

As a child growing up in a rigid and strict orthodox community, it was relatively easy to speak in public any time I was called upon. There was a pretty simple and uninspiring formula to follow, but it worked. While normally, the number one rule of speech is to start off with a joke – this step was irrelevant, because jokes were categorized as bittul zman (or, a waste of time) so that quickly and thankfully eliminated step one.

As far as the middle of the speech – the actual content – this was a bit more challenging. Even here, though, all you had to do was summarize someone else's thoughts on a topic and validate them as your own by quoting the most obscure of Rabbis – preferably from Poland – to lend authenticity, and somehow relate it to the subject matter at hand.

The closing line of a speech or dvar torah, however, was by far the easiest. All you had to do was say “And so, may we all merit the coming of moshiach bimhera biyamenu, amen.” Mic drop. No matter what the subject matter of the speech was, this worked every time.

I have a strong inclination that this approach isn't going to work for me this evening.

Jane, so masterfully, just led us in Kol Nidre.

שיבה של מטה אנו מתירין להתפלל עם העבריינים" "על דעת המקום ועל דעת הקהל בישיבה של מעלה ובי

*"By the authority of the Court on High and by authority of the court down here, by the permission of One Who Is Everywhere and by the permission of this congregation, **we hold it lawful to pray with sinners.**"*

So – for those of you who've felt guilt about participating in a partnership minyan like Kol Sasson, just know that at least for tonight, you're all good.

While I'm kidding, of course, we're all aware of the lengthy discussions and missives directed towards Kol Sasson and the concept of partnership minyanim like ours

across the world. All too often we are asked the question – “Mah Nitztede?” – Or, how can we justify ourselves? – which we read this time of year during selichot. We are circumventors of Jewish law. We are bypassing and discarding countless years of Jewish tradition for the sake of modernity. We are, as one letter denouncing our community states, “completely beyond the bounds of communal Torah observance.”

To all of this – I say unequivocally and without hesitation – yes. Yes, we are all of these things. And allow me the opportunity to provide some context for this brazen statement.

We gathered here tonight to begin the observance of Judaism’s most known and sacred holiday, Yom Kippur, with the recitation of Kol Nidrei. But what exactly is Kol Nidre? How has it become perhaps the most recognizable Jewish service on the planet? And what does it have to do with Kol Sasson?

A Commentary Magazine article from 2010, entitled “The Curious Case of Kol Nidre,” summarizes:

“...although Kol Nidre has become virtually synonymous with the Day of Atonement, it is not, strictly speaking, part of the Yom Kippur liturgy...Kol Nidre has had to survive centuries of powerful and persistent opposition expressed by eminent rabbis who have challenged the very principle underlying its recitation – the concept of a blanket annulment of sacred vows...the version in most common use today defies the laws of logic. That a disputed formula like Kol Nidre should eventually have won a central place in the standard liturgy is a phenomenon that defies complete comprehension.”

While the complete background and evolution of the Kol Nidre service is much more complex than we have time for, allow me to briefly delve into the surface level.

The vow was one of the most primitive forms of prayer in the time of the ancient Israelites. The eventual evolution of prayer in Judaism, however, made vows seem boorish and unsophisticated, and they were looked down upon by the masses. A specific vow made to God, however, was (and is) viewed as a significant

transgression, and if violated, was an extremely serious matter. Despite the severity of this perpetual vow-breaking, the Jews were unable to kick this lowly habit. To some extent, we still fall prey to this. How many of us have made bargains and promises to God in exchange for something? I know I did this roughly 5 minutes ago: “Oh God, if this speech goes over well, I promise to go to shul every week for the next year!” Unfulfilled vows therefore created significant ethical and religious problems for those that had made them, but still wanted to be a dignified part of the greater community.

This necessitated a halakhic response in the Talmudic period (mostly in the Diaspora) for Rabbis to somehow respond and deal with this group of vow-breaking people, and the concept of an individual annulling his or her vows in front of a Beit Din (or group of three qualified and learned men) was created.

So many people took advantage of this “get out of vow free” card without changing their vow-breaking behavior, however, that the rabbinate - and subsequently halakha - became the laughingstock of the notoriously anti-halakhic Karaite community at the time. This eventually prompted nearly all of the Geonim (the most recognized Jewish leaders and lawmaking body of medieval Babylonia) to decry and denounce the practice of Kol Nidre. Amram Gaon went so far as to say that Kol Nidre was a “minhag shetut” (or foolish custom). Other Geonim uniformly forbade the study of the talmudic tractate of Nedarim/Vows altogether. Over time, the practice of Kol Nidre became even more widespread and evolved into the communal formulation that we’re more familiar with today. Eventually, the two major competing Talmudical academies in Babylonia, Sura and Pumpeditha, took opposing views – with the more lenient Pumpeditha allowing the recitation, with some minor changes. I always did like Pumpeditha better, anyhow.

The useful part of the story here is - that recitation of **Kol Nidre, now perhaps the most quintessentially recognized Jewish service today**, circumvented Jewish law. It bypassed and discarded countless years of Jewish custom and practice for the

sake of modernity. And, lastly, Kol Nidre was back then I'm sure, regarded as "completely beyond the bounds of communal Torah observance." I am glad that Kol Sasson shares these uniformly heretical traits.

Despite the fact that that the rightful halakhic inclusion of women in our service is something Kol Sasson stands for and is proud of, it's certainly not the sole reason for our growth and success over the years – because there are really many unique things about this still emerging community that make us stand out. I'm often asked exactly what Kol Sasson is, and simply saying "a partnership minyan" or reciting our mission statement reduces us to soundbytes, and frankly - we deserve so much more than that. We have no denomination, we have no building of our own, and we have no rabbi – this description sounds like a community with a significant identity crisis, but in reality, not having these things has allowed us to innovate, create sparks, and fan flames. No matter who I'm speaking with, and no matter how many times I explain what we're trying to accomplish, I inevitably come back to two main concepts that I believe are core pillars of our institution above all: intellectual honesty and intentionality.

Regarding intentionality...For better or for worse, when you walk into a room of an event or service that was planned by Kol Sasson, you can pick anything about it, and chances are that there's either been an all-night meeting that's taken place to discuss it or an e-mail thread two weeks long about it. Whether it's the setup of a room, a new tune of a certain tefilah, or the minutiae surrounding the 27th revision of our Prayer for the United States Government – true story – every detail has been given painstaking attention to ensure that our community is happy and forward thinking. It's simply impossible for Kol Sasson to do something without robust and healthy discussion – not because we're Jews and we like to argue but because we are consistently concerned about what we're doing and whether or not it's aligned with our mission. It's generally unacceptable for us to do something in a particular way just because "that's the way it's always been done." There are so many painstaking details associated with getting it right, and it's these little things that really make a

difference. We're the only local shul I'm aware of that's administered satisfaction surveys, hosted parlor meetings for community feedback, and has embarked on not one but two strategic planning initiatives within the course of a decade. This intentionality – this attention to detail - is one of the hallmarks and pillars of our community.

Regarding the other pillar, intellectual honesty...Rambam said in his preface to Shmoneh Prakim, "Consider truth, regardless of its' source." I cannot think of an observant synagogue community that takes this challenge to heart more than Kol Sasson currently does. This is demonstrated perfectly by the range of speakers and educational programs we have brought to Skokie over the past year. There are too many to list here, but in particular the uniqueness of a shul that can bring Rabbi Dr. Daniel Sperber one month and subsequently Rabbi Dr. Zev Farber the next should not be lost on any of us. To remind you, Rabbi Sperber is an Israel prize recipient, Talmud professor and halakhist; Rabbi Zev Farber, no slouch, is the creator of TheTorah.com, a website and community for observant individuals that challenges whether or not God wrote the Torah. Both of whom, by the way, boast both rabbinic and doctoral bona fides. Kol Sasson looooooves academic rabbis.

This juxtaposition of speakers and broad range of opinions is a good indicator of the environment Kol Sasson attempts to foster. We are a community comprised of scholars, skeptics, seekers, and everything in between. As an always-thinking kehila, we recognize the vast challenges that Judaism faces in a rapidly changing world, and are not afraid to address these issues head-on, together. We may not have all the answers, but we certainly don't pretend to, either – which I believe is remarkably rare. In sum, we are intellectually honest bunch – our second pillar - struggling with our evolving identities as a progressive community while also holding fast to tradition and being anchored in halakhic practice.

It's at this point in the speech where you've likely realized that, hey, wait a minute, this is a Yom Kippur Appeal and I haven't been asked for anything yet. Don't worry, we'll get there.

I'm fortunate that I can stand up here and say with certainty that Kol Sasson isn't dealing with crippling, rising costs that necessitate every family's immediate financial participation. Our membership dues are modest – and that's because we have no building....yet. We have no full time employees. We do not have to pay for a Rabbi or Maharat's salary. Thankfully, our financial house is well in order – and we're beginning to plan for our financial future because of it. Right now, for our current operations, we have everything that we need on the financial front.

But – to be honest, and perhaps a bit greedy on Kol Nidre night, we don't have a lot of things that we WANT. And I have to be clear, what I want most when I walk into a davening experience with this community – this place that is so vibrant with spirituality, singing, authenticity and beautiful souls – is not to feel like I'm stepping into my grandmother's bathroom every time I look at these shower curtain mechtza's. And, while I was fortunate enough to go to Jewish summer camp – and I always want to feel like I'm back there, that doesn't necessarily mean that I literally want to have the Aron Kodesh FROM camp when I come to shul. (For those of you who don't visit us regularly, our Aron downstairs is on generous loan to us from Temple Beth Israel, and it looks...campy.) Daniel Weinberg, our immediate past President, spoke last year about Kol Sasson growing up and needing to move out of its parent's basement. Part of that process is getting your own stuff, and stuff that you're proud of. We begin that process tonight.

For those joining us this evening, I have two requests; both of which involve investing in the two core pillars that I've outlined tonight. The first, and in some ways the easiest, is an ask that speaks to our intellectual honesty. We are a partnership minyan, which means that – yes – alongside our commitment to progressive Judaism and inclusive participation, we were established as a mechtza

minyan, despite the cognitive dissonance this may strike with some. **I want the physical aesthetic for our sacred space to match the spiritual aesthetic when we are with this community.** I want those who join us as guests and join us as members to realize that Kol Sasson, in its 11th year, is beyond the start-up phase. For those who are able to give financially this evening, and I encourage you to do so – every dollar will go towards a new hiddur mitzvah campaign that will enhance the beauty of our space. Our goal this evening is to raise \$10,000 – and the first expenditure with these funds will be to build custom, elegant, transportable and beautiful mechitza pieces that will be with us in no matter what space Kol Sasson finds itself in. Any remaining funds after commissioning these mechitza pieces will go towards the construction of a new Aron Kodesh. I encourage you to give to make this next step for Kol Sasson a reality. But frankly the real need – the real ask – comes next.

The investment in our second pillar, intentionality, is perhaps what's most important. We are entirely lay led, which means that everyone involved in this fantastic 11 year journey of Kol Sasson has sacrificed thousands of hours to get us to where we are today. We do not have emergency financial needs, but we do have something eminently more important: the need for your time. Quite simply, things don't get done around here unless someone steps up to do it. Our current officers, committee chairs and participants sacrifice an enormous amount of time to get things right. As we grow, however – there is a very glaring need to have more hands on deck to help in every single aspect of our shul. More volunteers. More commitments of time. I cannot stress enough how absolutely vital it is that each of you give some of your time if you aren't already involved, and for those of you that are – keep giving!

If you look at your envelopes this evening, there are two pledge cards. One for your financial support towards our hiddur mitzvah campaign, where we will look to beautify our minyan. The second card is a pledge card of time, where you can commit to working on certain tangible aspects of shul that very simply, need your

help. We will treat the seriousness of both of these pledges equally and we intend to follow up with each of you about them. When you've marked off your 5775 contribution, you may give it to one of our officers collecting envelopes or you may send it in after Yom Kippur is over.

It is my wish – not ONLY for “Moshiach to come bimheyra biyamenu amen,” but for us to collectively sit here at this time next year, knowing that our collective pledges and vows of time will not need annulment, for they will have been fulfilled.

G'mar Tov