

Closing, Opening, Closing: A Neilah Reflection

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THE GATES, IT IS SAID, ARE CLOSING. NIGHT IS NEAR.

But we are far from finished. Although we have been in prayer and reflection for much of the past twenty-four hours, and come to the end of Yom Kippur hungry and tired, Neilah with its gentle urgency calls us to awareness and to interior action — certainly through its words, but also through the simplest of choreography and staging.

When we think about the meaning of any given prayer, ritual, ceremony, or service, there are two overlapping categories that we can focus on. One emphasizes the “why” — the intention of those who first performed or created a particular practice, and the reasons they shaped it the way they did. The other emphasizes the “how”— how we experience and understand an established practice. Although I am always curious about the origins and evolutions of a practice, it is this latter set of meanings that especially interests me: what a given practice is all about — and what could it be about — as a lived piece of ritual for those who participate in it.

There is a lot of significance in the characteristic prayers of Neilah — for example, the shortened confessions, the tentative optimism, the textual echoes forward to Hoshanah Rabbah and Shemini Atzeret. But what I want to focus on here is not Neilah’s verbal liturgy but its unique physical practice. After the silent Amidah, for the entire remainder of the service, the ark is open, the Torahs are visible, and we are standing.

In facing the open ark for nearly an hour, in the waning hours of Yom Kippur, we come face to face with death, with our own humility before the many facets of life, and even with birth — all good fodder for the *Yamim Noraim* at any time, but especially at Neilah. Let us look at each in turn.

Yom Kippur is often likened to a mini-death. The denial of food, drink, and other physical pleasures; *viddui*, or confession; wearing a *kittel*, a garment in which we will be buried upon our actual death — these aspects of the day put us in touch with our mortality not only symbolically, but physically. Perhaps we are trying to gain mastery over death by enacting it symbolically — throwing the cosmos a bone, telling the Malakh ha-Mavet, the Angel of Death, “See, I’m already dead, don’t bother coming after me.”

Or perhaps we are offering up ourselves to God as a symbolic sacrifice. In Mishnah Yoma, we learn that only two things combine with teshuvah to effect atonement: Yom Kippur and death. By playing at death on Yom Kippur, we’ve got the whole package, the trifecta. We can no longer offer up a goat to symbolize our death, so, as it were, we’ve got to get some skin in the game — our own.

But clearly the most important impact of engaging with our own mortality on Yom Kippur is not on God or on divine messengers of life and death, or on whether or not we will die, but on ourselves and on this question: Given that we are *all* dying, how are we going to live? What will we each do — in the words of the poet Mary Oliver — with our “one wild and precious life?”

Even at Neilah, with all its optimism and hope, its almost adrenal and exhilarating sense of being in the home stretch, mortality stares us in the face.

In Hebrew, an *aron* can signify three things. It is a closet, like the one in which our holiday clothes and our kittels hung earlier. It is the ark, in which the Torah is housed. And finally, an *aron* is a casket, the wooden box in which the bodies of the dead are placed in the earth. An *aron* will be our final bed, our final resting place, the sacred container in which we will be buried. We are reminded of this tangibly at the end of this day of engagement of death, when we orient ourselves towards the open *aron* in front of us.

But Neilah is also full of promise. And so when the doors of the ark are swung open, we are not simply staring into an empty aron, starkly and darkly contemplating our mortality. We face a sacred wooden container, crafted from trees no longer living, and inside it, the scrolls of the Torah — *etz hayyim hi*, our tree of life.

Do we stand for Neilah *because* the ark is open, symbolizing the still-receptive, open gates of heaven, during this last opportunity for teshuvah on Yom Kippur? Or, might we say that the ark is open precisely so that we will stand; so that, hungry and weary, we might feel a little more tired and a little more vulnerable, and therefore more open to the urgency of the task still before us; so that we might taste our mortality in a way that helps us really get it: There is no other moment. The moment is now. Be present. Pray like your life depends on it.

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Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach taught that Neilah is a time not of the gates slowly closing us *out* from heightened access to God, but a time of being closed *in* with God — a time for intimacy with the Divine, where we have the opportunity to pour our hearts out. It is the custom in many congregations for people who wish to do so to approach the open ark at some point during Neilah in order to offer their personal prayers, either silently or quietly spoken. As the parade of individuals goes by, the entire congregation cannot help but become conscious of the sheer multiplicity of prayers and yearnings in the room, even though they never hear the words thought and spoken before the ark.

We might similarly imagine that each of us at Neilah is, from wherever we are in the room, tied to the aron as our focal point — tied by a thread of our own stories shaping our prayers. These are multi-strand threads, twisting together struggle and gratitude and disappointment and satisfaction, suffering and celebration, ill health and healing — the list could go on and on. In this room — linking us to one another and to people in other rooms and other congregations, in hospital rooms, and living rooms — is an invisible weaving of private prayers whose color and texture are shaped

by the hardships and blessings, the fears and hopes in each of our lives, the things we know about each other — and the things we don't.

There is a story told of a hasid of the Seer of Lublin, who thinks that life would be easy if he had the power to read others' thoughts. The Seer of Lublin gives him the opportunity to test it out on two men in shul. The hasid sees that one man's thoughts are full of young men and women in intimate embraces, while the other man's mind is full of pages and pages of difficult Talmudic passages. The hasid slaps the first man across the cheek, then goes to the second man and shakes his hand, patting him on the back in a congratulatory fashion.

But the Seer tells him: "The man whose hand you shook is a book-binder, neither learned nor interested in learning. The man whose face you slapped is a *shadchan*, a matchmaker, who does great mitzvot every day by bringing couples together."

It is surely the case that even when we do know many things about other people with whom we share a community, or even about close friends or people in our own family, we invariably don't know as much as we think. Each of us is, simply, a mysterious and complex world unto herself or himself.

In the Torah, Yom Kippur was not primarily about personal atonement, but about purifying the sanctuary, the communal sacred space. In our own communities, if we are to have a sense of coming through Yom Kippur *as* a community and not just as collection of individuals, we need to cultivate a sense of humility, mystery, and awe, not only about before whom we stand, but *with* whom we stand — and to somehow silently provide for one another a holding environment for each of our prayers.

It is this sense of the relationship between our personal stories, our individual prayers, and our gathering as a community that is reflected in a custom that Rabbi Shamaï Kanter instituted for many years at the start of his Rosh Hashanah sermons. He would invite the congregation to recite with him the blessing that is said upon seeing a large gathering of Jews — *Barukh ata Adonai, hakham ha-razim* — praising the One who, we might say, is wise regarding all of our secrets, who knows every aspect of every one of us, those not obvious to others, and even those that may be hidden from ourselves.

The open ark during Neilah — with its doors flung wide like open

arms — continually reminds us of this final time on Yom Kippur to be fully present — to be, as it were, alone with God — or maybe it is more accurate to say, alone with God together. It invites the prayers we didn't yet know we had, the confessions we were not yet ready to make, the teshuvah still unfinished.

François Cheng, the Chinese-born French thinker and poet, writes: "We are always at the beginning of things, in the fragile moment that holds the power of life. We are always at the morning of the world." So it is even at Neilah. This ending will soon be a beginning — and the cry of the shofar, the *tekiah gedolah*, our cry of relief and fear and joy as we are each thrust forth like a brand new baby, into the new world called into being by our teshuvah, and by Yom Kippur itself.

In Sephardi and Mizrahi congregations, especially those where Torah honors are auctioned off, opening the ark at Neilah tends to be one of the most coveted honors. In many places, it is the tradition that this *petichah* is done by a man whose wife is pregnant, with the hope that the later "opening" of childbirth will be just as smooth and providential.

In this coming year — and at this time of *neilat ha-sha'ar*, of the gates slowly closing — may we be blessed with encounters with mortality that draw us further into life and living; with openness in our relationship with God and humility in our relationships with one another; and with many *petichot tovot*, with good openings, as what is yet to be, becomes what is.

Note: The author wishes to thank Rabbi Michael Bernstein for the story of the Seer of Lublin, which she adapted slightly from his version, and Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer for sharing the information about ark opening customs and the lovely phrase "smooth and providential."



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