



# CONGREGATION BETH ISRAEL

## ***Kol Nidre* Source Sheet**

Prepared by Liturgist Alden Solovy

### **1. Introduction to *Kol Nidre***

*Kol Nidre* is a ritualized Aramaic legal formula for annulling vows, with no mention of God.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, said before sunset, before the holy day begins, the congregation stands, and it is sung three times, successively increasing in volume. The leader is joined by two others, holding *sefrei Torah*, simulating a three-person *beit din*, court of law. *Vayomer Adonai, salachti kidvarekha* is sung three times.

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### **2. Rabbi Jonathan Magonet, PhD<sup>2</sup>**

*Kol Nidre* is another of those Jewish prayers of puzzling origin, controversial content (not just for Jews), and tremendous mystique.

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### **3. Dr. Eliezer Diamond<sup>3</sup>**

Like any thorough legal formula, *Kol Nidre* lists all the possible types of oaths and vows that a person might make so as to be sure to include them in the annulment process. Each term has its own enormously complex legal history.

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### **4. Rabbi Andrew Goldstein, PhD<sup>4</sup>**

The real power of the *Kol Nidre* belongs not to the words, but to the music. It seems to invoke the past, present, and future of our people and of our own personal lives.

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### **5. Dr. Reuven Kimelman<sup>5</sup>**

The linkage of sounds creates a rhetorical pattern where a sound of one unit gets repeated in the next unit tying unit one to two, two to three, three to four, and four to five. This creates a staircase crescendo effect that goes back one step only to jump forward two steps.

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### **6. Emotional Elements: Rabbi John Desmond Rayner and Rabbi Andrew Goldstein**

It has a *plaintive* element which evokes the suffering of our people in ages past... It has a *penitential* element which expresses our deepest yearnings to be released from the burden of past failures... It has a *jubilant, triumphant* element which comes out in its finale. It expresses our highest hopes.<sup>6</sup> I would add a fourth element: *nostalgia*, for all the memories of past Yom Kippur Eves and for those with whom we spend them.<sup>7</sup>

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### **7. Dr. Annette M. Boeckler<sup>8</sup>**

This melody triggers memories: of the year just past, of people who have died, of eras long gone, of martyrs through the ages... The *Kol Nidre* melody can also evoke uncertainty of the future and make the listener shiver. Yearnings, fears, and sorrows deep down within are set free. For many Jews, *Kol Nidre* provides the sound of atonement that is the core experience of Yom Kippur.

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<sup>1</sup> The opening uses the mystical name *HaMakom*. The closing uses the name *Adonai* (Num 14:20).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Rabbi Jonathan Magonet, PhD, "What if Cleverness is Foolishness and Righteousness and Illusion?"

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Dr. Eliezer Diamond, "*Kol Nidre*: A Halakhic History and Analysis."

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., Rabbi Andrew Goldstein, PhD, "Memories of the Past, Guidelines for the Future."

<sup>5</sup> Op cit., L. Hoffman, Dr. Reuven Kimelman, "Is *Kol Nidre* Typical?"

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi John Desmond Rayner, "The Magic of the *Kol Nidre*," a sermon given at South London Liberal Jewish Synagogue, Erev Yom Kippur, Sept. 22, 1996, quoted by Rabbi Andrew Goldstein, PhD, in op cit., L. Hoffman.

<sup>7</sup> Op cit., L. Hoffman, Rabbi Andrew Goldstein, "Memories of the Past, Guidelines for the Future."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Dr. Annette M. Boeckler, "The Magic of the Moment: *Kol Nidre* in Progressive Judaism."



## A Map of *Kol Nidre's* Poetic Structure and Rhetorical Pattern

Compiled by Liturgist Alden Solovy

<b>Preamble</b> Ps 97:11	On this night we sense ourselves in the presence of the light of the first day of creation. <sup>1</sup>	
<b>Invoke Courts</b>	Any fast that does not include the participation of some of the sinners of the Jewish people is not a fast. <sup>2</sup> Normally separate realms become one: the heavenly court and the earthly court, the consent of God and the consent of the community, ourselves distinguished (supposedly) from habitual sinners. <sup>3</sup>	
<b>Annulment</b>	What is for many one of Yom Kippur's highlights is, in most of its present formulations, a less than coherent legal formula of questionable efficacy. Its inclusion in our liturgy owes more to the mood it creates of generally erasing the errors of the past and beginning anew than it does to its halakhic importance. <sup>4</sup>	
<b>Forgiveness</b> Num. 15:26	The legalistic focus is entirely replaced with an emphasis on forgiveness. <sup>5</sup>	Numbers 15:26 is the biblical guarantee that God will pardon sins done unwittingly. <sup>6</sup>
<b>Prayer</b> Num. 14:19		This is the God for whom we say Kol Nidre. The God who begs for human meddling into divine affairs, who beckons us to stanch the flow of promised destructions. <sup>7</sup>
<b>Forgiveness</b> Num. 14:20		There was nothing to fear after all; there was and is only divine forgiveness. <sup>8</sup>
<b>Rejoicing</b> <i>Sheheciyanu</i>	The <i>Sheheciyanu</i> is normally a powerful, yet simple, acclamation. In the context of <i>Kol Nidre</i> it is a moment of grace, where we capture the insight that the way of the past year need not be our way forward from this moment on. <sup>9</sup>	

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Koren Yom Kippur Machzor* (Koren, 2014), p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> Talmud Bavli, Keritot 6b. Translation from Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/Keritot.6b?lang=bi>

<sup>3</sup> Op cit., L. Hoffman, Rabbi David Stern, "Night Vision: A Gift of Sacred Uncertainty."

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., Dr. Eliezer Diamond, "Kol Nidre: A Halakhic History and Analysis."

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Rabbi Aaron Panken, PhD, "Courting Inversion: Kol Nidre as a Legal Drama."

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, "Kol Nidre: Translation and Commentary."

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Rachel Farbiarz, "Woe is Me that I Have Sworn."

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., Rabbi Noa Kushner, "The Room with No Back, Only Forward."

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., Rabbi Karyn Kedar "The Sound and Pageantry."