

My friends,

I'd like to offer some remarks this evening, about our new ark that Jane mentioned earlier. It is always wonderful to have something new for the new year, and we couldn't be happier with how it turned out. We wish we could be with it in person to welcome it in, but for now, pictures will have to do.

As some of you saw last Sunday when Willa Siegel photographed it at the UU, it is a real beauty! (Thank you, Willa!)

It is the work of Alex Gruss, a New York synagogue designer and artist, and it comes to us in part through the generosity and efforts of our beloved Betsy Greer, *zichronah livrachah*, and our Adult Bnai Mitzvah class from last year -- as you can see on the inscription inside -- as well as our larger community.

On the outside are the words Kol Ami. On the inside are the words selected by the congregation: *hashmi-ini et koleich*/ let me hear your voice. These words are part of the love song in the Bible known as the Song of Songs – and the phrase is a play on the word “voice” in our congregational name, Kol Ami/ Voice of My People.

Here's the full verse from Song of Songs: “O my dove, in the cranny of the rocks, hidden by the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet and your face is beautiful.”

Who's talking? It's the male lover in the Song of Songs, speaking to his beloved. But this amazing book, which almost didn't make it into the Bible... for obvious modest impulses -- this book has been understood for the last several thousand years, as a love poem between the people of Israel and God. God here plays the role of the male lover, telling the people, let me hear your voice because your voice is sweet, *ki koleich arev*. In a loving relationship, one feels heard, one feels like one's partner wants to hear one's voice. Or imagine the same words in the voice of a loving grandparent -- *hashmi-ini et koleich*/ oy, bubbeleh, let me hear your voice. What's on your mind?

*Ki koleich arev* / your voice is sweet. But the word *arev*/sweet can have other meanings. It can mean a co-signer or guarantor. There is a saying that *kol Yisrael areivim zeh la-zeh* – all of our people are responsible for one another.

So here, God would be saying to us, Let me hear your voice, because you are a co-signer in this partnership, in this covenant. Your voice matters.

And again, another meaning – *arev* can mean a large crowd. God might be saying, Let me hear *your* voice out of the multitude of voices. Bring your own particular sensibility, your own qualities, your innermost self. You, your voice, your prayers are unique among all the voices in the room.

And we in turn, with this inscription we might be saying the same sort of thing to God. Let me hear Your voice – of all the mixed voices that I hear in my head, what to do, what to think, how to live, let me hear Your voice, God – whatever I mean by God. Let your words resonate inside me.

Now, perhaps this whole idea makes you want to squirm -- imagining a dialogue between us and God as loving partners, engaging in a love song. The notion of God is something many of us have difficulty with, let alone the notion of a *loving* God ... and the notion that we are to love God back may baffle us even more.

Some time a long way back, we Jews ceded the notion of God's love to Christianity, and we've become almost uncomfortable with the notion of loving God. True, as Jane mentioned earlier, we still say, V'Ahavta, you shall love the Lord your God. And *ahavah rabbah ahavtanu*, with great love you have loved us. But if I were to ask you, which religion is based on love – Christianity or Judaism? -- you would probably answer Christianity.

This is a far cry from the way it used to be, when an ancient Roman historian described the Jewish people as a "people intoxicated with their God." We're more like the song from Fiddler on the Roof -- Do You Love Me? Remember how Goldie answers Tevye: For 25 years I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house. We might paraphrase: For 25 hundred years we've prayed to you, died for you, lived for you. For 2500 years, we've argued with you. If that's not love, what is?

And yet, and yet, at the heart of Judaism lies a much more powerful notion of a God who loves not just the Jewish people but all of humanity. Rabbi Shai Held from Mechon Hadar in New York has been teaching about this. Right at the beginning of the Torah -- in the account of the creation of the world -- we read of God creating humanity in God's image. Rabbi Held notes: To be created in the image of God is to receive the gift of a life of infinite worth, of being infinitely

loved by God – not just collectively as a species but individually. Two thousand years ago, Rabbi Akiva commented: Beloved are human beings for they were created in the image of God. And especially beloved are humans for it was made known to us that we were created in the image of God.

God's love, says Rabbi Held, is a gift but also an invitation – for us to become loving too, loving one another, loving the stranger, loving our neighbors, loving all of humanity and all of creation. As Rabbi Held notes, we are created with love, for love.

And that love should be directed toward those whom God particularly loves. The Torah tells us very plainly whom God loves. God loves the *ger*, the stranger -- probably a better translation is not stranger but refugee, someone fleeing hardship and in need of assistance. It was common enough in the Ancient Near East for law codes to protect widows and orphans. Only the Torah expanded that to include the stranger. So if you love God, says the Torah, you must love and take care of whom God loves, and God quite simply loves the stranger, the most vulnerable, the least protected.

The way in which we repay the gift of life – the gift of having been dropped into this crazy, unpredictable, often horrible, bewildering, bewitching, magnificent world – we repay that gift with a deep gratitude that takes nothing for granted. With a sense of gratitude that becomes the north star of how we live, that then overflows into love toward others.

This, my friends, is the work we commit to on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This is the time of year when we look at our lives and the world around us – BUT the troubles of the world cannot, must not stop us from appreciating the Shehecheyanu moment, the gift of being alive to see this day. Over the next 10 days, we are invited to listen to our own voice as we pray, and to the voices of others, and to the quiet voice within. This is the time of the year to see what is blocking our gratitude, our sense of being loved – and to open our hearts, choosing to live with an awareness of the immense and loving gift of our lives. We can become channels for love, rather than vessels or stopped-up dams, reaching out to offer our love and compassion to the strangers in our midst and around the world, fulfilling the love at the heart of our covenant with the divine.

Then, when we find ourselves back in our place of worship and we appear before the ark, and we see the invitation, *Hashmi-ini et koleich*, let Me hear your voice,

we will answer *Hineini!* I'm here, I take nothing for granted, and I bring my whole heart to this love song with God.