



CHOSEN PEOPLE
MINISTRIES

WHEN WE FAIL,
THERE IS GRACE



DAY 9



On the evening initiating the Day of Atonement, Jewish people gather around the

world to hear the magnificent fifteenth-century prayer, *Kol Nidrei*, which is sung at the service. This moving, mournful, and soulful prayer is highly unusual within the Jewish faith, as the purpose of the prayer is to seek God's forgiveness for breaking vows and promises. After moving through the Ten Days of Awe, confessing and repenting for our sins, it seems out of character that the finale of our contrition comes as a request asking God to forgive us for intentionally or accidentally breaking our past and future commitments.

This is difficult for most of us to understand, but it is worth trying as the prayer helps us understand some aspects of Jewish history that are important to remember.

The translation is as follows:

In the tribunal of Heaven and the tribunal of earth, by the permission of God — praised be He — and by the permission of this holy congregation, we hold it lawful to pray with transgressors.

All personal vows 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.

May all the people of Israel be forgiven, including all the strangers who live in their midst, for all the people are at fault.^[1]

Many Jewish leaders over the years have actually wanted to remove *Kol Nidrei* from the Yom Kippur service. It has become the source of considerable antisemitism, as non-Jews believed it was the Jewish way to release themselves from debts to gentiles. Furthermore, it should be understood that, in Jewish tradition, the *Kol Nidrei* is not a request to be free of legal obligations that cannot be met without consequence. It is quite rightly understood there will always be penalties for a failure to perform a contract, as Judaism cherishes the value of keeping one's word.

According to one rabbinic commentator, "...**NO ONE** claims that *Kol Nidrei* exempts individuals from either past or future vows that involve others.

Kol Nidrei is **ONLY** for personal vows, as demonstrated above. Whether in business deals or interpersonal interaction, *Kol Nidrei* does not in any way provide license for Jews to be deceitful or lying.”[2]

The reason *Kol Nidrei* became so important is that it memorializes events in Medieval Europe, especially during the days when Jews were forced to convert to Christianity or Islam and chose to practice an “underground” version of Judaism. Those Jews, primarily located in Spain and Portugal, were called *Conversos* or *Crypto-Jews* (secret Jews). The singing of *Kol Nidrei* gave these “converts” an opportunity each year to ask God to forgive them for falsely converting.

This prayer, which still moves Jewish people to tears, reminds us of darker times during the Inquisition and persecution of Jews in Medieval Europe. The prayer says more about the Jewish view of God than it does about man’s ability to keep his word. The unknown author of the prayer, who may indeed have been a *Crypto-Jew*, believed that breaking vows was wrong, but in this instance, God would be gracious, merciful, and forgiving, as He understood the decision to “convert” to Christianity (specifically Medieval Catholicism) was made under threat of death.

Sometimes, the only lifeline Jewish people had to hold on to was that God would graciously understand the difficulty of keeping the Torah (biblical Law). The Jewish people were not looking for an excuse through the prayer, but rather the words expressed hope that God fully knew the circumstances endured by the Jewish people and that He also understood the deepest intentions of their hearts. *Kol Nidrei* expresses faith in the goodness and love of God.

Therefore, in a rather unusual way, *Kol Nidrei* reminds the Jewish people that our failure to keep promises and obligations, under more usual circumstances, requires God’s forgiveness, as our word is our bond not only to man but God. Jesus himself emphasizes the importance of one’s spoken word in Matthew 12:36, “*But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment.*” The prayer elevates our commitments to life, family, and business to a higher level by giving these obligations a divine dimension.

When we fail in our earthly obligations, we understand that we have sinned before God and need His release and forgiveness. This is beautifully expressed in the words of the Psalmist, who wrote, *“Your vows are binding upon me, O God; I will render thank offerings to You. For You have delivered my soul from death, indeed my feet from stumbling, so that I may walk before God in the light of the living”* (Psalm 56:12–13).

[1] Translation of the Kol Nidrei prayer as found in Philip Birnbaum, *High Holiday Prayer Book* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1951).

[2] Gil Student, “Explaining Kol Nidrei,” The Real Truth About the Talmud, accessed September 4, 2020, <http://www.angelfire.com/mt/talmud/kolnidre.html#Kol>.

Scripture Meditation:

The above passage gives us insight into the conflicted heart of the Psalmist. He mourns his failings, yet still trusts in a good and forgiving God who can keep him from sin. He does not blame God for demanding that he keep the commandments, nor does he demand license to disobey, as he takes full responsibility for his sin. On the one hand, he recognizes that God is the only one who can keep him from failing, but on the other hand, understands that sin is his failure and not God’s inability to “keep” him.

We can also be conflicted. We trust God to give us the power to be obedient and to walk with Him in purity, but we still sin. In these moments we are tempted to say that God is complicit in our sin because He did not give us the strength to resist it. Do you ever feel as if God did

not keep His part of the agreement in giving you power over sin? It is understandable to feel that way, but it is not true. He empowers us to choose His will over our own, and we must make the right choice. We cannot blame the Holy One for our sin, and we cannot knowingly make the wrong choice because we know that He will forgive us. His grace is not a safety net for sin and disobedience.

Give it your all! Resist sin but know that failure will come. I pray that you will be honest with God at that moment and fall upon His mercy, knowing that He also forgives.

I encourage you to read and meditate upon my favorite Psalm, which captures the heart of King David after being confronted by the prophet Nathan with his sins against Bathsheba and Uriah. The lessons in the passage will give us hope and strength to obey, knowing that if we fail, (and we will), that we are never beyond His ability and power to forgive.

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom. Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness, let the bones which You have broken rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will be converted to You. Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation; then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness. O

Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise. For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.
(Psalm 51:1–17)

Today's prayer:

Abba, as we meditate on Psalm 51, we ask You to reveal any hidden sin in us that we have not confessed. We pray that as the Jewish people read this psalm, they would recognize their own need for forgiveness and fall upon the mercy You offer through Your Son. Thank You for the truth that no failure of ours is beyond Your ability and power to forgive!