

Kol Nidre 5787 | September 20, 2026

Rabbi Jonathan E. Blake

Westchester Reform Temple, Scarsdale, New York

What Are We Doing Here?

I can tell from the sheepish look how the conversation is going to go even before the office door closes behind us. “I really don't know why I'm here, rabbi,” it begins. “I'm not religious.” “And I don't believe in God.”

I answer: “Now that that's out of the way, what brings you here?”

I imagine some of you feel something like this every time this season rolls around. Maybe you think to yourself, “Why do I do this? I don't even believe in organized religion.”

But, here we are.

So now that that's out of the way, can we talk about what brings us here?

This is a love letter to all of us who are wondering what we're doing here. (And, no worries, I love all of you who aren't wondering, too.) But for all the wonderers and the wanderers: come in, get comfortable. Maybe you don't believe in God. Or organized religion. Or even disorganized religion. Or maybe you don't know what you believe. You're not alone. Trust me. Just look around.

And let me be bolder still: you're in luck. Because while Judaism is religious, it is really so much more than what modern people usually mean when they say "religion."

Tonight, on the holiest night of the year, let's come up with a better way of understanding what we're doing here.

What **are** we doing here?

In the narrowest sense, we're here for Kol Nidre. I know people – you probably do too – who become dues-paying members of a synagogue for this one service, this one prayer.

Kol Nidre actually argues *against* Judaism as a religion. If Judaism were just a religion, you'd expect a prayer to

headline the holiest night of the year; if a belief system, a creed, a profession of faith.

But Kol Nidre isn't a prayer. For starters, there's no *Baruch Ata Adonai* – no mention of God at all. It's not in Hebrew. It's in Aramaic, the ancient Jewish vernacular – the language of commerce and contracts – and, fittingly, Kol Nidre is a dry legal instrument that annuls vows.

Kol Nidre first appears in the literature as a formula for invalidating vows taken over the past year. In the 9th Century, Natronai Gaon, head of the Rabbinic Academy of Sura in Babylonia, condemned it as a dangerous legal practice. An entire congregation cannot have its vows collectively annulled this way, he argued; such matters must be weighed case by case. His successor Amram Gaon called the recitation of Kol Nidre a *minhag shtut*, a “foolish custom.” For centuries, authority after authority agreed.

Then something happened. In 12th Century France, some of the greatest legal minds of the age declined to condemn and instead repaired the text, changing it from past tense to future, so that Kol Nidre preemptively releases vows made between

this Yom Kippur and the next. They gave technical explanations, but I suspect the real reason: they knew the people would never give it up.

Kol Nidre also created an optics problem for us: Gentile onlookers concluded that a Jew's oath couldn't be trusted, a pretext Christian communities used to force Jews to swear special oaths in court. This, despite the fact that Kol Nidre only ever could annul vows between people and God. It could never cancel a promise owed to another person — no debt, no contract, no obligation, no injury.

In 1839, Samson Raphael Hirsch, father of Modern Orthodoxy, abolished Kol Nidre from his first congregation but it reentered the service not long after. Our Movement originally cut the text of Kol Nidre from the *machzor*, but, and this is truly astonishing, the *melody* stayed: the *Union Prayer Book* kept a service called Kol Nidre in which the ancient chant was played on the organ, the words gone, the tune untouchable. *Gates of Repentance* eventually restored the full text because the people wanted it back.

The real story of Kol Nidre is this: the authorities opposed it for a thousand years – restricting it, revising it, removing it. But the Jewish people refused to give it up. They packed the synagogue for it. They named the holiest night of the year after it. And they did so, manifestly, not because of its content, but because of the melody and the moment, the experience of standing together as a People as the sun sets, with the Torah scrolls brought forth from the holy ark and the ancient chant rising from the depths.

What begins its strange and strangely durable life as a dusty legal technicality ends up, instead, as a magnificent window into the genius of Judaism. Kol Nidre teaches us that Judaism is **not merely a religion, but a civilization** – in which the common folk may ultimately prevail over even the greatest Rabbis who ever lived. **Not a belief system, but a conversation** – one in which every voice adds its unique Torah to the treasure-house of accumulated Jewish wisdom. **Not a faith, but an invitation to awe** – to feel the sacred within the dross of our frail and fleeting existence.

A civilization.

A conversation.

An invitation.

Three answers, I think, to the question we carried in here tonight: *What are we doing here?*

So another question. Have you ever heard of a game called Methodist Geography?

No, because, that's not a thing.

Methodists are united by creed and church. Methodism is a religion. Methodists don't play Methodist Geography.

Judaism, in contrast, is a **civilization**. Other religious traditions have rich cultures and communities, of course. But Jewish belonging has a particular thickness to it: we are united by peoplehood, a shared sense that a fellow Jew is *mishpoche*, family. Jewish Geography is our favorite pastime. Someone who wants to know what synagogue you belong to is most likely not trying to size up your theology. It's about the people. Especially now that even Jalen Brunson's got game.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, architect of Reconstructionist Judaism, built his entire body of teaching on exactly this idea in his 1934 book, *Judaism as a Civilization: Toward a Reconstruction of American-Jewish Life*.

Rather than work within the traditional conception — *God revealed the Torah to Moses at Sinai and gave it to the People of Israel* — Kaplan inverted the flowchart: *Judaism begins with the People of Israel, who wrote the Torah to capture their experience of the Divine, and to express the claims that experience makes on our lives*.

So yes, we're a *religious* civilization, but religion is only one piece of our identity. What makes Judaism Judaism also comes from our shared languages and culture, our folkways and our food-ways; our ethics and our arguments; our Nobel prizes and our genetic disorders; our pride when a fellow Jew succeeds and our shame when a fellow Jew does something disgraceful; our sense of shared history and shared destiny; our neuroses and psychic fixations; our music, literature, and art; and our humor – especially the inside jokes. Ordering

pastrami on white bread with mayonnaise at the deli may be kosher, but it sure isn't Jewish.

I think if we all related to Judaism as a civilization, we'd have a lot less Jewish guilt, a lot less *"I'm not a good Jew,"* and a lot more comfort and joy in Jewish settings. No one in this room is "less Jewish" for what you do or do not believe.

Judaism-as-civilization also rebuts the argument that we can divorce Judaism from Israel. If Judaism were just a religion, sure – one could be Jewish with no connection to Israel whatsoever. But we're more than what we pray or believe: we are an *Am*, a people, the collective expression of just under sixteen million Jews, nearly half of whom live in Israel – a civilization within the civilization. Our civilization has carried the land in its history and memory for three thousand years: in our calendar and customs, our poetry and yearning.

Israel is not the whole of Judaism, of course. But neither can we tell the story of Judaism while pretending that Israel is irrelevant to our peoplehood.

You may fall in and out of love with Israel. You may be proud of Israel, worry over Israel, *kvell* over Israel, weep for Israel, argue about Israel at the break-fast tomorrow. Go ahead, it's okay. Because in the Jewish civilization, arguing is not the opposite of belonging; it is often a *form* of belonging.

And that takes us to our second insight: that Judaism is a **conversation** – one in which every voice adds its unique Torah.

Kol Nidre itself, you will recall, is Exhibit A: the people defied their Rabbis and kept it right where they wanted it.

You came here tonight to be part of that conversation – a conversation about, well, everything. The Talmud is a conversation spanning centuries, among hundreds upon hundreds of rabbis who lived lands and generations apart: a great unfolding of arguments, as dense as kugel, as layered as baklava, as deep as the profoundest questions of philosophy, cosmology, psychology, law and life.

"Judaism," my friend and rabbi Larry Hoffman likes to say, "is a conversation in a register that does justice to the human condition."

I was thinking about that line this summer as I walked through Auschwitz with Cantor Kleinman, fifty members of our WRT family, and four educators: two Israeli and two Polish.

Judaism is a conversation in a register that does justice to the human condition.

Here we stood, on a late June day in the heat wave blanketing Europe, in that most inhuman place, where the Nazis murdered a million of our people, and a hundred thousand others – Poles, Roma, Sinti, Soviet prisoners of war – either through a slow death of forced labor, disease, and starvation at Auschwitz, or a terrifyingly abrupt end in the gas chambers and crematoria of Birkenau just up the road. And I thought about what Judaism had to say to us who came to bear witness.

For some who entered the camps, piety – the specifically religious part of Judaism – sustained them. I thought of Eli Sharabi, an Israeli abducted by Hamas on October 7th,

whose 491 days in captivity in the foul tunnels of Gaza inform his memoir, *Hostage*. When I interviewed him on this *bimah* last December, he told us that – never having thought of himself as religious – he and his fellow captives drew strength from making *kiddush* on Friday nights with what little water their captors provided.

His story reminds us that ritual and prayer can hold the hearts and souls of the suffering when all other words fail or fall away.

The moment came for Cantor Kleinman and me to lead a short service of memorial. Standing, sweltering, seeking the meager shade of a cattle car preserved in the vast expanse of the extermination camp, we found ourselves craving and creating ritual. The moment needed our attention. It needed *Kaddish*. It needed a melody older than our grief.

It did not need many words, and I did not have many. What I had was this:

Judaism didn't come into the world to make us more observant, or make us more fervent believers. Judaism came

*into the world **to help us become more fully human.** More human, so that we could see the brokenness and be the repair, so that we could stand in the darkness and be a light.*

Hillel gave us six words that Auschwitz turned into a commandment: *Bamakom she-ein anashim, hishtadel lihyot ish*. "In a place where no one is a human being, strive to be human" (*Pirkei Avot*, 2:5).

Auschwitz tells us, with unbearable force, why Jewish safety and sovereignty matter, why the world needs Israel. Yet just as much Auschwitz teaches, with terrible clarity, why the world needs *Judaism*: a conversation that insists on the sacredness of every human life.

As the world becomes, day by day, more inhuman, can we be a force for this humanizing holiness? Can we once again live inside that conversation that does justice to the human condition? That is the real work of this day.

I'll let you in on a secret. Getting to that conversation requires that we first stop talking long enough to pay attention: to

notice, in silence, the person in front of us, the lives surrounding us, the world holding us.

Which brings us to the third answer.

Judaism is, above all, an **invitation** to awe. And I want you to hear it from one of its greatest proponents. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel fled Warsaw just weeks before the Nazi invasion, rescued by the President of Hebrew Union College, our seminary. His mother and three of his sisters were not saved. This man, an ember plucked from the flames, is the one who spent the rest of his life teaching that the ground note of Jewish existence is amazement.

For Heschel, amazement isn't a reaction to the unusual; it's the baseline posture Judaism invites us to adopt toward all of existence, the mundane no less than the magnificent.

Awe is what we feel gazing out from the mountaintop. But it's also there in a perfect scoop of gelato. In the look from your loved one that means something only the two of you know. In waking up after a good night's sleep. In the sound of your grandchild's laughter. For Heschel, the capacity "to

experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures" is "one of the goals of the Jewish way of living" (*God in Search of Man*, 1955, p. 49).

If you are capable of being astonished, you are already on the starting line of a Jewish life. Everything else flows from awe: the ability to see another human being not as an object to be exploited but as an image of the holy; the willingness to live in covenant with creation, as partners in mending a broken world; the bravery to show up amidst that brokenness and still carry ourselves with gratitude for the mystery and majesty of it all.

We stand at every moment, in this too-short life, in a world where heart-stopping beauty and heart-rending pain intersect. Judaism invites us to stop, regularly, to answer the world with the only response it deserves: our awe.

These are, after all, Days of Awe, *Yamim Nora'im*. Our tradition named them after an *experience*, not a belief. No one will leave this sanctuary having signed a creed. *Everyone* can leave having felt something true: what forty generations have felt when the melody of Kol Nidre begins.

We would – if we stopped and took notice – make not just these ten days in September, but every day after, days of awe, lowercase. Let the way we see and treat each human being, each image of the Divine, be our living and breathing Judaism. Let our conversation do justice to the human condition and our deeds give honor to the civilization of the Jewish people. And even when no one else is acting like a human being, let our Judaism remind us to strive to be as human as we can be.

So the next time you find yourself at my door, and you feel the old disclaimer coming on – *"I'm not religious, but..."* – just come into my office. Because now you know: that was never the question. You are a cherished part of a civilization. You are an essential voice in the conversation. You are invited tonight, and every day you draw breath, to live in awe.

And that is what we're doing here.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.