

## Kol Nidrei Drasha 5784

I want to start the drasha this evening for Kol Nidrei with a story I heard from Rabbi YY Jacobson, one of the great orators in the Jewish community. He tells the story of an old Russian Chazan called Zalman Bronstein, who sang one of the most emotional Kol Nidreis he had ever heard. And he went up to the old Jew and said, Reb Zalman, "I notice that you closed your eyes during Kol Nidrei, where do you go?"

Reb Zalman sighed and said, let me tell you a story.

I was in the Russian army during the second World War. I was in the frontlines. It was hell there. My comrades, colleagues and fellow soldiers were falling like flies. One day in the middle of the war I was in the bunker and in comes a General in the Russian army to shave.

As he's shaving, he's singing to himself, a Russian lullaby.

And I, who was blessed with a voice and knew the songs, couldn't sit quietly as he was so out of tune and messing the songs up, I started to sing them correctly. The General hears the voice, looks at me and says, "with such a voice what are you doing here? You have to be the soloist in the Red Army's Choir! Come with me".

Zalman said, my life was saved as he plucked me out of the front lines. Everybody was being killed and I became very active and successful. They loved me, my voice, and I went around entertaining the troops.

One day they told me that there's going to be a huge performance, with all the big wigs of the Red Army attending. However, when I checked my calendar, I saw that it was on Yom Kippur! How could I sing on Yom Kippur, with the band, microphone? So, I pretended that I had a sore throat, I couldn't possibly sing. "My voice, my voice. I don't know what happened? Some bacteria, some virus entered my throat I'm sorry, I can't sing. I'm not the boss of my body." My officer said, okay we need to protect your voice because we need it.

So now, Zalman, is in his room on Yom Kippur. No shul. No crowd. No family. And as he sits in his room he closes his eyes and pictures himself back at home. Tears in his eyes. No family, no community. These are the dark years of the second World War.

When there is a knock on his door, he opens the door to see three generals in front of him. They come in and say, Bronstein, we know why you didn't go sing today! Your voice is as hoarse as our voice. Bronstein, we know why you didn't sing, because it's Yom Kippur. We are Jewish and we want to hear Kol Nidrei.

Zalman responds, saying, if I get up here and sing Kol Nidrei and the people hear my voice, you know what's gonna happen to Me? They will send me back to the front, so why would you do this to me? The generals replied. Behind the auditorium there's a forest that doesn't end. We will go deep into the forest where the trees are so tall that even your Kol Nidrei, only the trees will hear but here they won't hear it.

Okay!

So, the three decorated communist generals and Bornstein walk into the depths of a Russian forest. They're walking and walking because they have to be completely remote from civilization. They walked for a long time and the general says it's safe, nobody's gonna hear it. So Zalman starts to sing.

In his imagination he's back in his shul with his wife with his children, with his community, with Israel, with his friends.

It was a Kol Nidrei he'd never had before. There was no fanfare. There were no seats. It was him, Hashem, the forest and three Russian generals that had no connection to Judaism whatsoever.

But it was so authentic, it was so deep. He finished the first Kol Nidrei and before he was ready to go to the second, he opened his eyes and took a look and he sees three huge muscular powerful, tall, well-built, robust generals sobbing like babies.

Kol Nidrei brought them back to a world that seemingly was gone forever. The world of their youth that they gave up for the Bolshevik Paradise of Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin.

Now they were all sobbing. Kol Nidrei for a second time and the third time. Then the generals wanted him to go through all the songs of Yom Kippur, which they did in the forest till they came home.

Zalman, then said Rabbi Jacobson, every year when I get up and start Kol Nidrei, I am back in the forest with three generals.

The generals who have no strings attached to anything Jewish, who in their prayers were not trying to get their kids into seminary, into this school, that school. They were in a forest but they're connected to the Jewish People. And that is why my Kol Nidrei sounds the way it sounds.

When did these generals last hear Kol Nidrei? 25-30 years ago, sitting in a shul next to their father and grandfather. And no matter how much indoctrination they had been fed, their souls were still pure.

Tonight, we are in shul and are creating our own Yom Kippur memories. Take a moment to take the mental photograph. Make note of where you are sitting. Who is next to you. How are you feeling as you hear the songs of our wonderful Chazan Zvi and the choir. And let us use this time to fulfil the words of the Kol Nidrei.

For too often, we are alienated from our faith tradition and community. But at this moment I can let go of everything.

Let go of expectations and let go of the disappointments.

Let go of particular dreams and ambitions that are making me frustrated because they haven't materialized. Kol Nidrei - all the vows - means all the promises we make to ourselves. I can't, I can't, I can't, I'm not allowed, I am unworthy, I can't be loved, I can't love, I can't be present, I can't have the most incredible relationships with myself, with my loved ones, with my children, with my God and with my community. Let all these promises be nullified.

I want to share with you an idea called, the rule of 100. The rule says that if you dedicate 100 hours to any discipline you will be better than 95% of the population in that discipline. That translates into 2 hours a week or 18 minutes a day. So that means that there is no excuse for not achieving basic literacy, learning to play an instrument or dare I say, learning to be part of a community. Everyone complains about how difficult it is to be part of a community. That coming to shul is too hard. I don't understand the service. I don't know the people. I feel a stranger. The tune is always the same - Kol Nidrei. But if I can challenge you to

commit the 100 hours to the shul. I can guarantee that by next Yom Kippur you will be a different person. It was the 100 hours that those generals spent in shul as children that stayed with them all those years later. We need to commit to the 100 hours for our own sakes and for the sakes of our children.

We have a new Board, and we know that not everyone will be comfortable to come to shul and step into the sanctuary. But let's get involved in the shul. There are multiple ports of entry. And we would love to see you over the course of the year. And if 100 hours is too much. Surely 10% of that is doable. Tonight, let's make that commitment and let's truly function as a community and not as a theatre where we go to be inspired for an evening. Please join us to become a part of our incredible community.

I now invite our President, Mironne, to address you.