

Nomi Lerman
Kol Nidre 5777

Shana Tova! It is such an honor to be here tonight with all of you, and to be given the opportunity to share words of Torah with you. We are all coming from so many unique places-- some of us are brand new to Nehar Shalom, some of us come every once in awhile, and some of us are weekly regulars. All of us chose to come here tonight, to be together, and to journey through the comforting ancient words and reverberating melodies in tonight's Kol Nidre service.

On this night five years ago, I found myself sitting on the grounds of occupy wall street with 1,000 other people as we welcomed in Yom Kippur with Kol Nidre. The Occupy movement's primary goal was to advance social and economic justice while lifting up non-hierarchical alternative forms of democracy. There was an amazing spectrum of Jews and non-Jews that created this temporary one-night community, who came to show their support for the movement AND to also observe Yom Kippur.

Because the service had no microphones, our different voices swirled together to form a tapestry of depthful sound. I was blessed to be sitting directly in the center of this group, surrounded by people singing the familiar Jewish liturgy of Kol Nidre! All directions were given through the human mic, which was a system where people closest to the speaker would repeat phrases in unison loudly for those behind them to hear.

To get a small taste of how it worked, how about we try the human mic out here?

Please repeat after me:

"Here we are at the open gates * of Yom Kippur"

"Let's all take a moment * to ground ourselves here"

"Take a deep breath in AND * we'll release it together"

Everyone breathes in and out

Thank you for trying that out with me!

After Kol Nidre, many of us grape-vined our way in intricate circles, dancing to the wordless melodies that we belted. Our dancing and singing lasted deep into the night, and I completely forgot about hunger or thirst--

because all I felt was pure joy. But wait, isn't this supposed to be a serious and solemn day of fasting? Yom Kippur does embody all of these things, and we also teach that it is the happiest and most joyful day of our year as well. On Kol Nidre evening, many of us wear white clothing and tallisim to represent a deep cleansing of our collective soul, and a renewal that can help us look ahead to the new year. It is taught that our tallisim and white clothing are trying to emulate the light that shines from angels who are constantly singing. On Yom Kippur we are invited to be joyful and to sing together as part of our cleansing process, and we do this as individual souls within the wider community.

According to Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, as long as we live, our souls are constantly singing. Each soul can choose multiple ways of growing and connecting to this universe, all of which are unique and important.

Sometimes a person connects inwardly to the song of their own soul, where they are able to grow and work on the landscape of their inner world. Another person might choose to stretch their soul out to sing the song of their communities, connecting deeply with the struggles and dreams of their own families and people. Another person will expand their soul out beyond their own communities to every human being, singing the song of collective unification among people. Then there is the person who rises even higher from there until they unify with the Oneness of the universe, connecting with all creatures, with all of the worlds-- singing with existence. And finally, there is the person who sings all of these songs at once, together: The song of the soul, the song of one's own people, the song of human beings, and the song of the worlds -- these songs interweave together within this person at every moment and at all times. This interweaving of songs eventually rises to become the song of holiness, which is the song of our Creator. Rav Kook teaches that the name of our people, Yisrael, can also be read as 'Shir-El', which in Hebrew means the Song of G-d. We long to sing this song of G-d, and we keep trying to learn the parts in order to integrate each one into our awareness.

I think each one of us gravitates towards one or two types of soul-singing, finding it easier to interact spiritually with our individual selves, our immediate community, the people in this world, or the wider universe. We may switch between a few soul-songs throughout our lifetimes, however, integrating all forms of soul-singing at one time is extremely difficult! Maybe we feel connected with the song of the Jewish people but, oy! we forgot about the songs of creation, or all people, or the song within. As we yearn to connect with our surroundings, perhaps we are trying to recognize

and become aware of the meaning of our own name, Yisrael, Shir - El, the song of G-d.

I think the closest I ever came to feeling that integration was at Kol Nidre 5 years ago. As I was dancing and singing with 1,000 other people, integrating so many soul-songs on the hard pavement of wall street, I felt an unbelievable sense of unity. We were able to create that temporary community because we dreamed of a world without corruption, and our various spiritual and social identities coexisted on that threshold. That night I was able to connect the soul-yearning of myself with the Jewish people and with a larger human struggle for justice. This community, here at Nehar Shalom, is another place where I feel such a warm and genuine connection. This sweet community is permanent, and that consistency has allowed the space to put real intention into making people feel welcome to bring different parts of our whole selves to prayer and action. This community helps feed and cultivate the songs that spring from our souls.

As 5777 rolls in, I am honored and so grateful to be standing here tonight, praying with this special community.

As we gather together this Yom Kippur, I hope we can hold with us the Haitian families and all who have lost homes and loved ones to Hurricane Matthew this past week. I hope we can feel our collective songs and prayers vibrating to the places that need it in our communities-- to those who are living with illness, to the American Indians at Standing Rock who are fighting for clean water and land sovereignty, to people working for racial justice in this country, to the many corners of this world yearning for wholeness. Tonight's service began with us singing "Or Zaruah La'tsadiK Ulishrei lev simcha"-- *Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the noble-hearted*. I hope we are able to connect to the joy that many of our ancestors felt as they too, sat with tallesim and felt the light that comes with this yuntiv. Maybe part of the gift of Yom Kippur's righteous light is to rejuvenate us, and give us the courage to continue learning, growing, and singing together.

While it is definitely hard for an individual to hold each type of soul-singing at once, I think as a community of many voices, we have the opportunity to join forces-- to lift up the songs individuals are most strengthened by.

When we include all of our voices, we work towards learning the collective song of Oneness, Shir-El, a song that the Creator is singing always,

hoping that we have the motivation, curiosity, and holy chutzpah to listen in closely..... and, to sing along too.

Gmar Chasima Tova!