

Kol Nidrei

- Mayer Waxman

Kol Nidrei 5765

Right after selichos on Erev Rosh Hashana, Mark Sheiner told me about a book that he was reading. 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. Then Mark Sheiner told me about some family acquaintance, a Holocaust survivor, who used to tell him about the way that people were so Moser Nefesh 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.

When Mark told me this, I was moved. I must admit I was also confused. From the four years that we've had our minyan here, pretty much every Rosh Hashanah speech and every Yom Kippur speech was totally different from that of the previous year. The only quasi-constant was my address on Kol Nidrei. My address preceding Kol Nidrei for three years now, if I remember correctly, has been about how the Kol Nidrei is all about speech. I've explained how it is about being careful in what you say, that it's about the importance of keeping your word and that that is why we are embarrassed by the little ways in which we accidentally don't keep a promise. We want to make sure that our words mean something. Now if I'm right, and if I've been right for three years, then I didn't understand what emotion it was that was so compelling these partisans in the forest and the inmates of the death camps to be so moved that the one tefilla they would say is the Kol Nidrei. Let's save that question for a second.

Lets go on to a different question. Look at the Kriyas HaTorah for the day of Yom Kippur. The first reading, the main reading, is from Parshas Achrei Mot, from the Parsha that talks about the reaction after Aaron's sons died in the Beis Hamikdash. The third pasuk that we read, the third pasuk in the sixteenth chapter in Vayikra, of Achrei Mos, says: "B'zos yavo Aharon el hakodesh, b'far ben bakar l'chatat v'ayil l'olah," "With this, Aharon will come to the sanctuary." And then the parsha talks about what korbanos Aharon brings, what he is responsible to bring as the Kohen Gadol. So, Rav Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, the rebbe of the Sifsei Kohen – the Shach – who is widely referred to as the 'Rebbe Rav Heschel,' many of whose comments on the Chumash

were compiled as the Chanukas HaTorah, asks a question on the pasuk. He asks, 'It's kind of an odd pasuk, what does it mean 'B'zos yavo Aharon el hakodesh?' Didn't the Torah specifically list all the things that the Kohen Gadol is responsible for on Yom Kippur? Didn't the Torah describe all the sacrifices that the Kohen Gadol brings? So what does it mean when it says, 'Zos,' what extra, what special thing did Aharon bring when he went into the mishkan? After the death of his children.

I should forewarn you that there is a definite Kabbalistic tinge to the divrei Torah of Rav Avraham Yehoshua Heschel. Rav Heschel learns his answer to the question from what is incontrovertibly one of the most emotive and stirring tefilos of the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur liturgy. He takes his answer from the Nesane Tokef, the tefilla we say in the musaf of both days of Rosh Hashana and of Yom Kippur: "Let us tell how utterly holy this day is..." The Netaneh Tokef is the tefillah which has the stirring communal cry, "U'teshuva, U'tefillah U'Zedaka maavirin et roah hagezerah" - Repentance, prayer and charity cancel the stern decree.

If you look at the classic text of the machzor – the Artscroll has it and the Birnbaum does not – if you look above the word Teshuva, there is a small word tzom. If you look above the word u'tefillah, there is a small word Kol and if you look above the word tzedaka, there is a small word mammon. Above teshuva, repentance, it says tzom- fasting. Above tefila, prayer, the word says kol-voice. Above tzedaka-charity, the word says mammon- money. And, although the words are found in the ArtScroll text, there's no commentary on their meaning. Perhaps its because its so obvious, its so apparent that these small words are the way to enact the big words. How do you do teshuva, through tzom, fasting. How do you make a tefillah? Through kol- through your voice. And how do you give tzedaka? Through mammon, through your money. But the rebbe, Rav Heschel makes a deeper insight. He points out that the gematria, the numerical value of the word tzom, fast, is 136. The numerical value of the word kol is 136 and the numerical value of the word mammon is 136. Each number equal, each element, fasting, using your voice, and using your money, has equal value, but put them together and the sum of these three numbers is 408. What does the Torah mean when it tells us the Aharon went into the mishkan B'zos? The gematria of B'zos is 408. Aharon added on to his Torah-given duties as a Kohen. He added on the three practical prescriptions of fasting, voice and money. Aharon went B'zos, with repentance, prayer and charity, teshuva, tefilla u'tzedaka, over and above all the sacrifices that he had to bring, and this way Aharon won atonement for the Jewish people on Yom Kippur.

My friend, Rabbi Avraham Peretz Friedman – Rabbi Cary Friedman – recently translated the Chanukas HaTorah, and he made two interesting side points regarding this teaching. He pointed out that the Baal Shem Tov in his comments to Bereishis noted that the numerical value of the word sulam, ladder is 136, so Rav Friedman suggests regarding tzom, kol and mammon which are each equal to 136, that perhaps the implications are that if they are used properly, they can raise a person like a sulam to the highest spiritual heights. Furthermore, Rabbi Friedman points out that the pasuk "Hodu Lashem Ki Tov, Ki L'olam Chasdo," from Tehilim (118:1), which is the quintessential expression of praise to Hashem is also 408. So Rabbi Friedman suggests that this attitude must animate the repentance, prayer and charity that Aharon brings into the sanctuary in fulfillment of the verse, "B'zos Yavo Aharon el hakadosh," with this, Aharon will be able to come to the sanctuary. And conversely, together, teshuva, tefilla and tzedaka, tzom, kol and mammon, represent the ultimate praise of G-d.

I mentioned that the Netane Tokef, the tefillah in which these three ideas are so eloquently brought forth, U'Teshuva, u'tefillah, u'tzedaka maavirin et roah hagezerah, repentance, prayer and charity cancel the stern decree, I mentioned that this is an emotional tefilla by all accords. Why is this an emotional tefillah? What is so emotional about it? The Or Zaruah famously tells the story of the history of this tefillah, and you'll find it translated in your ArtScroll and in your Birnbaum, so I won't go into great detail, but there was a great tzadik, Rav Amnon, who was friendly with the rulers of Mayenz and they tried to convince him to change his faith. And every day he pushed them aside and said of course not, of course not. And one day he got fed up with them and said give me three days to think about it. And when he went home, he realized that the implication of what he said, is that I'll think about give me three days, of course he knew he wasn't going to change, he wanted them to leave him alone for three days, but he left them with the impression that he might change over time and the guilt for that little comment made him avoid coming in when the three days were up and when he was finally dragged in to see the leader of Mayenz, he said I'm sorry I didn't come but I'm so disappointed with myself that you should cut out my tongue as my punishment – and he meant this because his tongue could say such a terrible thing, could so imply, that he might falter his faith in God. But the evil magistrate or viceroy said it wasn't your tongue that made you refuse to come to me so your punishment should be that I should cut off your legs. And the gory story goes that joint by joint his legs and then his arms were cut off, and after each cut on each joint, the ruler of Mayenz asked him if he would change his religion and Rav Amnon, of course, refused. They eventually brought a terribly mutilated Rav Amnon back to his community and they left him there with all his mutilated body pieces as well. On Rosh Hashana, rav Amnon was brought to his shul at his own request and when the Chazzan was about to recite the kedusha, Rav Amnon asked him to pause so that he could say a tefillah. He then recited the Netana Tokef and right after completed it, he died. The story goes that three days later he came to Rabbi Klonimus, in a dream and he taught him the tefillah which was then to be sent around to all communities and added to the liturgy. The story for Netana Tokef is undeniably emotional and the very words of the tefillah and the famous cry U'teshuva, u'tefillah, u'tzedaka maavirin et roah hagezera is stirring and emotional. But coming back to the original question, where is the emotion, what is so emotional about the Kol Nidrei? My realization to the answer to this question came to me from a somewhat surprising place. As I was looking over the Kol Nidrei, in the Birnbaum siddur, I noticed in the footnotes, a brief history. It points out that the Aramaic formula for the Kol Nidrei for the dispensation of vows is more than a thousand years old. It goes on to say that in the eleventh century, Rabbi Meir Ben Shmuel, Rashi's son in law, changed the original wording of Kol Nidrei to make it apply to the future instead of the past, vows one may not be able to fulfill during the next year. Then it points out that the gemara suggests that Rosh Hashana is the time the Kol Nidrei should be said but because of the great solemnity of this tefillah, Yom Kippur was chosen instead. But the key point that I found, and I'll quote "the Kol Nidrei acquired intense significance particularly during the period of persecutions in Spain, where some hundred thousand Jews were forced to forswear their faith and adopt a new religion. Many of these attended the synagogue in secret at the risk of their life and used the Kol Nidrei text as a form of renouncing the vows imposed upon them by the inquisition. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, a chazzan in Germany composed a stirring tune which expresses fear and passion, pleading and hope for ultimate deliverance." In that passage, I read a striking resemblance to the story of Rav Amnon. Rav Amnon was being almost forced to change his religion and he let some

words slip out. He said 'Maybe I'll change.' The Jews being persecuted during the inquisition, sometimes would say, 'ok, you want me to convert, I'll convert,' with no sincerity, but the fact that they said it ripped at their hearts. For a Jew even to suggest that he'll give up teshuva, tefilla u'tzedaka, that he'll give up Hodu Lashem Ki Tov, Ki L'olam Chasdo is anathema. And like those suffering the tortures of the inquisition, those who suffered the torments of the Holocaust, and those in the death camps and the partisans in the field were stirred to almost un-comprehensible emotion by the thought of the words of the Kol Nidrei, by the tune of the Kol Nidrei. It is that emotion that we should grab onto at the beginning of this Yom Kippur and that commitment to teshuva, u'tefillah u'tzedaka that will hopefully grab us and bring us through the rest of this Yom Kippur.