

WHO ARE THE AVARYONIM OF TODAY?

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Soon the room will once again be filled. As all the House of Israel will gather together for Kol Nidre this coming Wednesday evening.

The service will begin with a strange prelude. We enact a Bet Din – a rabbinic court will be formed right here on the bimah. The Torahs will be taken out. And then acting as the *Av Bet Din*, as the head of the duly constituted court, I will recite a legal formula.

We will say: *al da at Hamakom, vi al da at hakahal, anu matirin lihipalel im ha avaryonim*. “By authority of the Court on High and by the authority of this court on earth, we hereby declare it permissible to pray together with the *avaryonim* – the sinners.

What a very very strange beginning. We begin the holiest moment of our liturgical year – arguably our most sacred shul experience with a legal formula – and worse – we use that formula to declare it legally permissible to pray with *avaryonim* – sinners.

What is going on here? Who are these *avaryonim*?

Let me share with you three possible theories as to who they are that are found in the commentaries. I learned about them from Rabbi Jack Reimer.

One commentator says that it refers to the marranos. These were Spanish Jews of the 15th century who do to the Inquisition disguised themselves as Christians all during the year. For all intents and purposes they looked like Jews who had abandoned their Judaism and converted to Christianity as the King and Queen had demanded they do. But once a year, when Kol Nidre came, they felt the tug of their old tradition and they slipped into the synagogue and asked to be admitted. And those who had remained Jewish against enormous pressure and at the potential cost of their very lives – they were not at all sure how to relate to these morranos who suddenly reappeared on their doorsteps.

Some argued that these people who denied their Jewishness all year had no right to enter the synagogue on Yom Kippur. Those who were still locked in a battle to maintain their Jewishness were afraid that the morranos would contaminate us if we let them in.

It is certainly not hard to understand such an attitude of rejection. We can sympathize with those who wanted to bar the people whom they looked upon as traitors and a threat to the survival of those who remained loyal. But the tradition ruled that it is permitted to let them in--*anu matirin lihitpalel im ha avaryonim*. So this first explanation imagines the opening lines of Kol Nidre as a forceful statement aimed at the traditional Jewish community to let those morranos come back in.

Another, more historically minded commentator, gives a different explanation. He says that this

declaration cannot possibly refer to the Marranos because it comes from Germany, not from Spain, and it can be dated even before the Inquisition. According to this commentator it refers to the philosophers, to those who challenged the faith by asking radical, heretical questions--about God, about torah, about justice. Most of the year, these people boycotted the synagogue. "Who needs it?" they said. "It is only a place for fools who don't know any better, who believe in nonsense, or who want to come together out of habit or out of nostalgia." But when Yom Kippur came, these people felt a tug, rational or not, and they wanted to come in and pray. And when they did, there were some people who wanted to say no. "These people mock our faith", they said. "They embarrass us in the eyes of our neighbors. They make fun of all that is holy to us. Let them stay out!"

A case could be made for barring them. But the tradition decided: let them enter---*anu matirin lihitpalel im ha avaryonim*.

The third theory of what this phrase means is the simplest of all. One of the commentators says that it refers to plain, simple, ordinary, garden variety sinners, to those who cheat or steal a little bit, to those who brag and boast or cut corners on business deals, or who do all of the other sins that we ordinary people are prone to do. There were some purists who did not want to pray in the same shul with sinners. But the tradition decided: *anu matirin lihitpalel im ha avaryonim*.

So far, this has been a historical talk, a survey of different scholarly theories as the origin of a prayer. But now let me take these three theories that we have studied and ask: which of them do you think best describes the *avaryonim* that we have in our midst today?

There are people in our midst today who are like the marranos...not by force, but by choice. People who deny and disguise their Jewishness all year long. We love to say "You know Karl Marx, the father of Communism, was Jewish or Leon Trotsky, the intellectual father of Soviet Communism, was Jewish." But what does that mean? Yes Marx was the grandson of two Orthodox rabbis but his parents converted to Christianity and he was the author of some of the most anti-Semitic literature of his day. And Leon Trotsky was born Lev Bronstein. He along with Stalin and three others fought to succeed Lenin as leader of the Communist Party after Lenin's death in 1924. In 1920, when Trotsky was head of the Red Army, Moscow's chief rabbi, Rabbi Jacob Mazeh, asked him to use the army to protect the Jews from pogromist attacks. Trotsky is reported to have responded, "Why do you come to me? I am not a Jew." To which Rabbi Mazeh answered: "That's the tragedy. It's the Trotskys who make revolutions, and it's the Bronsteins who pay the price." Even today we love to claim Jews who have no interest in claiming us. Take George Soros – people are quick to say that this one of the richest men in the world is Jewish but what does that mean? George Soros is ostentatiously indifferent to his own Jewishness. He is not a believer. He has no Jewish communal ties. He certainly isn't a Zionist. He told Connie Bruck in *The New Yorker* — testily, she recounted — that 'I don't deny the Jews their right to a national existence — but I don't want to be part of it.' We all knew that Nathan Birnbaum was the stage name for George Burns and that Isadore Demsky was the real name of Kirk Douglas but why are we so proud of people who were not at all proud of us? And there are many more we could name, many more who felt that if they were going to make it on Broadway or in Hollywood, that they had to perform a lobotomy on their memories and deny their identities.

There are such people, *nebich*. They deny that which is at the very heart of the American dream--the right of all people to be alike and the right of all people to be different. We should pity these people for living in such fear that they feel that they must deny who they are. But if they want to come in on Kol Nidre night and join us, how should we treat them? According to the opening lines of Kol Nidre we are obligated to say to these modern day marranos: welcome home, welcome back, we are happy to have you. *Anu matirin lihitpalel im ha avaryonim*.

We have *avaryonim* of the second kind amongst too. There are people who mock and challenge and ridicule and question all that is sacred to us all during the year. And yet, somehow, for some reason, somehow, something inside them pulls them, like a magnet, and they decide to come back to us at least for one night each year. If they come in, we should say to them: come home, come in come in WITH your questions, come in WITH your challenges, come in WITH your anger, for in our tradition you are allowed to be angry at God, provided that your anger is out of justice and not out of apathy, you are allowed to challenge God with your questions,, provided that your questions come out of concern and not out of indifference, and so we say welcome--*anu matirin lihipalel im ha avaryonimn*.

I don't know how many inverted marranos we will have at our doors Wednesday night and I don't know how many philosophers we will have,-my hunch is that the third explanation of the word is the one that best fits most of the *avaryonim* of our time. Nowadays I think it refers, not so much to the marranos or the philosophers, but to the sinners, to the plain ordinary sinners, to those who cheat a little, who lie a little, to those who boast and brag once in a while, to those who cut corners occasionally, in other words--to all of us.

Recently a woman told me that she would quit the shul if I permitted her ex-husband to join. Did I not know how she stole money from her, from her children – how he lied and cheated and cursed and was abusive throughout the divorce proceeding – if we could welcome him into our midst after the way he behaved than she wanted no part of us.

I showed her these lines from Kol Nidre – I explained that this is a congregation filled with imperfect people. I patiently tried to explain to her that if we did not permit imperfect people to come in here on Kol Nidre, we might not be able to get a minyan -- for the truth is that we are all imperfect. And what the formula that precedes Kol Nidre is saying is that it is okay to be imperfect – in fact that is precisely why we come here – to learn how to become better people. To paraphrase the title of a book that was famous a few years ago: I'm not okay, and you're not completely okay, and it is okay not to be okay, if only we admit it and if only we try to do something about it. Do you think she bought my explanation? No, she was too angry – but I hope you do. I hope you can understand what I am trying to say.

Therefore I suggest that what we do on Kol Nidre night while that formula is being recited is look around the room and take our imperfect hands and put them into the imperfect hands of the person sitting next to us, and then look around this imperfect synagogue, which is run, not by angels and not by perfect people, but by human beings, who try their best to do what is right but who sometimes fail,---look around this imperfect synagogue and look into the mirror at the imperfect person that you see there, and resolve that in this new year that now begins we will try harder to be better. And then say with the Bet Din on the *bimah: al da at hamakom vi al da at*

hakahal, anu matirin lihipalel im ha avaryonim.

I know a certain student, I won't tell you who it was and if you guess, I will deny it, but I know a certain student who came back to the Seminary after his first year in the rabbinate completely disillusioned. "My congregation doesn't observe this and my congregation doesn't observe that, and my people are guilty of this and my people are guilty of that..." he said. His teacher said to him very quietly: "If they were perfect, they wouldn't need you."

None of us are perfect and so let us accept each other with our imperfections. Let us pray with and for each other in one great united voice---and may God hear our imperfect prayers and answer them. Did you notice the sign outside the synagogue – the first thing you see when you come to pray with us here at TBS on the High Holy Days – do you remember what it says? "Shalom – we are glad you are here!" That is my message to all who would enter our doors on Wednesday evening and Thursday morning in fact on any day of the year – "Shalom, we are glad YOU are here – all of us, every single imperfect one of us. May we admit all those who want to enter our sanctuary on Kol Nidre night, whether they deserve to be admitted or not, and by virtue of this, when our time comes, may the *Ribono shel olam* admit us into His sanctuary, whether we deserve to be admitted or not.

Amen.