

Kol Nidre Address - September 20, 2026

When the sun sets wherever they may be, Jews across the globe will gather today for two main reasons:

- to hear Kol Nidre sung three times, first softly but rising to a dramatic crescendo that reflects our profound hopes for personal and communal repentance and renewal; AND
- to hear the president of the shul give an address that asks everyone to contribute money to the institution for operating expenses over the coming year

OK, people don't come to hear the plea for funds, but they know it's coming and they attend anyway.

At Kol Rina, we've always downplayed the plea for funds, but haven't entirely ignored the custom. Indeed, we used to have an explicit Kol Nidre Appeal, evidence of which was left in the mahzor that Stuart happened to use this year for Rosh Hashanah. [Hold up envelope and note] And the president would at least allude to it in their Kol Nidre address.

As the fiscal situation has weakened with some people moving away, some finding other venues, and some - sadly - passing away, the allusions have become a bit more explicit. That's because Kol Rina depends on donations for its continued operation, whether these come in the form of dues from members, from fundraisers, or from tributes of some sort. Regarding fundraisers: major fundraisers require a good deal of people-power to pull off; KR therefore has depended for the past few years on traditional appeals such as the Yizkor Book, Mishloach Manot, selling chametz, yahrzeit donations, a few donations from Adult Ed attendees, and - yes! - an informal Kol Nidre Appeal. At Kol Rina, we choose to focus our attention on the spirituality of this day, but our fiscal situation is such that I'd be remiss not to remind you: please pay your dues, contribute to our fundraisers, and consider a High Holidays special donation.

Actually, I overstated the case a few moments ago when I said that Jews across the globe expected to hear their shul president give an address asking for funds. The Kol Nidre Appeal is a fundraising tool that evolved on American soil. Synagogues - indeed, all institutions run by anyone anywhere - need operating funds. Many of the earliest Jewish communities in America were Sephardic. These Sephardic shuls provided much more than a place to hold services: they provided religious education, kosher food, charity to those in need, burial, and countless other communal services. They were

typically run by a governing board with a lot of power - the board was in charge of worship, assigning honors, supervising life events such as marriages and burial - and, importantly, the board also imposed financial obligations. Interestingly, much of the funding for these early communities came from wealthy Sephardim abroad, mostly in the Caribbean and Europe. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, large numbers of Ashkenazim immigrated to the US from Europe. In their European communities, fundraising tools had included the sale or auction of honors, the Mi Sheberach pledge, and the sale or rental of seats, and they continued these practices, at least for a while, in America.

As immigrant communities became more Americanized, and as American culture generally evolved in the 20th century, the fundraising mechanisms changed as well. A relatively recent UJA pamphlet with advice for congregations on dues structures states:

Throughout the 19th and well into the 20th century, most American synagogues raised money primarily by selling or renting seats. Similar to “season tickets” sold by sports franchises, members would buy a seat or rent one for the year, and that seat was their specific property and could not be occupied by anyone else. And just like season tickets, the choicest seats cost more. Synagogues were able to project their revenue by counting the number of seats that they sold. But by the end of World War I, as egalitarianism became a more central value in American culture, it was deemed unseemly for the wealthy to be able to buy preferential seating in a synagogue where everyone was supposed to be equal before God. The practice of selling seats had to go, and in its place most synagogues introduced the dues system — one fee for everyone and you could sit wherever you wanted.

Yet dues alone don't generally cover operating expenses: hence, the idea of doing some extra fundraising on a day when most of the congregation comes to shul, presumably sitting wherever they want. (That's assuming someone didn't take all the seats in the modern way - “saving” them with coats, etc. But I digress...)

All of this begs a question - why? Why this plea for treasure? Why all the toil? Kol Rina board meetings begin with a short drash, or d'var, or reflection - it grounds us, gives us a reason for the nitty-gritty governance work we're about to do. I'd like to take a few moments now to do the same. Because the fact is, I also overstated the case when I implied that all Jews are attending a Kol Nidre service tonight. That is obviously not true: as we are well aware many people who fully identify as Jews are doing something else. And many of them don't bother with affiliation either - why pay dues to an institution that can be easily ignored? American Jews don't rely on a shul for basic needs as their ancestors did - and, to the extent they do (e.g. senior housing, summer camps, a gym), services

are very often provided by a Federation or similar organization, not exclusively by the shul. So again - why do we work so hard to create and maintain this sacred space? And why are we here tonight?

This past year, I read a remarkable book entitled *Why Am I a Jew?* written in 2025 by the Israeli researcher, columnist, and editor Shmuel Rosner. He begins with chapters on What is Judaism? Who is a Jew? What are Jewish values? Then chapters on Antisemitism, the remarkable staying power of the Jewish people, Israel and the Diaspora, and Jewish genius. And then - an epilogue on the future of Judaism in which he poses the stunning question: "Why would anyone want to be a Jew?"

Rosner notes how very, very easy it is for a 21st century Jew to assimilate, to "drift away" from their roots, from their community.

Leaving the ranks is easier today than it was during certain periods in the past. The poet Heinrich Heine and many of his contemporaries converted to Christianity due to their desire to acquire a 'ticket' to European culture. But today, such a ticket is no longer required... For most Jews who assimilate, it's a simple transition that occurs seamlessly, devoid of intense drama or unbearable pain. [As an aside - think of the dramatic scene toward the end of *Fiddler on the Roof* when Tevye sings to his beloved daughter Chavale, who has left the community to marry a gentile. Today, it's easy to envision Tevye's great grandson (great great grandson?) paying for his daughter's interfaith wedding....] Assimilation no longer comes with a steep social price because most Western societies are tolerant of people who have no pronounced religious or ethnic affiliation[T]oday's Jew doesn't have to be untrue to himself and feign belief in another religion to stop being Jewish. He doesn't have to convert to Islam or Christianity. Leaving the ranks is a smooth process It's almost a casual drift from the Jewish world to the world outside - a drift many Jews have taken. [p 136]

When I read this passage months ago, I thought about the Kol Nidre chant - really, I did! Now, this could be the subject of a whole nuther talk, but the introduction to the Kol Nidre chant - giving permission for sinners to pray with the congregation and for the congregation to pray with sinners - was added, likely in medieval times, to make it clear that those who had strayed could be included in the congregation, at least for one day. In the medieval context, this appears to have meant that even those who were subject to a communal ban - at that time, violation of a binding communal rule could result in exclusion from the community by a rabbinic court - could rejoin on Yom Kippur. Yet today, people can drift away - and, if they choose, drift back - without any fuss. Certainly without the need for a legal formulation that permits the community to allow them in. Imagine Tevye's great-great (great-great-great?) granddaughter showing up at shul for Kol Nidre a few months after her interfaith wedding - she'd likely be greeted with hugs and big smiles - maybe even a few greetings of "Mazel Tov on your wedding." Whether for good or for bad, or somewhere all mixed up in between, we need

to recognize that there really is a radically different mind set in the 21st century. Rosner puts it this way:

We are living in a global world that undermines tribal and political boundaries, a multicultural world that makes assimilation easy, and a technological world that appears to have the ability to erode the power of historical memory. [p 144]

Rosner initially answers his question as to why Jews remain Jews by giving five reasons:

- Inertia: born Jewish and see no reason to change
- Personal ties: parents, siblings, partners, friends, community are all Jews
- Faith: Belief in the God-given Torah and in all the God-given commandments
- Spite: Surviving after the Holocaust is a “moral statement”
- Values: Judaism is a value system that should be embraced - some express this as tikkun olam, repairing the world.

For me, these reasons are fine as far as they go, but I think most of us could come up with this list on our own. Rosner gave me common sense; I wanted uplift. Yet he was just getting warmed up. Rosner goes on to discuss the “Jewish agenda that is abnormal - an agenda that includes a special mission not expected of other groups.” [p 137] As for the nature of this “mission” - well, that’s a subject for much discussion and debate, briefly surveyed over the next few pages. My favorite is Rosner’s quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks: Judaism is the “principled defeat of tragedy in the name of hope.”

And Rosner ends with the uplift I craved:

Why be Jewish? Because a Jewish life is a spacious place with an abundance of options. A Jewish life is the most ancient kind in the world and continues to revitalize itself each and every day.

Why be Jewish? Because the Jewish life is a multifaceted and exciting world... [A] Jewish life creates a framework of identity and commitments, fosters a feeling of pride and satisfaction, challenges one’s thinking and daily endeavors, provides meaning, and preserves a sense of belonging and continuity.

That’s why we are here tonight. It’s why we work so hard and give so much to this beautiful community we call Kol Rina. And it’s why you should - dare I say it - pay your dues and donate to our fundraisers.

G'mar chatimah tovah