

Gates, Locked and Unlocked *Shabbat Shuvah*

*Open for us the gates, in the hour of closing the gates,
for the day is passing away.
The day is turning away, the sun is returning to set.
May we now come into your gates.
We pray, gentle God, we pray.
Forgive us, we pray, pardon us, we pray,
have compassion on us, we pray.
Let us atone now, we pray; help us overcome our wrongs, we pray.*

(Neilah liturgy, *Kol Haneshamah*)

From the Midrash:

Rabbi Eliezer said: Since the destruction of the Temple, the gates of prayer are locked, for it is written, *Also when I cry out, God shuts out my prayer* (Lamentations 3:8). Yet though the gates of prayer are locked, the gates of tears are not, for it is written, *Hear my prayer, O YHVH, and give ear unto my cry, hold not your peace at my tears* (Psalms 39:13)...Rav Hisda said: All gates are locked, except the gates through which pass the cries of those suffering wrongs, for it is written, *Behold the YHVH stood by a wall of wrongs, and in his hand were the wrongs* (Amos 7:7). (Talmud, Bava Metzia 59a)

Another interpretation: *"For what great nation is there that has a God so close at hand as YHVH our God whenever we call?"* (Deut. 4:7): Rabbi Hanina bar Papa asked Rav Shmuel bar Nahman: What is the meaning of the verse, *But as for me, let my prayers be unto You in an acceptable time* (Psalms 69:14)?

He replied: The gates of prayer are sometimes open and sometimes closed, but the gates of *teshuvah* always remain open.

He then asked him: Whence [do you know this]?

[Rav Shmuel replied:] Because it is written, *You answered us in righteousness with wondrous works, O God of our salvation; You [who are] the confidence of all the ends of the earth, and of the far distant seas* (Psalms 65: 6). Just as the mikvah is sometimes open and sometimes closed, so too are the gates of prayer sometimes open and sometimes closed; but as the sea ever remains open, so is the hand of God ever open to receive the one who does *teshuvah*. (Devarim Rabbah 2:12)

On Opening the Gate (*Shmuel Reiner*)

Were someone to ask me to create a symbol for the Days of Awe, I would vacillate between **scales**, which are, of course, the zodiac sign of Tishrei, and **a gate**. My final choice would be **the gate**. And then I would ponder which kind of gate; a gate with doors open and light streaming through, or perhaps a gate with no doors at all...The climax of the Days of Awe is Yom Kippur, and its pinnacle is reached with day's end, during the *Neila* [closing of the gates] service. (*continued...*)

In contrast to other festivals, in which the intensity wanes as the day progresses, on Yom Kippur, as I experience it, the day's most powerful moment is when the sun hangs low in the sky, and through the treetops the sensation of fleeting time becomes stronger.

...At the conclusion of Elul and Tishrei, the days of Awe, we face the gate closing before our eyes. Perhaps our great hopes will remain on the other side of the gate. We have one final hope: **Let the gate not close for us.** This is the powerful experience of Neila.

The experience of *teshuva*, repentance, is to pass through the gate, to leave behind a world and to enter a new world.

This passage is not easy, for two main reasons:

The first, separations are not easy. Often we are enamored of our weaknesses; we are aware that they are problematic, but even so our failings find favor in our eyes and it is so difficult to part with them.

The second reason is that the new world, too, is not at all simple. Beyond the gate lies another difficulty, the fear of the new. The questions "What will be?" and "How will it be?" are frightening thoughts.

Going in, or out? (Rabbi Richard Hirsh)

I think we've got the Neila gates metaphor-imagery backward. It's not that the gates of *teshuva* are closing and we need to get inside before it's too late; it's that the gates are closing and we have one last chance to get out...to escape the usual routines/closed-in-spaces/habits/stories before we spend (waste) another year of opportunities.

Open Closed Open (Yehudah Amichai)

Open closed open. Before we are born, everything is open
in the universe without us. For as long as we live, everything is closed
within us. And when we die, everything is open again.
Open closed open. That's all we are.

- **What are the "gates" of *teshuvah*? What is closing, and what is opening, during these Days of Awe?**