Kol Nidre 2026

What Has Happened Between Us?

Kol Nidre begins about promises made, commitments undertaken, and the recognition that we do not always become the people we intended to be.

There is something deeply humbling about beginning Yom Kippur that way. Before we confess a single sin, before we ask forgiveness, before we speak about what anyone else has done, we begin by acknowledging our own fallibility.

And perhaps that is exactly where we need to begin this year.

Because many of us come into this sanctuary carrying real concern about the world around us. We see the hatred. We see things that frighten us, anger us, confuse us. We see suffering that should not be ignored, cruelty that should not be excused, injustice that demands a response. We worry about what is happening to our communities, to our country, to the world our children and grandchildren will inherit.

There is an old fable attributed to Aesop about two men who despised one another so completely that when they happened to find themselves traveling on the same ship, they deliberately sat as far apart as they could. One went to the bow, the other to the stern.

Before long, a terrible storm arose and the ship began to sink.

One of the men asked the captain which end of the ship would go under first. When he was told that the other man's end would sink first, he was relieved. At least, he said, he would have the satisfaction of seeing my enemy drown.

There is something almost darkly funny about that story until you realize the obvious thing the man has forgotten:

They are on the same boat.

When did what divides us become more important than what binds us to one another—our shared humanity, our compassion, our capacity for loving-kindness?

There are things happening in the world about which we should care deeply. There is suffering we should not ignore and injustice we should not tolerate. Our tradition tells us, *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*—"Justice, justice shall you pursue." The rabbis go so far as to teach that when we have the ability to protest wrongdoing and remain silent, that silence itself carries responsibility.

Judaism asks us to care.

What I have been wondering, though, is whether there is another question we need to ask alongside our concern for everything that needs repairing in the world.

What is the struggle itself doing to us?

What happens when anger, even justified anger, lives in us for so long that it begins to change the way we see other human beings? What happens when we become so certain that someone else is contributing to what is wrong that we begin to know that person only through what we oppose in them?

And at what point do we become a little like those two men on Aesop's ship—so focused on who is wrong, who deserves what, who will finally be proven right, that we forget we are bound up with one another whether we like it or not?

There is a passage in Leviticus that seems to illuminate this.

Lo tisna et achicha bilvavecha. *Hocheach tochiach et amitecha, v'lo tisa alav chet*.

"You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and you shall not incur sin because of him."

And in the very next verse:

"You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge… *v'ahavta l'reacha kamocha*—you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

We quote *v'ahavta l'reacha kamocha* all the time, but I think something important happens when we put it back where Torah placed it.

Love sits right next to rebuke.

The Torah does not say that if you love your neighbor, you must overlook what is wrong. It does not ask us to confuse compassion with approval or kindness with silence.

Hocheach tochiach.

When something matters, say so. When something is wrong, confront it.

But at the same time:

Lo tisna et achicha bilvavecha.

Do not allow hatred to take up residence in your heart.

And the rabbis understood how difficult that balance can be. When they interpret the final words of that verse—"do not incur sin because of him"—they teach that even when rebuke is warranted, the person giving it may not humiliate the person being corrected. In other words, we can be right about the wrong and still become wrong in the way we respond to it.

That feels to me like a particularly important Jewish teaching for this moment.

Because there is an enormous difference between having convictions and allowing our convictions to harden us.

There may be no better example of this in Torah than by Moses.

Moses comes down from Mount Sinai carrying the tablets of the covenant and finds the Israelites dancing around the Golden Calf. These are the people he has led from slavery, the people who stood at Sinai, the people who have entered into covenant with God, and almost immediately they have betrayed it.

Moses is furious, and Torah does not apologize for his anger. He throws down the tablets and shatters them. He destroys the calf. He confronts Aaron.

Then Moses returns to God and says plainly, "These people have committed a terrible sin: they have made themselves a god out of gold."

There is no moral ambiguity in Moses's response. He knows exactly what has gone wrong, and he says so.

But then he asks God to forgive them.

And when he does not know whether God will, Moses says, "If not, erase me from the book that You have written."

These are the same people who have disappointed him, infuriated him, betrayed everything he has been trying to teach them, and still Moses will not surrender them.

He can say, "This is a great sin," and at the same time say, "They are still my people, and their future matters to me."

And then there is a detail in this story that I think is one of the most beautiful teachings our tradition gives us.

Moses eventually receives a second set of tablets. But according to the Talmud, the fragments of the first tablets—the ones he shattered—were not left behind.

Luchot v'shivrei luchot munachim ba'aron.

The whole tablets and the broken tablets were placed together in the Ark.

The broken and the whole traveled together.

At the center of the Israelite camp, inside the Ark they carried through the wilderness, were not only the tablets of the covenant restored, but also the broken pieces.

They carried both.

Perhaps because repair is not the same thing as erasing the past.

Perhaps because something can be broken and still be sacred.

And perhaps that is one reason this ancient image speaks so powerfully on Kol Nidre. We do not enter this night as people who have managed to keep everything whole. We come

carrying what has endured and what has broken. And Judaism tells us that all of it can still belong to the sacred journey.

We come here tonight with our own whole tablets and our broken ones. We carry relationships that have nourished us and relationships that have disappointed us. We carry moments when we were generous and moments when we were not. We carry words we are grateful we spoke and others we wish we could somehow call back.

Teshuvah begins with the Jewish belief that what has been broken does not have to determine what comes next.

Tonight we ask God to see more in us than our worst moments. We ask God to know our failures without deciding that they are all we are. We ask God to believe in our capacity to change, to leave room for the people we might yet become.

And if that is what we ask of God for ourselves, then surely, we must ask whether we are willing to leave that same possibility open for someone else.

That does not mean every relationship must be restored, nor does it mean that every injury can or should be forgiven. There are people from whom distance is necessary and relationships in which boundaries are an act of wisdom. Compassion does not ask us to forget what happened or to pretend that harm was not harm.

It asks something different.

It asks whether we can protect ourselves without hardening our hearts; whether we can hold another person accountable without judging them; whether we can acknowledge what has broken without deciding that nothing sacred remains.

I can remain deeply committed to justice and still become a more compassionate human being. Because surely *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world, cannot mean that everything needing repair is somewhere outside of me.

There is a world within us as well.

The Mishnah teaches that Yom Kippur can bring atonement for the wrongs between a human being and God, but for wrongs *bein adam l'chaveiro*—between one human being and another—Yom Kippur itself cannot complete the repair.

There are things God leaves in our hands.

Maybe that is what I want us to carry into Yom Kippur.

Not the expectation that every relationship can be restored or every hurt repaired. There are things we cannot undo, people we may never understand, and convictions we should not surrender.

But as long as there is life, there is still something we can do with the person we are becoming.

We can ask whether anger has taken up more room in us than we intended to give it. We can notice when conviction has slipped into contempt. We can decide that another person's behavior will not determine the character of our own.

And perhaps that is where teshuvah begins—not necessarily by changing what we believe, but by remembering who we want to be while believing it.

That is why Torah can tell us in the very same breath to rebuke our neighbor and not to hate our brother in our heart.

Perhaps Judaism understood that the real test of our values does not come when they are easy to practice. It comes when compassion is difficult, when loving-kindness feels undeserved, when the person before us has disappointed us, angered us, or failed to see something that to us seems painfully clear.

Those are the moments when chesed becomes more than a beautiful word.

Those are the moments when it becomes a choice about who we will be.

Yom Kippur does not promise that every broken thing will become whole.

What Yom Kippur offers us is the possibility that brokenness does not have to have the final word.

There is still time to soften what has hardened, to return to the values from which we may have wandered, to become a little more generous in the way we see another human being and a little more faithful to the person we ourselves hope to be.

There is still time.

Ken yehi ratzon.

May it be so.