

The Wisdom of Solomon

by [Peter Glassman](#) (July 2021)



Ada Seated, Alex Katz, 1963

Junior year language major Judith Novaks looked out at the Yeshiva University grounds from her dormitory window. The campus was isolated from the hustling New York City world around it. Trees, grass, foliage, footpaths, and ivy-covered buildings radiated academia, freedom, and safety. She tried not to think of leaving her parents, Massachusetts, Boston University, and her boyfriend Michael Waxman. However, collectively they brought to surface her fear of life itself, when she and her family fled Budapest during the 1956 communist reorganization. Her father was an eminent democratic lawyer, which marked him and his family for death. Life in Israel in the years following was also fraught with persistent threats of attack by Arab countries. She had hoped that life as a US citizen would provide solace and freedom. And it did, with her father a Professor of Law at Brandeis University, until events in Boston brought back visions of her near death experience in Hungary.

“Why don’t we go out for a walk? The campus is beautiful and the September weather is perfect,” Keisha Steiner, her roommate at the dormitory, put her hand on Judith’s shoulder. “I know, I’m always asking for you to go outside. Your self-isolation is not healthy.”

Judith continued to brush her long tan hair. “I’m okay here and in the classroom.” She paused in mid-brushstroke and looked at Keisha. “I might not go to Yom Kippur services Saturday.”

“The Day of Atonement? It’s our most holy Jewish holiday. We all have something to ask God forgiveness for? Yeshiva is predominantly men. You should go to strengthen the female presence. Just go with me and project a commitment to make it a better year.” Keisha arranged her book bag and grabbed a Yeshiva-logo light jacket. “I have a nine o’clock class after my walk. See you later.”

Judith inhaled the fresh air from the half-opened window. Judith whispered, "It is a nice day. I wonder what mom and dad are doing in Waltham. Maybe it is colder in Massachusetts."

She looked at yesterday's newspaper headline and read it aloud, "Racial Unrest. Boston Schools Resist Integration." She yawned and spoke again, "And here I am in Yeshiva. I'm here because I'm Jewish and this should be a safe haven." She looked at the calendar highlighting Yom Kippur. "I wonder what Michael is doing at BU. It is still best I cut ties with the outside. After all, my goal is to work inside the United Nations as an interpreter. I should not be distracted by romance."

She picked up the school flyer summoning all to the Saturday Yom Kippur service. She spoke to the blue and white paper, "Why do I have to go? It's a mental prayer session connecting my thoughts with God. I can do that right here in my room." But some force was calling her. Some power was driving her to go. She traced the words on the flyer with a finger announcing the time for the start of the Service—the start of the most solemn prayer for all Jews—the Kol Nidre.

Saul Kinder felt her presence. He had been tracking the girl's aura from Israel. So many arrived from Hungary and she was so young during the 1956 communist uprising. Her destiny was written and was to be in the US. Only recently did he receive her last name. He and others from the Israeli Rabbinical Committee had tracked Israeli citizens relocating to America looking for those with the name Judith. Rabbi Benjamin Shubow at Yeshiva allowed her Yeshiva admission application data released to him. Kinder had her dormitory address. Judith Novaks roomed with Keisha Steiner, a "modernized" orthodox Jew, but he knew Judith still had her roots in traditional orthodox Judaism. She had been chosen. He had to find her at the Yom Kippur service.

The day was bright and mild. He threw open his window in the guest-house room. Rabbi Shubow selected him to be Cantor at the Kol Nidre service after hearing him sing and from his several Israel references. He spoke to the New York air, "I will be singing the Kol Nidre. It should awaken in her to define her real destiny in America." Kinder took a deep breath and shouted her name, "JUDITH."

Kinder looked at the few people walking to class. They could not hear him. "JUDITH," he announced again. No one acknowledged the summons. He knew only one person would hear him. God had selected Judith Novaks for a direction so important that only in a country as powerful as the US would provide for her quest to be effective.

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Judith was jolted with the loud pronouncement of her name. She looked out her opened window and no one else seemed to hear. Keisha returned at noon.

"Okay roomie, let's grab lunch. You and I have two classes this afternoon." Keisha restocked her book bag for her next subjects.

"Keisha, did you call my name? No, wait...it was a man's deep voice. It was like a summons. You know, like when your mother used to call you in when you were a child. Did you hear him shout for 'Judith?'"

"What do you mean called your name? I was in class. You were here, weren't you?" Keisha handed her a card. "I reserved a seat at the Temple for you. The Rabbi has a Cantor from Israel doing the Kol Nidre at the Yom Kippur service. Maybe you know him from Israel—Saul Kinder?"

Judith sat on her bed. "No, I do not know the name. You should not have made the reservation. I told you I am not going this year."

“Yes, you are. The Rabbi will have a conniption fit. You’re going with me. What kind of friend are you? I don’t want to go alone. They’re having orthodox seating: men and women in separate sections. I couldn’t go with a guy.”

Before she could respond she heard the deep voice again.

“JUDITH”

“Keisha, did you hear that...my name. It is loud and the windows are closed. Didn’t you hear it?”

“No, and if you’re hearing it, you need the Yom Kippur service. You need God’s presence.” Keisha waved her reservation card at Judith. “We’re going, and that’s that.”

Judith was able to focus on her two language classes. The professors at each class opened the sessions with a reminder of the Yom Kippur services with the Israeli guest Cantor singing the Kol Nidre.

Walking back to the dorm, Judith reviewed the highlights of why the Day of Atonement was so important. She could hear her father’s words, “Kol Nidre is our most devout prayer beginning the Yom Kippur Day of connection with God. It begins with an expression of repentance for all unfulfilled vows, oaths, and promises made to Him during the year.”

She pondered her past year and her time at BU. Everything was so beautiful with Michael Waxman and Boston. However, the name of a town outside of Boston had triggered the horrors of how the Hungarian communists had pursued her family. For some reason a warrant singled her out for being in non-compliance with the new laws. She was to die. She was only fifteen. Her father had to kill a man who had grabbed her and raised a knife to her throat. The Hungarian assassin had shouted, “This girl above all others must be slain.”

Right now, however, something had changed. Her thoughts lacked the fear of the remembrance in Boston she had just this morning. A new resolve posed new questions and she whispered, "Why...why do I all of a sudden not shiver with fright? What happened in Boston that was most positive? What am I doing here at Yeshiva University—a predominantly male Jewish orthodox college?"

Judith knew the answers lay at the Yom Kippur Service. She must listen to the Kol Nidre. She must ask forgiveness for leaving Michael Waxman. She must redirect her goals for the next year and thereafter.

Inside her dorm room she heard her name being called again, "JUDITH". She spoke to her image in a mirror. "I must ask God why I hear my name when no one else does."

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It's tradition on high Jewish Holidays to make reservations for a seat at the synagogue or the temple, orthodox or otherwise. Judith and Keisha were ushered to their reserved spots at the mid-section of the women's seating. The ratio of men to women was ten to one.

Kinder sat to the right of Rabbi Shubow near the symbolic Ark which held the scrolled Torah and Talmud—the Books of Hebrew Laws and history. The American flag was at the right of the altar, the Israeli flag to the left. He looked to his far left at the chorus to provide background for his Kol Nidre. Kinder scanned the women's section as the undergraduate and other students filed to their seats. *One of them is Judith.*

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Rabbi Shubow conducted the invocation. He summarized the history and reason for this one day of atonement and confession, "God gives us another year to correct our mistakes

and redefine our hopes and aspirations.” The Rabbi turned to the chorus and motioned to Kinder with his hand. “And now we collectively raise our thoughts with the Kol Nidre which literally means ‘all vows’, for review—those past and those offered for the coming year.”

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Kinder wore a black robe with a large blue and white shawl embroidered with Hebrew letters, like an untied scarf almost reaching the floor on both sides. His white yarmulke was similarly embellished. He looked from the men’s seating to the women’s section. All heads were to be bowed in anticipation of his first words. He swallowed hard as he saw one face not looking down. “It has to be Judith”, he murmured. After a deep breath, Kinder began and sang the opening words, “Kol...Nidre....” He made the two words stretch slow, yet deliberate. The rest of the prayer followed in lilting enunciation.

To all but one worshipper, Cantor Kinder’s deliverance appeared as a monotone chant. It was something they heard each Yom Kippur. It was ritual. For Judith Novaks, however, the words were a deep baritone in mournful but meaningful song. The voice was floating, somber, but with a vibratory, penetrating deliverance. She looked up at Kinder. Her heart beat faster as their eyes met and locked.

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In this opening prayer, Judith reflected on her past year. The Cantor tells that God has intervened in her life. The words tell how to ask how this is so. What has happened that is holy? Why should an ordinary student be the recipient of a worldly connection to God? She could not release her eye contact with Kinder.

As the Kol Nidre underscored the value of life, Judith now understood that she was divinely spared rather than

destined for termination in 1956. And now, on Yom Kippur in 1961, she felt reborn. As the prayer continued to express hope in life through redirection, she realized her departure from Michael and BU was directed by a higher power. And when Kinder, staring and almost pointing at her with his outstretched arms, sang of a sign for the presence of God, she remembered what had happened at the Boston theater. During the movie Exodus, the Israeli flag was raised to the new country's national anthem. She stood up, Michael stood up, and miraculously every person in the theatre stood up. Even her father felt the incident was not just a coincidence, but a sign of something divinely positive. She had not thought it to be a phenomenon directed to her or for her—not until tonight's Kol Nidre.

The prayer ended. Judith watched as Kinder moved to allow the Rabbi to continue the service. She knew she had to speak with the Cantor.

Yom Kippur service ended as solemn as it started. Most worshippers with regrets from the previous year's failings felt absolved. Hope for a better projection for the new year left many with a feeling of serenity. Such was the case with Judith. She waited for the assembly to file out and faced Kinder. He stayed at the altar with their eyes connected.

Judith walked up the three steps and stopped in front of him. Kinder seemed to tower over her. She swallowed and spoke first, "I am . . ."

Kinder quickly interrupted, "You are Judith. Did you hear me call yesterday and today?"

Her eyes widened, "It was you. I was not imagining? No one else could hear."

"My dear Judith, the Lord speaks to the masses in the synagogue and the temple. However, He does reach us everywhere and at all times." He extended his hand to her. "Do you

understand that nothing happens by coincidence? That things perceived as good or bad have meaning for future outcomes?"

She trembled at his touch, "Not until tonight, but I have mixed feelings. What am I to do?"

"You have reached a turning point in your life. Your knowledge of language will serve you well. You were born under the protection and influence of your father. His law profession is like a cloak, which you must now wear." He paused and followed her gaze. "You are still uncomfortable about one thing tonight are you not?"

"Not now, I mean what bothers me concerns the Temple." She looked out at the pews.

Kinder advised, "Close your eyes and tell me what you remember."

"I see the men to my right and the women to the left." She looked back at him. "It is wrong. Women should have an equal place in all things." Suddenly her pulse quickened. Her eyes widened. "Yes, I am no longer a person pursued, but a person pursuing. I am to help bring about change in this country. It will serve to stimulate needed equality throughout the world for all women."

Kinder walked her to the large arched doors. "It is written that you are to help change laws in this land. You will have the 'Wisdom of Solomon.' It will not be easy as both a woman and a Jew. You will, however, have God's and your father's guidance in the world of legal application."

Judith turned around at the doors and stared at the everlasting blue light in the Ark. "I sense someone else will achieve my goal."

"No, Judith, your name will change through marriage. You will be steadfast and rise to be a Supreme Court Justice

in this country. You will use your middle biblical name. Remember this Yom Kippur. It will guide you through some negative times, but always you will have the light of Israel with you.”

She turned away from the altar to face Kinder. He was gone. She called his name, looked inside the temple, and ran outside. She knew she would never see him again.

Judith smiled as she walked to her dormitory and whispered to the warm wind, “I have been Judith for so long. What will it be like being a Ruth?”

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