

**Resetting Our Defaults: Kol Nidrei 5769**  
**Temple Shir Tikva, Wayland, MA**  
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**K**ol Nidrei has come very late this year – just about as late as it can ever come. The spectrum of colors on the trees is already tuned to full-dazzle. The Red Sox are already in the American League Championship Series. The chill we feel signals that autumn is not a just a whisper in the air, but has made itself fully known.

Of course, there will be those who tell us Yom Kippur is never late nor early. It is always right on time: the Tenth of Tishrei. But in its dance with the calendar of the sun, tonight is just about as late from the equinox as our Days of Awe can ever be. The hour is getting late, the season is late, it is very late to be a Jew.<sup>1</sup>

This year, many of us enter this sanctuary in trepidation. Tomorrow, this place will be full to the bursting point, and many of us will be coming in with deep fears of the unknown year ahead of us. Some come in with trepidation about their health, or about the health of their loved ones. What will the New Year bring – healing and renewal? Or suffering, heartache, and worse?

Many people are coming through these doors this year with worries about money and budgets. Money worries are part of life, but this year is different. With the implosion of some of America's largest financial institutions, with a government bail-out to the tune of the better part of *a trillion dollars*, with the world's economies teetering and no clear sense how it will all turn out... There is a lot to fear; more so than in years past. We fear for our homes and our jobs. We worry about the well-being of our children and the welfare of our aging parents or grandparents. We fear for things that we once had convinced ourselves were secure and solid.

The truth is that this year, the chill in the air tells us that all is not well. The simple love and yearning of our hearts just might not be enough this year to “seal us for blessing in the Book of Life.” Where can we find strength? Where can we find comfort? Where can we find the certainty to say, without a quavering voice: I know that no matter what the year ahead throws at us, we will find the strength to endure and handle it?

We don't keep a clock in the sanctuary here, and thank G-d for that. Sometimes a sanctuary should be a place out of time. Sometimes there's a sense that time is bearing down on us too much, and this place can be a haven from that, temporarily.

It reminds me of an old story that I've heard many times in different forms. I have yet to track down the original. But it goes something like this:

*Once there was a young girl and her father who walked into their synagogue's sanctuary on a weekday afternoon, when all was quiet. The room was empty except for the maintenance man. He was perched on a high ladder, struggling with the clock that was mounted some thirty feet off the floor on the back wall of the shul. The girl's father, a founding member of the community who knew everything about the history of the place, stood with her as they watched the maintenance man do his work on the ladder.*

*The girl asked her father, “Why is the clock set so high up on the wall where no one can reach?” He smiled at her and said, “Well, the truth is it wasn't always like*

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf's phrase.

*that. It used to be at eye level, within everybody's reach. People would pass by, in and out of the sanctuary, and they would look at the clock. Then they would look at their watch. And then they would reach out and change the clock to match the time they had on their watch.*

*“When we moved the clock higher, people would peer up at it – and adjust their watches instead.”*

Well, we have spent the whole year adjusting the clocks we encounter in the world, adapting our environment to fit our lifestyles. On these Days of Awe, we reflect on our relationships, our lives, our place in the world, and, considering what is unsatisfactory, we adjust ourselves.

This space at this time of year is different from every other locus of our life – different from home, from school, from work, from the neighborhood and the store and ski slope and the golf course. It is a time and place when we say: My G-d, how can I seize control once again of the direction of my life – there is so little time, and the hour is so very late! Religion at its best gives us tools: **to recognize truths about our lives; to give us inspiration to go on; to give us the strength to change.**

One unusual part of the Kol Nidrei liturgy is the declaration that leads up to the Kol Nidrei prayer itself. We said it tonight right at the beginning of the service, just after lighting the Yom Tov candles:

***Biyeshiva shel ma'ala, u'viyeshiva shel mata***  
**In the court above and in the court below**

***Al da'at ha-makom v'al da'at ha-kahal***  
**In the sight of G-d and in the sight of the congregation**

***Anu matirin l'hitpalel im ha-avaryanim***  
**We are permitted tonight to pray with the *avaryanim* – with sinners.**

This is a very strange way to begin a service: by invoking the fact that we need to get special permission to pray, you know, with that person next to you. Why do we need permission to be together to say the Kol Nidrei? And who are these *avaryanim* – these sinners – whom we're allowing into our sanctuary?

The passage comes from the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Rabbi Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg, Germany. But it has long been associated with Jews of a different time and place. There are those who read the word “*avaryanim*” and hear not “sinners” but “*iberyanim*”, “Iberians.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, who are the Jews who are permitted to pray here? The Iberian Jews – the Jews of Spain and Portugal. The Spanish Jews had once celebrated a Golden Age of culture. But their freedoms and liberty eroded over time and change of regimes, and in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century they were given the classic European tripartite choice: Leave, Convert, or Die. And in 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella forcibly expelled the surviving remnant from the peninsula.

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, *Gates of Understanding 2: Appreciating the Days of Awe*, New York: CCAR Press, 1984, p.115.

Many left and many died. And many chose the outward garb of Christianity, while secretly adhering to a semblance of a Jewish life: surreptitiously lighting candles on Friday nights; quietly fasting on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Tishrei.

These *Conversos* – or Marranos – and their children often found their ways into other Jewish communities in Europe and even in Central and South America. And their outward spiritual confusion led communities to a serious conundrum: Which is reality? The outward Christian or the inward Jew? Should those who have drifted so far away from the community in their practice and behavior be counted among the community on the holiest night of the year?

When they gathered on Kol Nidrei, they would say the old words: *Anu matirin l'hitpalel im ha-avaryanim*. And they would hear: “We are permitted to pray with these strayed Iberians,” or, as our own translation has it, “No matter how far some of us may have transgressed by departing from our people and our heritage, we pray as one on this Night of Repentance.”<sup>3</sup> And that is certainly a theme to which we can relate.

After all, who are the *avaryanim*? We all are. We are contemporary people living in a secular world, and we all engage with that world every day. Nothing wrong with that – we wouldn't have it any other day. But as we travel the path of this modern life, it has a way of wearing down our souls, of diluting them, of coarsening them. We get tangled in a thicket of busy lives and lose sight of the path we once thought we were traveling. So we need this season of Teshuvah: to turn back to the road we once were traveling.

I think of it this way: If you've paid attention to your Blackberry, or iPhone, or your computer you've seen the option to “Return to Default Settings.” Yom Kippur is a day for resetting our defaults.

When I turn on my computer in the morning, as it bursts to life it calls up its standard default settings. The photo of my children that I've selected as wallpaper comes up; the desktop icons are neatly arranged on the left side of the screen, and it still makes that Microsoft sound because I haven't gotten around to changing it. These are the default settings for my computer, the automatic habits that it reverts to when I turn it on.

Which makes me wonder: What are the default settings for our Jewish souls? In other words, what are the standard settings we have before the world begins to tinker with them, as we obsess about work or school or jobs or bills or money or anything else.

It is a question I've always wanted to ask our Reform Jewish forbears. They, properly, encouraged us to place a great emphasis on the idea of **informed decisionmaking**, to learn everything about a particular tradition or custom before adopting it: “Before I keep kosher, convince me that Jewish eating traditions will enhance my life.” “Before I keep Shabbat, convince me that adding a day of rest will enhance my soul and improve the quality of my relationships.” And so on. So much of our spiritual lives is devoted to learning about the traditions and rituals of our people, rediscovering them, and then figuring out how to introduce them into our lives.

My question is this. I have no problem with informed decisionmaking; it is a hallmark of our religious movement. But when did our default settings shift? When did the presumption start that I *don't* keep Kosher until I'm convinced of it's worth; I don't do Shabbat until I'm

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<sup>3</sup> *Sha'are Teshuvah: Gates of Repentance*, Chaim Stern, ed., New York: CCAR Press, 1978, p.251.

convinced otherwise? In other words, when did the default shift from “I do these things, unless I am convinced...” to “I don’t do these things, unless I am convinced...”

Our factory settings that each of our souls came with are pretty good. I believe that people are hard-wired with capacities for kindness, for generosity, for empathy. I also think that most of us have a built-in yearning for transcendence and spiritual meaning.

I believe that Jews have built-in factory settings for Shabbat. For Tzedakah. Even for Torah. The Talmud<sup>4</sup> teaches that before we are born, every fetus learns the entire Torah; all of it. At the moment we are born, an angel smacks us on the lip, and it is forgotten. But the rest of our days are spent relearning, re-articulating, and rediscovering that spiritual wisdom that, if we listen closely, is there reverberating as an echo on the wind.

We intuit that there is more to life than just what is front of our noses. That there must be more to the meaning of adulthood, in Rabbi Harold Kushner’s phrase, than two cars, two careers, and two psychotherapists.

But life has a way of tugging at us, like the one loose string on the edge of a sweater. Bills and jobs and money worries and time commitments and car pools have way of pulling at that string until the sweater itself starts to get raggedy. And so it goes, as we go about our busy lives. The world works its work on us, and we become hardened.

Tonight we are all *avaryanim*, having moved beyond what we once envisioned for our lives.

But tonight, and tomorrow, we are permitted to pray together as one. We say: *anu matirin l’hitpalel im ha-avaryanim*. No matter how far we come unraveled, we are permitted together to pray as one. And there is no one whose prayers do not belong here. We are permitted – no, we are given the authority – to reset the defaults. And that gives each and every one of us enormous power and strength. I encourage you, on this Yom Kippur, to spend some time in reflection on your relationship to those Jewish settings, and which ones you want to re-assert in the weeks and months ahead.

The Maggid of Dubno was an 18<sup>th</sup> Century teacher and storyteller who lived in Belarus and Lithuania. He told this story to his disciples on the eve of another Yom Kippur:

Once there was a king who owned the most extraordinary diamond the world had ever seen. It was a gem of exquisite perfection and clarity, and the king was, justifiably, very proud of it. But one day an accident happened, and the diamond become deeply scratched. The king was devastated.

So he consulted with diamond cutters and lapidaries from throughout his kingdom, each a great artisan in his own right. But each one told him that even if they were to polish the jewel for days on end, they would never be able to remove the flaw.

The king was at his wit’s end when one young man – an apprentice to a jewel cutter from a far-flung corner of the kingdom – came forward. He pondered the diamond and told the king that with three weeks’ preparation, he could make the diamond even more beautiful than it had been before the accident. The king hastily agreed.

For three weeks, the young apprentice worked on the king’s diamond. Finally, at the end of the appointed time, the king came, with trepidation, to see what he had done. He entered the

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<sup>4</sup> Talmud, *Niddah* 30b

apprentice's workshop, he approached the work-table where his diamond lay, and he peered at the damaged jewel.

And he saw what the young man done. The scratch was still there. But the artist had taken it and turned it into the stem of a flower. And around it, he had etched the most delicate and intricate rosebud, roots, petals, and leaves. Indeed, the engraved diamond became more original and precious than it had even been before.<sup>5</sup>

So it is with us. We enter into this sanctuary as *avaryanim*. We come in flawed and broken, damaged in so many ways. Over the next day, we will not whitewash our brokenness, nor lie to ourselves. But by reaching out to one another and by joining together as a sacred Jewish community, we draw strength from ancient wells once again. May this Yom Kippur give us the strength to take those flaws in the diamonds of our souls, and to transform them into roses. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Retold from Nathan Ausubel, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, New York: Crown Publishers, 1948, p.66.