

## *Open the Gates*

Yom Kippur Taos 2021

Open for us the gates, in the hour of the closing of 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.

I did not understand the urgency of “Open for us the gates, at the hour of the closing of the gates” of Neilah the final liturgy at the closing moments of Yom Kippur until now, witnessing the last moments of the American military presence in Afghanistan. For three days in late August, I sat mesmerized, as I watched the gates close before my very eyes.

It is a scene of utter chaos. Thousands upon thousands besiege the gates of Kabul airport, pleading, pounding, praying - Open the Gates! Time is running short. Open the gates, they cry. We have been promised salvation for our American cooperation. They waive passports, pictures, pieces of paper, anything that they think can get them through. I watch in horror as women lift up their babies to the Marines on the top of the wall of barbed wire, perhaps never to see their children again. A gate opens, and the crowd surges forward. The lucky ones get through, while others are trampled to death, left lying in the open sewers of hell in the 100 degree heat. Desperate cries, via cell phones and social media, go out and around the world, and almost 100,000 lucky ones are helped onto planes, while those left on the tarmac cling to the propellers and a few even fall to their death. Then, the unspeakable happens. Thirteen American soldiers, among those who have been sent to provide order for this American final exit, are themselves blown to smithereens by opposing forces of darkness. P'tach lanu shaar! Open the Gates! Save us from certain death! the panicked crowd cries. A last planeload trickles through, and then, on August 31, 2021, the gates of Kabul clang shut. Now only the *extremely* lucky will find their way, through dangerous mountain passageways, or bribes or connections of connections.

The word Neilah, given to our last service on Yom Kippur, means to “linol” as in to fasten down one’s sandal (na’aliyim) to secure, to lock down, to fasten shut. This is the moment of Afghanistan’s lockdown. A strange greenish figure appears on my TV screen at midnight, Kabul time, August

31. It is the last soldier to fly from Afghanistan, ending a twenty year American engagement. The gates have closed and thousands of supplicants are left, facing uncertainty and perhaps even death.

Watching intently, I can not help but see the faces of European Jews, clutching their belongings, trying to escape the onslaught of the Holocaust. The lucky ones, those with relatives in America willing to answer a desperate plea, or those with enough money to bribe an official or forge a passport might get through, but by September 1939, the gates were closing, and the world turned a deaf ear to cries for help. P'tach lanu Shaar! Open for us the gates! The gates of the ghetto closed from the inside, as Jews were locked into the holding pens that would eventually lead to their death. Upon arrival at the death camps, there were "selectia" lines, where people were summarily chosen for life or death with a flick of a palm. We hear stories of survivors who made it out of the Nazi killing fields with ingenuity or plain luck, but for six million Jews, there was only silence. The gates were closed, nailed shut, locked as souls ascended in smoke.

In the immediate aftermath of World war II, Jewish refugees circled the globe, looking for shelter, clutching "pecklach" with shreds of belongings, looking for safe haven. Boats filled with refugees were denied access to America, and some survivors drowned. Others ran the lines of British defense and were able to enter Palestine. Many did make it to America, helped by Jewish institutions such as HIAS, an institution that helped settle refugees from Europe in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many of our grandparents and great grandparents came to America escaping anti-Semitism in Russia and Poland from 1900-1920, until the gates of open immigration into America drew closed. Our families arrived looking much like those streaming towards the airport of Kabul last month, clutching children and a few belongs, eager to face life in an unknown land.

In Leviticus (19:33-4) we are commanded:

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be as one of your citizens, you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God.

As Jews, we know what it means to be a stranger in a strange land. We are now the gatekeepers of Shaarei tzeddek, the Gates of Righteous Action , and must be the ones helping refugees seeking asylum from brutality. Those of us who have passed through the gates, and flourished into a new life, must now hold the door open for others.

Here in Taos we will have a unique opportunity as gate keepers in the months ahead. A consortium of religious groups will be helping to bring a few Afghani families to New Mexico. I hope that the Taos Jewish Center will become a major sponsor. Together with other Taos religious communities, we will help to open the gates of charity, righteousness and justice, providing food, shelter and an opportunity for others to embrace a new life here in America. Stay tuned.

It is said that when we sound the shofar one hundred times on Rosh Hashanah, we open the gates between heaven and earth for ten Holy Days of Repentance. At Neilah, at the hour of the closing of the gates, we implore:

Open for us the gates, in the hour of the closing of 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.

In the rabbinic imagination, fifty gates stand between heaven and earth, and each one of these gates demands teshuva, an examination of our deeds in the years that have passed. Therefore, We now pray as community:

Open for us all, in every place: the gates of enlightenment, the gates of blessing, the gates of gladness, of delight, of splendor, of confession, of self- worth, of humanity, of purity , of salvation, of loving-kindness, of mercy, of new hope, of forgiveness, of assistance, of providing, of tzeddkah, of community, of renewal, of shalom.

Open for us the gates of Teshuvah. Open the gates, at the hour of the closing of the gates. P'Tach lanu shaar. Open the gates.

Second century rabbis, reconstructing Judaism after the fall of the Second Temple, saw the gates of Holy Temple and the gates of the

surrounding walls as the primary metaphor for these Days of Teshuva, Gates of return. The remnant of those 2000 year old walls still stand, and we pass through gates- the Zion Gate, the Lions gate, and even the Jaffa and Damascus Gates, as we make our way through the Old City of Jerusalem to seek a spiritual connection at that ancient holy wall.

Pitchu Li, Shaarei Tzedek, Open for me the Gates of Righeousness. Li means or “to or for me”, or simply “ME”. *Pitchu li* can therefore also be read as Open ME. Open me, God, I cry. Help me to open myself in the places where I am closed. Pitchu LI. It’s an inside job.

Last night we spoke of the Gate of Tears, and the need to open from the inside where hurt and pain lie frozen in our hearts. In the words of the Zohar: (184)

*I saw one gate, taller than all the other gates.  
I asked about it, they told me:  
Through this gate pass all in pain, and all those in tears, and all those in search of return.*

Pitchu Li. Open me up, dear God, help me to open the gates locked tight within me; the gate of lovingkindness, gate of forgiveness, the gate of surrender.

Pitchu LI. Open me. Each one of us enters through gates that are uniquely our own. Some of us give charity easily, but never forgive members of our family. Others must struggle to pry open the gate of loving kindness, but flow easily through the gate of faith and longing. Each of us has our own specific pathway of return. We pray together as community, but each one of us must open our own particular gates. On this Yom Kippur, I ask: What is the gate within me that is still locked, the gate that is preventing me from living my life to the fullest?

In the words of the great Une Taneh Tokef prayer :  
*It is You who shall open the book of remembrance, but its contents shall speak for themselves  
For it bears the imprint of us all, which our deeds and our lives have inscribed.*

The deeds of my life stand before me, piled up at the Gate of Teshuva. I have walked away from that gate so many times. “Why bring that up

now? Let's just live in the moment. What is past is past." And so the gate remains locked, as I bury my guilt and resentment deep inside of my heart. I will have to drag it through yet another year.

*On Rosh Hashanah all is written and revealed  
And on Yom Kippur, the course of every life is sealed.*

I may be inscribed for another year of life, but if the inner gates remain locked? What then will be the quality of that life? Will I live surrounded by locked gates, in a prison of my own making? Pitchu li, Open me before the course of my life is sealed into an endless round of blame and despair.

In our liturgy, we are told that *'Etzem Hayom M'Kaper*" the essence of the day of Yom Kippur will bring atonement. This is true, but only if we have done the work of unlocking the gates from within. Only then does *'etzem hayom m'kaper*, does the power of this day of Yom Kippur tip the scales in our favor. The gates are closed with a double lock, and we must turn the key from the inside before God can then turn the key from the outside, opening the final Gate of Atonement.

P'Tach lanu Shaar, we plead. Open the gates for us, and seal us in the Book of Life for another year. We now come to the final questions of the Neilah liturgy : Ma Anu? What are we? Ma Chayenu? What is our life? Ma hasdenu? What is our loving kindness? Ma tzadkenu? What is our justice? These are the same as last year's questions, but I still do not feel ready for this year's final exam. A year of battling a plague that has not yet been conquered has made me keenly aware that this could be the last Yom Kippur of my life.

But it took watching surging crowd pounding the gates of the Kabul airport to bring the urgency of this Yom Kippur Day home. To quote Rabbi Alan Lew one more time:

"This is real, and We are Completely Unprepared."

The departing American troops were completely unprepared for a last-minute evacuation of Afghanistan. The citizens fleeing the Taliban were completely unprepared for a chaotic exit at the closing gates. I was completely unprepared for the frustration and anger that I experienced as a world away, I watched the scene play out before my very eyes.

And so, I have a vision on this Yom Kippur of our souls crowding the gates in heaven at the last moments of Neilah, chaos everywhere as we wave pieces of paper proving our good deeds, which surely must tip the scales in our favor, and begging to be helped over by those angels standing guard.

Avinu Malkenu, we cry, We do not have all the proper papers, our deeds are lacking, *but'selach lanu, forgive us, Machal lanu, have mercy on us, kaper lanu*, bring us atonement. Seal us into the Book of Life one more time.

I now understand that the gates can close, and multitudes can be left behind. There really *is* a deadline.

And then I hear it, the sound of the shofar wailing in the distance. It grows louder and louder as the gates begin to close at the final moments of Yom Kippur. Tekiah! Wake up ! Shevarim- we are broken, broken , broken but not abandoned. Teruah- The nine short blasts that call us to action. We CAN open the gates of Justice. We can open the Gates of compassion, the gates of strength and health and healing and repentance. It is not too late.

With great urgency and unusually complete conviction, in the final moments we pray:

Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohenu Adonai Echad  
Baruch shem kavod Malchuto l"olam va'ed  
Adonai Hu Haeleohim

Seven times we repeat God's name as the gates open one last time, and the final blast of the shofar lifts us all on the sound of hope, soaring past locked gates into a New Year.

Next year, may we all be together, B'Yachad, sealed once more into the Book of Life.