

Typically, the speech at Kol Nidre is designed to separate the congregants from some of their money. As you can see, there are no cards here so you are safe. However, my purposes are not totally benign. I hope to be able to inspire you to increase your commitment to our minyon, Kol Sasson.

We began this **season** of t'shuva over one month ago with the opening of Elul. For the next 24 hours, following this beautiful Kol Nidre service led by Jane Shapiro, we conclude.

We began our **personal** t'shuva with reflection and examination, and maybe some vows. Some of us began this one month ago, some on Rosh Hashana, some tonight, and many will frantically begin at nilah. Tonight, I want us to transcend the personal t'shuva, and think about the communal.

Although we translate t'shuva as repentance, it can also be understood as the verb to return. As individuals, we are attempting

to return to that pure state that existed when we were first born. As a community, we are attempting to return to a state of increased spirituality and true dedication to halacha, which fortunately leads to Kol Sasson.

In order to know how to get where we are going, it's helpful to know where we came from. During the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a decreased emphasis on spirituality and an increased emphasis on rigid halachic observance. A combination of sociological factors caused this. These sociological factors also allowed for the increased influence of radical negative theology.

Radical negative theology proposes that God is unknowable; we can only experience God by saying what he is not; and any attempt to understand, experience, or imitate God borders on idolatry.

Since we cannot know God in any positive sense, the only way to reach him is by performing mitzvot.

Radical negative theology's influence has increased in modern society. Prior to the Holocaust, most of our ancestors lived in tight knit Jewish communities. Even those who did not, still received their inspiration from those communities. We learned our religion from books, but we also learned our religion, our values, and our relationship to God from a mimetic tradition. We followed the practices of our parents, who followed their parents, who followed their parents, etc., etc. After the Holocaust we lost this communal experience of God. The result is that we were alienated from our community, and even worse -- we experienced a severe alienation from God.

Negative theology filled this vacuum. Our alienation was exacerbated by our modern, capitalistic, competitive, society, where the nuclear family replaced the extended family, and where we lost our communal, mimetic tradition. In an attempt to ameliorate this alienation, many accepted that mitzvot were the only path to God, and that the best way to return to God was by

adhering to Halachah and performing the mitzvot in as rigid a sense as possible. This might explain the undue focus on the kashrut of broccoli and asparagus and yes, even water. To summarize this explanation of our alienation – our loss of spirituality, I'd like to quote a passage from an article by Hayim Soloveitchik on this issue entitled "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy", where he writes: "Zealous to continue traditional Judaism unimpaired, religious Jews seek to ground their new emerging spirituality less on a now unattainable intimacy with Him, than on an intimacy with His Will.... Having lost the touch of His presence, they seek now solace in the pressure of His Yoke."

Kol Sasson allows us to actively reengage God's presence. As I stated before, t'shuva means to return, but it also means to reply. When we as a community undergo t'shuva, we are replying to God. We are undertaking an active role in the redemption of the

world: we are engaging in a partnership with God. This is what we at Kol Sasson do.

First, we reengage the 50 % of our community that has been most directly alienated from God, and we do so in an halachic manner.

To borrow a phrase from Darkei Noam, one of our partners around the world that have adopted this type of service, we have an inclusive, halachic service.

It is beyond the scope of this speech for me to fully elucidate the halachic justification for an inclusive service. The pamphlet that Rochelle prepared gives references to some sources. I will attempt a simplified explanation because it is important for us to understand the halachic basis so that we can understand our responsibilities.

The issue essentially comes down to two halachic principles and the tension between them. The first, kavod hatsibur,

congregational dignity, severely restricts women's participation because this reflects poorly on the congregation. The second, kavod haberiyot, human dignity, would allow women to more fully participate. Several rabbis have ruled that this balancing act between the individual and the congregation may be influenced by community standards, and consequently might change from community to community. At some point the scales tip in favor of human dignity, and accommodations towards women are permissible.

We need to understand that this tension between communal and individual needs is extremely contextual to both time and place. In 1919, representatives of the Yishuv in Eretz Yisrael asked the Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi, Abraham Isaac Kook, whether women could hold office in an elected assembly and whether they could vote. His answer was a resounding no. According to him, the Torah, the Prophets, Scripture, Halakhah, and aggadah all teach us that women cannot hold office and women cannot vote. But yet,

in Israel today, there is no religious community where the men vote and the women do not.

Our wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers are our equals in all areas of civil discourse. They go to college, pursue careers, and lend their valuable talents to community service. Their knowledge is equal to men's in both secular and religious spheres. It seems to me that in this time and this place it is no longer an issue of being halachically permissible to have a Kol Sasson service – it is an halachic imperative. Just as our individual t'shuva is a communal issue, this is also an issue that we must all attend to. It is not just a matter of personal preference. It is a matter of civil rights and halacha. We must perform our t'hsuva; we must return to God and reply to God by allowing our women to stand by our men to the fullest extent allowed by halacha.

Including women does not just decrease their alienation from the synagogue service and the Jewish community. It serves to

ameliorate everyone's alienation from God – which is another way of saying that it increases our spirituality. You have all seen it when you come to our Kabbalat Shabbat services, and during our Rosh Hashanah and Kol Nidre services. By empowering women, we have encouraged them to raise their voices in song along with the men. We have created a virtuous cycle – when women feel more spiritually involved, they express this feeling publicly through song which enriches all of our tefillah, and everyone becomes spiritually closer to God.

Our task is to build on what until now has been an organically developing movement. Today as part of our return/ our reply to God we must dedicate ourselves to this inclusive, halachic movement - a movement which began in Jerusalem with Shira Hadasha, but now encompasses similar groups across the country, and across the world. We owe this to our women; we owe this to our community; and we owe this to our descendants, our future

generations. This is not just a task for women, and it is not just an obligation for men, but it is a joint responsibility for all of us.

Rochelle and Jane took the first steps in this renewal when they decided to recreate the Shirah Hadasha service which they experienced in Jerusalem. Since then many people have stepped up to the plate to grow and nurture this service. The time has come for all of us to participate in actively growing this minyon.

Recently, I set in motion the process of incorporating Kol Sasson as a tax exempt organization. I hope and pray that when you are saying the al chet (*Hebrew here*)

for the sin that I committed by casting off responsibility that you will find a way to dedicate yourself to the responsibility you have to ameliorate your own alienation, the alienation of the women who are important to you, the alienation of the women in our community, and the alienation of immediate and future generations by deciding upon how you can best support and strengthen Kol Sasson.