

Kol Nidre – 5778
“All Of You – This Day”
September 29, 2017

I remember it so well. A friend had ditched me to play with another friend. I was 9 years old. I felt rotten. I tried hanging around the house, but my mother was having none of it. “The weather is nice, go out and play!”

“I don’t wanna!” She glared at me so hard I ran out the front door. I stayed out for hours, long after the time I should have been home for dinner. If she wanted me out of the house, I’d show her! My dad finally got in the car and went looking for me.

He found me in the middle of town, walking beside a stream. He drove 2 miles an hour and asked me to get into the car. Since I really was a piece of work in those days, I said, “No. You can’t make me.”

He pulled the car over and parked. As he got out and approached me I was afraid he was going to pick me up and throw me into the station wagon. But instead, he fell in, walking beside me.

I continued to mope. My father finally said, “Jamie, when will this day come again?” As a kid, I thought, “That’s easy, next week!” He said, “Try again.” I thought, “Ok, next month.” But that was wrong, too. So, I looked at my Dad and said, “This exact date, next year!” He shook his head and said, “Jamie, that’s next year. It’s not this day. This day will never come again.”

This realization rocked me and my kid brain. I could brood about how cruel life was, but that day would never come back to me. Each day is different. Each day is a challenge. Each day is a gift. We sometimes have to be roughly reminded of this simple fact that I learned when I was a kid.

Kol Nidre is just such a reminder. This night is not the same as last year’s or any other’s. The Torah we read tomorrow declares:

“You are standing here **this** day, all of you, before Adonai, your God...to enter into the covenant of Adonai, your God...I make this covenant...not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before Adonai, our God *and with all those who are not with us here **this day***. (Deuteronomy 30.9-14, excerpted)

Our Sages ask who were the ones who were “not standing here with our people this day?” They give us a bold answer, one that defies logic. You and me! All the future generations of our people! Born Jews and converts! Those who choose to stand with us, Jewish or not.

All of us, time travelers. We stand here this night, in this unique moment, a moment foreshadowed in the Torah. A moment that will never come again.

Atem nitzavim kul-chem ha-yom - “You are standing here, all of you, this day.”

Look around. I mean it. Look around. Look at the hundreds of people surrounding you right now. Think of the hundreds who [were/will be] here [earlier/later] than you. Add them all together. Two thousand people will stand here over this Yom Kippur, this holy moment.

All of us, this Kol Nidre. This day.

This is the 30th time I have stood with you, our Temple Sinai family, on Kol Nidre. This is the 30th time you have allowed me to speak to you from my heart about what is going on now in our Jewish lives. It is an extraordinary honor and responsibility and I stand before you this night humbled beyond words.

The humility does not only stem from inadequacy. It comes from knowing so many of you so well. We have lived through birth and death, b’nei mitzvah and weddings, through harrowing hospital crises and crowning personal achievements. We have shared injury, unspeakable sadness, remarkable recoveries, personal tales of endurance and sheer will.

When I wrestle with the verse, *Atem nitzavim kul-chem ha-yom*, I think of you, your stories. My heart overflows with them tonight. I would like to share four of them with you, but only with a caveat, a warning:

I have changed names and altered details of these accounts that I will share. Let no one here think that their private lives were opened for public display this night. All these stories are composites of many individuals and families and our shared times over the last 3 decades.

Atem nitzavim kul-chem ha-yom - Who all is standing here this night?

A couple, Shayna and Sam, stand here having achieved 55 years of loving marriage. They weathered the storm of raising children, mastering challenges, careers and crises. They have danced life's dance so well they know each other's moves without thinking.

But now the music has changed and they don't know how to dance the new steps. Health issues claim every moment of their time. Life is now an endless round of appointments with doctors, specialists and clinics. New medicines eat up their monthly budget.

Their children live out of town. The kids care, they call, they visit when they can. But Shayna and Sam have to handle all the challenges of daily living as they age into infirmity.

Sam is having trouble keeping his temper. He forgets things constantly. He can't hold a fork without dropping it, which gets him even angrier. And he refuses to accept help because he feels embarrassed. So, Shana gets embarrassed instead when he loses it in public.

They are bewildered and scared, afraid that their savings will run out and leave them poor and dependent on their children. They are afraid as they have never been before. They stand here on Kol Nidre in silent **fear** this night. We feel for them and we offer them help, help that they will politely refuse because they are still so proud.

Atem nitzavim kul-chem ha-yom. Who all is standing here this night?

Antonia stands here this night. Her husband left her 10 years ago but she has rebounded nicely. She is in her early 50's, her kids having flown the coop. After having endured the shock of rejection and the difficulty of living on one income, Antonia found her groove. She went to community college. She learned computer programming and latched on with a start-up that was looking for people who had both computer and life-skills, which Antonia has in spades. So, she makes a very nice living!

But beyond her success, she is nagged by a sense that she is missing something. Not socially. Antonia has never lacked for friends or dates. No, she wonders what it is all for? The struggle, the pain, even the joy of her life. What does any of it mean?

Antonia was surprised when she found some of her answers here, at this synagogue. She hated her Temple as a kid. But, now, searching to fill a hole inside, she found she was ready to look at Judaism and frankly, at life, with a different set of questions than before. She no longer insists that if our tradition isn't all true then it's all false.

She's learned that Bible stories for children were just that, stories for children. Antonia was amazed to find that the Torah is unafraid to take on mature issues of family conflict, violence, sex, greed power and privilege.

She finally asked me, "Why didn't you teach me any of this when I was a kid? It would have been helpful to know that the Torah was not merely fables!"

I have to admit that I did the Rabbi thing. I answered her question with question: "Antonia, did you want to have those kinds of discussions when you were 14? Maybe we taught you simple stories because you weren't interested in bigger issues?"

This made her furious. "Of course, I did! I wanted the hard stuff! No one would answer my questions about why Abraham agreed to sacrifice Isaac or why God wanted to flood the whole world! I wanted to be taken seriously and I wasn't!" Antonia is right. She wasn't taken seriously. She deserved to be.

Antonia speaks for an entire generation that grew up in the 50's, 60's and 70's. I have to admit that, for the most part, the Jewish world failed that generation. We thought that if we simply taught holidays and Bible stories our job was done. We were wrong. They deserved more. They deserved the best and most challenging of what Judaism has to offer.

And yet, Antonia is here tonight. She is **passionate** about how being Jewish will touch her heart, not roll off her back when she leaves here after Yom Kippur.

I invite her and all of you who believe you were not taken seriously when you were younger, to come to my new Wednesday class, "The Rabbi's Class," and you will be treated like the adult you are.

We will not shy away from controversy. Ask about the meaning of Torah! Ask about Jewish values! Ask about Israel! Ask your toughest questions! Together we will search for and find answers. Not just in my

class! Bring to the hard stuff to Rabbi Gorban in her Adult B'nai Mitzvah class. Bring it to Cantor Berman in her B'reisheet class. Don't spare us. We're ready for you! Bring it on. It's your birthright. Don't squander it.

Atem nitzavim kul-chem ha-yom. Who all is standing here this night?

Dan is a young man of 22 and he has little patience for tradition and commentary. He wants direct action to do *tikkun olam*, world repair. He doesn't want to learn Torah or sing Jewish music. He thinks we should be out in the streets confronting injustice. Everything is secondary to Dan.

Dan wants to know why I have not taken to the streets with him, joined the resistance, put on the pussy hat he keeps trying to give me. When I try to explain, he interrupts. He says that my words are merely excuses. It is a direct challenge, one that makes me angry and want to raise my voice in response.

Dan feels we should confront Israel every day over the Occupation of Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. He demands to know why don't I join him in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanction movement? For him, BDS is so obvious as not to brook discussion. It's something we can *do*, he explains.

I envy Dan his certainty, his absolute conviction that what he believes is right and what he is doing is for the good. It's not like I don't remember being that certain...

1971. We took to the streets to end the war in Vietnam. The police confronted us. When I saw the police, I made my way to the back of the crowd, to safety. My friends were arrested. I was embarrassed that I was afraid.

I did show up in court to support them. Almost everyone was charged with blocking traffic and the cases were dismissed en masse. Except my friend, Danny Levine, son of one of our Rabbis. He was charged with the crime of, "Lurking with Intent To Commit Mischief." The judge threw that out, too.

All of this flashed through my mind as Dan castigated me for not taking to the streets with him. When he finished I told him wherever hatred

marches in Pittsburgh I'll be proud to march with him. But no violence! To my surprise, Dan agreed.

This summer our group from Temple Sinai protested in the streets of Jerusalem. We joined a protest of more than 1,200 against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. We protested his abandoning us non-Orthodox Jews on the issues of conversion and our right to pray, men and women together, at the Kotel, the Western Wall. I think Dan would approve.

But Dan and I will never agree on BDS. I insist that history, context and complexity matter. Over one hundred years of history and hatred matter. I refuse to have the Israel I love reduced to a slogan or an easy, dangerous platitude like BDS, which hurts working Palestinians and endangers Israelis' lives.

I reject right-wing racist Israelis. I want Dan to reject those who want nothing less than Israel's destruction. I am passionately attached to the middle path, two states for two peoples, living in limited peace with imperfect justice.

That said, I love Dan. He is filled with **anger** over the stupidity, hatred, racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, the moral blindness that he sees in our country. And he is standing here tonight.

So, he and I will work with PIIN, Repair The World and Bend The Arc to change Pittsburgh for the better. We will work with Seeds of Peace, The Merkaz-Kerama Center, Sikkuy, the Israel Religious Action Center and others groups to advance the tolerance and peace in Israel, person by person.

Atem nitzavim kul-chem ha-yom. Who all is standing here this night?

Mary is a convert, having come to Judaism more than a decade ago. She is tired of having people say to her, "You don't look Jewish." She has no patience for people who question why she has a Christian first name. She could just change it to Miriam, from which Mary is derived, but she feels she shouldn't have to change her name to be accepted in the tribe.

A tribe. That's what Mary sees. When she began her studies, she hoped she could become Jewish and be accepted. After her conversion, she asked me: Now that I'm Jewish, can I pray to the God of our patriarchs and

matriarchs, Abraham, Sarah and everybody, even if I am not descended from them?

We looked up the answer together. Moses Maimonides, the Rambam as he is known, our greatest medieval sage, greatest of our philosopher and lawgiver, was asked the exact same question by a convert.

And Rambam answers from 900 years ago, no, you are not allowed to pray to the God of our patriarchs and matriarchs. No, you are *required to*. He ruled that they are now your ancestors and you have every right and privilege that a born Jew has. Mary is triumphant. The answer she has been looking for is right there in a document from the 12th century!

Mary no longer grimaces when people say stupid things about her name because she knows she belongs. Nothing anyone can say will make her question herself tonight. The great Maimonides validates Mary and her **longing** to be Jewish and that's good enough for her. And me. And should be for all of us.

Fear, Passion, Anger, Longing. All are here tonight, in addition to our aching to find sweet forgiveness.

I think I misinterpreted our verse tonight. Maybe it does not mean "You are **all** standing here this day." No. We should read it as, "all of you." **All of each of you**. All of what is inside of you, your fear, your passion, your anger and your longing. To be authentic Jews today we need all of you, every aspect of you. I say that our very survival depends on it!

Leon Wieseltier is a major thinker in American Jewish life. To him, there is a major threat to our survival is not anti-Semitism from the right or left, nor is it agitation against Israel. It is our refusal to embrace our heritage; to learn, to engage, to drink in our unique Jewish knowledge, the source of the values we claim to uphold.

Wieseltier reminds us that four generations ago, our great-grandparents were impoverished in goods but rich in Jewish knowledge and spirit. Today, many of us are rich in goods, but incapable of listing the books of the Torah, much less what is inside them. And Hebrew? Forget about it!

This is why it is so critical that "Atem Nitzavim Kul-chem," all of us standing here tonight, pour our fear, passion, anger and longing into embracing our heritage, engaging with it, learning some of it, making it our

own. Being Jewish is not a preference, like favoring bagels over baguettes. No, it is an essential way of being for all who are willing to stand here, tonight and claim it for ourselves.

Atem Nitzavim – All of you who are standing here this night. Kulchem – all that is in you, not just all of you together!

Atem Nitzavim – All of you, your psyche, your soul, your longings, your joy, your despair!

Atem Nitzavim - All of your intellect, curiosity, and spiritual searching!

Atem Nitzavim – All of us. All of each of us this night. This night which will never, ever come again.

I finally got in the car with Dad. We drove home in silence. When we got out, I begged him not to tell Mom that I had been such a jerk. He smiled and said, “Our secret, ok?” I threw my arms around his neck and kissed his cheek, a moment that will live forever in memory.

This day, our 30th Kol Nidre together, will live in memory as well. Thank you for opening your hearts and lives to me. Thank for forgiving my mistakes. Thank you for standing together with me, here and now. This Kol Nidre. This day, the day we stand together, all of us, all of all of us. All of all of us.