

**Yom Kippur evening (Kol Nidre), 5772**  
**Rabbi Brian Field**

*Bruchim ha-ba'im.* Welcome to Yom Kippur with Judaism Your Way. We're honored and touched that you are here. You may be single or partnered. You may be a teenager, a young parent or a grandparent. You may be gay or straight. Maybe you've been practicing Judaism for a long time. Maybe you're just getting started, or restarted. You may be Jewish or maybe not.

At Judaism Your Way our goal is to find Jewish ways of saying "yes" to as many Jews and their loved ones as possible. "Wherever you are on your Jewish journey, we'll meet you there."

My name is Brian Field. I'm the rabbi of Judaism Your Way.

I want to deeply appreciate my co-workers at Judaism Your Way - our executive director, Lolly Gold, and our program assistant, Samantha Raizen. And thank you to our many volunteer greeters for helping to provide such a warm welcome to everyone who is here.

I also want to appreciate the members of our board, whose vision of a spiritually generous, inclusive Judaism has brought JYW to life.

A big thank you to the Denver Jewish Day School for making our Torah scroll available to us.

My companions up here, are, on guitar, Yaniv Salzberg, and on violin, Katie Glassman. In a few moments, Rebecca Berg will be performing on the cello.

Let me say a few words to those among us who aren't Jewish: Some of you are on a spiritual search and your path has brought you here. We hope your time with us helps you on your path.

And some of you are here because your beloved is Jewish and you are here as an expression of support and love. Like our non-Jewish ancestors in the Torah, you are a source of affirmation, encouragement, continuity and blessing.

Let me give you one example of the Torah's attitude to non-Jews who are participants in the Jewish community. Joseph, the son of Jacob, ends up as prime minister in Egypt, where he saves Egypt, as well as his birth family, from a famine. Joseph marries Asenat the daughter of an Egyptian priest. They have 2 sons, Ephraim and Menashe. Years later, when Joseph's father, Jacob, is lying on his death bed, Joseph brings his two Egyptian-born sons to their grandfather. Jacob places his hands on their heads and says, "Through you may all Israel be blessed, saying, may God make you like Ephraim and Menashe."

I believe that the Torah is calling us to look through Jacob's eyes.

So, in the spirit of Jacob, in whose name so many of our prayers are offered, in fact, whose adopted name, Israel, has become the name of our people, I say to you who are not Jewish, or who are an interfaith couple, or who are raising children in an interfaith family, or who are the children of an interfaith family, through you may the Jewish people be blessed.

Now that we've gathered inside the tent, and we've begun to settle into this most sacred of times, we will prepare for a moment that happens but once a year – the moment of Kol Nidrei.

You can find the words on p.4. On first glance, it doesn't look like much. In fact, it may seem ethically problematic, that you don't have to live up to your word. So what's going on here? Is going back on your word a value that Judaism is promoting?

In fact, business people including some of our board members have come to me and asked, with some concern and even more incredulity, "Why are we saying this?" Apart from the fact that it's a tradition.

It's a great question. And it's not the first time it's been asked. In fact, when Kol Nidrei first arose in the 700s, it was met with extreme hostility by the rabbinic authorities, for this very reason. And that hostility resurfaced in the Middle Ages. And even the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Mordecai Kaplan, wanted to get rid of it

But Kol Nidrei stuck. People loved it. It stuck so deeply that the name of the prayer became the name of the entire Yom Kippur evening service. And I think there are powerful reasons why it stuck.

So for the next couple of minutes, I'd like to take a closer look at Kol Nidrei.

Kol Nidre is based on a teaching in the Torah, in the Book of Deuteronomy:

*“When you make any vow to the Eternal your God, you must pay it without delay... If you refrain from making a vow, that is no sin, but you must be careful to perform any promise you have made with your lips.”*

Deut 23:22-24

Note the Torah’s language – *“when you make any vow to the Eternal your God.* The rabbis teach that the Torah is talking about a specific kind of vow – a vow between a person and God, usually involving some kind of commitment to the Sanctuary. Over the centuries, Jewish practice extended this and related teachings to include all religious vows, commitments about personal practice, commitments that a person assumes for themselves alone, where no other persons or interests are involved.

The Torah’s language clearly does not intend business or civil contracts. Over the millennia, Judaism has been very thoroughly documented, and there is no evidence that the KN was ever used to nullify business contracts. It was strictly spiritual/religious.

However there is one business connection. I was talking about Kol Nidre with our organizational development consultant, Sheldon Romer, and he shared with me that there is one way that Kol Nidre can offer an important perspective for business and the working environment.

Sheldon offered that you can determine the health of an organization on the basis of the rigor of the commitment that people in that organization have to each other. Business consultants call this commitment management. Commitment management is about 3 things: (1) how to ask for a commitment from someone else, (2) how to get a commitment from someone else, and (3) in those cases where a person has not followed through on the commitment, how to get an apology and a recommitment. How one apologizes and recommits is crucial in organizations, in personal relationships, and wrt oneself. And that's what Kol Nidre is all about.

In my opinion, the enduring reason KN is retained is that it speaks a core truth about our human imperfection. Despite our best intentions, we can't always follow through. And when we're in integrity, our not following through feels bad. This is not a prayer that gives us an excuse to not be in integrity. Just the opposite – it's a prayer that strives to help us stay in integrity. As hard as we may strive to live up to our promises and obligations, with Kol Nidre we confess up front that we will not always be able to. And when this happens, we have to be able to forgive ourselves, to be forgiving of others, and give others the opportunity to forgive us. Kol Nidre plays a large role in that.

There's one other aspect of Kol Nidrei that I think is the reason for its continuing power. Kol Nidrei acquired intense significance in Spain in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, where hundreds of thousands of Jews were forced to convert to Christianity. Many of these forced converts continued to attend synagogue in secret at the risk of their lives. They used the Kol Nidrei text to allow them to pray as Jews by forgiving their breaking of the vows that they had made to another religion. It was also the prayer offered by the children and grandchildren of those who were forced to convert, as they made their way to communities where it was safer to be a Jew, and they wished to return to the Jewish people.

As I see it, Kol Nidre has become the Jewish people's prayer of inclusion.

This is more more than a historical footnote. KN continues to resonate with people **who feel social pressure to hide their Jewishness**, or to stay in the closet about some other aspect of their lives. I'm thinking particularly about gay and lesbian Jews who are in the closet about their gay identity in their Jewish communities and those in the closet about their Jewish lives in the gay community. Up to the last few weeks, I'm thinking about all the closeted gay soldiers who are serving our country as patriotic Americans.

I can also imagine that **many Jews practice some version of don't ask-don't tell about their Jewish identity in various social contexts**. And I think that that's so many of us.

Kol Nidre asks that we be forgiven for keeping parts of ourselves hidden. Kol Nidre invites us to forgive ourselves about what we feel is safe to show and what isn't safe. Kol Nidre recognizes the pain that comes with carrying hidden and split identities. As long as it is not safe for even one person to tell his or her complete truth, there will be a place for Kol Nidre. Kol Nidrei offers a vision of a time when each of us is completely safe to be who we are.