

YOM KIPPUR 5779
NEILAH – THE OPENING AND CLOSING OF GATES
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In 1998, a film appeared entitled *Sliding Doors*. As the film opens, Helen, played by Gwyneth Paltrow, has just been fired from her job and is heading for the subway to make her way home. She reaches the platform just as the doors of the train begin sliding shut. The movie traces two parallel lives: one in which Helen misses the train, and the other in which she manages to squeeze between the doors into the subway car. Each scenario determines a different fate: whether she begins a new successful career, finds her true love, and even whether she lives or dies. In one scenario she is confronted with the infidelity of her boyfriend when she arrives home, is comforted by her friend, gets her long hair cut and dyed blonde, and falls in love with another man. In the other scenario she misses the train and by the time she arrives home he is showered and dressed. Eventually, she suspects things and the plot takes a different road.

The meaning explicit in the movie is that seemingly insignificant circumstances, decisions or simple timing, can determine whether opportunities are gained or lost. Whether the doors of the train are open and you can get on the subway car or they shut in your face and you are delayed ten or fifteen minutes can make a huge difference in your life and in the life of others.

This is the message of Neilah, the last service of Yom Kippur, as the long day comes to an end. Instead of sliding doors we get the opening and closing of gates. That the gates actually close at the end on Yom Kippur is not dependent upon us. It is dependent upon the setting of the sun, the ending of the day, and the closing of the Day of Atonement. But, the metaphor of the opening and the closing of the gates is a very significant one, not only for Neilah itself, but for our lives and the way we live them.

As you know, when we reach the point of Neilah we are exhausted, both physically and emotionally, and, yet, at the very same time, we are energized to know that we have a few moments more to offer our prayers, open our hearts, and express our innermost wishes to G-d for a year of health, happiness, and personal fulfillment, for a year of peace and harmony for all. When the Amidah is repeated by the Hazzan, the Ark is opened and this time it is not closed until we reach the very end of its repetition. It is, by far, the longest time that the Ark is open throughout the course of our entire ritual year.

There was a discussion in the Talmud concerning as to what does Neilah really mean. The Mishnah refers to Neilah as *Neilat Shearim*, “The closing of the gates.” The Jerusalem Talmud speaks of it as *Neilat Shaare Shamayim* “the closing of the gates of heaven.” Other sources explain it as *Neilat Shaare Hekhal*, “The closing of the gates of the Temple.” The gates of heaven are referred to in Jacob’s dream at a place called Beit El. When Jacob wakes from his dream of a ladder on which angels are ascending and descending, he concludes, “Surely this is none other than the abode of G-d and that is the gateway to heaven.” G-d is as present for Jacob at that time as I hope He has been for us during the entire day of Yom Kippur as we open our hearts and souls to the Almighty. Now, at the end of the day the gates of heaven begin to close as we offer our last prayers. More realistically the reference in the Mishnah may simply be to

the fact that the gates of the Temple which have been open on Yom Kippur are preparing to close at sunset.

However we may understand it from the aspect of the text, the metaphor is clear. Gates are opened and they are shut. But, what does it mean to be open? What does it mean to be shut? What does it mean symbolically that the gates to the Ark remain open for the entire service of Neilah and then are abruptly closed, as we complete our Yom Kippur prayers? Is there a special solemnity to the Day of Atonement that cannot be achieved at any other time during the year of which Neilah is the ultimate apex?

The Neilah service is a very special one. It is unique in so many ways. We change the liturgy in asking G-d not merely to inscribe us in the Book of Living but to seal us in that Book; its Nusach, the liturgical chant, is totally unique and not used any other time during the ritual year; the metaphors used in our prayers do not occur anywhere else in our prayer books; and we find ourselves at a level that we cannot and will not attain throughout the rest of the year. Neilah derives from the same root as *na'al*, "shoe." At the Burning Bush G-d commands Moses to remove his shoes, "for the place on which you stand is holy ground." Perhaps at Neilah we stand on holy ground aware of G-d's presence surrounding us just as Moses sensed it at the Burning Bush.

Neilah, according to Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, evokes the story and parable "Before the Law" from *The Trial* by Franz Kafka. In Kafka's narrative, a man accused of wrongdoing seeks admittance to the Law in order to clear himself, but he is unable to do so as a guard bars him from entering. Perhaps he can enter later, the guard suggests, but it will not be easy: the Law has many gates, each more powerful than the other. So, although the gate is open, the man remains outside waiting for permission to enter. Over the course of many years, he never receives that permission. Over time, his eyesight grows weak, and he no longer has the strength to wait much longer or much time to live. At the end of his life the man wonders why no one else has tried to enter the gate. The guard explains, "No one else can ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it."

Kafka's parable is very difficult to understand as is much of his work. There have been many attempts at interpreting the parable, but one thing is clear, the gates are not always open for us. There are sometimes gatekeepers who want to keep us out and we despair of ever entering them. We are often presented with *Neilat Shearim*, gates closing. Sometimes, like Helen in the movie, we can squeeze through those gates, and other times, they simply close in our face and we have to wait for others to open them, for we are unable to do so ourselves.

What does the opening and closing of gates symbolize? Does Neilah represent the opening of our hearts, our minds, our souls, just before the gates close for one last time on Yom Kippur? Does it symbolize new opportunities, new challenges, and new anxieties? Does the opening of a gate afford us new possibilities for growth, moving on in our personal and professional lives, and in our spiritual experiences? Are we ready and willing to embrace the potential of new experiences? When gates open are we ready to enter them and take the chance that we will find something worthwhile on the other side? Or, like the presence of the gatekeeper in Kafka's story, are there doubts, fears and anxieties which keep us from walking through those gates as we

are frightened by what may await us? And what does the closing of the gates symbolize for us? Is it the end of a journey, an episode, a chapter? Does it mean that the gates are totally closed to us for all time? Or, does it mean that we need to find a new gate, a new opening, a new opportunity?

Alexander Graham Bell wrote: “When one door closes another door opens, but we so often look so long and regretfully upon the closed door, that we do not see the ones which open for us.” Do we mourn what was in the past and seem stymied from entering new gates? Do we have faith in ourselves and in our abilities to cope with new experiences or are we so entrenched in our past ways that entering a new gate simply frightens us? When one door closes, another one opens, when one gate closes shut, a new gate gives us an opportunity to walk through it and move on. Our issue is are we able and willing to do so.

I think of this imagery and these metaphors this year on a personal, professional, and communal basis. As you know, this will be my last Yom Kippur as your senior Rabbi and the gate will be closing on my career in the pulpit after almost 43 years of serving congregations in the Chicago area. When one gate closes another one opens, at least I hope so. What will that new gate mean for me and my family? Will I be able to walk through it with confidence in myself and in my abilities to meet future challenges and surmount them? One the one hand, there is a great deal of personal excitement as Bryna and I look toward the future and to spending more time both in the State of Israel and with our immediate family. One the other hand, to be quite candid, after so many years of being in the pulpit, especially here at Beth El, there is anxiety in meeting the new challenges of retirement, as well as experiencing a new geographic location. Will new gates open and will I be able to take advantage of them in order to make life as personally fulfilling for me as it has been in being your Rabbi?

Retirement, I believe, does not mean being sent out to pasture. I will never lose the title of Rabbi. However, to be very honest, I am very much looking forward to being called Abba and Saba, as often as being called your Rabbi. I look forward to the personal and professional challenges that await me in the future. Yet, like many of you, the closing of a gate brings with it anxieties and concerns. Hopefully, it can also bring new opportunities and challenges that excite me and add to my life’s purpose and meaning. The future is never clear, nothing is promised, challenges await, but I am excited to assume them. Dorothy Cantor in her book *What do you Want to do When You Grow Up? – Starting the Next Chapter of Your Life* writes that “an iron-clad commitment to one course of action can mean missed opportunities. Growing up always involves a bit of improvisation, shaping and reshaping a life as we go along, and the willingness to refocus and redefine wants and needs. Perhaps, you will decide it’s time to move on once again. After all, growing up is never done.” I pray that I will be able to follow her recommendation and continue to grow in mind, body, and spirit and continue to make a contribution to my family and my community.

As the gate closes on 5778 and as we have begun 5779 what awaits the Jewish world and the world at-large. We don’t have a crystal ball but we know with much certainty, that there are many challenges ahead. In this country, in the State of Israel, and throughout the globe, I have a feeling this will be a very difficult year. We have concerns about our country’s leadership and its direction. This applies to both sides of the aisle. We are today a very divided country. The

civil dialogue I pleaded for last Rosh Hashana has not come about. In fact, I believe the atmosphere has worsened. Look at the many issues that confront us: immigration, the economy, civil rights, judicial appointments, education, foreign policy, as just some examples. There is only division of opinions and very little unity in our population. Instead of *e pluribus unum*, we live in silos, and the melting pot, if it ever existed, is now in the rear view mirror, a dream of the past.

What will this new year bring as we move towards midterm elections, with world events both in dangerous spots around the globe, and in some areas we cannot even imagine? I must admit I am not tremendously optimistic that we will be able to face all the challenges that await us in the coming year and I ask myself what kind of America am I leaving? What kind of country will I visit in the years to come? As an immigrant myself to the United States I have been a proud citizen and have admired the American spirit, its democracy, and the accomplishments of those who live in this country. Will I be able to feel the same way in the future? Will I continue to be proud of being an American, one who has chosen to be a citizen of this country?

In Israel there are many dangers on the horizon. We can be proud of what Israel and its citizens have achieved after only 70 years of statehood. It is truly an amazing country. It is a vibrant democracy with a flourishing society and a mind-boggling number of advances in technology, science and medicine to her credit. Yet, we are concerned about the northern border in Syria and Lebanon and the southern border in Gaza. Will this be a peaceful year or one of skirmishes, battles, or G-d forbid, wars? Israeli society, itself, is very divided concerning its future and its democracy. The issues of the past few months have produced fissures as never before. There is real concern about religious pluralism and the fact that a possible theocracy is slowly being created in Israel. What will this year bring? Into what type of society will Bryna and I be stepping? Will we need to worry about bomb shelters and safe rooms? Do we need to be concerned about our own personal safety and that of our family? What kind of democracy will Israel be? What kind of religious life will we find in the State of Israel? There are many different synagogues which I can chose to attend near our apartment but Rabbinic officiations which have been the staple of my life as I have served in the pulpit are coming to an end as I will not be able to officiate at weddings or conversions which will be accepted by the state.

And we have seen in the last year there is a real divide between the Jewish communities in Israel and in the Diaspora. In June, the American Jewish Committee published surveys of Israeli and American Jews which portray sharp differences of opinion between the two largest Jewish communities on President Trump, U.S.-Israel relations, and Israel's security and peace process policies. On Jewish communal issues, such as Jewish religious equality in Israel, the surveys confirm fissures between American Jews and Israelis, though, at the same time, the data shows a degree of commonality in opinions about the vitality of both the Diaspora and the State of Israel and their significance for the future of the Jewish people.

In commenting on the survey, Lawrence Grossman, the AJC's director of publications, writes that any declaration of Jewish unity today would come up against the hard facts detailed in these surveys. He writes that: "The divide it reveals between the world's two largest Jewish communities raises serious questions about the future viability of the relationship and challenges Jewish leaders to devise ways to keep the communities from drifting even further apart." As one

who has lived in both worlds, a product of Diaspora Jewry but also I hope, in the near future, a citizen of the State of Israel, as one who is sensitive to the issues, can I make a meaningful contribution which will ameliorate the situation, or will I be a bystander and watch as we pull ourselves apart and threaten our very existence both in Israel and the Diaspora? Only time will tell.

In a larger Jewish world there are real concerns about anti-Semitism both on the left and on the right. Jewish schools, synagogues and community centers have been vandalized and Jewish shop owners terrorized in Western Europe. Jews in the streets in Brussels and Stockholm have been attacked for wearing kippot in public. Jews in Paris have been murdered and military police threaten Jewish schools in Caracas. In Germany an angry mob led by hundreds of neo-Nazis were joined by over 8,000 ordinary citizens spouting anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic rhetoric. In England a leader of a major political party voices anti-Semitic and anti-Israel statements without remorse.

Here the U.S., according to a recent ADL report, there has been an 89% increase in reported anti-Semitic incidents on campuses in the past year. Another study reported a nearly 60% increase in harassment, vandalism and assault of Jews and Jewish institutions in 2017. ADL also reports that there are more people running for public office in this country who express anti-Semitic views than ever before.

When our “March of the Living” group was present in the place where the Warsaw Ghetto used to stand, we heard the story of Chaim Kaplan, a Warsaw Hebrew teacher and author who wrote a journal from September 1, 1938, until August, 1942 when he knew the end was near. On October 14, 1940, when word reached them about the ghetto being closed off, he wrote: “There is a rumor that in one of the congregations, the prayer leader came in and dressed himself in a kittel and prepared to lead his poor and impoverished people in the Neilah service when a boy from his congregation broke in with the news about the ghetto. At once, the Jew dispensed with Neilah, took of his kittel and went back to his seat. There was no point in praying when the Gates of Mercy were locked.” We can only hope that G-d will keep the Gates of Mercy open and allow for a good year for the Jewish people.

However, we have a role to play as well. Will we have the strength, courage, wisdom and insight to assume the challenges before us and surmount them? A year from now, with G-d’s blessing, will we be able to say that we have made our contribution to our local community, our nation, the Jewish people, and the world at-large? So much is uncertain. Uncertainty brings anxiety, trepidation and fear. Hopefully, we will be able to walk through the new gate, the New Year, and meet whatever awaits us on the other side. If our doubts and fears overwhelms us, then the gatekeeper, like in Kafka’s story, will keep us stymied from moving forward.

I would like to suggest we gain some hope, faith, and confidence in ourselves and our abilities by looking at the beginning and the end of the Neilah service. One of the pleasures of coming to Beth El over 30 years ago was reciting for the first time a Piyyut written by Rabbi Moshe ibn Ezra in the 11th century entitled *El Nora Alilah* which we sing just before the repetition of the Amidah for Neilah. The poem which translates as “G-d whose deeds are awesome” brings with it a hopeful theme just as we prepare to open the gates and offer our last prayers on Yom Kippur.

This poem is not usually recited in the Ashkenaic rite, but is found in the Sephardic one. I am very pleased that we added it here at Beth El and that we sing it each year as we prepare to open the Ark. It contains within it all the themes of Yom Kippur. We ask G-d for forgiveness, to grant us length of days, to bring tidings of redemption, to show compassion to us, all at the hour of the closing of the gates. It is a text full of hope for the future as it concludes: “May we, your children, celebrate with joy and gladness, length of days merited at the time of Neilah, in this closing hour.” But the best part of the poem is the upbeat melody that has been chosen from the Spanish-Portugese tradition. Even as we come near the closing of the gates, the closing of the heavenly portals, the ending of the day, not knowing what the next day will bring, never mind the next year, our mood is upbeat, hopeful, with faith in G-d and in ourselves. Even before the gates open and remain so, we are confident that G-d will forgive us for our transgressions, that it will be a good year for us, our families and our community. Yom Kippur is not a time of mourning, it is considered a white fast, a time of hopeful longing for better times.

And after it is all done how do we end Yom Kippur? With an affirmation of faith. The words of the *Shema Yisrael*, the *Barukh Shem*, and *Adonai Hu Ha'Elohim* phrases. On the one hand, these are the words of the deathbed confessional, and on the other, a symbol of faith in G-d, in our people, and in our future. We stand united as we recite these phrases expressing them with hope and faith, awaiting that final Shofar blast which will culminate this long day with the musical note of *Tekiah Gedolah*. The gates have now been shut, the day is now over. When we rush from the synagogue to our homes for family time and a meal, we do so with a sense of hope and confidence in the future, feeling strengthened by our prayers and our community. We are hopeful that our prayers have been accepted, that the year to come, even with all its question marks, will be one in which we will respond appropriately to all our challenges. We are not filled with dread, we are filled with self-confidence and hope. As the phrase in the Neilah service says: “Keep open the gate for us, at the time of closing of the gate, for the day is coming to an end. The day will come to an end, soon, the sun will set, let us come into Your gates.” This is our hope and prayer that the gates will remain open and that they will always allow us to enter through them to a future filled with promise and fulfillment.

And the very final thing we say at the conclusion of this day of ritual and fasting, of prayer and beating our breasts, is *LeShanah HaBa BeYerushalayim* – “Next Year in Jerusalem.” I have repeated this phrase every year at the end of Yom Kippur and at the conclusion of the Passover Seder for as long as I can remember. But for me, for Bryna, this year, we pray, it is a reality. Next year in Jerusalem the gates will open for us with new challenges and new opportunities as we pray that Jerusalem may be a peaceful city, as its name implies, and remain the eternal capital of the State of Israel.

In the movie *Sliding Doors* a very few seconds dictates whether Helen will have one reality or another. If she can walk through those doors there is one future ahead of her, if she misses those doors being open and stands before them closing in her face, it is a totally different reality. I pray that the doors may be open for us at all times, that a gate, even if it may close at one moment, may allow another gate to open, and that the new gate may be filled with peace, harmony and tranquility for the world, strength and unity for the Jewish people, and blessings for all of us today and every day.