

The Power of Humility

Shana Tova.

In the final season of Larry David's comedy series *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Larry promises his good friends Jeff and Suzy Garland that he will show up for their daughter's wedding; he even promises to offer a toast. They remind him over and over in the weeks leading up to the big day to not forget about it.

But, of course, the day comes, and he completely forgets about the wedding. After a paint gun duel against *Hamilton* creator Lin Manuel Miranda, Larry realizes what he has done.

But of course, Larry cannot admit his mistake. Instead, he pulls out the card of a young actor he met and asks her to be his "stand in." She stands before the wedding party, awkwardly reading Larry's distinctive words to the chagrin of everybody present. Suzy is furious.

Perhaps more angry than if Larry simply didn't show. Sending an actor to read his toast only adds insult to injury; it highlights just how much he has let down his friends. It demonstrates that he could not admit he broke his word. He does not understand the hurt he has caused them by not being there, by thinking that sending an actor in his place makes everything okay.

Larry demonstrates what many of us do on a daily basis, in a much less dramatic way: deny when we mess up.

It can be very hard to admit that you made a mistake. That you did not live up to your word. That you did not fulfill your promise. But by admitting our mistakes, we learn to not define ourselves by our past actions. We learn that we are more than them. That we can act differently in the future. That we can grow and change.

That is something Larry David doesn't do very well. Nor do most of us, most of the time. Yet it is something we can strive for, and achieve, this High Holiday season.

And the first step is to admit we messed up. The first thing we did this evening, the opening act to this holiest day of the year, is to admit we do not always live up to our word. We began with Kol Nidrei, an ancient legal formula which releases us from the vows we are unable to fulfill.

Kol Nidrei applies only to promises between us and God. But it offers us a model for how to move beyond our shortcomings, to undertake the process of teshuvah, of personal return, on these holy days, and every day. It teaches us that the process begins by admitting where we have fallen short, where we have made mistakes, but that we are not our mistakes, and that we can grow by taking a second chance.

We don't know where Kol Nidrei came from, or how it rose to such prominence in our liturgy. For centuries Kol Nidrei was a renegade ritual opposed by the rabbis of the time, since Judaism already possessed a legal mechanism to release people from their vows. Hatarat nedarim. One stands before a bet din of three people, who annul your vow if you regret having made it.

Why, then, proclaim Kol Nidrei, if not to annul vows? What are we to make of the drama, the music, the pomp and circumstance of this ritual? What does it all represent?

I believe that the pomp and circumstance is exactly the point. Kol Nidrei is meant to be a grand gesture, a magnificent tribute... to admitting we were wrong. To learning from the mistakes we make with our words, and our actions. To being humble. To being a human being.

That is a message we don't often hear in our achievement oriented society. We are told we must be smarter, stronger, better than those around us to succeed. Our culture holds up perfect bodies and the A+ grade; and we try our best to fit that mold. Though we all have skeletons in our closet and imperfections inside and out, we try our best to hide them. Including, especially, our moral ones. We don't like to admit we made promises we have not kept. That we have let others, and ourselves down.

Dena Weiss of the Hadar Institute in New York shared that every year she would make a list of what she hoped to change this new year. One year, in her mahzor, she discovered a list from a previous year, only to find that it was identical to her current one. Well, the items were listed in a different order.

Every year we make promises to others, to God, and to ourselves, that we find ourselves unable to fulfill. Kol Nidrei does not release us from all of our promises, but it does tell us where to start, and

that is to be honest about what we can, and cannot do. To know that we may not fulfill all our promises, as hard as we may try. To be realistic about where our capacities lie this new year.

This begins by admitting how we have fallen short of our word this last year to others and to ourselves. How we let down those we care about. Including ourselves.

It can be hard and painful to do so, because it makes us feel vulnerable, and less than those around us. We see people doing just fine all around us- especially on social media. We hold a mirror to ourselves, and know we wouldn't put what we see on Facebook.

The power of Kol Nidrei is that it sets the tone that here, today, it is okay to post that we have fallen short. No, it more than okay. It is admirable. It is respectable, as respectable, as admirable, as

grand as Kol Nidrei itself, because it is the first step toward change.

Before we proclaim Kol Nidrei, we declare that by the authority of the heavenly and earthly courts, we grant permission to pray with those who have transgressed. As Rabbi Wise has taught, that is all of us. We give ourselves permission to be open, for once, that we have transgressed. To be open about how imperfect we are.

Because it is only by doing that that we learn to be better, to grow, and to change.

Kol Nidrei teaches us first and foremost that we- our words and our actions, are all works in progress. We make mistakes, but we are not our mistakes. We are all on a journey to becoming better than we were before, better versions of ourselves. And Kol Nidrei teaches us how we get there.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes in the Koren Mahzor that the release from vows at Kol Nidrei models how we are released from sin during the high holiday season. Kol Nidrei models how teshuvah works, how we return to who we are meant to be.

How so? Because Kol Nidrei and teshuvah run on the same fuel and are powered by the same engine, and that engine is regret. Regret is a gift, a truly wonderful one we all have. It empowers us to shift course in life. Sincere regret, or harata, works wonders, Rabbi Sacks notes. It transforms our future by changing our past. It removes the intention in our sins.

We can understand how the engine of regret works by examining how vows are annulled. Say we pledged to God we would give more charity than we actually are able to. Our savings became depleted. We now regret our pledge. That regret, according to the rabbis, turns our pledge into a vow made without intent, without

full awareness of its consequences. It no longer counts. It no longer is valid. It was done by mistake.

The engine of regret turns something intentional into something inadvertent and mistaken. It works for vows, and it works for other sins as well. Say the cashier at Kroger gave us twenty dollars in change when we were owed only one. We knew we should have given it back. But we didn't. We took the money. If we regret our action, and apologize for it, God considers it, according to Resh Lakish, as if we took that money by mistake. Oops. We misread the number. We took it mistakenly. Without intent.

Just like the tzedakah pledge. In both cases, our engine of regret, our capacity to feel remorse, transforms something intentional into something inadvertent, mistaken, something we wouldn't do now. Something that does not define who we are. And that allows us to not repeat it and to take a different course in the future.

Teshuvah does not change what we did, but it changes how we relate to what we did. It changes how we see ourselves. Our misdeeds do not represent who we really are and what we really intend. Instead, they are simply mistakes, ones we can learn and grow from. We deserve a second chance to show we will act differently next time.

This is the final lesson Kol Nidrei teaches us, that no matter how short we fall of our words, we always deserve a second chance. God is always there to forgive our missteps and our mis-speech and to offer us another shot.

It is fitting God does so, because, according to the midrash, God in God's Self asks Moses for a second chance. God asked Moses to annul God's vow, just as we ask God to annul our vow. If God-GOD!- deserves a second chance, then how much more so do we human beings do as well.

Let me explain. After the sin of the golden calf, Moses asked God to forgive the Jewish people. God responded, “I want to, but I have already made an oath to destroy those who sacrifice to any god other than Ado-nai. I cannot retract my word.”

To which Moses replied, “Well, God, you gave me the power to annul oaths, for you taught me that a rabbi can absolve one of an oath.” God proceeds to stand before Moses as in a court of law. God expresses God’s regret for having made this vow. In response, Moses absolves God of God’s vow to destroy those who have sinned. The Jewish people are saved.

What does this midrash teach us? I believe it comes to tell us that even God spoke words that God regretted. Even God wishes God didn’t say what God said. Even God needs Kol Nidrei, so to speak. God models for us the courage to admit you are wrong, to not stand by your words till the bitter end; thank God, because otherwise God would have destroyed our ancestors. God models

for us teshuvah, returning to who we are meant to be, by admitting and learning from our mistakes, by taking a second chance.

As we have seen, Kol Nidrei may take the form of a legal proceeding, an annulment of vows, but it ultimately is so much more. It enacts before us the process of teshuvah we conclude on this day. It is a grand gesture to being humble and to opening ourselves to how we have fallen short, so we can learn and so we can grow.

When we annul our vows on Kol Nidrei, and when we make teshuvah, the engine of regret transforms our mis-steps and mis-deeds into simply mistakes, ones that do not define who we are. We embrace that we are works in progress always growing and becoming better. We are more than our mistakes. We can do differently. We can grow by taking a second chance.

Just like God. God asks Moses to absolve God of God's vow. We ask God to absolve us of our vows. Situations change, we change, and we learn.

May we in this new year grow by making mistakes, hopefully new ones, until we return here again next year, looking back and seeing just how far we have come.

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