

Kol Nidre: Variations on a Theme

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/kol-nidre-variations-theme>.

Introduction

Kol Nidre is a legal formula recited in the evening service that begins the holiday of Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement. This ritual recitation may have been developed in the early medieval period as a response to Jews being forced to convert, either to Christianity or Islam. The text absolves those who recite it from vows in God's name made under duress, so that the breaking of such vows is not counted as a sin. Its dramatic recitation and musical setting lend it an emotional intensity that has allowed the prayer to develop resonances beyond the stated meaning of the text. The High Holidays—the celebration of the new year on the Jewish calendar, which includes Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur—have in general come to signify a return to tradition and to religious duties that may have been neglected over the past year, and Kol Nidre serves as a climactic moment of this return.

This kit gathers together examples of the use of Kol Nidre in modern Jewish literature, music, and film, asking students to consider how the prayer has come to stand for adherence to and return to Jewish tradition, and what precisely that return entails.

Cover image: Cover of sheet music for an arrangement of Kol Nidre by Solomon Schenker, 1913. Courtesy of the Center for Jewish History, https://www.flickr.com/photos/center_for_jewish_history/4991049347.

Subjects

Film, Jewish Holidays, Music, Performance, Religion

Reading and Background

- Those wishing to read more about Kol Nidre may wish to consult Rabbi Eric Solomon, "Examining the Mystery of Kol Nidre," "Sounds of Kol Nidre: A Conversation with Marsha Bryan Edelman," and especially the essay collection *All these Vows: Kol Nidre*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman (Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011).
- Ari Kelman examines the history of recordings of Kol Nidre [here](#). Teachers will find links to additional clips they can use in their teaching, as well as analysis of the different versions and their development.
- To learn more about Anton Rubinstein, see James Loeffler's *The Most Musical Nation: Jews and Culture in the Late Russian Empire* (Yale University Press, 2013).
- Those wishing to read more about *The Jazz Singer* may wish to turn to Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (University of Michigan Press, 2005); Michael Alexander, *Jazz Age Jews* (Princeton University Press, 2003); and Jeffrey Shandler, *Jews, God, and Videotape: Religion and Media in America* (NYU Press, 2009).
- For more on Samuel Roth, see Jay A. Gertzman, "The Promising Jewish Poetry of a Pariah: Samuel Roth," *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 28 (2009), pp. 58-72.
- Alan Dein's reflection on David Axelrod's "Kol Nidre" provides some more context for the piece.

Resources

1: Diary excerpt, R. Iljisch's "A Yom Kippur at Anton Rubinstein's," 1899.

Anton Grigoryevich Rubinstein (1829-1894), was a Russian pianist, composer, and conductor, known for his virtuosic piano performances in which he played pieces illustrating the entire history of piano music, and for his prolific output of operas, concertos, symphonies, and solo piano works. Born to Jewish parents in the village of Vikhvatinet, in the Podolia Governorate, not



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far from Odessa, Rubinstein was raised as a Christian following his family's conversion to Russian Orthodoxy.

In this diary entry, St. Petersburg Jewish journalist Robert F. Iljisch (1834-1909) recounts an intimate performance by Rubinstein at a salon in the Hotel Bellevue in St. Petersburg. He describes Rubinstein as “genuinely Semitic” in his appearance, and explains that although Rubinstein had “long ago passed over into another camp,” he had “remained [a Jew] at heart.” The salon took place on Yom Kippur, and although Rubinstein claims that he was not aware of the holiday, when he takes to the piano he performs a series of improvisational variations on the traditional Ashkenazi tune of Kol Nidre, which transport the diarist into an exquisite moment of prayer.

Suggested Activity: Have your students discuss the following questions: Why is the diarist so moved by Rubinstein’s performance? What is the melody of this prayer, without its words, conveying to him? Does the context (a salon rather than a synagogue) transform the meaning of the tune from a prayer to a performance, according to the diarist? The diarist seems to be invested in the idea of authenticity—Rubinstein as a genuine Jew, despite his conversion and this Kol Nidre as an earnest one despite the setting. Why might he interpret the situation this way?

Ask your students if they can imagine the musical performance. They may wish to listen to a version of the Kol Nidre melody, such as [this one](#) (cantorial) or [this one](#) (cello). If they are musically inclined, invite them to create their own variations on the tune of Kol Nidre and to describe to the class how it felt to improvise around the tune. How does their improvisation shape their emotional relationship to the melody? And how do their feelings about the melody inform their improvisations?

Source: R. Iljisch, “A Yom Kippur at Anton Rubinstein’s,” *Menorah Magazine*, vol 25 (1899), 174-182, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044105332720&view=1up&seq=184>. Based on a translation from Russian to German by Leon Houchtenberg, in the *Zeitung des Judenthums*.

2: Poem excerpt, Samuel Roth’s “Kol Nidre,” 1918.

Samuel Roth (1894-1974) is most famous as a disreputable publisher and plaintiff in the *Roth v. United States* (1957) Supreme Court ruling on freedom of sexual expression. In his early years, he was an editor, poet, and bookseller, writing alongside and publishing poets such as Charles Reznikoff and Louis Zukofsky. His poem “Kol Nidre,” appeared in *Poetry*, the prestigious modern journal edited by Harriet Monroe. It is about the experience of hearing the Kol Nidre prayer and the series of associations the poet experiences, including a sense of communal guilt and despair.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students to rewrite the questions Roth asks about Kol Nidre in this stanza in their own words. What are the existential or theological concerns that Kol Nidre produces for Roth? Then, invite your students to compose their own poem that consists of a series of questions in response to Kol Nidre. They can model it on Roth’s stanza, using some of the same sentence constructions if they wish.

Ask your students how interpreting the prayer through questions rather than statements shapes their experience of the prayer itself.

Source: Samuel Roth, “Kol Nidre,” *Poetry*, June 1918, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=12&issue=3...>

3: Sheet music cover, “Kol Nidre,” 1913.

This arrangement of Kol Nidre for piano, violin, and mandolin, with words, was printed by Solomon Schenker, one of many music publishers working out of small outlet stores in New York’s Lower East Side at the turn of the century.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students to describe what the image on the sheet music conveys. What objects of Jewish ritual are present, and what does that tell them about the sheet music’s audience and the associations the public had with Kol Nidre? Ask your students to design their own contemporary sheet music cover for Kol Nidre. Ask them to think about who their audience is and what kind of message they want to convey about the meaning or context of the music.

Source: Center for Jewish History NYC, “Sheet music: Kol Nidre,” *Flickr*, Sep. 15 2010, https://www.flickr.com/photos/center_for_jewish_history/4991049347.

4: Film excerpt, Alan Crosland's "The Jazz Singer," 1927.

The Jazz Singer, the first feature-length motion picture to include synchronized sound, tells the story of Jakie Rabinowitz, a cantor's son who leaves his home and changes his name to Jack Robin in order to become a professional jazz performer. He does this over his family's objections, forsaking his family's generations-long commitment to the cantorate. In a stirring scene in the film, Jakie is called to fill in for his ailing father at the synagogue on the evening of Yom Kippur and has to choose between his opening on Broadway and his obligation to his family and the religious culture from which he stems. Kol Nidre becomes a moment of repentance and return in Jakie's struggle between tradition and modernity.

Note: Teachers and students who wish to explore the film in its entirety should be prepared to discuss issues of race and racism, and should be aware that the film includes scenes of the main character performing in blackface.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students: What is the relationship between the father's deathbed and the music? To what extent does the performance demonstrate the performer's virtuosity as a singer, and to what extent does it demonstrate his devotion to his father and his faith? What do you think of the text "a jazz singer—singing to his God" that appears on the screen? What other labels might you have placed on Jakie in this moment (e.g., "a loyal son—singing for his father" or "a singer—sharing his passion for song")? Do you see the ideas of return and authenticity in this clip as related to the diary entry in resource one of this kit? What, if any, are the differences you discern between these portrayals of musicians' connections to their families' religious traditions through the melody of Kol Nidre?

The Jazz Singer has been remade several times, and your students may also wish to view clips of other versions of Jakie's performance of Kol Nidre and compare them. Some such versions include: **Danny Thomas** (1952); **Jerry Lewis** (1959—Kol Nidre occurs around 51:00 in this clip); **Neil Diamond** (1980); and **Moyshe Oysher's** performance in the 1939 Yiddish film *Overture to Glory*, a variation on *The Jazz Singer* about a young cantor who is lured to the city to become an opera singer. In the closing scene, Oysher's character returns to the synagogue for one last Kol Nidre before he dies a broken man.

Alternately, your students may wish to compare the film version of *The Jazz Singer* to the 1922 short story "The Day of Atonement," by Samson Raphaelson, upon which the film was based. Ask your students: How would you compare the experience of reading about a musical performance to that of hearing the performance itself? You may wish to have your students write a prose description of the scene from *The Jazz Singer* before they read this excerpt and then compare their own writing to Raphaelson's scene.

Source: *The Jazz Singer*, directed by Alan Crosland (1927, Los Angeles, CA: Warner Brothers).

Excerpt: Bigatrus, "Kol Nidre – Al Jolson, *The Jazz Singer* (1927)," Apr. 24 2011, video, 2:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTufuWn3jv8>.

5: Song, the Electric Prunes' "Kol Nidre," 1968.

In 1968, pioneering avant-garde composer, record producer, and arranger David Axelrod released his album *Release of an Oath*, under the name of the American psychedelic conceptual rock band the Electric Prunes (which had already broken up, and with whom he had previously collaborated). The opening track, "Kol Nidre," incorporates elements of liturgy together with repetitive, haunting sequences of notes reminiscent of the traditional melody of Kol Nidre.

Suggested Activity: Listen to the song together as a class. Ask your students to consider the relationship between this version of Kol Nidre and the other versions described in this resource kit. What is the relationship between musical performance and prayer? Between melody and text? What do you think Axelrod is trying to express about the relationship between the past and its traditions and the future-oriented music he tended to perform?

Students interested in the blending of musical genres in Kol Nidre performances may also wish to discuss Jeremiah Lockwood's combination of blues and cantorial melodies in [this performance](#).

Source: hitmusicsingles, "The Electric Prunes – Kol Nidre," May 22 2010, video, 4:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0pVUkQbcO4o>.

6: Film excerpt, Edward Norton's "Keeping the Faith," 2000.

In this excerpt from the 2000 film *Keeping the Faith*, Rabbi Jake Schram (Ben Stiller) speaks after the cantor concludes his performance of Kol Nidre, confessing to the congregation that he secretly has been in a relationship with a non-Jewish woman.

Suggested Activity: Ask your students about the relationship between the rabbi's sermon and the performance of Kol Nidre. What does the inclusion of the prayer tell them about the role Kol Nidre has in popular culture? What valences might it carry for the audiences watching the film? Why does the film only include the final few notes of Kol Nidre? How would it have been different if it had included the entire prayer?

Ask your students whether they see this as a reference to (or in conversation with) *The Jazz Singer*. Ask: how does this film address the notion of return and reconciliation with Jewish tradition? (You may want to share with your students that in *The Jazz Singer*, Jakie meets and pursues a relationship with the non-Jewish Mary Dale, a musical theater dancer who later discourages him from performing Kol Nidre, out of fear that his failure to sing on Broadway that night will ruin his career. She ultimately comes to hear him sing Kol Nidre at the synagogue and praises the performance as "a jazz singer—singing to his God").

Source: *Keeping the Faith*, directed by Edward Norton (2000, Burbank, CA: Touchstone Pictures).

Excerpt: micosh888, "Keeping The Faith yum kipur," Apr. 20 2012, video, 3:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9SKgq5XedQ>.