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YOM KIPPUR / YONKIPER:
FACING UNCERTAINTY

With Kol Nidre and Yizker



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A Secular Kolnidre

•*KOLNIDRE*...through the centuries, the mournful melody sounds.

KOLNIDRE: all our vows. Around the time of the Spanish expulsion, the tragic notes and words were joined. They spoke for them, then...they speak to us, today.

•*KOLNIDRE*. The *conversos*, the secret Jews, at swordpoint...in the blaze of burning bodies on bonfires of hate...forced to deny their own identity and to accept another. In secrecy and stealth they returned to the remnant of their people on this, the eve of *yom kippur*. On this one night they conquered fear. On this one night they reclaimed their heritage.

•In their heartbreak and sorrow, they chanted this plea: *KOL NIDRE*...all vows that have been forgotten have no meaning now in our hearts. And their sisters and brothers replied: "In the name of the Court on high and of the people here, we declare it is permissible to be together with our silent brothers and sisters."

•*KOLNIDRE*...the mournful melody and the words of sorrow spoke for them. Do they speak to us...today? We, too, have made vows that are forgotten. But it is not our forgotten vows that need forgiving. It is the *forgetting* of our vows that troubles us. For our vows were freely made and not to others, but to ourselves.

•*KOLNIDRE*...the vows that we have forgotten we now remember, on this night. We vowed that we would keep high our dedication to our people's culture, while holding fast to the conviction that our people's fate is bound beyond breaking with the oppressed and dispossessed of all the world.

•**TOGETHER:** *KOLNIDRE*...all our vows to forge a Jewish peoplehood of today from all the riches of the past are *not* forgotten. We remember them on this night...and we will keep our vows as best we can.

•We, too are *conversos*. Driven partly by fear, partly by the complexities of our lives, partly by the difficulty of swimming against the stream. We, too, return to our peoplehood and to our humanism on this night.

•**TOGETHER:** *KOLNIDRE*...on this night, we try to conquer our fears as we try to remember our vows. For this night...For this year...For our lives.

•Somehow, as we stand on the rim between the momentous year just passed and the uncertainty of the year to come, there is a soothing—yes, a spiritual—value to poetry and music. Our spirits need to be refreshed. We need to turn our minds to examine matters that desperately need our thoughts.

•In the year just passed, flames did not threaten to consume our city, but despair and frustration remain rampant in our streets. The flames may be extinguished, but what have we done to quench the smoldering embers in human hearts? Can we be safe in our homes when homelessness stalks the streets? Can our children grow up in a decent world when other children are taught in delapidated schools, without books or computers or even toilets fit for human use? Do we need a text from holy writ to tell us what is right and good?

•Illness and pestilence grow in poverty while attention is focused on market averages and unproductive speculation. Is it not time to put an end to the private purses that grow fat from disease and despair? Is it not time to declare that universal health care is a human right, as is breathable air and drinkable water—lest the pestilence that grows in poverty reach into our own homes?

•The workers in our fields and factories, with documents or without, need to join unions, as our forebears did, to gain their basic rights and a living wage. As do all workers who labor without dignity, and those whose decent salaries depend on long and stress-filled hours. Contemplating the past and our future, we need to remember our own heritage. And with actions of solidarity, not just in songs or words.

•And who will stand up, as the Prophets of old, and declare that morality and ethics—whether they derive from gods or human experience—do not encompass a system where corporate profits, real or finagled, are valued above the cost in human lives, in human dignity, in safety, or even in common decency?

•Perhaps we need to heed with profound understanding the answer to be found in the words of our ancient, angry Prophet Amos: “I loathe, I spurn your festivals...I will pay no heed to your gifts...Spare Me the sound of your hymns, and let Me not hear the sound of your lutes. But let justice well up like water and righteousness like an unfailing stream.”

•Do the horrors throughout the globe proclaim that nationalism must inevitably lead to chauvinism...and ethnic pride to murder? Perhaps part of the answer may be found in the words of the philosopher of Secular Jewishness, Dr. Khayim Zhitlovski. To those who advocated divestment of cultural distinctiveness, he replied: “The true significance of ‘inter-nationalism’ is in the hyphen.” Today we might add, the same is true of the hyphen in multi-culturalism.

•And in reply to the constant debate over which is more important, Jewish identity or progressive activism, Zhitlovski declared: *vos mer yeed, alts mer mentsh—vos mer mentsh, alts mer yeed*—the more Jewish one becomes, the more human one is; the more a decent human one is, the more Jewish one becomes.”

•Especially at this moment, we need to affirm once again that oneness with a people is perilous unless it is part of allegiance to humanity as a whole, and that oneness with humanity is hollow unless it is rooted in one’s own identity.

•And perhaps, too, this is the time to remember that both allegiance to humanity and oneness with our people can be a source of inner strength as we grapple with the continuing puzzle of who we are...and how we should live. In our search for meaning

beyond ourselves, there are grains of truth and pockets of comfort to be found in a people's culture that is bound to others but does not efface itself.

- For some of us, that is where we find transcendence: in preserving our individual dignity while meeting the needs of family and loved ones...upholding the integrity of our families as part of a larger community...reveling in our Community against the broader backdrops of peoplehood, nation, humanity.

- The search for meaning beyond ourselves often involves the comfort of ritual, or ceremonial actions—the inner peace derived from the repetition of familiar behavior. Our ritual on this *kolnidre* night is not determined by the authority of the past, even as it recalls ancient rites. It is what seems to us right and fitting.

- These are the words of the Prophet Isaiah, which tradition selects to be read on the day of *yonkiper*.

- Let us listen intently to the words of our Prophet...the poet of peace and hope. Let us read the ancient words to each other. And, as we read, let our ears strain to catch their meaning, as they might be heard in Baghdad and Fallouja, in Bethlehem and Jerusalem...in Johannesburg and South-Central...in Tien An Min Square and in the *barrio*...in Kishinev and in Kosovo...and on the streets of all the cities where homelessness and despair and violence and disease cry out for the hopeful message of the Prophets of *mentsh-lekh-kayt*, of human understanding and decency.

READER: Is *this* the fast that I have chosen?
ALL: A day for people to afflict their souls?
READER: Is it to bow down our heads as bulrushes
ALL: And to spread sackcloth and ashes under us?
READER: Will you call this a fast?
ALL: No, *this* is the fast that I have chosen:
READER: To loosen the bonds of injustice,
ALL: To undo the bonds of the yoke—
READER: To let the oppressed go free by smashing every yoke!

ALL: It is to share your bread with the hungry
READER: And to bring the outcast poor to your home.
ALL: When you see the naked, that you clothe them—
READER: And not hide yourself from your own flesh.
ALL: Then will your light break forth as the morning
READER: And your righteousness will go before you.
ALL: Is not *this* the fast that our history has chosen?

•...the fast that our history has chosen. We stand before our history on this night of *kolnidre*. We, a people obsessed with history. On this night of reckoning, of the search for ourselves, we need to see ourselves through the prism of our history.

•These are the words of another of our prophets, the Yiddish writer and thinker, Y. L. Perets: "...Not only an individual but a people, too, must possess a memory. A people's memory is called history. What is true of an individual without memory is also true of a people without its history: they cannot become wiser or better."

•The words of Perets, a prophet of the 20th century, continue: "One generation passes away and another generation comes, but the Earth abides forever. If people want to be part of the Eternal, they must be of the Earth...for people must find their fulfillment on Earth. They do so by being reborn in their children and their children's children. This is eternity."

•Perets goes on to expand the idea of eternity beyond parenthood: "Individuals are not free, single dots in the universe. They are ringlets in a net. The net is their generation. A human being is also a link in the infinite chain of generations that reaches back to the Patriarch Abraham and extends onward to the end of time..."

•A brilliant poet and activist of our own time, Muriel Rukeyser, wrote these words almost as if she were writing for us, on this very day: "Now we turn to memory. We search all the days we had forgotten for a tradition that can support our arms in such a moment. If we are free people, we are also in a sense free to choose our past, at every moment to choose the tradition we will bring to the future. We invoke a rigorous positive, that will enable us to imagine our choices, and to make them."

•Remembering our past selectively, in "a rigorous positive," do we really think of ourselves as ringlets in the net of our own generation and links in a chain of generations? If we don't—how then can we be wiser and better? If we do—then the

Jewish part of our total beings that we remember tonight places burdens and responsibilities on the totality of ourselves...and not just tonight.

•We **are** links in the chain of generations. We are the survivors of millions of victims of gas chambers. "...The tradition we will bring to the future" declares that we cannot sit idly by when any government, by action or inaction, befouls the atmosphere, the soil or the seas, or when weapons of mass destruction are stockpiled in the arsenals of **any** nation, including our own

•As links in the chain of generations, we are no strangers to a past of ghetto walls and barriers at borders. We remember our grandparents and great-grandparents, stealing across borders to arrive, undocumented, on these shores. Our history gives us no choice but to stand with refugees from oppression *and* hunger who have followed our forebears to the gates we now call ours. They are vilified in the same words as were our own ancestors. "The tradition we will bring to the future" demands that we stand with our memory, with the newcomers, and with their demand for equal rights, for legalization.

•As links in the chain of generations, we know that sweatshops are a living reality in our own time, in our own city. We recall our ancestors' struggle to pry loose the sweatshops' greedy clutches. Even as we call on those in power to police the grimy, locked doors, we must examine our own consciences and the labels in the clothes we are about to buy. And demand to know who stitched and sewed...and at what price.

•On the day of *yonkipur*, observant Jews perform the ceremony of *yizker*, a memorial. The ceremony began during the Middle Ages, when the Crusades wiped out entire

Jewish communities along the Rhine. Then, the *yizker* ceremony consisted of reading the names of the martyred communities.

•In the following centuries, *yizker* became a time of personal memorial for departed parents and other close relatives. From the start of our Secular *kolnidre* observances, we have tried to combine the historic memories of our people with the personal sorrows of those among us who mourn recent losses in their own families. We do so again tonight.

(MEMORIAL CANDLE IS LIT.)

Yizker: you shall remember.

We do remember. We, who seek our ethics in the imperatives of historical experience...we have not forgotten that commitment to humanity is meaningless without commitment to each other...to families, to children, to parents, to lovers, to ourselves.

We remember, especially at this time, the women and men who were part of our lives and who are now part of the eternity that is human memory. In silence, we contemplate the empty spaces their deaths have left in our lives...in silence, we celebrate the spaces in our lives that they made richer, fuller, happier, more loving and more deep in meaning. We mourn their deaths as we celebrate their lives. As we affirm life itself.

In the rising of the sun and in its going down we remember them.

In the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter we remember them.

In the opening of buds and in the rebirth of spring we remember them.

In the blueness of the sky and in the warmth of summer we remember them.

In the rustling of leaves and in the beauty of autumn we remember them.

In the beginning of the year and when it ends we will remember them.

When we are weary and in need of strength we will remember them.

When we are lost and sick at heart we will remember them.

When we have joys we yearn to share we will remember them.

In our remembering is life eternal.

(Roland B. Gittelsohn, adapted)

The Sholem Community of Los Angeles is a secular Jewish educational, cultural, and social institution. It offers a way to be Jewish that harmonizes with progressive values of social responsibility and justice. The Sholem Community frequently uses Yiddish spelling in its observances and education.

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