

Tonight is viewed as one of our most holy moments. The haunting melody of Kol Nidre rings in our ears. We know that this time tomorrow the gates will have closed, the book sealed. At this pivotal moment in our year, what do we most want to hear?

I know the words I most want to hear at this time are just three simple words: “you are loved.”

These three simple words mean the world to so many of us. Being loved, knowing that someone cares, is as important to our well being as individuals as is oxygen, water, and food. Our knowledge that someone cares is essential to our mental and physical well being.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro wrote in a poem, that “we are loved by an unending love.” That love is the love of God. The same love that our prayers Ahavat Olam and Ahavah Rabbah speak of, right before we recite the words of Shema. “Hear O, Israel, Adonai is your God, Adona is One.” These are words of love. God’s words of love and commitment to our ancestors and to us.

Being loved, being needed, being wanted is at the core of our existence and yet we also need more. We need action in our lives, we need to make and do. So many of you are craftspeople - woodworking, quilting, drawing, painting, writing. Though I do not consider myself a craftsperson, I admire the skills greatly. A favorite pastime in normal times for me is travel, and with travel comes museums and the chance to see something I have never seen before or learn something I did not know before.

While thinking on this topic of love, I read Dr. Robert Alter's commentary on the first words of Deuteronomy 6:5, the words which begin our *V'ahavta* prayer.

And you shall love the LORD your God. It is a new emphasis of Deuteronomy to add to the traditional fear of the LORD the emotion of love, perhaps in an effort to deepen psychologically the conception of monotheism. Ibn Ezra [a Biblical commentator from the 12th century] links this injunction with the immediately preceding declaration of God's oneness [the *Shema*]: "Since we have no other god but only Him alone, you have to love Him, for we have no other god." In this view, the lack of rivals obliges us to make this divine suitor the object of our affection....¹

The command to love God often is a stumbling block for those who wish to draw closer to our tradition. No one wants to be commanded to feel one way or another. I find Alter's commentary, supported by Ibn Ezra, to be one which can help us understand what our ancestors were thinking and feeling when these words were spoken to them for the first time. Our love of God is commanded as a way for us to connect and embrace the concept of One God in a time and place where the norm was many gods. The love God has for us, through the commandments and our sacred texts, is a part of us loving God.

Our need to be loved is an aspect of our humanity, the same as our need to experience, to learn, to grow - all of which must be guided by our values. A structure for being guided by our values, titled the four "C's", I learned from Rabbi Karyn Kedar, a colleague, scholar, author, and poet.

¹ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (Norton, New York, 2019), pg. 641.

The four “C’s” are the essence of what I want to share with you this evening. An expression of how loving ourselves is connected to loving our world.

The first C is for Conviction. Conviction is a personal red line. My red line is different from your red line, but each is important. Conviction guides when and where we choose to speak up, when and where we choose to act. It is often hard to see others acting, others showing where their personal red line is when we do not feel the same drive or call to act. Though it is hard, we must sit with ourselves and be comfortable with ourselves, love ourselves enough to say this is my red line, or it is not.

The second C is for Courage. Courage to act when we must act, courage to remain quiet when it is not time to act. Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz writes that though courage is not a traditional middah, character trait, in the Jewish tradition of mussar, that courage actually underlies every other character trait. Courage in and of itself is a spiritual practice.² Courage is an act of love.

The third C is for Clarity. Clarity of speech. How to say it, whatever it is, in the exact right way. We are often told that it is not our place to speak, to stay in our own lane. But if our red line is crossed, we must have the Conviction to know we must act, the Courage to act, and the Clarity to express ourselves plainly. The clarity to say what is clear in our hearts with our words.

Finally, the fourth C is for Compassion. Compassion not only for others but for yourself.

Compassion for yourself because when we have the conviction, courage and clarity we often find ourselves standing in a tornado. We only need to think of those individuals who we look up to,

² <https://www.jewishideas.org/article/jewish-imperative-cultivate-courage>

who have been the voice of change: Martin Luther King, Jr., Susanne B. Anthony, Gandhi, Marsha P. Johnson, Nelson Mandela, Malala Youfazai, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg...the list goes on and on. Compassion for our world, compassion for ourselves. The root of compassion? Love.

Rabbi Kedar shared this structure of action, the four C's, in a teaching session and I immediately thought of all that is happening in our country and our world. Where do each of us stand, where is our conviction, courage and clarity? Where is our compassion for ourselves?

About a month ago a hate group, as defined by the Southern Poverty Law Center, came to Kalamazoo. They call themselves the Proud Boys. We had advance notice that they were coming, though the details were sketchy. I was in contact with our partners at ISAAC, and in contact with Reverend Nathan Dennison who planned a vigil for victims of domestic terror for the same day as the planned demonstration from the Proud Boys. I was asked if I would be present at either event, and I said no. It was difficult for me to acknowledge that I felt my presence would put me in danger, and would likely not help those gathered to mourn victims of domestic terror. My presence at a counter protest would also likely be unwelcomed. My red line, my conviction, was to rather speak up about the presence of a hate group demonstrating in Kalamazoo, to hold our elected officials and police accountable for keeping citizens safe, to use this pulpit for the betterment of our entire community. It is never easy to sit on the sidelines when one wants change. Yet I learned from a friend that there is a role for each person in making change - some march, some cook, some pursue legal avenues, some babysit, some use their

platforms, like pulpits, to spread the message widely. We must each find our place in movements for change, in movements to make our world a world of love.

It takes courage for me to stand here, on this pulpit, on Yom Kippur, our day of atonement and say the following words: We must do better as a community. Clarity here is important - every single day each one of us must acknowledge the privilege we have, and act for the betterment of all people. Our country was built by slaves, our society continues to benefit from racism. We can and must do better, for the future of our country depends upon it.

I know that these words are difficult to hear. Some will tell me that I am being political, to stop talking about politics. Clarity is important. I am speaking of ethical monotheism, I am speaking from our Jewish tradition. Our tradition which says we must love God, and that we are all made in God's image. Our tradition which teaches us that the entire world was made for us, AND that we are but dust and ashes. Our tradition which teaches us to treat the stranger as a native for we were strangers in the land of Egypt, AND that God made a *brit*, covenant, with our ancestors. Our tradition which teaches us that the earth was given to us to provide for us AND that we are responsible for it. We must have the conviction, courage, clarity and compassion for ourselves and for our fellow citizens of our shared planet as we try, fail, stumble, and try again to improve our world.

This Yom Kippur, let us forgive ourselves for our failings, let us forgive those who have done us wrong, and let us commit to working together to build a better world. Each one of us is a small but vital part of the puzzle. I hope you will be my partners in this vital work for change. May our work together bring about the change we wish to see in our country and in our world.

With the words of Rabbi Menachem Creditor we sing together:

Olam chesed yibaneh...yai dai dai

Olam chesed yibaneh...yai dai dai

Olam chesed yibaneh...yai dai dai

Olam chesed yibaneh...yai dai dai

I will build this world from love...yai dai dai

And you must build this world from love...yai dai dai

And if we build this world from love...yai dai dai

Then God will build this world from love...yai dai dai

May you be well over the fast.

May you be inscribed for a good year in the Book of Life.