



Yamim Noraim Tefillot



NEILA

The Human Gates of Neila

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

The Neila experience is dominated by a sense of foreboding and last-minute urgency. Four *tefillot* have already been completed throughout Yom Kippur: Ma'ariv, Shacharit, Mussaf and Mincha. At this stage during Neila, the gates are closing. Our *tefillot* may not ascend and may not penetrate *Shamayim* in time. There's an urgency to daven furiously and desperately to assure that our *tefillot* do indeed ascend at the last minute before the gates slam shut.

Over the years, before Neila, Rabbi Yehudah Amital related the following revolutionary perspective:

Shir HaShirim describes a courtship between a man and a woman, which is meant to capture the courtship between Hashem, the man, and the Jewish people, the woman. Throughout history we have sought each other, trying to unite, trying to rendezvous. In the Megilla, when the man seeks the woman, Hashem is looking for us; when the woman seeks the man, we are looking for Hashem.

In chapter 5, the courtship reaches a critical point. The man solicits the love of his beloved in a direct way, knocking on her door – *kol dodi dofek!* He pleads with her to open the door, but she is indolent. "I'm already in my pajamas, it's too hard to wake up. I've already washed my legs, I don't want to dirty them." At which point, the man says: "Well, if you can't answer the door for me, I'll go one step further. I'll stick my hand through the door. Just take my hand." Finally, the woman awakens.

Slowly, she gets up to open the door, her hands filled with the aroma of perfume, and her fingers on the lock of the door.

This interaction is a parable for our people's relationship with Hashem. Hashem pursues the Jewish people, asking us to open the door to let Him in. Slowly, lethargically, the Jewish people arise, attempting to open the door for Hashem.

"I rose up to open to my beloved; my hands dripped with myrrh, and my fingers with flowing myrrh, upon the handles of the door" (Shir Hashirim 5:5). The Midrash likens this scene to the sequence of prayers on Yom Kippur. The woman's rising is Shacharit, her "hands full of myrrh" refers to Mussaf. "My fingers with flowing myrrh," as she draws ever closer to her beloved, is Mincha. And finally, when she takes the door to open it - this is Neila. Slowly but surely, Yom Kippur culminates in Neila as the Jewish people respond to Hashem's call and open the door to allow G-d in.

Traditionally, Neila is understood as our attempt to keep the doors of heaven open, to allow our *tefillot* to ascend. In this Midrash, however, the door we are trying to open is not the door of heaven, potentially blocking our *tefillot*. It is the door that separates man from woman, the door that separates Hashem from His people and the door between Hashem and our own heart. This is the door that we have tried to open through all of Yom Kippur and hopefully can pry open during Neila.

That door is not the gate of heaven, but rather the gate of the human heart – the only gate whose key Hashem does not possess. For Him to enter and

create that rendezvous, a human being must let Him in. The goal of Neila is not to look towards heaven, to try to halt the closing of the gates of *tefilla*. It is a time of internalization, of looking into our own hearts, of trying to open our hearts to allow Hashem to enter.

The Midrash teaches us that the true drama of Yom Kippur is *not* whether our *tefillot* will or will not be accepted, but whether we will become one with Hashem. Hashem is trying to open the door. He's on the other side of the entrance of the human heart, trying to enter. He's our ally. He's cooperating. Will a rendezvous occur? This is the drama of Neila; it is our attempt to pry open the gates of the human heart and allow Hashem to enter.

May we open the door and let Hashem into our hearts!

● *Adapted from a shiur given as part of the 'Rabbi Moshe Taragin on Rav Amital z"l' series.*

Rabbi Moshe Taragin has taught at Yeshivat Har Etzion since 1994. He previously taught Talmud at Columbia University and Yeshiva University, and served as Assistant Rabbi at the Fifth Avenue Synagogue. Rabbi Taragin is the author of the popular online shiur "Talmudic Methodology" and he co-wrote the commentary for the The Krengel Family World Mizrahi Edition of the Koren Yom HaAtzma'ut Machzor.



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