

When I was a child, I loved the classic Disney movie, Pinocchio. I loved that song, *“I got no strings to hold me down,”* I loved Geppetto, but most of all, I loved Pinocchio’s adventures and his final transformation into a real boy.

Sure, there were lessons along the way, most clearly about not lying or risk your nose growing. But, overall, as a child, Pinocchio was just a fun story for me. I cannot remember when, but at some point, it occurred to me that there was at least one similarity between Pinocchio and a story I had learned in religious school.

Pinocchio, in an effort to save his maker, Geppetto, finds himself in the belly of a whale. The similarity is, of course, to Jonah. Tomorrow afternoon, we will be reading the book of Jonah. While he did find himself in the belly of a large fish, the use of a fish in this story is about the length to which Jonah will go to hide.

As a literary work, Jonah is quite remarkable. As soon as Jonah is called by God to go and prophesize to the people of Nineveh, he runs away and hides from his responsibility. Jonah makes his way to the Jaffa port and boards a ship going to Tarshish, a town that is literally on the edge of the known world. A storm comes and this section of the story ends with Jonah being thrown overboard by the crew after admitting the reason for the stormy sea was his desire to escape God, to hide from God.

Throughout these initial scenes, there is a recurring Hebrew word, *yarad*, he went down. Jonah went down to Jaffa, the port. He goes down into the boat, and finally as the storm begins to ravage the vessel, Jonah goes down into the hold of the ship. As if he had not gone down enough, Jonah is thrown overboard by the crew of the ship and God appoints a huge fish to swallow him, it is clear that he has gone down as far as he can. It is as though God is saying, *“You want to see what it feels like to go down? You like the belly of a ship, how about the belly of a fish!”*

After a prayer of contrition Jonah is spewed out of the fish and finds himself on dry land once again. God tells him to go to Nineveh, and finally Jonah listens. Jonah arrives in the city, walking through the streets and calling out *“Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overturned!”* As soon as Jonah’s message is delivered, the people of Nineveh repent and God decides not to destroy the city.

Until this point, we have only been able to infer why Jonah was running from his responsibility. He never stated why he didn’t want to prophesize to the people of Nineveh, he just tried to hide himself. Now that the city has repented and God has decided to spare the people, we find Jonah sulking. Jonah is upset and essentially says to God, *“Isn’t this exactly what I said was going to happen, God?!? Nineveh would hear my message and repent. I knew you would forgive them because you are forgiving, kind and compassionate.”*

Jonah delivered his message and the people changed. It would seem that Jonah could declare “mission accomplished,” but he has the exact opposite reaction. Jonah is perturbed by his calling. As a prophet, it is his responsibility to move people and encourage them to change, but internally, Jonah is motivated by a sense of justice, not compassion. Jonah, more than any other, is the reluctant prophet.

It is Jonah’s reluctance that is the most human thing about him. His attempt to hide himself, to bury himself so far down, so far away from the truth he knows that makes him such a believable character. I imagine we all know the feeling of reluctance, the weight of knowing we should and must do something that we don’t want to do. Most of us can directly relate to Jonah’s literal spiral downward, his avoidance of fulfilling his call, his hiding from responsibility. It is likely that at least some of us can even relate to Jonah’s feelings in our own most intimate relationships.

In many ways, what we have been doing since we began Rosh Hashanah, since we began thinking about ways we missed the mark this year, ways we need to ask for forgiveness, people we need to ask forgiveness from, has all been about coming out of our own hiding, confronting our own truth we know is there. Yom Kippur is all about taking off the mask, looking deeply in the mirror of our souls and learning to be the best of who we are, the person we are meant to be. Liturgically, Jonah is not the only time this we are reminded of this. The prayer we are about to chant, Kol Nidre is also fundamentally about this idea.

As I am sure you have noticed, I am not giving this sermon in the traditional spot during the service. I am giving it as we approach one of our most famous prayers, Kol Nidre. The famous Ashkinazi music for Kol Nidre is probably Judaism’s most recognizable tune, it is famous the world over. Even “Beethoven incorporated the opening motive of Kol Nidre into the sixth movement of his string quartet in C-sharp Minor, opus 131”¹

I am sure, for many of us here tonight, it would be as if Yom Kippur never really happened if Kol Nidre was not heard. And just to emphasize its importance, our service tonight is never referred to as Erev Yom Kippur, as the evening of Rosh Hashanah is called, it is always just called Kol Nidre. The funny thing is that Kol Nidre actually isn’t a prayer at all.

No, its not written in Hebrew and it does not follow any of the classic prayer formulas. Kol Nidre is a legal pronouncement, an Aramaic text that clears us of any vows or oaths we have made over the last year and in the coming year. Semantically, the motzi is far more spiritual than Kol Nidre. In the motzi, and most other well-known Jewish liturgy, we find a combination of praise and thanks. In our lengthier prayers, we expound on how

¹ Hoffman, Lawrence A. *All these vows: Kol Nidre*. Woodstock, VT, Jewish Lights Pub., 2011.

great God is. Kol Nidre has none of that. Kol Nidre is all about us. All about the things we say we are going to do, and do not. So why this prayer? Why is this the spiritual highlight for so many Jews?

Clearly, that well-known piece of music is one of the reasons. And as far as Jewish music is concerned, it is one of our oldest pieces of music. Scholars debate just how old it is, but they are certain it is old. Our oldest musical manuscript comes from the 18th century, which is not so old, but in general, the oldest Jewish musical manuscripts are from the 18th century. There is, however, reference to Kol Nidre being sung three times, as is traditionally done, in an eleventh century French machzor known as Machzor Vitry.

There continues to be references in 14th, 15th and 16th century texts to a well-known tune, and, Dr. Mark Kligman, a professor of Jewish ethnomusicology at UCLA, deduces that the melody was so closely connected to the text that there was most likely very little change to the music. While not a literal expression, we call this kind of Jewish music, *Misinaï*, from Sinai.

The history of Kol Nidre was not always so well-known throughout the Jewish world. For many years, Kol Nidre was not heard in Reform synagogues. It was not until the 1940's that Reform Jews began hearing Kol Nidre again. Early Reformers were concerned with a problematic idea like the annulment vows.

Maybe more important than the rejection of annulment of vows was the reality that Kol Nidre had led to significant hostile literature attacking Jews for being unreliable in their commitments. Then, something interesting began to happen. In the 1940's, rabbis began giving sermons on Kol Nidre and making a connection to the Conversos of Spain.

Conversos were Spanish Jews who converted to Christianity in the 15th century but who secretly continued to practice Judaism. It certainly made sense in their minds; here is a prayer that is meant to annul vows. Who are the Jews that really need this annulment? Jews who have taken vows to other religions to spare their lives, of course. However, there is mention of Kol Nidre from periods much earlier than the time of our expulsion from Spain.

Kol Nidre is discussed in rabbinic literature well before Christianity ever gained a foothold in Spain. How did this come to be? How could the Jewish community come to think that Kol Nidre was a response to forced conversion in Spain?

There was a mistake in the translation in the statement that comes just before the actual Kol Nidre prayer. B'shiva shel malah, U'V'sihvah shel matah, Al Da'at Hamakom V'al Da'at haKahal, Anu Matirin l'hitpallel Im Ha'Avaryanim. By the authority of the heavenly court and the earthly court: "With the foreknowledge of the God of time and space and with the agreement of this congregation, we give permission to pray with habitual sinners."

It turns out, that last word, Avaryanim, can also be translated as Iberians. Rabbi Ed Feinstein goes into depth regarding his understanding of the myth of Kol Nidre and the conversos². After 1492, when all the Jews were expelled from Spain, and many made their way across Europe, we have to imagine their Ashkenazi counterparts, while accepting of their brethren, knew that many had taken oaths to Christianity. The Ashkenazi Jews had no way of knowing who had taken vows to Christianity and who had not. Therefore, as the myth goes, the beginning of Kol Nidre acknowledges the 500-pound gorilla in the room, giving permission for the rest of the supplicants to pray with them. But, just because rabbis got it wrong in 1940's sermons doesn't mean that all is lost with this translation issue.

If we play out the myth a little further, we realize the Conversos were always in hiding. When in Spain, they hid from the Spanish by being Christian on the outside and Jewish on the inside. When they immigrated to other parts of Europe, they hid from the other Jews around them. They did not want to admit what they had done while living in Spain. Rabbi Feinstein continues in his essay, we are all Iberians. We are all hiding something. Just as we all have sinned this year, each of us is hiding. We are hiding from those we love and from those we despise. We are hiding from ourselves. The plans we had laid out so carefully do not always come to fruition. We hide because life sometimes does not turn out the way we expect. We hide because sometimes the truth hurts, sometimes it just feels easier to stay hidden, sometimes, like Jonah we reject the call we hear and run away from who we really are inside.

The funny thing about Kol Nidre and the anti-Semitic literature that appeared in response to the prayer is that Kol Nidre isn't even about vows or commitments made between people. All of the vows and oaths that Kol Nidre addresses are those that a person makes between him or herself and God. These private vows have little effect on other people. We are asking forgiveness for things that only affect us.

Each of us has a prophetic calling from our hearts, "Don't hide from yourself. Don't hide from the people you love and care about." As we hear the words of Kol Nidre, may we be motivated to come out of our hiding because we have compassion for ourselves, because compassion is what we deserve.

² Hoffman, Lawrence A. *All these vows: Kol Nidre*. Woodstock, VT, Jewish Lights Pub., 2011.