

Kol Nidre 5769 “Our Broken Tablets”

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All personal vows that we are likely to make, all personal oaths and pledges we are likely to take between this Yom Kippur and the next Yom Kippur, we publicly renounce. Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void, neither firm nor established. Let our personal vows, pledges and oaths be considered neither vows nor pledges nor oaths.

There it is - each and every year when we gather together in prayer on the eve of Yom Kippur we ask of God, we ask each other, and we ask ourselves to be let off the hook – we ask not to be held responsible for our words and our deeds in the coming year!

Doesn't that seem strange to you? Isn't this the time of year when we are supposed to look at our past deeds and words and recognize the hard work that we all must do in order to become better people?

Yet instead, here this night, we said just opposite – we said that our actions and our words in the year to come don't matter, because there may be a chance that we aren't going to be able to fulfill them.

There must be more to it – right? There must be more beneath the surface of this sacred prayer...one which we say not once, not twice, but three times! To be honest, in recent years, especially since becoming a father, I have found it difficult to draw meaning from the words of the Kol Nidre prayer. Instead I have found that it has been the sad yet beautiful music from which I have been able to draw meaning and inspiration. And the

truth is I am not the first person to have such struggles with the Kol Nidre. If we take a closer look at our translation we will notice it says “vows between us and God” and “if we fail after honest effort...” this is actually not what the Aramaic prayer says that we recite.

Ok, so we can change the translation in order for us to make more sense of it, but I still struggle with it none the less. After all our tradition teaches us that our prayers are meaningless and empty, if they do not transform us – if they do not move us to better people - our prayers are just words on a page if we they do not push us and move us to change.

How then can the words of the Kol Nirde transform us and move us to action – how can this seemingly audacious request help to change us for the better in the coming year? I can think of no better place for us to turn to in help than Moses himself, the greatest prophet and teacher our people has even known.

Close you eyes for a moment – picture the scene – you are Moses – forty days and forty nights, up on the mountain, no food, no water, no sleep, just you and God – there you are witnessing God carve two stone tablets out of the mountain side – there you stand as God’s finger engrave with fire the Commandments directly onto the very tablets. God places them in your hands to present to the people ...tired, hungry, thirsty you descend the mountain, with the work of God in your hands....and when you get to the bottom of the mountain – there they are the people Israel – worshiping the golden calf – in anger and in disgust you heave the tablets towards the ground and they shatter into a million tiny pieces...

Empty handed, broken hearted and frustrated God summons you to the top of mountain once again – this time to replace the shattered set of tablets. You ascend the mountain one more time – but this time it’s some how different - as you make your way up to the top of the mountain, covered in fire and smoke, this time God comes down and meets you half way – this time God asks you to carve the tablets from the side of the mountain – this time you are an active partner with God from start to finish – ok open you eyes!.

Two tablets, one broken and one whole. The first set of tablet - made by God alone - Moses took no part in their creation and therefore had nothing to lose if they were smashed and broken – and indeed they were. The second set of tablets – unbreakable – made together by Moses, God and the people Israel. The first set of tablets represents for each of us all of the broken promises and vows that we made this past year – to ourselves, to our family, and to all of the people in our lives.

We broke them because perhaps, like the first set of tablets they were ours alone, perhaps because we didn’t let anyone hold us accountable for what we said we were going to do. Think back now to the Kol Nidre prayers....in essence it’s all about those broken words and deeds...Just as God understood, the second time around that Moses needed to be part of the process in order for him to be successful so too do we need our friends, our family members, our teachers, and others to be play and active role in our lives. We can not be the only ones carving our tablets out of the side of the mountain; we must get others to help us.

Isn't this what we do at school when we get report cards and progress reports? Aren't they are about helping us to live up to our potential, helping us to live up to the promises we make and the goals we set for ourselves. Together with our teachers, our parents, and our friends they help us do better, they hold us accountable for what we do. Isn't this what a review at the office is about – to make us better at our jobs – to go over the goals we set for ourselves – to enlist our co-workers and our colleagues to help us be do better. When we are not living up to the promises and goals we make at work or at school - we ask our selves who do we need to help us be more successful - when we smash our first set of tablets with a bad grade or missed assignment – don't we make sure that we build for ourselves a second even stronger set of tablets?

Shouldn't we then do the very same thing as a father, as a son, as sister, as a grandparent, as a friend? We are all human, we will all make mistakes, we will break promises and smash a few tablets here and there....but it's we do afterwards that truly counts! How do we turn to our loved ones in the aftermath of the smashed tablets, pick up the pieces, ask for forgiveness, and ensure that we will live up to the new set of promises we make...Who are you going to ask this year to help you carve your second set of tablets?

What ever did happened to the first set of tablets that Moses smashed into a million little pieces? A *midrash* teaches us that he went back and picked up each and every piece, placed them into a special Ark and that the Israelites carried it around the desert with them wherever they went. Just as Moses carried around his broken set of tablets so to do

we carry around with us all of the broken promises, all of the unfulfilled vows, all of the goals we set for ourselves that we just didn't accomplish.

We carry them around with us, as Moses did, not to dwell on our past, but as a reminder - A reminder that we need each other – a reminder that our words and our deeds do indeed matter.

I imagine that each year on the eve of Yom Kippur, like tonight, Moses would stand in front of the people Israel, remove the cover of the ark – and stand face to face with all those tiny fragments. This was Moses' Kol Nidre – his Kol Nidre was the set of broken tablets – they were his reminder of his broken promises and broken vows – and that was his way of reminding himself that he needed the Israelite, he needed God, and he needed the people he loved in order to be successful.

We don't have a set of broken tablets – rather we have the Kol Nidre prayer – think back to the beginning of our service tonight – we removed the Torah scrolls from the ark – we stood in our place – and peered into the *Aron Hakodesh* – looking perhaps directly at our very own broken tablets.

Kol Nidre then isn't there to let us off the hook for what we may say and do in the year to come. No, Kol Nide is meant to transform us and move us to action! It's a reminder of our imperfection, a reminder of our humanity and that no matter how hard we try we will make mistakes – like Moses. But it also teaches us that our success depends on including the people in our lives weather at home, at work or at school – and that they are the ones who must help us to carve our new unbreakable set of tablets. When we know that

someone we love and respect is holding us accountable and helping us to be successful then we are more likely to follow through – just like Moses.

Kol Nidre...may God give us all the strength to pick up the broken pieces – and may God give us the wisdom to know and to recognize the people in our lives who can help us to carve our new set of unbreakable tablets...

Take a minute or two now and turn to each other – ask each other for forgiveness for one broken promise or vow in the past year that you may have made – and then think together about one thing, one promise that you can build and make with each other for the year to come....