

Kol Nidrei

By: Cantor Paul Kowarsky

The entire Kol Nidrei ritual is absolutely fascinating. No one has been able to determine just where and when Kol Nidrei originated and under what special circumstances, if any. We do not know who the author was, whether the original language was Hebrew or Aramaic, nor exactly when or how its long struggle for acceptance into the Yom Kippur liturgy was won. There are many theories, myths and legends woven around both the text and the melody.

Tradition has it that the Kol Nidrei is chanted by the Ashkenazim, in a melody of tremendous spiritual impact. However, few of the millions who experience this impact every year, are aware of the paradoxical and controversial history of Kol Nidrei.

Kol Nidrei is not a prayer. It is a legal formula for the annulment of certain types of vows. The name of G-d is not even mentioned in Kol Nidrei. The language is a mixture of Aramaic and Hebrew. The style is prosaic but the wording is somewhat technical. Moreover, although Kol Nidrei has become virtually synonymous with Yom Kippur, it is not, strictly speaking, part of the Yom Kippur Liturgy. It is an introductory declaration, which must be recited before the sunset. This declaration, as it were, ushers in Yom Kippur.

Why the whole ritual for the dispensation of vows could have, in the first instance, been associated with Yom Kippur, is strange. The Talmud mentions that he who wants his future vows to be null and void, should declare this on Rosh Hashanah, not Yom Kippur. In fact, the entire practice of annulling vows was attacked and condemned by Talmudic scholars through the centuries. This is really a separate subject for study.

In the text of Kol Nidrei, the verbs are all in the past tense - "all oaths, vows,..." which we have "taken, made, given,..." (in the past) shall be rendered null and void. But the time period is "from this Yom Kippur until the next." - Total grammatical disorder is clearly evident.

Besides Jewish scholars and teachers who opposed the Kol Nidrei because of its purported annulment of vows, there was also opposition from Christians, who condemned the Jews because of the Kol Nidrei - Why? Jews, said the Christians, are permitted by their religion to perjure themselves in their dealings with Christians, and then on the holiest of nights - on Yom Kippur, they may clear their consciences merely by reciting the Kol Nidrei.

The Jewish defence of Kol Nidrei has always been, however, that the declaration of annulment applies only to vows relating to man's relationship with G-d, and not between man and man.

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Kol Nidrei was also one of the early targets of the Reform movement, which arose in the 19th Century in Germany. In 1844, the first Conference of Reform leaders decided to expunge the ancient ritual entirely from the Yom Kippur liturgy. However, in the most recent editions of the Reform Prayer books, Kol Nidrei has been restored with its full text.

Perhaps the main task of the Chazan is to render the liturgy more meaningful through song and music. It is considered vulgar to use a melody which has no integral relationship to the text, merely to introduce a lovely tune.

Kol Nidrei is itself the outstanding exception to that rule. It is the melody that stands out, that touches the heart, that moves the Congregation. The words add absolutely nothing to the mystical, spiritual attraction of the melody. As we have seen, the words really constitute a dry, legal formula, which need careful thought and interpretation to make them meaningful. The strength and endurance of the Kol Nidrei melody comes from an association with poignant moments in the Jewish past, and draws upon our memories, our longings and our hopes as Jews.

Let me mention some of the legends and theories associated with the origin of Kol Nidrei.

According to one theory, the text of the Kol Nidrei originated in Spain during the 15th Century, when the Marranos were asking for dispensation for having taken vows of faithfulness to Christianity in order to spare their lives. This theory is not sound - a) because we know that the text was already in use in the 8th Century and b) because many Sephardi communities, which were much closer to the Spanish Jewish Tradition than were the Ashkenazi, European Jews, did not recite Kol Nidrei at all.

There is another legend (also involving the Marranos) which proposes that the Kol Nidrei melody originated as a series of phrases used as a code for Marranos. When a Marrano attempted to enter one of the secret Yom Kippur services, he was made to pass from one watchman to another. He would chant a phrase, and would receive the next phrase in response. He would then be directed to the next watchman until he reached the actual service and joined his fellow Marranos, who were risking their lives to be Jews again on Yom Kippur.

This is an attractive story - but it has failed to win much support. Why? Even in the Sephardi communities where Kol Nidrei is chanted now, the melody used is not our traditional Ashkenazi melody. In fact there are two current Sephardic melodies used for chanting the Kol Nidrei; one is for the Western and the other for the Oriental communities. Both melodies are based on the S'lichah mode.

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So the history of the Kol Nidrei melody is as obscure as that of the words. A.Z. Idelsohn, the great Jewish Musicologist, in his book, "Jewish Music", suggests that the musical phraseology of Kol Nidrei can be traced to the Gregorian Chants (the Catholic liturgical chants codified by Pope Gregory I in the 7th Century), and to the Minnesingers (the medieval German poet-musicians who were active from 12th to 15th Centuries).

Since Kol Nidrei is neither a prayer nor a hymn, it is difficult, from a liturgical point of view, to understand why such an elaborate chant should have been provided for it in the first place. Idelsohn suggests that perhaps the Chazanim were obliged to improvise a melody because of certain legalistic and practical considerations: the Chazanim had to begin Kol Nidrei while it was still daylight, and prolong its recitation until sunset; moreover, in order to enable the late-comers among the Congregation to hear Kol Nidrei, they would have to repeat it several times. In the course of time an elaborate melody of 14 motifs evolved.

It is interesting to note that the Kol Nidrei melody has found its way into the works of such non-Jewish composers as Beethoven (the penultimate movement of the G minor Quartet, opus 131, and the first movement of the Trio, opus 9, No. 3). There is also the well known cello concerto by Max Bruch entitled "Kol Nidrei".

In traditional Congregations, the Kol Nidrei is sung 3 times, The oldest written version of the Ashkenazi melody is by Ahron Beer from the 17th Century. There are many musical settings using the traditional melodic pattern as a base. Perhaps the most popular and simplistic is the setting by Henry Russoto (early 20th Century). Well-known other musical versions are by Louis Lewandowski, Max Helfman and Leib Glantz.

The melody is begun very softly like one who hesitates to enter the presence, and ask something of a King. Gradually the volume increases, as we become more confident. Each time the Kol Nidrei is sung, therefore, it is sung louder. In some traditions, they start singing the Kol Nidrei in one key the first time. Then they go up 1/2 step for the second time, and still another 1/2 step up the third time.

Whatever the origin of the Kol Nidrei melody may be, it is impossible to explain the melody's mystical attraction. This is the Jewish song par-excellence, and it achieves its grand status without any help from the text.