

## Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, when we are closest to G-d and most connected to the essence of our souls. It's the holiest day of the year, when Jews come together, fasting and praying as one

### 1. Yom Kippur Lights

Even though there is no food to be had on Yom Kippur, we still dress the table with a festive cloth and light candles before the onset of the holy day. We say two blessings on the candles: one for the candles, and the other, the Shehecheyanu blessing, thanks G-d for enabling us to reach this milestone.

### 2. Pre-Yom Kippur Blessings

There is a time-honored custom to bless one's children before Yom Kippur begins. Although there is no required formula, it is customary to say:

**For a son:** *"May G-d make you like Ephraim and Menashe."*

**For a daughter:** *"May G-d make you like Sarah, Rivkah, Rachel and Leah."*

**For all children:** *"May God bless you and watch over you. 'May God shine His countenance upon you and be gracious to you. 'May God turn His countenance toward you and grant you peace."*

### 3. Kol Nidre

Before sunset on the eve of [Yom Kippur](#), the congregation gathers in the synagogue. The Ark is opened and two people take from it two [Torah scrolls](#). Then they take their places, one on each side of the [cantor](#), and the three (forming a [bet din](#) or rabbinical court) recite:

By the authority of the Court on High and by authority of the court down here, by the permission of One Who Is Everywhere and by the permission of this congregation, we hold it lawful to pray with sinners.

This invitation to outcasts is not specifically for Kol Nidre but for the whole of [Yom Kippur](#), it being obvious that when even sinners join in repenting, the occasion is worthy of Divine clemency.

The cantor then chants the passage beginning with the words *Kol Nidre* with its touching melodic phrases, and, in varying intensities from pianissimo (quiet) to fortissimo (loud), repeats twice (for a total of three iterations) lest a latecomer not hear them. The following provides the traditional Aramaic text, which (except for the one line connecting one Day of Atonement to another) is nearly identical in both [Ashkenazi](#) and Sefardic liturgies, with an English translation:

Aramaic Text	English translation
<p>כָּל נְדָרֵי, וְאַסְרֵי, וְשְׁבוּעֵי, וְחֲרָמֵי,          וְקוֹנָמֵי, וְקוֹנָסֵי, וְכַנּוּיֵי, דְנִדְרָנָא,          וְדֵאֲשְׁתַּבְעָנָא, וְדֵאֲחֲרָמְנָא עַל          נַפְשָׁתָנָא. • מִיּוֹם כְּפוּרִים שְׁעֵבֵר עַד          יוֹם כְּפוּרִים זֶה, וְ-• ♦ מִיּוֹם כְּפוּרִים          זֶה עַד יוֹם כְּפוּרִים הַבָּא עָלֵינוּ          לְטוֹבָה. ♦ בְּכֹל הַיּוֹם אֲחֲרָטְנָא בְּהוֹן.          כְּלֵהוֹן יְהוֹן שְׁרוֹן, שְׁבִיקוֹן, שְׁבִיתוֹן,          בְּטֵלן וּמְבַטְלִין, לָא שְׁרִירִין, וְלָא קִיְמִין.          נִדְרָנָא לָא נְדָרֵי, וְאַסְרָנָא לָא אֲסָרֵי,          וְשְׁבוּעָתָנָא לָא שְׁבוּעוֹת.</p>	<p>All vows, and prohibitions, and oaths, and consecrations, and <i>konams</i> and <i>konasi</i> and synonymous terms,<sup>[5]</sup> that we may vow, or swear, or consecrate, or prohibit upon ourselves, •from the previous Day of Atonement until this Day of Atonement and ...• ♦ from this Day of Atonement until the [next] Day of Atonement that will come for our benefit. ♦ Regarding all of them, we repudiate them. All of them are undone, abandoned, cancelled, null and void, not in force, and not in effect. Our vows are no longer vows, and our prohibitions are no longer prohibitions, and our oaths are no longer oaths.</p>

The leader and the congregation then recite Numbers 15:26 ("May all the people of Israel be forgiven, including all the strangers who live in their midst, for all the people are in fault."). This verse is considered part and parcel of the Kol Nidre recitation,<sup>[6]</sup> and different regional traditions<sup>[6]</sup> have woven it into the recitation in various ways.<sup>[7]</sup>

The leader then says: "O pardon the iniquities of this people, according to Thy abundant mercy, just as Thou forgave this people ever since they left Egypt." And then the leader and congregation say together three times, "The Lord said, 'I pardon them according to your words.'" (quoting Numbers 14:20).

The Torah scrolls are then put back in the Ark, and the customary evening service begins.

### **Origin and history**

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The date of the composition of the declaration and its author are alike unknown; but it was in existence at the Geonic period (589–1038 CE). There was a common theory that it commenced during and because of a period of extreme persecution, in which Jews were forced at sword's point to convert (either to Christianity or Islam) and that Kol Nidre was supposed to nullify that forced conversion.

The tendency to make vows to God was strong in ancient Israel; the Torah found it necessary to caution against the promiscuous making of vows (Deuteronomy 23:23). As one commentary puts it, "it is considered a fearsome sin for one to violate his vows and oaths and the Sages regard it as an extremely serious matter for one to approach the Days of Judgment [meaning the High Holy Days] with such violation in hand.

Rash vows to God that for whatever reason were not fulfilled created painful religious and ethical difficulties for those who had made them; this led to an earnest desire for dispensation from them. Therefore, halakha allowed for the absolution from a vow ('hattarat nedarim'), which might be performed only by a scholar, or an expert on the one hand, or by a board of three Jewish laymen on the other.

This rite declared that the petitioners, who were seeking reconciliation with God, solemnly retracted their vows and oaths they had made to God during the period intervening between the previous Yom Kippur and the present one; this rite made them null and void from the beginning, entreating in their stead pardon and forgiveness from God.

### **Adoption into the prayer services**

The readiness with which vows were made and the facility with which they were annulled by the scribes gave the Karaites an opportunity to attack rabbinic Jews. This may have encouraged the *geonim* (leaders of early medieval Babylonian

Jewry) to minimize the power of dispensation. Yehudai Gaon of Sura (760 CE), author of the *Halakot Pesukot*, forbade the study of the *Nedarim*, the Talmudic treatise on oaths. Thus the *Kol Nidre* was discredited in both of the Babylonian academies and was not accepted by them.<sup>[14]</sup>

Amram Gaon in his edition of the Siddur calls the custom of reciting the *Kol Nidre* a foolish one ("minhag shetut"). According to others however, it was customary to recite the formula in various lands of the Jewish dispersion, and it is clear likewise from Amram's Siddur that the usage was widespread as early as his time (9th century) in Spain. But the geonic practice of not reciting the *Kol Nidre* was long prevalent; it has never been adopted in the Catalan or in the Algerian ritual, nor in the French regions of Carpentras or Avignon.<sup>[15]</sup>

At one time it was widely believed that the *Kol Nidre* was composed by Spanish "Marranos", Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity, yet who secretly maintained their original faith. This idea has been shown to be incorrect, as the prayer pre-dates this era (circa 15th century) by many centuries. However, this prayer was indeed used by the Marranos and it is possible that its great significance and wide usage derives from this persecution.

As *Kol Nidre* clearly predated the Spanish Inquisition, it was supposed that it may have commenced during the Visigothic period in Spain (7th century),<sup>[17]</sup> but this theory has serious weaknesses, such as its adoption by Jewish communities around the world, even in liturgical communities that did not experience such persecution.<sup>[18]</sup> It may be that it was simply inspired by the Talmudic instructions about avoiding oaths.

A very different reason for *Kol Nidre* was suggested by the *Zohar*; God has already threatened and vowed terrible punishments upon the Jewish people for their sins, but by our own demonstration that we can unbind ourselves from vows using *Kol Nidre* we hope to persuade God to similarly annul His own vows of calamity. As stated in the Orot Sephardic mahzor:

According to the holy *Zohar*, *Kol Nidre* is recited on Yom Kippur because, at times, the Heavenly judgment is handed down as an 'avowed decree' for which there can normally be no annulment. By reciting the *Kol Nidre* annulment of vows at this time, we are asking of God that He favor us by annulling any negative decrees of judgment that await us, even though we are undeserving of such annulment.<sup>[19]</sup>

### **Adoption into Yom Kippur services**

Originally, the annulment of vows was performed on Rosh Hashana, the New Year, ten days before Yom Kippur. The Talmud says, "Who wished to cancel his vows of a whole year should arise on Rosh Hashanah and announce, 'All vows that I will pledge in the coming year shall be annulled.'" There is, in fact, a ritual that is supposed to take place the day before Rosh Hashana (because one does not do such chores *on* a holy day), known as hatarat nedarim (annulment of vows), where the individual presents himself before a tribunal of three and recites a Hebrew formula, very different from that of Kol Nidrei, asking for annulment of all vows.

So, from a time before the composition of Kol Nidrei there was a corresponding ritual intended for Rosh Hashana. It is believed that Kol Nidrei was added to the liturgy of Yom Kippur, ten days after Rosh Hashana, because that service is much more solemn, because Yom Kippur is entirely attuned to the theme of repentance and remorse, because (despite the great importance of Rosh Hashana) Yom Kippur services are better attended, and perhaps because Yom Kippur itself is once referred to as Rosh Hashana in Scripture (Ezekiel 40:1).

Such reasons were enumerated by, among others, Asher ben Jehiel (early 14th century).<sup>[21]</sup> There may be an additional reason — perhaps the annulment of vows was moved to, or repeated at, the beginning of Yom Kippur in order to minimize the risk that new vows would be made in the ten-day interval between the repudiation of vows on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and, more than the rather dry legalistic Rosh Hashana declaration, Kol Nidre includes an emotional expression of penitence that sets the theme for Yom Kippur.

### **Permission for sinners**

Together with the *Kol Nidre* another custom developed: the recital before the *Kol Nidre* of the formula mentioned beginning "Bi-yeshivah shel ma'alah" (*By authority of the Heavenly Court...*), which has been translated above, and which gives permission to transgressors of the Law or to those under a ban "to pray with the congregation", or, according to another version, to the congregation "to pray with the transgressors of the Law."<sup>[22]</sup> This addition is traced to Meir of Rothenburg (d. 1293), and was subsequently endorsed by the Rabbi of Mainz, Jacob ben Moses Moelin, "the Maharil" (died 1427), and substantiated by the Talmudic teaching that "Any community fast in which sinners do not

participate, is not considered a [valid] fast." From Germany this custom spread to southern France, Spain, Greece, and probably to northern France, and was in time generally adopted.<sup>[25]</sup>

It has been suggested<sup>[26]</sup> that Kol Nidre originated with this invitation to *avaryanim* (sinners) to join the congregation's prayers, as an effort to inspire their return or at least prevent losing them completely, rather than as a mechanism for coping with Christian or Muslim persecution.

### **Change of tense from past to future**

An important alteration in the wording of the *Kol Nidre* was made by Rashi's son-in-law, Rabbi Meir ben Samuel (early 12th century), who changed the original phrase "from the last Day of Atonement until this one" to "from this Day of Atonement until the next". Thus, the dispensation was not a posteriori and concerning unfulfilled obligations of the past year, but was *a priori*, making reference to vows one might not be able to fulfill or might forget to observe during the ensuing year. Meir ben Samuel likewise added the words "we do repent of them all", since real repentance is a condition of dispensation.

The alteration made by Meir ben Samuel, which agreed with Isaac ibn Ghayyat's view, was accepted in the German, northern French, and Polish rituals and in those dependent on them, but not in the Spanish, Roman, and Provençal rituals.

The old version is, therefore, usually called the "Sephardic". The old and new versions are sometimes found side by side. Because it is traditional to recite Kol Nidrei three times, some Sephardic communities and even some Ashkenazic communities (especially in Israel) make a point of reciting both versions (usually referring to the previous Yom Kippur in the first two iterations and the next Yom Kippur in the third).

### **Method of recitation**

As to the manner in which the hazzan (cantor) is to recite the *Kol Nidrei*, the Mahzor Vitry (early 12th century) gives the following directions: "The first time he must utter it very softly like one who hesitates to enter the palace of the king to ask a gift of him whom he fears to approach; the second time he may speak somewhat louder; and the third time more loudly still, as one who is accustomed to dwell at court and to approach his sovereign as a friend."

The number of Torah-scrolls taken out for the *Kol Nidrei* varied according to different customs. In some places it was one; in others, two, three, seven, or even

all that the synagogue possesses. The first Torah-scroll taken out is called the *Sefer Kol Nidrei*.

Although *Kol Nidrei* is printed in every prayerbook for Yom Kippur, and it is commonly thought of as being the beginning of Yom Kippur, technically speaking it must be performed *before* the commencement of Yom Kippur, since such juridical business cannot take place on a holy day.

*Kol Nidrei* should be recited before sunset, since dispensation from a vow may not be granted on the Sabbath or on a feast-day, unless the vow refers to one of these days.

However, some communities (apparently Sephardic and in the minority) consider it proper to wait until nightfall, when Yom Kippur officially begins, before reciting Kol Nidre. The men of the congregation wear their prayer shawls, one of the few times in the year that these are worn in the evening.

### **Analysis**

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The vows and pledges being annulled by this ceremony are of a limited category.

As the ArtScroll Mahzor explains it: "There is a dangerous and erroneous misconception among some people that the *Kol Nidrei* nullification of vows—whether past or future—... gives people the right to break their word or to make insincere promises that will have no legal force. This is not the case.

The *Kol Nidrei* declaration can invalidate only vows that one undertakes on his own volition. It has *no* effect on vows or oath imposed by someone else, or a court. Also, the invalidation of future vows takes effect only if someone makes the vow without having in mind his previous *Kol Nidrei* declaration. But if he makes the vow with *Kol Nidrei* in mind—thus being openly insincere in his vow—the vow is in full force.

Moreover, as Rabbi Yechiel of Paris explained in a Disputation that took place before the King and Queen of France in 1240, "Only the erroneously broken vows are annulled, that nobody might commit the sin of intentionally breaking vows.

Philip Birnbaum, in his edition of the Mahzor, comments on this passage: "It refers to vows assumed by an individual for himself alone, where no other persons or interests are involved. Though the context makes it perfectly obvious that no vows or obligations towards others are implied, there have been many who were misled into believing that by means of this formula all their vows and oaths are annulled.

Kol Nidrei is not a prayer, it makes no requests and is not addressed to God, rather, it is a juristic declaration before the Yom Kippur prayers begin. It follows the juridical practice of requiring three men as a tribunal, the procedure beginning before sundown, and of the proclamation being announced three times.

#### **4. The Power of Five**

On Yom Kippur, the Torah instructs us to "afflict" ourselves, which means abstaining from an assortment of physical pleasures. There are two reasons for this: a) On this day, when our connection to God is brought to the fore, we are compared to angels, who have no physical needs. b) We afflict ourselves to demonstrate the extent of our regret for our past misdeeds.

Instead of focusing on the physical, the majority of the day is spent in the synagogue, devoted to repentance and prayer.

Five additional prohibitions are traditionally observed, as detailed in the Jewish oral tradition (*Mishnah* tractate *Yoma* 8:1).

The number five is a set number, relating to:

1. In the Yom Kippur section of the Torah, the word *soul* appears five times.
2. The soul is known by five separate names: soul, wind, spirit, living one and unique one.
3. Unlike regular days, which have three prayer services, Yom Kippur has five.
4. The Kohen Gadol rinsed himself in the mikveh (ritual bath) five times on Yom Kippur.

The prohibitions are the following:

1. No eating and drinking
2. No wearing of leather shoes
3. No bathing or washing
4. No anointing oneself with perfumes or lotions
5. No marital relations

A parallel has been drawn between these activities and the human condition according to the Biblical account of the expulsion from the garden of Eden. Refraining from these symbolically represents a return to a pristine state, which is the theme of the day.

By refraining from these activities, the body is uncomfortable but can still survive. The soul is considered to be the life force in a body. Therefore, by making one's body uncomfortable, one's soul is uncomfortable. By feeling pain one can feel how others feel when they are in pain. This is the purpose of the prohibitions.

It is also customary not to wear gold jewelry on Yom Kippur, as gold is reminiscent of the sin of the Golden Calf, and on the Day of Atonement – the day when we were *forgiven* for that egregious sin – we do not want to "remind" the Prosecutor (Satan) of our past sins.

### ***Fasting:***

- All adults over bar or bat mitzvah fast, including pregnant or nursing women.
- Healthy children should be educated to fast for a short amount of time, starting from the age of nine. They shouldn't be given to eat after sundown on the eve of Yom Kippur, and their breakfast should be slightly delayed.
- Fasting on Yom Kippur is of utmost importance. This is true even if in order to fast a person must spend the entire day resting in bed and will miss synagogue services.
- Someone who is ill, a woman who has recently given birth, an individual who needs to take medication, or a person of advanced age who feels it difficult to fast should consult with a rabbi.

Someone who upon a rabbi's instructions (based on the recommendation of a medical professional) needs to eat on Yom Kippur need not be dejected. The same God who made it a mitzvah for healthy people to fast on Yom Kippur also commanded that preservation of life and health is even more important than fasting. The healthy person fulfills a mitzvah by fasting; the ill person does a mitzvah by eating.

### ***Leather Footwear:***

We don't wear shoes or slippers if they contain any leather at all—whether in their uppers, in their soles or heels, or in an insert.

The prohibition applies to footwear only. Wearing a leather belt, kippah, or jacket presents no problem whatsoever.

Children, too, should be taught to wear non-leather footwear.

### ***Washing and Bathing:***

The prohibition against washing or bathing applies whether using hot or cold water, and even to washing only part of one's body. In the words of the Sages: "Even to insert a finger in cold water is forbidden."

Nevertheless, there are several exceptions to this rule. They are:

- It is permitted to wash hands upon exiting the lavatory.
- It is permitted to wash any area of the body that has become soiled.
- Upon awakening in the morning, one performs the ritual hand washing—but washes only until the knuckles.
- Before they administer the Priestly Blessing, the priests' hands are ritually washed in the normal fashion.
- It is permitted to wash one's hands before handling food.
- Someone who needs to bathe or wash for health reasons should consult a rabbi.

### **5. A Day to Forgive**

More than 3,300 years ago, after hearing from G-d at Sinai, the children of Israel sinned by creating and worshipping a golden calf. Moses came down from Mount Sinai, saw what had happened, and smashed the two tablets on which the Ten Commandments were engraved. Moses then ascended the mountain once again, and stayed there for 40 days, and then another 40 days. On the tenth day of the month of Tishrei he came down with a complete pardon as well as a second set of tablets. Ever since, the day of Moses's descent has been known as Yom Kippur, the day of forgiveness, an appropriate day to ask G-d (and others) to forgive us for anything we may have done wrong.

### **6. Pure White**

There is an ancient custom to wear white on Yom Kippur. This reminds us of the burial shrouds that all people wear eventually. But the white garments also remind us of the pristine angels to whom we are compared on this most sacred of days.

### **7. The 10 Martyrs of Yom Kippur**

The narrative of the Ten Martyrs graphically depicts the horrific death of ten sages at the hand of an evil Roman king nearly 2,000 years ago. Notable among the victims were Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel. This heart-rending

account describes deaths that were brought about on the altar of senseless hatred.

### **8. Five Prayers Services**

On an ordinary day, there are three daily prayers: Maariv (evening prayer), Shacharit (morning prayer) and Minchah (afternoon prayer).

On Shabbat and holidays, we add Musaf (additional prayer). Yom Kippur is the only day of the year when we pray Ne'ilah, the closing prayer, which is said as the sun is sinking in the west and this special day is coming to a close. Yizkor is also recited.

### **9. Vidui**

Confession in Judaism is called *Vidui* (Hebrew וִידוּי). There is also a commandment to repent on Yom Kippur. Accordingly, Yom Kippur is unique for the confessional, or *Vidui*, that is part of the prayer services.

The Yom Kippur confessional consists of two parts: a short confession beginning with the word *Ashamnu* (אָשָׁמנו, "we have sinned"), which is a series of words describing sin arranged according to the aleph-bet (Hebrew alphabetic order), and a long confession, beginning with the words *Al Cheyt* (עַל חַטָּא, "for the sin"), which is a set of 22 double acrostics, also arranged according to the aleph-bet.

### **10. The Final Blast**

The blowing of the *shofar* at the conclusion of Yom Kippur is the culmination of a day spent fasting and praying for a sweet new year. The blast is reminiscent of the *shofar* blasts that rang out when the Divine Presence departed from Mount Sinai. It also serves to remind everyone that the night following Yom Kippur is a

## **Mishnaic and Talmudic literature**

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The following summary of the Temple service is based on the traditional Jewish religious account described in Mishnah tractate Yoma, appearing in contemporary traditional Jewish prayer books for Yom Kippur, and studied as part of a traditional Jewish Yom Kippur worship service.<sup>[19]</sup>

While the Temple in Jerusalem was standing (from Biblical times through 70 CE), the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) was mandated by the Torah to perform a complex

set of special services and sacrifices for Yom Kippur to attain Divine atonement, the word "kippur" meaning "atone" in Hebrew. These services were considered to be the most important parts of Yom Kippur because through them the Kohen Gadol made atonement for all Jews and the world. During the service, the Kohen Gadol entered the Holy of Holies in the center of the Temple, the only time of the year that anyone went inside. Doing so required special purification and preparation, including five immersions in a *mikvah* (ritual bath), and four changes of clothing.

### **Recognition by the United Nations**

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Starting 2016 the United Nations officially recognizes Yom Kippur, stating that from then on no official meetings would take place on the day. As well, the United Nations stated that, beginning in 2016, they would have nine official holidays and seven floating holidays which each employee would be able to choose one of.<sup>[46]</sup> It stated that the floating holidays will be Yom Kippur, Day of Vesak, Diwali, GURPURAB, Orthodox Christmas, Orthodox Good Friday, and Presidents' Day.<sup>[46]</sup> This was the first time the United Nations officially recognized any Jewish holiday.