Rabbi Nathan Kamesar

Kol Nidre, 5779

Shanah Tovah, everyone.

Here we are at Kol Nidre. Perhaps the most sacred time of the Jewish year. A time when our worldly cares are set aside; when we are supposed to be locked in to this moment; when the primary concept on our mind should be atonement; when even our physical needs – eating, drinking, bathing – are no longer relevant. This moment, right now, is the height of the Jewish spiritual year.

And yet, what is this moment based on? What is the cornerstone of tonight’s liturgy? The Kol Nidre prayer, the foundation of tonight’s service, and arguably the foundation of the Yom Kippur liturgy as a whole, is a bit strange: “Every vow we have vowed,” it says, “every promise we’ve made, from the present Yom Kippur until the next, we renounce all those vows, promises, and obligations; we are released from them; they are erased and abolished; they have no binding force or effect. Our vows are not vows,” it says, “our oaths are not oaths, our promises are not promises.”

So the foundation of the spiritual year is a strange renunciation of vows. Hmm.

The prayer has been controversial for centuries for a number of reasons. Some past communal leaders believed it gave our neighbors reason to be skeptical of us; if we renounced all future vows, they believed, what good would our word appear in business or in interpersonal dealings?

Others thought it smacked of superstition – an incantation we chanted as if to invoke a spell. We’re an enlightened people, these leaders thought. We don’t believe in charms or magic formulas. Are we sure we should be uttering this?
Others claim that it doesn’t even make sense. The verb tenses seem to change indiscriminately from clause to clause. All the vows we have vowed, from now until next year. The vows we have vowed, in the coming year. To them, the language was inscrutable, never mind the underlying meaning.

For centuries, Jewish leaders have pushed to deemphasize, and some altogether eliminate, this prayer from our service.

One such leader was Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, the co-founder of the Reconstructionist Movement, one of the most influential Jewish voices of the 20th century, and in some ways, the godfather of this synagogue, given his influence on the rabbis who have come through these doors. Kaplan was big on making sure our prayers said what we meant. That we didn’t say something in the Hebrew that we didn’t actually believe in the English, simply for sentimental reasons.

So he took the Kol Nidre prayer out of the mahzor, out of the High Holiday prayer book, at his progressive congregation on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. And how did his congregants respond? A self-styled intellectual congregation, not totally unlike this one, considering themselves at the forefront of Jewish innovation and progress?

Did they embrace his leadership with open arms, proud of their new pathway forward, say, Rabbi Kaplan, you’re right, thank you for presenting us with this enlightened new way of looking at our liturgy?

In short, no. They didn’t. They revolted. Demanded the Kol Nidre prayer be put back in the following year.

In fact, his own mother wrote him a letter, scolding him. With the subtlety and nuance that only a Jewish mother can muster, she wrote as follows. Mordechai, she wrote:
“You are destroying Judaism. Do you understand what you are doing to yourself?” She continued. “I will not tell you what you are doing to me and maybe to your father in his grave.” These are her actual words. “I am too weak now; I cannot write more. Be well and happy with your family.” Signed, (not love) “Your mother.”

So, where did Kaplan go wrong? Was he not just doing what he had promised the people? Developing a Judaism that was consistent with their 20th century intellectual, universalistic values?

Kaplan, like many rabbis and cantors before him, underestimated the power of a simple feature of the Jewish experience that no amount of reasoning could challenge, a feature that I’m going to talk to you about tonight: Memory. Nostalgia.

The power of the people’s longing for the Kol Nidre prayer transcended its technical meaning. Throughout the ages, it has been so. It has held immense meaning for us, irrespective of its literal translation. Theodor Reik, a student of Sigmund Freud, described being overcome upon hearing the Kol Nidre melody played on a cello. “A distinct association grew with the recurrence of the melody,” he said. “I saw myself as a child and remembered that my holidays over a period of years had been spent in a little Hungarian town.” When he heard the melody of Kol Nidre, he said, “there grew into my mind the picture of the synagogue, people in white robes, moving their bodies rhythmically in prayer; and of my grandfather at my side.” “I remember,” he said, “the visible signs of contrition delivered by all those serious people, and their emotional participation in the text, and how I, child as I was, had been carried away by that irresistible wave of feeling.”

Hearing the melody transported him back in time. Carried him off to a place he once knew. Allowed him to revisit days that had since passed him by.
This is nostalgia, the power of memory.

We think of nostalgia as being associated with happiness. “A sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past,” the dictionary definition says, “typically,” it continues, “for a period or place with happy personal associations.”

But as those of you who watched the television show Mad Men know, nostalgia means something quite different. Nostalgia comes from the Greek words, nostos algos. Nostos means “return home” and algos means “pain.” So it’s in fact the pain, the ache, associated with returning. Nostalgia refers to the subtle pain, that twinge in our hearts we feel when certain memories are invoked; the bittersweet longing for those inherently ephemeral moments. Trying to grasp our arms around those moments and coming up just short.

Mad Men was based on the men and women who worked for the advertising agencies of Madison Avenue in the 50s and 60s, and in a particularly poignant episode, our reluctant protagonist, the antihero Don Draper, is hired to develop an advertising campaign for Kodak, the photography company. In particular, he’s hired to develop a campaign for the product then known as the wheel – that circular device most of us are familiar with, where you place slide images in the many slots of the contraption, and it projects the images and creates slideshows. You click, the device rotates, next slide.

The Kodak executives are concerned because they don’t think their technology is very snazzy or impressive, and they believe something needs to be shiny and new to sell.

“New is one way to go,” Don Draper says to them. “But perhaps a deeper bond,” he says, “is the one created through the power of nostalgia.” “It’s delicate,” he continues, “but potent.”
He proceeds to use the wheel to show the Kodak executives a slideshow of his own family – his two children, climbing a tree; him resting his head on his pregnant wife’s stomach; he and his wife smiling, biting opposite ends of a hot dog. This device isn’t about new, he tells them. It’s not a spaceship. He clicks back to his newborn infant. It’s a time machine.

“It goes backwards and forwards,” he says. “It takes us to a place we ache to go again.” “It’s not called the wheel,” he says, clicking to a picture of his daughter shrieking with joy on his shoulders. “It’s called the carousel. It lets us travel the way a child travels. Around and around and back home again to a place where we know we are loved.”

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Jewish tradition is no stranger to nostalgia, to memory – to the time machine evoked by our experiences, our rituals, and our traditions.

The Passover Seder is nothing if not a vehicle through which we remember the past. This includes our collective pasts as a people – the matzah we eat, evoking the bread eaten by our hurried ancestors; the maror, bitter herbs, evoking the bitterness of slavery; the lamb shank, that visceral reminder of the blood dripping from our doorposts – the Passover Seder is a vehicle for transmitting our collective memory, and the Seder is a vehicle for putting us in touch with our individual memories, our personal, our human memories.

The Seder itself is designed for children: items to touch, to taste, to smell, to hear, to grab our attention. The Seder is built not only to remind us of who we were as a people, to bring us back to our roots, but to remind us who we are, who we were, as individuals – what it felt like to be a child. When we dip our finger in the cold wine, dropping it on our
plate, staining the matzah and hardboiled egg, making them soggy, when we do this, we are, potentially, transported back to our childhood, when the same exact thing happened. When, on Hanukkah, we gather around the candles, see the lights flickering in the window, the smell of latkes wafting from the kitchen, some of us are transported back to our youth. And, tonight, Kol Nidre, these somber hymns, these haunting melodies, they have the power to pierce our souls, to take us back to previous sanctuaries, of years ago, perhaps here, perhaps somewhere else. The rhythm of the Jewish year is essentially booby trapped with stops that take us back to our childhood, that take us back to days gone by.

Now, of course, not all of us are Jewish or grew up Jewish, and even if we did, not all of us can tap into the same memories. We all have our own. So before we proceed, I’d like us to take a moment, just a short moment, for each of us to access a memory – a feeling of nostalgia. We’re going to be talking about this power, the power of nostalgia, and I want us to feel it, to tap into it. So, if you can, if you’re able, I want you to transport yourself back in time, just for a moment, to a time you long for. A smell, a sound, a place, an image – something that brings you back to a good place you haven’t visited in a while. A sense of longing. Just for a moment.

This transportation, being transported back in time, is a central feature of the Jewish experience.

Judaism is in many ways about being transformed. Transformed into being the best version of ourselves, the holiest versions of ourselves. You shall be holy, for I, Adonai your God, am holy, our Torah says. Well, one of the primary Jewish means of achieving this transformation, this holiness, is nostalgia, being transported back in time.
As we said, nostalgia comes from the word nostos, return. Remember, too, that we are in the Jewish season of t’shuvah. T’shuvah is often translated as repentance – we’re in the season of repentance where we make atonement for our sins – but t’shuvah really means something much more fundamental than that. T’shuvah literally means returning. Going back in time.

We invoke this Jewish notion of returning, of t’shuvah, every time we place the Torah back in the Ark. When we do so, we chant a series of words from the biblical Book of Lamentations that includes various forms of the word, t’shuvah. We sing Hashiveinu Adonai Elekha v’nashuvah, hadesh yameinu k’kedem. Return us, these words say. Return us O adonai, to You, and let us return. Renew our days as of old.

This is one way the Jewish tool of nostalgia, of t’shuvah, works. Renew our days as of old. Traditional Judaism talks about this meaning returning to Temple times, but it can also mean returning us to our own days of old, returning us to the sweetness of youth. “Weren’t things better in our childhoods?” we sometimes tell ourselves. “When we were, perhaps, our kindest selves, our most innocent selves? Our most curious selves, our most easily-awed selves?” How wonderful is it when we see children amazed by their first encounter with certain features of the universe? Their first encounter with an animal, their first encounter with a flower, or a candle, or Elmo – how wonderful when we see the world through a child’s eyes? Isn’t this what we’re all after, in some sense?

Take us back, we say; help us return. Renew our days as of old. Help us experience that awe we once knew, so profoundly.

T’shuvah, returning in time, hearing the music of Yom Kippur, dipping our finger in the cold wine at the Passover Seder, has the capacity to transport us back, to rejuvenate us,
to remind us of the strong, true foundation from which we are built. “Take us back to first principles,” we are saying. If everything we need to know we learned in kindergarten, then t’shuvah, nostalgia, returning, helps us remember that which is most important in life – treat others as we wish to be treated. Love Adonai your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your might, our ancestors said; remember your interconnectedness with others. T’shuvah is about returning to what matters most.

On the other hand – and there is always another hand – just as our tradition sometimes brings us back to the past in order to transform us, dipping us in the pool of waters that rejuvenate us; just as our tradition sometimes bring us back to the past in order to transform us, sometimes it is up to us to go back to the past in order to transform it. Sometimes, rather than the past transforming us, we need to transform the past.

So, how do we do this, you ask? Isn’t it true that you can’t change the past? That what’s done is done?

Not according to Jewish tradition. Jewish tradition, to borrow from Faulkner, says that the past isn’t dead. It’s not even past.

The ancient rabbis taught that God created t’shuvah, the act of repenting, returning, before God even created the world. Thus, as framed by scholar Ehud Luz, the rabbis taught that t’shuvah, returning, is not subject to the usual order of time. That t’shuvah, repentance-returning, assumes the possibility of reversing the past.

What do they mean?

Well, it’s the season of repentance. Part of what the rabbis seem to be talking about is that when we engage in a process of revisiting our past actions that weigh us down, when we scrutinize our missteps, we have the opportunity to transform these moments –
transform them not simply into errors that we apologize for and then pretend never happened, but into life altering moments that set us on new, better trajectories.

What might this look like?

For the rabbis, perhaps, this was about inviting the Divine into this journey back in time with them. Following their lead, I might say, “Av harahamim. Merciful parent. I know you know who I am. I know you made me, I know you fashioned me, flaws and all. Help me,” I might say. “Help me understand your intentions for me, help me learn from past mistakes, help me build a foundation from my past, so that my unique journey serves not to weigh me down, but to buoy me. Help me view my past, my mistakes, not as insurmountable barriers that prevent me from reaching my fullest potential, but as opportunities to grow closer to You, to be my best self.”

We thus effectively change the memory. No longer does whatever this moment was burden us with despair; instead it serves as an inflection point. It causes us to see a relationship in a new light; it leads to new, better habits; it gives us better insight into how the universe operates. Of course, we can’t eliminate the hurt we caused another person. That remains and maybe always will. But we can learn from it. We can do better next time. We engage with the memory in a way that transforms the moment, and thereby transforms ourselves.

But the time travel the rabbis were referring to, I believe, was not simply about the harms we meted out. The time travel, the t’shuvah, the rabbis were referring to, I believe, was also about the harms we experienced, in our own lives.

Remember that the algia in nostalgia – algos – means pain. Now, is the pain being referenced, the pain of longing for the past, for happier sweeter times? That yearning, that
aching to return, as we suggested earlier? Or do we experience that subtle pain, when we have a brush with a memory, because the past is indeed painful? Do we experience it because buried in our past we all have moments of hurt, moments of loss, moments of fear? Is the algos there, the feeling of pain that is present when looking back, because, subtly, it brings up those moments when we first felt disappointment, shame, or pain?

When I think about the twinge in my heart that comes from some of these High Holy Day melodies – aseh imanu tz’daka ve’hesed – when I think about the twinge in my heart that comes from some of these melodies, sometimes I wonder whether that ache is a longing or whether it is a recoiling that I am experiencing.

We know that the painful memories we experience contribute to who we are as human beings. We have neuroses, aftereffects that play out in various ways. We are insecure, we’re overconfident; we’re hyper defensive, we succumb too easily to criticism; we’re territorial; we’re selfish; we’re stubborn; we’re aggressive; we’re manipulative; we’re self-loathing.

These experiences are often about our pasts. Often, these traits were developed years ago as coping mechanisms. Survival strategies. We needed to protect ourselves from our environment for various reasons, and so we developed certain prickly exteriors to fend-off would be threats.

I’ll speak for myself. I’ve often made reference to my father’s sudden death at age 35, my current age. I was 7 then, one of my sisters was four, the other not even a month old. The tremors from that event still reverberate. But perhaps more formative than that sudden loss was its aftermath. Remarriage, divorce, remarriage, separation. Three schools
in four years. Multiple planned moves across the country. Instability was our watchword; uncertainty and disruption were always in the air.

Today, things are different. I just married a beautiful, brilliant woman, the love of my life. In a couple of weeks, we'll be moving into our first house together. I have a job that I love, working with you, a warm, kind-hearted community. I have the support of not one but two generous families. I am truly blessed.

And yet, those who know me well, know that I have an incredibly hard time appreciating these gifts. They know I can be what they call hypervigilant, always scanning the horizon, concerned about potential threats and pitfalls, rarely settled, rarely able to rest in the moment. Disruption has been what I've always known; and I still anticipate it.

Our memories, it should go without saying, hold immense power over us, particularly when we haven't done the work, as scholar Bessel van der Kolk puts it, of integrating these memories into the ongoing flow of our lives. Our memories hold immense power over us, particularly when we assume that just because things happened a certain way when we were young, that things will always play out that way. They hold immense power over us when we fail to understand that all important, holy insight: that was then; this is now.

Your journey doesn't have to look like mine for you to have certain stories, certain narratives still recurring, over and over in your life. Maybe you were in a relationship where the love was never secure, always being withheld; now you seek relationships that play out the same way, without even realizing it. Maybe your household growing up was marked by strife, yelling; now, a calm home unsettles you. Maybe as a child you never received appreciation or validation; now your appetite for it is insatiable.
Here again, the Jewish concept of time travel, of t’shuvah, of returning, serves you. In this instance, the function of t’shuvah, the function of returning to the past, the nostos algos, is about recognition. Understanding what it is that is weighing you down, that is contributing to your habits, your choices. Understanding that just because your life was one way early on, just because being constantly on edge served you well then, doesn’t mean it does so now. Here, teshuvah, here time travel, is about integrating the memory into the flow of your life, wrestling with the memory so that it does not dominate your existence, reminding yourself of that same truth: that was then; this is now.

I don’t pretend to assert that that will be the end of your journey. We need many resources to transform, to buttress our resiliency: we need a supportive loving community, family and friends, diet and exercise, perhaps a religious tradition that helps keep us grounded and curious. There is no simple solution to changing habits and improving choices. To transforming ourselves.

But what we do know is that engaging with memory is a central element of being Jewish and of being human. Engaging with our good memories – the soft moments of childhood, of innocence, of celebrating holidays around lit candles, sweet melodies, transporting us to a nourishing time and place – engaging with these memories buoy us, steels our reserves for the future.

And engaging with our challenging ones – those that hold us back, those that tie us to narratives that are no longer relevant, narratives that always seem to have answers, but answers that are in fact for different moments, different questions than today’s – engaging with these memories, ideally, helps diminish their power over us, helps transform us, helps clear the way forward and set us on a new trajectory.
Kol Nidre, we sing, every vow we have vowed and will vow. Whether or not it makes sense, our memories enervate us, transform us, power us on our way. May it always be so.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah.