

P'tah Lanu Sha'ar - Gates: Opened and Closed; Locked and Unlocked
Selichot 2021

*Open for us the gates of righteousness;
Then shall we enter, praising the Eternal One.
We knock at Your gates, merciful God;
Please do not turn us away empty-handed.*

*Open for us the gates
Even as the gates are being closed.
The sun is low, the hour is late,
Let us come into the gates at last.*

(Neilah liturgy, Machzor Ruach Chadashah - Liberal Judaism)

*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)

Milton Steinberg

In our lives many gates swing shut. As we begin life, it spreads before us like a corridor with many doors. But as we walk down this corridor the doors close behind us, one by one, year by year.

Remember the unopened doors. Enter them before they close. We live only once. Do we not want to live fully? The corridor of life stretches before us. Each one of us must walk down its stately length. The gates do not stand open forever: as we walk down the corridor they shut behind us. And at the end they are all closed, except the one dark door that leads to the ultimate chamber of God.

This then is the meaning of Neilah; the call to the doors which we never open. Before it is too late, let us open the gates that lead to truth, enter the door of beauty, go through the doors of goodness. Let us open the gates to those things in life which abide eternally — before the gates swing shut, before the doors are closed.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that, rather than building great physical edifices, Judaism created sanctuaries and palaces in time. When we light the shabbat or holiday candles we are opening the gates to these great dwellings of the spirit.

Tonight, as we mark Selichot, we speak of opening the gates of the new year, an image that speaks of expansiveness and possibility. In our tradition, these gates have many names: gates of repentance, gates of compassion, gates of righteousness, gates of heaven. All these names speak of opening gates within, the barriers inside ourselves to truth and change, compassion and a sense of eternity.

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.

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? (Reconstructionist Prayerbook)

I think we've got the Neila gates metaphor-imagery backward. It's not that the gates of yeshiva 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.

Marge Piercy: "Coming Up On September"

*The New Year is a great door that stands across the evening
and Yom Kippur is the second door.
Between them are song and silence,
stone and clay pot
to be filled from within myself.*

Jewish mystical tradition

This time between the gates is one of an exceptional connection between the material and spiritual worlds: The Zohar teaches that [this period is] when the world we live in —the world of creation, inevitably a world of brokenness and disconnection—unites with the world above...where all is One.”

The gates are also metaphors for the markers of a human lifespan from birth to death. On Rosh Hashanah we celebrate the creation of everything, ourselves included. On Yom Kippur we rehearse death—a physical removal from the world which includes abstention from food, sex, bathing, and other attentions to our bodies as well as dressing in white, reminiscent of both shrouds and the clarity of angels. This ten-day cycle is meant to remind us of both the transience and significance of our individual lives, encouraging us to make the most of our time between the gates of beginning and end.

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.

Whatever their names or origin, the gates are always spoken of in the plural. They are always multiple, more than one path is available to us if we wish to enter. The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder Hasidism, taught that an opened heart is the key which unlocks any spiritual gateway. Tonight we stand again at these widening gates, on the threshold of a splendid sanctuary in time. May the gates represent an opening of our hearts and minds to the extraordinary possibility of life renewed.

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