

**“FIVE SACRED SPACES”**  
**Part Three**  
**“THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE –**  
**Rome, Italy”**

**Kol Nidre Eve 5770**  
**September 27, 2009**

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**New Orleans, Louisiana**

We gather this night mindful that Kol Nidre eve is a night like unto no other of the Jewish Year! This is Judaism's holiest moment...the night when the Kol Nidre is sung.

Our theology is very clear as to the drama of this moment. Standing in God's presence, we are humbled by the fact that we are only:

dust, a shattered urn, grass that withers,  
a flower that will fade. We are a shadow moving on, a cloud  
passing by,...a dream soon forgotten.

Primarily because we are so frail and vulnerable, all the more critical then, that while we enjoy the privilege of life, we summon the moral strength to break old and unacceptable patterns and turn from our destructive ways toward living the quality of life we know we are called to make our own.

We have been visiting sacred spaces during these High Holy Days. And, tonight, there is no more appropriate stop along the way than at the Great Synagogue of Rome (see it on page 9). This Tempio Maggiore, (The Great Temple) was constructed upon that same ground of the ancient Roman Ghetto created in 1555 by Pope Paul IV so as to segregate the Roman Jews behind its walls. Each day at dusk the Ghetto's three gates were locked from the outside, imprisoning between 5 to 10 thousand people into one third of a square mile of flood and plaque prone squalor.

The handsome synagogue one sees today was built in 1904, its ark doors however date all the way back to the synagogue which stood on that spot in 1586. Finally in 1888, the walls of the Roman ghetto and the houses therein were torn down and Rome's Jews were given their civil rights as Italians. In September **1943** however, a thousand Roman Jews were imprisoned in this very synagogue awaiting transfer to Auschwitz. Of the thousand who were sent on the trains on that night, fourteen individuals survived.

Here in the Crescent City, churches and synagogues and mosques, harmoniously stand side by side in heartwarming coexistence. We live in the **New World** and I thank God for it. Just take a short stroll up or down our beautiful Avenue and see it for yourself.

New Orleanians often confuse religious denominations not certain of which is the Catholic or the Baptist or the Presbyterian. And it is certainly often the case that people will confuse the two synagogues on St. Charles Avenue. But speaking of confusion, almost two years ago, on the eve of our daughter Debra's wedding, the limousines, having left the French Quarter hotel at the scheduled minute, slowed down toward a stop at Temple Sinai's handsome entrance, but kept right on going.

“Stop! Stop!,” we yelled to the driver, oblivious of the error as he drove behind his glass windowed cockpit, and bringing us to a ceremonial arrival directly before the doors of the Holy Name of Jesus Church! Such things never happen in the Old World!

Now note there is a neighboring church just to the right of the Great Synagogue of Rome. It is called the Church of Saint ‘Angelo in Pescherio, literally the Church where the fish are measured in an adjacent open market.

What we know about this church is that it is one of four which bordered the ancient ghetto on all sides. But here is what was decried. Every Jew who had attended worship on a given Shabbat was forced to attend lectures aimed at converting them to Catholicism on that very Shabbat afternoon at one of these four churches.

We cannot even begin to imagine the horrors, the degradations and insecurities to which our Jewish brothers and sisters were once subject. There were thousands of martyrs who refused to deny their Judaism. No one knows how many others, after submitting to forced baptisms and feigning public acts of Christian piety, found their way, nevertheless to the synagogue on this sacred night with the purpose of revoking forced oaths and atoning for their sins.

How fortunate we are that our time and place in history calls for no such extreme measures. And yet, living as we do in **the very best of times**, is there a single person here tonight who has **not** managed this past year to sink to his or her worst level of behavior?

It is amazing that some things just do **not** change. From medieval world to the Enlightenment; from the advent of modernity to what some label as post-modernity – (whatever that means!), human nature has remained impervious to change. The caveman never died, he has just learned to wear ultra suede.

In some ways, of course, we face the same challenge tonight as have our fellow Jews of every age:

How do we unburden ourselves of sin?  
How shall we forgive but also,  
how shall we be forgiven?  
We have said things this year we should  
never have said, but we have failed to  
speak when we should have spoken up.

We stand here tonight as fellow penitents, works in progress, whose indelible dignity was captured by John Newton’s reassuring confession:

I am **not** what I ought to be.  
I am **not** what I want to be.  
I am **not** what I hope to be.  
But still, I am not what I **used** to be.

So you see, Kol Nidre eve is not only the most sacred night of the Jewish year, it is also **its most hopeful**.

Did you know that this night is also designated by Jewish tradition to remind us of our mortality? As a matter of fact, in Orthodox synagogues there are laymen who are wearing white Kittles tonight in synagogue. A Kittle is essentially like a burial shroud. And at the essence of Yom Kippur is, of course, the sealing of our fate. We want to be inscribed in that Book of Life! The Book of Destiny.

I read a fantastic short story written by Dr. David Eagleman, titled "Prism". It bears a thoughtful message for us on this Kol Nidre eve. The author presents God as wanting all of us to participate in the hereafter, but when our time comes there are some unfortunate loose strings. For instance, how old should each person be in the afterlife?

Engleman writes:

Should this grandmother exist here (in the after life)  
at her age of death, **or** should she be  
allowed to live as a young woman,  
recognizable to her first lover  
but not to her granddaughter?

In the end, God decides it is unfair to keep people the age they were when their lives ended.

Problems developed immediately. Allowing everyone to live forever as a young adult leads to an impossibly lusty situation.

But at middle age they talked only about their children and mortgages, making conversations in the afterlife tedious.

Solution? God lands on an ingenious answer while one day watching light diffract through a prism. So when you arrive, you are split into your multiple selves at all possible ages. The **you** that existed as a single identity is now **all** ages at once.

But, our imaginative author, Dr. Eagleman, informs us:

It's a fact of the afterlife; don't be surprised  
to discover that after the decomposition into  
your different ages, the different yous tend to drift apart.

For example, the 18 year old **you** finds a whole lot more in common with other 18 year olds than with **your** 73 year old **you**.

Beyond the name, the yous have little else in common.....But don't lose hope: ...once in a while the different yous organize a gathering, like a family reunion, bringing together all your ages into a single room. At these reunions, the middle-aged will pinch the cheeks of the young, and the teenagers will politely listen to the stories and advice of the elderly.

You see what happens?  
...They come to understand, with awe, the complexity of the **compound identity** that existed on the Earth.

I was drawn to this imaginative story of fancy because I believe that in a lifetime there **are** many yous **and** many mes. We transform ourselves – personalities, beliefs, loyalties and passions – far more often than we outgrow our shoes.

- We learn, often too late, but we grow!
- We fall and we rise.
- We sleep through moments of profound meaning **and** are wide awake not missing a moment of the trivial.
- We crave the acceptance of the **mindless, but popular crowd**, at the cost of forsaking our divinely gifted insights and distinctiveness.
- We run with all our might to grasp hold of fleeting and sinful pleasures, but then wonder cluelessly how the purpose and meaning of **our stay on earth** has eluded us.
- Our tents have been pitched in the lowlands of the mundane, while the pathway to the heights of love and faith, vision and service has been obscured by neglect.

There are many yous and many mes, appearing and vanishing as through that prism in Dr. Eagleman's fanciful story. But his stories were **of lives** brought already to their end. And that is very different from our situation right NOW!

Our stories are yet to be told in full and still, each one of us is boundless with rich possibility.

Those Jewish brothers and sisters of ours who gathered in the Great Synagogue of Rome they knew something we must never forget. The winds of life and fate blow in every direction, sometimes bringing us joy, and sometimes pain. And we will probably never understand the reason why one and not the other.

But now, as we prepare to listen once again to the sacred melody of Kol Nidre, make no mistake. There **is** still so much of our destiny which we hold in our hands.

Pray God, therefore, that this Holy night, our **deeds** will reflect **our highest resolve**.

Amen!