



KOL NIDREI DRASH, AT KEDEM, 2021

BY MARLO NEWTON

Why do we daven kol nidre 'forward'? Isn't it despondent, to assume we are going to need absolution from our vows before the year has really got going? One teacher told me it was from the times of persecution, when we knew that we might be asked, in the year to come, to vow allegiance to another G-d, and so had a kind of advance "fingers crossed" [ironic] against making a false vow.

Then why do the Sephardim, closest of us all to the Marrano history, still recite the Kol Nidre 'backward'. As a plea for forgiveness of past false vows in the preceding year.

One reason is that the version looking backwards was the first one.

It was Rashi's son-in-law, Rabbi Meir ben Samuel (early 12th century), who changed the original phrase "from the last Day of Atonement until this one" to "from this Day of Atonement until the next". Meir ben Samuel likewise added the words "we do repent of them all", since real repentance is a condition of dispensation. There was also the distinct concern that a person would die with unfulfilled vows having been made since the previous Day of Atonement, so annulling these vows in advance might diminish the weight such unkept vows imposed on a person at one's death.

It was Rabbeinu Tam, however, Rabbi Meir be Samuel's son, who also tried to change the perfect tense of the verbs ("which we have vowed", "have sworn", etc.) to the imperfect. Whether the old text was already too deeply rooted, or whether Rabbeinu Tam did not correct these verbal forms consistently and grammatically, the old perfect forms are still retained at the beginning of the formula, but a future meaning is given to them.[32] Yes, as a grammarian it does my head in.

These changes were accepted in the German, northern French, and Polish rituals but not in the Spanish, Roman, and Provençal rituals.[33] The "old" version is, therefore, usually called the "Sephardic". The old and new versions are sometimes found side by side.[34] Because it is traditional to recite Kol Nidrei three times, some Sephardic communities and even some Ashkenazic communities (especially in Israel) make a point of reciting both versions (usually referring to the previous Yom Kippur in the first two iterations and the next Yom Kippur in the third).[35]

I like that idea – looking backwards and ahead. The older version makes sense if we have spent Elul out doing teshuvah with our fellow human beings and are now asking forgiveness from Hashem, to repair the final relationship before we can ask for a good new year.

Thinking about a Kol Nidre that is forward facing, we already have in mind forgiveness from Hashem for false vows made to God, but what might we need forgiveness for in advance in our dealing bein adam lechavero?

I've been watching a lot of tv lately. I know you're shocked.

One of the shows that hit deepest was Annabel Crabbe's Msrepresentation, about the systematic exclusion and silencing of women in Australian politics, since white settlement. Most of what she put on view we accept now as abhorrent, but what didn't we see in the moment?

What didn't I see? What will I not have vision enough to see in the coming year?

I've also rewatched the entirety of West Wing, one of my formative experiences of the American story and one I have celebrated for its storytelling and loved for its characterisations. Watching it twenty years later – yes, it's been that long- I couldn't help being struck by the dismissal of women's concerns in the larger political picture, always sacrificed for something more important in the moment, and in everyday acts in the workplace, like not taking RSI seriously because it only affected the women-dominated secretarial pool.

What didn't I hear then? What will I miss hearing in the coming year?

I watched the "Black Lives Matter" marches and the women's marches and I couldn't understand intersectionality or why it mattered because it didn't matter to me. I let acquaintances play down the importance of the battles for people of colour with the excuse that I was tired of trying to be "woke".

What didn't I do? For God's sake yes For God's sake what won't I do in the coming year?

We stand before you this day

Shaking and bowed down with a psychic exhaustion.

Last year I refused to be part of an online service - I felt I could not pray without the community around me – I could not wish someone good yontev, or well over the fast, over zoom. I hated every minute of the zoom services and I didn't go to them all. It didn't help.

This year I truly thought we'd make it. Then a wave of delta davka inside our own community destroyed that hope. To be a free people, in our own minyan. That was the action that took away our freedom. The freedom of a few denied the freedom of the many.

It's been that kind of a year. The freedom of a few to ignore the election result of the many resulted in a Capitol riot that threatened democracy at its very seat. The freedom to continue to invest in fossil fuels overriding the sacred duty to the land that we were taught all the way back in Bereshit. The freedom to tell mildly amusing jokes that hurt and offend groups we don't know so well, or care for that much. The freedom to ignore the claims of injustice and oppression if they don't relate to our struggle.

I would argue that an active and painful struggle to face the mistakes of our past is how we argue for the chance of another year.

The freedom to make promises to our children is precious, and we lost it last year. We promised them a birthday party this year. We promised them a holiday. We promised them a cure. We broke that promise. We broke a lot of promises “bein adam lchavero”.

In the year to come, let us not make empty promises. Let us not make pontifical statements from our islands of privilege, but let us stop and learn in time, to say I didn't know that, I'll have to rethink that.

Sara Ronis, one of the teachers I learn from on daf yomi asks in relation to the famous lamed vavniks, the 36 righteous who sustain the world: What might it mean to treat ourselves as though we are one of the 36 who have God's explicit permission to be in God's presence every day, who sustain the world through their actions and presence?

As some of you know, or might be delighted to discover, there is a custom to indicate the Hebrew year with a verse (or part of a verse) that is equal to that year in gematriya. You know, Aleph equals 1, Bet equals 2 etc. Such words or phrases are called chronograms. The custom has spread to written correspondence and email, as a way to enrich the meaning of the current year. Here are some biblical phrases that equal 782 תשפ"ב. (The number of thousands in the year—currently 5000—is often omitted.)

Daniel Matt, another Sefaria friend has put together chronograms for the year 5782
פסוקים לכבוד שנת תשפ"ב

(לֹא־תִשָּׂא (ויקרא יט, יז) 7)
7) You shall not hate (Leviticus 19:17)

(וַיִּשֶׂם לָךְ שָׁלוֹם (במדבר ו, כו)
And may He give you peace (Numbers 6:26)

(עַד אֲשֶׁר־אֶרְאֶה (קהלת ב, ג) 28)
28) Until I could see (Ecclesiastes 2:3)

Until I could see. What did I not see? What will I witness in 5782?

At funerals, and sometimes at Yizkor, we read my favourite reflection for this time of year. Birth is a beginning and death a destination, and life is a pilgrimage, from defeat to defeat to defeat until, looking backwards or ahead, we see that meaning lies not in some high place along the way, but in having made the journey step by step - a sacred pilgrimage. Let us encourage one another to look backwards and ahead, and continue our sacred pilgrimage - together. Ken Yehi ratzon.

Marlo Newton