

A VOW FOR JEWISH UNITY

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From the 8th century on, the evening service for Yom Kippur began with the text Cantor Pincus chanted so beautifully -- the Kol Nidrei -- a text that nullified vows that we have made in the past and were unable to fulfill. The text of the Kol Nidrei has its roots in the Book of Numbers, which tells us that when a person makes a vow to God or swears an oath, that person shall not break the vow, and must do all according to the words of the oath. From ancient times vows and oaths held great power and one is warned repeatedly to consider well the power of one's vows and promises.

By the 5th century CE, there was a discussion in the Talmud as to whether or not one could be released from vows and promises. The majority of the rabbis insisted that, on this powerful day of Yom Kippur, individuals should be given the opportunity to release themselves from vows they were unable to keep in the past year, thus the Kol Nidrei was created. Rashi's grandson, Rabbi Jacob Tam, in the 12th century, revised the text of Kol Nidrei and changed it to refer to vows that would be made in the future. Rabbi Tam recognized that with the coming Crusades, individuals would be forced to make life-changing vows in order to protect their lives. Certainly by the time of the Inquisition, our Spanish forebears knew that the only way to protect their lives and their faith was to renounce their Judaism publicly and practice their Judaism in secret, while publicly behaving as Christians. For these Marranos, Kol Nidrei became the central statement of their faith. By the year 1500, an Ashkenzai cantor in Southwestern Germany voiced the sentiments of the terror-stricken Marranos using a touching melody which expressed the fear, and the horror as well as the hope for salvation. That tune is preserved in the setting Cantor Pincus sang this evening. For almost 500 years that tune and those words served to release Jews all over the world from the vows they made and could not fulfill.

Our very presence here is a vow – a promise – we are here to be preserved and uplifted by Judaism and Jewish values and culture and we are here to see that Judaism and Jewish values and culture continues. It is that reason that this congregation, its rabbi and its leadership, professional and lay, have invested so much time and energy in its youth education program. It is why the retention rate among post-bnei mitzvah students in this congregation is so high. It is why I was able to see a robust and rambunctious group of teenagers here for their first day of Confirmation Class – filling the social hall and consuming massive amount of the Confirmation Class staple: Pizza.

But that vow – that promise -- is not just lived out in what happens within the walls of this congregation; it is also lived out in your connection to Medinat Yisrael – the State of Israel. Your hallways are covered with pictures of your trips, and your rabbi's family personal commitment to the State of Israel, living and teaching and studying there, is part of this promise – this vow. And in its simplest form this vow is summed up in the words: **אם ישראל חי** – the People of Israel shall live and endure – and is summed up in the words from the early rabbinic period,

כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה
All Israel is responsible one for another.

Jewish unity is critical to our survival – and yet, there are those who are not fulfilling that promise.

Breaking news (well probably not breaking news, I am sure that you have seen this on the internet in the last couple of days) as published by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency: Israel's Sephardic chief rabbi, Shlomo Amar, said in a Rosh Hashanah message that it is better for a Jew to pray by himself than with Reform Jews. Amar made the comment in a pre-holiday interview with the right-wing Orthodox newspaper Makor Rishon that was published two weeks ago. Amar called Reform Judaism more of a threat to the religion than secular Jews. He also called Reform marriages invalid.

He called on the Orthodox community to reach out to secular Israelis while they are still in school, saying that if they are not reached, the Reform movement "will find them."

I wish that this was an isolated incident – it could be easily dismissed as the ravings of a singular fundamentalist. But it comes on the heels of years of similar statements from within the Jewish community. And these attacks on Jewish unity and solidarity are not from just the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, but in words and deeds heard and done around the world.

Our Reform and Progressive communities around the world grow and flourish – and they do, and will continue to do so – here in North America, we are the largest Jewish denomination, and in 45 countries around the world we are expanding and making our presence felt. And it is the threats from within our own Jewish communities that pose the greatest threat to our entire Jewish world.

In Hungary, under recently passed legislation by the country's right-centre government, religious institutions are subject to government grading, which impacts the degree of public funding they receive. While the Orthodox Jewish community has been granted first class status, Progressive Judaism was only granted second class status. The Orthodox community did nothing to change

the government's mind. No-one stood up for Jewish unity and a rift continues to divide the Jewish community.

The European Union for Progressive Judaism and the World Union for Progressive Judaism leaders met with the leaders of Mazsihisz, the state recognized Jewish organization which has effectively had a monopoly over recognition and major funding, and which refused one of our congregations, Sim Shalom, membership some years ago. These Progressive leaders also declared in the strongest terms that nothing less than "full unreserved recognition and first class status would be acceptable." Intensive meetings with the leaders of our two Progressive communities and their rabbis led to increased cooperation between them, creating a catalyst for the formation of an umbrella Hungarian Progressive Jewish Association. But the challenge from without (the Hungarian government) would not exist were it not for the intransigence of the Orthodox community, which gloated in the delegitimization of the Progressive community.

In a similar development, Austria has passed a law on April 19 that extends a variety of rights to Orthodox Judaism but does not extend the same rights to Progressive Judaism. We have done much to prevent the law from being passed. The government has turned over the right to determine who is a part of the official Jewish community to the new self-regulating Jewish community body which is dominated by the Orthodox. Based on our past experience, they will have no interest in following a pluralistic approach to Jewish religious matters. One of the many problems that we would face is that the Orthodox dominated "Religionengesellschaft" could discriminate against the halakhic decisions by our rabbis, especially our women rabbis. It cannot be the sole right of the Orthodox to decide "who is a Jew". And it is not the function of the government to place this definition into the hands of one Jewish denomination only. The Jewish community as a whole must learn to stand together.

This pattern of one segment of the community denying the legitimacy of another is being repeated around the Jewish world. In Latin America there are continuing struggles even between the Conservative community (known as Masorati) and the Progressive community, but in light of recent efforts on the part of the World Union, we seem to be making remarkable inroads for the sake of Klal Yisrael.

That struggle continues in the land of our heritage. Due to the gargantuan efforts of the Israel Religious Action Center and our Israel Movement for Progressive Judaism and MARAM (the Israeli Reform Rabbinic Association) the fight over recognition of Progressive rabbis has achieved a major first step. As most of you know, the government funds the salaries of most Orthodox rabbis, and builds and supports orthodox congregations. In the past couple of years several of our Reform communities have won land grants and temporary structures from the government. And our recent great victory was in the Israel

Supreme Court which agreed with our case and demanded the funding of the salaries of Rabbi Miri Gold and a dozen other Progressive rabbis serving in smaller municipalities around Israel. And while this is a victory worthy of celebration, our joy is tempered by the fact that the funding for these salaries comes not from the Religious Ministry, but from the Ministry of Sport and Culture. The parity that we long sought – the respect and recognition -- is still elusive. And the threats to our own survival come more from within the Jewish community than from without.

This morning an organization called Hiddush (headed by Rabbi Uri Regev) released its 4th annual survey of the Israeli public's attitudes on Religion and the State. The Chair of Hiddush, Stanley Gold said, "The study proves that the public wants Judaism, but a Judaism that is free of coercion. It demonstrates how unsubstantiated and pretentious is the claim of the ultra-Orthodox parties that they represent Judaism and Jewish interests. In actuality, these parties are undermining Judaism by linking it with political coercion, corruption, extremism, and thereby distancing the general public from Judaism and the Jewish People from Israel. There is no greater enemy to Judaism and the Jewish People than the ultra-Orthodox parties, and the government's continued surrender to their demands." What Hiddush has found calls on all of us to work towards building a more inclusive Israeli society – which can be a model for Jewish communities around the world. But we must engage – and we do so, not by denying the ultra-orthodox their right to be "machmeer" (stringent), but by demanding a level playing field, and an openness to hearing and living out the teachings of Jewish tradition.

To do any less, runs counter to everything that Jewish tradition teaches us.

כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה

Sifra, commenting on the verse in Behukotai (Leviticus 26:37): "And they shall stumble one upon another", teaches that when one Jew errs and commits a sin, all Israel is responsible one for the other.

In Pirke Avot -- the Mishnah's tractate which contains the sayings of the early rabbis, the concluding verse of the first chapter reads: "Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said, ' by virtue of three things does the world endure: truth, justice and peace.'

על שלושה דברים העולם אומד: על האמת, על הדין ועל השלום

This statement that the world rests on these three things: truth, justice and peace, should be guidance for all of us as we seek to uphold the cardinal value of Jewish unity. But what is truth? Truth has been called by the rabbis "the seal of God." Truth is the ability to speak that which one sees, but for the sake of peace, truth must always be spoken in love. In fact, Dr. Joseph Hertz, who was formerly the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire and also one of the great

Orthodox commentators quotes Blake, " A truth that's told with bad intent beats all the lies you can invent." It is truth that we depend upon when two meet in conversation. Yet, when we call upon our texts to provide us with that basis of truth, it is here where we get into the greatest difficulty. I, like my Orthodox brethren, have no question that God's revelation to us is perfect. However, I am more than willing to admit that our perception of God's perfect revelation may not be so perfect. Hence those who cite chapter and verse of a text to prove that they utter the truth can only depend upon their own imperfect perception of that truth. For the sake of truth we must be willing to accept that the truth we profess might not be true for others – in the spirit of humility, I am willing to say that my modern understanding of Jewish law and practice might not always be right – but I am not willing to dismiss the validity of either an Orthodox understanding, nor that of my our Progressive interpretation. And for the sake of Jewish unity, truth must be widely embracing and not narrowly dividing.

The same goes for the issue of justice. Justice should be our ability to call the innocent, innocent; and the guilty, guilty. Yet we all know that, as much as we hope for issues of justice to be painted in black and white, the reality of the human condition has demonstrated over and over again that justice can only be painted in shades of gray. Justice, we pray, is truth in action. Certainly the Book of Deuteronomy chides us all: צדק צדק תרדוף Justice, justice you shall pursue. These words are also inscribed on the Liberty Bell and the words that were inscribed on the hearts of the founding fathers of this country. And justice executed without compassion is no justice at all. And even if I were to admit that Progressive interpretations conflict with the interpretations of Orthodox authorities, for the sake of what is just and right, we must make room for one another within a unified Jewish world.

The third of the issues upon which the world rests is *shalom* -- peace. Peace can exist even where people disagree. Peace can exist where views may differ. Peace can exist as long as respect can exist. Respect is the lynch-pin of peace.

And respect is precisely what is missing in our Jewish community. The liberal and orthodox communities have long since lost respect for each other.

We often have a myopic view of Jewish history that it is only in the recent past that the Jewish community is as divided as it now finds itself. Truth be told, we know that throughout our past our people have been divided. In fact, the earliest rabbinic period, in those decades around the destruction of Second Temple -- the earliest group of rabbis were known as the Zugot -- the pairs. There were five great pairs of rabbis. The fifth great pair were known as Hillel and Shammai and they each had disciples known as schools. More often than not, these two schools disagreed about the application of Jewish law and the understanding of the way to live out God's decrees.

In Talmud Eruvin (13b) Rabbi Abba stated in the name of Samuel: "For three years there was a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, the former asserting Jewish law is in agreement with our views and the latter contending Jewish law is in agreement with our views. And then a bat kol -- a voice from the heavens -- issued forth, announcing:

אלו ואילו דברים אלוהים חיים

-- the utterances of both, these and these, are both the words of the living God. But the *halacha* -- Jewish law -- is in agreement with the rulings of Beit Hillel.' That did NOT negate the value of Beit Shammai. Hence, from the earliest time of the Common Era, the Jewish community remained divided in opinion as to the application and interpretation of Jewish law -- and thus lived as a divided people.

Further in this Talmudic text we read, "Our rabbis taught for two and a half years were Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel in dispute, the former asserting that it would have been better for humankind not to have been created than to have been created and the latter, Beit Hillel, maintaining that is better for humanity to have been created than not to have been created. Finally, {the rabbis} took a vote and decided that it would have been better for humanity not to have been created than to have been created, but now that humanity has been created, let human beings investigate their past deeds and let them examine their future actions."

Ultimately, for the sake of our community, we must build bridges of respect between the various streams of Jewish expression. As Rabbi Joseph Epstein wrote (Kitzur Shnay Lukhot Ha--brit, 6b) it is "only when all Jews work together as a community that the whole Torah can be fulfilled." In this way, the world will be sustained by truth, by justice and by peace. And thus we will be able to live out this axiom for the sake of Heaven.

On this eve of Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment, we look to the promises we have made and failed to keep, and look at the promises we may make and find difficult to fulfill. Our very presence here is a promise – not just to a Judaism that is learned and practiced within the walls of this shul, but to help build a Jewish world in which the values we espouse can thrive and flourish. And Jewish values cannot thrive where division exists. So we must continue to build Progressive communities around the world – places like this one, where all who come to find Jewish values and learning and community are warmly embraced. And we must promise to work for Jewish unity, and hope that we not need Kol Nidrei to cover our failure of will or action. May this New Year find the whole Jewish world strengthened and more unified because we fulfilled our vows – for we are all responsible, one for another.

!גמר חתימה טובה