YOM KIPPUR EVE 5769

THE JOY OF TESHUVAH

At the beginning of our service tonight words were suspended as the haunting voice of the cello claimed our attention. Cecilia Tsan, Principal Cellist for the Long Beach Symphony, beautifully wove the musical phrases of Kol Nidre into a mesmerizing mist of memories and emotions. Alluring, enrapturing, transportive, the Kol Nidre melody works its magic on us, bringing us to a place in a way that words alone cannot. It returns us to a place of spiritual purity and centeredness.

The music achieves what the text of the Kol Nidre prayer by itself cannot quite attain: the alleviation of our anxiety about unfulfilled and perhaps forgotten promises on this eve of the Day of Atonement. The origins of the melody are lost in the shadows of ancient history. Yet, its effect has remained profoundly clear for centuries: to soothe us, to settle us into this moment, to draw us into the heart of Jewish tradition.

The power of Kol Nidre to help us return to a path of sacred living is recounted over and over again in stories from our history. For those who have been lost, it has been like a beacon in the middle of a fog, directing the traveler home.

Franz Rosenzweig, one of the greatest Jewish intellects to ever live, was one on whom Kol Nidre wove its magic. Like many European Jews of his generation, Rosenzweig, born at the end of the 19th century, grew up in a home that was nominally Jewish. His religious education was minimal. As a young man, he decided to convert to Christianity, which he viewed not as a rejection of but as a rational extension of Judaism. On Yom Kippur in 1913, as a way to ritualize his farewell to Judaism he attended Kol Nidre Services at a small orthodox synagogue in Berlin. Rosenzweig stumbled out of that service, transformed by the power of Kol Nidre. He passionately re-embraced Judaism and produced one of the most influential works of modern Jewish philosophy, *The Star of Redemption*.

A generation later millions of Jews who had survived the Holocaust wandered in search of communities and a way of life that had been shattered, like the windows of their homes and businesses on Kristallnacht.

One who emerged out of the fires of the Shoah was Reb Leizer. Liberated from Buchenwald by American forces, Reb Leizer paused at its gates and wondered, “Where should I go?" He harbored some glimmer of hope that his youngest son, whom he had smuggled out of the ghetto just before being deported, had survived.

Reb Leizer bought a hand organ and with it strapped to his back he began wandering the countryside. At each village he came to he would set the organ down and begin playing. Children would flock to his side. As they surrounded him, Reb Leizer would begin playing Kol Nidre. Immediately the faces of some of the children would reveal signs of recognition, of sadness, of longing. Reb Leizer would linger with those children, asking them, “Have you seen my son?” Always the response would be the same. With sorrow in their voices, they would say, “No, we haven’t seen him.”

After a while, Reb Leizer, rather than increasing their sadness, would speak to the yearning that he saw the Kol Nidre melody had evoked from deep within their souls. He began reassuring them that Judaism had survived and that the Jewish people together would find homes for each one of them. Though he was unable to find his son, Reb Leizer was credited with saving scores of Jewish children from despair and with restoring their faith.

At the end of his search, Reb Leizer took his organ and buried it in the ruins of a destroyed synagogue in a town in Poland and then went to Israel. People from that district of Poland say that at times they hear the tunes of a hand organ coming out of the earth, and among the tunes is the melody of Kol Nidre.

Kol Nidre’s power to cause a spiritual return was at the heart of the extraordinary journey of the great composer Arnold Schoenberg. Schoenberg, born in Vienna, converted to Christianity as a young man. Some years later, divorced and alone, he attended a synagogue with some friends on Yom Kippur. Like Rosenzweig before him, Schoenberg emerged from that service determined to return to Jewish life. In 1933 in a ceremony at the Rue de Copernic synagogue in Paris, Schoenberg, with Marc Chagall serving as one of his witnesses, formally re-embraced Judaism. So profound had been the effect of Kol Nidre on his very soul that Schoenberg threw himself into his own musical composition of the liturgy. His Kol Nidre, Opus No. 39, had its world premiere in Los Angeles on September 22, 1938, just two weeks before Kristallnacht. Schoenberg intended his piece to reflect the power of the Jewish people and the dignity of teshuvah in the face of the growing Nazi menace.

In each of these cases – Rosenzweig, Schoenberg, and the children who flocked to Reb Leizer – it was the music of Kol Nidre that worked the magic of a return.

That it is the music which carries this moment to resolution is fitting. For the entire complement of Yom Kippur services may be experienced as a rich and compelling dramatic opera, at the heart of which is a story about a conflict between two brothers: Moses and Aaron.

Indeed, in our libretto, the machzor, the text immediately after Kol Nidre reads "Please, pardon the iniquity of this people.…" This language evokes the episode of the golden calf, where the word "pardon" is used in the Torah for the first time. The Biblical setting is that of a community frenzied with disorientation, searching madly for leadership and direction. And staring at each other across the chasm of this frantic assembly are Moses and Aaron, each responding to a different voice of urgency.

Moses responds to the voice of God. Through his fervent embrace of the Ten Commandments, Moses embodies rigorous and absolute adherence to the law. He endures 40 days and 40 nights on the harsh cliffs of Mount Sinai. His exposure to the raw elements of this divine encounter leaves him physically transformed forever. So radiant is his face from absorbing God's voice that the people can hardly bear to look at him without there being a veil over his face. He burns too brightly for them. He illuminates aspects of themselves the people would rather have remain obscured in the shadows of their lives. And upon his return from the mountain top, Moses gazes at the frivolousness coursing through the community and, deeming the people unworthy to receive the law, smashes the tablets on which it is inscribed.

Aaron responds to the voice of human beings. He feels sorry for the people stumbling about in their newly acquired freedom. They demand an immediate answer to their anxieties. Aaron is willing to make some compromises for the sake of possibly bringing some measure of comfort to the people. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad to accept their jewelry. It's just a small thing to melt it down. Maybe taking the time to cast a golden calf would give the people an opportunity to calm down and come to their senses.

But time runs out. Aaron's compromises produce the abomination of an idol. And his inner moral rupture is expressed externally by his brother's demonstration that even small compromises can in their accumulation shatter a way of life.

Every generation since Sinai has confronted this tension between unyielding adherence to principle and the desire to make some small accommodations in the face of social pressures. The Yom Kippur services display this dynamic. Tomorrow afternoon we will read about the Ten Martyrs who, in the face of Roman oppression, cried out: "How survive without the Tree of Life? Why live when the soul is dead?" They chose death over abandonment of Torah.

Yet tonight's Kol Nidre service probably originated with the Marranos, the Conversos, clandestine Jews whose hearts were torn between their public conversion to Christianity or to Islam and their secret fidelity to Jewish existence. Kol Nidre seems designed to acknowledge, pay homage to, and redeem those who have made compromises.

And now the song is sung for us. Each of us has made some accommodations along the way with our sacred teachings: turned a deaf ear to someone in need; spoken more harshly than we should have; spent less time with a loved one than we could have; abused our environment; ignored the newcomer among us.

Yet the melody of Kol Nidre spins a web of enchantment designed not to castigate us for our failures but to remind us of our goodness. The English and Hebrew words used in our prayer book for this process convey profoundly different dynamics. The English word "repentance" comes from the Latin "poenitire," which means "to make sorry," which in turn is from "poena," "pain." In Old French "repentir" means "to feel regret for sins or crimes." Repentance implies a recognition of past shortcomings and a commitment to change in the future. With repentance, it is the awareness of our imperfections that impels us to alter our behavior. We resolve to become a new person.

By contrast, the Hebrew word "teshuvah" is not about becoming a new person. Built on the Hebrew verb *lashuv*, "to return," teshuvah is about returning to the old, to one's original nature. Underlying the concept of teshuvah is the understanding that we are, in essence, good. Seen in this light, what motivates us to teshuvah is not our inadequacies, but rather our positive inner core. While repentance is usually associated with sadness and feelings of regret and remorse, teshuvah is characterized by joy. It is a return to a spiritual center of calm and goodness that exists within us.

Listen again to the Kol Nidre melody. Hear not only the plaintive cry but also the uplifting tone of optimism. It is the voice of an entire tradition calling out to us, seeking to draw us back to our better selves. If we allow ourselves to be swept up in its mist of remembrance and promise, we will discover ourselves on a path that leads to the heart of a way of life whose purpose is the sanctification of all life, the establishment of justice in every land and the fulfillment of peace in every heart. And may we all find healing through this return.