

# On Closure

Yom Kippur, Kol Nidrei – 5775 (2014)  
R. Yonatan Cohen, Congregation Beth Israel

In about 24 hours from now we will assemble for the *Neeilah* service, literally the closing prayer of Yom Kippur. *Neeilah*, as I am sure many of us would attest, is a very powerful moment. It represents the culmination of an entire season of repentance and the crescendo of a day replete with prayer. The Rambam (Hilchot Teshuva 1:4) explains that “*itzumu shel yom*,” meaning the day of Yom Kippur itself causes atonement, and Tosfot further explains that this atonement takes place at the very end of Yom Kippur, during *Neeilah* (*Sehvuot* 13a).

According to Rav Soloveitchik the potency of this moment of *Neeilah* is entirely subjective. It is “directly proportional of the feeling of the Jew on Yom Kippur.” Rav Soloveitchik further explains that “to some...[it] can indeed be great and powerful. [...] Yet, for others, [...] [it] is almost nonexistent. [...] When the consciousness is [...] powerful, [...] [Yom Kippur] is indeed potent and the resulting atonement is all the more effective.” (Rav Soloveitchik, *Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified*, pp. 130-131)

If indeed, the potency of *Neeilah* is entirely subjective, as Rav Soloveitchik describes, then we better start preparing now. If indeed, there is a direct correlation between our internal consciousness and the potency and efficacy of the resulting atonement then we better set our minds and hearts to this task right now.

Let us begin with a very simple question – What actually occurs or transpires during the *Neeilah* service? In other words, what actually closes and seals at this time?

The sages in the Jerusalem Talmud present a seemingly minor disagreement about this matter. According to some of our sages, *Neeilah* represents the closing of *sha'arei shamayim* or the heavenly gates. Other sages however explain that *Neeilah* refers to the shutting of *sha'arei ha'azarah* or the closing of the gates to the temple's court. (JT Brachot 4:7)

Rav Shagar zt”l, a leading contemporary Jewish philosopher and thinker, offers a brilliant insight to this Talmudic debate. *Sha'arei shamayim*, the closing of the heavenly gates, and *sha'arei*

*ha'azarah*, the shutting of the gates of the temple's court represent two different paradigms; two different modes of reaching atonement on this day.

Herein lies the great difference between the two. *Sha'arei shamayim*, the closing of the heavenly gates occurs through Divine decree whereas *sha'arei ha'azarah*, the closing of the gates to the temple's court occurs through human initiative. One process is imposed upon us while the other originates within us, and can only be accomplished through exercising one's free will. (Rav Shagar, *Al Kappot Hamanul*, p. 90)

Let us begin with the closing of *sha'arei shamayim*, of the heavenly gates.

Sadly, we all experienced in one way or another, and to varying degrees, the closing of heaven's gates. These are moments of profound trauma in which suddenly what was no longer is. The passing of a loved one; the passage of time that renders certain possibilities null and void; or the experience of utter failure, all fall within the realm of the closing of the heavenly gates.

Rav Shagar explains that while the gates may have forcefully shut in our face, many of us might still lack internal or emotional closure.

As some of you know, about 7 years ago a very close friend of my family passed away under tragic circumstances, likely from a drug overdose. His name was Harel and he was like a younger brother to my mother, and an uncle to my siblings and me. In the years leading up to his death, our relationship became strained. In retrospect, Harel was probably going through a profound depression, that in my view, likely led to his death.

In recent years, I find myself thinking about Harel almost every month. Some of you may remember that I spoke about my own struggles with accepting his death several years ago, also on Yom Kippur.

*Sha'arei shamayim*, the heavenly gates abruptly closed on him. His death felt like a Divine decree. And yet, while the gates have closed, I am still in desperate need of closure.

Frayda and I have dear friends who have been struggling to conceive a child for many years now. Name the treatment and they've been through it. Needless to say they have mortgaged much of what they used to own and have given up much in life for the purpose of realizing this all-consuming dream. Time is passing and meanwhile it is quite likely that she has passed the age in which conception is even possible.

In recent months they have begun speaking as though *sha'arei shamayim*, the heavenly gates are abruptly closing on them, almost by Divine decree. And yet, while the gates may have already closed, they are still in desperate need of closure.

Other gates have closed this year as well.

Certain relationships came to an abrupt ending. Some dreams were rendered null and void by failure or the circumstances of our lives. Doors that once seemed wide open are now shut closed.

Sadly, we all experienced in one way or another, and to varying degrees, the closing of the heavenly gates by what feels like Divine decree. And yet, while the gates may have already closed, many of us are still in desperate need of closure, of an internal *Neeilah*. Many of us are carrying so much spiritual and psychological baggage, sadly and for good reason, solely because we have not yet reached closure.

Now let me be clear.

Closure in this sense does not mean cultivating the hope or belief that what once was will suddenly reappear. That's not closure. In contrast, closure in this sense, means an internal acceptance of the decree. My beloved friend Harel is not coming back, our dear friends will likely not have a biological child, etc. etc. Nevertheless, unlike the abrupt closing of the heavenly gates, which is likely an experience of *din*, of harsh judgment, I view this internal act of acceptance as one deriving from *chessed* and *rachamim*, of mercy and loving-kindness. Through *Neeilah* we rid ourselves of the burden and weight of what could have been, but is no longer possible, and become open to what could still be.

In other words, in the process of this sort of internal *Neeliah* we finally take stock of the gates that are closed so that we may become aware of the gates that can now become open.

Perhaps I am naïve, or overly optimistic, but in this way I am deeply religious. I at least would like to believe that for every gate that closes another gate opens...if only...if only we can see it.

The closing of the gates of the *azarah*, the temple court, which was accomplished through human activity, offers a different model. Here we are not called to take stock of all that is already shut and closed, but rather we are called to take note of all that ought to be shut closed by our own initiative. In other words, *neeliat shaarei ha'azarah*, the closing of the gates to the temple's court, challenges us to reflect upon areas in our life, be it relationships, behavioral dynamics, or chosen paths, that must be drastically closed, rendered null and void, through our own actions and initiatives.

Many of us have certain relationships that must come to a close. We each have adopted patterns of behaviors that must be abruptly disrupted. We each have chosen certain paths in life that must be altered entirely. We are in desperate need of *neeliah*, in desperate need of shutting our own gates and doors.

Many of us have certain relationships that must come to a close. Like Abraham and Lot, we may need to part ways with people we once deeply loved. We read in the Torah:

ח. וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל לוֹט אֵל נָא תְהִי מְרִיבָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וּבֵין רְעִי וּבֵין רְעִיךָ כִּי אֲנָשִׁים אַחִים אֲנַחְנוּ:

ט. הֲלֹא כָּל הָאָרֶץ לְפָנֶיךָ הִפְרָד נָא מֵעַלֵּי אִם הִשְׁמַאל וְאִימְנָה וְאִם הַיָּמִין וְאִשְׁמְאִלָּה:

8. And Abram said to Lot, "Please let there be no quarrel between me and between you and between my herdsmen and between your herdsmen, for we are kinsmen.

9. Is not all the land before you? Please part from me; if [you go] left, I will go right, and if [you go] right, I will go left."

At the same time, we must always remember how critical our rabbis were of *Yaakov Avinu*, of Jacob our patriarch, when he chose to part ways with Esau after they made peace with one another. Our rabbis were audacious, even harsh, in their critique of the esteemed patriarch for his failure to recognize the possibility of *teshuvah*, of repentance, for his brother Esau.

This is critical – so let me state it loud and clear -Don't ever rush to give up too easily, too hastily, on the ones you love. *Teshuva*, return, is possible.

Parting ways is not a *le'chatichila* – it is not the ideal choice – but, but parting ways sometimes is the only remaining choice. Even with people we once deeply loved, people with whom we once shared a life path as Abraham did with Lot, even with them...sometimes, after careful examination, sometimes, we too must shut the doors, and bring about a *Neeilah*, sealing what once was but now, can no longer be.

Still, it is not enough to only look at our relationships with others, we must also look at ourselves, at our own actions and deeds. We each have adopted patterns of behaviors that must be abruptly disrupted. We each have chosen certain paths in life that must be altered completely.

The great Maimonides offers a most succinct definition of Teshuvah, of repentance in his major code of law. Maimonides explains:

ב. ומה היא התשובה הוא שיעזוב החוטא חטאו ויסירו ממחשבתו ויגמור בלבו שלא יעשהו עוד שנאמר יעזוב רשע דרכו וגו' וכן יתנחם על שעבר שנאמר כי אחרי שובי נחמתי

“What constitutes *teshuvah*? That a sinner should abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart, never to commit them again as [Isaiah 55:7] states "May the wicked abandon his ways..." Similarly, he must regret the past as [Jeremiah 31:18] states: "After I returned, I regretted."”

The Rambam's definition is so simple, it is so obvious, and yet how many of us at this time last year promised ourselves that we will never, ever...and yet we did again. How many of us committed at this time last year that we will abandon some of our wayward ways...and yet here we are...still on that same path.

*Teshuvah*, repentance challenges to do a *Neeilah*, to willingly and forcefully shut the gates, with all our strength, with all our might, and put an end, on all the different ways our own behavior drags us down. It is not up in Heaven, it not up to God, it is solely up to us to shut those gates.

The great Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai describes life this way:

“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.”

This year, we will need to close and we will need to open.

Some gates have already closed, some gates too soon, some too abruptly. Lord, Hashem, God, let us reach true closure this year.

Some gates need to be closed; certain shared paths or ways of life must be abandoned. Lord, Hashem, God, let us find strength within ourselves to close those gates.

And still, let us also discover new gates to open, new doors to walk through. Let us, together with God, find new purpose in the life that we have yet to live.

Permit me to conclude with another poem by Yehudah Amichai, whose words convey an urgent, pleading prayer:

**Before**

Before the gate has been closed,  
before the last question is posed,  
before I am transposed,  
Before the weeks fill the gardens,  
before there are no pardons,  
before the concrete hardens.  
Before all the flute-holes are covered,  
before things are locked in the cupboard,  
before the rules are discovered.  
Before the conclusion is planned,  
before God closes his hand  
before we have nowhere to stand.

