

A passenger on a Windjammer trip along the Atlantic coast discussed the dense fog, making sailing very difficult. "No sailor likes fog," she said. Then she added, "Often the fog seems immensely worthwhile from the spectator's viewpoint, just for the pleasure of seeing it lift. It is a thrilling experience to see the shores and objects coming into view after being wholly blanketed."

Like the traveler eagerly awaiting the lifting of the fog, we too eagerly anticipate the High Holidays, when we can disperse the challenges that have clouded our view throughout the year and look forward to the new beginning they bring.

On this first evening of Rosh Hashanah, we cast off the imprisoning fog to its upward sweep, revealing the *Yamim Noraim*, *the Days of Awe*, rife with imagery of judgment, redemption, justice, prayer, and life—perhaps best defined through the imagery our prayers provide throughout the holy days.

We plead with God in the Avinu Malkeinu prayer:

*Avinu malkeinu p'tach sha'aray shamaim lifateinu. Our parent, our sovereign, open wide the doors of Heaven to receive our prayers.*

The doors of Heaven are unlocked, and the Holy One prepares for our petitions to arrive. They open at the beginning of the High Holy Days and lock once again at the Neilah service as we conclude Yom Kippur.

The Hebrew word *Neilah* - means locking, referring to the spiritual concept of the closing of the gates of Heaven, a moment of profound significance as we offer our final prayers and supplications during the Neilah service.

Although Judaism teaches that the gates of prayer are always open to the truly repentant, as individuals and as a congregation, we feel that this is our final chance to pour out our hearts before the Divine Throne of Mercy. Even those who have paused their time in the Sanctuary during the holy day to rest usually return to participate in the Neilah service.

The composers of the High Holidays exemplified tremendous wisdom in choosing gates and doors as imagery for these sacred days. When we celebrate and observe the beginning of a new Jewish year, we sincerely focus our efforts, prayers, and time on growing into the best version of ourselves.

Doors play an essential role in the High Holiday service. At various intervals, the curtains of the Holy Ark are opened and shut, ultimately remaining open for the entirety of the Neilah service. This evokes memories of Abraham Avinu, whose name is repeated in the High Holiday liturgical and Torah Readings. Abraham's tent had openings on all sides so that wayfarers could gain entrance quickly.

Both humble and imposing, doors have fascinated the imagination of writers in every culture. In his classical essay, titled *On Doors*, Christopher Morley wrote with feeling when he cleverly observed:

"The opening and closing of doors are the most significant actions of (hu)man's life. What a mystery lies in doors! No (hu)man knows what awaits (her or) him when (s)he opens a door... even the most familiar room where the clock ticks and the hearth grows red at dusk may harbor surprises."

Morley spoke metaphorically about the gateways of our lives. These momentous life changes can be best understood as exiting from one stage and entering the other through a liminal threshold.

Liminal moments like the first step, the first word, the first day at school—these signal doors opening. The B'nai Mitzvah celebrations, the first day of college, the betrothed standing under the wedding canopy, the first day at the office—while exciting, there will typically be a mystery lying beyond. Even the familiar will harbor surprises. How we enter a gateway signals much of the emotion we feel.

When we burst through the door, it shows our excitement for what lies on the other side - like returning home to our families following an absence. Sometimes, we can't even bring ourselves to touch the doorknob because we're so nervous about what is on the other side. Sometimes, we're gentle, like walking into a hospital room. We may be tentative because we are still determining what will appear next. We know well that a slammed door communicates much. This leads us to ask: How will we open the door of teshuvah, the Gates of Return, growth, and repentance this year?

We are familiar with what lies behind these gates, but if we've learned anything this past year, we can never be sure what tomorrow will bring, let alone the year ahead.

We conceived of grand plans. The skyscrapers of our existence were going to pierce the heavens. The ships of our glorious hopes were going to span seven seas. We were going to expand to far-away places. Then it happened on October 7th, and in the horrific day's aftermath - limitations - the doors were closed.

With the sun setting on Yom Kippur, we plead, "*P'tach lanu sha'ar b'yat ne'ilat shaar ki pana yom - Open to us a gate when a gate is closed.*"

Just as in life, when one is shut, another can be opened. We cannot relinquish hope. The Ark's doors remain open throughout the Neilah service, symbolizing our faith that an entry will be available at our behest. We express the confidence that as this last year closes, this future year will open.

Our tradition is predicated on the fundamental belief that there is always hope. Joseph, cast down by his brothers into the pit's depths, was carried off to Egypt, where he would ascend in power to be second only to the Pharaoh. Moses, a former prince of Egypt but now a lowly shepherd, will go on to be God's shepherd. At 40 years old, Akiva does not know the *aleph-bet*—the Hebrew alphabet—so he attends school with the children and ultimately ascends to the highest heights of Jewish leadership and scholarship. These narratives are testaments to the enduring power of hope in our tradition.

When Moses asked God's name, God answered: "*Eheye Asher Eheye—I shall be what I shall be.*" It was here that Moses learned the motivating essence of Jewish life. To be and to become are forces of freedom. Opening new doors excitedly, tentatively, and fearfully is one of our highest tasks at Erev Rosh Hashanah.

The dense fog has lifted to reveal the brilliant Gates of Teshuvah. How will we approach them? None of us knows what lies on the other side, yet here we stand, prepared or unprepared, in awe.