

Congregation Tikkun v'Or, Ithaca NY
Kol Nidre: 5786 / 2025

Introduction

(excerpt from Faith's kavanah for the Kol Nidre prayer)

We recite Kol Nidre each year. Like reading the Torah, week by week, the same words, over and over, every single year. And each year, because we are different and the world is different, when we listen, we hear differently.

This year amidst the swirling chaos of our disintegrating democracy and a rising tide of hate and hurt, I was struck by something author Roxanne Gay wrote. She was reacting to this line from Kiese Laymon's work on racism. He wrote: "If we in America have reached that point in our desperate culture when we must murder children, no matter for what reason or what color, we don't deserve to survive, and probably won't." Gay's reaction?: "I was stunned into stillness."

She didn't say, "stunned into silence." Now is not a season for silence. But stunned into stillness. And I've been thinking a lot about what that means. I'll share more as part of my d'var later in the service.

For now, consider that Yom Kippur is, by design, a day carved out for stillness. We stop work to embrace contemplation. We replace nuance and complexity with simple, straightforward declarations of what we need: life, love, peace, forgiveness.

As Chris plays Kol Nidre, I invite you to inhabit the stillness. Center yourself so that you can listen, deeply, with your whole self – body, mind, and soul.

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2025 Kol Nidre D'var – Faith Rogow

Ever watch TV crime dramas? You, know, the one's in which there's a moment when the odds of justice being realized seem absolutely insurmountable. We're sure that evil will go unpunished and the bad guy will go free. And then the hero finds some clever way to obtain the necessary evidence or the District Attorney says just the right thing to convince jurors to convict.

To me, living through America's descent into authoritarianism feels a little like the arc of those cop shows, except... in real life, there isn't some superhero coming to reclaim justice and we don't have a handy room of clever script writers feeding us clear – and always successful answers... It's just us.

Knowing that it's on us is actually a source of great hope. We are not lacking in skill or experience. We have a few thousand years of Jewish tradition and wisdom to draw from. And lots of practice doing things in community. All of our important observances are collective and public. We pray in community, we confess our transgressions as a collective, we form supportive congregations like Tikkun V'Or. The habit of placing ourselves in community rather than isolating ourselves, is a great source of strength.

In this moment, the fact that we don't have script writers or comic book super powers is also terrifying. I know I don't have to spell out all the details for this group. You already know. But I want to be clear that we aren't talking about the future anymore.

To paraphrase the famous Reverend Neimoeller admonition, they've already come for trans people and (black & brown) immigrants... and to some degree scientists, journalists, artists, writers, librarians, teachers, universities and anyone who dares insist that Palestinians are human and that just as we have sacred ties to the land, so do they.

The authoritarian playbook is familiar – as they begin to demand allegiance to a demagogue, they wipe out all the people who might provide evidence of the fearless leader's lies. They drive them away, hide them, intimidate them into silence, or when that doesn't work, kill them. Our tax dollars aren't yet funding death camps, but they are being used to fund the construction of concentration camps all over the country, and our government is practicing on immigrants how to “disappear” people – evocative of the way Latin American dictators dealt with dissidents half a century ago.

In America, this is new. The United States has never fully lived up to its ideals, but real change has occurred. I have witnessed it in my lifetime. Because of the progress achieved by our collective battles for Civil and Disability Rights, Women's and LGBTQ Rights, the life I live today is possible: a fulfilling career in education and children's media as an “out” lesbian, married to my beloved, owning a home without needing a man as a co-signer, having a congregation that welcomes me as a scholar and spiritual leader – all of it would have been unthinkable a century ago.

Of course, I have always understood that these advances were fragile. Still, I never thought I would live to witness the complete disintegration of democracy. But here we are.

Living in these times is traumatizing and it is reasonable to be afraid.

We sing a song at Tikkun v'Or – *kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar m'od, v'ha-ikar lo lfacheyd klal* – all the world is a narrow bridge and the important thing is not to be afraid. Why does it tell us not to be afraid when there are things in front of us that should terrify us? After all, in the immediate moment fear can be helpful. It literally produces chemical reactions that hijack our brains in ways that allow us to narrow our focus and act impulsively to keep ourselves safe, as when we run to escape danger.

But when we make decisions about long-term plans or policies, acting from fear usually results in colossally bad decision-making. And when we live in fear for too long without reprieve, it literally begins to eat at our physical bodies. So the song urges us not to limit our responses to fear.

That leaves us with the dilemma of how to acknowledge the fear and not let it paralyze us into acquiescence. Our traditions offer us lots of options – far too many to enumerate tonight. So allow me to explore just a few of the facets of our heritage that I think have contributed to our resilience as a people.

Psalms are a great place to start, celebrating music and art and encouraging each generation to sing God a NEW song. We value creativity. So let's keep being creative. That's one thing.

A second thing is our *t'filah* – our routine prayers. The standard service is divided into sections and each major section includes a call for peace, usually as the conclusion to the section – the last thing we think about before moving on. We end the Shema section with *Hashkiveynu* and it's request to spread over us a shelter of peace. The Amidah ends with *Shalom Rav* (evening) or *Sim Shalom* (morning). And in the service's closing section, the final sentence of the *Kaddish* is "*Oseh Shalom*," "grant us peace."

It's not a vision of sameness. Judaism never says everyone must do or believe exactly what we do. In fact, it explicitly reminds us that we are bound by a Covenant with God that doesn't apply to others unless they voluntarily choose it. But for us to receive the benefits of that covenant (including having what we need for physical and spiritual sustenance), the rest of the world can't be in conflict, and so we pray for peace for *everyone* and envision a time when all the world shall be one.

I also find it helpful that we have a regular schedule for prayers and holidays, requiring us to keep putting one foot in front of the other, even when it is hard.

Another place I've found useful guidance is the Passover Haggadah and the framework of the 4 children. It's a good reminder that in terms of political strategy or message, one-size-fits-all doesn't work. There are different types of people and they require different approaches.

It would take too long to go into great detail, so I won't. But here's a quick example:

1) We're often encouraged to try to understand the perspectives of those who have embraced MAGA identity. Listening in pursuit of understanding is always a good thing. But just as we reject the "wicked" child who separates themselves from family and community, there is no need to seriously engage people who applaud cruelty and see empathy as a weakness. If they question your literal humanity, that's a non-starter. We have zero obligation to engage with anyone who denies our basic dignity or humanity. Zero.

To them we can explain that we will happily engage when they acknowledge that our humanity is every bit as full as theirs and that we, too, are made in the image of God, just like they are. Until then they will not get an ounce of our energy – not even in debate.

2) To those who acknowledge our humanity but have succumbed to conspiracy theories we can offer alternative visions of comfort (not facts – that's not effective). They are acting from fear and uncertainty – we can show them how to travel a different path to feeling okay about themselves and their world.

3) To those under direct attack we offer as much direct support as we are able. We show that we understand the connections between us, even if we may take issue with some of their choices. We know that if we do not defend *them* now, *we* are next.

4) To those who resist we offer facts – we repeat and teach the truths that they are trying to defend. And we offer to be allies in resistance.

Our faith & traditions survive because they evolve – through learning and through wrestling with texts and what it means for every person to be a reflection of God’s image. We don’t look away.

It’s exhausting. And it’s going to get worse.

But just as certain as I am that it will get worse before we can make it better, I am convinced that it *will* get better. History teaches us that all tyrants eventually fall and we’re going to have a lot of work to do to rebuild a just society after the current tyrant falls... So here’s a survival strategy. Take time as part of your routines to stop and imagine what that repaired world looks like – not in place of resisting the current government, but as inspiration to keep going.

We started this service with a song from a Psalm (3:7-8):

*Lo ira mayriveevot am asher saviv shatu ahlie.
Kumah haShem v’hoshee-eyni*

“I am not afraid of the multitude set against me. Arise, God, and save me.”

The Psalmist intended it as comfort for those engaged in military conflict. Soldiers who defended God’s ways could count on divine assistance. In these times, as many of us resist rising fascism, we will feel ourselves surrounded by a multitude set against us. If we choose to be the spiritual army reflected in the values of the prophets,

- rejecting the tribalism that scapegoats some while rewarding others, and
- accepting that no matter what others choose to do, our responsibility is to pursue peace and serve humanity...

If we do that then we bring a divine Presence into this world. And that strengthens us in ways that help us move through our fear.

In 1 Kings 19 there is a description of an encounter between Elijah and God. It’s a time of military battles and great suffering and Elijah is urging people to understand that only a return to God’s righteous path will stave off utter defeat and decimation.

The text says, Elijah “walked forty days and forty nights as far as the mountain of God at Horeb. There he went into a cave and spent a night and the word of God came to him and asked, “Why are you here Elijah?”

He replied, “the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and put Your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life.”

God instructs Elijah to come out of the cave and stand on the mountain to see the Holy One. And sure enough, God passed by. Here’s how the text describes the encounter:

“There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by God’s power; but God was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but God was not in the fire.” And then, after the fire Elijah heard *Kol demamah dakkah* - “a still, small voice.” THAT was God.

You don’t have to believe in the personal God of Elijah’s world to learn from the story. It works equally well if God is viewed as a moral compass, or the life force that connects us all, or simply the spiritual side of human nature that elevates humans to be their best selves.

What the text teaches us is that it wasn’t in the ostentatious displays of awe-invoking power or even in military victory that Elijah found God. It was in the stillness after the storm. We see the storms of authoritarianism today and, like Roxanne Gay, we must be stunned into stillness. It should stop us in our tracks because it is so serious. But it is in the moments of stillness that we reclaim our strength and the will to continue to resist injustice.

We are fortunate that Judaism has built-in just such moments of stillness. Yom Kippur is one of them. It creates a cocoon in which to retreat, momentarily, from the swirling chaos that surrounds us, to focus on what’s important, and then to listen. This Yom Kippur I hope that what you hear when you listen, inspires and renews. Amen. May it be so.
G’mar chatima tovah.

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