

Promises.

That's what tonight is really all about – promises. '*Kol nidrei*' means 'all promises.' We could use the term 'solemn vows' like our machzor does but, to be honest (and if we're not honest tonight, when will we be?), that term feels pretty detached from real life and probably doesn't have a whole lot of resonance for most of us here. The text of Kol Nidrei uses lots of different words – *nidrei, esarei, sh'vuei, charamei*: promises, oaths, vows, pledges. More words than we actually have distinctions for in English, because the rabbinic lexicon was full of lots of different shades and nuances of promises. Just like the Inuit have more than fifty words for different types of snow – true, it turns out, in the final analysis! – the Kol Nidrei prayer has seven different words – depending whether the formula invokes God's name or not, whether we're forbidding an item or an action to ourselves, whether we make a permanent promise or one of limited duration. Because the rabbis really paid attention to these fine levels of distinction because they cared deeply about the issue of the commitments we make.

But at the end of the day it all comes down to promises.

What is a promise? It's an intention, made solid. Given form, concretized – made official through deliberate affirmation. It's a solemn commitment – a pledge to act differently than we otherwise would without the promise. Because that's the point of the promise: *differently*. No one ever makes a promise to eat more ice cream – we don't have to, because we're already happy to eat more ice cream. A promise, by definition, has to be a break with our normal impulses and instincts, has to be rooted in a fundamental hope or intention to do things *differently*. And *different* is hard. After all, there's usually a reason that we end up falling into the habits and patterns we do – real reasons. Powerful reasons. Reasons that the best intentions in the world can't magically undo, however we might wish for it or work at it. No wonder we need this day and this prayer again and again, year after year.

I sometimes wonder how I know if I'm actually making a promise, as opposed to just saying something. Obviously, if I say, "I promise," then I am. But how often do I tell someone I'll do something: "I promise"? I try not to do it very much because, sadly, I know there is a pretty decent chance that, for reasons ranging from totally justified to totally *un-*, I won't end up being able to do the thing I say. And that would be breaking a promise. So I just tell someone – Aimée, my kids, perhaps some of you – "Yeah, I'll do that." So when I don't, it's not *really* breaking a promise, right? As an aside, some Jews have the habit of saying the words, "*b'li neder*" when they say they're going to do something. "*B'li neder*" means "without promising" – it's the same word, *neder*, as in the phrase "*kol nidrei*" and it's like a built-in disclaimer: "What I'm saying to you isn't really a promise, so I'm not actually guilty of breaking a promise if I don't do it."

I appreciate the impulse, but saying *b'li neder* or even just failing to say "I promise" merely underscores the problem: aren't we always supposed to mean what we say? If we don't say "I promise" does that mean that the commitments we make shouldn't be taken seriously, have no force? As Napoleon is reputed to have said, "The best way to keep one's word is not to give it." Good point, but am I really off the hook for not doing what I say I'm going to do if I don't actually say the magic words, "I promise"?

Maybe those words have some secret power because they suggest that we're willing to accept consequences if we don't keep our promise, so we really, really mean it. The ancient Israelites knew this: They would usually include God's name in a promise to make it an oath, and to make them culpable for retroactively taking God's name in vain if they didn't fulfill their

statement. Clever, right? Children know this too: they say, “Swear to God” or “Cross my heart, hope to die”: it’s a solemn statement that you know you’ll be doing something really wrong if you don’t keep your promise, and something bad might happen as a result. Although children don’t really hope to die, and sooner or later they’ll come to learn that the consequences for failing to keep promises aren’t always so starkly obvious.

It’s hard, when I’m reading books to my children – one of my absolute favorite activities and one I am grateful that my children still allow me to indulge in. The parents in those books are usually so virtuous – take Pa, for example, from the *Little House* books, which I read start to finish with Adir. Pa is absolutely so dependable, so reliable – so willing *and able* to fix any problem, make any situation right. Or the character of Silas in Neil Gillman’s spellbinding *The Graveyard Book*, which I had read not long ago with Yael. Young Bod Owens knows he can count on his guardian Silas to keep him safe and care for him in a world that inevitably threatens and disappoints. Or Danny’s father in Roald Dahl’s wonderful *Danny, the Champion of the World* – I am in awe at the way these fathers and father figures always live up to their commitments, always manage to live up to their intentions, always make good on their promises – even as I hate them for it. Because it’s an impossible standard and it’s disempowering and it’s not fair, and suddenly ‘doing your best’ looks lousy by comparison: doing your best to always be there, kind, patient, curious... and absolutely to always keep your promises.

For me, what are the consequences of breaking my promises? Obviously, there’s disappointing the person I made the promise to – a child, a friend, someone else. There’s disappointing myself. Perhaps, although I’m not sure about this, there’s disappointing God. There’s an erosion of trust between me and the person I promised: I’ve let them down once, which means they’re more likely to assume I will again. Which is right because, inevitably, I probably will. Maybe broken promises in a strange way establish a baseline of trust in a relationship: I’ve let you down in the past but at least now you know how far you can trust me. You’ve let me down in the past but I’ve acknowledged and accepted those mini-betrayals: it’s a way of being willing to commit to someone else even though you know they aren’t, and never will be, perfect. Maybe being willing to accept someone, broken promises and all, is a sign of love.

But is this what we want relationships to be based on – knowing that we’ll inevitably and continually disappoint? Couldn’t we aim for something higher? Shouldn’t we?

Kol Nidrei is both, simultaneously: it’s an acknowledgement that we’ve messed up – this year, as in every year that preceded it and as in every year that will follow. An admission of our shortcomings and a desire to be accepted anyway. *And* it’s a plea for forgiveness, an urgent supplication to have the bad things we’ve done wiped away, not held against us – to restore the trust as though it never had been broken. And so an intention – a promise? – to try again, to keep aiming for that target of perfection that we’re always going to miss. The way Charlie Brown always misses the football, although here there’s no Lucy to blame, since we’re well aware that *we’re* the ones who have snatched the football away with our own two hands, even as we’re running at it full tilt. Run, take aim, kick... knowing we’re going to miss, knowing we’re going to fall, knowing we’re complicit in our own falling; but somehow being able and willing to run and try anyway.

It’s the continuing to try, I think, that’s critical – the hope against hope that this one time we’ll kick the football squarely between the goalposts, watch it arc through in a graceful and grace-filled curve of fulfillment. Because as improbable as that is, if we don’t try then what are

we even doing here? Despite all the obstacles, and inevitable failures, we have to keep trying – *that's* the commitment and *that's* the promise. Not any specific thing that we promise to do and then fail at – although I don't mean to minimize the significance of that or absolve us from trying, either. But the commitment that, having failed, we're not going to let ourselves *stay failed*. That we will get back up and, if we're lucky enough to be given another chance, another shot, we're going to take it.

Tonight is it, tonight is our shot at *differently*. Tonight, Kol Nidrei, we have to muster the strength to acknowledge that we have failed and disappointed, that we will fail and disappoint again. But just because this will be the almost-certain outcome of our attempts, doesn't mean we're off the hook for putting any less energy or effort into the commitments we make the next time. We may not be able to fulfill all our promises but we can offer the purity of our intentions and resolve in remaking them as an offering on the altar of our self: that I *will* do my best and, when I fail, I *will* do my best again. That I will trust in the possibility of *differently* and do everything in my power to make *differently* a reality. That I will extend the same understanding to others who have let me down that I ask for myself. And that this year *will* be the one I keep my promises.

Swear to God.