

Over a six week period late summer and fall year, our traditions tells us repeatedly that we are free human beings, with the power to reinvent ourselves. We are not bound by the foolish things that we said or did in the past. With sufficient effort, we can change who are. The fact is, according to our tradition, we are not only free to do so but we are obligated to reexamine our past. It is a mitzvah to do teshuvah.

The Zohar, our mystical commentary on Torah, puts this process of teshuvah in the context of the judgement we face after we die. It imagines that each of our days exists as an independent clone of ourselves. To put it another way, imagine that at the end of each day, God makes a complete, bootable, backup of ourself. At the end of our life, each of those clones or backups form part of the clothing in which we cover ourselves in the world to come. The Zohar suggests that we literally wear every day of our past selves on the day we appear before the Holy Blessed One.

But here's the rub – any day on which we behaved kindly and honorably and honestly and in accord with Torah accompanies us on our journey through life and clothes us in the World to Come. Any day on which we behaved falsely, dishonorably, without kindness, justice, mercy, or Torah, is exiled from our presence. That thread or patch of cloth would be missing, leaving our clothing in the world to come in tatters.

But each Fall, our liturgy reminds us that if we reexamine our days that we can fix that which we broke. We can recover the lost moments from our past, we can learn from our mistakes and not only do tikkun and repair the past but learn from it so that we become stronger and wiser in the future.

Kol Nidre is the penultimate statement of the power of atonement. Tomorrow's liturgy and ritual throughout the day pile on the message: We can break free of the chains of our past. Take a moment to appreciate the power and the poetry of the Zohar's metaphor. Close your eyes and imagine the days when your words got away from you. When your anger overwhelmed your compassion. When you lay your head down on your pillow having failed to resolve a relationship, with a sense that the day got away from you and you didn't live up to your best self. Imagine that day living in exile, its work incomplete, cast away on a pile of wasted days, barren hours, time bent out of shape with abuse and neglect. Now imagine that you can carefully sweep up the long-disregarded days and clean them up, fix what's wrong with them, and restore them to your orderly shelf of well-regarded and lived days.

That's the process of atonement. If you've been living the Jewish calendar fully, you've been doing this for the past six weeks, trying to remember the things you've done wrong. The setting of Kol Nidre reminds us, however, that we can't fully release our past until we acknowledge and take responsibility for our past words and deeds. If we've said something we regret, we need to express our regret out loud. These past six months have been difficult for most of us. The next six months may not be much easier. We are enduring stresses caused by the pandemic and its associated isolation, health fears, and economic disruption; and stresses caused by the upcoming election. It's a lot to handle. We probably said things we regret. Be kind to yourselves and be kind to others around you. Don't use words uttered under stress against them. Release them, and yourselves, from the chains that bring you down and hold you back. Become your best selves and help your loved ones do and be the same. We conclude the Kol Nidre prayer with the words, סְלַחְתִּי כְּדָבָרְךָ, "I have pardoned as you have asked." Be Godly people and be free with your forgiveness. סְלַחְתִּי כְּדָבָרְךָ, "I have pardoned as you have asked."