

Kol Nidrei - The Absolution of Vows

The words "Kol Nidre" are Aramaic for "all vows," the first words of a declaration by the congregation the evening before Yom Kippur. Not exactly a prayer, more like a legal formula, Kol Nidre annuls any personal or religious oaths or prohibitions, to preemptively avoid the sin of breaking vows made to God which cannot be or are not upheld.

"By the authority of the Court on High and by authority of the court down here, by the permission of One Who Is Everywhere and by the permission of this congregation, we hold it lawful to part with sinners.

"All vows we are likely to make, all oaths and pledges we are likely to take between this Yom Kippur and the next Yom Kippur, we publicly renounce. Let them all be relinquished and abandoned, null and void, neither firm nor established. Let our vows, pledges and oaths be considered neither vows nor pledges nor oaths."

[Some traditions change the declaration to apply only to vows made "between last Yom Kippur and this Yom Kippur."]

The leader and the congregation then say together three times, "May all the people of Israel be forgiven, including all the strangers who live in their midst, for all the people are in fault." (quoting **Numbers 15:26**.) The leader then says: "O pardon the iniquities of this people, according to Thy abundant mercy, just as Thou forgave this people ever since they left Egypt." And then the leader and congregation say together three times, "The Lord said, 'I pardon them according to your words.'" (quoting **Numbers 14:20**).

Kol Nidrei is not a prayer, it makes no requests and is not addressed to God, rather, it is a juristic declaration before the Yom Kippur prayers begin. It follows the juridical practice of requiring three men as a tribunal, the procedure beginning before sundown, and of the proclamation being announced three times.

The date of the composition of the declaration and its author are alike unknown; but it was in existence at the Geonic period (589–1038 A.D.) The earliest version is dated around 800 A.D.

- See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kol_Nidre

Vows were Allowed by Discouraged

Deuteronomy 23:21-22 - "When thou shalt vow a vow unto the LORD thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the LORD thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee. But if thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee."

Numbers 30:2 - "If a man vow a vow unto the LORD, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out

of his mouth."

Then follows a long explanation of how a father or husband can disallow the vows of his wife or daughter. In fact, there is much more about how to *disallow* a vow than about how to make one.

Ecclesiastes 5:5 - "Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay."

(NET - It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it)

Proverbs 18:21 - "Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof."

The Pharisees in Jesus' day could bind themselves to their promises in various degrees and so excuse themselves from keeping commitments they had made with lesser oaths. They could use their oaths to sound exceedingly pious and to justify themselves as deeply religious, while being in fact hypocritical.

Matthew 23:16 - "Woe unto you, ye blind guides, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor!

17 "Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold?

18 "And, Whosoever shall swear by the altar, it is nothing; but whosoever sweareth by the gift that is upon it, he is guilty.

19 "Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gift, or the altar that sanctifieth the gift?

20 "Whoso therefore shall swear by the altar, sweareth by it, and by all things thereon.

21 "And whoso shall swear by the temple, sweareth by it, and by him that dwelleth therein.

22 "And he that shall swear by heaven, sweareth by the throne of God, and by him that sitteth thereon."

To increase their reputation for piety, they could even deny their families benefits by saying they had dedicated certain items or wealth to God.

Mark 7:10-13 - "For Moses said, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death: But ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; he shall be free. And ye suffer him no more to do ought for his father or his mother Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered:

and many such like things do ye."

Jesus is emphatic:

Matthew 5:33-37: - "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord. But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'-- anything beyond this comes from the evil one."

James seems to include even our plans into this category of vows:

James 4:13-16 - "Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that. But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil."

James takes a hard line on vows, saying they lead to hypocrisy:

James 5:12 - "But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation (*hypokrisis*)."

He was probably insisting that believers not make deals with God. A child would never swear that if his father would protect him, he will do such and such. The faith of a child just assumes God's care and protection and doesn't even think in those terms.

Bargaining is a reliance on our own "works." We either try to impress God or others. Faith does not try to manipulate God.

Some pious Jews, when making any promise, declare that they do it *b'li neder*, "without a vow," that is, they are declaring that they do not wish the promise to have the status of a vow, because to break a vow is a serious offense.

A whole tractate of the Talmud (*Nedarim*) deals with vows

Some sages thought Kol Nidrei may simply serve as a reminder before the festival of Sukkot, during which time one traditionally fulfills one's vows and brings a peace offering, to keep all of one's commitments. The sin of not discharging one's vows is so great, we petition God in Kol Nidrei for forgiveness, both for those vows which went unfulfilled, but even for those which we imagine were kept. In this interpretation, Kol Nidrei doesn't so much annul vows, but rather begs God's forgiveness for not keeping them.

Vow = *neder* in Hebrew - a ban placed on something

Oath = *shavua* in Hebrew - a personal commitment to do or not do something

The difference between a *neder* and a *shevuah* is that a *neder* alters the status of the object (ie., this apple becomes forbidden to me, it is banned), while a *shevuah* alters the status of the person (ie., I am forbidden to enjoy the apple).

For us, Kol Nidrei is an opportunity to look at all the scriptures that dissuade us from making vows, then to recognize how much we make vows and have expectations in our daily life, and finally then to "annul" the vows through the traditional Kol Nidrei renunciation as part of seeing Yom Kippur fulfilled on the cross.

Negative Sayings about Vows in the Talmud

The sages were often contradictory in their opinion about the nullification of vows. There are frequent negative statements:

"Samuel said, even when one fulfills his vow, he is called wicked (B. T. Nedarim 22a, 77b) On what verse is that based? 'If you cease from making vows you will be free from sin' (Deuteronomy 23:23)

R. Nathan said, "One who vows is as though he built a high place (for idolatry) and he who fulfills it is as though he sacrifices on it (B. T. Nedarim 22a)

That is interesting, because many times our vows are driven by idolatry - "By God, I'm never gonna let THAT happen to me again!" - or like in 'Gone with the Wind' - "I'll never go hungry again!" Personal vendettas of retribution, vows to close ourselves off to others after a great personal loss, or to put up walls when we've been hurt by someone, etc. This all happens when we're worshipping in idol rather than God.

In Jesus' day, people in a dispute were tempted to utter the vow of *madirin Hana'ah* - denying someone any benefit from oneself or conversely vowing not to enjoy any benefit from the hands of the other. All social and commercial relations were cut off, and there was virtually no way to restore the relationship without incurring the sin of breaking a vow.

Illegal Private Altars

But many times we make a vow in all sincerity and for a good reason, even as a spiritual goal.

The rabbis had a saying for that situation too:

In the Talmud (Nedarim 60b), taking vows is equated with building illegal altars. For it was taught: R. Natan said: Whosoever makes a vow is as though he had built an unlawful altar (*bama*), and who fulfills it, is as though he burnt incense thereon.

Cain and Abel, Noah, and the patriarchs built altars and sacrificed to God in many places - wherever they were.

Jacob's Vow

The patriarchs also made private vows to God along with sacrifices and worship at private altars:

Genesis 28:20 - "'And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, if God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, So that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the LORD be my God: And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee."

(Jacob here is not "making a deal" but he actually says "SINCE God will be with me ...)
Nevertheless, this was a pious vow showing his devotion to the Lord, paired with building an altar and offering a sacrifice.

But after the Exodus God issued a new requirement: No more private altars.

Leviticus 17:3-4 - "If any one of the house of Israel kills an ox or a lamb or a goat in the camp, or kills it outside the camp, and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it as a gift to the LORD in front of the tabernacle of the LORD, bloodguilt shall be imputed to that man. He has shed blood, and that man shall be cut off from among his people."

This was modified in the land of Canaan until the Temple in Jerusalem had been chosen as the sole place of worship and sacrifice:

1 Kings 3:2 - "The people were sacrificing at the high places, however, because no house had yet been built for the name of the LORD."

Absolving our 'Private Altars'

The message of Kol Nidrei is that vows and oaths - which had once been allowed as expressions of piety and good will, like the private altars of the patriarchs - were now unnecessary, because worship and piety were focused on the Temple ritual - and ultimately its true meaning of the ritual as fulfilled by Messiah.

Our attempts to make a deal with God or promise things to God if he intervenes for us, or even promising things to God out of thankfulness for what He has already done for us - that's become superfluous, and therefore sinful.

The kind of vows we usually make are more like Jephthah's reckless vow in **Judges 11:29-40** where he promises God, "If you give the Ammonites into my hands, whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me when I return in triumph from the Ammonites will be the LORD's, and I will sacrifice it as a burnt offering." His young

daughter came out to meet him, and she became the sacrifice.

One reason we should not make vows is that we no longer belong to ourselves. In the same way a husband can disannul the vows of his wife, or a father of his daughter, Christ has done this for us - his Bride - as reflected in the Kol Nidrei.

Because it is built into our nature to make vows, make plans and have expectations, etc. we need to see the ritual of Kol Nidrei absolving us of them (as Christ has done by taking it all to the cross).

Another look at Jacob's vow - The Levites and Generational Debt

God had told Jacob in the dream "the land on which you lie I will 'give' to you and your descendants." Jacob then made a vow to give a tenth of the increase from the land that God promised to give him and his decedents. Jacob did not inherit the land, but his descendants did. God fulfilled his vow to Jacob by giving the land to his "children." And Jacob's vow is paid by them in the Promised Land, through the requirement for the tithe in the Law. So a vow given by one man was required from his future generations.

Adam Clarke's Commentary on the passage of Genesis 28 states this, "Jacob seems to make this vow rather for his posterity than for himself, as we may learn from **Genesis 28:13-15**; for he particularly refers to the promises which God had made to him, which concerned the multiplication of his offspring, and their establishment in that land. If, then, God shall fulfill these promises, he binds his posterity to build God a house, and to devote for the maintenance of his worship the tenth of all their earthly goods. In fact, his taking refuge with Laban was probably a type of the sojourning of his descendants in Egypt, his persecution, so as to be obliged to depart from Laban, the bad treatment of his posterity by the Egyptians, his rescue from death, preservation on his journey, re-establishment in his own country, &c., were all typical of the exodus of his descendants, their travels in the desert, and establishment in the promised land, where they built a house to God, and where, for the support and maintenance of the pure worship of God, they gave to the priests and Levites the tenth of all their worldly produce. If all this be understood as referring to Jacob only, the Scripture gives us no information how he performed his vow."

Rabbi Moshe Alshich, renowned as one of the great sermonizers of the Jewish world and a biblical commentator in the 16th century, interprets the passage in Jacob's vow. His works which were translated by, Yitzchak Hirshfeld, Avraham Braud in 2006 in their work titled, "The Book of Mishlei" wrote, "Scripture says, Jacob vowed a vow to say. . .All that you give me I will doubly tithe to You (**Genesis 28:20,22**). Our sages say (midrash Bereshith Rabbah 70:1) that with these words Jacob was instructing future generations to pledge money to charity in times of distress the word אָמַר, to say, in the clause, "Jacob vowed a vow to say," indicates that Jacob had something to say to others, namely, he wanted to teach all his descendants the importance of tithing to charity." (p.385)

The Book of Jubilees (circa 2nd century) tells a similar story, "And Levi discharged the priestly office at Bethel before Jacob his father in preference to his ten brothers, and he was a priest there, and Jacob gave his vow: thus he tithed again the tithe to the Lord and sanctified it, and it became holy unto Him. And for this reason it is ordained on the heavenly tables as a law for the tithing again the tithe to eat before the Lord from year to year, in the place where it is chosen that His name should dwell, and to this law there is no limit of days for ever."

This refers to **Deuteronomy 14:23** - "And thou shalt eat before the LORD thy God, in the place which he shall choose to place his name there, the tithe of thy corn, of thy wine, and of thine oil, and the firstlings of thy herds and of thy flocks; that thou mayest learn to fear the LORD thy God always."

The Levites had "no inheritance in the land" but instead lived off of the tithes of the other tribes, as vowed by Jacob.

A Related Question: So Is Tithing Still Valid?

A careful study of the relationship of tithing to vows shows why tithing is not a binding practice for New Testament churches

- Tithing was initiated from a personal vow in response to God's covenant with Israel not the New Covenant with the Church

- The tithe was to be taken from the increase of the land of Israel, and from nowhere else

Jacob offered to give God a tenth of the gifts God promised in his dream, not from income or precious metals

- Jacob's vow was voluntary and accepted by God proving that tithing was not a requirement prior to the law.

- If tithing is required because it was 400 years prior to the Mosaic law, then points 1-4 are just as relevant since they were established at the same time

-- From <http://www.tithing.com/blog/jacobs-tithing-vow/>

Leviticus 27 is all about how to manage your vows. It speaks as if vows are a regular issue, but nowhere endorses the idea.

If a vow was made and you wished to redeem it, you were to add one-fifth to it (Leviticus 27:13,15,19,27 - also for tithes, 31). But what if you failed to fulfill your vow?

Deeper meaning of Kol Nidrei

A ritual called "*Hatarat Nedarim*" is the formal, legal annulment of vows conducted in front of a panel of learned men before Rosh Hashanah and before Yom Kippur - in *addition* to Kol Nidrei. Hence, the formal legal procedure of *Hatarat Nedarim*, already performed before the holiday, is not what is going on in the synagogue in the Kol Nidre. If it were, that would be redundant.

The answer may be that Kol Nidrei covers the vows of the community as a whole, while the *Hatarat Nedarim* can only annul personal vows.

Kol Nidre is a joyful emotional release for the community as it begins the long liturgies marking Yom Kippur.

At the end of the Yom Kippur, as part of the final prayers of repentance, *Neilah* marks the fifth *Amidah* of the Day of Atonement. It focuses on the 13 attributes of God:

"Lord, Lord, God, Compassionate, with loving kindness, patient, with kindness and truth; keeper of mercy for thousands, forgiver of iniquity, transgression and sin; clearing us. Forgive our iniquity and sin and accept us (cf. **Exodus 34:6–7**)"

Rabbi Amitai ben Shepatiah (10th cent. Italy) presented in his prayer poem called the *Ezkerah Elohim ve-Ehemayah* ("Lord I remember Thee and am sore amazed"), a direct appeal to one of the divine attributes -Compassion - to intercede for us.

"Attribute of compassion, pour upon us
In the presence of your creator, cast our supplications
For the sake of your people, request compassion
For every heart has pain and every mind is ill."

Other rabbis have protested that to appeal to an attribute of God like Compassion as a separate being is a "deviation from strict Halakhah." But those who defend it say the emotional depths uncovered by the struggles toward repentance at Yom Kippur require release by marking out Compassion as the pathway to God's mercy. Then the community - knowing it has received atonement and forgiveness from God for their failure to keep vows - can also forgive itself.

This recalls the New Testament description of Christ interceding on our behalf:

Romans 8:34-35 - "Who is there to condemn us? For Christ Jesus, who died, and more than that was raised to life, is at the right hand of God — and He is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"

"Who is there to condemn us?" - Satan is powerless to condemn on Yom Kippur! And if so, so are we.

In fact, when one makes a vow, he also calls down a curse upon himself (if he fails to fulfill the vow).

Although vows would usually refer to God - "May God strike me down if..." the original idea was that Satan does God's dirty work (as seen in the book of Job's heavenly court gathering).

In the context of protection against curses and magical spells, words for "vow" "prohibitive vow" and "oath" mean "curse" or "spell" in magic incantation texts and in the Babylonian Talmud.

'alah for instance means both an oath and a curse in Hebrew.

[See Encyclopedia Judaica on the term "Oath" — <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/oath>]

Isaiah 65:16 - See the contrast between "one who invokes a blessing on himself" (*mitbarekh*) and "one who swears" (*shaba* - from sabbath - seven - to swear - i.e., one who invokes a curse upon himself).

The Curse of the Law

God placed a curse on any in Israel who would not obey his commands:

(Details of this curse are given in **Deuteronomy 28:15-68**)

Galatians 3:10 - "For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them."

Paul then explains how this has been resolved:

Galatians 3:13 - "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree:"

But what about the curses we created and voluntarily brought upon ourselves through the making of a vow or an oath? There seems no legal way to resolve this.

The answer is that we agree as a community on Kol Nidrei that our vows were not vows, that they never existed and are "of none effect," because as the Bride of Christ, our Husband has disannulled them for us.

The wording of the Kol Nidrei ceremony recalls that of **Numbers 30:8** - "But if her husband disallowed her on the day that he heard it; then he shall make her vow which she vowed, and that which she uttered with her lips, wherewith she bound her soul, of none effect: and the LORD shall forgive her."

All this is included in Christ's sacrifice and intercession, foreshadowed in the rituals of Yom Kippur.

Just as the scapegoat carried away sin to "Azazel" in the wilderness, vows (which are actually curses) had to be nullified by a stronger incantation that plucked them out by the root as if they had never existed.

This is the Kol Nidrei ritual. It points to Christ

--See "Kol Nidrei: Its Origin, Development and Significance" by Stuart Weinberg Gershon

The Decrees that Stood Against Us

One clue as to how the Kol Nidrei and Yom Kippur atonement works is that the participants are all wearing white robes, like shrouds of the dead. We reckon ourselves as dead...buried in baptism.

Curses cannot find their way to someone already dead.

Colossians 2:13-15 - "Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it."

Christ took the "The decrees that stood against us" on the cross - This is more than just the Law's demands, but He also took the legal demands of vows and oaths we created, including the curses generated by unfulfilled oaths.