

## Ne'ilah: Closing of the Gates

Germantown Jewish Centre | Yom Kippur (5781) Text Study  
Rabbi Rebecca Richman

*In this Yom Kippur text study, we will learn about Ne'ilah, the concluding service of Yom Kippur. What does it mean that the "gates" are closing at the end of this day? What are we meant to do in these final moments? How might we feel when the service comes to a close? We'll take a look at some of the prayers and meditations in the service, and do some reflecting in anticipation of the closing moments of Yom Kippur.*

### Opening Questions to Consider

- What are your associations with the end of Yom Kippur?
- If you have been to a *ne'ilah* service before, what has it felt like?
- Where do you hope to be (spiritually, emotionally) at the end of Yom Kippur this year?

### Introduction to Ne'ilah - What is it? What's Included?

#### **1. Ne'ilah, adapted from Reuven Hammer (Machzor Lev Shalem, p. 394)**

Ne'ilah means "closing," and referred originally to the closing of the gates of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. It then took on a more spiritual meaning, and was understood to refer to the symbolic closing of the gates of heaven.

On ordinary weekdays there are three services at which we recite the Amidah (*Arvit*, evening; *Shaharit*, morning; and *Minhah*, afternoon). On Shabbat and Festivals we add a fourth (*Musaf*, literally "addition"). In the Talmud, a fifth service, called Ne'ilah, was added on all fast days. Today, we recite a Ne'ilah service only on Yom Kippur.

#### **2. El Nora Alilah (Machzor Lev Shalem, p. 407)**

Attributed to Moshe Ibn Ezra (c. 1055-1135, Spain), this *piyyut* introduces Ne'ilah in the Sephardic rite. Note that the name *Moshe* and the word *Hazak*, "be strong," are spelled out in the first letters of each verse. The poem is a plea for forgiveness. This *piyyut* entered the Ashkenazic machzor in the 20th century, marking the opening of the ark for Ne'ilah. The last stanza, adapted here, is not part of the original poem but has been attached to it in many editions.

*INTRODUCTION TO NE-ILAH: A PIYYUT*

Awe-inspiring Creator, God, find forgiveness for us	awe-inspiring Creator, God, in this closing hour.
We who are called "few in number" and tremblingly beseech You,	raise our eyes toward You, in this closing hour.
As we pour out our souls, craft forgiveness for us,	wipe away our sins and denials, in this closing hour.
Be our protector. seal our fate for joy and glory	Shield us from terror; in this closing hour.
Be compassionate and loving toward us; who would oppress or war against us,	bring judgment on all in this closing hour.
Remember our ancestors' righteousness and as at the beginning,	and renew our days as of old, in this closing hour.
May this year be one which is pleasing to You. Restore Your remaining flock to their former glory	Restore Your remaining flock in this closing hour.
May we, Your children, length of days merited	celebrate with joy and gladness, in this closing hour.
<i>El nora alilah hamtzei lanu m'hilah</i>	<i>El nora alilah bi-sh'at ha-n'ilah.</i>
<i>M'tei mispar k'ru'im u-m'sal'aim b'hilah</i>	<i>I'kha ayin nos'im bi-sh'at ha-n'ilah.</i>
<i>Shof'khim l'kha nafsham hamtzi-eim m'hilah</i>	<i>m'beih fisham v'khashasham bi-sh'at ha-n'ilah.</i>
<i>Heyeih lahem l'sitrah v'hotmeim l'hod u-'gilah</i>	<i>v'hal'tzeim mi-m'cirah bi-sh'at ha-n'ilah.</i>
<i>Hon otam v'raheim aseih vahem p'hilah</i>	<i>v'khol loheitz v'loheim bi-sh'at ha-n'ilah.</i>
<i>Z'khor tzidkat avihem k'kedem u-r'hillah</i>	<i>v'haddeish et y'meihem bi-sh'at ha-n'ilah.</i>
<i>K'ra na sh'nat ratzon l'oholvah v'oholah</i>	<i>v'hasheiv sheirit ha-tzon bi-sh'at ha-n'ilah.</i>
<i>Tizku l'shanim rabbot b'ditzah u-v'tzaholah</i>	<i>ha-banim v'ha-banot bi-sh'at ha-n'ilah.</i>

אל נורא עלילה אל נורא עלילה המצא לנו מחילה	אל נורא עלילה בשעת הנעילה.	אל נורא עלילה בשעת הנעילה.
מתי מספר קרואים ומסלדים בחילה	לך עין נושאים בשעת הנעילה.	מתי מספר קרואים ומסלדים בחילה
שופכים לך נפשם המצאים מחילה	מחה פשעם וכחשם בשעת הנעילה.	שופכים לך נפשם המצאים מחילה
היה להם לטרה וקתמם להוד ולגילה	וחלצם ממארה בשעת הנעילה.	היה להם לטרה וקתמם להוד ולגילה
חן אותם ורחם עשה בהם פליה	וכל-לוחץ ולוחם בשעת הנעילה.	חן אותם ורחם עשה בהם פליה
זכר צדקת אביהם פקדם ותחלה	וחדש את ימיהם בשעת הנעילה.	זכר צדקת אביהם פקדם ותחלה
קרא נא שנת רצון לאהליבה ואהלה	והשב שארית הצאן בשעת הנעילה.	קרא נא שנת רצון לאהליבה ואהלה
תזכו לשנים רבות בדיצה ובצחלה	הבנים והבנות בשעת הנעילה.	תזכו לשנים רבות בדיצה ובצחלה

**3. Neilah Service: Closing of the Gates - The concluding service of Yom Kippur, Ronald L. Eisenberg, <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/neilah-service/>**

Paradoxically, as the initial hunger from fasting [for those who have fasted] wears off, many worshipers feel a revitalization of their spiritual strength. Beginning with the repetition of the Amidah, the ark remains open throughout the Neilah service. All who are physically capable remain standing, an act that requires additional effort and adds to the feeling of urgency and spiritual transformation.

In the Amidah, the phrase used since Rosh Hashanah, "inscribe us in the Book of Life," now becomes "seal us in the Book of Life," as the final seal is placed on the divine decree. As the climax of the Day of Atonement rapidly approaches, the prayer leader and congregation join in the recitation of three biblical sentences whereby they rededicate themselves to the essential theological doctrines of Judaism.

The first is a single recitation of the Shema , the quintessential affirmation of faith.

This is followed by a threefold repetition of “Praised is His name, whose glorious kingdom for ever and ever,” the line that is usually recited as a silent response to the Shema.

Finally, the verse Adonai hu ha-Elohim (the Lord is God) is repeated seven times.

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד (1)  
 בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מְלַכְתּוֹלְעוֹלָם וָעֶד (3)  
 ה' הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים (7)

This declaration is followed by a long blast of the shofar (*tekiah gedolah*), an echo of the ancient practice of sounding the shofar to proclaim the beginning of the 50th (jubilee) year of freedom throughout the land (Lev. 25:9). Just as all lands returned to their original owners and slaves were freed from their masters with the onset of the jubilee year, so we celebrate our personal liberation from the overwhelming burden of our transgressions. The piercing blast of the ram’s horn also symbolizes the certainty that we have been granted divine forgiveness and been inscribed for a good year. This confidence in the future is expressed as all join in saying *le-shanah ha-ba’ah be-Yerushalayim* (next year in Jerusalem).

## **Tone and Urgency of Ne’ilah**

### **4. Closing of the Gates: Inspirations for Neilah**

[https://ajws.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/JJR\\_August2019.pdf](https://ajws.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/JJR_August2019.pdf)

The sun is in the treetops. It’s Neilah, and we’re watching as the gates of heaven slowly begin to close, holding a mixture of hope and trepidation. Have we changed enough this year, this day, for our prayers to break through into the heavens? Will the gates close before we can plead our case?

### **5. Neilah: The gates are closing, but where? When? How?, Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson**

<https://jewishjournal.com/judaism/holidays/225057/neilah/>

Where are those gates? Inside our hearts? In God’s ample love? At heaven’s door? ...The choreography of keeping the ark open throughout the Neilah service offers a visual that the closing gates are literally just before our eyes: the gates of Torah. But that “where” is never nailed down, never specified. And we don’t identify the “when” of our gates, either: The end of services? The end of Yom Kippur?

For us, the bigger paradox is that the very tradition that is rushing us to repent while there’s still time is unambiguous in holding that God always welcomes the sinner, is [also] always eager for us to turn in repentance...But if God always is eager to receive the sinner in repentance, then what’s the rush? Why do we feel pushed to hasten our process to coincide with the conclusion of Yom Kippur?

Were we to operate only with the assumption that repentance always is available, then we would never be motivated to actually change at a particular instance. Just as knowledge of our certain mortality infuses our life with a need to seize the day, so does the push of Yom Kippur as a time particularly favorable to *teshuvah* [repentance] inspire us to more focused contemplation than a more open-ended process would.

But if all we had was a sense that we must repent today, before the end of the day, then repentance is paralyzed by the ticking of the clock, by the desperation inspired by time running out. It is precisely the paradoxical balance of an open-ended process joining hands with a particularly favorable moment that makes forward movement happen.

## **What Happens After Ne'ilah?**

### **6. The Story of Reb Zusya - Hasidic tale**

Rabbi Zusya of Hanipoli was an 18th century Hasidic rabbi and a revered teacher. There is a story of a conversation he had with his students when he was old and had taken ill. He began to weep until one of his students asked, "Rabbi, why do you weep? Surely if anyone has assured a place in the kingdom of heaven it is you!" The rabbi turned his head towards his beloved students and began to speak softly. "If, my children, when I stand before the heavenly court, I am asked, 'Zusya, why were you not a Moses?' I shall have no hesitation affirming, 'I was not born a Moses.' If they ask me, 'Why were you not an Elijah?' I shall speak with confidence, 'Neither am I Elijah.' I weep, friends, because there is only one question I fear to be asked, 'Why were you not Zusya?'"

### **7. The Day's End - Jonathan Magonet (in Machzor Lev Shalem, p. 392)**

The journey through Yom Kippur was a real journey -- one to be measured not by what we feel when it is over, but by how we lead our lives in the days and weeks and years afterwards, when the final shofar blast has pierced not only the highest reach of the heavens, but also the deepest reach of our souls.

### **8. Rebecca Solnit, Hope in the Dark**

Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes—you alone or you in concert with a few dozen or several million others. Hope is an embrace of the unknown and knowable...It's the belief that what we do matters.

### **Closing Blessing (Rabbi Richman)**

*As we near the end of Yom Kippur, let us feel the intensity of the season and of the day. May we stand in awe as the gates close, humbled by the unknown and hopeful for the year ahead. May we be open to transformation. G'mar chatimah tovah - may our sealing be for good.*