



SERMON KOL NIDRE: STANDING UP

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Wednesday 15 September 2021
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue

- 1 From March to October 2020, I didn't stand on a bimah in front of congregants. Not once. It was a very strange and troubling time. Not a pleasant time.
- 2 But even more strange and troubling was the fact that, when I did finally lead a service in front of real, live congregants again, it felt incredibly weird to be standing over people on a raised bimah. After six months of Zoom services, during which I was seeing people's faces directly on a level with my own, sitting at a computer, it felt unnatural to be above people. It felt like a form of forced superiority that I didn't deserve – or want. It felt like being on a pedestal.
- 3 Throughout this year's High Holy Days, I've been exploring how the different physical actions we do with seats – five of them listed in the Mishnah¹ – reflect the liturgical journey we're all on. On Erev Rosh Hashanah we looked at leaning; Rosh Hashanah morning was about lying down; tonight is about standing up.
- 4 Standing can denote the superiority of the one who is standing, like a teacher standing over their pupils or a master standing over their slave. But, oddly enough, it can also mean the opposite: the Queen sits on a



throne while commoners stand before her, and the judge sits on the bench while the defendant stands in the dock.

- 5 Chava Weissler's poem *Standing at Sinai*² rather neatly captures both of these meanings: the female narrator boldly "pushed right up there with the men, stood next to Miriam", made sure that she had a position of importance for the climactic moment of the Torah. But also, everybody "stood and waited and trembled", in meek fear before the awesome power of God.
- 6 Standing can be a sign of superiority; standing can be a sign of inferiority.
- 7 Standing definitely plays a particular role in legal contexts, and tonight, Kol Nidre, we're all in the dock in some sense or another. At the start of this service, we formed a court and enacted a legal formula to release us from all unfulfilled vows rashly made over the last year.
- 8 We read a story³ about one particular dilemma faced by Rav Nachman, a rabbi in ancient Babylon, while he was sitting as a judge. One of the parties to the case was the wife of a colleague, and it would have been only polite for him to stand up when she walked in as a mark of respect to an acquaintance. On the other hand, he had to continue to appear impartial, otherwise he might spook the other party, a stranger, into fearing that the case had been predetermined.
- 9 What was Rav Nachman's solution? He told his clerk: "Go outside, find a duck, and throw it at my face. Then I will stand up" – and it looked like he had a genuine reason to stand up, namely to avoid being hit by a duck, and wasn't showing partiality towards a particular litigant.



- 10 Full marks for creativity, but the Tosafists, rabbis in medieval Europe, had a question: we're not just supposed to stand up, to show respect but to stand up "in an honourable fashion"⁴ – so if he was standing up because of the duck, was he in fact showing proper respect for his friend's wife? They came up with three potential answers.⁵
- 11 First possibility, he was going to show respect by standing up, and he in fact did stand up (whether or not the duck had anything to do with that), so there's no problem.
- 12 Second possibility, his friend's wife would have realised what was going on, and so understood that he was really rising out of respect for her, and only used the ruse of the duck so as to put the other party at ease.
- 13 Third possibility, standing up because of a duck is still "in an honourable fashion", because that rule is more about place – standing up in a bath-house or toilet – than context.
- 14 Why am I telling you all this? Well, tonight we're all actors in a legal drama. Indeed, a musical legal drama, because, like in any good musical, the important bit of our legal procedure – the Kol Nidre formula – was sung.
- 15 It definitely is a drama; it's not real. There aren't two parties present, and nor is there a judge – at least no earthly Judge. So why do we stand? Nominally, out of timid respect; we imagine ourselves to be in court, so we imagine ourselves standing before the [j][J]udge. But, in fact, just as Kol Nidre is really a ritual, rather than a legal process, and only works through conveying intention and providing meaning for us, so too our standing.



- 16 So, of the Tosafists' three possible answers about how to stand in a respectful way, the second one, in my view, is right. What's important is not the physical action – standing in a way completely devoid of meaning, of intentionality, of kavannah, is insufficient – but the purpose that is conveyed. Whether you're standing in shul, standing at home, or indeed sitting at home because that's how you get a better view of the computer screen or because that's what's more comfortable or because you're unable to stand, that's OK.
- 17 Yom Kippur contains an awful lot of what is called closed-script liturgy, prayers which are worded for you and which you're expected to read out as if they're your own words. But don't let this blind us to the personal dimension, to the meaning that we can bring to our words and to our actions.
- 18 Tonight, we all stood: even those who didn't physically stand, stood with their hearts.
- 19 Tomorrow morning, we'll be sitting. G'mar chatimah tovah, wishing you well over the fast.

GKW 15.09.21

¹ m.Zavim 2:4

² Chava Weissler. "Standing at Sinai", *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 1 (1985): 91-92.

³ b.Shevuot 30b

⁴ b.Kiddushin 33a

⁵ Tosafot to b.Shevuot 30b, sv 'Efrach'