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September 13, 2013: Kol Nidre

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Title: Kol Nidre

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9/13/2013—Tonight is Kol Nidre. This is the holiest night of the year and it is the beginning of the Day of Atonement. There was a story today in the Jewish Chronicle about a Kol Nidre address scheduled for the evening service. The address was about forgiveness, how it might be possible to forgive even the most heinous, terrible crime. I thought that this was a strange place to start for the Day of Atonement. After all, traditionally, Yom Kippur is not about forgiveness but about repentance, the Hebrew word teshuvah. Forgiving others seems a strange place in that context. After all, I am the one who needs forgiveness, not someone else. This strange starting point seems related to a general inability of liberal Jews at least take sin seriously. I also have before me the Yom Kippur greeting from Rabbi Michael Lerner, the publisher of Tikkun magazine. Lerner says this about sin. "Sin is not about some ontological evil in us. We are created in God's image, and our fundamental yearning is for a world of love and kindness and generosity. But we have gotten off the path, missed the mark, and so we need this yearly spiritual tuneup and path adjustment so we can come back to our highest selves." I guess my basic feeling is that sin is about some ontological evil in us and that repentance is impossible without that starting point. Karl Barth wrote that man, all men, are "enemies of God." And we must ask God for forgiveness of our sins. That seems to me to be the message of Yom Kippur.