

Neilah Service – 5774
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DC Minyan

Before I begin, it would be inappropriate for me to allow you to believe that the thoughts I plan to share with you are uniquely mine. To that end, I start by acknowledging Rabbi Rachel Silverman, Jonathan Baker, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, and Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik – whose words provided the puzzle pieces of this Dvar. I simply put them together.

The original title of this final part of the service is – NEILAT SHE'ARIM.

Ofentimes translated as “the closing of the gates”, most Hebrew speakers will point out that the root of the word Neilah actually means to lock rather than simply to close. Either way, the implication is that this is a last chance of sorts.

At first glance, this seems to make sense – if time is running out, everything feels more urgent, including repentance. But I wonder if viewing Neilah as a final chance also has the potential to imply that what's done is done...so what's the point?

Similarly, we are about to replace all references to being inscribed in the book of life with “seal us in the book of life.” That sounds pretty final too. Does it literally mean that tonight it is decided who lives and who dies? And how might that impact how motivated we are to better ourselves tomorrow?

At this point, after 24 hours, all of our defenses are stripped away. By now, we are more in touch with our core vulnerability. We have had countless opportunities to list all of the things people tend to do wrong and to think of personal examples for each. Now we are desperate and begging – perhaps because for the first time all day, we are most acutely aware of the fact that we have all said and done things that would be a legitimate reason not to seal us in the book of life.

It is exactly now when we repeatedly invoke the Formula of the 13 attributes, describing God's merciful nature, no fewer than 8 times. The formula originates from what is considered to be the very first Yom Kippur.

No sooner than 40 days after the revelation at Mt. Sinai, Moses had not returned and the Jewish people panicked, creating a substitute for God in the form of the golden calf. On the one hand, it's shocking how quickly the nation fell from its highest level of spirituality to its lowest form of human insecurity and impulsivity. On the other hand, we can probably relate. It is a common misconception that Moses himself first spoke the 13 attributes in order to secure God's forgiveness, but in fact these words were produced initially by God. God describe God's own nature as: “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in loving kindness and truth, extending loving kindness to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion and sin, and absolving the guilty who repent”. The purpose of this was to confirm for Moses that the people were forgiven.

And then, the people lose faith again. After hearing the concerns of the spies regarding the Land of Canaan, they cry out for a new leader who could return them to Egypt. Once again Moses prays on their behalf, this time using God's own words – the 13 attributes.

And immediately, God spoke two words that we will also repeat over and over again throughout Neilah – SALACHTI KIDVARECHA (I have forgiven, specifically because of your words). The 13 attributes are a formula provided directly by God to be used in the inevitable event of sin, as we were designed as an inherently imperfect people.

However, we are not a religion that views humans as tainted by original sin or destined to ultimately fail. Rather, we are the agency of our own future by which we have the capacity and control to choose life.

Because I want to suggest that perhaps being sealed in the book of life is not the same as asking to merely be kept alive. For some of us, it is a struggle to feel motivated to pray and repent and correct our actions out of the fear that we may live or we may die. It can be comforting to assume that good deeds lengthen your life and bad deeds hasten your death. But we know that there are so many untimely deaths that can't possibly be explained by inadequate repentance on Yom Kippur. And so even as we stand here, without really knowing who will and will not be standing here one year from now, when we asked to be sealed in the book of life, perhaps we ask to be inspired and be given the strength to live life intentionally, rather than simply survive passively. For me and perhaps for many of you, this is a more palatable interpretation.

Repentance on Yom Kippur and especially during Neilah is not the act of simple throwing yourself on God's mercy – it is the exact opposite. It is the process of combing through every aspect of our behaviors and thoughts, to identify what must be changed, to commit in that moment to trying our best to change, as imperfect as we still may be, and to present that case to God in every possible way that we know how. Not because we know we ultimately have no control, but explicitly because the control belongs to us.

And doing everything in our control includes invoking some seemingly desperate claims:

If not for our own merits, then forgive us for that of our forefathers.

If not for our own good, then so that we have further opportunity to serve you, God.

If not for our own merit, then at least because you are our parent who loves us unconditionally (Avinu Malkeinu - Our Father, Our King).

We then invoke the 13 attributes, our God-given trump card for forgiveness.

After this, the only words we have left to use are simply to declare our loyalty to God with the Shema – the same prayer that is the last on the lips of the dying and the martyred.

Finally, as Rav Soloveitchik described, when we are completely out of words, our last option is the primal scream of the shofar blast, after which the doors of the ark and the proverbial gates of heaven are closed and locked.

And yet...

...we immediately rejoice and sing "next year in Jerusalem". One second ago we were completely tapped out, desperate, exposed and vulnerable. And immediately afterward, we collect ourselves and we move forward. We do so with parts of the regular daily prayer (the *kaddish*, *borchu*, the *amidah*) – making good on our commitments to strive for closer connection to God. And most importantly, we do so by physically and metaphorically building the Sukkah – making good on our commitment to rebuild our personal relationships and our community.

And in these ways, we choose life.

Gmar Chatima Tovah.