

The Kol Nidre I Will Always Remember

Kol Nidre Introduction, Eli Rubenstein, Congregation Habonim,

Yom Kippur 2011

What is the essence of the Kol Nidre??

That we are frail, that we are imperfect, that we while we resolve to do better, we also know we will slip and fall again – and yet, and yet, it is the very knowledge of this imperfection, that gives us the right to try again and again.

As the Kotzer Rebbe said, “there is nothing more whole than a broken heart,” for it is only in the knowledge of our imperfection that we are given the impetus to try again and the latitude to forgive ourselves for not always succeeding.

The Kol Nidre says this: we are not flawless, but we are also not hopeless.

The pattern of the Kol Nidre starts off quietly, for the first rendition, then a little stronger for the second version, and finally, the last version is the strongest, most confident – as if to say, we know we are weak, we know we are frail, but we will yet, somehow, find the faith and the courage to persevere.

Allow me to relate to you a short story from the 1997 March of the Living told to us by Judy Weissenberg Cohen in the Tempel Synagogue in Krakow.

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[Kol Nidre in Auschwitz - Judy Weissenberg Cohen's Story](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GT4DDUauu-s&feature=email)

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Here in Birkenau is where I also had this unlikely and unforgettable experience:

Practicing Judaism or celebrating any Jewish Holiday was totally forbidden by the Nazis. But this particular year, in 1944, when I was here, one day, some of the older women asked these two specific Kapos (high-ranking prisoners) for permission to do something for Kol Nidre (the Eve of Yom Kippur.)

Most of the Kapos were really brutalized and brutal people but a few of them remained humane. We knew these particular two were approachable. One of the kind Kapos, I remember, was a tall, blonde Polish non- Jewish woman. The other one was a little red-headed, young woman, a Jewish girl from Slovakia. The women told them that we wanted to do something for Kol Nidre. The little red-headed girl, Cirka I believe was her name, but I am not sure, was simply amazed that anyone still wanted to pray in the hell-hole called Birkenau.

“You crazy Hungarian Jews” she exclaimed. “You still believe in this? You still want to do this and here?”

Well, we did.

So, we asked for and received, one candle and one siddur. We were about 800 women jam-packed in one barrack. They all came: the believers, the atheists, the agnostics, women of all descriptions and of every background. We were all there.

The two Kapos gave us only ten minutes and they were guarding the two entrances to the barrack to watch out for any SS guard who might happen to come around unexpectedly.

Then, someone lit this lone candle and a hush fell over the barrack. I can still see this scene: the woman, sitting with the lit candle, started to read the Kold Nidre passage in the siddur. Incredibly, all of this happened in a place where, we felt, it was appropriate that instead of we asking forgiveness from God, God should be asking for forgiveness from us.

And yet, we all wanted to gather around the woman with the lit candle and siddur. She recited the Kol Nidre very slowly, so that we could repeat the words if we so desired. But we didn't. Instead, the women burst out in a cry – in unison.

Our prayer was the sound of this incredible cry of 800 women. It seemed to give us solace.

Remembering Yom Kippur was somehow a reminder of our homes, and families because this was one Holy Day that was observed even in the most assimilated homes.

Something happened to these 800 women. It was almost as if our hearts burst. I never heard either before or since then such a heart rendering sound.

Even though no one really believed the prayer would change our situation, that God would suddenly intervene – we weren't that naïve – but the opportunity to cry and remember together helped us feel better. It reminded us of our former, normal lives; alleviated our utter misery, even for a littlest while, in some inexplicable way. Even today, many decades later, every time I go to Kol Nidre services, I can't shake it.

That is the Kol Nidre I always remember.

Kol Nidre in Auschwitz – what does that story mean – why did the women – who had been abandoned by God, by humanity, because of their religion, in that very place of all places – not give up on the Kol Nidre?

Perhaps Elie Wiesel put it best (and here I am paraphrasing him slightly) when he said, *“To be a Jew is to have all the reason in the world to destroy and not to destroy. To be a Jew is to have all the reasons in the world to hate and not to hate. To be a Jew is to have all the reasons in the world to mistrust and not to mistrust. To be a Jew is to have all the reasons in the world not to have faith in language, in singing, in prayers, not in God - but to go on telling the tale, to go on carrying on the dialogue and have our own silent prayers and quarrels with God.”*

I think all of us will have diverse feelings when hearing the Kol Nidre – for some it connects us to the divine, for others with their own souls. For some of us it helps us feel a part of the hundreds of generation before us, and for yet others among us, it connects us with Jewish communities around the world, who also stand at this moment in awed silence and reverence for this hour.

But the universal message of the Kol Nidre is one of faith, of not giving up, of having the courage to look at the coming year and say, despite all of my shortcomings, I will not give up on my life, on the life of my people or in humanity. Kol Nidre, here tonight and in Auschwitz over 70 years ago, is about saying that life, my life and everyone’s else’s, has sacred and infinite meaning and preciousness. And we shall not abandon this hope, this age-old conviction, until our very last breath.

And it is with these thoughts in mind that I ask you all to rise for the Kol Nidre.

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[ol Nidre in Auschwitz - Judy Weissenberg Cohen's Story](#)

oving story about the chanting of Kol Nidre in Auschwitz told to students on the 1997 March