

יוד
 שום עיר שער
 ולאו שוול לחכ
 עליו דאורן שידור
 יפרושנו לפני
 החכם ויתעור
 ויתעור

[illegible]

לוי ער
לוי ער
והוא ידוע שאל
המלך ידוע
והוא ידוע
שעבדו
והוא ידוע

[illegible]

גמטריה
טעדי דאס
וואס ווארטט ווארט
טעדי דאס ווארט
טעדי ווארט
טעדי דאס
טעדי דאס
טעדי דאס

כעל שית שחרי להקל ויון נב
נמשין וחרו וצח וצח וצח
שכל וצח וצח וצח וצח
כמן וצח וצח וצח וצח

A large, ornate initial letter 'S' in red ink, decorated with black filigree and a small cross at the top left.

וְדִאִשְׁתַּבַּעְנָא וְדִאֲהַרְיֵנָּה וְדִאֲסַרְנָא :
עַל נַפְשֵׁתָנָא בְּשַׁבּוּעוֹת מִיָּד בְּפֻרִים זֶה
עַד יוֹם בְּפֻרִים הַבָּאָה עֲלֵינוּ לְטוֹבָה כִּי
כִּלְהוֹז וְדִאֲהַרְיֵנָּה בַּחוּץ כִּלְהוֹז שְׂדֵי :
שְׂבִיקֵין שְׂבִיתֵין בְּטָלִין וּמְבוֹטְלִין לֹא
שְׂדֵירִין וְלֹא קִימִין נַהֲרָנָא לֹא נִדְרֵי
וְאֲסַרְנָא לֹא אֲסָרִי וְשַׁבּוּעֵתָנָא לֹא שַׁבּוּעוֹת

וְאֶחָדָם עֵשֶׂת הָיְתָה

ונכסלה / לבר ערת בני ישראל ולבר הער קהתם כי לכל דעם בעתה
 נא לעז העם הזה כבוד וחסד באשר נשאלת
 לעם הזה ממצרים כי הנה יושב לפניך
 ויאמר יי סלחתי כדברך
 ויאמר יי סלחתי כדברך ויאמר יי סלחתי כדברך

כדור

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם אשר מביאין צערות עמוסות מלפניך
 פניה טעורים ורעיונות מרעיה שונים ומהלליה את העמוסות האסורות
 את הפסולים במשקלם ובהם ב' ימים ובלילה חלול אחד מן המעט המועד
 ויוסף מנע את וימסר ויום השבת לילה ומהליל ביד יום וציון לילה יי נבואת
 שמו יי די וקיום ונצח ויחיד ויחיד לעולם ועד ומהליל יי ומהליל יי ומהליל יי

[illegible]

The History of Kol Nidrei

For many Jews, the most haunting and iconic moment of Yom Kippur is the chanting of *Kol Nidrei*, a prayer recited in a dim sanctuary at sundown. Its melody is ancient and emotionally charged, and its words—an annulment of vows—can seem obscure or even puzzling. Why does the holiest night of the year begin not with confession or praise, but with a legal formula about breaking promises?

The origins of *Kol Nidrei* are tangled in history, *halakhah* (Jewish law), and spiritual yearning. To understand why we recite it, we need to trace its development over more than a thousand years—from a practical legal declaration to a profound ritual of renewal.

Vows and Their Burden

In ancient Judaism, vows (*neder*) were a serious matter. The Torah warns repeatedly against making vows lightly. In Talmudic times, rabbis developed complex laws to guide when and how vows could be annulled. These laws were so intricate that later scholars, including the Geonim (early medieval Babylonian rabbis), advised avoiding vows altogether. By the 8th century of the Common Era, some rabbinic academies had even stopped teaching the laws of vows.

Yet, despite the decline of formal vow-making, two customs emerged during the High Holiday season that addressed their burden. One was a practice known as *hatarat nedarim*, in which individuals would ask a panel of three laypeople to dissolve any vows they may have made. The other was a public, communal version of this process that took place on the night of Yom Kippur—*Kol Nidrei*.

What Does Kol Nidrei Actually Say?

At its core, *Kol Nidrei* is a sweeping declaration that cancels personal vows. The oldest known version dates to the early medieval period and was written in Hebrew. Later versions appear in Aramaic, a common language of Jews at the time. The prayer lists different kinds of vows—formal oaths, self-imposed prohibitions, and ritual commitments—and declares that they are null and void. Versions differ on whether the vows being annulled are those from the past year from those yet to be made in the year to come.

This distinction became a point of controversy. Traditional Jewish law requires that each vow be annulled individually, and only with valid grounds. Blanket annulments—especially of future vows—seemed to bypass the seriousness of the *halakhic* process. The Geonim objected strongly to the custom of *Kol Nidrei*, believing it risked encouraging carelessness with one's word.

In response to their criticisms, some later rabbis attempted to revise the prayer. In 11th-century France, Meir ben Samuel (father of the famed commentator Rashi) altered the text to refer to vows of the coming year instead of the past one. This version eventually became the standard in Ashkenazi communities.

Origins and Theories

For many years, it was widely believed that *Kol Nidrei* originated in medieval Spain, among Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity but continued practicing Judaism in secret. The theory was that *Kol Nidrei* served as a symbolic way to undo coerced conversions. However, this idea has been disproven by the discovery of texts dating the prayer several centuries earlier, including geonic sources from Babylonia and *halakhic* works from the Land of Israel.

While scholars debated whether the prayer began in Babylon or the Land of Israel, the evidence now points to an origin in the Land of Israel. Texts from the Cairo Geniza and early liturgical poems suggest that the communal annulment of vows was already practiced in Israel by the 6th or 7th century of the Common Era. There, individual petitioners may have been forbidden to annul vows on the Sabbath or festivals, so a public version—*Kol Nidrei*—was developed to include the whole community in one sweeping declaration.

Some scholars have noted similarities between the language of *Kol Nidrei* and ancient Jewish magical texts. These incantations often used formulas to cancel oaths made to demons. While some once speculated that *Kol Nidrei* came from such magical roots, it's now believed that the legal formula came first, and the magical texts later borrowed its language.

Legal Concerns and Spiritual Meaning

Despite questions about its legal standing, *Kol Nidrei* endured. Its emotional impact proved more powerful than the technical debates surrounding it. For centuries, communities held on to the practice because it spoke to something deeper than law: the desire to begin again with clarity and peace of mind.

By reciting *Kol Nidrei*, we acknowledge that human beings make commitments they cannot always uphold. We take on obligations, speak with conviction, and later find ourselves unable to follow through. The prayer gives us a ritual way to release the weight of those moments, to create room for honesty and renewal at the start of Yom Kippur.

Today, *Kol Nidrei* marks the threshold of sacred time. The sanctuary grows quiet, the melody rises, and something shifts. The words may be legal in origin, but they open a space for reflection and return. They invite us to enter the day with humility, aware of our limits and still hopeful about who we can become.

Source: This summary is based on *Kol Nidre: Studies in the Development of Rabbinic Votive Institutions* by Moshe Benovitz (Brown Judaic Studies, 2020).

Our Holocaust Torah

On this sacred night, as the haunting melody of *Kol Nidrei* begins, our Holocaust Torah from Rakovník joins the other scrolls from our *aron kodesh*, standing among them as both survivor and witness.

This Torah came from Rakovník, a once vibrant Jewish town in what was then Czechoslovakia. During the Holocaust, the Torahs and the lives they represented were taken, destined for an uncertain future. After the war, some 1,564 *Sifrei Torah* were discovered in Prague, rescued, and ultimately transferred to the Westminster Synagogue in London in 1964. The Westminster Trust subsequently loaned the scrolls to Jewish communities around the world.

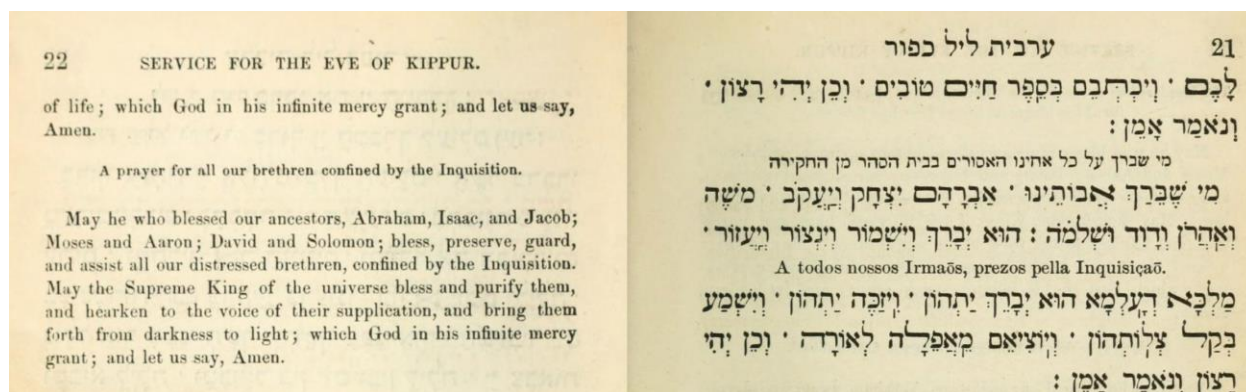
In 1973, our Rakovník scroll made its way to B'nai Shalom, shared with us as a solemn trust. With its arrival, we became guardians of a legacy. Decades later, when the scroll returned to London for the Westminster Trust's 60th anniversary, we were reminded that this scroll is part of a global chain of memory, a shared responsibility among communities to preserve what was nearly lost.

We honor the lives lost in the Shoah by entrusting a teenager from our congregation to hold the scroll during *Kol Nidrei*, linking generations in sacred remembrance. Tonight, as we gather in awe and repentance, the Rakovník scroll stands among us, bearing silent testimony to the power of memory, resilience, and the enduring spirit of the Jewish people.



A Reflection Before the Prayer for the Captives

To be read after Kol Nidrei, in the tradition of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews



In the communities of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam, London, and the New World—descendants of those forced to flee Iberia under the shadow of the Inquisition—it became a sacred custom to recite a prayer for captives immediately following *Kol Nidrei*. At the very moment when the gates of repentance were opened and the soul laid bare before God, they paused to remember those who could not be present: their imprisoned brothers and sisters, hidden away in dungeons or in exile, cut off from family, community, and prayer.

In their *machzorim*, there is one line that appears in Portuguese, a language that had fallen out of their daily use generations earlier: *A todos nossos Irmãos, prezos pela Inquisição*—God protect our brothers, imprisoned by the Inquisition. Year after year, they recited this line in Portuguese, reaching across time and geography, to embrace those who had suffered and to insist that their pain still mattered. It was an act of enduring compassion. They would not allow the memory of their brothers and sisters to be buried by the passing of centuries. They would not begin Yom Kippur without first opening their hearts to those who could not stand beside them in prayer. In that one fragile, foreign line, they carried generations of grief, love, and unbroken responsibility.

Tonight, we take up that same tradition.

We remember *our* brothers and sisters in captivity. With grief, compassion, and moral urgency we pray for those still held for nearly two years, whose lives remain suspended in fear and silence.

To pray for the captive is to affirm the dignity of life even when it is threatened; to proclaim hope even when it is hard to find. As our ancestors once cried out for their beloved, so do we. As they kept memory alive through ritual and language, so must we.

This night, as we begin the journey of Yom Kippur, may our prayers rise on behalf of all those in darkness. May they be remembered, may they be comforted, and may they come home in peace.

מִי שְׁבִירָךְ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אַבְרָהָם יִצְחָק וְיַעֲקֹב יוֹסֵף מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן דָּוִד וּשְׁלֹמֹה, וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ שָׂרָה רִבְקָה רָחֵל וְלֵאָה הוּא יְבָרֵךְ וְיִשְׁמֹר וְיִנָּצֵר אֶת הַנֶּעֱדָרִים וְאֶת הַחֲטוּפִים אֲשֶׁר נִלְקְחוּ מִבְּתֵיהֶם, מִיִּשׁוּבֵיהֶם וּמִקְבוּצֵיהֶם, מִמִּצְבֵי הַצָּבָא וּמִמְרֻחְבֵי הַמַּחֲזֹל, וְשִׁנְמִצְאִים כָּעֵת בְּסִכְנַת חַיִּים, בְּמִרְחַב זֶר וְעוֹז, בְּיַד מְלָאכֵי חֲבִלָּה מְסֻכָּנִים בַּעֲבוּר שְׁאֵנוּ וְכָל עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל מִתְּפִלָּלִים בַּעֲבוּרָם, הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא יִמְלֹא רַחֲמִים עֲלֵיהֶם, וְיוֹצִיאֵם מִחֲשָׁךְ וְצִלְמוֹת וּמוֹסְרוֹתֵיהֶם יִנְתֵּן וּמִמַּצּוּקוֹתֵיהֶם יוֹשִׁיעֵם, וְיִשְׁיִבֵם מִהֲרָה לַחִיק מִשְׁפָּחוֹתֵיהֶם, לְיִשׁוּבָם וּלְבֵיתָם, וְלִשְׁדוֹת שְׁמִחָתָם וּמְחוּלָם. וְיָקִים בָּהֶם מִקְרָא שְׂכָתוֹב: וּפְדוּיֵי יְהוָה יִשׁוּבוּן וְכֹאז צִיּוֹן בְּרִנָּה וְשִׁמְחַת עוֹלָם עַל רֹאשָׁם. שְׁשׁוֹן וְשִׁמְחָה יִשְׁיִגוּ וְנָסוּ יָגוֹן וְאַנְחָה . וְנֹאמֵר אָמֵן.

May God who blessed her ancestors Abraham Isaac and Jacob, Sarah Rebecca Rachel and Leah, Bless all those currently held captive and find themselves in dire straits. May the Holy One have mercy on them and deliver them from darkness to light, protect them from all harm, and speedily restore them to their families' loving embrace. May you speedily fulfill Your prophet's vision: "And all who are in captivity shall return and come to Zion with song; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." And let us say: Amen

Aheinu kol beit yisrael, ha-n'tunim

אֲחֵינוּ כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל

b'tzarah u-vashivyah,

הַנֶּתוּנִים בַּצָּרָה וּבִשְׁבִיָּה

ha-omdim bein ba-yam u-vein ba-yabashah

הַעוֹמְדִים בֵּין בַּיָּם וּבֵין בַּיַּבֶּשֶׁה

ha-makom y'raheim aleihem,

הַמָּקוֹם יִרְחֵם עֲלֵיהֶם

v'yotzi'eim mi-tzarah lirvayah,

וְיוֹצִיאֵם מִצָּרָה לְרִוְחָה

u-me'afeilah l'orah, u-mi-shibud lig'ullah,

וּמֵאֲפִלָּה לְאוֹרָה וּמִשֻּׁעְבוּד לְגֻאֲלָה

hashta ba-agala u-vizman kariv.

הַשָּׁתָא בַּעֲגָלָא וּבְזִמָּן קָרִיב.

For all our family of the House of Israel, fellow Jews who face anguish and captivity, whether on sea or on land: May the Divine have compassion upon them, and bring them from distress to relief, from darkness to light, from subjugation to redemption, now, speedily, and soon.

I

On this sacred day,
we are invited to return.

The fast calls us not just to refrain from
food,
but to quiet the noise within—
to still the rush of anger,
the pull of desire,
the wandering of thought.

Even when we carry the burden of guilt—
when old voices whisper that we are
unworthy,
when painful memories of past wrongs
make it difficult to forgive ourselves—
still, we can choose.
We can cleanse our actions,
speak honestly before God,
and promise to use our words for healing,
not harm.

This day brings us near the angels—
not because we leave our bodies behind,
but because, like the angels on high, we
dedicate our bodies fully—

through bended knee and song filled
voice—
to praise, to prayer, to presence.

Let our eyes fast from distraction,
our ears from bitterness,
our tongues from carelessness.
Let even our imaginations turn toward what is
holy.
And let our repentance be crowned
with acts of compassion and repair.

For this is the fast that brings us close.

II

We are clay. You are the potter Who shapes
us at Your will. Mold us into worthy vessels
Even though we're only clay. Do not smash
us if we prove imperfect, remember we are
only clay.

*We are glass. You are the artisan Who can
form us into many shapes. Form us into
finest crystal—Even if You have to twist and
turn us. But do not smash us if we are not
pure, remember we are only glass.*

We are silver. You are the smith Who
molds us as You wish. Hammer us as You
design Even though we are not gold. Do not
smash us if we tarnish, remember we are
only silver.

*We are the rudder. You are the helmsman
Who steers us to the left or to the right.
Direct us to the shore You choose. Do not
let us idly spin Even if we consistently resist
Your grasp, remember that the waves are
very strong.*

We are threads. You are the weaver Who
creates the patterns that You like. Weave
us. God, into Your plan. Make us supple,
straight, and true. And do not discard us If
we should be imperfect. Remember we are
only threads

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook [Israel's first Chief Rabbi] points out that just as there is a confession for the bad, so, too, is there a confession for the good. "A person should also be joyous concerning the good he or she has done," he writes. "It follows that just as there is a great benefit to self-improvement through confessing one's sins, so is there great benefit to confessing one's good deeds." Rav Kook insists we speak with humility of our good deeds. We can always do better. But, reminding ourselves of what we've done well builds self-confidence, which is critical to belief in one's ability to do and accomplish for oneself and for the world. Inspired by this approach, we may consider an opposite recitation of Ashamnu, focusing on the good we've done.

We have forgiven	מַחֲלֵנוּ	We have loved	אָהַבְנוּ
We have comforted	נַחֲמָנוּ	We have blessed	בֵּרַכְנוּ
We have been creative	סָלֵלְנוּ	We have grown	גָּדַלְנוּ
We have stirred	עוֹרָרְנוּ	We have spoken positively	דִּבַּרְנוּ יְפִי
We have been spiritual activists	פָּעֵלְנוּ	We have raised up	הָעֵלִינוּ
We have been just	צִדִּיקְנוּ	We have shown compassion	וַחֲסָנוּ
We have longed for the Land of Israel	קוֹיְנוּ לְאֶרֶץ	We have acted enthusiastically	זָרְזָנוּ
We have been merciful	רַחֲמָנוּ	We have been empathetic	חֲמַלְנוּ
We have given our full effort	שָׁקַדְנוּ	We have cultivated truth	טַפַּחְנוּ אֱמֶת
We have supported	תָּמַכְנוּ	We have given good advice	יַעֲצָנוּ טוֹב
We have contributed	תָּרַמְנוּ	We have respected	כִּבְדָּנוּ
We have repaired.	תִּקְנָנוּ	We have learned	לָמַדְנוּ