



## HIGH HOLIDAYS

### Kol Nidrei

Does G-d Need to be Forgiven?

Kol Nidrei 1944 In The Auschwitz Women's Barracks

October 8, 2019

## DOES G-D NEED TO BE FORGIVEN? KOL NIDREI 1944 IN THE AUSCHWITZ WOMEN'S BARRACKS

### ABSTRACT

Yom Kippur means the Day of Atonement. Atone is made up of two words: at one. By atoning for our errors, by asking for forgiveness and being granted forgiveness, we become “at one” with G-d and with each other.

But here's a question: G-d fulfills all the mitzvot He gives us. How does G-d fulfill the mitzvah of asking for forgiveness from us on Yom Kippur? Does G-d say Kol Nidrei as well? How does a perfect G-d “atone” for anything? Why would G-d even need to ask us for forgiveness and to atone?!

Another question: even when we can reach a level of unity on Yom Kippur, how do we maintain it throughout the year?

We can find our answers in a heartrending story that happened this night 75 years ago – Yom Kippur at Kol Nidrei in the women's barracks of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

If you think Jews are divided their externals, this story will change your perspective forever.

### 1. Day of Atonement – At One

We are about to enter the holiest day of the year. We are about to embark on a 25-hour awesome journey of returning to who we truly are.

In just a few moments we will open the ark and remove the Torah scrolls to chant the haunting and hallowed Kol Nidrei prayer. Kol Nidrei removes all the bonds that bind us and unties all the knots that confine us.

Yom Kippur literally means the Day of Atonement. Atone is made up of two words: at one. By atoning for our transgressions, by asking for forgiveness and being granted forgiveness, we become “at one” with G-d and with each other.

That is why it is customary before Yom Kippur to ask each other for forgiveness, as well as asking G-d for forgiveness, for anything we may have done to hurt one another. We also grant forgiveness to others who may have wronged us.

As such, allow me to take this opportunity to ask each and every one of you forgiveness for anything I may have done this past year. And I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me.

I also hope that you ask each other for forgiveness and that you grant forgiveness to each other.

As is also customary, I would like to, at this awesome moment, bless each of one you, and all of us and the entire world: may G-d shine His countenance upon each one of you and all of us, and bless us all with health, happiness, prosperity and success, both physically and spiritually.

May this coming year be one of only revealed good and joy, and a goodness and joy than only grows. And may our challenges be transformed into growth opportunities.

May we and all of Israel be written and sealed in the Book of Life, and may we use that gift of life to fulfill our individual and collective mission in making this world a true home for G-d. Amen.

## 2. Jewish Unity

When we forgive each other and G-d forgives us, we heal the breaches and schisms that separate us. This allows us to experience our integral and intrinsic unity – standing as one people, one nation – *am echad*, united with Hashem echad.

Thus, the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, is becoming at-one – atone – as the Torah tell us that this day is *achas b'shana*,<sup>1</sup> one day in the year, manifesting the oneness of the divine and our oneness with the Divine oneness – *yechida l'yachdecho*.

But the big question is even when we can reach a level of such unity on Yom Kippur, how do we maintain it throughout the year?

Another question: We are taught that G-d fulfills all the mitzvot He gives us.<sup>2</sup> Since we have the mitzvah of asking G-d and each other for forgiveness before Yom Kippur, and to atone for our wrongdoings, that would suggest that G-d too preforms this mitzvah. How does G-d fulfill the mitzvah of asking for forgiveness from us on Yom Kippur? How does a perfect G-d “atone” for anything? Why would G-d even need to ask us for forgiveness and to atone?!

We can find our answers in a story that happened this night years ago in a very different place.

Turn the clock back exactly 75 years. The night was the same. It was Yom Kippur. The people were the same. They were Jews. But the place was very different. It was Auschwitz.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 30:10. Leviticus 16:34.

<sup>2</sup> Shemot Rabba 30:9.

### 3. Kol Nidrei, 1944

Judy was born to Margit and Sandor Weissenberg and lived in Debrecen, Hungary. Seven siblings, they grew up in a household steeped in tradition, following the laws of Moses. Judy was the youngest.

They lived quite comfortably, with other extended family members, in three separate dwellings, around a courtyard, with a huge iron door separating their peaceful cocoon from the noisy street. The yard was full of Margit's potted plants, the scent of which Judy can still smell in her dreams. This is where they always played. This was the eminently loving and safe world of Judy's early childhood.

On March 19, 1944, the Germans occupied Hungary and the hell began. Judy was 15½.

In 1997, during the March of the Living, where students from all over the world come to remember, learn, and connect, Judy shared her story of Kol Nidrei night in the barracks of Auschwitz.

Practicing Judaism or celebrating any Jewish Holiday was totally forbidden by the Nazis at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. The Nazis knew it would give solace to the prisoners. So we weren't allowed to mark any Jewish occasion.

But this particular year, in 1944, when I was there, one day, some of the older women -- and by older I mean they could have been 35 or 40 years old (to a 15 year old anyone who is over 30, looks old) -- asked these two specific Kapos (high-ranking prisoners) for permission to do something for Kol Nidre.

Most of the Kapos (prisoners with authority) were really awful and brutal people but a few of them remained truly kind. We knew these particular two were approachable. One of the kind Kapos, I remember, was a tall, blonde Polish woman, non-Jewish. The other one was a little red-headed, young woman, a Jewish girl from Czechoslovakia.

The women told them that we wanted to do something for Kol Nidre. The little red-headed girl, Cirka (or Cila) I believe was her name, but I am not sure, was simply amazed that anyone still wanted to pray in that hell-hole called Birkenau. "You crazy Hungarian Jews" she exclaimed. "You still believe in this? You still want to do this and here?"

Well, we did.

So, we asked for and received, one candle and one siddur (prayer book). We were about 800 women jam-packed in one barrack. Everybody came: the believers, the atheists, the Orthodox women, without their sheitels, of course, because we were all bald, the agnostics, women of all descriptions and of every background. We were all there. Maybe it's hard to believe, but every single type of Jew was packed into that barrack. It made no difference what you looked like, dressed like, or thought you believed in. We were all the same.

The two Kapos gave us only ten minutes and they were guarding the two entrances to the barrack to watch out for any SS guard who might happen to come around unexpectedly.

Then, someone lit this lone candle - and a hush fell over the barracks. I can still see this scene: the woman, one woman, sitting with the lit candle, started to read the Kol Nidrei passage in the siddur.

Now normally on Yom Kippur, which means Day of Atonement, we ask forgiveness from G-d. Yet, unbelievably, all of this happened in a place where, we felt, it was appropriate that instead of we asking forgiveness from G-d, G-d should be asking for forgiveness from us, for putting us in this hell hole, for taking away our families, for turning a nation of priests and royals into skeletons, for taking away our humanity.

This is what we all felt. We should ask G-d for forgiveness? Forgiveness for what? For being Jewish? For believing in Him? For saying Shema? For watching my 18-month old nephew get murdered?

We should ask G-d to forgive us? G-d should ask us to forgive Him!

And yet, as crazy as it sounds, we all wanted to gather around the woman with the lit candle and siddur.

She recited the Kol Nidre very slowly, so that we could repeat the words if we so desired.

But we didn't.

Instead, in unison, as one, all of the women in the barracks burst out in a unified cry. Our prayer was the sound of this piercing cry of hundreds of women. I don't know if you know what a room of 800 women crying sounds like. It pierced the heavens. It pierced each one of us.

It seemed to give us solace. Remembering Yom Kippur, remembering Kol Nidrei, was somehow remembering who we were, remembering our homes, remembering our families.

It made no difference how "assimilated" your home was, this was one Holy Day was coming back home.

Something happened to these women. It was almost as if our hearts burst. I never heard, either before or since then, such a heartrending sound.

Did any of us really believed the prayer would change our situation, that G-d would suddenly intervene? I don't think we thought that way. We were not naïve; we had lost everything and hope wasn't a word we knew. And still, all of us together crying, the oneness of it, the opportunity to cry and remember together helped us feel better. It reminded us of our former, normal lives; alleviated our utter misery, even for a little while, in some inexplicable way.

Even today, many decades later, every time I go to Kol Nidre services, I experience it all over again. I shudder just as we did back then in the barracks.

That is the Kol Nidre I always remember.<sup>3</sup>

#### 4. We Are One

This moving Yom Kippur event in the darkest of places can help us answer both questions posed earlier.

Sometimes it takes the eclipse of the sun to reveal for us the true and deeper power of the sun, which we cannot see on a regular day.

In the hell of Auschwitz, the unified cry of Kol Nidrei by so many different Jews united them in ways we cannot imagine. But it teaches us that at the heart and soul of who we are – we are one. We are one even in the darkest pain and we are one in the greatest light. We are one even when we are enslaved and tortured by others, and we are one when we are free.

Today, as we recite Kol Nidrei in freedom, we must remember what it was like when Jews recited it when they were not free. Carrying that memory all year round can help us remain united throughout the year.

That is our challenge: how to keep that memory alive even when we get back to our regular routines.

One of the ways to do it is by contemplating on the story of how the at times G-d needs to ask us for forgiveness.

#### 5. Why Does G-d Need Forgiveness?

How does G-d preform the mitzvah of “atonement” and “asking forgiveness” (*kayyochol*, so to speak)?!

The Talmud tells us<sup>4</sup> that when G-d caused the moon to diminish itself, G-d then said “bring an atonement on My behalf for having diminished the moon.”

Why would G-d need an atonement? Because G-d chose to commit and engage with us on our terms. “I am with you,” G-d says, “in your pain.”<sup>5</sup> Since it is G-d Who created existence and all its challenges, G-d assumes responsibility for the pains and difficulties He has created.

This is not meant to be sacrilegious and blasphemous. Quite the contrary, it teaches us the depth of G-d's involvement in our existence and our existential loneliness. And it is meant to be empowering. G-d is with us both in the joys and pains of life.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWTdOAYQJZs>; <http://www.theverylongview.com/WATH/fragments/fragment2.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Chulin 60b.

<sup>5</sup> Psalms 91:15.

In the words of Chassidus: All of existence and all its hardships are rooted in the great tzitmtzum – the concealment of the Divine presence in this world.

And that is why G-d asks us for forgiveness. The concealment was necessary for us to exist, but that doesn't mean that G-d is oblivious of the pain it can cause. The father hides from the child to elicit his ingenuity in finding his/her father. But that doesn't mean that the father has no pain when the child cannot find him or even gives us looking.

## 6. G-d Forgives Us. Do We Forgive G-d?

Yes indeed, Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, when we atone for our imperfections and ask G-d to forgive us. And surely G-d grants our request and forgives us, as we recite tonight, the stirring words from the verse: *Vayomer Hashem Solacht`i Kidvorecha* – And the Lord said: I have pardoned in accordance with your words.<sup>6</sup>

But perhaps, as Judy so eloquently puts it, G-d too “needs” – He chose to need – atonement and forgiveness. And just as G-d forgives us today, we forgive Him.

Forgive G-d for what?

For concealing His presence from us so well. For allowing His children to suffer the hells of Auschwitz. For allowing so many to be killed, hurt and traumatized. For allowing every form of human pain and suffering.

For diminishing the moon and the dignity of the Jewish people compared to the moon.

For creating the tzitmtzum that makes us feel that we are separated and alone when we are truly one.

For creating so many concealments, masks and illusions. Illusions that can divide us instead of unite us. Masks that don't allow us to see though we are all different, we truly are parts of one majestic tapestry.

Yom Kippur, the holiest day, begins by removing every bond that separates us, every oath that divides us, every designation that defines us, every delineation that creates space between us, every promise that pulls apart, every commitment that gaps us.

*Kol Nidrei...* all of these differences are null and void. Period.

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<sup>6</sup> Numbers 14:20.

Just as we say Kol Nidrei and absolve ourselves of all bonds, barriers, separations, dividers, oaths, promises, commitments – so too does G-d (*kayyochol*, so to speak) say Kol Nidrei and absolves Himself of all the tzimtzumim and concealments, which bring on all the bonds and separations.

And just as G-d forgives us on Yom Kippur, we forgive G-d for all the concealments and all the forces He created that allow us to feel divided.

With this forgiveness and atonement in hand – we become at-one: together we experience a free and uniting oneness – oneness with each other and oneness with G-d.

## 7. The Secret to Unity

When G-d forgives us and we forgive G-d, then our integral unity gets revealed. Just as it did in 1944 at Kol Nidrei in Auschwitz,

But this time we experience the unity in light and in joy. We realize that beneath the shrouds of the tzimtzum and concealment we are all one. Our definitions and differences are all shades and colors of one beautiful masterpiece; musical notes of one grand symphony.

This Yom Kippur epiphany empowers us all year round to remember that together with our diversity we are one: We may laugh differently, but we laugh as one. We may cry differently, but we cry as one. We may pray differently, but we pray as one to one Almighty G-d, Hashem Echad.

Let us remember this as we begin Kol Nidrei, which abolishes all differences. And all that's left is one. And the One. On this One Day of the year – *achas b'shanah*.

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