

## Neilah 5781

### Are the gates really closing?

Rabbi Alan Lew shares the following story in his book “This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared:”

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev said that it isn't just that the gates of heaven are open during the Ten Days of Teshuva; what is far more significant is that an energy, an attractive force, passes through this opening during these days. This is a very subtle energy, and for most of the Ten Days, when the gates are wide open, we don't even notice it. But during the Neilah service, as the gates begin to close and the opening becomes narrower and narrower, this attractive energy becomes more and more intense, more and more noticeable. It is precisely this energy which draws us to the Neilah service so intensely, and which inspires us to pray so fervently once there. The prayer we utter at Neilah is that most urgent of all human prayers, the prayer of the last chance. The gates of heaven are closing. We only have a few minutes left.

But don't our rabbis teach that the gates of repentance are like the ocean, always open? So are the gates closing, or are the gates always open?

The truth is the gates of repentance are always open – God will always welcome back the repentant sinner, anytime, anywhere. The problem is that we close the gates ourselves. Most of us only reflect on these deep and weighty topics at this time of year, during the High Holidays. We know that if we don't do it now, we're probably not going to come back to these issues until next year. We will have closed the gates of repentance through neglect. The gates are always open, but we won't be paying attention. We won't see them. We'll be looking the other way.

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And according to at least some of the rabbis, while the gates of repentance are always open, the gates of prayer are sometimes open and sometimes closed, and it's also that energy that we feel this time of day on Yom Kippur.

Since the Day of Judgement on Rosh Hashanah, and the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah*, the ten days of repentance since, in principle we've done a lot of repenting. Right now the gates of prayer for Yom Kippur ARE closing; the atonement offered by this unique and special day is passing. Our prayer now is the prayer of last resort, acknowledging that our efforts at teshuvah have been inadequate, and we cry out to God to forgive our sins and give us another year despite the failings in our efforts at teshuvah.

We will recite the vidui, the confessional, yet again, maybe this time the words will sink in and open our hearts as we acknowledge our many shortcomings. Why do we confess our sins today, on Yom Kippur, and not on Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgement? On the Day of Judgement, we are afraid to incriminate ourselves, and just as Canadian law provides protections against self-incrimination, God allows us to avoid the awkwardness of self-incrimination on Judgement Day. But we are now past Judgement Day. The judgement has been handed down and confessing at this point won't change that, but it will show contrition and regret for the sins we have committed, perhaps inclining the judge to be merciful during the sentencing.

We cry out to Avinu Malkeinu, our father our king, asking Him to answer us and be kind to us, for our deeds are inadequate. And we emphasize Avinu, our father, praying that God will have mercy on us as a parent has on a child.