



The Promise of Kol Nidrei

Topic

Yom Kippur

Grade Level(s)

5th – 12th

Big Ideas

- Focusing on what we can still do instead of what we have failed to do can lead to greater accomplishment.
- Sometimes how something sounds can be more meaningful than its literal meaning.

Learning Targets

Students will:

1. Understand what the words of *Kol Nidrei* mean
2. Reflect on what it means to ask for forgiveness before transgressing
3. Use the underlying message of *Kol Nidrei* to inspire them to fulfill a promise they have made to themselves

Relevant Vocabulary

<p>כָּל נִדְרֵי (<i>Kol Nidrei</i>)</p>	<p>Traditionally, an important element of the Yom Kippur services Literally “All Vows”</p>
<p>מַחְזֹר (<i>Mahzor</i>)</p>	<p>A Prayer Book for Holidays</p>
<p>בֵּית דִּין (<i>Beit Din</i>)</p>	<p>A Jewish court. Often made up of rabbis but can be made up of laypeople in certain situations</p>

Materials / Technology Needed

- Yom Kippur *Mahzor* (An electronic version of *Kol Nidrei* can be found at [Sefaria](https://www.sefaria.org).)
- Recording of *Kol Nidrei* (An example can be found [here](#). The recording includes introductory portions. The *Kol Nidrei* paragraph begins at the 2:00 mark.)
- Google Keep Notes (or another sticky note app); if using Zoom, the Whiteboard feature can work as well

Background for Teachers

Kol Nidrei holds a special place in the hearts of many. It opens Yom Kippur services with a melody that is instantly recognizable. (In fact, the melody is one of the melodies that tradition states were handed down at Mount Sinai.) In addition, it offers the opportunity for the community to prepare to focus together on how to better themselves as individuals. For many, it is one of the most important elements of Yom Kippur services.

Yet the words of *Kol Nidrei* have posed challenges for generations (e.g. *Tosefot Nedarim* 23b). In general, the text is a legal statement for annulling one’s vows; and, traditionally, such an annulment normally must be done in front of a בֵּית דִּין (*beit din*).^{*} In particular, the



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request to have all vows annulled “מִיּוֹם כְּפוּרִים זֶה עַד יוֹם כְּפוּרִים הַבָּא” (from this Yom Kippur until the next Yom Kippur)” poses an additional conundrum. How can one be freed from all of the vows they have taken? All the more so, how can one preemptively be released from the vows they will make in the upcoming year? How does it look for the Jewish people as a whole to ask to be absolved of the vows they make to God?

Ultimately, the power of *Kol Nidrei* has won out over the many objections to the point that many congregations refer to Yom Kippur evening services as *Kol Nidrei* services.

While this activity does not focus on the difference between vows made to God and vows made to other people, it is worth emphasizing at some point during the activity that *Kol Nidrei* absolves a person from the unfulfilled vows between a person and God but does not absolve a person from transgressions with other people. Making amends for transgressions with another person requires speaking directly with that person.

* Because it is a legal statement, *Kol Nidrei* traditionally must be completed before the actual beginning of Yom Kippur since legal matters cannot be conducted on the holiday.

Prepare in Advance

- Set up a shared Google Keep for the class.
- If using Sefaria, have *Kol Nidrei* ready for viewing.

Description of Activities

1. Ask students when they have made a promise to a friend or family member? How sincere was the promise? How easy did they think it would be to keep the promise? How successful were they in keeping the promise? Students answer these questions through the Google Keep sticky note app.
 - a. If doing this activity over video conference, students can share answers through the chat function or through the Google Keep sticky note app. Answers given through the chat function can be compiled through the Whiteboard feature.
2. Students listen to a recording of *Kol Nidrei*. Discuss:
 - a. What does this sound like?
 - b. What feelings does this evoke?
 - c. What, if anything, does it motivate you to do?
3. What about the recitation of this section leading into Yom Kippur do you think makes the *Kol Nidrei* service such a popular and meaningful experience for such a large percentage of Jews? [Note that points of discussion here could include the melody, the feel of the music, needing a good introduction and other non-text-related subjects.]



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4. Explore the words of *Kol Nidrei* together. If doing this from home, display the text from Sefaria through screensharing. If together physically, students can look in a *Mahzor*. Some points to focus on during the discussion about the text of *Kol Nidrei*:
 - a. The words themselves are a legal formula that annuls vows. Traditionally, the recitation of *Kol Nidrei* is completed before the actual beginning of Yom Kippur since legal proceedings may not occur on Yom Kippur.
 - b. Kol Nidrei literally means “All vows” in Aramaic, and it refers to vows made to God (and not those made to other people). The vows being annulled (depending on the *Mahzor* being used) are both those that were made in the past year and those that will be made in the upcoming year.
 - c. The text asks that all kinds of vows become as though they were never made or that preemptively all vows will be as though they were never made.
 - d. Notice that the paragraphs after the request to annul all vows refer to places in the Torah where God forgives *B’nei Yisrael* (the Children of Israel) for unintentional transgressions.
5. Ask:
 - a. How does focusing on the words change your understanding of *Kol Nidrei*, if at all? How do the words affect your thoughts about making vows to do or not do something?
 - b. How can you be better about fulfilling the promises you make rather than relying on forgiveness if/when you do not live up to those promises?
 - c. Who is often the ultimate beneficiary of vows made to God?*
6. Prompt students: “Think of something that you promised yourself you would accomplish over the last year but have not accomplished yet.”
 - a. For students learning from home, tell them to take 10 minutes right now to begin the process of fulfilling the promise they made to themselves. Students take a picture of themselves to share.
 - b. For students learning in school, tell them that at home they should begin to fulfill the promise that they made to themselves and take a picture of themselves to share.
 - c. Older students can post their pictures to their social pages with the hashtag #BetterIn5781. (Note that the year can be changed depending on when the activity is being done.)
7. Optional Final Reflection: How are fulfilling a promise to oneself and the need to recite *Kol Nidrei* related?

** There is much written about who exactly is the beneficiary of vows to God, and many argue that mitzvot between God and people are really about bettering the self. This debate is not meant to be the focus of this activity, but the idea of self-improvement as a result of promises made to God is one that is relevant to this discussion.