

PERMISSION TO PRAY WITH SINNERS
[thanks to Rabbis Jack Riemer and Aubrey Glaser]

There is something about the Yom Kippur evening service that has always puzzled me. Why does the Kol Nidre prayer - arguably the focus of the whole evening, so much so that we name the entire service after it - why does this prayer occur at the very beginning of the service?

Dramatically, choreographically, if that's a word, it makes no sense. We all know that any event, including a worship service - maybe especially a worship service - is supposed to build toward the climax, what Larry Hoffman calls "the ritual moment." This is the moment of completion which provides catharsis or joy or solace. It doesn't work if the most important part happens at the beginning. So why do we put it there?

Cynics will say that it's a way to make sure that everyone gets to Temple on time. I think there's probably a better reason, and it has to do both with the meaning of Kol Nidre, and with the declaration we make immediately before reciting it.

We really begin the service by saying: "*Anu matirin lihitpalel im ha avaryonim* - We hereby declare it permissible to pray with those who have gone astray." Before just about anything else, we say that we are permitted to pray with those who have made mistakes. But of course, just about by definition, that applies to all of us. We have all strayed in some way; that's why we're here. So why, suddenly, do we need to say this before going on with Kol Nidre?

This piece of the liturgy, the permission to pray with sinners, may go all the way back to the first century, in Jerusalem. There was, you may recall, a small to-do about whether a certain Jew who had been crucified was or was not the messiah. The people who thought he was not the messiah were Jews. The people who thought he was the messiah - were Jews. This was an internal struggle, a theological debate among Jews. Jews who lived and worked together. Jews who prayed together. At some point the Jewish leadership, the majority of whom thought he was not the messiah, began to wonder: if the ones who believe in Jesus as the son of God are committing blasphemy, perhaps it would be a good idea to steer clear of them, especially during prayer services. This isn't your everyday, run-of-the-mill sin. This

has to do with the very nature of God. So perhaps God will be unhappy with us for letting them join in. Perhaps God will not hear us if we knowingly mingle our prayers with theirs.

Though it was a serious theological question, the discussions may not have been quite that high-minded. You can just imagine the Ritual committee meetings where this was discussed – “I’m not setting foot in the sanctuary if those people are allowed in...;” “those idiots are going to ruin it for everyone.”

And then they came up with a way to – at least temporarily – hold the community together. They decided that it was okay to pray with people who were wrong about how they believed in God, and they declared it to be so. I like to think that they did it because they realized that it was not their job to judge others’ theology – that was up to God. But regardless of the reason, to make sure that everyone knew that it was okay, they added that declaration at the very beginning, a declaration giving permission to pray with sinners. The sinners they meant were the folks who thought that Jesus was the son of God. But likely when the messianics said the same declaration, they were thinking the reverse – it was the deniers who were the sinners. The prayer was non-specific enough that everyone could think what they wanted. And for a little while, the Jewish community stayed whole.

Of course that changed fairly quickly and there was a split into two religions. But the prayer remained. It remained in part because once Jews add a prayer to the prayer book, it almost never comes out. And it remained because the theological question remained: Does praying with people who are blasphemers risk having our own prayers invalidated?

That question reemerged with great force during the Spanish Inquisition, a time when many Jews converted to Christianity. Some of these *conversos* became sincere adherents of their new faith. But many only went through the motions of conversion while secretly clinging to their Judaism. We believe that the Kol Nidre prayer originates from that period.

When these secret Jews began to escape to places like the Netherlands, the existing Jewish community had a problem. Jewish law was clear that publicly denying ones faith is one of only three things that a Jew must refuse to do, even if it means death. And yet these Spanish Jews had committed apostasy and were now asking to be part of the community. Could the

community pray with these apostates, these sinners? Were they actually sinners? The short version of the solution they came up with was *Anu matirin lihitpalel im ha avaryonim* - this ancient declaration giving us permission to pray with sinners.

And why was this at the beginning of Yom Kippur eve? Because although today it is the highlight of the service, in centuries past it was prelude. In order to even get to the rest of the service, we had to first acknowledge that it was okay to pray with blasphemers, and then those who had unwillingly converted out, or were worried that they might yet have to do so, needed to recite Kol Nidre – may my vows be annulled.

That's the history. But those folks are long gone. Thankfully we do not face the need to pretend not to be Jewish. And yet the declaration remains. And Kol Nidre itself remains. At the very beginning of the service. Clearly, we are intended to find meaning in these prayers. We don't knowingly have large groups of blasphemers sitting among us these days. So the questions for us tonight are: Who are the sinners today? And why do we need permission to pray with them?

As I said earlier, we are all sinners; we are not perfect, we have made mistakes, we have missed the mark. Are we really worried that God will not forgive us because someone in the room cheats on his taxes or cheats on her husband?

Jack Riemer suggests that we begin the service with these words because deep down within each and every one of us there is a feeling of smugness and superiority at those who have gone astray in worse ways than we have, and there is also a feeling of anger and bitterness at those who have gone astray by hurting us.

I would add that it may also be the opposite: perhaps deep down within some of us is the feeling that we are not worthy to be prayed with; that if people knew what was really going on inside of us, they would shun us, look at us in horror.

And so what the tradition is telling us by making us listen to this declaration at the very beginning of the service is that until we can overcome these feelings, our prayers tonight will have no effect. Until we can think of ourselves not as sinners, but as human beings who have made mistakes and are worthy of forgiveness, we will find no catharsis on Yom Kippur. Until

we can forgive the mistakes of others, we have no standing to ask others to forgive us, and what's more, we have no right to ask God for forgiveness.
[based on Riemer]

I think we need to turn the declaration *Anu matirin* on its head. It was originally meant to protect us in case God looked unfavorably at our inclusion of sinners in the congregation. I think today we need to understand it as a command to us that we not look askance at others out of a false sense of superiority, and that we not shrink into ourselves out of a false sense of inferiority. We all come here tonight as penitents in the sight of God. We should leave judgment of others in the hands of God.

Here's a story from Rabbi Jack Riemer. I know that all of his stories are true, though I'm not quite as sure that they ever really happened. He writes:

“Let me tell you one of the most embarrassing lessons that I have ever learned in my life. I was a teenager, and, like all teenagers, I was quick to judge and slow to understand. Like all teenagers, I knew what was right and I knew what was wrong, and like all teenagers I was happy to catch my elders doing something that I was sure was wrong.

“It happened on Kol Nidre night. There was a man in our synagogue who had been sentenced to prison. I don't remember the details. I guess that it was probably for some kind of white collar crime, whatever it was. This man paid his price, and after some years of imprisonment, he was released. He came to shul for the first time on Kol Nidre night. And much to my surprise and shock, the rabbi gave him an honor! The rabbi called him up to open the Ark for Kol Nidre!

“And I was furious! How could the rabbi do this? On the holiest night of the year, he was giving an honor to a convicted criminal?? To a man who had just spent several years in the state penitentiary?? I was furious! And I couldn't wait for the break on Yom Kippur, so that I could go up to the rabbi and challenge him. I said to him—with all thechutzpah of a teenager—how could you do such a thing? Wasn't what you did, by giving an honor to this scoundrel, an insult to every single person in this synagogue? Wasn't what you did an insult to the Torah and to the teachings of Judaism? Shame on you! How could you have done such a thing?

My rabbi, God bless him, was much smarter than I was. He understood the impetuosity of youth, and so he did not slap me down, as well as he could have. Instead, he said to me in a very calm voice: “My dear young man, try to imagine, if you can, how this man must have felt when he walked into the synagogue last night. He must have anguished over whether he should show his face in shul or not. He must have known that everyone in the synagogue knew that he had just been released from jail. He must have wondered: How will people greet me? Will they turn around when I walk in, and whisper to each other: Look who has the nerve to come tonight? He must have felt that every eye in the room would be on him, and that every tongue in the room would be talking about him. If we had snubbed him, I am sure that this man would have never set foot in a synagogue again for the rest of his life.”

“And therefore, I decided to welcome this man back into the community. I decided that if he had done bad things, he had paid the price for what he did. And that he deserved the right to start life over again with a clean slate. And his wife and children deserved the right to feel that they were part of the Jewish community, and that they were welcome here. Do you realize how much courage it must have taken for this man to come in here last night knowing that all eyes would be upon him when he walked in? Was it not right to let him know that he is still a part of the Jewish people, and that we want him to know that he has, and that he will always have a place amongst us? Should we not say welcome home to anyone who tries to reclaim his place among us, in honesty and in teshuvah?”

“That rabbi put me in my place that day, and I have never forgotten what he said to me. He taught me that the doors of teshuvah are always open to anyone, and that it is God’s job to judge people. It is not ours. Ours is to say at the beginning of every Kol Nidre service: *Anu matirin lihitpalel im ha-avaryonim*, we hereby declare it permitted to pray with those who have gone astray - and to mean it when we say it.”

We are the *avaryonim*, the ones who have gone astray; at the very beginning of the service it we admit it so that God will take us back, and so we will see ourselves, not as aggrieved innocents, but as people who have done wrong.

On this holiest day of the year, before we ask God to forgive us, let us forgive each other. Before we ask God to overlook our transgressions, let us

overlook the transgressions that have been done against us. And before we judge those who have strayed, let us admit that we, too, have strayed, and let us declare with a whole heart: *anu matirin lihitpalel im ha avaryonim*, that we are willing to pray together with those who have gone astray, for we are like them, and they are like us.

May God hear our prayers tonight, and may God forgive us, together with all those who have gone astray. And to this, let us all say: amen.