

Kol Nidrei Drush – 3 – Hear the Voice of Your Soul

- Yossi Michalowicz

Is there a Jew capable of withstanding the power of the Kol Nidre melody? Yet we do not know where and when the melody was composed. We haven't the slightest idea who composed the text of Kol Nidre. The words haven't any validity at all in Jewish law. They do not even have a logical explanation, though there have been many theories based on historical events that sound plausible. The words are prosaic, incomprehensible, yet thanks to the soul rending melody, the words too have become immortal. Our national soul is in the Kol Nidre melody. All our past generations live in it. Our entire history is expressed, our grief, our sorrows, our pride, our steadfast faith.

Let me share with you two Kol Nidrei stories:

The poet Heinrich Heine, born a Jew, mocked humanity and scorned the world with his sharp satire and caustic wit. His humour did not fail him even in the final bedridden years of his life.

One Kol Nidre night, his dearest friend, the composer Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdi found Heine in a dark mood. Asked what was wrong, Heine replied: "Don't you know that this is Yom Kippur night and Kol Nidre is now being sung in the Synagogue? Please play Kol Nidre for me", Heine implored Mendelssohn-Bartholdi.

The composer played Kol Nidre on the piano, and the two men - both branches severed from the Jewish tree - wept. Ever-so-delicate Jewish strings concealed in a dusty corner of their hearts quivered. They emerged from their concealment to haunt the two Jewish souls which had been baptised Christian, with the strains of Kol Nidre. Such is the mystic power of Kol Nidre and its melody.

There is another story that is retold in a book. It was about the partisans during World War Two and it recounted the story of how they gathered together in the forests, one Erev Yom Kippur – maybe a hundred soldiers – civilian-soldiers, some of them children, some of them elderly. They gathered in silence and in fear, but the emotion of the evening overtook them, and they started to say Kol Nidrei. But of course, there wasn't a siddur among the hundred or so of them gathered there, so all they could do was repeat all that they remembered, and all that they remembered was the nigun, the tune, of the Kol Nidrei. And they just kept repeating this tune, they kept humming this tune, they kept singing together in unison the powerful tune of the Yom Kippur Kol Nidrei. And they did this for about an hour, and the author of this book tells about how it seemed as if not only were they all swaying and crying and feeling the emotion but the very trees under whose cover they were taking for their very life, the tops of the trees swayed and moved along with them to the tune of the Kol Nidrei. A holocaust survivor tells about the way that people were so Moser Nefesh [self –sacrificing] in the camps. I don't know which of the murderous concentration camps it was, but this person recounted how small groups of starving, emaciated Jews would gather together in secret, knowing that they risked their very life, just to somehow say the Kol Nidrei. Maybe there they hummed the tune as well, maybe one person knew the words, whatever it was, the strength and the emotion of the Kol Nidrei so touched these

Jews during the time of the Holocaust.

How do we explain this? What is so special about this prayer at this time that evokes these kinds of feelings?

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro (the Pieszesner Rebbe) gives us guidance in how to look at life, which will be so helpful for us in understanding what the opportunity that Yom Kippur presents to us. He says the following:

“We have many feelings that flow shallowly and weakly. If we broaden such a feeling and bring it into full being, it will turn into a great river whose waters, with those of its tributaries, will never run dry.

But if we do not expand these feelings, they will disappear without ever having seen the light of the sun.

For instance, sometimes a person feels an inner discomfort. He doesn't know whether he needs to eat or sleep or drink a brandy. And then this feeling dissipates. But it was really an instance of the soul stretching forth a limb, wanting to experience and have a pure thought.

Other times a person has a feeling of joy or the like. Since this feeling is not contained within a physical container (because it is a limb extended by the pure soul), he doesn't know what it is and what he is feeling. His soul is knocking softly and fluttering, but he drinks a vodka or does some other this-worldly act. But this does not calm the movements of his soul. He has only diverted and aroused his physical feelings to roar and thunder. But he did not hear the voice of his soul.”

The Rebbe is teaching us that every time we have any kind of an emotional feeling, it is a spiritual experience of the soul that is trying to express itself in the person's conscious world. Would that feeling be properly cultivated, one would be able to move forward in life in a very positive way.

However, because the person fails to recognize the potential of the soul's effort to make itself known to the person, the person “drowns” out the sound of the soul, with the louder noises of this world. He continues:

“In the same way, the priests of Molech [a form of idol worship where parents would sacrifice their children in the fire before the idol named “Molech.”] would beat on drums so that a father would not hear his son wailing amidst the flames of Moloch. A person's physical feelings are so loud that the quaking of his soul passes [unnoticed and] in vain. It is as though his soul miscarried.”

Unbelievable! What is one of the topics that we will be reading from the Torah tomorrow afternoon? The Torah reading says: “You shall not present any of your children to pass through for Molech.” Similarly, in our times, the loud noises of this world are being used to drown out the crying of the soul that is seeking to make its presence known. Each and every one of us has feelings and emotions which could develop into thoughts of becoming a greater person, but we miscarry. We turn on the physical volume and bang on the drums! That feeling that could have brought you to something greater and closer to G-d, has just died! The Rebbe continues:

“Regarding this, our Society proclaims to each member: Know how to look. Know how to look at everything that is occurring within you and outside of you. "Looking" does not only refer to looking at some object. It is rather a type of birth. We give birth to and bring forth something that we look at. We bring forth and give birth to its form until it becomes a form that we can gaze at.

When you have a feeling, you must look. That is to say, you must bring forth a form [of the

feeling], and look at that form.

Not only minor feelings flit through a person and are lost because he is unable to look. But even entire mitzvot flash by him, returning to where they came from. He can feel what was within him, but he is incapable of focussing and imaging and knowing what he felt. For instance, he cannot tell how his feelings on the eve of Yom Kipper differs from those of Rosh Hashanah or from those of Passover eve, and so forth.

Therefore, we advise you: Teach yourself to look.”

Tonight is Yom Kippur. The Torah calls it the “Sabbath of Sabbaths.” This means that there is no day in the calendar year as ripe to let the emotional and spiritual energies flow. On this day, through the grace of G-d, our souls are gushing over the brim ready to cascade into our consciousness’ and come to the deepest feelings and awareness of what we truly are – a Jewish soul!

A whole year long those feelings and emotions get drowned out by the “Molech” of daily life. Can we not hear all that noise pollution from daily traffic, to surround sound heavy metal music, to loud bands at weddings, to the constant blare of the radio talk show hosts! The sounds of advertisers grabbing for your attention through various mediums of the media. The news makes so much noise. Our daily urges for foods that are either unhealthy or healthy. Even when doing the Mitzvah of exercising, the music in the club breaks your eardrums. The idol worship of making more and more money causes such a racket. Every wonder why the cash registers used to make so much noise?

Never before has the noise in this world been so loud. Why? Because mankind is making the greatest efforts not to think about anything. Mankind’s actions scream out the following philosophy: “All I have to do is make the world louder than my emotions, so I won’t have to face my emotions!”

And G-d knows this. Oh how He knows this! So in His infinite wisdom he created a day and commands his people to **TURN OFF ALL THE NOISE** for an entire day! It is the Sabbath of Sabbaths! He tells us that at least one day of the year, a healthy person must get in touch with his emotions, and tap into his soul. How do we do it?

We spend the day in Shul –tonight and tomorrow – all day! There is no noise in a Shul! No media influence. No one trying to sell you anything. No one trying to beat you to get anything. No stress. No work. No phones, faxes, blackberries, etc. We are all here – regardless of our background – to accomplish the same goal: to reconnect to our true selves. To that end, we don’t make any of the standard noises of the body through eating, drinking, bathing, intimacy, etc. We quiet down the body. Many men just wear a plain white kittel. We want things to be so quiet...so still... so that we can hear the slightest quivering of emotion emanating from our souls.

And oh are there all kinds of tempting noises to grab your attention throughout the day: Hockey season has started. The baseball playoffs, football – sports is in full swing! There are people you haven’t seen all year long that you want to shmooz with. At home, there is the newspaper and magazines to read. Just to mention a few.

This is the great opportunity and challenge of Yom Kippur. We have been avoiding ourselves all year long, and today is the day where we can experience feelings and emotions that have been lying dormant all year. Kol Nidrei has begun the process. The shiver has gone down our spines. We have the opportunity to sing the prayers with the congregation, study some Torah throughout the evening and tomorrow in Shul. And we culminate it 24 hours from now with the most beautiful singing of 5-600 people during Neilah! We can nurture those shallow and weak feelings until they become great rivers that do not run dry! We can allow our souls to fully

express how they genuinely feel “Hashem Hu HaElokim!” 7 times!! 600 souls crashing their waves in unison expressing their natural essence.

But as the Torah says, be careful: “You shall not present any of your children to pass through for Molech.” Our Rabbis tell us that our most special children are our thoughts. [expression – “Brain-child]. We must be so careful not to drown out those spiritual thoughts through the various outside noises that society is screaming out!

And then the Rebbe concludes:

“In general, be the kind of person who seeks God everywhere. Perhaps you will find God Who hides Himself and the holiness of His glory. When you seek Him, you will find Him.

And where will you find Him? In yourself and in everything around you.

To attain this end, you must abjure haste, for a hasty person cannot come to understanding. But on the other hand, be careful that your deliberateness does not lead to the opposite: to lethargy and depression.”

The Rebbe is exhorting us to slow down the pace of our lives, in order to locate the Divine that resides in each and everyone of us.

Can we do this? We certainly can. And you don’t even have to be Jewish. Let me briefly tell you the story about a person named Delores Gray whose own words best express the message I am trying to convey.

Delores Gray. The African-American descendant of sharecroppers, she'd achieved her piece of the American dream: a California condo, a terrific and lucrative career, and a life full of dear friends and devoted family. In matters of the spirit, too, Delores should have been content: as an ordained minister of the Strait Way Church in Watts, she was part of a loving and accepting religious community.

And yet... and yet... something in Delores's soul murmured within her. Some unaccountable yearning sent her on a spiritual search that took her to a new and far-off land - Israel - and to an ancient heritage, the Jewish heritage, which was at once incredibly strange and completely familiar.

In "My Sister, the Jew" Delores, now renamed Ahuvah, shares her astonishing spiritual adventure.

In the following excerpt, we meet Ahuvah on the holiest day of the Jewish year, standing on the verge of her decision to join the Jewish people.

"Yom Kippur was approaching; it was to be the first time I would fast on that holiest of days.

While eating my last meal for the next twenty-five hours, I wondered what it would be like. The walk to the synagogue seemed so strange. The streets were absolutely silent, with an other-worldly serenity and calm.

The synagogue was enveloped in the same remarkable peace and quiet I had felt walking through the streets. The cantor began to chant a soft melody called Kol Nidrei. Every Hebrew word seemed to penetrate my soul and cleanse it of all residue. I was completely divested of anything from my past. Spiritually, I knew what was going on, but to verbalize it would take much more spiritual fine-tuning.

I sobbed uncontrollably throughout the entire length of the singing. When I finally stopped, I looked around for Avigail. There wasn't a face that I recognized. A lovely lady standing next to me motioned wordlessly, as if to ask, "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, I can't explain this. There's nothing you can do," I answered aloud. I didn't know at that time that one shouldn't talk during Kol Nidrei.

To console me, my newfound friend put her arm around my shoulder and gave me a warm

embrace. That was exactly what I needed. I looked at her, and we exchanged smiles. There was no need for words. I couldn't explain to her or anyone else what was happening inside of me. Although it was the first time in my life I had heard the melody, it was as though my neshamah, my soul, knew Kol Nidrei. I had no idea at the time that the prayer was a declaration of the nullification of past and future vows and oaths, but at that moment I felt my soul experiencing something that I had been awaiting my entire life. Much later, I figured out what was going on: by nullifying all my previous commitments, I was enabling my soul to return to its Jewish roots. When I left the service that night, I wished the other congregants a "chatimah tovah," blessing them that they would be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Life for the next year. I felt I was saying it as a Jew. I walked down the street knowing that I would never forget that night as long as I lived. The peace that lingered in the air on my way back to the hotel surpassed all my understanding. I couldn't hear a bird; there were no planes, no cars. Even the leaves on the trees weren't moving. I said to myself very softly, "I know who my God is. This is what it will be like when Mashiach comes. The peace of the Almighty is in this place."

What makes Ahuva Gray so special? She was looking for something! She was searching! She was trying to hear that soft soul-like voice as it was expressing itself through her feelings and emotions. And as the Rebbe said: In general, be the kind of person who seeks God everywhere. Perhaps you will find God Who hides Himself and the holiness of His glory. When you seek Him, you will find Him. And where will you find Him? In yourself and in everything around you. Yes, Ahuva Gray was quiet enough to hear the voice of her soul!

And if we can quiet things down enough like Ahuva Gray, what might we hear our souls saying?

- Please take me back home into G-d's warm embrace...
- Please make up with your old friend that you haven't spoken to in years...
- I'm starving for closeness to G-d, please do a Mitzvah...
- I'm tired of living a life of unrealized potential....
- How come you don't take me to Shul more often...
- G-d really does love you...

Who knows? No one does until we quiet everything down, turn down the static, and begin to listen. Whatever you hear – it will be the real divine - you talking.

Let me close with one last Kol Nidrei Story:

Let us share a story told about Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev. Once, on the day before Yom Kippur, a Jewish innkeeper living near Berditchev was arrested by the landowner on whose property the Jew's inn was located.

The Jew had not paid his rent for a long period of time. He was not trying to steal; he just did not have the money. Business was not that good; he had a large family; and on the day that the rent was due, he simply did not have the money.

In those days, the landowners were very powerful. In their own territories, they ruled like kings. So after waiting several days for his money and issuing a number of warnings, the landowner locked up this Jewish innkeeper and his family on the day before Yom Kippur. He told the Jewish community that unless they present him with the overdue rent — 300 rubles, no small sum of money in those days — the family would rot away in a dungeon for the rest of their lives. One of the greatest mitzvot is pidyon sh'vuyim, the redemption of captives. And so, one of the chassidim in Berditchev took it upon himself to collect the money to redeem this family. Although the sum was well beyond his means, he wanted to make this effort because he knew that the lives of the family depended on it. They had no one else to help them, and unless he was able to amass the money, they would stay in the landowner's dungeon until they died.

He began collecting. Since it was the day before Yom Kippur, the people were especially sensitive and gave generously. But they did not give enough. It is not that they did not want to — just as the innkeeper had not had the money to pay his rent, they also did not have that much to give. And so, after collecting for several hours, the man had managed to gather less than fifty rubles.

He knew he needed three hundred, and he realized that at this pace he would never get the money before Yom Kippur and might never get the money at all. He decided to take a rasher course of action, and headed to the neighborhood where the free-thinking Jews lived. These were younger people, who worked with the non-Jewish landlords. They were wealthier, but their concern for their fellow Jews and for Jewish practice was less. Still, it was the day before Yom Kippur, and there would be no better time to approach them.

When he reached that neighborhood, he saw a hall filled with many people. There were Jews sitting there gambling, playing cards. The fact that in a few hours Jews all over the world would be saying Kol Nidrei did not appear to interest them. They were interested in playing cards, drinking vodka and gambling.

The chassid saw that the tables were filled with money. On any one of the tables there was enough money to redeem the family. He approached one of the tables and told the people, “Tonight is Yom Kippur, the time when G-d forgives everyone. Why not prepare for the day? I have something constructive for you to do with your money. A family is in terrible need. Instead of wasting your money gambling, give it away for a good purpose.”

At first, the people just ignored him. But the chassid was persistent. Finally, one of them told him, “You know what? You see this vodka standing here on the table? It is finif un ninesiker.” Finif un ninesiker means 95% ??? ?????? ???? ? --> alcohol. That is not 95 proof, that is 190 proof. The man filled an ordinary drinking glass and told him, “If you drink a glass of this finif un ninesiker , we will collect 100 rubles for your cause from our table alone.”

The reaction of the chassid was, “How can I drink a glass of whisky that is 190 proof? In a couple of hours, it will be Kol Nidrei. After a full glass of this, I will be finished; there is no way I will be able to concentrate on my prayers.” But then a second thought came to his mind, “If they give me a hundred rubles, I will have a third of the amount I need to save this family. What should I be concerned with? Having a more spiritual Yom Kippur myself or doing everything I can to save the family? Who knows how long it will take to collect one hundred rubles any other way?” And so, he made the decision to drink the glass of vodka.

He downed the glass; and the gamblers kept their word and gave him the money. Afterwards, he wobbled over to the next table and spoke to the people, “You see your friends, they just gave me a 100 rubles to help a poor family. Why do you not do the same?”

The people told him, “You know what? We will do the same, but you will have to do the same, too. If you drink another glass of finif un ninesiker , we will also give you 100 rubles.”

The chassid began to plead with them, “Please, tonight is Kol Nidrei. As it is, I am going to be dizzy tonight, but if I drink another glass, I am just going to be out. You are going to give me the money anyway, so why make me do this?”

But the people demanded their entertainment. “Listen, either drink it or good-bye.” Again the chassid thought, “What is more important: my spiritual experience on Yom Kippur or the fact that I can get this family out of the dungeon earlier?” He did not have to think long. His entire life was directed towards others, not to himself. And so he gave them their entertainment and drank the glass of vodka. They gave him the hundred rubles, and everyone was happy.

Afterwards, he wobbled over to a third table and asked them whether they would contribute to

the cause. He explained that now he needed less than a hundred rubles. It was just hours before Yom Kippur, and they could make it possible for a poor family to spend the holiday outside a dungeon.

They were not interested in his explanations, but they were prepared to continue the fun. So they made him the same offer: one hundred rubles for a glass of finif un ninesiker. He did not have to think much at all. Particularly after two glasses of vodka, it was very clear to him: “Forget about a more spiritual Yom Kippur; think about the family. With this glass, you can get them out today.” He drank the third glass and they gave him the 100 rubles. Now he had all the money he needed to get the family out.

He asked the gamblers a favor, “Please, can someone help me get over to the home of this landowner so that I can give him the money?” The spirit of Yom Kippur must have indeed been in the air, for one of the gamblers excused himself from his company and drove the chassid to the landowner’s home in his carriage.

The landowner was not happy to see a drunken man at his door, but he was very happy to get his three hundred rubles. After counting the money, he ordered that the family be released.

Naturally, they were ecstatic. The innkeeper ran over to the chassid and hugged him, thanking him profusely. The chassid was not interested in receiving thanks; he did not see anything special in what he had done. He asked the innkeeper one favor. “I will not be able to get to the shul by myself. Could you help get me there?”

Needless to say, the innkeeper obliged and brought the chassid to the shul. There he lay down on one of the benches. He knew that he would not be able to pray, but he wanted at least to sleep in the atmosphere of Yom Kippur.

Soon people started coming to shul for Kol Nidrei. Everyone took a book of Tehillim in hand and prayed. As the din of their prayers began to rise, the chassid was aroused. He looked up and saw the ark open and people taking out Torah scrolls. Although this is also done before the Kol Nidrei prayers, the most normal association a person would have with Torah scrolls being taken out at night, particularly when he is intoxicated, is the celebration of Simchas Torah.

And so our chassid jumped up from his bench, ran up to the bimah, the platform on which everyone was standing, and began shouting “Atah Horeisa,” the prayer recited before the Simchas Torah Hakkofos. Everyone looked at him in amazement. “What is he doing? Doesn’t he know tonight is Yom Kippur?! In a few moments we will be reciting Kol Nidrei. What kind of joke is he playing? Is he drunk?” They were about to grab him and throw him out of the shul. But the Rebbe, R. Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev turned around and said, “Leave him alone. He has the right to do what he is doing.” R. Levi Yitzchok was a tzaddik, a completely righteous and spiritual person. He knew everything the chassid had gone through.

He began to explain to the congregation that the holidays of Tishrei follow in sequence. It is not mere coincidence that Rosh HaShanah is followed by Yom Kippur, and then by Sukkos, Shemini Atzeres, and Simchas Torah. A spiritual initiative begins on Rosh HaShanah and continues and intensifies until it reaches its peak on Simchas Torah.

“This person,” he said, pointing to the drunken chassid, “has just displayed tremendous mesirus nefesh (self-sacrifice). He sacrificed his Yom Kippur experience to save a Jewish family. But he did not give up Yom Kippur; he sprang over it. His self-sacrifice enabled him to bypass all the intermediate levels and reach the level of Simchas Torah, the zenith of our Divine service throughout Tishrei.”

Ladies and Gentlemen, many of us would like to wake up on Simchas Torah and by-pass all the soul searching work on Yom Kippur – but how many of us are on this hero’s level? As this drush

ends, we will all have a free-will choice to make: All our souls have been touched to one extent or another by Kol Nidrei. In a few moments, we will have to decide how to deal with this uneasy feeling that Kol Nidrei puts us through. You can either stay in Shul and let the singing move you deeper, go to an educational experience in the Playhouse and understand what you should be feeling, go to a class a little later on, and connect on an intellectual level. Come back tomorrow and spend the day cultivating that feeling until it reaches it's zenith at Neilah '...OR just go back into that noisy street or into your noisy homes and drown out the beautiful soft voice of your soul. Please choose wisely. Please try hard to hear the voice of your soul.