

Worth the Weight: Kol Nidre 5785

Rabbi Dan Slipakoff

Shana Tovah, it is good to be here with you. On this most sacred of nights. Tonight, we are reminded of the fragility of our lives and the preciousness of each moment we have. This year, we come here carrying more than just the weight of missed opportunities or strained relationships. We have faced illness, fear, and loss. We have come through moments that we were not sure we would survive—whether it was a physical danger or a crisis of the heart and conscience. When we overcome a challenge, just like when we are faced with a tragedy, we need to name it. We can label the experience as a resource and we pocket it. And then, we can tap into that resource in future times of need. Yes, the Jews have generational trauma, and we also have generational treatments.

And so I offer some of those resources tonight, beginning with prayer and gratitude. Tonight, we not only ask God for forgiveness, but we also offer up our gratitude for the very gift of being here. The *Birkat HaGomel* is a prayer we offer when we have come through danger. It is usually recited after travel, after sickness, after giving birth, after any experience that leaves us acutely aware of the line between life and death. We all stand in the threshold of a new year, uncertain of what lies ahead, but deeply grateful for the opportunity to be here together, alive and hopeful. I recognize that some might say, as individuals or a collective, that we have not yet “come through” the danger, that we are still in its midst. But we have made it this far, we have made it to this moment in time, one step further than yesterday, and that in itself is remarkable. Tonight, during our rehearsal for death, I would like to offer this blessing.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שְׁמַמְלָנוּ כָּל טוֹב

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam, sheg'ma'lanu kol tov.

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has bestowed every goodness upon us.

You can say Amen if you too are feeling grateful to be here tonight. Yes, on Kol Nidre. What better night to feel gratitude? As talmud teaches: Yom Kippur is a day of Joy because it is a day of pardon and forgiveness.¹ To err is human, to forgive is Divine. To examine our deeds, seek to improve, and to find some seemingly counterintuitive way to actually feel good about it? That's pretty Jewish. Kol Nidre itself is an admission of our imperfections, of the broken promises we made and will continue to make to ourselves and to others. And, it is a declaration that if we are given the sacred gift to be sealed once more in the Book of Life, we will keep striving for better.

Our collective perseverance, our commitment to improvement, these are not gifts to be accepted passively. This comes with a responsibility, and in our tradition, this responsibility is captured by the word *kavod*. *Kavod* comes from the root meaning “to be heavy”. And besides meaning weight, W E I G H T, the word holds the dual meanings of honor or burden. Honor and dignity - as we read in the 10 Commandments:

כָּבֹד אֶת־אָבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמְךָ, *kaved et avicha v'et imecha*,

Honor your father and your mother.² And burden – as we read, at the beginning of Isaiah's rebuke of the wayward Israelites:

Oh, you sinful nation!

עַם כְּבֹד עֲוֹן - *am keved avon*

People *laden* with iniquity!

You brood of evildoers!³

Spoiler alert - this Isaiah text leads to neither the total demise, nor the total teshuva of the Jewish people...

I have been using this *kavod* teaching with B Mitzvah students for some time now to emphasize the importance of that awesome life-cycle process. The moment celebrates and

¹ Bava Batra 121a

² Exodus 20:12

³ Isaiah 1:4

honors how much growth and hard work they have put into the endeavor of becoming B Mitzvah, an inheritor of the commandments. But it also vaults them into the new category of Jewish adulthood, which comes with a number of responsibilities which yes, might weigh heavily on their shoulders. I offer this teaching right before our B Mitzvahs wrap themselves in their tallit. Right before they carry the Torah into the gathered congregation which they will lead in prayer. Kol Nidre is traditionally the only night of the year we wear *tallitot*; and as some of us are wrapped tonight, and as some of us held up the Torah on behalf of all of us, we feel the weight, the *kavod*, of our Judaism.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks taught: “It is no small thing to be a Jew. Each of us carries with us the hopes of a hundred generations of our ancestors and the destiny of generations not yet born. We are responsible to the Jewish past for the Jewish future, and much depends on how we carry that responsibility.”⁴ We carry the names of our ancestors as we are called to Torah. We carry Torah scrolls rescued from the Holocaust. We hold space and emotions for one another. We carry collective scars and stories, laughter and tears. Our most shameful wrongdoings and our greatest triumphs. We - carry - a - lot. How does it feel to carry this weight? Like a burden? Like an honor? If we have learned anything from this past year, that choice is a false binary. It feels like both.

This past year has indeed placed a heavy burden on many American Jews. The constant presence of trauma and intensified conversations around Israel have been deeply personal and emotionally exhausting. It’s a psychosomatic experience, impacting both our minds and bodies. Israel and Palestine and antisemitism and war have been omnipresent, bringing complex emotions to the surface and often creating a sense of being caught between many competing narratives. Seeking safe harbor, and being rebuffed at every port.

Even in the midst of being in positions where we feel expected to answer for, explain, or defend matters beyond our control, many have felt disenfranchised - denied the right to

⁴ Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, “Renewing Our Days: Rosh Hashanah 5762/2001”. Available online at: <https://rabbisacks.org/archive/a-collection-of-messages-for-rosh-hashanah/>

grieve or process in places that felt safe and spaces that once felt like home. This is not a symptom or result of this side or that side, this is all of us - struggling to uphold our Jewish world.

It is exactly this time, right now, as things feel so divisive in our world,
That we must come together - even if it is for the sake of arguing. Rabbi Hillel taught:

אל תפריש מן הצבור *Al tifrosh min hatzibur*

do not separate yourself from the community.⁵

The talmud adds a baraita, an interpretation, urging us to trust the process:

“anyone who is in anguish together with the community, will merit seeing the consolation of the community.”⁶ Now is not the time to isolate, now is the time to congregate: to acknowledge pain and damages, and search for improvements.

I can only speak for myself, but antisemitism and war are not at the core of my Jewish identity, and I will not be defined by them. My Judaism is born of joy and love and light, and I refuse to surrender the good. And I know that our history overflows with examples of this same response to darkness. Each of us must strive to be a *dugma chaya*, a living example of the good in us; a counter-argument, an antidote, to the hate and ignorance that infects our world. We must bring the *ma'asim tovim*, the good acts, which flow like milk and honey within these walls out into a world which could learn a lot from the way this community strives to navigate the complexities of life.

This my friends is the other *kavod*, the other weighty responsibility. It is the glory and honor of being Jewish. It's not a weight you bear, it's a weight you lift
This is the weight you lift from the core of who you are as a Jew:

Your educated, opinionated,

⁵ Pirkei Avot 2:4

⁶ Taanit 11a

Pluralistic, moralistic,
Faith inspired, Justice wired
Kiddush making, challah baking
Time invested, battle tested,
core.

It's the coming home with a stack of good books weight
The schlepping bags of donated food weight
The loading up the car to head back to Summer Camp weight
The lifting the chair during the horah,
The lifting your grandkid to light the menorah weight

As we *pir-suma d'nisa*, we "publicize the miracle", the miracle that we are here
And we're not going anywhere - except for forward. Forward towards a more perfect world.
A more perfect world that we may never reach, but we are nonetheless obligated to work
towards.

All these weights, the burdens and the honors do not simply materialize into our lives. They are the result of the choices we make. Our Torah reading tomorrow morning comes from the end of Deuteronomy, as Moses stresses to the Israelites the importance of upholding the Covenant: Choose life—so that you and your offspring will live.⁷ If we aspire to a vibrant and enduring Jewish future, the seeds will be sown in the choices we make today. Each choice has the potential to shape our legacy, to nurture a future strengthened in our values and identity. I've recently seen studies which state that adult humans make 34,000 choices a day.⁸ Many are subconscious, but we still make thousands and thousands of conscious choices a day. Research out of Cornell says we might make 225 choices a day

⁷ Deuteronomy 30:19

⁸ Graff, Frank. "How Many Decisions Do We Make In One Day?" *PBS North Carolina*.

about food alone!⁹ Maybe not tonight and tomorrow, but actually that's a choice too.

How many of these choices are informed by your Jewish identity? How many times a day, a week, or a year do you view your decision making through a Jewish lens? These choices shape the fabric of our lives.

How do I show up for a friend?

Which causes do I support?

How do I celebrate, and mourn?

How do I explain the world to my children?

Being born and raised Jewish is one of the most significant aspects of my life. But *choosing* to live an engaged Jewish life, could be the single most important and the best decision that I have pursued. Choosing Judaism is how we find ourselves with the gift of being in this place so that when our worlds feel chaotic, we get to band together to make sense of what we can. These years we are currently living through will be remembered, retold, and re-examined by generations to come.. We have the opportunity—and responsibility—to ensure that our choices today will inspire and sustain future generations. I'll tell you how I want them to look. I want my choices to reflect resilience, courage, empathy, and pride. I want my choices to show that when the world is cruel, we can still respond with love. And when choice and freedom are threatened, that we fight to protect them.

In 12 Days, we will celebrate Simchat Torah. How beautiful! We will celebrate the end of our Torah reading and the beginning of the next cycle in one triumphant breath. And we will joyfully dance with our Torah scrolls, just as we did last year on the night of October 6th and yes, on the fateful morning of October 7th. We will sing and we will dance, and we will pass our Torahs around to anyone who would like to experience the *kavod* of carrying the scroll. To acknowledge the burden, and uplift the joy, and to share in the sacred responsibility

⁹ Ibid.

as we once more embrace the gift to begin again.

May each of us be blessed

As we carry the weight