**Shma Koleynu - A Prayer & Engagement Project**

*Shma Koleynu-* Hear our voice and our prayer - *Adonai Eloheynu,*

*khus v’rakhem (2x) aleynu* - Have mercy and compassion for us

*v’kabel b’rakhamim, b’rakhamim uv’ratzon et tefillatenu*”- and accept with compassion, and favor our prayer.”

We find these heartfelt words in the daily liturgy of the Amidah, as well as in the Amidah of Yom Kippur. Although it is not yet Yom Kippur, I am lifting them up today because they are relevant from this very first day of 5779 and onwards, as you will soon find out.

With these words, *Shma koleynu,* we ask that our voice and our prayer be heard. But what is our prayer?

Perhaps our prayer is to be seen. To be received. To be known.

Did you know that in this uber-connected world in which we now live, just last year Vivek Murthy, the former surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, who has dealt with [Zika](https://www.cbsnews.com/zika/), [drug and alcohol addiction](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/addiction-is-a-chronic-illness-not-character-flaw-surgeon-general-vivek-murthy/) and [obesity](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/soaring-global-obesity-rates-come-with-hefty-price-tag/) lifted up the epidemic of loneliness in America and its severe consequences.

Here is a quote from a CBS interview with him:

"‘It turns out that loneliness is associated with a reduction in your lifespan **that is as severe as the lifespan you see with smoking 15 cigarettes a day,’** he said. ‘We evolve to be social creatures and thousands of years ago if you were connected to other people you were more likely to have a stable food supply and to be protected from predators. So when you're disconnected, you're in a stress state. When that happens chronically, it can have a profound impact on your health’"

He adds, "’I have met have thousands of people who have friends on Facebook but find few people who really know them. As a society, we have built stronger Wi-Fi connections over time, but our personal connections have deteriorated’” (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/loneliness-epidemic-former-surgeon-general-dr-vivek-murthy/>).

Where in your life are *YOU* really seen and known*?*

Perhaps our prayer is to have a place where we can explore and play in the arenas that most enliven us. To be able to develop and grow in new ways, and to have an outlet for our natural talents and gifts as well as for those that are laying in wait for us to develop them.

Where in your life do you activate your passions and particular skills?

Our prayer is to give. And to be held. To be able to go to that vulnerable place where we aren’t always strong, where we don’t have to hold it all together and do it all, just by ourselves.

Where in your life do you feel that you can let go a little because others will help you to meet your needs?

*Shma koleynu...*

I call a prayer that contains the components I just mentioned a prayer toward actualization and self-realization.

In the Reconstructionist Daily Prayerbook (which you can find in our synagogue library) Rabbi David Teutsch offers the following commentary on this prayer, *Shma Koleynu*:

“We plead that our prayer be accepted. That plea can only have meaning if we listen to it ourselves. If we are to find grace in *teshuvah,* then it is we who must turn our hearts. If we are to be forgiven, we must forgive ourselves. **If our families or our communities need changing, then it is we who must change them.** Thus we cry out to the divine within. We call upon the strength, the insight, the spiritual vision hidden in our hearts: hear our voice that we may give meaning to our words” (*Kol HaNeshama Limot Hol,* p. 116).

*Shma koleynu…*

So what is your prayer? What do you want changed? What are you looking for?

For you’re here right now to get something. Perhaps an infusion, a deep connection, an inspiration to be a Jew out there in the world. Or perhaps you aren’t quite sure why you came here today, but it just came together and so here you are. (4)

According to Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, “Our fulfillment, the whole or integrated self, is our goal and our destiny.”

(<https://kaplancenter.org/blog/personality-and-whole-self>)

(Check out KaplanCenter.org for information and quotes about Mordechai Kaplan’s ideas about belonging, behaving and believing, and much more.)

So how close do we get to actualizing “our goal and our destiny”? Where have we found, or not yet found, outlets for our self-realization?

That is the purpose of this High Holyday season- not to make ourselves feel “bad” or “good,” but to ensure that we are allocating some of our life energy to that question.

On August 8, 1940 (as Kaplan himself was in the summer preparation period for Rosh HaShannah) he wrote in his diary:

“... [the attainment of our moral and spiritual growth] is deemed ***the acme of human achievement*** and ***that which gives worth to society and its institutions***.” (<https://kaplancenter.org/blog/personality-and-whole-self>)

In other words, “the worth of [a society and] an institution may be measured by the degree to which it embodies modalities of achieving the fulfilled or the complete self.”

Where in society do YOU find modalities for achieving a fulfilled, complete self?

What institutions help YOU get there?

Which brings us to shine light on our relationship with the society within which we live and the ‘institution’ within which we are gathering: Oseh Shalom.

What can we say about the worth of our society? What can we say about the worth of Oseh Shalom?

Keep in mind- who we are as Oseh Shalom impacts the potential of our greater society. So let us not underestimate the power that we could have through and with Oseh Shalom.

But before we really go there, a quiz:

According to the rabbis, our ancestors were enslaved in Egypt for 200-400 years. They easily could have continued that way, so what was the catalyst for the chain of events that led to the Exodus from slavery and ultimately to Mount Sinai and our *brit/* covenant with God?

a) Joseph being sold into slavery?

b) Pharoah deciding to kill all the Jewish baby boys?

c) Moses going back and forth with Pharoah, and the 10 plagues?

d) Our ancient ancestors getting so fed up with slavery that they called out to God: Listen to our voices! *Shma Koleynu!*

Please vote-

The answer is “d”! Calling out to God to listen to us. Hear us. Know us…and our deep misery in slavery.

And so on our journey to “human achievement” as Kaplan says, we need to open our mouths to call out to You, God, so that we can also hear.

*Shma Koleynu,* Hear our Voices, *Adonai Eloheynu…*

So opening our mouths to call out to God was the ball that we got rolling and that eventually took us to Sinai and a sacred *brit/* covenant with God.

In the words of Rabbi Sid Schwartz, “**A covenant is a contract of the heart.** It is far more than an exchange of money for a range of goods and services. **The starting point for the spiritual history of the Jewish people begins at Mt. Sinai when our ancestors entered into a *brit*, a covenant with God**. That covenant involved many obligations for our people, obligations that we were not always prepared to live up to. **But there is an implicit promise that if we live up to our part of the covenant, we are rewarded with a life of blessing” (**http://www.rabbisid.org/it-is-called-covenantal-community/).

How does that relate back to us right here?

In coming here today, you each had a choice, and you continue to have choices. That is what the High Holydays remind us: we have choices over our destiny. And our destiny unfolds according to what we choose and how we engage at each moment.

And so when you come here, to Oseh Shalom, you again have a choice: do you want this to be like the grocery story where you buy your staples? Do you want this to be like the gas station where you get filled up? Do you want this to be like your gym, where you drop in or sign up for your yoga class, or to access the pool or weightroom?

Do you want to be pulled in myriad directions, responding to the overwhelming demands that others place on you, or do you want to be strategic in terms of how you spend your time, sitting in the driver’s seat and engaging with life based on what is deeply meaningful *for you*?

Perhaps you’re a parent of young children, and long to give your children a strong grounding in Judaism, and yet feel somewhat alone and overwhelmed by this responsibility.

Perhaps your children are older, but still at home, and you’re in the midst of running them around to their various activities, trying to find some time for yourself, and still hoping to give them that grounding in Judaism that you imagined could be possible, but seeing the days, weeks, and years pass every so rapidly.

Perhaps you don’t have children at home, and you’re trying to figure out how to spend your free time- whether you’re retired, or simply have hours at the end of the day and on the weekends. What can *you uniquely* do to make a difference in this world?

Perhaps you are in your elder years, wondering about the meaning of your life and how- in this world where we are so often valued by what we are ***do***ing- *you* bring value to this world when what you *can* do feels increasingly limited.

And at whatever age and stage we find ourselves, perhaps you- or someone in your family- has failing health and you need to step in and take responsibility.

Where can we find inspiration and guidance as Jews in all that we face in this world?

Where can we feel powerful in this world, and where do we feel supported in our passions and struggles?

It can’t happen overnight, but if you bring your whole self, Oseh Shalom can become this “go to” place for you, where you can become an integrated, whole self.

This fall we will be kicking off the 2-3 month-long Shma Koleynu Engagement Campaign to make sure that Oseh Shalom *is* the place where *you* can lift up *your* voice and make *this* world and *this* community the one of your dreams.

What is this Shma Koleynu Engagement Project?

It starts with deep relationship building between the synagogue and you, so that we can activate you in the *fullness* of who you are and the passions that *you* hold in your heart.

This fall, expect an invitation to be part of a small group conversation. And if you get a phone call from a phone number that you don’t recognize,

1. be sure to listen to the voice message.
2. Promptly call back.
3. Commit to showing up at one of the Shma Koleynu meetings so that you can
   1. build new relationships with others here, regardless of how long you’ve been connected with Oseh, and
   2. so that you can also make sure that your passions and interests help guide what takes place here at Oseh Shalom and in the wider world.

**What this is not:**

Lest your mind has entered “criticism mode,” and you find yourself saying, “Excuse me, new Rabbi here- we have already done things like this with focus groups in the past number of years. Didn’t anyone tell you?”

Let me clarify what this is *not.*

**This is not about**

1. **Focus groups where you give us information and then the synagogue leadership provides new services to you**
2. **Selling the congregation to you**
3. **Feeling forced to become “best buddies” with everyone or even adding one more person as a FB “friend”**

The High Holydays ask us to engage in life with radical honesty, for our lives do make a difference, and our time and energy are too precious to waste.

Rabbi Josh and I don’t look at this community as a collective of observers, clients or customers. Yet you *can* choose to be a customer or a client, looking at the menu of options and taking what you want.

Or you can be a leader- with the time and energy that you have, you can engage as an owner of this community. Together, we can shape the future of Oseh Shalom in such a way that will make your grandchildren want to come here, not just you.

*Shma koleynu, Adonai Eloheynu…*

Hear our voices, Source of All that exists!  
In calling out to you, may we - through Oseh Shalom - move ourselves toward a place of further integration, wholeness and self-actualization, which - as Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan reminds us - is our destiny!

Shannah Tovah.