

5772 Kol Nidre 2011: Vowing in the face of change, changing the face of our vows

Let me begin with an announcement: A very important prayer is all but missing from the prayer book we are using tonight. When Gates of Repentance was first published in 1978, it was representative of the Reform movement at the time. And while there are many many prayers in the machzor that we do not recite on a regular Shabbat, there is one that we recite every Shabbat but that you will be hard-pressed to find.

It can be found, though, if you look very hard. On page 354, tucked into the third paragraph of the Prayer for our Congregation and our People, there is an English recitation of the Misheberach l'cholim, a prayer for the healing of the sick.

Today, 99.9% of Reform congregations in the United States rarely go a full weekend without singing Debbie Friedman's setting of Misheberach. It is as familiar as the Sh'ma <sing a little bit>. But this did not used to be the case.

Until a little over 12 years ago, Reform services did not include Misheberach. It was part of a group of prayers deemed unnecessary by early Reform rabbis, who felt it made the services too long and reflected an outdated theology. God can heal the sick? No way – that's what science is for!

But when Debbie Friedman put it to music in 1999, it quickly flowed right back into mainstream Reform Judaism. All of a sudden, Misheberach was no longer outdated. The prayer provided (and continues to provide!) salve for those who are sick and for those who care about those who are sick.

A prayer once relegated to the 3rd English paragraph of a general blessing recited only on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur has become a prayer phenomenon. Entire families stand around hospital beds and sing Misheberach. The pain disappears from the face of the bedridden. Shoulders relax, worry lines fade.

Words and prayers are fluid. Their meanings change over time.

Beginning last Wednesday evening and continuing until tomorrow night at sundown, we have been immersed in the Yamim Noraim, the Days of Awe. The word “Nora”, translated as “awe” comes from a Hebrew root meaning “to fear”. Awe is used to convey a sense of grandeur, of fearful respect. But these days, awe is far more frequently used in conjunction with suffixes like ‘-some’ and ‘-ful’:

“DUDE! That movie was AWESOME!”

“Dude, that hamburger was AWFUL.”

And it’s not just we in America who are so great at diluting word-meanings. “Lo nora” is a common phrase in Hebrew, and its vernacular translation is “Eh. No big deal”.

At first it may seem that these shifts in word-meaning are detrimental: the original meaning holds more power than it’s new, watered-down meaning! The word “awe” is being misused, abused!

But there is another way to look at these changes.

There is no point in lamenting the ‘loss of meaning’ of the word awe. The change has already happened. The word simply means something different now.

At the beginning of our service tonight we listened to another prayer the Reform Movement removed for awhile, this time for more deeply felt theological reasons.

Kol Nidre, “all our vows.” It’s a funny way to refer to the prayer. It sounds noble; “look at us making all these vows!” but the irony is that Kol Nidre states the complete opposite – Kol Nidre is a DISavowing.

A *what?*

We start the holiest day of the year, the day in which we all stand as a community and physically beat our chests in recognition of our sins, by essentially asking God not to hold us to any vows we may make with God in the coming year?? No wonder some non-Jews have held this up as proof that the Jewish people are not to be trusted. Who wants to trust people who pray to not be held accountable for their promises?

“Wait,”

Say the learned Jews in defense. “You’re reading it all wrong!”

We take vows very seriously, so seriously that we would not hesitate to adhere to even those vows we are forced to make, those vows that are detrimental to our lives! Kol Nidre is a prayer of pikuach nefesh, of saving a life, that we may not martyr ourselves (hm. martyrdom. hm.) in order to maintain a vow.

For a long time it was believed that this prayer was invented in the 15th century by conversos, Jews in Spain and elsewhere who were forced to outwardly renounce their religion and convert to Christianity. While it makes a good story, Kol Nidre was written long before the 15th century. Nevertheless, the connection does point out the meaningfulness of Kol Nidre to those Jews who had to navigate their Judaism under a veil of Catholicism in order to remain alive.

“Excuse me,” says the bubble-gum chewing 16-year-old in the back of the sanctuary whose mother made her come to services on a Friday night when she could be out partying: “no one caaaaaaaares about Jews anymore. It's like, totally not a problem. We're totally safe.” These days in most of the world, it is safe to be Jewish out loud; to pray with conviction

and pride and to practice Jewish ritual and tradition in public. So, why **do** we still recite Kol Nidre? Is it not a little melodramatic?

Dramatic, yes. Melodramatic, no.

Everything changes with time. It may be a cliché but it is an accurate one: life is unpredictable.

We make vows, we promise to do better and be better based on who we are and what world we are living in.

But in six months, or even a day, the world may look very different.

Four years ago, Amanda Knox was a 20-year-old University of Washington student studying in Italy. I have no doubt that her goals, her vows, her promises were very real and important to her. Then she was accused of a murder and put in jail in a foreign country. My guess is that the goals, vows, and promises of 20-year-old pre-jail Amanda changed drastically at that moment.

Just this week Amanda was acquitted and now has the freedom to make new goals, new vows, new promises. I am sure that some of them will mirror those she had in 2007, but four years later, life has made her a different person.

We are all different people than we were 365 days ago when we last heard the melody and recited the words of Kol Nidre. To be sure, few of us have suffered anything as drastic as Amanda did, but the shape of our lives has changed and will continue to change.

If we focus solely on the world turning and changing, making vows can seem difficult, even impossible.

This year I will sell my house and move to the coast like I have always wanted to
But wait – the market could improve! Maybe I should wait.

This year I will run a marathon

But wait – I'm starting a new job and have no idea how time-consuming it will be. What if I tell all of my friends I am running a marathon and then don't have time to train properly and run it anyway (because I don't want to let them down) and then at mile 17 I tear a ligament and have to undergo surgery and months of recovery time! Perhaps I should hold off on the marathon this year...

This year I will fly in my grandchildren from southern California so that they can see snow.
But wait – what if I win that online raffle I entered yesterday and am able to fly us all down to Mexico this winter?

This year,

But wait.

I don't want to be bound by this vow with its specifications and restrictions.

The power of Kol Nidre lies in its use. On the one hand, Kol Nidre exists to underscore the Talmudic warning (in Chullin 2A) against making vows willy-nilly. But Kol Nidre also allows us to simultaneously be idealistic and realistic: idealistic in making well thought-out vows and realistic in our ability to fulfill them.

“God”, we say. “We want to change the world, to become the best. We want to make vows, we really do. But there may be obstacles, there may be full-on roadblocks. God, we need you to understand that.”

As my professor Rabbi Richard Levy writes, Kol Nidre gives us the ability “to vow in the face of change yet to change the face of vows when time’s new knowledge has changed the meaning of the vow.”

On Yom Kippur, we have 24 hours to focus on nothing but our words, our prayers. My prayer for us is to embrace change, to recognize the inevitability of change, and to be brave in the face of change. Let’s make well-chosen vows to improve our lives and those we love, even knowing that we may have to break them –

because if you never make a vow, you will never have the opportunity to fulfill it.