



## **“Close to God”**

Yom Kippur 5771 Sermon

Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe

There is a prayer that may be the most powerful ritual moment we have in the Jewish year. Its melody pulls us immediately close to our tradition and history. The cantor slowly utters the Aramaic words, and we can feel the presence of our ancestors in European ghettos as if they were right next to us. The whole congregation stands silently and listens. The cantor’s chanting is at once mournful, pleading, and awe-inspiring. Many of us don’t feel our observance of Yom Kippur is complete unless we have *heard* this prayer, setting the solemn tone of the day to come. And that prayer is...Kol Nidre.

Few Jews know the true history and meaning of this text. It is not really a prayer, but rather a legal statement. It nullifies all of the vows we might make in the coming year – not just the ones we can’t quite fulfill, but all of them. How did this prayer become part of our service? Some of you might have heard it was created for the *Marranos*, who were forced to convert to Christianity during the Inquisition. It wasn’t, although they did use the prayer. It came out of deep fears on the part of Jews during ancient times regarding vows made in haste or a moment of passion – promising, let’s say, as you’re washing your last Passover dish at two in the morning, never to host another family Seder. In those times, this might have been considered a real promise to God, and if you didn’t fulfill it, this was a problem. There is even some evidence that many Jews believed in demons that would hold you to every word you said. Since studies show that most of us lie every three minutes, they had reason to be afraid!

From Talmudic times to modernity, rabbis have tried to remove Kol Nidre from the service. Taking back all of our vows was a bad ethical teaching. It also fueled anti-Semitism based on the idea that you couldn’t trust a Jewish promise. But superstition persisted, and eventually, the Ashkenazi melody we all know became so popular that the Kol Nidre was here to stay. Now, we have recordings of everyone from Neil Diamond to Johnny Mathis singing the prayer on holiday albums, and we have developed new interpretations. In our prayer book, we ask God to release us from promises we could not fulfill *after honest effort*. We are not perfect and our tradition gives us a second chance.

I will bet that none of this was on your minds while you listened to the prayer. And that’s because none of it matters. The Kol Nidre is one of those moments in Jewish life that cannot be explained through logic. It doesn’t fully make sense in our own time, and yet it has deep meaning. This prayer moves us. It ties us to our roots. And, it connects us to something greater



than ourselves: our community, our people, and ultimately, God. Its history and meaning don't get in the way of that at all. The truth is that some of what is *most powerful* about Judaism cannot be approached intellectually. It is not rational; it exists in a different realm of experience. Each of us would have a great deal to gain from being more open to these aspects of Jewish tradition.

We are Reform Jews, and we are proud of it. More than any other stream of Judaism, Reform has responded to the prophetic call for justice. It also freed modern Jews from outdated and restrictive observances that didn't fit our modern lives. At first, many believed this new movement would die out quickly, but this July we celebrated 200 years. We showed the world that there is more than one way to be Jewish.

The early reformers had to make a clean break from tradition, so clean that in retrospect, perhaps they went too far. In 1885, they discarded all the ritual commandments of Judaism and scores of other traditions that weren't directly connected to ethical principals: the wearing of *tallises* and *kipot*, the *Bar Mitzvah* ceremony, praying in Hebrew, chanting Torah – and yes, also the Kol Nidre. But more recently, a lot of these traditions have returned to Reform Judaism in spite of their non-rational nature – or maybe, because of it. Even *Lecha Dodi* on Shabbat evening was one of those prayers the early reformers frowned upon. It's a mystical poem, picturing Shabbat as a beautiful bride. For many of us today, this is the highlight of the Shabbat service.

Gradually, we have returned to these traditions, for one reason: they move us. Still, I believe many of us are held back by a great myth of Reform Judaism: the myth that the only parts of Judaism that can speak to us are the ones that engage the rational mind. In the coming year, I challenge you to explore the things that bring us to tears or make us feel warm inside, the moments that give us a sense of healing.

Elaine told me one ten-second event on Shabbat evening has saved her relationship with her daughter Ali. It helps them transcend the day-to-day tensions that build up every week. There are days when mother and daughter are not speaking to each other at all, but in that moment after the candles have been lit, this ritual goes where words cannot. Ali stands silently beside her mother. Elaine holds her head and kisses her: May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. In that moment, whatever they have been fighting about disappears. Sometimes, a simple blessing can help us cut through the barriers of our everyday struggles and bring us together.

On the morning of his wedding, Joshua drove out to a nearby lake to enact a ritual that a few years before he never would have considered. He took a ritual bath, using the natural *mikvah* of the lake. Hours before he



was to stand under the *chuppah*, this act was immensely powerful. Amongst the trees, far from the hustle of wedding preparations at the hotel, he waded in up to his neck. He said a blessing, lifted his feet and lowered his head. And when he did, he felt cleansed, renewed, prepared for this overwhelming day, and for the life transition that awaited him. Rituals can help us address the emotional complexity of major life events and be present for important moments.

When Carolyn's father died, I offered to lead a *shiva minyan* for him. Even though she felt uneasy about holding a prayer service in her home, she agreed. Twenty relatives and friends sat with her and listened to her speak about her father. Watching Carolyn's face as we joined in saying the *Kaddish*, it was clear what a healing thing the *minyan* was for her. It wasn't about the particular words that were chanted or said. It was the fact of gathering together, and it was healing power of prayer.

In each of these stories, the effect of the ritual could not have been anticipated in advance. It had to be felt in the moment. Our tradition challenges us to step outside of our comfort zone.

When you choose the life of a rabbi, you sign up for lots of interesting conversations – on the airplane, in the coffee shop, even the barber's chair. In my daily travels, I am often granted the status of personal pastor to the unaffiliated. I hear about weddings, *b'nei mitzvah*, people's home congregations, and so on.

There are themes that repeat themselves: experiences with Judaism as children, the role of religion in the world, but I'd have to say, the most frequent question of rabbinic airplane conversation – besides whether bacon is kosher if eaten thirty-five thousand feet above the ground – the biggest topic people want to discuss is *the most* unscientific, non-rational concept in all of Judaism: belief in God.

For many, the Jewish presentation of God feels monolithic and forced. We're uncomfortable with the idea that in order to call ourselves religious, we must "believe" in an image of God that is handed us by the text. We like to say that Judaism doesn't emphasize belief as much as action. But where does that leave us when we study Torah and when we pray? *This* is perhaps the toughest barrier for the modern Jew in being open to the non-rational aspects of Judaism.

If you confided in me that you don't believe in God, I would ask you to tell me about the God in which you don't believe. The booming voice? The white beard? Then I would say that you follow in a long line of distinguished Jews who felt the same way. The *Kabbalists* called God *Ein Sof*, without end, and they tried to achieve union with God through meditation. This was five hundred years ago, and they were miles away from an all-powerful, intervening God. In fact, a literal reading of the Bible was not even the



intent of the Talmudic sages, who freely acknowledged the presence of parable in the Torah. These rabbis used the text as a starting point for their own individual images of God. They are attempts to imagine the unimaginable.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, our greatest thinker Moses Maimonides acknowledged that we could *never* know what God is, and that any attempt to describe God in the Torah is nothing more than metaphor. So what stops us from contemplating God, invoking our ancestors' metaphors, savoring their emotional depth, and praying to God through our people's many doorways – from the voice that beckoned to Moses from the burning bush, calling him to fight injustice, to the still, small voice that spoke to the prophet Elijah when no one else could reach him?

There is a story about the *rebbe* and the village atheist. The *atheist* has been talking for years about his plans to prove to the *rebbe*, once and for all, that God does not exist. Finally, one day, he arrives at the *rebbe's* door. His heart races as he presents his proofs and demonstrations. Finished, heaving and red in the face, he waits for the *rebbe's* response. The *rebbe* looks at him gently and smiles. He replies with one word. "*Efshar*," he says. "Perhaps." Hearing this, the man breaks into tears, and the two of them embrace.<sup>1</sup>

*Efshar*. Perhaps. God in Judaism is how *we* engage with what we do not know, what we will never be able to fully address through science and logic: the utterly personal experience of being alive. None of us knows how we came to be here, or why. What unites Jewish conceptions of God is that they represent *our people's* relationship with what *we* call God, our own search for meaning, for glimpses of something beyond us. That the stories and images we have collected over thousands of years are imperfect is no secret. Nor is it a secret that they are beautiful, each instructive in its own way, and uniquely Jewish. To call oneself a Jew is to be willing to participate in that search.

One of my teachers, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, relates that he once asked a group of Jewish kids whether they believed in God. Not one raised his hand. But when he asked them whether they had been close to God, every single one had an experience to share: the lighting of the Shabbat candles, the funeral of a grandparent, helping another person.

These children understood that the question is not whether we believe in God, but how we can feel close to God. *Efshar*. It is possible. We can do it by being open to the aspects of our tradition that speak not only to the mind, but also to the heart. When we stand as a congregation and hear the *Kol Nidre*, we feel close to God. When we gather to say *Kaddish* in a house of mourning, we feel close to God. When we place our hands on the heads

---

<sup>1</sup> Story told by Rabbi Harold Schulweis in his book, *In God's Mirror: Reflections and Essays*.



of our children and speak a blessing, we feel close to God. In the coming year let's ask ourselves the right questions: how can we feel close to God and how can we bring God into our lives? *Efshar.*