

# What's in a Bowl?

## BABYLONIAN MAGIC SPELLS AND THE ORIGIN OF *KOL NIDRE*

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The Jews of late antiquity had a rich and nuanced practice of magic. We might depict them as rational and logical, but any perusal of the Babylonian Talmud will show a preoccupation with *mazikin* (“harmful beings”) and other supernatural powers. Indeed, Jews no less than their non-Jewish neighbors believed in the existence of these types of forces in the world around them, some of them beneficial but others harmful. The positive and sometimes even the malignant forces might be harnessed to a person’s advantage. But a person needed protection from them as well, toward which end people depended on professionals to create spells against illnesses, enemies, and the realm of the sinister in general.

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Spells such as these have been unearthed in various locations in Mesopotamia, especially in the Babylonian city of Nippur (today's Iraq). They were written in 300–700 CE on clay bowls, buried in and around domestic environments, sometimes in graveyards. The incantations are composed of recurring phrases, words, verses, and various types and styles of formulae, to call upon different names of God and angels, who were believed to have positive powers (though occasionally also malignant ones), and to protect against the demonic as well. The bowls were usually buried upside down under the floor in and around the house, to prevent the powers that they held from escaping as they worked their magic promoting prosperity, health, and protection, especially for the young. They represent the vivid popular culture that is only partially reflected in the contemporary Rabbinic sources.

Scholars have shown interesting similarities between some texts of these magic bowls and *Kol Nidre*, both in vocabulary and style. For example:

Overtured are all the vows [*kol nidre*] and curses and spells and sorceries and curses and sorcerers and evil knocks that may lodge in this man.<sup>1</sup>

The pronounced parallel to *Kol Nidre* (“All vows, obligations, oaths,” etc.) and the shared vocabulary in general are remarkable because *Kol Nidre* is known to us only from much later sources, from the geonic literature of the ninth century. Not all the words typical of *Kol Nidre* are found in the bowls, but we do have interesting similarities that go beyond just the actual words *kol nidre*. In some bowls, we see long chains of annulment and banning phrases, just as in *Kol Nidre*: for example, “Bound, seized, attached, pressed down, trashed, exorcised are all [the evil powers].”<sup>2</sup> Both the bowls and the prayer use certain key Aramaic nouns and verbs, such as “vow,” “swear,” “bound,” and “annulled,” and both utilize a common style and syntax. We cannot help but conclude that formulae quite similar to our liturgy were in Jewish use centuries before the appearance of *Kol Nidre* in the liturgy, even if they were composed and used in a completely different context.

The linguistic and stylistic resemblances between the magical bowl formulae and the prayer are striking enough for many scholars to conclude that *Kol Nidre* originated in the world of magic. No wonder geonic authorities were not overjoyed finding *Kol Nidre* appearing in the various

liturgies that came their way. But despite the parallels in formulaic style, prayer is not magic, and we should pay equal attention to the way the two differ. Scholars have been less careful to explore the differences in psychological and cultural function served by the magic bowls on one hand and the liturgical prayer on the other.

Some differences between *Kol Nidre* and magic bowls are clear:

1. *Kol Nidre* is used in a legal-liturgical context. The bowls were used for magic.
2. *Kol Nidre* is an oral ritual. The bowls relied on a written text. True, the installation of bowls in the home may have had an oral component of which we are ignorant, but the formula inscribed upon them functioned thereafter as a written charm acting in its own right.
3. Although *Kol Nidre* might not have begun as a communal practice, our sole knowledge of it is as a public synagogue ritual. The bowls were entirely personal and private, a function of each individual home.
4. *Kol Nidre* corresponds to a specific calendrical moment (Yom Kippur). The bowls were utilized at any time, presumably as needed.
5. Although normally sung by a cantor, *Kol Nidre* may be led by any adult Jew. The bowls were produced by experts of magical ritual.
6. Despite their common language (“all vows”), *Kol Nidre* is general, annulling all the vows and oaths that the people present in the synagogue take. The magic bowls were specific, each one designed to protect a particular client (or clients) from demons and from bad wishes of other human beings and powers—it was meant to annul any vows that could harm the client made primarily by foe but presumably also by friend or even the client him- or herself. *Kol Nidre*, that is, annuls the vows and oaths of each individual Jew present in the synagogue, while the magic bowls compelled external powers.
7. *Kol Nidre* makes no sense unless the participant understands its content or at least its aspects and implications. It requires intentionality (*kavvanah*) and earnestness, if not in the strict halakhic sense, then in the manner that it is perceived. A client who ordered a magic bowl did not have to understand it at all; on the contrary, the efficacy of the incantation may have been enhanced by its cryptic and secret nature.

To sum up, *Kol Nidre* has both personal and communal aspects, in that it negates individual oaths but only from its communal ritual setting. It corresponds to annual calendrical time and relies on no special technical knowledge. The magic bowls were dependent on individual whim; they were made by experts for private and domestic use in order to fulfill personal needs.

Even if *Kol Nidre* is a direct descendant of magic practices in Babylonia of late antiquity, we can detect a crucial developmental difference between the two. The magic bowls operated in a world full of harmful external powers, in which case all one could do is to protect oneself, one's family, and one's property; *Kol Nidre* does not deal with fear of demonic powers, invoked by other people's vows, but, rather, with the fear of unfulfilled oaths and vows made by each worshiper. It revolves about the human being who says it, not a world of demons from whom the person saying the prayer must fear retaliation.

If the differences between the two practices are so great, however, what is the use of comparing the two? What can be learned from their relationship and possible common origin?

First, it is important to acknowledge the stylistic and linguistic similarities between the two. The magic bowls reveal much older linguistic forms and an older practice as well, perhaps, than what we see in *Kol Nidre*. It is, at the very least, fascinating to watch a domestic magical practice become a communal liturgical ceremony. Second, however, is the realization that the two practices together attest to the enormous gravity people ascribed to vows and the consequences of making them—so much so that a formal means to deal with them was instituted in both private and public domains. Taking vows was considered a serious act with cosmic ramifications, binding on both human and supernatural beings, who share a common world of cause and effect.

Most importantly, the two practices exhibit profound features of human nature, especially when confronting the unknown. Both reveal elemental concerns rooted in human vulnerability, the sense of ultimate helplessness in a world that is beyond our control or comprehension. Both reflect anxieties in a reality that is beyond the human ken, and a craving for control in a world that is all too often out of control. Like prayer, both *Kol Nidre* and the magic bowls are ways of using speech formulaically to achieve certain ends. But neither one is actually a prayer. Both appeal to law more than to God, in that the bowls access the arcane laws that govern

hidden forces of nature, while *Kol Nidre* has its place in the legal context of Rabbinic Judaism. The bowls obey magical laws that banish evil forces from one's immediate universe; *Kol Nidre* prescribes a legal means to prevent one's own ill doing through vows made in error or in haste.

Did the people who ordered a bowl from a professional actually stop worrying about the dangers that made them order them once the bowl was placed in its proper place under the doorpost of the house? I dare say that the anxiety did not completely evaporate. Do Jews who, even today, depart crowded synagogues after hearing *Kol Nidre* leave behind their regrets, guilt, and shame over wrong decisions, unkept promises, and unfulfilled expectations? Probably not entirely—fears and anxieties have a persistent nature. These two practices are designed to ease distress and attain peace of mind: the bowls, because of danger directed by others at the person deploying the incantations; *Kol Nidre*, because of danger caused ultimately by the worshipers themselves. Both acknowledge the insecurities of life and the haunting realization that we can never gain full control over our lives.

And to be honest, do any of the modern precautions we take to overcome our fears and anxieties have a total effect? Do any of the “self-help” books, shows, and specialists, diets, psychological therapies, physical exercises, Eastern and Western practices, not to mention the excessive medications and drugs many of us consume, remove distress and fears? I bet that in most cases the answer would have to be negative here too.

One can finish “unfinished business” only to some extent. Our existential fears remain with us, and we can only pray that we may confine them and gain some control over them. Yom Hakippurim is the day our tradition designates for *cheshbon nefesh*, “soul-searching,” but every time we stand in prayer, not only on the High Holy Days, we have an opportunity for reflection and modest empowerment. Yom Hakippurim and *Kol Nidre* provide us with a language and tools to help us cope with our finite and fragile nature. This is a redemptive language, and it grants us *nechamah purta*, “minor consolation,” and a chance for growth.




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