

SACRED SOUNDS

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A Small Moment of Holiness in an Uncertain World

By Hazzan Jennie Chabon

Sometimes when the vastness of the pain and injustice in the world feels overwhelming, a small gesture on a local level can be a soothing balm to our troubled souls.

Yesterday was one of those days when I needed something tangible to combat my sense of helplessness against the barrage of bad news on the radio and TV. So, my family and I went to the store and bought delicious food to give away: cookies, dates, fresh bread, and oranges. When we got home, we arranged the food in a basket and walked across the street to our neighbors' house.

Our neighbors are Muslim, and though they have lived in their house for a long time, I have had only one conversation with them several years ago, when the grandmother of their family brought over a plate of lemon cake and candy during the height of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At that time, she offered us the plate with no explanation, just that she wanted to give it to us to enjoy. We all understood why she was there and we were so moved by her gesture. We closed the door praying for peace on our little street, even if it doesn't exist world-wide.

Yesterday, her daughter-in-law opened the door in her hijab, 8 months pregnant and very surprised to see us on her doorstep. I gave her the basket and told her that it was an offering of peace for their family. I could almost not get the words out because of the tears fighting to pour out of my eyes. She put her hand to her heart and introduced herself. She told us about her family. I wished her the traditional Hebrew blessing for a pregnant woman, that the baby should come out *b'sha'ah tovah*, at the good, right, blessed time. She is naming her baby Maya, meaning princess.

The whole interaction lasted just a few minutes, but staring into that woman's eyes and talking with her filled me with hope, and renewed my commitment to continue working for justice and peace. I didn't need to explain that I was moved to bring her food because so many Muslims have been detained at airports across the country this year. We all understood. I see you, I tried to say with my eyes. I see the holy spark of the Divine in you and I pray with all of my heart that peace will come to Jews and Muslims and all people across our country during this divided time.

My prayer is for us all to find small moments of holiness to help us navigate the fear and uncertainty in our world. My neighbors and I have never talked about Israel or Palestine or American politics. We have hardly discussed the weather. But we have looked into each other's eyes with love and compassion and shared some sacred food with one another. I believe that if we ever do have the opportunity to engage in more significant conversations, the memory of sweet dates and powdered cookies will guide our tongues to speak with righteousness and grace.



*Hazzan Jennie Chabon serves
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Wake Up and Smell the Coffee

A High Holyday Message from Cantors Assembly President, Hazzan Alisa Pomerantz-Boro

Recently, the Keurig coffee maker in my office died. Over the years, we had grown quite close. I knew my Keurig well and we had a comfortable and content relationship. I knew exactly when I needed to add water. I knew the best way to order new pods. I kept a variety of coffees, teas, and hot chocolates for anyone who came to meet with me in my office.

On the very day that I sadly unplugged my Keurig, I had a meeting with a member of my shul who comes in regularly to study with me and to seek my counsel. I apologized that I could not offer her a cup of coffee and we proceeded to have a meaningful meeting.

A few days later, this congregant surprised me with a brand new Nespresso machine, an entire tray full of capsules, and a fancy new drawer to hold them! If you are fortunate enough to have experienced a Nespresso, you know that the capsules come in a variety of beautiful jewel tones. From my desk, I can see purple, red, gold, brown and blue. Each one has a different flavor profile. They also have different aromas, notes, and tones.

“Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, or mend a broken bridge, or rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will.”

-Abraham Joshua Heschel

I was thinking that our sanctuary and our liturgy are like coffee makers and we are like the pods or the capsules. Our *machzor* has been waiting for us all year and so has our shul family. We each possess our own flavors and colors. Each one of us comes to shul with different thoughts on our minds. We carry different memories with us. We have different ideas, thoughts and feelings. Our liturgy is fixed. Each one of us is unique. The words are the same, but we have changed.

My intention is not to advertise Nespresso or Keurig. The purpose of this message is to be a wake-up call (coffee pun intended)! During the month of Elul leading up to the High Holydays, we evaluate who we are and what we have done. We question whether we have lived up to our potential. We wonder if we can do better. We ask ourselves what is holding us back. We think about how we can enhance our own spirituality and repair the world.

The High Holydays is a time for personal renewal. I pray that you will be inspired by the ancient words of our liturgy, the inspirational words from our rabbis, the melodies of our people, the voices of our choirs and the sound of the *shofar*. I feel blessed to be part of my caring congregational family. When we come together as a spiritual community, we are inspired. The word inspire comes from the Latin *‘inspirare’*, which means to breathe or blow into. In other words, one who inspires breathes spiritual life into another.

As a Hazzan, I am grateful that my colleagues and I have the opportunity to both inspire you and be inspired by you. We love to lead you in prayer and to bring you together in song. We enjoy preparing our *daveners*. We *kvell* from our students who learn how to chant Torah and Haftarah. We marvel at your enthusiasm when we teach classes in preparation for these days of awe. We are excited when we roll the Torah scrolls and get the silver polished. We long to lift you higher. We relish those moments when you really sing with full hearts. Whether you drink coffee or not, we pray that this High Holyday Season awakens you spiritually.

In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Zichrono Livracha*:

“Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, or mend a broken bridge, or rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will.”

I pray that you and all of your loved ones will be inspired to be a blessing.

Shana Tovah!
Hazzan Alisa Pomerantz-Boro
President, Cantors Assembly

Hazzan Alisa Pomerantz-Boro serves Congregation Beth El in Voorhees, New Jersey.



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Sh'ma Koleinu

By Hazzan Marcia Lane

Every year, when I start to work on my music for the *Yamim Nora'im* – the Days of Awe – I think about these words:

<i>Sh'ma koleinu, Adonai, Eloheinu.</i>	Hear our voice, Adonai our God.
<i>Chus v'racheim aleinu.</i>	Be gracious and compassionate to us.
<i>V'kabeil b'rachamim u'vratzon</i>	And receive, with compassion and with Your will
<i>Et tefila-teinu.</i>	Our prayer.

The words are not specific to the liturgy of the *Yamim Nora'im*. They appear in our *Amidah* every day, three times a day. But on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur they have added significance.

First of all, the actual words are extraordinary. “*Sh'ma*” is the word that calls our attention to statements of primary importance. Our credo, our statement of belief begins with the word “*sh'ma!*” But here, in this prayer, it is God who is enjoined to “Listen! Pay attention!” And what do we ask God’s attention for? “*Koleinu*” – **our voice**. That is, the single, unified voice that rises from all of *Klal Yisrael*, the Congregation of Israel, to present one great, unified prayer. If the prayer meant “voices” it would have used the word “*koloteinu*.” We unite our voices into one great VOICE with which we pray for grace and compassion. And the prayer goes on with text that is only found in the High Holiday version:

<i>Al tashlicheinu b'eit zik-no.</i>	Don't discard us in our old age.
<i>Al ta'az-veinu.</i>	Don't abandon us!

In our youth, in our strength, perhaps our sins sit lightly on our shoulders. But memory has a way of compounding our errors, our stupidities, our transgressions, when we grow older. Each day is more precious, and the thought of losing time, love, or support is more frightening.

On Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur Jews come out of the proverbial woodwork! Why? What is the power of the communal experience? Not, certainly, brevity. Not comfort – so many of us are in more formal, less-comfortable clothes! Fellowship? Perhaps. Certainly it's convenient being able to see and greet so many of our friends and neighbors in one place. But I can't believe that friendship or curiosity explains our visceral need to attend services on these three days. Instead I think we come together in order to join our single, small voices into the one great VOICE. We come together because we desperately need to be heard. I don't know of anyone who feels personally responsible for all of the sins listed in the *viddui* – the confessional: *Ashamnu, bagadnu* – We have sinned, we have transgressed but that, too, is written in the plural. We, as a congregation, take responsibility for each other, and we plead on our own behalf and on behalf of the *kahal* – the community.

There is another, more practical implication in the words of this prayer. It implies that we all actually raise our voices. Although the *hazzan* is the congregation's representative in prayer, we all need to be singing and praying, to the limits of our ability to do so. We cannot simply sit in the sanctuary and witness someone else praying. The quality of our singing voice or the fluency of our Hebrew is irrelevant to this process. We must each raise our voice.

I don't know how many adult Jews actually think much about God, or sin, or prayer. Nonetheless we flock to synagogues all over the world to return to a simpler understanding of ourselves and our relationship with our Maker. We say, out loud and in public, “Perhaps we have not behaved according to our finest, truest selves. Listen to us! Be merciful, even if we don't deserve it! *Sh'ma koleinu!* Hear our voice!”

Hazzan Marcia Lane serves Temple B'nai Abraham in Meriden, Connecticut.



The Power of Our Voices

By Hazzan Sue Knight Deutsch

The room is tiny and clinical, the beautiful view of living trees seen from the window belie the end of life that is occurring in this room. My voice rises with the plaintive sound of *Kol Nidre*, sung only for the 99-year-old woman in this hospital room who has asked to hear it one more time. It is not *Yom Kippur* quite yet, and she may not make it to *Yom Kippur*. As I passed the nurses' station, shofar in hand, I warned them that there would be a loud trumpet sound coming from Room 215. One blast of *Tekiah Gedolah* and my patient smiled and closed her eyes, transported to another place in time. Feeling the presence of others around me, I turned to

see the hospital staff standing at the door watching. A nurse told me that other Jewish patients had heard the sound and asked if I would go to visit them. The *kol d'mama dakah* (the still, small voice) had awakened with the call.

For sixteen years, I was the sole spiritual leader of a synagogue in a Jewish assisted living facility, as well as its chaplain. The synagogue had a closed-circuit TV that was piped into the apartments so that those who could not attend services could still pray with me. When it came to High Holy Days, I made a point to visit each resident who could not come to synagogue to hear the raw sound of the shofar; I blew the shofar for them, and then I went to the local hospitals to do the same. I was taught to blow the shofar by a layperson who also visits the sick. This mitzvah is not reserved for clergy alone; being present for those who need us is a basic Jewish value. Now I have another part-time pulpit, I lead workshops, and I'm an on-call chaplain. I still go the hospitals with my shofar to visit Jewish patients who yearn for that connection. Year after year, one thing is certain: no matter who we are, God listens to our many voices, and the true power of our voices can be heard in who we are and what we do.

Hazzan Sue Knight Deutsch serves Temple Beth El of South Orange County, CA as High Holy Day Cantor, is an on-call chaplain, leads contemplative minyanim, and teaches workshops on her book "The Healing Hand: 5 discussions to have with the dying who are living."

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The Cantors Assembly promotes the profession of the Cantorate, serving our members and their congregations by supporting our colleagues in their roles as vibrant, engaging, vital clergy and musical leaders.

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