All our Vows:

Kol Nidre, which literally means “all our vows,” is not intended to nullify all our promises. It isn’t a blanket, let everyone off the hook kind of prayer. This is a classic, historical misconception that led to persecution and mistrust in various places during the Middle Ages and was the reason why many rabbis of old sought to remove it from the liturgy. But something about its words and the haunting melody resonated with ordinary Jews and they simply refused to let go of it. They understood its true intent.

Sometimes we have moments of great fear, anger, or passion and we make crazy promises. “If you don’t stop picking on your sister, I swear to God, I’m going to hang up by your ankles.” “If you leave me, I swear I will kill myself.” “Get me out of this God and I promise I’ll never eat treif again.” And to the thug who’s holding a knife to your throat: “sure, sure, I promise I won’t call the cops once you leave, believe me I won’t rat you out.” You know these kinds of promises. You can probably think of examples from your own lives, when you were pressured from without or overwhelmed by emotions from within, when we find ourselves in desperate straits and promising just about anything to anyone – including God – if they can somehow make the situation better. This is what Kol Nidre is for.

The notion that your word is your bond is firmly engrained in Jewish tradition – this is why we are cautioned not to take oaths, promises, or vows lightly. We are expected to make every effort to fulfill our promises to others and, only after making a sincere effort, if we find ourselves unable to fulfill them, only then can we expect the Kol Nidre prayer to absolve us. It is another reminder to be careful about how we choose and use our words.

One of the most fascinating parts of this prayer is that its scope not only covers the oaths and vows in the year that has just passed, but in the year that has just started until next Erev Yom Kippur. Clearly the author of this prayer was all too aware of human failing. We fail, we beg forgiveness, we try to make amends and we fail again. So it seems a good time to consider the vows, oaths and promises we will make in the year ahead. So here is my prayer for Yom Kippur Eve:

May God grant us the wisdom to choose our words wisely.

May God grant us the wisdom to choose our words with kindness and integrity.

May we be sincere in the promises we make to God, to others and to ourselves.

May we be sincere in our efforts to fulfill them.

And if, after making an honest effort, we find ourselves unable to fulfill them, then O God, may we be absolved of them.

Shanah Tovah v’tikateivu.