

Rabbi Nathan Alfred, GIL 5785

It's Kol Nidre. We gather in the synagogue on the holiest night of the year. The twenty five hours and the fast of Kippour stretch before us. We wear white. We eschew eating and drinking. We pray intensely. We pretend to be angels, as we ask God to forgive us for our sins, and to seal our names in the Book of Life.

It's a profound moment in the year to consider who we are and where we find ourselves. It's an opportunity to consider our actions this past year, the promises we have made, and to resolve to improve our behaviour in the year to come.

Perhaps inspired by the October rain, at Rosh Hashanah I spoke about the wild, barbaric flowers that grow with savage beauty amidst a devastated landscape. I also spoke about our need for Amichai's wildpeace.

Tonight I would like to talk about something that the 20th century Libyan Jewish writer, Herbert Pagani, once described with similar imagery, when he sang: "Ca fleurit comme une herbe sauvage, n'importe ou..." in his song "L'amitie". That is to say, this Kol Nidre I want to talk to you about friendship.

The rabbis understood the importance of friendship. The Pirkei Avot (1.6) tells us – "aseh leha rav ukneh leha haver" make yourself a teacher and find yourself a friend. And elsewhere the Babylonian Talmud (Ta'anit 23a) states – "o hevruta o metuta" friendship or death – that is to say, that without friends, there is a loneliness that embitters our lives. Friends offer each other help, they support each other, they are loyal. Friends are there for you. Friends can challenge you – when Resh Lakish died, Rabbi Yohanan mourned the loss of his intellectual equal and halachic sparring partner. Who else could provide 24 objections to every legal dispute they discussed together? A good friend is like an "ezer kenegdo" – an oppositional helper – which is why happy couples may row a a lot, but are also often best friends.

As Herbert Pagani put it,

"Au clair de l'amitie, le ciel est plus beau... L'amitie c'est une autre famille, et c'est moins complique que l'amour...", maybe some of you remember this song, that was published in 1977.

It may be less complicated than love, but friendship is not a simple topic. Especially in the world that we have been living in these past twelve months. I know that I am not the only one who has lost friends this past year.

After October 7th I was pleasantly surprised to be contacted by many friends, asking how we were. Perhaps they knew we lived in Jerusalem, after the attacks, they got in touch. Even friends who I hadn't spoken to in more than twenty-five years made contact. They shared their concerns, they sent good wishes, it was very touching. And then there were those who were silent, who said nothing. In those first days and weeks it

seemed like the whole country was collapsing – we were very scared. And the silence of friends, close friends, even family members – well this silence was very loud.

It reminds me of what happens when someone dies. Sad to say, I have lost both my parents. And each time, it was very noticeable who got in touch, and who did their best to ignore my loss. True – some people don't deal with grief very well. It's often those who have lost their own parents who know more easily what to say. It's not for nothing that the advice when going to a shiva is not to engage the bereaved in conversation, but rather to wait for them to say something, and to direct the conversation.

But with friends who were silent, for me at least, with certain friends it felt wounding. They did not understand or want to understand my pain. And with some friends, this hurt has gone on for a full year now.

In other cases, they added insult to injury; they made clear that they blamed Israel for the attacks of October 7th, or for antisemitism in the world. Normal rational people saw us as the aggressor and not the victim. I have friends, even family members, who went on marches for Palestine. Friends who posted viciously and virulently on social media.

And again, I stopped talking to them. In my own worry and grief, my own struggle for security, I blocked them and mentally deleted them from my life. I didn't have the energy to engage with them, to deal with Jewish self-hatred, or non-Jews who didn't see Israel in the same way that I do. And in some cases it gave me a certain self-satisfaction. If I could make an academic distinction between anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism before October 7th, afterwards such a nuance became impossible. It was clear that people who single out Israel for criticism – and not China or Russia or any other country that is guilty of far more human rights violations than the Jewish State – at heart, hate Jews. The world became much more black and white. And having enough of such people felt the right thing to do. It felt good to lose friends.

But tonight is Kol Nidre. Over the next twenty five hours, it's a time for deep introspection. It's a time for heshbon hanefesh, the accountability of the soul. And I ask myself, is the world, in fact, so black and white? Am I right on this one? And do I really have to lose friends over this, as important as it seems? Does it still feel quite so good? Should a silence really become interminable, or continue until the grave?

There are stages of grief, and the Jewish mourning cycle forces us to get up from our grief – after sitting shiva for a week, after the month of sheloshim, and after the first year of mourning. Jewish mourning practices encourage – even oblige – us to return to the world that exists beyond our mourning. The situation is complicated by the ongoing situation, by the hostages and the war and the uncertainty about the future. This complicates our loss and our grief, which still feels very raw.

But one day, we will need to talk to our friends again and make our peace with them. Because – eventually, and painfully – we will need to make peace with our enemies too. This is not a suggestion of appeasement but rather a statement of reality. Wars end, and countries and peoples make compromises in order to live alongside each other.

Peace seems far from us, but may it come in our times. And in the meantime, let's use this Kol Nidre and our moments of soul-searching and introspection to see whether we can find it in ourselves to reach out to our friends. To break the silence or to reach across the political divide.

In Mishnah Peah (1.1) it is written that “making peace between two friends” – making “shalom bein adam uhavero” is up there as a mitzvah alongside honouring our parents and studying torah. That's a major mitzvah. When friends fall out, it's acknowledged that it takes a supreme effort to bring them back together.

Jacques Derrida wrote in his book, “the Politics of Friendship”, that the intimacy of friendship lies in the sensation of recognizing ourselves in the eyes of another. And that to love friendship is to love the future, and the possibilities it holds that goes beyond our individual lives.

At Yom Kippur we read parshat Nitzavim and remind ourselves that God puts before us blessing and curse, and life and death. And that we must choose life!

To choose friendship is to choose life. It's taking a risk on someone who is not ourselves, and not our family, not our blood and maybe not our religion. There's no friendship without the possibility of being wounded. This year we feel wounded, and yet let's use this Yom Kippur for healing. May we emerge from this Yom Kippur with a renewed spirit, and when the fast ends with the cry of shofar tomorrow night, let us go out into the wider world and, slowly but urgently, consider anew our friendships and acquaintances. One day this war will end, and on that day we must be ready to build the future and a better world.

Gmar hatima tova – may you all be sealed in the book of life.

And tzom kal – I wish you all an easy fast!