages and homes.

## 8. Newborn Communication

The miraculous and inspiring story of Nancy and Howard Kleinberg is one of the Greatest Love Stories less because of the ideal romance, knight in shining armor and all that. It is the greatest love story because distance and separation did not only hinder their love but rather fostered it.

Out of this magical union, generations upon generations rose out of the ashes. The very purpose of building the home, the bayit, is to produce fruit and birth light into this world.

As Kol Nidrei, the removal of all bonds beings, as we walk into the year's proverbial Holy of Holies, we separate ourselves from this world, from everything, even from our superficial selves.

But, as we learn from Nancy and Howard Kleinberg, the separation doesn't separate us: it only allows us to come together stronger, in such a way that leads to an eternal union between our loved

ones, our own selves, and our Creator.

Walking into the core nuclear reactor is how we build an everlasting edifice in this very real world.

May we all use this holy day to enter our personal Holy of Holies and reconnect to our own essential core, which then empowers each of us to build an ever greater home, with even stronger relationships – with your spouse, with your children, with your extended family – and eternal edifice, with perpetual fruits, in healthy children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and on.

May we all be written and sealed in the book of life so that we may fulfill our nuptial vows – marrying heaven and earth, body and soul, G-d and Israel.

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