

Rabbi Mark Cohn

Yom Kippur 5777/2016 Evening:

“Music as Melody to our Hearts for Expansion in this Moment”

INTRO TO BLOCH: We have remarkable talent in our ranks. Our city is known as the City of the Arts, and indeed, our temple community is a part of that experience and the beneficiary of that in so many ways. From our stained glass to the musical accompaniment we have just experienced, from lectures given here by world-class film studies professors to singer-songwriters who have graced this bima. We are intentionally loading the opening of our service tonight with musical presentation to elevate our souls and consciousness as we approach Kol Nidre. We will hear in a moment a piece written by Ernest Bloch, a Jewish composer who was born in Switzerland in 1880. Bloch moved to the US in 1916 and held the position of Musical Director for the Cleveland Conservatory of Music from 1920-25; followed by the San Francisco Conservatory of Music until 1930. He was a professor at the University of CA, Berkeley until 1952 and passed away in 1959. His “Avodat HaKodesh” (Sacred Service) written during a temporary return to Europe from 1930-33 is perhaps his most famous composition and was and is hailed, according to the Milken Archive for Jewish Music for its “... use of a Jewish worship service and the liturgy as the basis for a sophisticated, full-length, almost oratorio-like work that could speak to non-Jewish and Jewish audiences alike—and would find equally appropriate expression in concert performance and in the context of classical Reform worship—*Avodath Hakodesh* was a watershed undertaking, a major contribution both to Jewish liturgical expression and to the genre of sacred music per se.”

“It is not my purpose, not my desire, to attempt a ‘reconstitution’ of Jewish music,” Bloch once explained: or to base my works on melodies more or less authentic. I am not an archaeologist. I hold it of first importance to write good, genuine music, my music. It is the Jewish soul that interests me, the complex glowing agitated soul that I feel vibrating throughout the Bible; the freshness and naïveté of the Patriarchs; the violence that is evident in the prophetic books, the Jew’s savage love of justice; the despair of the Preacher in Jerusalem; the sorrow and immensity of the Book of Job, the sensuality of the Song of Songs. All this is in us; all this is in me, and it is the better part of me. It is all that I endeavor to hear in myself and to transcribe in my music: the venerable emotion of the race that slumbers way down in our souls.”

You may use this time to simply reflect on the thoughts and prayers in your own hearts or those in our machzor of which there are hundreds depending on where you wind up. If you are like me, you can either listen or read, in which case I highly recommend you listen. If you enjoy doing both simultaneously, you will find themes of this night reflected in historic and contemporary sources.

SERMON: Kol Nidre. Sometimes I hear it in my sleep. Especially at this time of year – the melody, the words, the need to write a sermon, the intensity, the history.

Kol Nidre. It's such an important prayer that the nickname for this whole service is called by that prayer. But typically we hardly have settled ourselves in our seats when we are rising again, prepared to watch the Torahs come out of the ark, representing a Beit Din – a Jewish court, before which we must appear and testify that

All vows –

Resolves and commitments, vows of abstinence and terms of obligations,

Sworn promises and oaths of dedication –

That we promise and swear to God, and take upon ourselves

From this Day of Atonement until the next Day of Atonement, may it find us well:

We regret them and for all of them we repent.

Let all of them be discarded and forgiven, abolished and undone;

They are not valid and they are not binding.

Our vows shall not be vows; our resolves shall not be resolves;

And our oaths – they shall not be oaths.

Kol Nidre. A prayer that according to legend was crafted by Jews in Spain forced to convert under the Inquisition. A prayer that would relinquish them from vows taken under duress for survival. A prayer that historically dates back long before the 15<sup>th</sup> century and is first recorded in our world's oldest Jewish prayerbook, that of the great scholar, Rav Amram, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century in Sura (about 100 miles southwest of Baghdad). This prayer which has a fascinating history is at once theologically and morally very challenging and yet is so central to our worship experience that when earlier versions of Reform prayerbooks in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century took out the text, congregants demanded the words and music (written in the 1880s) be included anyway.

The old Union Prayerbooks (hold up a copy) reframed the prayer into a hope that we would offer sincere prayers during the coming year and live to fulfill them. In terms of the Aramaic (the prayer's language – not her sister language: Hebrew), in the old UPB, there are only two smaller font words: Kol Nidre, to indicate where it was sung but not, God forbid, the words in full or in their original, which according to some would make the Jew an untrustworthy business partner.

Gates of Repentance brought back the full Aramaic text but a hardly translated and loosely reinterpreted version of the prayer. Mishkan HaNefesh, in that style of renaissance – drawing from our sources and finding new meaning in them – presents the Aramaic in full, a faithful translation, and multiple notes and poems and explorations with which we may struggle and evolve as individuals in light of this formative and central text.

Tonight, we have opened up this part of the service, and not to worry, this is my sermon tonight, to give us time to settle in and prepare for this grand prayer, this central piece of liturgy that says – we are ready to repent right now not only for the things we did wrong this past year – but for the promises and vows we are about to enter into in the coming year that we don't make good on with God. We are using this moment to look forward and backward – and all the while be present right here, right now.

This moment in which time effectively stands a little still is unique in the range of Jewish holidays.

Have you ever stopped to notice that Jewish holidays – of which we have so very many – are so often about story?

There is Sukkot with its focus on the Fall Harvest and the Exodus from Egypt. There is Shavuot with its focus on the First Fruits, giving of Torah at Sinai and the Exodus from Egypt.

There is Passover, which is all about the Exodus from Egypt.

There are Hanukkah and Purim – which when coupled with Passover are the three holidays we mark when we say: They tried to kill us, we survived, let's eat!

There is Tisha B'Av – the only other full fast day, which is the story of the destruction of the First and Second Temples on the same day of the same month roughly 600 years apart ... and the same day on which Queen Isabella expelled the Jews from Spain in 1492.

There are the modern Israeli commemorations of Yom HaShoah, Yom HaZikkaron, Yom HaAtzmaut.

And then there is Rosh HaShanah which is about the Creation of the World and how we got here.

But tonight, as we mark Yom Kippur, we realize that this is the one time a year when being at-ONE with ourselves is the only goal. We are not commemorating historical events or mourning sorrows, we are not rejoicing with renewal or giving thanks for miracles. Today ... being at one with ourselves and being at one with God: THOSE are our goals – and they are wrapped up in each other. Hence this is the day of at-one-ment: Yom Kippur is the one day when you can absolutely say, when you are right here surrounded by all these people: it really is all.about.me.

Other holidays have their stories.  
This holiday is about your story.

What is your story?

What is your central plot and where do you need editing and revising? Where are you in search of healing and reconciling? Where is your plot thickening and where is it unraveling?

This is your day, as the old machzor said: This is your day, Israel. Prepare to meet your God.

I would amend that slightly – or significantly: This is your day, Israel. Prepare to meet yourself and in so doing, you will, if you allow yourself, to meet God.

Kol Nidre is a prayer that is about vows and promises and oaths and forcing us to think about what we are willing to commit to and what we swearing to ourselves and to God – or to God and therefore to ourselves. Kol Nidre is asking us to stand here with no other story than our own and use the precious hours of this day and all the prayers and readings in this sacred book to find our way in such that we know how to live as we go out. We need to look into our souls so we can live outwardly soulful, intentional, meaningful, beautiful lives.

The night may be called for this prayer that strikes a chord in our heart and our souls but the day is here for us to examine and reflect, repair and repent these souls of ours.

In a moment, we will hear Jacob Weinberg's "String Quartet, Opus 55" which contains a melody you will recognize but elaborated on in such a way that it allows our own thoughts and prayers to remain anchored in these critical words but wander to how we need to develop them in our hearts and souls. There are beautiful readings in our machzor surrounding Kol Nidre that I invite you to continue to consider as we hear this presentation by an exceptional quartet of Israeli musicians who are currently students at the UNC-SA. Jacob Weinberg was born in Odessa in 1879, moved to British Mandate Palestine in 1922 and to New York City in 1925. He was one of the founders of the Jewish National Conservatory in Jerusalem and was on the faculty of Hunter College for many years. The Milken Archive of Jewish music writes of him, "Jacob Weinberg belongs to that pioneering school of composers who, together with Jewish performers, folklorists, and other intellectuals in Russia, attempted during the first two decades of the 20th century to found a new Jewish national art music based on authentic Jewish musical heritage. It was his membership in the Moscow section of that organization, known as the *Gesellschaft für Jüdische Volksmusik* ([Society for Jewish Folk Music](#)) in St. Petersburg, that first defined for him the nature of his own Jewish identity and ignited the interest in Judaically based art that informed most of his work from then on."

Thanks to Art Bloom's researching, we were able to get a hold of this music through Jacob Weinberg's grand-daughter, Ellen Mausner, who lives in Manhattan and wrote to me saying that he "...would be thrilled that you are performing his work at the temple at the High Holy Days." When I asked her what he would want us to know about him, she replied, "... that he was a classically-trained Russian composer who joined the Society for Jewish Folk Music to study how to incorporate Jewish folk tunes and melodies from Jewish religious services like the Sabbath and the Yom Kippur series into classical music forms. He was very proud of being Jewish. He had a doctorate in music from the Moscow Conservatory of Music and studied for years after with famous teachers of piano performance - Sergei Taneyev, and others." She added: "I think he was a genius."

Kol Nidre has such mystic and power. What privilege we have to have this prayer in our prayerbook, these words in our tradition, this melody to inspire, to challenge, and to allow our souls to return, reflect, repent, and find renewal and expansion as we develop our own stories. Right here. And right now.