

KN SERMON 2025

Sometimes **when** you say something is more important than **what** you say. Context always matters. You can say “Great” – meaning something really is great – someone passed an exam or cooked you a nice meal. Or you can say “Great!” sarcastically, when someone’s made a mistake that’s going to take a lot of work to clear up. Kol Nidrei is another example. It doesn’t really matter what it was originally written for, what matters is what we hear when it begins.

It's a sign that all bets are off. That we are going back to the beginning, a clean slate, a fresh start. Everything that has been or will be promised, everything that has been or will be said, everything that has or will be done, is all erased, like a computer getting wiped. That’s what we’re hoping for tonight – a fresh start, a clean slate.

If Rosh Hashanah is all about life and birth, then Yom Kippur is about acknowledging our own mortality. And Kol Nidrei is the opening, the preamble for the rest of the day. Many of us have already been preparing for today by visiting our parents or grandparents graves at the cemetery, thinking perhaps about the fragility of life. Traditionally we bless our children before we light the candles before Yom Kippur because there’s a possibility that this will be our last chance to do so, that we might not be here next year. I am wearing a kittel, a white robe that is also used for burial, because there is the tiniest

possibility that tonight or tomorrow, I may be called to account for my sins and die.

When we took the scrolls out of the ark at the beginning of this service, we were left standing in front of an empty ark. The Hebrew word for an ark, is the Aron HaKodesh, the holy box. But Aron is also the Hebrew word for a coffin – a different kind of wooden box. So everything, particularly in this opening service, leans into some kind of confrontation with death. We pray that we won't end up in a casket, an Aron, this year. But all bets are off. We don't really know what's going to happen this year.

This focus on the finite aspect of life is by no means exclusive to Judaism. Life and death are one of the most pervasive themes in the history of art – a reminder of our numbered days and a powerful motivator to live well while you can.

The American abstract expressionist artist Jack Whitten said that art is our compass to the cosmos. He saw art as a way of capturing the soul, of expanding his vision. He created a famous painting in memory of the jazz musician Miles Davis and I think he probably felt the same way about music. If art was his compass to the cosmos, what's your compass? How do you find your direction through life? When we say, as we will many times over the next 24 hours, "we turn to God", what do we mean? When do we make that connection – is it through

music, poetry, literature? Through being in nature? Yom Kippur is the festival of the human spirit but soul connections don't just happen in shul. Actually many of us are far more likely to make a spiritual connection in a place of beauty rather than in shul - we come here to be in community, to listen to the music, to have some time out of our daily lives, but our compass to the cosmos often lies elsewhere. And we weave music and poetry throughout our liturgy now to help us navigate through it and perhaps in the hope of lighting that spark. But spiritual connection can take place anywhere – at a concert, at a gallery, in a bookshop, at the birth of a child... and of course at the end of life.

Yom Kippur rehearses both the death of the old year, AND the death of our old ego. If we want to be transformed, if we want to create something new, then we need to let go of a part of what we were. We need to let go of all our vows, Kol Nidrei, all those promises that we thought we should make to ourselves, but which we have now outgrown.

We have already confessed once tonight and we're going to confess some more sins, personal and collective, tomorrow. But confession is also made on your deathbed. Rabbi Eliezer taught that you should repent one day before your death. His students asked him, But how do you know when you will die? He answered – Indeed. So repent every day so that you will live a repentant life. We confess because there's a possibility we

might not make it to the end of the day. Of course we know that we most probably will and this time tomorrow we will hopefully have a huge sense of relief that we've got to the end, with another year of life ahead of us. But the truth is, and the truth always is, that you never really know. That we have a lot less control over our lives than we think, and that there's a reason there's a morning prayer that thanks God for letting us wake up again in the morning. Because it could be otherwise. And once a year we really face up to our vulnerability, our mortality, we say – we don't know whether we're going to survive past tomorrow, so we will go through all the activities that we should do before we die, please God, maybe we'll be saved from death this year and restored for a new year of life. It sounds dark, but actually it's incredibly life-affirming. It's about the yearning to live and to live a better life in the coming year.

We know that we are imperfect. Mistakes are inevitable and failing is a part of life. But as human beings, we also know that we can change. And so we free ourselves to begin our lives again, we understand that our failures will not kill us and we **are forgiven**, even as we **ask** for forgiveness. That is the awesome, epic nature of the journey that we begin tonight. Lets continue on this journey together. Ken Yehi Ratzon.