Singing Kol Nidrei in the Vatican

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It was early in the summer and I was kind of dreading explaining to Alla that I might have to cancel our planned three-day vacation to the Jersey Shore.

"Why?" she asked, skeptically.

I explained that I had received an invitation from the Rabbinical Assembly to apply for a special seminar program being organized by the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano, our Conservative Jewish seminary in Buenos Aires.

"So we're going to Argentina?" she started to smile.

"No, not exactly," I said.

"Then where?" she asked, the skepticism returning.

"If it works out," I explained, "then we are going to Rome."

Alla was okay with that.

What is the connection between Buenos Aires and Rome? The answer is the pope, who is Argentinian and had served as archbishop of Buenos Aires before becoming bishop of Rome and pope of the Roman Catholic Church. As the Cardinal Archbishop, Jorge Bergoglio attended Rosh Hashanah services in Buenos Aires in 2007. In 2010, he co-wrote a book with Rabbi Abraham Skorka, a Conservative rabbi and then the rector of the Seminario, a dialogue between the Jewish and Catholic leaders of Argentina, called *On Heaven and Earth.* Back in 1994, he was

the first public official in Argentina to condemn the deadly antisemitic attack against the Buenos Aires Jewish community center, the AMIA, that killed 85 people. When he was elected pope in 2013 one of his first official acts was to reach out to the chief rabbi of Rome and invite him to his installation. "Due to our common roots," he said in 2013, "a Christian cannot be antisemitic." He visited Israel in 2014 at the invitation of the late Israeli president Shimon Peres, only fourteen months into his papacy.

Pope Francis came to Rome with a long-established record of interfaith dialogue with the Jewish community, represented in Buenos Aires chiefly by the leadership of the Seminario. So it was not surprising to me that the Seminario, now led by Rabbi Ariel Stofenmacher, had secured a commitment from the pope to do more to bridge the gaps between the Jewish people and the Holy See.

When we talk about the Vatican and its Library, our minds wander to its Secret Archives and what information they might reveal about a different pope and his activities, or I should say, apparent passivity, during the time of the Holocaust. It was just a week ago that a new document was released by the Vatican, a 1942 letter to Pius XII from a German Jesuit reporting on the murder of up to 6000 people each day at the Belzec concentration camp—what we today would label a death camp—in Poland. The letter eliminates any real doubt that the Vatican, that the pope himself, was unaware of what was happening at the hands of the Nazis. And it was today's pope, Pope Francis, who back in 2019 had ordered the opening of the Pius XII archives to scholars and investigators leading to the release of this particular letter a week ago. The same Pope Francis who invited the small group of rabbis and other religious scholars that I had the privilege to be a part of, to see the Vatican's treasures of Hebrew manuscripts.

The Vatican Library is a library of books with treasures going back to the first popes. Organized as a resource for scholars in the fifteenth century, the Vatican Apostolic Library holds hundreds of rare and priceless Hebrew manuscripts in its collection. The Vatican opened its doors to us, lent us its librarians as our hosts, who guided us through their extraordinary reading rooms, their book conservation laboratory where they painstakingly patch holes in the paper, fix old bindings, and eliminate the insects that eat away at the old books, and their digitalization laboratory where they methodically take images page by page of their books with the most high tech cameras and equipment so that the images can be put online and made available to scholars around the world on any computer or smart phone.

Libraries are not mere archival storage facilities for the records of history. They are temples, sanctuaries, for the scholars and the curious. A research institution like the Vatican Apostolic Library is usually only visited by specialists, academics working on a dissertation or book who need to pore over a specific volume that only that library possesses. I'll be giving a Sunday morning talk on October 29th on the value of such manuscripts to scholars of the Bible and Judaica. But my small group of about twenty visitors were not specialists, come to Rome to uncover mysteries, to shed light on the past, to reveal a previously confidential letter to a pope about Jews in Poland, for example. No, we were visitors. We were received by the librarians, by the order of the pope, and shown the treasures and the workings of the library the way a friend might invite us into a living room and share a proud collection of sports memorabilia. A specialist would be given a desk to sit at, and a librarian would bring over the volumes requested, and then the specialist would pour over the volumes, painstakingly taking notes, for several days, or weeks, or months, hoping to find something of interest, some original insight, that could be published. I

did that years ago when I was working on my dissertation, combing through German military archives in Munich, gathering data and looking for stories I could tell about my research topic, German Jewish soldiers in the German army in the First World War. In the reading rooms of the Vatican Library this summer I saw scholars and students pouring over manuscripts, pursuing their own academic journeys through the words and thoughts of the past. And somewhere not far from where we were, I imagined, were scholars carefully going through the correspondence of Pius XII, looking for revealing letters like the one released a week ago. But we were not there for that this summer. We were there for the VIP tour, the overview perspective. We were there to meet the librarians as much as the books they care for. And we were there to close a gap, to heal a breach, that had formed over many centuries between the Church and the Jews.

Who were we? About twenty men and women, mostly Argentinian rabbis and Seminario administrators. A rabbi from Mexico but now from Costa Rica. One Israeli rabbi. A rabbi from Argentina but now from Long Island. Two graduate students from NYU. A scholar from Oxford teaching in Chile. A Polish nun. A Greek Orthodox Bulgarian woman studying Bible. A woman from Kenya called "Scholar" representing the Kenyan Anglican church. A Chilean man who serves on the board of the Seminario. The rector of our seminary in Budapest. And me. I was the Gringo rabbi who was also representing our small seminary in Germany. And then of course, Alla, who comes originally from Ukraine. Two honored professors were invited to join us and teach us, David Golinkin, another "Gringo rabbi" from the United States but now Israel who heads our seminary in Jerusalem, and Adolfo Roitman, another rabbi from Argentina but now Israel who is the curator of the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem. We first met at the impressive synagogue in the Roman ghetto, introduced to each other at breakfast, toured the Ghetto neighborhood,

attended receptions at the Argentinian embassies to Vatican City and to Italy, visited the ancient synagogue of Ostia Antica, Rome's port on the Mediterranean, and of course, toured and heard lectures at the Vatican Apostolic Library.

While there was a Catholic, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox member of our group, valued for the interreligious dialogue that we were there to promote, we were essentially a Jewish group, and as such our presence had meaning to the librarians devoted to the care and preservation of Hebrew and Judaic treasures in the vaults of the Vatican. Why does the Vatican hold hundreds of priceless Hebrew manuscripts, I have been asked. How did they get them? Simply because they are collected as all major research libraries hold collections. There are priceless Hebrew manuscripts in the libraries of all the major German and Dutch universities. In Moscow and in St. Petersburg. In Oxford and in Cambridge. In New York and in Jerusalem. European cities in the medieval and Renaissance periods prided themselves on their universities and libraries, claiming themselves as capitals of the republic of letters, if not of temporal power and might. The Church in the fifteenth century saw itself as the center of learning. Given a charge of collecting all the books there were in the world, Vatican librarians made use of the agents of the Church in purchasing the volumes to which we were introduced. In that time, in the Renaissance, a century before the invention of the printing press, it was not inconceivable to collect all that was fit to be written. The knowledge and wisdom of the Jews was a part of that treasury of knowledge. And this summer, its librarians proudly and delicately shared with us their treasured remnants of the patrimony of European Jewry.

Volumes of the Talmud, of midrashic homiletic commentaries on the Bible, a manuscript of Rashi's famous Bible commentary, prayer books, an enormous Bible manuscript. All of these

handwritten, carefully preserved for centuries by the librarians of the Roman Catholic Church. I want to share two experiences of this visit, one in the digitalization laboratory, and one in the reading room. The digitalization lab was where the manuscripts met the high tech cameras and computers, where a handwritten document that could be read only by one person at one time in one place is transferred to a digital image and uploaded to the Vatican Library's website where it that can be read by everyone everywhere all at once. That is extraordinary. And while the technicians there deal with pixels and files, they asked us what all those little lines and symbols meant around the words, above and below the letters, in a Hebrew biblical text they were working on. They knew that some of the dots and lines were vowels, but there were other symbols they could not understand.

"Oh, those are the trope!" one of my colleagues explained. "They tell us how to chant the text." He then began to *leyn* it, a beautiful Yiddish word that means both read and sing, to chant as we will hear the Torah and haftara chanted tomorrow morning and afternoon. All of a sudden, the words on the page, the trope marks carefully written centuries ago, jumped off the page into sound that filled the room. The technicians were amazed, their jaws dropping.

"That's what those marks mean?" they exclaimed. Of course, this was not their field, they were technicians, not scholars, so could not be expected to understand what the marks meant on the pages they were so carefully preserving for posterity. And yet suddenly, the ancient words in their medieval hues brought life into the room.

Then there was our last afternoon at the library. Friday afternoon, just a few hours before the sun was to set and we would celebrate Shabbat together at the synagogue of Rome, and then

share a dinner at a kosher restaurant in the ghetto. The hours before that we gathered in a beautiful reading room, surrounded by shelves of books, sitting under vaulted ceilings with frescoed paintings. Laid out for us, on a half dozen desks, were various Hebrew manuscripts, the pride of their holdings. We were given time to explore each book on our own, carefully turn the pages, examining them, reading them. I eagerly made my way to a thick Talmud volume that contained the tractates of Kiddushin and Ketubbot, covering marriage and family law. I was looking for the beginning of Ketubbot, because I studied that section for a demanding oral exam when I entered rabbinical school, some twenty-nine years ago. It was not that easy to find, because Tractate Ketubbot followed Tractate Kiddushin in this volume before me, and unlike the books we are used to using, there was no header at the top, telling me where I was, what page, etc. The text just flowed the way the text in the Torah flows, and you have to feel your way through it, kind of guess how far to go, look for something you recognize, until you find what you are looking for. I wanted to turn the pages quickly, but was mindful of the librarian looking over my shoulder, peering down watching that I didn't turn a page too roughly, endangering the book. Eventually, I found what I was looking for. The way I studied each word all those years ago came back to me, as I looked at the care with which the scribe wrote each word on the page. I thought I could almost hear the sing-song of the Talmudic dialectic jumping off of the book.

And then I heard real singing. On another reading table was a huge book, a *mahzor,* a high holiday prayer book. From Spain, from the early modern period. My colleagues opened it to the Kol Nidrei. The words *kol nidrei* mean "all the vows" as in "All vows, renunciations, bans, oaths, formulas of obligation, pledges, and promises that we vow or promise to ourselves and to God from this Yom Kippur to the next—may it approach us for good—we hereby retract." In this

astoundingly beautiful manuscript, the word *kol,* consisting of only two Hebrew letters, filled an entire page, and understand, the size of these pages was three to four times the size of what you are holding in front of you. Deep black beautifully painted letters surrounded by a drawing of a dragon in blue and gold. The dragon faced the next page across the spine, where the rest of the text was written out, filling the space, black letters painted on white. I wish I could have taken a picture of it, but the librarians would not permit us to take pictures of the books. But I did open my phone and pressed record. Because at that moment, a half dozen rabbis, led by Rabbi Silvina Chemen, started to sing the Kol Nidrei. That was the recording I played into the microphone before we sang the Kol Nidrei here tonight. I struggle to describe for you what that moment felt like. The haunting melody of Kol Nidrei, with the high and low voices, literally filled the room. I could almost see the words flying around, filling the space, as if they were being freed from the confines of the book that preserved them. I saw the Vatican librarians relax their vigilance and start to show emotion, sensing what the books they kept meant to the people to whom they really belonged. As I felt the sound bounce off the acoustics of the room, I looked up at the vaulted ceiling and saw the insignia of the pope, the silver and golden keys, crossed over each other, bound with a red chord and crowned with the papal tiara in gold and white. The dragon protecting the words of the Mahzor began to look up from its book to that crown on the ceiling above, in both conflict and harmony. I thought about the meaning of the Kol Nidrei, especially to Jews in Spain who pretended to be Christian in order to avoid expulsion, who vowed, swore, pledged and promised to be true to the Church that threatened them, and then on Yom Kippur eve, secretly renounced those vows and promises, pledging their true selves to the God of Israel and the traditions of their ancient people. Now we are that ancient people, and there we were

freely singing those words within the innermost sanctuary of that very Church. At the invitation of the pope himself.

A day of atonement is a day of healing. That was a day of atonement at the Vatican. There was nothing more to say after that except bid farewell to our speechless hosts. Then we left the Vatican and went to the synagogue.