

Kol Nidre 5773

Why is this night different from all other nights?

**** A collaborative sermon by Dusty Klass and Leah Citrin ****

Tonight, on this the 25th of September, the 9th day of the Hebrew month of Tishrei, we all take our seats in synagogue, open our slightly-larger-than-usual red prayer books, and we ask ourselves:

Ma nishtana halaila hazeh mikol haleilot?

Perhaps this question sounds familiar. Perhaps you have heard it before, sung by your youngest child, or at least the youngest child at the dinner table.

Why is this night different from all other nights?

It turns out, Pesach is not the only night of the Jewish calendar that is different from all other nights.

It turns out, Yom Kippur is a pretty “different” night as well.

On all other nights, we sing Debbie Friedman tunes and Shabbat-y sounding music. On this night, everything sounds like [insert humming of HHD motif here].

Beginning with Rosh Hashanah and continuing through the conclusion of Yom Kippur, we sing Bar’chu and Mi Chamocha to the same tune to which we sing “Lshana tova tikateivu”. This melody – short, repetitive, and easy to follow, is known as a “MiSinai tune”. Though we know there must have been a point at which it was composed, the tune has so permeated the Jewish world that its origin is figuratively assigned to the moment at Sinai, when the entire Jewish people stood together to receive the Torah. In truth, it was probably composed somewhere between the 11th and 15th centuries, and we have sheet music for these MiSinai tunes beginning in the late 1700’s.¹

But it is appropriate that our High Holy Day tunes carry something mythological in their sound. The American Conference of Cantors, a body of those men and women who have dedicated their lives to creating meaning through music, reminds us that, “These melodies evoke something different than does our regular Shabbat worship. They evoke remembrances of ages past, of wonder at the mysteries of the universe, of lives lived and

¹<http://reformjudaismmag.org/Articles/index.cfm?id=1274>

lost – heroically – in utter faith and devotion to our people, and to God. We cannot expect High Holy Day music to sound and feel like Shabbat. The High Holy Days are a unique, awesome and special time of year. That uniqueness and awe is echoed in music that reverberates with the hopes and trials of ages past. Through this music we preserve our people’s history and our spiritual legacy.”²

The music we sing tonight is a mood setter, a reminder of where we are and what night it is, a reminder that this isn’t your everyday Shabbat service.

This Barchu, this call to prayer feels different than the call to prayer Jews recite up to three times daily;

this call to prayer marks the beginning of a soul-searching 24 hours of confession and repentance.

There is no tune more soul-searching than Kol Nidre. Even after the Reform Movement did away with the words of Kol Nidre in 1844,³ congregations continued to use the Kol Nidre melody to begin Erev Yom Kippur services. Yom Kippur simply didn’t feel like it had begun until those notes reverberated throughout the sanctuary. Eventually, with the publishing of *Gates of Repentance* in the 1970s, the original Aramaic words were reinstated in the Reform High Holy Day service throughout America.

In fact, the experience of the music of Kol Nidre is so central to Judaism that after World War II, once liberated from Buchenwald, Reb Leizer of Czenstochow is said to have journeyed the Polish countryside playing the melody on a hand organ, searching for his youngest son. He never found his own child, but whenever he played the tune, he found kids who noticed; children who recognized the tune. Through the music of Kol Nidre, Reb Leizer was able to help many young scared Jewish kids begin the return to their religious heritage.⁴

So then, why is this night different from all other nights?

Because the music says so.

Why else is this night different from all other nights?

²<http://www.accantors.org/acc/node/107>

³ It turns out that the words of Kol Nidre negatively affected Jews’ relationships with the non-Jews amongst which they lived.

⁴<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/music/16858/melancholy-melody-2>

On all other nights, we don't beat our chests even once. On this night, we beat our chests multiple times.

We start with an admission that we are not perfect; we have sinned. Together we recite Ashamnu, listing transgression after transgression, one at a time, all the way from aleph to tav. It is daunting to think that we have done enough wrong in a single year to fill an alphabet, and yet here we are. But this guilt is not each of ours to bear in solitude—Ashamnu is plural; these are *all* plural confessions. We all say them for each other, so that no person must say any of them alone.

But at the same time, we feel disconnected.

Surely **I** have not personally committed all of these sins.

Maybe even collectively in this room we have not committed all of these sins. However, the Babylonian Talmud tells us “*kol Yisrael aravim zeh l'zeh*”⁵; “all of Israel is responsible for one another.” In other words, though none of us have committed all 25 sins we recite in Ashamnu, it is possible that someone else for whom we share a sense of connection or responsibility did commit that sin.

But we do not just share the responsibility for the commitment of sin. There is an importance to the act of stating these transgressions out loud. Communally acknowledging all that can go wrong creates a preventative measure: listing, out loud and for all to hear, everything that counts as a transgression will help us refrain from slipping up, from missing the mark in the future. We have equal responsibility to help others be the best that they can be.

Our chest beating continues as we recite “*al cheit sh'chatanu lifanecha*”, “for the sin we have sinned before you.” In *Gates of Repentance*, we see that each time we repeat this formula – tonight, tomorrow morning, and again the afternoon, we find a different list of sins. The list is long. The list is wide. The list makes us think at this time of year of our own long lists: what sins have we committed that are on the list? What sins have we committed that are not on the list? How can we shorten these lists and improve ourselves in the year to come?

Thus, this night is different from all other nights because on this night, we confess.

How ELSE is this night different?

⁵ Shevuot 39a

On all other nights, God is Adonai Eloheinu. On this night, God is Aveinu Malkeinu.

Tonight, we think of God differently. God is *Avinu*, our father. Then God is *Malkeinu*, our king. Putting aside any issues with Judaism and gender, and acknowledging that all families are not created equal, there is nevertheless an important juxtaposition between God as our FATHER and God as our KING. The relationship between a parent and children is not the same as between a ruler and subjects. The words of our prayers during the High Holy Days remind us that as a parent, God is loving and compassionate, and as a ruler, God is enforcer of law and justice. Together, *avinu malkeinu*, God is both.

And although God is also called our father and king throughout the rest of the year, the images given to us of God via our Shabbat and weekday prayer service are less majestic than during the Yamim Noraim. God is Creator, Revealer, Redeemer. The One who brings on the evening, the One who saves. God is worthy of praise, Giver of strength, Shield of Abraham and Sarah. God requires partnership with humans. God is **Adonai Eloheinu**.

God, during the Yamim Noraim, cannot be ignored. Some appreciate this; for them, these holy days are holy because God is more clearly defined. Others shy away from this; for them, a majestic God is harder to approach and feels more distant.

A third reason that tonight is different from all other nights: God is more clearly defined. God is *avinu malkeinu*.

Now, there must be a fourth question, because as we know with Judaism and questions, good sets of questions come in fours.

Why is this night different on all other nights?

On all other nights, our motivation for being here might be overridden by other obligations. On this night, we find ourselves here on purpose, regardless of the obligations that may pull at us.

Why do we do this? There is no single answer, no well-researched study on the decision of hundreds of thousands of Jewish people to appear twice or three times a year in a synagogue where they may never be seen the rest of the year. Writing about what she dubs “the Ashamnu reflex”, blogger Judy Gruen writes that “No Jew wants to be left behind on what can seem like Worldwide Jewish Guilt Day... [on] The day when God tallies up all

our year's misdemeanors, derelictions and felonies...every Jew in the known universe shouts, "I'm in!"⁶

Are we here because we would feel guilty if we were not? Maybe. But Rabbi Arthur Green asserts that something greater propels us toward shul during the High Holy Days. Regardless of how often or rarely Jews celebrate calendar holidays like Sukkot and Simchat Torah, Green writes that Jewish people are still deeply connected to celebrating life transitions Jewishly. People want to celebrate lifecycle moments from birth to naming, from childhood to adulthood, from single soul to unified husband-wife soul-team. It is for this reason, Green asserts, that Jews fill the pews on Yom Kippur.

He writes that the Yamim Noraim "partake of the life cycle as well...they are the Jew's annual confrontation with mortality...The Days of Awe become a yearly time to contemplate our past, to wonder about the future, and to pray that we will still be here a year hence, to do the same thing all over again."

On Yom Kippur we ask God to seal us in the book of life for another 364 days. On the one hand, my 2012 liberal Jewish sensibility is less inclined to believe that an old wizened Dumbledore-like figure is sitting at a desk with a quill pen hovering over a piece of parchment, deciding whether or not to cross out my name. That being said, there is something incredibly important to me about remembering that I am human, that humans make mistakes, and that those mistakes can be fatal if not acknowledged and corrected.

Why is this night different? It is different because we are here. We are here to mark the passing of a year and to commit to the coming of a new year. We are here to brace ourselves and to ask for the strength, courage, and health to make it to next year's Yom Kippur.

Ma nishtana halaila hazeh mikol haleilot?

By asking how this night is different, we acknowledge that it is different. And it should be different.

But being different does not mean better. Being different does not enable us to remove the importance of other nights from our Jewish calendar. Tonight is special, to be sure, but every moment has the capability of being, in its own way, special.

⁶<http://www.aish.com/j/fs/My-Yom-Kippur-Confession.html>

We can infuse our other nights together with the powerful reflection and awe-filled moments of this night.

We can find meaning in music.

We can consider new names for God.

We can create daily opportunities for repentance and forgiveness.

Let us do this with intent and with purpose. Let us do this individually and collectively. Let us start this right now. Ken yihe ratzon. May it be God's will.