

**Ne'ila has Arrived, For us and For the World:**

**A Plea for Environmental Awareness and Action**

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In the waning hours of the day, the people in the town had already made their ways home. Families sat, huddled close to one another in their modest but warm houses. They were secure and glad to have some time with their family before going to bed. But the *sandlar*/shoemaker was not yet home.

*Lo aleicha hamilacha ligmora/* we may not be able to finish all of our work

he said, quoting Pirkei Avot to himself,

*V'lo ata ben choring lihibatel me'mena /* but neither are you free to desist from it.

The *sandlar* recited this phrase as he continued to work, by the light of a small candle. "While there is still some light, I will continue my work". And so, he did. By the dimming light of a small candle the *sandlar* continued his work, for, once the lights go out, who knows what would follow? Only when flame disappeared would he close his door.

In ancient times, when the Temple in Jerusalem still stood, one *kohen* would be given the responsibility to close the gates of the Temple, as day turned into night. He would close the gates as the dusk became dark. That moment, called *Neilat HaSharim*, closing the Gates of the Temple, was the original "*Neilah*". When the gates closed, the day had ended.

Later, after the Temple was destroyed, our Sages instituted the *Neilah* service as a reminder that, not only would the gates in ancient time be closed at this moment, but, on Yom Kippur, this is the moment at which the heavenly gates of prayer would be closed be closed. Now is the time for our final, most heartfelt prayers. For, once the lights go dark, once the gates close, our work is complete, our prayers have ended, our fates are sealed.

The urgency of this moment could not be more relevant. Over the past several months, scientists, observers of nature and people from all over the world are raising their voices and saying stop! We must save the world...now! These are now our last moments. Our world is imperiled, and not enough people are listening. The world has been exploited and polluted, poisoned and denuded. One cannot take and take without giving and protecting and expect the world, the earth itself, not to react. And the earth has reacted:

Global warming is setting new record high temperatures and making certain places on earth uninhabitable.

Polar Ice Caps are melting, causing flooding and destruction of property.

Pollution caused by the burning of fossil fuels contaminates the air we breathe.

We see the destruction of the rain forests in South America

Monster hurricanes are reaching land in unprecedented numbers.

Record numbers of tornadoes destroy everything in their paths when they strike.

More severe weather, summer and winter, has become the rule, not the exception.

And all of this will only get worse.

The list goes on.

When the world was created, according to the Book of Genesis, it was given to humankind “to guard and to tend”. This world is ours and we are destroying it, steadily, and incrementally. Some reason that, because the deterioration is not progressing with lighting speed, maybe we have more time. But we do not. My friends, **this world has reached *Neilah*!**

But I must say one more word, at *Neilah*, there is still time to act, to change, to do *t’shuvah* and return to the path from which we have strayed. *Neilah* is a final reminder that our candle is now flickering. There is still work to be done and, although we may not finish it all, we may be able to start and begin a new change in behavior, a new approach which will limit our carbon footprints, limit our uses of fossil fuels, limit the waste we generate and bury from every home, in every town in every country throughout the world.

This is the moment of *Neilah*. As we return to our services, we must enter this moment with a sense of urgency, with an awareness that time is running out. So let us delay no longer. Let us begin the work we should have started and enforced long ago.

For us, at TBHBE, we have improved our recycling capabilities and placed new limits on the waste that we generate through this building. We must each do this at home and at our places of employment.

We will not be able to correct the mistakes of the past quickly or easily. It took a while to get where we are. It will take a while to make global changes capable of reversing the environmental disasters we now face. At the same time, we must not say: what difference can I make? Compared to the entire world, how can I make a difference? Rather, remember the *sandler*:

It is not for us to finish the work. Neither are we free to desist from it.

We shall do what we can do. Fix what we can fix. Most importantly, we will teach our children, so that when we can no longer do the work, they will already be there, working to repair the broken world they have inherited.