

Lift Every Voice and Sing
Yom Kippur 5781
Rabbi David Russo

Just over 9 years ago, I was interviewing for a position here at Anshe Emet.

I remember the first morning that I walked into Anshe Emet.

As part of the interview, I attended morning minyan.

I remember Debby Lewis picking me up from my hotel at 630 in the morning.

And she told me that I was going to lead the service.

I happen to like leading services.

I started to lead.

Everything was going well.

And then I reached the repetition of the Amidah.

As the minyan-goers among you know, there's a long portion where the service leader reads in Hebrew alone, without the congregation following along.

I was nearing a paragraph toward the end which includes the words Shema Koleinu - God, hear our voices.

I finish the previous paragraph.

Matzmiach keren yeshua.

And then, all of a sudden, every voice in the room chimed in:
Shema koleinu Adonai eloheinu!

I was completely caught off guard.

At first I wondered, what did I do wrong?

Did I mess the line up?

Why is everyone correcting me right now?

What did I say?

Then I realized, I had just witnessed a tried and true Anshe Emet custom.

In this community, when the service reaches Shema Koleinu, the entire minyan sings the words together.

Since then, this has become one of my favorite customs at Anshe Emet.

The words Shema Koleinu mean, God, hear our voices!

I love that, at a climactic moment in the service, everyone raises their voices at once.

We are all calling out to God.

Asking as a community, for God to really listen.

This phrase is highlighted in the liturgy for the High Holy Days.

It is one of the peak prayers of the season.

We raise our voices as one.

Shema Koleinu - hear our voices.

We ask God to hear us, and to help us.

Kabel berachamim uvratzon et tefillateinu - accept our prayer willingly and excitedly.

Al ta'azveinu - do not abandon us.

It's a pivotal and powerful moment as our community, and our people, calls out to God together.

The words Shema Koleinu derive from a verse in the Book of Psalms (65), where we read *Shomea tefillah* - that God is the one who listens to prayer.

From the earliest commentaries, our tradition emphasized God listening to us, to all of our prayers simultaneously.

One particularly moving tradition relates:

מלך בשר ודם יכול לשמוע מן שנים ושלשה בני אדם

A human King can hear from two or three people at a time.

ואינו יכול לשמוע מן כולן

But cannot possibly listen to all of the King's subjects.

אבל הקב"ה אינו כן

But God isn't like that.

אלא הכל מתפללים

Instead, everyone prays.

והוא שומע תפלתם כאחד

And God hears all of their prayers as one.

God is unique from a human monarch in two ways:

1. God can listen to more than just a few people at one time.
2. When God listens to everyone, God hears all of our prayers as one.

Even when our prayers are unique, and different, God collects all these prayers, and listens to the beautiful cacophony.

I love this image.

I love that my prayer is going to be different than your prayer.

But God gathers them together in a symphony of prayers.

What a human leader would not be able to handle, in quantity and diversity, is music to God's ears.

When one voice might otherwise may be unheard or neglected, many voices are meant to rise up together.

This is the very essence of Anshe Emet's racial justice team, Koleinu.

Koleinu was formed earlier this year, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and so many other tragedies.

The name was inspired by this liturgy - that we pray that God will hear our voices.

We want to make sure that we truly hear each other's voices - and especially the voices of Jews of Color, whose voices we have not always lifted up and listened to in the past.

We are a group of diverse people coming together - each with our own backgrounds and prayers - but with a unified voice for strengthening our community.

In the face of systemic racism and violence, the only response is to stand together; to raise our voices.

Koleinu is heeding the call.

Harkening back to what I said on Rosh Hashanah about closing down some of the many "tabs" we keep open so that we can focus on just a few priorities - this is a tab that I'm opening this year.

This is where I will put some of my focus.

Through programs and a wide variety of resources, Koleinu seeks to:

- Lift up the voices of Jews of color in our community
- Create communal conversations on race and racial justice - for example, in November, Anshe Emet will

participate in Kol Tzedek, USCJ's conference on racial justice.

- Strengthen connections between members of Anshe Emet Synagogue with predominantly black communities in Chicago

Since its inception earlier this summer, Koleinu has done some amazing work.

Our own Tani Prell led an anti-racism training for our community.

On advice from Koleinu, the AES Book Club read "The Color of Love", a powerful memoir of a Jewish person of color.

And Christie Chiles-Twillie has lent both her voice and her words to the cause, from singing and speaking to our community on Juneteenth Shabbat, to sharing a piece for our High Holy Day Compendium of Kavanot.

With her permission, I'd like to share a part of what she wrote. The full version of the compendium is available on our website.

"On June 19th, I spoke about Cel-Liberation Day, the end of slavery for the African Americans in the United States and I shared the song "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

This beautiful song, with lyrics that are both heartbreaking and powerful, are a reflection of survival and determination to ensure our future generations have fruitful lives.

We pray that they never suffer as we have in the past and we lift our voice to God in prayer to prove our ongoing devotion and love of blessings, no matter how few.

I cannot help but hear the echoes of this song in the prayer Shema Koleinu – when we ask God to hear our collective voices.

This song, and this Jewish verse, bind us together as people of faith who cling to our family, community and our gratitude to Adonai for always being with us.”

This year, as we recite the words of Shema Koleinu, I invite you to chime in.

By taking your place in our community and in the world.

By recognizing your individual potential and sharing it with others.

By listening to and lifting up the voices of those who aren't being heard.

By bringing our voices together when the service reaches its fever pitch- shema koleinu, hear our voices.