

## Over-Promise and Strive to Deliver

G'mar Chatimah Tova

My husband Josh has a theory regarding chores: he believes that if I don't expect him to do something, I will be impressed when he does it - and that will make him look like an amazing husband.

Time and time again, he insists that he is not going to accomplish a given task. "I'll do it tomorrow," he says; or "It'll be done by the end of the weekend. **<pause>** Next weekend." But I can't count the number of times that I've left the house and returned to find that he's built a bookcase, put together a stroller, cleaned out the garage, or cooked dinner - all while insisting that he wasn't going to do it. Sure, it's a little odd... but it's endearing that he goes to great lengths just to see the surprised and grateful look on my face when I see all that he has accomplished.

Josh's favorite trick is to casually remind me that we need to empty the dishwasher. We'll have just finished dinner, and as we're getting ready to load the dishes, he'll say, "oh shoot, it's still full, I forgot to unload it!" I groan and open the dishwasher door... to find the dishes unloaded, and a goofy grin on his face. Of course, I have my own version of this trick: I never let him know that I've caught on, so he keeps unloading the dishes!

All that is to say that Josh's theory is an example of the concept, "Under-promise and over-deliver" - appropriate in business, but just as beneficial in a marriage. After all, it's human nature to be pleasantly surprised by an unanticipated gesture of goodwill or kindness - and those acts go a long way in a relationship.

---

On Yom Kippur, though, our instinct is to do the complete opposite. Rather than being realistic about what we can and cannot do, on Yom Kippur we're encouraged to swing the pendulum in the other direction - to over-promise, even though we know that there is no way we can accomplish everything we say we will.

All of this promising started tonight, as we ushered in the holiest day of the year with the annual annulment of vows - *Kol Nidre*.

Kol Nidre has vexed rabbis for generations. While most have given up trying to evict it from its current leading role on *erev* Yom Kippur, it's not for lack of trying. The nearly 2000-year-old paragraph isn't even a prayer; it's a strange legal formula, written in Aramaic, that turns the sanctuary into a courtroom. Previously, the prayer-that-is-not-a-prayer annulled all vows "from last Yom Kippur to this one." However, that was halachically problematic for many reasons - not least of which is that this is not actually the Jewish legal process for annulling vows! So in the 12th century, Rabbenu Tam (Rashi's grandson) changed it from the past tense to the future tense so that it instead annuls vows "From this Yom Kippur to the next Yom

Kippur” - even before the vows are made! His modification placated some of the criticism; and the new form was widely adopted. It’s the one we heard tonight.

Rabbi Eliezer Diamond, a teacher of mine at JTS, describes it this way: “What is, for many of us, Yom Kippur’s highlight is, in most of its present formulations, a less than coherent legal formula of questionable efficacy.” So why do we continue to insist on its place in our service?

There is a magical aura to Kol Nidre; it is a moment in time that is neither last year nor next year. Author Sydney Taylor describes the gates of Heaven being open wide enough to see the angels passing by. The music is from the time of the Crusades. The Shalichat Tzibur recites the paragraph three times, almost as if it is an incantation with mystical qualities - chief among them the power to cleanse us of our commitments before we even make them.

We put our faith in the words of *Kol Nidre*, in the hope that it will wipe our slate clean and allow us to start anew with God. We know we’ve made mistakes over the past year - and we know we’ll make them in the coming year - so we cling to the opportunity to erase them magically from our record. We acknowledge our deep fear that even our best intentions will not be enough - even as we seek reassurance that God will still love us.

Kol Nidre itself, and the entire experience of Yom Kippur, acknowledge **this** vulnerable truth: for most of us, the distance between who we are and who we ought to be, who we *want* to be, is vast. This day offers us a moment to accept who we are, struggles and failings included.

---

Tomorrow night, as the gates are closing, we know that we will be forgiven; after all, that's God's job. The verses immediately following Kol Nidre read:

ונסלח לכל—עדת בני ישראל ולגר הגר בתוכם, כי לכל—העם בשגגה.

"The entire congregation of the people Israel shall be forgiven, as well as the stranger who dwells among them, for all have erred."

And then: ויאמר ה' סלחתי כדברך - "Adonai replied, I have forgiven, as you have asked."

The text tells us that forgiveness from God is a foregone conclusion - yet Kol Nidre is the still most widely-attended service of the year. For a People that is chronically late, tonight we were remarkably on-time. Like Opening Day at Fenway, it's only the first of many - but we feel compelled to experience the specialness of the initial moments. 25 hours of fasting, praying, singing, begging, and soul-searching will leave us feeling forgiven by God - yet it is still Kol Nidre that draws us in as we begin the annual gut-wrenching process of praying for our lives and our souls.

We come back to this place - this liminal time and space - year after year, because we make all sorts of vows over the course of the year. Some of those vows are explicit, others implied; some for ourselves, others for the world; some are made with specific intentions, and others without considering the ramifications. We want all of our vows to be meaningful, even if we don't always know how to make them so. The opportunity for self-reflection on Yom Kippur allows us to recalibrate our internal compass, and ask some of the hardest questions of our lives: What have I done with the past year? Who have I hurt or harmed? What have I lived for and what will be my lasting legacy?

---

Which brings me back to the dishwasher. The act of exceeding expectations is wonderful. Everybody wins when you beat an important deadline, donate more than you pledged, or surprise your loved one with something that makes their life easier. But God isn't interested in promises - God is interested in deliverables - proof, results, and success.

Tomorrow morning's Haftarah makes it extremely clear that the fasting and promises from today are not enough:

הַ הַכָּזָה, יְהִיָּה צוֹם אֲבֹתֵיהֶוּ--יּוֹם עֲנוּת אָדָם, נִפְשׁוֹ; הִלְכֹךְ כְּאֶגְמֹן רֹאשׁוֹ, וְשָׁק וְאַפֶּרֶ  
יִצְעֵ--הִלָּזָה תְּקַרָּא-צוֹם, וַיּוֹם רָצוֹן לַיהוָה.

**5. Is this the fast I desire, a day for people to starve their bodies?** Is it bowing the head like a bulrush and lying in sackcloth and ashes? **Do you call that a fast, a day that the Lord finds favorable?**

ו הָלוֹא זֶה, צוֹם אֲבֻחֶרְהוּ--פֶּתַח חֲרָצְבוֹת רָשָׁע, הַתֵּר אֲגָדוֹת מוֹטָה; וְשִׁלַּח רְצוּצִים חֲפָשִׁים,  
 וְכָל-מוֹטָה תִּנְתְּקוּ

6. **No, this is the fast I desire:** to unlock fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of the yoke to let the oppressed go free; to break off every yoke.

ז הָלוֹא פָּרַס לָרָעִב לַחֲמֶךָ, וְעֵנִיִּים מְרוּדִים תָּבִיא בֵּית: כִּי-תִרְאֶה עָרֹם וְכִסִּיתוֹ, וּמִבְּשָׁרְךָ לֹא  
 תִּתְעַלֵּם.

7. It is **to share your bread with the hungry, to take the wretched poor into your home; and to clothe the naked,** and do not ignore your own flesh.

It is not enough, God says, to speak the words that we think God wants to hear. It is not enough to make promises to ourselves, either; instead, we must put our money where our mouths are and truly help people.

This is very difficult; after all, the Book of Life is closing in 25 hours, and it's much easier to convince ourselves that our prayers alone will "seal the deal" than it is to commit to living a more generous lifestyle. It is much easier to over-promise and deal with under-delivering later, than it is to figure out the process of actualizing those promises, particularly when our pledges are grand in scope.

In an essay on Kol Nidre, Dr. Erica Brown acknowledges that we don't always make good on our promises. "Empty words are sometimes all we have," she writes.

A year ago, we made promises, we aspired to something, we expected that by this year, things would be different. But here we are again, promises unkept, aspirations unfulfilled, remembering the words we said last year.

This is the paradox of Yom Kippur - each year, we atone and promise to do better, without really believing that we can.

---

Rabbi Milton Steinberg offers a perspective on how to reconcile the dichotomy between what we want to do and what we actually believe we *will* do. “What if,” he asks, “every year you say you’ll change, and every year you don’t?” He concludes that logic dictates that we have only three choices: give up, lower our standards, or try harder.

For the sake of our People, we cannot give up.

For the sake of ourselves, we cannot lower our standards.

So we must try harder.

Judaism is an aspirational religion. We continue to strive *towards* perfection, without the expectation of actually achieving it. It’s important to know, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, that God does not ask us *not to fail*. God asks us to acknowledge our

failures, repair what we have harmed, and move on, learning from our mistakes and growing.

One of the ways we do that, of course, is through *tshuva*, *t'filah*, and *tzedakah*.

**T'shuva** - cultivating a spiritual life and returning to Torah. **T'filah** - cultivating gratitude and connecting with transcendent values. And **Tzedeka** - cultivating generosity and pursuing justice.

---

An ethnographic study of pediatricians & pediatric specialists showed that physicians need to recognize and acknowledge times when they made a mistake that resulted in harm coming to their patient. On a recent episode of the NPR podcast “On Being,”<sup>1</sup> Dr. Louis Newman, the author of “Repentance: The Meaning & Practice of Teshuvah,” discussed the results. Owning responsibility, he said, helps the doctors avoid making the same mistake again - but it is crucial that the doctors have a safe place in which to reflect on these errors and process them.

Like those doctors, we too require a safe space for reflection and processing. For us, that safe space is the *Aseret Yamei Tshuvah*, the Ten Days of Repentance that culminate in Yom Kippur.

Dr. Newman concludes:

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://onbeing.org/program/louis-newman-the-refreshing-practice-of-repentance/7923>



The ultimate benefit of doing *teshuvah* is that it offers us a way to overcome our past precisely because we have confronted and taken full responsibility for it. It enables us to escape the sense of guilt, in some cases even the despair with which many of us live. In its place, we come to live with self-acceptance and hope, because we know that moral renewal is always a possibility.

Whether we are contemplating teshuvah in the personal realm or on a global scale, the process is the same. We must acknowledge our past actions, understand their impact, and formulate a plan for how to act differently in the future.

---

We face a great many problems today, on scales ranging from local to national to global. On Rosh Hashanah we talked about the Syrian refugee crisis, as well as the plight that low-income parents face without enough resources to keep their infants in clean diapers. We heard from congregant Lori Silver about CJP's efforts to reduce poverty in the Boston Jewish community. And we briefly touched upon the Black Lives Matter campaign, inequality in Israel, and the rising anti-Semitism in the world.

There is no easy solution to any of these problems; even the issue of a diaper shortage among low-income families cannot be solved without addressing the systemic problems behind it. But just because we can't fix something on our own does not mean that we can't chip away at it.

Tonight, we will sing *Mi She'ana*, a prayer that recalls instances when God answered our ancestors in their times of need, and begs God to answer us too. In each

example, the individual took action based solely on faith - they took one step forward, then another, believing that they were doing what God wanted. Instead of simply asking for help, they let their action be their prayer. We may live in a time of more man-made “miracles” than divine, but that is all the more reason why, like Nachshon ben Aminadav bravely walked into the un-parted sea, we must take the first steps towards fixing our world - and have faith that God will help us along the way.

---

Doing *teshuvah* does not undo or change the past. And yet, repentance is precisely the process by which we can - in the moral realm, if not in the physical realm - go back to the deed, find what led to the transgression, and shape a different future.

Just as we evaluate our personal flaws, we must assess our societal flaws, recognize our own role in them, and take steps to improve. This year the Black community in America has successfully drawn attention to a problem which is NOT new - the systemic devaluation of black lives and black achievements in America.

Nothing we can do or say will lead to us sitting here next Yom Kippur, congratulating ourselves for eradicating racism. But Rabbi Tarfon taught:

לא עליך המלאכה לגמור, ולא אתה בן חורין להבטל ממנה.

*It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but neither are you free to ignore it<sup>2</sup>.* In the spirit of over-promising and striving toward

---

<sup>2</sup> Pirke Avot 2:16

significant change, we should be able to look back next Yom Kippur and know that we did all that we could to move our society forward.

---

To that end, I'd like to share four ways that we can move the needle on this problem.

The first is the easiest: after Yom Kippur is over, go home and **Google “how white people can be allies to black people.”** African-Americans are feeling more empowered to make a change in our country than they have felt in decades. It is not our job to dictate how that change happens or what that change looks like; instead it is our job to magnify their voices and help them be heard.

Second: **know what privilege is, know what YOUR privilege is and use it to help those who don't have it.**

Privilege means being a part of a group that has special rights, advantages, or immunities not granted to non-members. In many cases, this is not due to any action taken - it is simply afforded because of accident of birth. There are many types of privilege we each may carry: white privilege, male privilege, educated privilege, financial privilege.

The key to privilege is this: most of us walk through the world generally unaware of it. We notice it most when we are on the outside - which, for most of us in this

room, is rare. Knowing our privilege means noticing when we're using it - without any effort on our own part - and when others don't have it.

Elie Wiesel wrote, "When the life or death - or simply the well-being - of a community is at stake, neutrality becomes unacceptable, for it always aids and abets the oppressor, never his victim."<sup>3</sup> Using your privilege to help means noticing racism where you might have naively turned a blind eye before - and whenever possible - even if it feels a little scary - saying something to stop it. Staying silent when you witness oppression is the same as supporting it.

And third - **use your influence**. A Senator can work to remove sentencing laws that disproportionately affect black men. A manager can make sure that she interviews qualified minority candidates for an open role. A rabbi can connect her congregation to churches with many black congregants to encourage Bible study and socializing. We each have our own strengths and spheres of influence where we can help work against some small piece of the systemic racism that's been in place for centuries. It's your job to figure out how you can do your part.

Finally, we have to **stop the phrase "all lives matter."** Yes, we are all created B'tzelem Elohim, in God's image. But if all lives were treated equally, America's prison population would not be 60% black - four times their representation in the country as a whole<sup>4</sup>. "Driving while black" would not make you five times more likely to be pulled over. And black students would be graduating from high school at

---

<sup>3</sup> A Passover Haggadah; As Commented Upon by Elie Wiesel - page 7-8

<sup>4</sup>

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2012/03/13/11351/the-top-10-most-startling-facts-about-people-of-color-and-criminal-justice-in-the-united-states/>

a rate better than just 68% - which only shows how America's racist past still haunts us today and perpetuates the cycle of inequality.

We did not create this reality - but we ARE responsible for working to change it.

---

Kol Nidre allows us to dream big. It empowers us to make grandiose vows to ourselves over the course of the next year, knowing we have permission to not fulfill them completely. But in this case, it's not enough to say we want to do something, and ask for God's help - we have to take the first step. And then the second, and the third, and keep on moving forward, having faith that the best way God can help is by inspiring similar actions from others.

לא עליך המלאכה לגמור

It is not our task to finish the work - but we ARE responsible for making the world a little better every year.

You may recall the story about the village that was asked to fill a giant barrel with wine in advance of a celebration. Each villager thought, "If **I** contribute water, and everyone else brings wine, then nobody will be the wiser." And of course, the celebration was held with a giant barrel of water.

---

Each of us will spend the next day in two spaces simultaneously. Physically, we will be in this room with each other; spiritually, we will be secluded, deep in a private conversation with God. This is the crux of how we can each - as individuals - solve

the problems that plague the world, our country, and our community. We must acknowledge that in some way, we have been bringing spiritual water to Yom Kippur year after year. We have promised to do things for ourselves, for our friends, for our families - but neglected to recognize that we do not live in a vacuum. The world around us needs our attention too.

Spend the next day digging deep into your soul, and searching for the spiritual equivalent of wine to put in the shared barrel. Individually, our contributions are small; together, they are how we can repair the world. All that we are able to give - that's all God asks of us, and it's everything we must ask of ourselves.

G'mar Chatimah Tova.