

Above and Below: Which Jerusalem?

Kol Nidrei 5767

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Temple Shir Tikva

It's a strange prayer, the Kol Nidrei. The cantor sings it with such a timeless and magnificent melody. I was told as a kid that the *point* of the prayer was that it was supposed to bring people to tears, and I remember being mystified by the way it actually did so. It is the perfect example of a prayer where the melody is at least as important as the words: it would simply not work being read aloud, and it simply would not function if it was a wordless *niggun*. It is the perfect synthesis of notes and language.

As the melody still rings in our ears tonight; let's re-consider the words of Kol Nidrei:

Let all our vows and oaths, all the promises we make and the obligations we incur to You, O G-d, 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: May our vows not be vows; may our oaths not be oaths; may our promises not be promises.

Nidrei in Aramaic are vows, and in ancient Israel, the notion of making a vow was taken very seriously. The prayer reads like a person swearing in court with her hand on the Bible. Which isn't so outrageous: We chant Kol Nidrei with the Torah scrolls out and in front of us, to reflect its complete seriousness. We chant it three times, each time our voices becoming a bit stronger, as if we slowly grow more confident each time with what we're actually saying.¹

For many people, this prayer is the essence of what this night is all about; we call this entire evening *Kol Nidrei*. And yet, like almost everything that we consider quintessentially Jewish, this prayer is not without its controversy.

Historically, people fought over whether or not we should even say Kol Nidrei. Its first appearance in any texts that we have today is in the 9th Century prayerbook of Rav Amram Gaon in Babylonia – and there, he denounces it, calling it a “foolish custom.”² There are Orthodox authorities that disliked it and liberal Reformers who rejected it – after all, who wanted a prayer that said, “Please, forget the promises we made”? And this prayer was also a spark for anti-Semitism. In 1910 a Berlin newspaper claimed that the Kol Nidrei gave Jews permission under Halakha to lie. The paper read:

Like the Talmud... [Kol Nidrei] is a culpable deception of the Aryans by the Jews. A Jew can commit perjury in court; his religious convictions allow him to do it. He may brand truth a lie and ruin his fellow men. These moral views of Judaism are... criminal assaults on humanity and civilization.³

¹ This is the sense of the 3-fold repetition of the prayer in Machzor Vitry (11th Century).

² Reuven Hammer, *Entering the High Holy Days*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998, p.115

³ Hammer, p. 113

And yet, despite the forces of rabbinic fundamentalism or liberal secularism or pernicious anti-Semitism, Kol Nidrei hung on. More than that: it has become the cornerstone of this, our most sacred day of the year. It seems that it is one of those Jewish customs that even though rabbis opposed it, was carried into Jewish life on the shoulders of the Jewish people themselves – like Chanukah; like Zionism; like many other examples. And we are a richer people for it, thank G-d.

I find that Kol Nidrei captures the essence of what Yom Kippur and these entire Days of Awe are all about. The notion isn't that we give ourselves permission to lie – we are a people that place *emet*, truth, as one of the highest primary values of our existence. **Kol Nidrei isn't about permission to lie. It is about permission to fail.**

Kol Nidrei to me means: we will strive to be the best people we can be in the year to come. In the enthusiasm of our self-reflection, in our fervor, we might even make some promises that we'll be unable to keep (“I'm going to stop smoking,” “I'm going to get in shape.”) The key to the prayer is, in our English translation, when it says, “After honest effort, if we find ourselves unable to fill them... may we be absolved of them.”

This is a season for introspection and sorting through our souls. Kol Nidrei forces us to ask ourselves: what promises have we made in the past? Have we been able to keep them? Have we tried our best? Have we really been unable to do what we know we're supposed to be doing – or are we deluding ourselves? Kol Nidrei is a mirror.

So I invite you tonight to ask yourselves: what promises have we made, and to what degree have we kept them?

One realm in which we have made commitments is to the State of Israel. Many of us come into the sanctuary this year with Israel weighing heavily on our hearts, for this was a difficult summer for us *Hovavei Tziyon*, us lovers of Zion. As the Katyushas fell on Israel's northern third this summer, our hearts broke time and time again. As we heard of our brothers and sisters in Israel being forced into bomb shelters, I know that many of us shared the sense of helplessness that war brings. I know because you told me.

All summer long – and tonight, too – we have been praying for the well-being and safe return of three Israelis: Eldad Regev, Ehud Goldwasser, and Gilad Shalit. May G-d protect them and return them to their families in safety and in peace speedily, today. We reserve a prayer for them this Yom Kippur as well.

And our hearts are large enough to feel for all the innocent victims of this war everywhere. For the Lebanese men, women, and children who became human shields on the front lines by the Hezbollah terrorists; for every individual who was injured or hurt. Surely we can all agree that the summer's events were a disaster for everyone who lives in the region.

As Jews, we have made vows and commitments to Israel in our past – whether we realize it or not. Part of the reality of being a Jew anywhere in the world in the 21st century is the existential reality of living in a generation when we have a State of Israel.

When I was a kid in Hebrew school, we were not told “You know, we feel very good about Israel,” or “We are glad Israel is there.” We were told: *We love Israel.*

Consider the force of that word “love.” Consider the people in your life whom you love – family, friends. “Love” does not mean you agree with the other all the time or even often. “Love,” however, means an emotional commitment to the other.

It means something more than that, too. In Hebrew, the most common word for “love” is *ahavah*. As biblical scholar Jacob Milgrom has pointed out in his 2,700 page commentary on

Leviticus (really!), the Hebrew word *ahavah* always means something more than merely the emotion of love. It always entails action. When the Torah says *Love your neighbor as yourself* (Lev. 19:18), it means: Act to preserve the well-being of your neighbor. When the Torah says *Love the stranger*, it means: act to ensure that the stranger in your midst is treated justly and is protected and taken care-of. When the Torah says *Love Adonai your God*, it means: Do G-d's Mitzvot.⁴

So when we say, "We love Israel," it means we have made certain vows and commitments. To ensure her well-being and safety. To maintain a connection with her. And to correct her when she lets us down, as we would for anybody else who we claim to love.

Love means deep in the core of our being, there is an attachment to Israel that makes it home. Let's ask ourselves: Think back to last October, when Iran's President Ahmadinejad said that "Israel must be wiped off the map," and that it should be "annihilated" with "one storm." He said this at the same time as he pursued his continuing quest to acquire a nuclear weapon. Of course it should outrage our sense of justice and decency: In the 21st century, how can one member of the United Nations call for the annihilation of another? And how can the world not respond in unison, with one voice, condemning this? But beyond that – what did it do to us in our souls? This threat, after all, was not just the stuff of politics and the day's ugly news. This was about our *mishpocha*, after all!

Like many of you, as Hizbollah's missiles rained down on Haifa, Tzefat, Afula, Kiryat Shemona, and everywhere else, I asked myself plenty of times this summer, "What does it mean to be a lover of Israel – from over here?" For me, part of the fascination of the modern State of Israel is the tension that exists, always, between the sublime wonder of eternity that exists there, and the very real down-to-earth day-to-day living that happens there.

It has always been like this. The midrash asserts that in reality there are TWO Jerusalems. There is the earthly, physical, imperfect one of this world. And there is a heavenly, spiritual, ideal Jerusalem above as well. It asks: when we pray, which one should we turn towards?

The answer is striking: It says, it doesn't really matter, because they are BOTH in the same direction. In other words, the ideal and the reality are never so distant from one another as they might seem.

In the best book about Israel that I read in the past year – in fact, in one of the best books that I've read in years, period – this is dramatically illustrated. The book is the memoir of Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* – a book that our Wednesday morning Torah class studied last spring. In 1930's Jerusalem, young Amos confronts his grandfather, a poet who has made aliyah but still has Russian culture in his blood, and who writes love-poetry to the land, but in Russian. Amos confronts his grandfather about his pie-in-the-sky celebrations of the heavenly Jerusalem when real life there is tough, impoverished, and difficult:

[He says to his grandfather,] "You've been in Jerusalem for many years now, you know perfectly well what the streets are paved with, and what really floats over Zion Square! So why do you keep writing about something that simply doesn't exist? Why don't you write about the real Jerusalem?"

Grandpa Alexander, [he writes], furious at my impertinent words, turned in an instant from a pleasant pink hue to a blazing red, thumped the table with his fist, and

⁴. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, The Anchor Bible, p.1653.

roared: “The real Jerusalem? What on earth does a little bed-wetter like you know about the real Jerusalem?! The real Jerusalem is the one in my poems!”⁵

In other words, Amos Oz’s grandfather argues that the heavenly Jerusalem, the one of our dreams and our prophets’ visions, is the stuff of true reality.

In the opposite camp, the great Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai argues for the reality of the earthly Jerusalem, the one of imperfection and pain and hard work, as being the real one. One of his most famous pieces is called “Tourists,” and it is a poem I always share with my groups when we go to Jerusalem for the first time. In it, Amichai writes:

Once as I sat on the steps by a gate at David’s Tower, I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. “You see that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there’s an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head.” “But he’s moving, he’s moving!” I said to myself: Redemption will come only if their guide tells them, “You see that arch from the Roman period? It’s not important; but next to it, left and down a bit, there sits a man who’s bought fruit and vegetables for his family.”⁶

Amichai comes down firmly on the side of earthly Jerusalem, the one that exists in this world.

So which is the reality? Amos Oz’s grandfather’s heavenly vision of what *should* be? Or Amichai’s insistence on what we already have?

I would argue that the Midrash is correct; that they are, indeed, two sides of the same coin: There is a physical Jerusalem made of flesh and blood and tears and people who work and shop and go to school. And there is a heavenly Jerusalem that is the root of our souls as. How can we possibly relinquish either one?

We have a real modern state of Israel of flesh-and-blood (although, perhaps, on some days a little too much blood). We should celebrate that miracle every single day. Yet that does not let us off the hook: Modern Israel is damaged and broken in many ways. Voices of hate occasionally dominate its dialogue (as last week, when a well-known MK made a call to expel Israel’s territory of all its Arab residents.) It has serious issues of social justice: for instance, there is only one adjective for the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor in Israel: it is almost **American** in that regard.

Part of the reality and earthliness of modern Israel is that it is cantankerous, noisy, and rude, particularly in the public sphere. Israel is involved in an enormous amount of soul-searching this Yom Tov, in the wake of the war with Lebanon. Questions are being asked about the competency of the IDF and its leaders in a way that has not been done since the Yom Kippur War. Politicians are being raked over the coals. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert tonight would envy President Bush’s approval ratings. Israel is a place with much pain, and all of it is worn on rolled-up sleeves. And yet all that is also a sign that freedom to dissent and debate is alive and well in the region’s only democracy.

And Israel – how well we know! – is a magnet for all the Jew-haters around the world. Amos Oz, at age 70, writes about how the graffiti adorning the walls of Europe has changed in a

⁵ Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Nicholas de Lange trans., Orlando: Harcourt Press, p.88.

⁶ From “Tourists,” Yehuda Amichai, originally in *A Great Tranquillity: Questions & Answers* (1980), in *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p.137.

half-century. He writes: “When my father was a young man in Vilna, every wall in Europe said, **‘Jews: Go home to Palestine!!’** Fifty years later, when he went back to Europe on a visit, the walls all screamed, **‘Jews: Get out of Palestine!!’**”⁷

Still, as people of faith, we have a moral responsibility to hold Israel to the highest vision of what it could be. It is not enough to say, as a generation did, “Well, Israel is a good country in a bad neighborhood.” We have a right and even have taken a vow to hold Israel, whom we love, to the values that our tradition demands of us as Jews.

Living with that extraordinary and holy quandary: The Heavenly Jerusalem versus the Earthly Jerusalem, is a lot of what Israel means to me.

So on this night of Kol Nidrei, of investigating the vows we’ve made and the ones that thus far we’ve failed to live up to, we ask ourselves: What commitments have we made to Israel?

We know we should make giving Tzedakah to Israel a priority; most of us have not lived up to our commitments. How can we do better in the year ahead?

We know we should visit Israel. Most of us have not in the recent past. In three months, a handful of Shir Tikva families including three generations of my family will be taking a Family Trip to Israel. The CJP has visits to Israel this winter, and there are always other opportunities to get there. If you and your family have made different commitments, I urge you on this Kol Nidrei to ask: How come?

We know we should send our children to Israel. Too many of us have not. Anyone who knows a teenager who has spent time in Israel knows that it is, potentially, a galvanizing Jewish experience for an adolescent Jewish soul. One phenomenon in the Jewish world in the past five years is called Birthright Israel – it offers, virtually for free, an Israel experience for college students, and it is an incredible gift.

(A word about Birthright. If your college-age student hasn’t been to Israel yet, they should absolutely seize the opportunity given by Birthright. But what we forget is: Birthright Israel was established as a stopgap measure by the community during the dark days of the second Intifada, when high school trips to Israel dried up for a year or two. We were at risk of having a generation of teenagers who would have no firsthand experience of Israel’s wonders. Today, we should reassert that college is not too late, but it is late: Adolescence is the most important time for growing Jewish souls to discover what Israel means to them, to us.)

There is so much more. We should call Israeli friends, and let them know of our emotional support. We should find every creative and off-the-wall way to reaffirm that emotional connection. And we should be well-informed.

It is hard to remain neutral about Israel. Many people love it with a love that is so strong that it blinds one to any possibility that it may ever do any wrong, and sometimes commits serious strategic and moral blunders. Many hate Israel with a hatred that is so visceral that it resurrects every old anti-Semitic canard: That everything wrong with the world, every war, every scandal, every injustice, is Israel’s fault. Forget the fanatics. Our injunction is the Torah’s: **לא תוכל להתעלם** / We simply must not remain indifferent.⁸

Therefore, tomorrow afternoon I invite you to join us for a very special dialogue. As you know, we have an annual tradition of having an afternoon conversation on Yom Kippur about

⁷ Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, p.60.

⁸ Deuteronomy 22:3

topics close to our hearts. It is, among other things, an opportunity to spend the entire day in shul, in reflection and introspection on our most deeply-held values.

This summer I was in the bookstore when I picked up a copy of Alan Dershowitz's newest book, an anthology called *What Israel Means to Me*. Dershowitz has gathered together eighty leaders from many walks of life – politics, religion, culture and entertainment, and more – and solicited from each of them a short essay on precisely that: *What Israel Means to Me*. The exercise – a healthy one – results in many spirited and beautiful pieces. Some represent politics of the left; some are voices of the right. Some emphasize the Heavenly Jerusalem of the Spirit; some concentrate on the Earthly Jerusalem of day-to-day life.

We're going to do the same. Tomorrow afternoon, several members of our community are going to share "What Israel Means to Me," and there will be an opportunity for questions and dialogue. I certainly hope you'll join us.

All summer long, as the missiles were raining down on the Galilee, we prayed for peace and safety in Israel. When we gathered here on Shabbat, we prayed the words King David wrote three thousand years ago. He wrote:

עֲמָדוֹת הַיָּי רָגְלֵינוּ בְּשַׁעְרֵיךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם׃
יְרוּשָׁלַם הַבְּנוּיָה כְּעִיר שְׂחִבְרָה לָהּ יַחְדָּו׃

Our feet stood inside your gates, O Jerusalem:
Jerusalem built up, a city knit together!⁹

What did David mean when he called Jerusalem a city "knit together"? That is the source of the Midrash of the Heavenly and Earthly Jerusalem: It is a place where the ancient and the modern are bound; where the idealistic and the all-too-real coexist. What is knit together? The souls of the Jewish people, wherever they might find themselves, are knit together with our ancestral home, and thus with one another.

In that sense, these three millennia-old words are in some ways more meaningful than ever. Especially these words:

שְׂאַלוּ שְׁלוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם וְשְׁלוֹם אֲהַבְיָךְ׃
יְהִי־שְׁלוֹם בְּחִילְךָ שְׁלוֹהַּ בְּאַרְמֹנֹתֶיךָ׃

When you pray, pray for the peace of Jerusalem;
May those who love you be at peace.
May there be peace within your ramparts,
tranquillity in your citadels.

לְמַעַן אֲחֵי וְרַעֲי אֲדַבְּרָה נְאֻם שְׁלוֹם בְּךָ׃
לְמַעַן בֵּית־ה' אֶלְקֵינוּ אֲבַקֶּשׁה טוֹב לָךְ׃

For the sake of my family and friends,
I pray for the your well-being;
For the sake of the house of Adonai our G-d,
I seek only your good.

9. Psalm 122