

Yom Kippur evening – October 8, 2019  
Rabbi Helen Cohn – Congregation M'kor Hayim  
“May your yes be yes, and your no, no”

Kol Nidre. The most popular and well-attended service of the Jewish year. My guess is that this service is so popular because of its solemnity, and because of the music that transports us in ways words rarely can.

But do we actually know what the Kol Nidre prayer is actually about? It is a legal declaration—actually not a prayer—that releases us from all vows we might make in the coming year, if we find that in spite of our best effort we cannot keep the vow.

And the vows we are referring to? They are vows made to God. Vows, oaths, or promises that we make to other human beings are *our* responsibility, and Kol Nidre does not get us off the hook when we do not keep them.

When I say “promises” I am also thinking of commitments we make to people and organizations. In the biggest sense, I am talking about personal integrity in words and deeds.

The world and all life was created with words: “*Va-yomeir Eloheim...va-y’he chein.*” God said...and it was so. Just as God created with words, so do we. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, “We make or unmake the social universe with words....If we honor our commitments there is trust, cooperation, and graciousness in human relations. [If we do not honor them], trust wanes and the social fabric begins to unravel.” (YK machzor, p 72-3)

What comes to mind is my experience with people who come to me to talk about their inner, spiritual lives. We usually meet about once a month in my home office. Some of these people I have been meeting with for years and I have gotten to know each in his or her uniqueness. In terms of our topic tonight, I know who will be 5 to 10 minutes late, who will arrive exactly on time, and who will forget or cancel at the last minute. Although on one level it’s not a big deal, on another level we are talking about commitment, the social fabric, and ways we do or do not keep our promises.

There is a Jewish practice that, when we say we will meet someone, or that we will attend a meeting, or go with someone to a movie, we preface it with the words “*Bli neder,*” without a vow. I like this practice because it acknowledges (just as Kol Nidre does) that we are not always in control; that in spite of our best intentions we might not be able to meet, or to keep the commitment. My personal response to an invitation is generally some form of “I plan on attending,” or “It’s in my calendar.” I’ve read Unatana Tokef too many times to be able to say “I will be there!” That’s why I am leery of saying “I promise...” Kol Nidre and Yom Kippur are never far from my mind, year round.

Or to quote Ecclesiastes, “Better not to vow than to vow and not fulfill.” (5:4)

So what's a person to do? Well, this is when we come into the territory of Careful Speech and integrity. The Talmud says, "Let your yes be yes, and your no, no." (Bava Mezia 49a) This teaching is about making your words align with your intentions.

I encountered a painful example of this some years ago. A woman I'll call Cindy and I had a falling out. It was partially a misunderstanding, partly my fault. She had invited me to her engagement party. I told her I wasn't sure I could come, and I thought we left my attendance open. That day I did not feel well and spent the afternoon of the party in bed with a fever. I didn't call to say I was not coming – my mistake. When I found out how hurt she was, I apologized wholeheartedly, but that incident ended our friendship. Years later I saw her on a street corner. I was genuinely glad to see her, and she seemed to feel the same. We made plans to have lunch, then the morning of our date she called to cancel. So we rescheduled. She cancelled that date too. Would you believe it took me until the third cancellation to realize she had no intention of meeting with me or picking up our friendship? I do understand how difficult it is to be candid in a situation like this, to say "I would prefer not to continue our friendship," or words to that effect. But telling the truth would have been cleaner, more honest, more aligned with personal integrity.

After the Talmud says "Let your yes be yes, and your no, no" it continues with, "One must not speak one thing with the mouth and another with the heart." (Bava Mezia 49a)

The Talmud and Kol Nidre—each in its own way—are pointing to how to be a person of one's word. For me, this is the essence of integrity. Here's one definition of "integrity" I especially like: "the state of being whole and undivided."

Technically the promises and vows we refer to on Kol Nidre are those made to God, but I believe they should include human beings as well. We are *b'tzelem Eloheim*—made in the image of God—so our promises to people are as important as those made to God. In this regard, "promises" actually refers to something bigger. It includes commitments such as volunteering for a project, saying we will visit a sick friend, offering to bring food for the Food Bank, filling out a pledge card. We say we will do it, and even if there is an implied "Bli neder," our word is our honor. Our speech creates worlds; when we do not fulfill what we say, our world begins to unravel.

Sometimes we make these promises silently, only to ourselves. I think we are equally obligated to fulfill them (Bli neder) even if they were not spoken aloud. Our soul is recognizing who we truly are and who we want to be in the world. We are speaking to ourself silently, but these are promises too. When we have the thought, "Yes, I want to write a check for the Food Bank," that too is a promise, a commitment to ourselves, that creates worlds when it is fulfilled.

Remember when earlier I mentioned the people I meet with, and how I have learned who will be on time, and who will have excuses or stories for why they aren't? Well, other people know those kinds of things about *us* as well. We might think other people don't notice, but they do. Yom Kippur asks us to ask ourselves: Are we a person of our word? Do we create worlds or unravel them? Can we be counted on to fulfill what we say?

Kol Nidre is our escape hatch, our emergency exit, the legal fiction that allows forgiveness for unfulfilled promises made between this Yom Kippur and the next. But let us not count on that. May our yes be yes and our no, no. May our words, our commitments, and our intentions create worlds of trust and integrity in the year that is coming.

Ken y'he ratzon