

Kol Nidre in Spain

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In his classic “Behind Many Masks,” Gerald Berreman (1962) explores the notion of a “back region,” that is, the domain of beliefs and behaviors which people try to hide from one another in order to create favorable impressions. His analysis derives from fieldwork in Sirkanda, the Pahari Himalayan village in which Brahmins took extensive measures to keep unorthodox religious practices and dietary regulations from public view. Only through a series of lucky, unexpected circumstances did Berreman become aware of back region comportment.

Berreman’s article is brilliant not only because it dramatically raises ethnographic awareness of basic, ubiquitous principles of social behavior. It also alerts fieldworkers to processes through which the people under study—and people—keep certain aspects of their beliefs and behavior secret. At the same time, as a defensive measure native informants engage openly in acts that belie the back region. In other words, in order to protect their reputation and self-image, those under investigation engage in a self-conscious performance for the ethnographer. They reveal certain aspects of their lives while concealing others.

Near the end of his essay, Berreman analyses his own techniques of impression management during fieldwork in Sirkanda. “My own behavior was tailored for my village audience,” he states (1962:21). Berreman continues,

I carefully and, I think, quite successfully concealed the range of my interests and the intensity of my interest in some matters such as inter-caste relations. I refrained from going where I was not wanted even when I could have gone without being challenged and when I very much wanted to go....In the village, I concealed the extent of my note-taking, doing most of it at night or in private....I concealed such alien practices as my use of toilet paper....I simulated a liking for millet chapaties and the burning pepper and pumpkin mixture which makes up most of the Pahari diet. Even more heroically, I concealed my distaste for the powerful home-distilled liquor, the consumption of which marked every party and celebration. Such dissimulations were aimed at improving rapport....In this behavior a front was maintained in order to sustain a particular definition of my situation; a definition which I thought would increase my access to village back stage life, thereby contributing to the ultimate goal of understanding the lifeways of these people. [1962:21]

In 1962, prior to the days when anthropological reflexivity became fashionable, it was highly courageous of Berreman to make these admissions, particularly in print. As a young graduate student in the mid-1960s, I read Berreman's confession of his own ethnographic impression management and his words affected me deeply.

Since that time, in at least four major field settings, I have encountered numerous examples of informants donning masks of social respectability in order to expose me, the anthropologist, to a sanitized version of their beliefs and behavior. Thanks to Berreman, I have also become aware of my own complex attempts at impression management.

Of these attempts, none has caused me more personal anguish than the need I have felt—rightly or wrongly—to disguise my Jewish ethnicity. I have devoted my career to the study of peoples who, throughout history, have expressed both institutionalized and informal anti-Semitism. The world is a very different place than it was when I began fieldwork in the sixties and seventies. For poor, economically marginal Spanish-speakers with little or no schooling, the word “Jew” in those days bore extreme negative connotations. Jews were untrustworthy money-grubbers, the assassins of their lord Jesus Christ, and responsible for many of the world's ills.

Fighting against such stereotypes, how could I settle among such peoples and expect to obtain information from them? Indeed, I did not even try. Instead, I hid my Jewish identity. Judaism became part of my back region. Much of my behavior in the field, particularly regular attendance at Mass, would belie my ethnic origin, should it ever be unexpectedly revealed. Of course, attendance at Mass was first and foremost an essential source of ethnographic information. But the social by-product of Catholic observance, that is, a public redefinition of my actual identity, was never far from my consciousness. To help me justify and cope with this religious posturing, I kept Kol Nidre in mind.

Kol Nidre is among the oldest and most famous rituals in the Jewish ceremonial calendar. It is celebrated just prior to sundown on Yom Kippur and lasts about fifteen minutes. Kol Nidre is not, properly speaking, a prayer. It is more a sung legal declaration or policy statement, which derives its emotional power from the sacred context in which it takes place—that is, in synagogue on the holiest day of the year. Two men, each embracing a Torah scroll, stand to either side of the cantor. Solemnly, all three face the congregation. The cantor starts by chanting a sort of preamble: “By the authority of the court on high and by the authority of the court below, with divine consent and with the consent of this congregation, we hereby declare that it is permitted to pray with those who have transgressed.” Next, in what many music-lovers consider to be the most hauntingly beautiful melody of all Judaism, the cantor sings:

All vows, obligations, oaths and anathemas...which we may vow, or swear, or pledge, or whereby we may be bound, from this Day of Atonement to the next..., we do repent. May they be deemed absolved, forgiven, annulled, and void, and made of no effect; they shall not bind us or have power over us. The vows shall not be reckoned vows; the obligations shall not be obligatory; nor the oaths be oaths.

So captivating is the Kol Nidre music—readers might recognize it from Max Bruch's justly famous rendition for cello—that most listeners probably ignore the perplexing message. Certainly children fail to understand the lyrics fully. As a child, I heard Kol Nidre each year in the tiny orthodox synagogue adjacent to the six-story apartment building in the Bronx where I grew up. My memory of this ritual parallels that of psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, who, writing in 1931, states, "I remembered the mysterious trembling that possessed the congregation when the cantor began the Kol Nidre. I remembered the visible signs of deep contrition exhibited by all these serious men, and their emotional participation in the text, and how I, child as I was, had been carried away by that irresistible wave of feeling. Yet I was...certainly incapable of understanding the full meaning of the words" (Reik 1958:168).

Even to knowledgeable adults, the Kol Nidre text has always proved enigmatic and disturbing. For one thing, it has been cited repeatedly in anti-Semitic political campaigns. Reik recalls that, in 1920s Vienna, Austrian newspapers publicly posted German translations of Kol Nidre to remind readers that Jews are fundamentally untrustworthy. From the perspective of Jewish believers, however, Kol Nidre offers a possible pardon from unavoidable or inadvertent blasphemy. If you say or do anything to controvert God's wishes, Kol Nidre theoretically absolves you from guilt. Some scholars believe that Kol Nidre is an anachronistic survival from the days of forced conversion in Europe, particularly in Iberia, where for generations thousands of Jews had to pretend to be Christian. The Kol Nidre formula allowed Jews to practice Christianity openly, while retaining their secret Jewish identity.

Kol Nidre still functions in Spain to reconcile conflicting religious identities. My own identity is a case in point. Over the past two decades, as I have sat through countless Catholic Masses in the small towns of Castille and Andalusia, I have relied on Kol Nidre as an excuse for sacrilege. Kneeling in church alongside friends and neighbors, my mind turns first to the preamble: it is legal to pray with transgressors. The problem with that strategy is that I have never been clear about exactly who are the transgressors, myself or the Catholics sharing my pew.

If the preamble provides little consolation, I can resort to the main Kol Nidre text, which declares my vows and obligations to be invalid. Hence, whenever the priest recites the formula, "Christ be with you," and I answer, along with parishioners, "And with your spirit," Kol Nidre supports my secret sentiment: "I don't really mean

it." Kol Nidre, too, presumably absolves me of guilt for barely whispering during Mass the most sacred text in all Judaism—the Sh'ma Yisroel, or "Hear, oh Israel." I am uncertain whether this practice (which at least one other Jewish anthropologist has reported to me) is contrary to Jewish law. Of one thing I am sure: there is no relief from moral responsibility because my attendance at Mass is voluntary, not forced, as it would have been in the era of Ferdinand and Isabel. Whether or not Kol Nidre actually originated in the Spain of the Catholic Kings, it lives on as part of my interior life.

And yet I do not believe in the magical power of prayer. The Sh'ma, Kol Nidre, and other snippets of Jewish ritual which periodically flash across my mind during Mass are mainly Pavlovian reactions to religious stimuli. Religious ritual of any kind evokes in me that small portion of the ceremonial life of my childhood that I still remember. Something similar occurs when a child learns to play the piano, then leaves it for many years, only to return to it periodically as an adult playing over and over the same two or three simple memorized melodies. Kol Nidre in this sense is among my few memorized pieces. It is what I might recall in any ritual context. It is also, clearly, part of what reminds me of my ethno-religious identity, so that I can resist confusing the boundaries between myself and my fieldwork friends and informants.

Being a Jew in the field is no different from being a Jew anywhere else. Ethnic or religious identity is established through a dual process of voluntary and forced separation. In Spain, I have always made it clear that I am not Catholic. To that extent, I have perhaps widened the social distance from friends and informants that already exists by virtue of nationality and native tongue. When my wife, four-month-old daughter, and I settled in the small Castillian village of Becedas in April 1969, one of the first questions anyone asked was, "You are Catholic, aren't you?" Our standard response was, "*No practicamos ninguna religión*," that is, "We do not practice any religion"—a true statement.

This occurred during the Spain of dictator Francisco Franco. The close alliance between him and the Catholic Church operated to perpetuate, largely through educational institutions, an obsessive concern with religious purity. Nonetheless, informants at least pretended that our religion was unimportant to them, as if to excuse any offense they might have committed by asking about it in the first place. I drew pleasure from one neighbor's response in particular. When informed that we practice no religion, he gleefully retorted, "Then you don't have to take communion? What luck!" This incident was my first indication that not being Catholic might actually prove advantageous. At least I might arouse the curiosity, and even sympathy, of the few anti-clerics still alive in Becedas.

In fact, in Becedas, any benefit I might have gained from not being Catholic was negated by my faithful participation at Mass. I attended Mass mainly as a source

of ethnographic information. But attendance served secondarily to assure villagers that I was no infidel. At times it seemed downright impossible to convince people that I was not Catholic; there seemed no other rational explanation for such regular church attendance. Then, too, my wife and I maintained the fiction that my infant daughter was at least baptized. In Franco's Spain, where Church ideology prevailed, it seemed sadistic to withhold baptism—the source of salvation—from an innocent child. I acted to assure that my daughter would receive normal treatment, even if my wife and I might never become fully integrated into parish life.

To distinguish myself by declaring to be non-Catholic was one thing. To assert Jewish identity was another. In Becedas, during research leading to the doctorate, I never revealed my ethno-religious background. During post-doctoral fieldwork in Andalusia, circumstances convinced me that it was prudent to do so. Unfortunately, despite the incipient liberalization that Franco's death brought to the town during the year of our residence, developments proved me wrong. In Monteros, a town of some five thousand inhabitants located in the heart of Andalusian olive-growing territory, my closest friend was a butcher, whom I call Marcos. There was a time near the end of my field stint that my wife and I considered taking one of Marcos's daughters back with us to the United States for a study year abroad. This gesture, we reckoned, would compensate Marcos and his family for the abundant help they had provided me. It would also solidify the close bond that united our two families. It would help all of us to overcome the emotional impact of the impending separation, which we anticipated would leave us empty and dislocated.

Before making a final commitment, however, I had to consider the near certainty that, during her year abroad, the daughter in our care would discover my Jewish identity. It would be better to inform them of this circumstance from the outset. Hence, in preparation for the trip, I revealed to her and her parents that I am a Jew. The casualness with which the family greeted this news was reassuring. It made me question why I had not been more truthful earlier. However, fate was to determine that secrecy in this matter had perhaps been the correct decision, after all.

Prior to settling in Monteros, I had purchased a used car in Málaga. It was what they used to call a "Seiscientos," a Seat 600, for which the ownership papers never arrived, even a full year after cash payment. The car was a bona fide lemon. It functioned so sporadically that it was under repair as much as on the road. Even without official papers, I had hoped to sell it for a decent price, if only to recoup some of my financial loss. Marcos, who owned an old but serviceable van, insisted that I sell him my car. I suspected his motive: it was his way of avoiding separation. It would provide a tangible remnant of my presence long after my departure. Trying to protect Marcos against his own worst impulses, I told him that I would prefer not to sell him a demonstrably unreliable car. I hoped to gain some money from the sale, but I preferred that he not be my victim.

I tried to dissuade Marcos from the purchase by resorting to one of his favorite cautionary aphorisms. "There are no bad horses in Andalusia," he used to say. The reason, he explained, is that no seller is willing to reveal the defects of his horse, lest he be unable to find a buyer at a reasonable price. The seller withholds information from prospective clients in order to unload the undesirable beast as quickly and easily as possible. Likewise, I told Marcos that I would sell the car to someone from outside of Monteros, where buyers were unfamiliar with its extravagantly poor service record. Surely, Marcos could sympathize with that strategy.

But no. As soon as I rejected his request to buy the car, Marcos turned morose. "It is understandable," he said. "It's in your blood. All you people are the same. You are selfish and can't help it. Even if you wanted to sell me the car, your blood won't allow you to. You would rather get more money from someone else than sell it to a friend for a good price." As a defense mechanism, Marcos had resorted to the classic stereotype of the greedy Jew. In Berreman's terms, he has classified me as a member of a particular race, that is, as belonging to a group "based on characteristics regarded as *intrinsic* to the individuals comprising the stratum," grounded in "features regarded by members of the society...as inevitable consequences of birth or ancestry, often described as God-given or genetic" (Berreman 1981:14; italics in the original.) How could I effectively combat such deep-seated prejudice?

At the moment of his response, I hated Marcos. He was a living specter of pre-War fascism. I felt violated, vulnerable, angry. I regretted ever setting foot in Andalusia, befriending Marcos and the people of Monteros, exposing my young, impressionable children to their way of life and thought. With misgivings, I had sent my two daughters to school in this town. There they learned the catechism; they memorized the Hail Mary and Our Father; they trotted gleefully to Mass with widows eager to impress them with the virtues of Catholic ritual and belief. Was Marcos's anti-Semitic outburst my reward? Anxious to disprove his odious accusation that I had no choice but to follow the dictates of my blood, I relented to his request at once. I would sell him my car for exactly the asking price.

This incident, like many others in Spain, served to remind me that anti-Semitic stereotypes arise under the most unexpected circumstances in the field. Often as I have heard it, the term "*perro judío*"—Jewish dog—continues to rankle. So does the ethnic slur "*una judiada*," literally, a Jewishness, which can be roughly translated to mean "treasonous act" or "stab in the back." Whenever these or other ethnic slurs spontaneously emerge from the mouths of beloved friends and informants in the field, I am reminded of how different we really are.

Oddly, for a basically secular Jew like myself, it is in the religious realm that I am most likely to overcome these feelings of separateness. Perhaps by focusing my

scholarship on the topic of popular religion, as I have done, I am able temporarily to transcend the cultural barriers between me and the people I study. It is true that while crossing myself at Mass, marching in procession behind the image of a miraculous saint, attending a wake, or observing a passion play, I am plagued by the fear that in some ill-defined way I am betraying my people. It is on these occasions that the Kol Nidre is likely to come to mind. And yet, in retrospect, I recognize that it is the aesthetic dimension of Catholic ritual that I respond to most. It is the artistry, not the sacred message, that enables me to overcome cultural barriers.

In this sense, too, Kol Nidre serves me well. Ultimately, when I watch a Catholic ritual, what I experience is the exquisite beauty of the Kol Nidre and other orthodox religious music. I make an unconscious association between the ceremony under study, on the one hand, and the mysterious chanting in that little Bronx synagogue, on the other. It was in that synagogue, before I even turned thirteen, that I was pulled inside from time to time to help complete the *minyan*—the quorum required for prayer. It was there, too, that on High Holidays my body seemed to blend indistinguishably with those of the older men, sweaty and smelly from being crowded together, and wrapped in woolen prayer shawls at the height of the New York Autumn heat. These men reminded me of who I was, gave sign of who I would become. All of that was beautiful to me. Whenever I observe a religious ritual, be it in Spain, Mexico, Brazil, or Bali, I enjoy a similar aesthetic experience. It is the Kol Nidres of my childhood that have given me whatever religious sensibility I might have, despite the absence of firm belief. Ultimately, it is that experience which has made it possible for me to pursue my livelihood partly by observing, chronicling, and analyzing Roman Catholic ceremonial life. It is that experience, too, which allows Berreman's "back region" to assert itself, however privately, even as I practice rituals that negate its existence.

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