

Renewing Ourselves

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The college that I went to had an unusual grading system — I'm pretty sure it's unique to that school. The only grades were A, B, and C. There were no pluses or minuses. And, you could take any class, as many as you wanted, pass/fail. But, most intriguingly, there were no F's — you couldn't actually fail a class. If you did, that class was completely wiped from your record — it was as if you had never taken it.

It certainly took some of the pressure off of us, knowing that bombing some class wouldn't follow us around for the rest of our lives (as we imagined it would). But, it was during our orientation week that a Dean explained to us why the school had this policy. It was, she explained, to free us to try anything, absolutely anything, that we wanted. College should be about expanding your horizons, she told us. It should be about learning, and exploring, anything and everything, regardless of whether we thought we were up to it. If you're a hard-core science person, but you want to take an advanced class in Shakespeare? Go for it. See what happens. The worst that could happen is — nothing. There was no penalty for failure, and so there was complete freedom to try. You might be surprised what you can accomplish, and you might even be surprised by how much you learn, even if you don't officially succeed.

Suddenly, what had felt like a simple safety net was transformed into something much more profound and inspiring. It was permission and, implicitly, a challenge to stretch ourselves. To question who I was, and what I could do. We get so locked in to one vision of ourselves, one set of expectations, that we sometimes forget to imagine who we might be.

Tonight, Kol Nidrei, is offering us the exact same opportunity. Kol Nidrei, the service and the prayer, are our annual challenge to push the boundaries of what we can do and, more importantly, who we might be.

Kol Nidrei, the prayer itself, is fascinating. It isn't actually a prayer, technically speaking. It's a legal formula. Our mahzor translates it:

Let all our vows and oaths, all the promises we make and the obligations we incur to You, O God, between this Yom Kippur and the next, be null and void should we, after honest effort, find ourselves unable to fulfill them. Then may we be absolved of them.

It's not a great translation, to be honest. It captures the gist — this is an annulment of vows. But, the idea that it only includes vows between us and God, rather than between people, as well as the idea that we are required to make an honest effort if

our vows are to be annulled, reflects many centuries of rabbinic interpretation, but, it's not found in the text we read earlier tonight. Kol Nidrei is simply a long, technical, legalistic list of different types of vows, which we might make during this upcoming year, and a declaration that none of them shall be binding on us.

You can start to understand why many rabbis through the centuries strongly resisted, and even tried to ban, Kol Nidrei. And, why many of our enemies used it to prove that we were untrustworthy. It reads, on the surface, like the ultimate "get out of jail free" card. Not exactly the stuff out of which holy moments are made.

But, Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum notices that Kol Nidrei is in the future tense—it's talking about vows which we'll make this upcoming year. It wasn't always that way; originally, Kol Nidrei referred to vows made during the year which we just concluded. About 800 years ago, though, the rabbis shifted it to the future. That's important. Because we also have to remember that, even though it doesn't say so explicitly, the sages have always been clear that Kol Nidrei only applies to the promises which we make to God, not to each other. You put those two together—we're only talking about promises that we're going to make, and only to God—and Rabbi Nussbaum suggests the possibility that Kol Nidrei might really be about giving us the opportunity, and the challenge, to take risks with ourselves. To rethink who we might be. To set a high bar for ourselves, knowing, before we even begin, that we'll inevitably fall short, but that there's no penalty for that. How else can we allow our reach to exceed our grasp? Kol Nidrei, it turns out, is about aspiration.

It's easy to miss — so much of Yom Kippur focuses, in a negative way, on our past. We have sinned. We have failed. We have transgressed. I'm sorry. Forgive me. Fine. That's true. I've sinned. I failed.

Now what?

Can I imagine a different me? Can I imagine, even if only for this hour, that I might be a person substantially different, substantially better, than the person I've been? Might I be more willing to try to be that person, might I be more willing to promise God that I *will* be that person, if I know that, even if I fail, God's already forgiven me?

This isn't completely new — the idea that Kol Nidrei and Yom Kippur are supposed to be a spur towards self-improvement is not exactly a novel insight. What's new here is the idea that, when we're doing this annual process of teshuvah, we might be failing by not dreaming. By not striving. By being so tentative in our self-evaluations, perhaps out of fear, that we miss the opportunity to see ourselves totally, radically renewed. Transformed. What a waste it would be to get through this holy season and miss an opportunity to try something bold with ourselves.

By giving us permission to fail without penalty, Kol Nidrei is pushing us, almost begging us, to think big. To think deeply about not only who we've been, but about who we want to be. About who we *can* be. Maybe, about who we were meant to be.

You were created *Betzelem Elohim*—in the image of God. We all were. That means that each of us, each and every one of us, you included, is a being with unlimited potential. We were born to be, made to be, anything and everything. But, that's not how life plays out. We learn pretty quickly in life to be who we are — a person with traits, tendencies, gifts and limitations. We become specialists — perfect at being exactly who we've become. Rarely if ever wondering why we became this person or if, just maybe, we might have become someone else. Or, if we still might.

Why would a computer science major with a love for political science classes ever take a class in basic music theory and keyboard skills? Maybe because I realized that something was missing. That my world, as I had been constructing it, was limited, but didn't need to be.

Why would a Rabbi who's always been known, and happily identified, as a rationalist, start exploring mystical theology and spiritual practices, such as meditation and chanting? Most certainly because I realized that something was missing. That my world, as I had been constructing it, was limited, but didn't need to be. Something was missing, because something is always missing — from each of us. And, the only reason to let it remain that way is an unwillingness to try anything new.

Ultimately, what I'm talking about is the idea of trying to live deliberately. About not being content to wander through my life as if it's a story which was written before I ever got into it. As if some combination of my genetics and my early history dictates everything important about who I am, and who I will be. Of course, there are limits – I'm not so unrealistic as to think that I have a shot at playing major-league baseball. But, realism and limits are a topic for another day. If I allow myself, today, to dream not about a slightly better version of the person that I am, but rather about a new and unlimited me, what might that look like? Might I discover that the me I thought I knew wasn't the best me, wasn't the real me, all along?

We are born free, but we eventually submit to a kind of personal slavery. When we don't even think of the possibility of a different kind of life, we have become slaves to our preconceived notions of who we are. But, the Jewish story is a story of being freed from slavery. We celebrate that liberation every Passover, and we thank God for it every time that we pray. But Egypt, the place from which we go free, isn't just some historical kingdom which forced us to make bricks for building cities. The Hebrew name for Egypt is *Mitzrayim*, which means "the narrow place." Our sages have always understood that *Mitzrayim* is really the name for anything which hems us in. Anything which limits us. We all live in a kind of *Mitzrayim*, a kind of slavery. The only thing keeping us there is our fear of taking flight.

There's a legend of a tzaddik, a righteous man, named Zusya. Lying on his deathbed, he was visited by his disciples who were surprised to find him, ordinarily so peaceful and serene, crying uncontrollably. One of them asked him, "Reb Zusya--

why are you crying? Are you worried that, when you die, God will ask you ‘why weren’t you more like Moses?’” “No,” Reb Zusya replied. “I’m worried that the *kadosh baruch hu*, the Holy One Blessed be God, will ask me, ‘Why weren’t you more like Zusya?’”

It’s time to start being ourselves, more fully than we have been. That’s what God is asking us to do, starting tonight.

We’re going to fail at it. That’s all but guaranteed. Hopefully, we’re going to dream big, and dream wide. We’re going to imagine a version of ourselves that we haven’t even dreamt was possible, at least, not in years. We’re going to promise, promise our selves and our God, that we’re going to *be* that person. We’re going to commit, we’re going to vow, to be that person. And, we’re going to fail. We’re going to fall short of the mark we’ve set for ourselves.

And, God willing, we’re going to walk back into this room next year, glorious failures all, knowing that we’ve already been forgiven.