

Rabbi Andrea Merow, Yom Kippur 5780 – A Four Part Song

(Start at Rabbis lectern)

As many people here know, as the sun set on this day, my sister, parents and I have just gotten up from a truncated *shiva* for our beloved brother Joel, z”l, whose life ended last week after a four and half year courageous fight against cancer. Some have questioned me if I would be able to be here on the bima this day, but those closest to me know that my solace is often found here, leading prayer, song and study, so I would want to be nowhere else. I acutely feel Joel’s absence at this moment because he always stayed with me on the holidays and am grateful to have my sister and cousins with me. Over the last 25 years Joel commented on the ideas of my sermons well before they were written, he read every holiday sermon well before it was presented. This year, he heard the idea. It is traditional in religious circles to dedicate one’s learning, or a sermon, in someone’s memory, so I present to you my thoughts for Yom Kippur eve, *L’zacher nishmat achi Yaakov Hirsh ben Yehuda Leib v’simcha*, in memory of my brother Joel, and in gratitude to his dear partner Tina.

(move to center)

Yom Kippur 5780 – A Four Part Song

When we think about this year’s blockbuster movies we think of Bohemian Rhapsody, about Freddie Mercury, lead singer of the rock band, Queen, Rocket Man about Elton John and Yesterday, about the Beatles. Last year, we saw the 3rd remake of A Star is Born which follows a hard-drinking musician who discovers and falls in love with a young singer. I hope that you saw them on a large screen, with good surround sound so you could feel the power of the song. Song is story told in poetry or prose, with music.

Each film is about the lives of those who created and transmitted meaningful verses and tunes that they are known for. Each film understands the lives of the singers and songwriters AS songs in and of themselves. Their lives were rich and complicated, beautiful and messy. In the films, and in their lives, we see a glimpse of artists who grapple with who they are and who they want to become. For example, Elton John began his career as a shy piano player with a knack for composing. It took him years of soul searching to grow into his identity as a person and as a musician. He struggled with addiction and with becoming a talented musician and public persona; no one would accuse him of being shy today.

Figuring out who we are, and who we will strive to become is the sacred work of these 25 hours.

Who and what will we each strive to be in the coming year?

I am a fan of Krista Tippet’s podcast called “On Being.” Her interviews ask the questions that we ask today: “What does it mean to be human? How do we want to live? Who will we be to each other?”

In response to Tippet's questions, we look to our songs and poetry, our *shirim*, for guidance. In Hebrew, the word "*shir*" means both song and poem, one only knows from context if it is a song or a poem. While there is great value in our law, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that we learn more from story and poetry than from law. It is poetry, song and story that most often pierce our hearts. There are several important songs or poems in the canon of the Jewish People that you may be familiar with including Moses' Song at the Sea, The Song of Deborah, and of course The Song of Songs, a poem about love relationships between two people or between Humans and God.

An important Jewish poem of the 20th century, that you may not have heard of, is called *The Four-Part Song*, written by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. Rav Kook is most well known for being the first chief Ashkenazi rabbi of British Mandate Palestine. In that role he created new law for Jews resettling the Land. He was responsible for creating a religious narrative to understand the work of the early secular Zionists as holy. A child prodigy in Jewish law, his enduring interests were in spirituality and morality. He was a modern mystic.

There are many translations of Rav Kook's poem. As you leave this evening copies of his poem in Hebrew with two English translations will be provided for you to take home.

In the Poem Rav Kook speaks about 4 responsibilities. They are: to care for the self, for the Jewish People, for all of humanity, and for all of Creation.

A Four-Part Song begins...

There is one who sings the song of one's soul. Inside of one's soul one finds everything. There, one experiences one's total spiritual fulfillment.

And there is one who sings the song of the nation or People. One leaves the boundaries of the individual soul, which one finds narrow and not idealistic enough. One yearns for great heights. With a deep love one unites oneself to the entire Jewish people and sings its song.

(One is pained by its sufferings and finds happiness in its dreams. One is immersed in deep thoughts concerning its past and future and tries to understand its inner spiritual nature with love and a wise heart.

And there is one whose soul is so all-encompassing that it expands beyond the limits of the Jewish people. One sings the song of humanity. One's spirit ascends and becomes concerned with the greatness of humankind and its Divine image.

One seeks humanity's ultimate purpose. One looks forward to its ultimate perfection. From this source of life, one draws all of one's thoughts and insights, one's ideals and visions.

And there is one who rises even higher until one unites with the entire world, with all creatures, and with all of existence. And with all of them, one sings.

And then there is one who rises up with all these songs together. Each gives its voice. Each plays its melody. The song of the soul, the song of the People, the song of humanity and the song of all of Creation. And each one harmonizes inside of him or her at every moment and at all times.

(And this simplicity in its fullness rises to become a song of holiness, the song of God, The song of Israel...*Yisrael - Shir El*. It is a single song, a double song, a threefold song, and a fourfold song.)

Remember Krista Tippet's questions from her podcast "On Being.": "What does it mean to be human? How do we want to live? Who will we be to each other?"

In Judaism, being a full person means balancing these four priorities enumerated in Rav Kook's poem. We are each responsible for the wellbeing of the self, the wellbeing of the Jewish People, the wellbeing of ALL of humanity, and the wellbeing of all of God's immense creation. That is quite a bit of responsibility – but for our rabbis, this is what it means to live fully, engaged in this world.

On the High Holidays we have the imagery of scales of justice. What if we could also see those scales as scales of our commitments in the world, and Yom Kippur as a time to examine how we balance those commitments in our lives?

We can each ask:

How do I care for myself, for my body and soul?

How do I care for the Jewish People?

How do I care for all of humanity?

How am I a steward of this beautiful world?

Our lives are not zero-sum games, where we can only care about one issue; we can and do balance multiple priorities. Our difficult task is to strive for balance, where we contribute part of ourselves towards each of these commitments. And our task in this world is to discern which of these priorities or songs would benefit from more of our selves.

Let's start with the first, care of the self, of our bodies and souls. As the ancient Rabbi Hillel teaches, "If I am not for myself, who is?" What are the songs that you will sing for the betterment of your sacred self?

For example, I have a cousin who is an executive at a large corporation, a mom, a wife, a friend. She is very busy. And yet, one of our favorite family activities is to track her running. Several years ago, she started running at 5 am with a group of women, they have now completed several marathons. After the first, we jokingly said, sweetheart, if you need to go somewhere that is 26 miles away, call us, we will give you a ride. Through her commitment to running and fitness, she has become an inspiration to care for the body that God gave her. And through her friendships with her fellow runners, she has also found a way to help nurture her soul.

Others commit to prayer or to meditation.

So, ask yourself: What will you commit to this New Year that will help you to care for your body and your soul?

Rav Kook next speaks of the song we sing for the Jewish people. These are our commitments that show our deep love for the Jewish people, its past, present and future.

In the poem Rav Kook uses the term *u-ma* which can mean nation or People. This very religious man deeply understood that Judaism is not only religion - it is culture, language, land, customs and law.

Our Judaism needs to include vibrant expressions of all of these.

Over the holidays we offer a Traditional service AND our center for Spiritual Well-being offers 5 Alternative Spiritual Experiences that celebrate the holiday and reach people's spirit in a different way through study, meditation and song. It is the sacred task of each generation of Jews to build spiritual options that speak to the diversity of the Jewish People.

Last year both Rabbis created a service for elementary age families. The best part of that festive davvening is the 4 teens who helped to choose the tunes, learned the service, and lead us with *ruach*, voices, and drums. They now lead this service on several Shabbatot throughout the year. They are what a vibrant Jewish future can be.

Jewish culture is alive here. Come learn Israeli music, dance and Hebrew at Beth Sholom.

How will you help to create a joyful, lived, vibrant Judaism – either locally or globally this year?

Rav Kook's 3rd song is the one we sing for ALL of humanity.

This summer while at The Hartman Institute I met Julie, the head trauma nurse at Hadassah Hospital, Ein Karem. Julie made aliya decades ago; she loves Judaism and Israel. Ten years ago she realized that 30% of her patients in acute care are Palestinians from the West Bank / Judaea and Samaria who did not have follow up care when they returned home, so she created a network of nurses in Arab towns, and in Arab countries, who provide follow up care for Julie's patients. Eight years ago she had 17 nurses, last February 190 nurses met for a care conference that Julie ran. Julie is an example of how a person cares deeply about the Jewish People – so much so that she made aliya and lives a traditional Jewish life, and also sings Rav Kook's 3rd song, the song to deeply care for all of humanity.

The same is true closer to home. We at Beth Sholom are blessed to run a food pantry with the Jewish Federation. When the pantry was created at Temple Sholom, many though not all our clients were Jews; here, many, though not all of our clients are immigrants or people who have

been left behind in society. We are delighted for so many reasons that we can serve ALL of God's children here. It is what our tradition calls a *Kiddush HaShem*, an honoring of God's name. The Psalmist says that "God feeds all (Psalm 136), and thus, we feed all. But something else important happens when we give a Catholic Haitian immigrant food. Our clients now know that it is the Synagogue and Jews that care about them – we care about all of God's children, just as Rav Kook instructs. Rabbi Batya Glazer, director of the Jewish Community Relations Council notes that our food pantry is true interfaith work. It is not only food that our clients receive, they build relationships with our volunteers; they build love between peoples. Our volunteers give food and friendship. Because as we know, there but for the grace of God go any of us. Those who volunteer in the pantry sing the song of the Jewish People and the Song of Humanity.

Finally, Rav Kook asks us to consider how we are stewards of the Earth.

It is easy to get stuck on the politics of environmentalism, or any issue for that matter. Scholar Imani Perry asks, "How do we shift what we talk about as political questions to ethical questions, which is really where they belong?" The answer, I think, is to focus on our Jewish values. OUR Jewish value is to be stewards of the earth. We are each responsible to put that value into the world.

Every day that I see our preschoolers I am reminded of the famous story of *Honi haMaegel* who is walking and sees an old person planting a carob tree. Honi asks: "How long will it take for this tree to bear fruit?" "70 years" was the reply. Honi asks, "Why are you planting a tree when it's obvious that you will not live long enough to eat its fruit?" The reply "I was born into a world that was already full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, so too I am planting for my descendants."

What will you proverbially plant this year in God's garden? Or, how will we each change our lifestyles to better appreciate, protect and be stewards of God's earth.

While we may respectfully disagree about a policy, our values as Jews compel us to find ways to act as ethical stewards for this world.

My most important college experience outside of the classroom occurred in my Jewish a cappella group, called Pizmon. (And they are coming here this November). The first rule in a cappella singing is to listen to those around you, to not sing over or under others. Today, we are asked to listen to our heart, so that we can more fully sing a song for ourselves, for the Jewish People, for humanity and for all of creation.

Many songs have four or more parts, some high, some low, some provide the beat. As beautiful as a solo voice can be, there is a richness in hearing how we make harmony. There is a richness in having a community where people care for the world, for humanity, for Judaism and who take care of themselves. There is a richness in our lives when we care about all 4 priorities.

Rav Kook knew that by dedicating some part of our lives to each of these four areas, we will be fully human and more fully Jewish. On this Yom Kippur, I encourage us to incorporate each of Rav Kook's four melodies into our own lives, so this we will create lives with more harmony, by caring for ourselves and for the entire world.

Shiru L'Adoni Shir Hadash – in this new year let us sing a new song, one that balances our multiple commitments in this world.