

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

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Devar Torah for Kol Nidrei

For We Are Your people, and You are our God

5779



Dr. Ron Wolfson opens his book, [The Spirituality of Welcoming. How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community](#), with the following true anecdote:

"I will never forget the time I walked into the sanctuary of a large Conservative congregation...I had been invited as scholar-in-residence to speak on Friday evening. After I gave my talk, the rabbi emeritus, a long-time acquaintance, said, "Ron, tomorrow morning would you like to sit with me?" I readily agreed.

The next morning, I showed up promptly at 8:55 a.m., five minutes before the start of the Shabbat morning service. As I looked around the enormous sanctuary, there were about eight people in the room: the shammas (ritual director), four or five regulars, who, I assume always come on time, and three guests of that day's Bat Mitzvah who had taken the invitation time seriously!

The service began, but no rabbi emeritus was in sight. I took a seat on the aisle one row from the back of the sanctuary, hoping to see the rabbi when he came in. About ten minutes later, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked up and saw a sweet o/d man looking at me with the saddest eyes. "You know, I wouldn't tell you that you are sitting in my seat." He then pointed to an empty seat directly behind me. "And I would sit there," he continued, "but, if I sat there, where would my friend

who always sits there sit?" I looked around; there were 785 empty seats, but this man needed the seat I was *in!*¹

Although such a story would never happen at Hillcrest Jewish Center, I am sure we can all relate to it. "You are sitting in my seat," is a statement not unique to synagogues, but also heard in churches, theaters, and airplanes.

I was thinking about the origin of the statement "You are sitting in my seat." People do buy seats for the High Holy Days, for example, but not for Shabbat. In addition, nobody takes the seat home after using it (I hope I am not giving you any ideas). However, people feel ownership over that seat. The other day, I surprised myself telling Silvia, while pointing to a wooden chair in the Ferkauf Chapel that looked like any other, "this is my seat!"

I would like to suggest that the statement "this is my seat" is not related to the word "seat" in the statement, but to the word "my;" as in "my seat."

As a matter of fact, the word "my" is a word I use very often throughout the day: "my phone," "my office," "my assistant," "my son," "my daughter," "my wife," "my parents," "my brother," "my friends," "my co-workers," "my body," "my doctor," "my shul," "my congregants," and the list goes on...

While everybody will agree that I don't own "my office," or "my friends," or "my doctor," the ownership expression is part of our daily conversation.

I wish I owned a soccer team. I don't. Nevertheless, I refer to Boca Juniors as "my" team, America is "my" country, the Jewish people are "my" people, and what I really believe in, are "my" values.

It is not unusual for rabbis to go to rabbinic conferences and hear other rabbis ask them: who is "your" cantor? Do you get along with "your" president?

Now, not only is there generally no ill intention in such expressions, but indeed, they are actually an expression of love and endearment. Last week, Cantor Fuchs,

¹ Wolfson, Ron: The Spirituality of Welcoming. How to Transform Your Congregation into a Sacred Community. *Jewish Lights.* 2006

"my cantor," proud of something I had said, pointed to me and said to those present at services: this is "my rabbi!"

At this point I will stop giving you examples because I believe the point I am trying to convey is clear: In our daily conversation, we all feel very comfortable with the word "my", and its associated feeling of ownership. Its use, followed by almost any possible existing noun, comes naturally to us.

Based on the above I would like to suggest a revolutionary, even sacrilegious idea: that we "own" God.

I would like to suggest that we should own God the same way, and with the same passion, that we own our seats in shul, our soccer team, our children and spouses, our rabbis and cantors, our country and our values.

In 1959 Herman Wouk published a book that summarizes many key aspects of Judaism and is intended for both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences. The title of his award winning book is [This is My God](#).

We all know how to feel passion. Indeed, we are passionate people who talk passionately about politics and about sports, about our children and about our projects, about Israel and about our politicians, about President Trump and about the Kardashians. We all know what passion is.

However, at some time in our youth, maybe in Hebrew School, or during our teen years, someone told us, mistakenly, that passion and God go together only in Christian movies.

The truth is that bringing passion into our relationship with God is at the core of our Jewish belief system.

The High Holy Days' liturgy is very solemn. The name *Days of Awe* in itself points to this fact. One of the few exceptions is a beautiful liturgical medieval poem, recited in all the five services of Yom Kippur, before the vidui, before the confession of sins. The name of this liturgical composition is *Ki Anu Amecha*, and it

is, in my humble opinion, the highlight of my Yom Kippur experience, an ultimate expression of mutual ownership between God and us.

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| וְאַתָּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, | אָנּוּ עַמֶּךָ |
| וְאַתָּה אָבִינוּ. | אָנּוּ בְנֶיךָ |
| וְאַתָּה אֲדוֹנֵנוּ, | אָנּוּ עַבְדֶּיךָ |
| וְאַתָּה חֶלְקֵנוּ. | אָנּוּ קְהֵלְךָ |
| וְאַתָּה גּוֹרְלָנוּ, | אָנּוּ נַחְלָתְךָ |
| וְאַתָּה רוּעֵנוּ. | אָנּוּ צֹאנֶךָ |
| וְאַתָּה נוֹטְרָנוּ, | אָנּוּ כֹרֶמְךָ |
| וְאַתָּה יוֹצְרָנוּ. | אָנּוּ פְעֻלָּתְךָ |
| וְאַתָּה דוֹדְנוּ, | אָנּוּ רַעֲיָתְךָ |
| וְאַתָּה קְרוֹבָנוּ. | אָנּוּ סִגְלָתְךָ |
| וְאַתָּה מְלַכְנוּ, | אָנּוּ עַמֶּךָ, |
| וְאַתָּה מְאַמְרָנוּ. | אָנּוּ מְאַמְרֶךָ |

*We are Your people, and You are our God;
We are Your children, and You are our parent.
We are Your servants, and You are our master;
We are Your congregation, and You are our portion.
We are Your heritage, and You are our destiny;
We are Your flock, and You are our shepherd
We are Your vineyard, and You are our guardian;
We are Your creatures, and You are our creator.
We are Your spouse, and You are our beloved;
We are Your cherished ones, and You are our closest friend;
We are Your people, and You are our sovereign;*

The origin of this liturgical composition is the very well-known verse from the Song of Songs: *I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine* (Song of Songs 6: 3), or sometimes translated as *I belong to my beloved and He belongs to me*. In this poem we emphasize our relatedness to God.

I would like to share with you my first experience as a rabbi in America, exactly 20 years ago. It was on a Friday night, the first Friday night I officiated as a rabbi at

Beth Israel Synagogue, in Roanoke, Virginia. I remember that I spoke and while I don't remember exactly what I spoke about, I know that I spoke about God. After services one of the old time members in the Shul approached me and told me: "I have been a member of Beth Israel Synagogue for more than 15 years, and this is the first time that a rabbi has spoken about God."

I knew what she was talking about because I grew up the same way. My rabbis growing up spoke about antisemitism, about Israel, about social justice, about human rights, about family, and education, but rarely about God.

Organized religion in America is, according to all surveys, in decline. I would like to suggest that one of the main reasons is that religious leaders stopped talking about God with passion, and we forgot to add the word "my" before the word God.

It is time to for us to start "owning" God and to bring Him back into the conversation, not as a word in the prayer book or as an academic subject for an adult education program, but as a living presence in our lives.

Let's try it...

For we are Your people, and You are our God; we are Your children and You are our father; we are Your congregation, and You are our portion; we are Your heritage, and You are our destiny; we are Yours and You are ours.

Our God and God of our ancestors, my God: As we enter the holiest day in the Jewish calendar we ask You to enter into our lives. More than ever we need to feel Your presence, we need to own our relationship with You. צְמָאָה לִי בַּנֶּשֶׁמָי My soul thirsts for you, Hashem! We are indeed thirsty for connectedness and meaning, and only true passion and love will quench our thirst.

Bring us closer to You, Hashem, for we are Your people, and You are our God, and bless each of us and our loved ones with health and sustenance, with joy and peace, with a good and sweet year.