

Kol Nidre 5781 – Broken Promises **Rabbi Marc Israel**

A tragedy happened one day in Jerusalem - walking down the street, a member of the *Knesset* was tragically struck by a truck and killed. His *neshama* arrived immediately to *Sha'are Shamayim*, to the Gates of Heaven and there he met the angel Gavriel at the entrance, who stopped him as he was about to enter and said:

"It seems there is a problem. It's rare for a high-ranking elected official to make it up here, so before we make a final decision, we want you to spend one day in Gehinom (hell) and one in Olam HaBa. Then you can choose where to spend eternity." The MK was a bit confused, but since he will get to make the choice, goes along without much argument.

Gavriel sends the MK down to Gehinom and there our MK finds himself in the middle of a beautiful spa in Cyprus. In the distance is a bar and at the bar are all his friends and colleagues from his whole life and from across the political spectrum.

Everyone is happy and relaxed – no one is even arguing politics. They run to greet him, reminisce about the good times they had on earth, laugh a little about how each of them became wealthy at the expense of the people they had pledged to serve. They go the casino, the shvitz, drink some scotch and enjoy some fine sushi.

The Satan is there and seems to be a friendly guy who likes dancing and telling jokes. Before the MK realizes it, a day has passed and its time to go. Everyone gives him a big hug and waves as he heads back to Olam HaBa.

Over the next 24 hours, the MK up in Heaven joins a group of contented souls studying Torah, singing zemirot and meditating. It is also very pleasant and relaxing and the 24 hour again goes by quickly.

Gavriel returns. "Well, you've spent a day in Gehinom and another in Olam HaBa. Now, you must choose where you want to spend eternity."

He reflects for a minute and then answers, "Well, I hate to admit it but Gehinom was a lot more fun."

Saying nothing, Gavriel sends him back to Gehinom. Suddenly the man finds himself in the middle of a barren land covered with waste and garbage. His friends are dressed in rags and rummaging through the trash. Its sweltering hot and miserable out there, like a sticky, summer DC night.

Satan comes over to him and smoothly lays his arm around the MK's shoulder.

"But, I don't understand," stammers the MK. "What happened to the spa, the bar and the casino? Why do my friends look so miserable now, when they were so happy when I saw them?"

Satan looks at the MK: "You of all people should understand the answer. Yesterday we were campaigning. Today, your vote has already been cast."

Politicians over-promising during their campaign and under-delivering once in office is as old as democracy itself. Indeed, Plato notes that "In politics we (wrongly) presume that everyone who knows how to get votes knows how to administer a city or a state. We don't look for the best-looking doctor when we are sick" He clearly understands the difference between what one needs to say or do to win an election and how that contrasts sometimes with what one does while in office.

So it is not surprising that we continue to see the same phenomena today. And if we think we have problems with our political system here in America, consider the state of Israel, where it took three elections to finally arrive at one of the least stable governments in Israel's history. Were it not for Benny Gantz's concerns regarding Coronavirus, there probably would have been a fourth election last month. And when you look at the platforms and where things stand now, it is not hard to understand the joke about the MK.

Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu ran his campaign based on a promise to annex the West Bank and to curtail the Israeli Supreme Court's powers, so he could avoid a corruption trial. Vice Prime Minister Benny Gantz ran on a campaign based primarily on getting Bibi out of office, promising that he would not serve in a government with Bibi as Prime Minister.

And today? Bibi is Prime Minister, Benny Gantz is Vice Prime Minister under him, plans for annexation are halted and Netanyahu's trial is set to begin evidentiary hearings in January with no changes to the Court. Perhaps one could have argued that all of this was justified in order to install a government that could keep Israel's coronavirus numbers under control. And you might have convinced me of that back in July. However, now that Israel has surpassed the US rate of infection per 100,000 people, it's hard to see how the compromises made to form the government were really worth it.

In the midst of all of this turmoil, suddenly, in what seems to come out of nowhere, Jared Kushner delivers a huge gift to Israel in the form of an agreement to establish full diplomatic relations with Bahrain and the UAE, as long as Israel agreed not to annex the West Bank. And we are told that in addition to these countries, there may be five more countries that will be ready to sign such agreements in the coming months.

The importance of these agreements goes far beyond the new relationship between Israel and these two small, albeit wealthy, nations. It's important to break down a 53-year-old policy agreed to in Khartoum where the nations of the Arab League unanimously promised the famous Three No's - No Peace, No recognition of Israel and

No negotiations with Israel. While Bahrain and the UAE are not the first nations to have broken that agreement, they are the first in over 25 years. With this agreement, the long-held narrative of Israel being a tiny island among a sea of enemies begins to unravel. I'm not suggested that Israel no longer faces any dangers, it certainly does, but rather that those dangers are no longer coming from every side. In fact, almost all of its threats are now generated from one place – from Iran. But even there, the Israeli army has been able to attack with relative impunity over the last few years, taking out some of their nuclear installations, disabling computers and bombing their weapon storage sites, filled with arms in transport to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

The reason this Agreement is important is that I fervently believe that an Israel that is feeling less threatened by its neighbors is an Israel that is far more likely to negotiate a real peace agreement with the Palestinians, if their leadership ever decides to take that route. Rather than feeling abandoned and betrayed by these agreements, I would hope that the Palestinians would see this as an opportunity to engage in negotiations.

But wait, what happened to Bibi's primary campaign promise to annex the West Bank? First of all, he found out there was less support for it in the American government than he expected. Second, Israel was facing sanctions and even greater isolation from the world community and third, and most importantly, the circumstances changed. The promise made on the campaign trails could not have envisioned the agreements with Bahrain and the UAE. For the far right and settler's movement, that is not much consolation for backing Bibi in the March election and joining in his government. But for most everyone else, that does matter.

And that brings us back to the question from which we began – why do we elect politicians who make us promises that we know they are unlikely to keep – at least not to the degree that they promised. Why do we keep voting for paradise and ending up in an arid desert?

Perhaps part of the answer can be found in the central prayer for which this evening's service is named – Kol Nidre. All vows. It is strange, we begin our new year by disavowing all the vows that we might take in the coming year. Quite the opposite of the secular new year where we make vows that we never intend to keep. And Kol Nidre goes beyond vows, and includes all renunciations, bans, oaths, formulas of obligation, pledges and promises. Like many of you, and generations of rabbis from centuries past, I find this concept to be problematic. It seems like this prayer is the "I had my finger's crossed" excuse of Jewish law. But is there a different angle, a different way that we might be able to see this prayer?

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, z"l, notes that "most of the vows made by a person during the year have little to do with holiness and spiritual elevation...Life is full of aggravated expressions, such as "If you don't do this I will never speak to you again!" Halachically, without Kol Nidre, these utterances would be considered binding vows, if there were at least two witnesses. But he notes that Kol Nidre comes and releases us from such commitments. "The absolution of vows and the inner resolution to annul them forever,

not only removes obstacles from interpersonal relations, but also relieves the spirit of unnecessary burdens.” In other words, he is saying, our recitation of Kol Nidre takes us away from those mindless statements made in moments of passion that we never intended. His explanation teaches that not holding ourselves or others to such vows can actually improve human relations.

Rabbi and Psychologist Ruth Durchslag agrees. She writes that when we finally get to a place of silence and reflection, we realize that some of the “pronouncements [that we have made] may seem hollow and harsh...Often, from this place, I wish I could take my words back. Kol Nidre gives me the permission to do just that.”

The problem, of course, is that these answers don't deal with the promises we make that we should feel duty bound to keep – fidelity to a spouse, a pledge to repay a bank loan, a promise to tell the truth in court. All of the commentaries acknowledge this weakness – but they also remind us that going to the other extreme can be even worse, recalling Yiftach's promise to sacrifice the first thing he sees upon returning from battle and fulfilling that oath even when it is his daughter. The damage of the promise kept can sometimes be worse than the damage of the promise broken.

Applying these lessons to the Israeli election, consider that when Benny Gantz was campaigning, Coronavirus was still isolated to East Asia. Israel's first case had been identified just two weeks before that election and at that point, each person who had acquired the virus did so outside of Israel. Should Gantz have kept his promise to the voters not to serve with Netanyahu or compromised for what he believed was the good of the country?

What about Bibi and annexation? Would Israel be better off today if he stuck to the campaign promise to go forward with annexation and not have signed the Abraham Accords with Bahrain and the UAE? There are some, mostly extremists, who may argue yes, but it's a tough case to make.

So should politicians be able to promise whatever they want with impunity? Should they be allowed to make Gehinom seem like Gan Eden? I don't think so. But if not, how do you draw the line?

As my children will tell you, there is nothing that I had more than being lied to. They know that the lie will always be worse than the act in my eyes.

But I think when it comes to drawing this line, we have to distinguish between a lie and a broken promise, because they are not the same thing. A lie is something that we say knowing full well that it is not true. A broken promise, on the other hand, may be something that we believed at the time we said it, but circumstances changed in some manner. Maybe we didn't work hard enough to make it happen, maybe we learned new information that made us realize it wasn't the best course of action. Read in this way, I believe Kol Nidre is about releasing us from those sincerely made promises, not the lies.

How can you tell the difference? Most of us can never be sure. In the end, the ones who will truly know are you and God. Then we will find out if what we are seeing, at that point, is the campaign promise, or after our vote was already cast. Let's pray that each of us will be written and sealed for a healthy and happy New Year - one in which we are able to fulfill the promises of our heart that were sincerely made, but one where we are also able to forgive ourselves for those promises not kept, despite our best intentions.