

Kol Nidrei – Alternative Service

Picture an apple, any apple, any size, any shape, any color or palette of colors. Imagine cupping this apple in your hands. Feel the texture, the topography, the temperature. What fragrance does your apple emit? What specific characteristics identify this as your apple? Now imagine yourself, still holding your apple, alone in a windowless but well lit room. The room is painted white: the walls are white; the ceiling is white; the hardwood floor reflects the whiteness of the space. In the middle of the room stands a Plexiglas pedestal. Walk over to the pedestal, place your apple on the pedestal, examine your apple atop the pedestal, and then walk away.

If this set up of an apple atop a pedestal sounds familiar, you're probably a fan of Yoko Ono and are acquainted with her 1966 display entitled APPLE, which recently was reprised in her "One Woman" show at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. For those not familiar with her work, picture this: a whitewashed room in the middle of which stands a Plexiglas pedestal labeled on one side with the word APPLE in capital letters. Atop the pedestal is a Granny Smith apple. That's it, the entirety of Yoko Ono's masterpiece: APPLE.

Okay, I thought as I stood elbow to elbow with others viewing this exhibit. Some people looked amused. Some people looked entranced. And some people, like me, looked absolutely baffled. Was I missing something here? The day before I was privileged to see Gustav Klimt's *Woman in Gold* at the Neue Gallery on the Upper East Side. Now, here I was looking at a Granny Smith apple. I'm not a huge fan of modern art, but since the museum chose to stage this Yoko Ono exhibit there obviously was some profound meaning or mind blowing insight to it, but I just wasn't getting it.

Kol Nidrei – Alternative Service

Like the apples we each imagined a few minutes ago, we journey through life with different perceptions and perspectives. On this night of Kol Nidrei, the words we speak and the prayers we recite resonate with each of us in a different way. The purpose of the *machzor*, of the fixed liturgy, is not to convince us to think one way or another. We are not automatons that can be programmed to believe and feel and experience alike. We read in Genesis that God created us *B'tzelem Elohim*, in the Divine image, but that doesn't mean we're alike in every way. Rather, our sages taught that being created *B'tzelem Elohim* means that each of us is endowed with Divine-like qualities, such as those described in Exodus chapter 34 (verses 6-7) and recalled during the High Holy Day and Festival services. These qualities are called *Shlosh Esrei Midot*, the Thirteen Attributes of God, and include compassion, grace, slowness to anger, and a proclivity to act kindly, to speak the truth, and to be forgiving of those who have wronged us.

Just as the prayers we recite affect each of us differently, so does the overall worship experience. While our Kol Nidrei service here in the Abrahams Family Chapel in many ways resembles the service in the Zwerin Sanctuary, which in many ways resembles the service at other Denver synagogues and synagogues in Israel and throughout the world, how we perceive and connect to and are affected by this happening is uniquely our own experience. We travel though life together and are influenced by family and friends and society, but at the core of who we are and what makes us tick, we stand alone. And each of us stands as an individual, unique and alone, on this holy day. We stand separately as we reflect on the past, as we atone for the mistakes we made intentionally or unintentionally, as we seek forgiveness from those

Kol Nidrei – Alternative Service

we have wronged, and as we offer heartfelt promises to ourselves, to one another, and to God that we will do our best to change our ways for the better in this New Year.

Which brings us back to Yoko Ono's APPLE. Like I said, I'm not an aficionado of modern art. A piece of yarn dangling from a ceiling tile doesn't ring my bell and I've yet to discover an existential insight in a monochromatic canvas. Still, I was perplexed by the fact that I just wasn't getting that apple. Some spectators literally were transfixed by a piece of fruit. Try that at your local supermarket. Let me describe the apple. I already mentioned that it was a Granny Smith. It was green, pretty uniform in color, larger than a tennis ball but smaller than a softball. The stem was attached, and the apple looked fresh and unblemished. It had a waxy sheen that was enhanced by a spotlight overhead. A small sign on the wall noted that the apple is changed periodically.

That's what got me thinking: the apple is changed periodically. When is the apple changed? By whom is the apple changed? (Yoko Ono, perhaps?) Are there specific criteria by which the decision is made to change the apple? Is the apple ever replaced by something other than a Granny Smith? What happens to the old apple?

The questions swirling through my mind about the apple relate to the essence of Yom Kippur. While our past actions and our future intentions are the focus of attention on this is the Day of Atonement, it is the knowledge that each of us has in our own hands the power to actualize personal change that makes this day so meaningful. We get to make the decisions. We get to be in control of maintaining the status quo or mixing things up. There's little difference between

Kol Nidrei – Alternative Service

conjuring up the image of an apple and imagining how our lives can look different in this New Year. Our existence is what we make of it. Of course, unexpected things happen. Setbacks and obstacles can thwart our best intentions and often there's nothing we can do to overcome them, but at the onset of this year, and we're only ten days in, isn't starting off with better intentions worth a try? As Ezekiel reminds us, the purpose of this day is to confess our transgressions, to ask for forgiveness and to strive to acquire "a new heart and a new spirit" (Ezekiel 36:26).

We are about to recite *vidui*, the formal confession of sins. The *vidui* is repeated numerous times on Yom Kippur, but the mere repetition of these words doesn't complete the process of repentance. Rather, our confession of sins must be preceded by an expression of regret for the wrongs we have committed and by a heartfelt promise to not repeat them. Maimonides (Teshuvah, ch.1-2) holds that the more the sinner confesses at length the better. He suggests a basic formula, such as: "O God! I have sinned, I have committed iniquity, I have transgressed before You by doing such-and-such. Now I am sorry for what I have done and am ashamed and I'll never do it again." Originally, the Yom Kippur confession wasn't scripted like it is today. It was left to the discretion of the individual to express regret, remorse and contrition in his or her own way, which makes a lot of sense. Since each of our experiences is unique, so are our transgressions. In fact, the Hebrew word *cheit*, which usually is translated as sin, actually has more than one meaning, which syncs with what we've been saying about individuality. In addition to being defined as sin, *cheit* can mean: wrong, distortion, transgression, foul, offence, crime, misdemeanor, contravention, infraction, malfeasance, crossing, lapse, guilt,

Kol Nidrei – Alternative Service

infringement, perpetration, and vice. *Al cheit shechatati l'fanekha*, for the sin which I have committed before You. On Yom Kippur, we reflect on our personal *cheit*, however we define it, and swear an oath to God to act differently in this New Year.

The *vidui* in our *machzor*, as in every High Holy Day prayer book, is introduced by a litany of sins in alphabetical order. Think of it as “the Kol Nidrei Top Ten List of transgressions we have committed before God.” The list isn’t comprehensive and for many doesn’t resonate personally or reflect our past actions. Rather, the goal of the alphabetical list is to get our attention, to put up in bright lights a menu of sins that jolts us into beginning the process of heartfelt repentance. Some people question both the format of the Hebrew acrostic, as well as the need for a formal, written *vidui*. Regarding the acrostic, it’s merely a mnemonic device, a memory aid to help us think, “What transgressions did I commit in the past year, and for what do I need to seek forgiveness?” As for the scripted formula, “*Al cheit shechatanu l'fanekha*, for the sin which we have committed before You,” by confessing our sins collectively, we spare one another the embarrassment of proclaiming our personal misdeeds to the world. *Lo l'vayesh*, do not embarrass, is a highly regarded Jewish principle. Yom Kippur isn’t about airing our personal, dirty laundry. It’s about bringing to our personal attention the awareness that the laundry basket is full.

On Yom Kippur, each of us is like the museum curator responsible for Yoko Ono’s APPLE. At some point, even under the most ideal conditions, a pristine piece of fruit will turn. With spectators jostling for a closer look, the apple might fall and bruise. The spotlight overhead might cause the apple to age prematurely. A critter roaming the galleries might enjoy the apple

Kol Nidrei – Alternative Service

as its midnight snack, or the apple might sit untouched for days and weeks and just naturally wither away over time. Regardless of the scenario, at some point the apple will have to be replaced. Someone will be responsible for making the decision: Why to replace it? When to replace it? With what to replace it?

On this Day of Atonement, we grapple with comparable but more profound decisions. On this Day of Atonement we ask: Why did I act the way I did in the past year? When, if not today, will I take the time to examine, with intent and intensity, how I choose to live my life? For what transgressions do I need to seek forgiveness from my family, from my friends, and from my community? For what misdeeds do I need to forgive myself? At what point on this Yom Kippur will I be ready to ask forgiveness from God? Let's begin that process now.