

## *Ne'ilah: The Call to Greatness*

*Ne'ilah*, short for *Ne'ilat She'arim*, "the closing of the gates," is a service nowadays unique to Yom Kippur. In ancient times a *Ne'ilah* prayer was also said on public fasts instituted in Israel because of drought; and when the Temple stood a *Ne'ilah* prayer was said by priests during their rota of duty. Now it exists only on Yom Kippur.

There was a dispute between Rav and R. Yochanan as to the significance of the name. One held that it meant the closing of the gates of the Temple, the other that it meant the closing of the gates of heaven (*Yerushalmi Ta'anit* 4:1). In truth however the Talmud states that "though the gates of prayer may be closed the gates of tears are never closed." What gives this moment its drama and urgency is that it is the culmination of the one day that has the power to cleanse us of our sins. The Sages said that in the absence of the Temple and the service of the High Priest, the day itself atones. The prayers we are about to say are the last syllables of this consecrated time.

The sense of an ending is intense. The process of preparation and prayer began forty days ago on Rosh Chodesh *Elul* with the blowing of the *shofar* and the saying of Psalm 27. It gathered pace with the saying of *selichot*. It became a courtroom drama on Rosh Ha-Shanah with the *shofar* proclaiming that the heavenly court is in session and we are on trial for our lives. The case for the defense has been made. We have neither denied nor made excuses for our sins. We have confessed our guilt, individual and collective, and we have appealed for mercy and forgiveness. The trial is now in its closing moments. The court is about to rise. The verdict, signed, will soon be sealed.

What has given Yom Kippur its unique place on the map of the Jewish heart is that it is the most intensely personal of all the festivals. Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot are celebrations of Jewish memory and history. They remind us of what it means to be a member of the Jewish people, sharing its past, its present, and its hopes. Rosh Ha-Shanah, the anniversary of Creation, is about what it means to be human under the sovereignty of God. But Yom Kippur is about what it means to be me, this unique person that I am. It makes us ask: What have I done with my life? Whom have I hurt or harmed? How have I behaved? What have I done with God's greatest gift, life itself? What have I lived for and what will I be remembered for? To be sure, we ask these questions in the company of others. Ours is a communal faith. We pray together, confess together, and throw ourselves on God's mercy together. But Yom Kippur remains an intensely personal day of conscience and self-reckoning.

It is the day on which, as the Torah says five times, we are commanded to "afflict" ourselves. Hence: no eating or drinking, no bathing, no anointing, no sexual relations, no leather shoes. If we are men we wear a *kittel*, a white garment reminiscent, some say, of the white tunic the High Priest wore when he entered the Holy of Holies. Others say it is like a burial shroud. Either way, it reminds us of the truths we must face alone. The Torah says that "No one else shall be in the Tent of Meeting from the time that [Aharon] enters the sanctuary to make atonement until he leaves" (*Vayikra* 16:17). Like the High Priest on this holy day, we face God alone. We confront our mortality alone. Outwardly we are in the company of others, but inwardly we are giving a reckoning for our individual life, singular and unique. The fact that everyone else around us is doing likewise makes it bearable.

Fasting and repenting, I stand between two selves, as the High Priest once stood facing two goats, symbolic of the duality of human nature. There is the self I see in the mirror and know in my darkest hours. I know how short life is and how little I have achieved. I remember, with a shame undiminished by the passing of time, the people I offended, wounded, disappointed; the promises I made but did not fulfill; the harsh words I said and the healing words I left unsaid. I know how insignificant I am in the scheme of things, one among billions who will live, die, and eventually vanish from living memory. I am next-to-nothing, a fleeting breath, a driven leaf: "Dust you are and to dust you will return" (*Bereishit* 3:19). Yet there is a second self, the one I see in the reflection of God's love. It is not always easy to feel God's love but it is there, holding us gently, telling us that every wrong we repent of is forgiven, every act of kindness we perform is unforgotten, that we are here because God wants us to be and because there is work He needs us to do. He loves us as a parent loves a child and has a faith in us that never wavers however many times we fail. In Yeshayahu's words, "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet My unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor My covenant of peace be removed" (*Yeshayahu* 54:10). God, who "counts the number of the stars and calls each of them by name" (*Tehillim* 147:4), knows each of us by name, and by that

knowledge confers on us inalienable dignity and unconditional love. *Teshuvah* means “coming home” to this second self and to the better angels of our nature.

At no other time, barring exceptional circumstance, will we be as close to God as we will be for the next hour. We have fasted, prayed, and had the courage to face the worst about ourselves. We have been empowered to do so by our unshakable belief that God loves, forgives, and has more faith in us than we do in ourselves. We can be better than we are, better than we were. And though we may have stumbled and fallen, God is holding out His hand to lift us, giving us the strength to recover, endure, and grow to become the person He is calling on us to be: a blessing to others, a vehicle through which His light flows into the world, an agent of hope, His partner in the work of redemption.

Faith is the courage to take a risk, as Avraham and Sarah took the risk of following the Voice calling them to leave their land and birthplace to travel to an unknown destination, as the Israelites did when they began their journey into the desert, an “unsown land.” To be a Jew is to take the risk of believing that the evils of this world are not inevitable or irremediable; that we can mend some of the fractures of humanity; that we, by loving others as God loves us, can bring the *Shekhinah* into our lives, turning a little of the prose of the human condition into poetry and song.

Jews do not accept suffering that can be alleviated or wrong that can be put right as the will of God. We accept only what we cannot change. What we can heal, we must. So, disproportionately, Jews are to be found as teachers fighting ignorance, doctors fighting disease, economists fighting poverty, and lawyers fighting injustice. Judaism has given rise, not in one generation but in more than a hundred, to an unrivaled succession of prophets, priests, philosophers, poets, masters of *Halakhah* and *Aggadah*, commentators, codifiers, rationalists, mystics, sages and saints, people who gave the Divine Presence its local habitation and name and taught us to make gentle the life of this world. Judaism has consistently asked great things of our people, and in so doing, helped make them great. Tonight, at *Ne'ilah*, God is calling us to greatness.

That greatness is not conventional. We do not need to be rich or successful or famous or powerful to find favor in the eyes of God and our fellows. All we need is *chein* (graciousness), *chesed* (kindness), *rachamim* (compassion), *tzedek* (righteousness and integrity), and *mishpat*, what Albert Einstein called the “almost fanatical love of justice” that made him think his stars he was a Jew.

To be a Jew is to seek to heal some of the wounds of the world, to search out the lonely and distressed and bring them comfort, to love and forgive as God loves and forgives, to study God’s Torah until it is engraved in our minds, to keep God’s commands so that they etch our lives with the charisma of holiness, to bring God’s presence into the shared spaces of our common life, and to continue the story of our ancestors, writing our chapter in the book of Jewish life.

“Wherever you find God’s greatness,” said R. Yochanan, “there you will find His humility.” And wherever you find true humility, there you will find greatness. That is what Yom Kippur is about: finding the courage to let go of the need for self-esteem that fuels our passion for self-justification, our blustering claim that we are in the right when in truth we know we are often in the wrong. Most national literatures, ancient and modern, record a people’s triumphs. Jewish literature records our failures, moral and spiritual. No people has been so laceratingly honest in charting its shortcomings. In *Tanakh* there is no one without sin. Believing as we do that even the greatest are merely human, we also know that even the merely human – us – can also be great. And greatness begins in the humility of recognizing our failings and faults.

The greatness to which God is calling us, here, now is “not in heaven... nor across the sea” (*Devarim* 30:12–13) but in our hearts, minds, and lives, in our homes and families, our work and its interactions, the tenor and texture of our relationships, the way we act and speak and listen and spend our time. The question God asks us at *Ne'ilah* is not “Are you perfect?” but “Can you grow?”

There are three barriers to growth. One is self-righteousness, the belief that we are already great. A second is false humility, the belief that we can never be great. The third is learned helplessness, the belief that we can’t change the world because we can’t change ourselves. All three are false. We are not yet great but we are summoned to greatness, and we can change. We can live lives of moral beauty and spiritual depth. We can open our eyes to the presence of God around us, incline our inner ear to the voice of God within us. We can bring blessings into other people’s lives.

And now, in absolute humility, we turn to God, pleading with Him to seal us in the book of life so that we can fulfill the task He has set us, to be His ambassadors to humankind.