

# Annulling Our Vows—for Good

*Why is the most well-remembered Jewish prayer an annulment of vows? A fascinating Midrash about Moshe, G-d, and His vows after the Golden Calf, that shed some light on the issue.*

## **Did You Ever Make a Vow?**

Good Yom Tov, and a meaningful fast to everyone!

You know, there's always an election going on somewhere at some level, whether municipal, city, county, state or national.

And there's always a candidate or politician (not always are those two words the same thing!) who typically promises one thing, and, upon entering office, ends up doing another thing (or not doing what he or she promised to do).

But it's not just politicians who say they're going to do this or that, and end up not doing it—it's ordinary people, too.

Have you ever gotten mad and sworn you'd never talk to so-and-so again—only to find out that things were not as they had seemed? Or, so-and-so made up with you and so now things are okay again? But if you had sworn to not talk to him again, how can you violate your vow now?

Sports lovers might remember the same situation with LeBron

James, when he returned to the Cleveland Cavaliers basketball team. There were Cavs fans who were so mad at their hero when he left that they swore they'd never talk about him again. However, as soon as he came back to play for Cleveland, these same diehard fans conveniently forgot about their vows to excommunicate "King James."

However, all this creates a minor problem.

You see, the Torah tells us in the Torah portion of Matos (Bamidbar 30:3): "If a man makes a vow to the L-rd or makes an oath to prohibit himself, he shall not violate his word; according to whatever came out of his mouth, he shall do."

It doesn't get much clearer than that! If you say you're going to do it, the Torah says you have to stand by your word, at least when you take an official vow or oath—it's forbidden to annul that promise, and if he or she does so, he is "violating" his words.

In Judaism, words have powerful meaning. G-d created the universe with words. What distinguishes the human being from all other living creatures is speech. And so a person is obligated to stand by his or her words.

## **Rabbi Akiva' Annulment**

But for a situation where one goes back on one's words, whether intentionally or accidentally, we have a solution, too: Kol Nidrei.

The Kol Nidrei prayer annuls all our vows. But what exactly is this supposed to be? The story is told of Rabbi Akiva, how at the

beginning of his career in Torah scholarship, he was known only as Akiva. He had been born into a poor and simple family and had never even learned how to read. He worked as a shepherd for the wealthy businessman Kalba Savua, the richest man in Jerusalem.

Kalba Savua's daughter Rochel saw Akiva the shepherd and noticed he had something special about him, that he was not an ordinary man. She wanted to marry him. She asked him, "If I betroth myself to you, will you go study in the study hall?" And he said yes!

Now, she knew that her father would oppose this match with all his might—here, the beautiful daughter of the wealthiest man in Jerusalem gets married to a poor 40-year-old bachelor shepherd?! So they married secretly, and she sent him off to learn. But her father heard about it, and he vowed to exclude her from any benefit from his possessions. He also banished her from his home, removed her from his will and ensured that she'd never get a penny from him.

Decades went by, and this same boorish Akiva sat and studied Torah until he became the great Rabbi Akiva of Talmudic fame.

When he finally returned to Jerusalem, no one would have recognized him. He was now one of the leading Torah authorities of his day—kind of like your local grocery checkout clerk guy coming back to town 20 years after disappearing, but now he's the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. So when Rabbi Akiva came back to town, the Talmud tells us that he

arrived with a parade of 24,000 students.

Of course, the whole town went out to see him, including his long-suffering wife. When she tried to approach him, the Talmud tells us that his aides tried to push her away (apparently they didn't know who she was). But he said to them, "What's mine and yours is hers"—all the Torah that I learned and which I taught you is all in her merit.

But then comes the most interesting part of the story. The Talmud continues: "Her father [Kalba Savua] heard that an important man had come to town. He said, 'I will go to see him; perhaps he will annul my vow!'"

As mentioned, Kalba Savua had sworn many years ago that his daughter Rochel would not benefit from his possessions. But now, years had gone by and he pined away for his daughter, and he wanted her to come back to him. But he had taken a vow—so what do you do?

However, there is a solution in the Torah for problems like this: You go to a distinguished and competent rabbi, and he has the power to annul the vow.

So Kalba Savua hears that one such big rabbi is now in town. So he says to himself, maybe this rabbi will have the power to release me from my vow? The Talmud continues: "He came to him, and Rabbi Akiva said [Kalba Savua didn't recognize him], 'Did you take that vow knowing that your son-in-law would become an important person?'" When a vow is annulled, the person is asked, "If you knew then what you know now, would you still have taken that vow?"

So that's what Rabbi Akiva asked Kalba Savua: At the time, when you were angry at your daughter for marrying that guy Akiva, if you had known that Akiva would turn into a distinguished person, would you still have disavowed her then from your possessions?

Kalba Savua replied that "even if he had learned one chapter or one law, I would not have disavowed her from my possessions."

So Rabbi Akiva then said to him, "I am Akiva."

The Talmud (Tractate Kesuvos 63a) concludes that Kalba Savua fell to his hands and knees, kissed Rabbi Akiva's feet and gave him half of his wealth.

## **The Annulment of Kol Nidrei**

What we learn from this story (besides the power of change) is the process of annulling vows.

If those hardcore fans of LeBron James had known that their sports hero would only be leaving town for four years, would they still have burned their jerseys and sworn that they'd never be his fans again? Apparently, absolutely not! And so they could "annul" their "vows."

And that, my friends, is what Kol Nidrei is.

We gather together in shul, take out all the Torah scrolls from the ark, and form a Beis Din, a Jewish legal tribunal, and annul all our vows and promises that we made accidentally. But we definitely cannot annul the promises we gave other people; as we say in the Hatoras Nedarim ceremony, "And I do not request

release on those vows that ought not be released.”

Now, that’s all very nice, very fine and good. But what does this have to do with Yom Kippur? Yom Kippur is a day of pardon and atonement, the day on which we approach G-d to ask forgiveness for all that we didn’t do right over the past year, and promise Him that in the coming year, we’ll try harder. We then ask that in the merit of that pledge, we be granted a good and sweet New Year.

All the other prayers that we pray on Yom Kippur are understood. For example, we say “Al

Cheit” (“For the Sin...”), because on Yom Kippur, we confess our sins. We say “Avinu

Malkeinu” (Our Father, Our King) at the Neilah prayer because we ask our heavenly Father and

King at the closing of the heavenly gates to give us a good year. Even the famous “Unesaneh

Tokef” prayer has its place on Yom Kippur. But what does Kol Nidrei have to do with Yom Kippur—and as the first prayer of Yom Kippur yet? As a matter of fact, Kol Nidrei has become the most famous Jewish prayer (next to Shma Yisrael, perhaps).

When I was a yeshivah student, we would go out every Friday to public places as the Rebbe had instructed, to ask Jewish passerby to put on tefillin. I can remember how a Jewish tourist came by. This man only spoke Yiddish! (Or would only speak Yiddish to me.) He said, “Today is my father’s yahrzeit, and I

want to say Kol Nidrei.” He meant that he wanted to say Kaddish, but he forgot the word “Kaddish.” The only prayer whose name he could remember was Kol Nidrei.

So again, why does Kol Nidrei get such an honored position in the prayers of the Jewish Nation?

## **God’s Vow, Moshe’s Annulment**

There is an amazing Midrash about the story of the Golden Calf. Everyone knows the story. It’s 40 days after the Giving of the Torah, at which the Jewish Nation hears the Ten Commandments, including “I am the L-rd Your G-d” and “You shall have no other gods”—and they still go ahead and create a Golden Calf, and worship it!

Moshe Rabbeinu at the time was on Mt. Sinai, and G-d gave him the bad news and said (Shmos 32:10), “Now leave Me alone, and My anger will be kindled against them so that I will annihilate them!” That’s what G-d wanted to do. But then the Torah continues (32:11), “Moshe pleaded before the L-rd...”

Here the Midrash says something amazing: “At the time that the Jews made the Calf, Moshe stood appeasing the L-rd to forgive them. The L-rd said, ‘Moshe, I already swore, “One who sacrifices to [false gods] shall be banished!”, and a matter of an oath that came out of my mouth cannot be taken back!’” (Rashi, Shmos 22:19).

In today’s terms, G-d said to Moshe, “Reb Moshe! I love you very much and would very much want to help you—but my hands are tied! The law says that someone who worships idols

gets the death sentence, and it's impossible to change the law! I'm very upset, but this time, I cannot help you."

According to the Midrash, Moshe responds: "Master of the Universe! Did you not give me annulment of vows, saying [in the Torah], 'A man who vows a vow... shall not violate his word'? He may not pardon himself from his vow, but a scholar can annul his vow when the man asks him to." So Moshe said to G-d, in the same Torah that establishes the law for the idolworshippers, it also writes that someone who promises something and then regrets it can go to the "scholar" to get it released.

The Midrash continues: "Every sage who issues rulings, if he wants people to accept his rulings, needs to first follow his own rulings," said Moshe to G-d, "and here You commanded me about annulling vows! The law is that You must annul Your own vow just as You have commanded me to release others from their vows!"

Moshe essentially said to G-d: If You want us to act according to Your instructions and release people from vows, then You need to lead by example and release Yourself from Your vow!

True, You swore—but Your Torah also says that it's possible to release one's self from a vow!"

And the Midrash concludes: "Moshe wrapped himself in his tallis and seated himself like a sage, and G-d stood like one asking for annulment of his vow... [as the verse states], 'And I sat on the mountain'—for Moshe sat to annul the vow of his creator."



In that situation, Moshe acted like G-d's rabbi and a rabbi, when he releases someone from a vow in Jewish court, assumes a seated position. So Moshe sat down in court to release G-d from His vow, so to speak.

However, in order to release a vow, one needs to find a reason—something that had the person taking the vow had known at the time of the vow, then he or she would not have taken the vow.

So what did G-d say to Moshe? "I regret the evil which I said I would do to My Nation." At that moment, Moshe said, 'You are released, you are released, you released! There is no vow and no oath here" (Shmos Rabbah, Ki Tisa 43:4). Moshe Rabbeinu released G-d from His vow and paved the way for G-d forgiving the Jewish Nation for the Sin of the Golden Calf.

## **Annulment for Annulment**

Ladies and gentlemen: When did this all happen? When did G-d forgive the Jewish Nation for the Sin of the Golden Calf? On Yom Kippur, over 3,300 years ago.

And so when we arrive at Yom Kippur every year, when the day starts and we come to ask for pardon and forgiveness from G-d, we form a Beis din, a Jewish court, as we are wrapped in Talleisim and while the Torah scrolls have been taken out. We then say Kol Nidrei—we release all our vows, and together with that, we pave the way for the forgiveness that we seek from the Master of the Universe.

And to merit G-d agreeing to release one's vows, and giving us

a good and sweet new year despite it all, then we need to do the same thing—to release ourselves from our own vows: Every times we got angry at somebody and said, “I’m never talking to that guy again!” or, “I will never do business with him again” or, “I’ll never forgive him for what he did to me!” and so on.

My friends, it’s now time to forgive and move ahead. A lot of time people say, “I promised that to myself, and I’m going to stand by my word”—I’m not going to break my word, and, as everyone knows, a word is a word!

Says the Torah, with G-d, things are measure for measure—if you annul your vow and don’t “stand by your word” when it comes to matters that are the opposite of Ahavas Yisroel, love of fellow Jew, then, in the merit of that, G-d will also “go back on His word” and forgive us, and give us all a good and sweet new year.

Good Yom Tov!