

Kol Nidre, Arvut

- Nisson Shulman. Arvut through history and today, reflected in the Kol Nidre

KOL NIDRE
ARVUT

Consider how Kol Nidre begins: The Rabbi proclaims in solemn assembly, in the presence of the Sefer Torahs, in the presence of all the congregation, Biyeshiva shel maala, ubiyeshiva shel mata, al data Hamakom veal data hakahal, anu matirim lehitpalel im haabaryanim. An amazing statement, where the community's representative calls upon heaven itself, upon the Heavenly Court, to accept the presence and even the prayers of sinners who might be present.

By what authority can we do this? What is the source of the power that allows us, so to speak, to tell G-d whom to allow within our congregation? And where did this prayer originate? What compelled us to make it the first Yom Kippur prayer?

The answer lies far in the past. At the end of the Fifteenth Century, the Jews of Holland, Belgium, France, Germany and Italy were met with a wave of new immigrants, those who fled the Iberian Peninsula – those who survived and escaped the Spanish Inquisition. Many were not so lucky. Many sacrificed their lives rather than convert. Many more fled, but flight was extremely dangerous, especially because piratical sea captains would take the fare of the unfortunates, proceed a few miles offshore, throw them all overboard so that they could steal their belongings, and then they would return immediately for another boatload of lucrative human cargo. Some did survive, and joined the communities in countries to which they fled.

It was a dreadful trial, and many could not stand the test. Even today we find remnants of “Converso” communities in many parts of Spain, Portugal and parts of the rest of the world, who gave up their Jewishness, tried for a time to live secretly as Jews, but gave it up altogether in the course of time in fear of the dread Inquisition; for many caught backsliding were tortured, and often finally burned alive.

When the Holy Days came, the converted Jews were sorely troubled. And so a few of them found some excuse to make business trips abroad, to join at least on this night and day with their brother and sister Jews elsewhere in the world. They came to Jewish communities and found that some Jews resented those who had failed the test while they themselves had sacrificed so much. The Jews who had always lived in those countries were also troubled, and didn't know how to react to these secret Jews; Should they be welcome them, or not.

And so the elders rose and solemnly declared, by the authority of the Court of Heaven as well as the court of earth, “We declare it lawful to pray with these unfortunate Jews”. They are our brothers.

This is not the first time we had faced this problem. The inquisition was invented by the fanatical Visigoths of the seventh century. But the great numbers that could not withstand the test in Spain and Portugal presented this problem in instances beyond number.

My revered father and teacher, Z"l, pointed out that this is the only use in the Mahzor, and indeed in scripture and rabbinic writing, of abaryanim for "sinners". In fact, in all of Halachic literature you do not find this word used in this way. Usually the sinner is a chote or a poshea, but not an abaryan. Abaryan, he said, has a double meaning: those who have gone beyond the boundary (hence sinner), and those from the land of Iberia! The abaryan – the Iberian, a hidden way of alluding to Marannos.

By what power can we do this? By the greatest power our people have: the great commandment of arvut, that we are all responsible each for the other. All Jews are responsible for each Jew, wherever they may be, whatever their trouble and suffering.

The Jews of Holland, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, proved this, in those days of trouble and of multitudes of refugees, as Jewish communities had proven again and again in history, ever since Nebuchadnezzar dragged the first Jewish exiles to Babylon.

There was already a community in Babylon, small, but capable. Because, the Talmud, reading between the lines of the Bible – discovered a remarkable thing; That Daniel, his friends and the most talented youngsters were exiled 18 years before. And that 10,000 of the people's leaders, %hecharash vehamasger, "artisans and craftsmen", were exiled 11 years before. Who were the so-called "artisans" and "craftsmen"? The Talmud looks behind the euphemism and proves that this was the community leadership, the Sanhedrin, the officers, the men of power, vision and statecraft. "What a blessing", says the Talmud, that G-d placed the first exiles into Babylon half a generation earlier, to build the community, prepare the institutions, and to stand ready to receive their brothers and sisters when they would come, to care for them, heal their hurts take responsibility and finally absorb them. Because Kol Yisrael arevim ze baze. "All Israel are responsible one for the other."

It was not easy. The captives came in chains, dragged to a Babylonian victory celebration. The Jews who had already settled in Babylon were required by the conquerors to join in that celebration, and even to join in their taunts, crying out at the top of their voices, Nakte Barberaya, "The Barbarians" – meaning the Jews – "are captured and crushed". The Talmud describes how they went out to meet the fainting captives dressed in black beneath and in the obligatory festive white outside, running along the lines of captives, making believe they were shouting the required obscenities at them, Nakte Barberaya, Nakte Barberaya, and all the while pleading in whispers for news, "How is my uncle, what happened to my cousins, to my son, my daughter, my father, my mother", Nakte Barberaya, Nakte Barberaya.

Slaves were sold at auction. Their fellow Jews did everything in their power to ransom as many as they could; fed them, clothed them, found them domicile, taught them, absorbed them, because "All Israel are responsible for each other", Kol Yisrael arevim ze baze.

Eventually that community grew great. It produced the Babylonian Talmud, the greatest sages of our people of all time, and lasted for almost 2,500 years until modern times. It was the world's leading Jewish community for over a thousand years.

Again and again in history, wherever we lived, our people had born responsibility for each other, as Maimonides so trenchantly expressed, Ulemi aniyei Yisrael nosim eyneyhem; haleaku”m shesonin otan veropdfin achareyhen? Ha eyn eyneyhem teluyot ela leacheyhen. (Hilchot Matnot Aniyim, 10:2). For all Israel are responsible for each other.

We are part of our people. And today we are living once again through just such times of hatred and upheaval. We, too, must recognize our own responsibility, and in the words of Mordecai to Esther declare, “Who knows if not for this very moment and this very task were we placed here and given the ability to help!”

This new age in which we live is at once wonderful and terrible. Think of the wonders of these last half century.

- We have seen, the State of Israel born out of the ashes of the worst period of Jewish history;
- We have seen, for half the world, the birth of new freedoms which they never had before. And Jews we had long given up for lost gathered to their homeland – from Arab lands, from lands that once were the Soviet Union.
- And we have seen many of the Jews from what was once the Soviet Union, and who were cut off from their heritage for more than 70 years, three quarters of a century; begin to study their heritage again.

What a time we live in! If there was any doubt in the decade and two that have passed that we are living in an age of redemption, let that doubt now be laid to rest!

But we have also seen hatred of Jews growing again, in European lands we had hopes were finally purged of Jew-hatred. Greater freedom does not necessarily mean the end of Anti-Semitism. 70% of Soviet immigrants to Israel have been victims of Anti-Semitism. The last time the Croats in Yugoslavia were independent, they slaughtered two thirds of Yugoslavia's Jews. An article entitled "A Treatise on the History and Philosophy of Criminal Violence", published by the Croat President, Franjo Tujman, in 1989 is pure Anti-Semitism and repeatedly refers to "Judeo-Nazism". And now, in countries we thought were never going to be blatantly anti-Semitic, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Jew-hatred has exploded in ways we had not imagined.

And in Israel we have seen and experienced a new kind of war, a war of terror waged against civilians, innocent men women and children.

But when the Talmud describes the time of redemption, our very own time, it declares that there will be a mixed blessing; Light and dark will be mixed; good and bad; wondrous happenings and terrible challenges at the same time; and certainly that is happening today, when as great as are the wonders, so great are the challenges we face, so great are the sacrifices we are called upon to make.

We are called to make them – because all Jews are responsible for each other. We were in the Hebrew University cafeteria and in the Sbarro pizza shop, in the hotel at the Seder in Netanya, the bus at Gilo and now the ambush of two busses in Beer Sheva. The rockets fall on Shderot, but we must feel they fall on us as well. A rabbi described how community leaders were sitting

at a dinner and just as the main course was being served, they heard the news that 22 karbanot gave their lives in Israel. One of these “leadership” invitees remarked, “I heard 23. Say, isn’t this meat delicious?” Another Jew, apparently not part of the “leadership group” but invited anyway, pushed away his plate. He was asked, “Don’t you like it?” He answered, “Who can eat when you hear such news. The rabbi remarked, “At that moment I saw who was a real community leader”. That is how a Jew who senses Arvut must feel.

When our brothers and sisters in Israel see Jews coming on missions today, they see it as fulfilling our mutual responsibility. When they see young Jews coming to study and visit they are strengthened and made even more courageous, in our Eretz Yisrael, the Land of the courageous. The greatest boost to the morale of Israel was the immigration of 400 Americans at one time, particularly at this time. The government was at the airport. All the news media were there. It happened last year and it is happening again. Israel takes great strength from the American response to the war on terrorism, from statements from friends in high places, from the awareness that America, too, is fighting a terrible war against terrorism. But nothing could equal the injection of strength and courage given by America olim coming off the planes family by family.

We are challenged in many ways. No Jewish child, here or in Israel should be denied a Jewish education; No immigrant or citizen of Israel should become a yored, leaving Israel in frustration; But more than any other challenge, is the challenge of this Kol Nidre night, of Yeshiva shel Maala and yeshiva shel mata, the challenge to make real the fact of arvut, that all children of Israel are one! Like our fathers of old who ransomed the captives; like they fed and clothed and housed the newcomers; like they sacrificed everything they could for their brothers and sisters, so too must we!

KOL YISRAEL AREVIM ZE LAZE. All Israel are responsible each for the other. Let no single Jew be left out! Let no single Jew suffer that with which Mordecai threatened Esther if she would not help, saying, "If you do not rise to the challenge, somehow we will find help from another quarter, but you and your household will be lost to the Jewish people". We are part of our people and must remain so! By visiting Israel as well as contributing to Israel. By going on aliya if we can but if we cannot, then yearly making pilgrimages to Israel! We all count. We all care. We are all of us responsible for each Jew, everywhere in the world. In merit of our prayers and our acts this coming year, Hashem will bless you and grant you for a good and healthy and happy year. GEMAR HATIMA TOVAH.