

Kol Nidre Sermon 5781: Rabbi David J. Small
“**Ha-Ba Aleinu leTovah-May** it Approach Us for Good”

This year
Kol Nidre holds special meaning for us.

A prayer that was intended to be retrospective, asking release from all vows promises and resolutions we made and failed to keep in the past year, pivots forward and becomes *prospective*, as the prayer concludes:

Miyom kippurim zeh, ad yom kippurim haba.....

What?? “from this Yom Kippur to next Yom Kippur? We are preemptively annulling all the commitments we have yet to make? That sounds too easy. Too lenient.

But this very phrase was the subject of a struggle between rabbinic authorities that tried centuries ago to change the wording and were overruled by popular demand of the people.

The people insisted that the wording stay as it is.

From this Yom Kippur until next Yom Kippur. “***Ha-ba Aleinu LeTovah*** - May it approach us for good.”

Perhaps this insistence on a forward- looking prayer responds to a human need to approach the future with hope.

First of all, a hope that we and those we love will *be* here next year at this time.

This is a legitimate concern, made all the more pressing and poignant by the global pandemic that has taken the lives of 200,000 in this country, especially among the elderly, and those with less access to protective gear and adequate health care, including the financially insecure and people of color.

It is always true that the future is uncertain, but the certainty *of* that uncertainty has been driven home to us.

Second, the need to prospectively be forgiven for mistakes and errors we have yet to make is a way to empower us to dare to change, knowing full well that this journey is fraught with failures and mistakes.

This declaration that the vows we make and the decisions we take in the coming year, that we fail to fulfill, or succeed at be forgiven, opens the way for us to break out of the status quo.

So many things have changed for us in this pandemic. While keeping safe and being together poses countless obstacles, we have also been freed from what we usually do. There is no “normal.” We have been required to experiment, to dare to innovate and go beyond our usual approaches.

We are forced to ask ourselves: *What is essential and what can be let go?*
Where might we make changes for the better?

This very service tonight is one example. And while many of us fervently hope to be back together physically under one roof next year, we try mightily to come together spiritually and emotionally as a community now. And for those who are not able to come in person,, we have opened a door to connection that we shall not close in the future. And that is a promise. Once this pandemic ends, we will continue to provide connections for people who cannot come to synagogue in person.

Really trying to change ingrained habits or to discard settled perceptions of who we are is fraught with challenges. We write our identity with our thoughts and actions. Rewiring and reshaping ourselves takes tremendous effort over time. It requires perseverance and grit.

Kol Nidre and its sad yet insistent tune ends on a bright note.

We have seen people around us who have had to learn new roles and take on new skills.

Parents who have become primary school teachers for their kids every other week
Seniors who have become online pros with help from the younger generation
Synagogues who are learning new ways of reaching our people via online platforms and good, old-fashioned phone calls; our parking lot--a prayer space? Who knew?
Our willingness to risk breaking out of our customary patterns is a form of moral courage. This is true as individuals, and families, as a community and as a nation.

Just because this year, we pollute the air and choke the atmosphere with carbon dioxide, does not mean we have to live this way.

Just because, this year, one out of six children experiences hunger in our wealthy country does not mean we have to preserve this degree of food insecurity.

Just because, this year, some families live in fear that a major illness will wipe them out financially does not mean it has to be that way.

Just because, this year, people who look different or come from different lands feel the pain of a terrible legacy of oppression that we have yet to fully overcome does not mean we cannot turn to one another with compassion, understanding and respect.

Just because this year, people who disagree yell at each other or ignore each other does not mean that next year we cannot listen and learn.

Just because we have been settled in habits and ways we say we wish to transcend does not mean we cannot make meaningful change in the year to come.

Just because we sit on the couch when we could be out walking does not mean we cannot lace up our shoes in the coming year.

We call God, ***“Ha-Omer v’ Oseh ha-Gozer u-Mekayem”***

The One Who says and creates, Who decrees and fulfills”

The Torah teaches us that we are made in God’s image, *b’tzelem Elohim*.

This means , like the Creator, we are endowed with the power to think, speak and create.

We are able, if we will it, to decree and fulfill those decrees.

Not by magic nor supernatural agency, but by will, work, determination, failure and return, resilience and hopefulness.

Kol Nidre becomes a *Teshuvah* manifesto, our declaration that we resolve in the coming year, to improve ourselves and improve our world. And if we fall and fail, we will never stop trying. We will remain accountable. We will remain committed.

This concerted honest effort confers honor upon us. As fallible humans, we do not despair, we do not give up. And for the coming year, we aim to succeed and do better than last year.

HaBah Aleinu LeTovah, may next year approach us for good, through God’s help and blessing and through the good, honest effort we put forth. For all our foibles and failures, we humans are endowed with the capacity for learning and change.. Our rich tradition gathers us to celebrate this capacity, to hold ourselves accountable and to gird ourselves for the path ahead.

I am grateful this year for Kol Nidre. I am thankful for the opportunity to stand before you and to stand with you, as we resolve, we promise, to seize this moment and walk forward into the New Year ready to do the work we need to do to heal and improve ourselves and our world.

May God bless and aid us in our journey and let us say, “Amen.”