

Yom Kippur evening – September 18, 2018 / 10 Tishrei 5779  
Rabbi Helen Cohn – Congregation M'kor Hayim  
“What if I’m wrong?”

The actual words of Kol Nidre are a legal formula that asks release from promises we might make but cannot fulfill, from now until next Yom Kippur. We make this request in the presence of the Torah, which explains the ritual that has developed at the beginning of the Yom Kippur evening service.

However, beyond the words of Kol Nidre we find a more profound thought. Naturally we want to keep whatever vows or promises we might make in the coming year. But life experience teaches us that we can’t always do as we have promised. There is too much that we do not know, too much uncertainty. As Rabbi David Stern says, “Kol Nidre grants us the gift of sacred uncertainty: the chance to begin this new year with a sense of what we do not know, rather than a narrow certainty about what we do.” Let’s read together (slowly, thoughtfully) the entirety of his comments on page 17 of our *machzor*:

“In its emphasis on humility, Kol Nidre provides a corrective to the toxic certainties of polarized discourse. What if we approached each other with the humility to recognize that our most confident convictions will always be qualified by the limits of our own knowledge and understanding? In its haunting melody and strangely legalistic language, we begin to sense the twilight truth: our high horses too often stumble, and our soapboxes stand on shaky ground. Kol Nidre grants us the gift of sacred uncertainty: the chance to begin this new year with a sense of what we do not know, rather than a narrow certainty about what we do. It’s what Buddhists call ‘beginner’s mind.’ What if every time I were ready to proclaim some self-evident truth, I allowed Kol Nidre to whisper in my ear, ‘Says who?’” (*Mishkan HaNefesh*, YK, p 17, Rabbi David Stern)

This somewhat formal statement expresses what I would like us to consider tonight. But I have another way to say the same thing, thanks to New Zealand country singer Mel Parsons. I’m taking a short snippet from one of her songs entirely out of context, but I’m hoping it will stick in your mind long after this evening. The snippet is: What if I’m wrong? [play “What if I’m wrong?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZo-OKgrWAc>]

Yes: It’s a good practice to ask ourselves regularly, “What if I’m wrong?”

My mother and I were sharing a slice of lemon meringue pie recently. She recalled that as a young girl she was convinced that the white fluffy toping only rose and separated from the yellow bottom when the pie was baked. She said, “I remember when I learned I was wrong.”

Do you remember a time when you realized you were wrong?

Let’s take a more complex situation, as our mind tries to form a judgment based on limited information. A friend belongs to a congregation of about 120 families. My

friend told me about “Jake,” a member of the congregation about whom my friend and her husband have a difference of opinion. As I tell you about Jake, notice what your mind does with the information. Do you jump to a conclusion or a judgment about the kind of person he is? Jake carries a registered gun all the time. Jake’s wife has a serious illness and he cares for her tenderly and patiently. He is paranoid and very conservative, politically. He helps build the sukka and is always willing to help the congregation whenever asked. He got into a violent argument with a woman over a traffic incident. He says of himself he was on a downward spiral, but in high school he worked for a guy who turned his life around. Jake tears up as he speaks with gratitude of this man.

When my friend finishes telling me about Jake I realize once again that we cannot know or judge what is in the heart of another human being. Yes, we can judge their actions and hold them accountable, for example if they break the law. But tonight I’m talking about our inner judgments and assumptions about other people. As a popular saying goes, “Other people are not a failed version of you.” Just because they make other choices, or load the dishwasher differently than you, doesn’t mean they are incompetent or wrong-headed.

Here’s another example of a false assumption and the lasting hurt it can cause. A friend in her late 70’s—I’ll call her Maggie—recalls an incident when she was about three years old. It was during WWII in England. A man came to see her family, and when he entered their house the light from the open door put his face in shadow. Maggie’s mother called to her to greet the man, but she was shy and hid in her mother’s skirts instead. Her mother roughly grabbed her by the arm and spoke sternly to her. For many years Maggie remembered this incident and deeply resented her mother for it. Much later she saw this incident from a different perspective. She learned that this man, a family friend, had been burnt in the war and his face was badly scarred. Maggie’s mother was embarrassed, maybe even mortified, because she assumed Maggie’s behavior was because of the man’s appearance. That’s why the mother reacted so strongly when Maggie hid her face, when in fact Maggie was just being a shy three-year-old. Maggie could finally forgive her mother, when she realized all the mistaken assumption that occurred around this one incident.

How quickly we make assumptions and jump to conclusions that might be totally wrong, and yet we hold onto those judgments, sometimes for years.

During these days of introspection and *teshuvah*, it’s worth considering: [play “What if I’m wrong”]

Have you ever had the experience of relating an event to someone and that person finishes your sentence if you pause even a moment? Or the person interprets how you must have felt—when in fact that wasn’t how you felt at all? In my own experience, whenever someone jumps in to finish what I’m saying, they are almost always wrong. What I learn from this is that I should not complete other people’s thoughts, because I’m equally likely to not know what they are trying to say. Better to realize “I might be wrong” and just listen patiently.

Our tradition cautions us “Do not judge another until you have been in that person’s place.” (Pirke Avot 2:5) Since it is impossible to be fully in another person’s place, or to walk in their shoes, it’s best to heed Rabbi Stern’s advice of “sacred uncertainty,” the chance “to begin this new year with a sense of what we do not know, rather than a narrow certainty about what we do.”

Of course there are times for action, to stand for what we believe is right in a social or political arena. But in our relationships, I hope this refrain comes back to you, as a reminder that people and situations are complex in ways we can never fully know.

Before you assert with self-righteousness and confidence that you are *right* about something or someone, consider: [play “What if I’m wrong?”]

Amen