

Rabbi Karen Citrin
Yom Kippur Morning 5770
Pitchu Li: Open the Gates

In the winter of 2005, the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude presented The Gates project for Central Park in New York City. Their 7,503 gates made of saffron-colored fabric panels generated controversy, public support, and over one million visitors. The project employed hundreds of New York City residents. Official gate-keepers distributed small samples of the fabric to visitors and maintained the gates that were exposed to high winds and other natural elements. The Gates created a golden river appearing and disappearing through the bare branches of the trees, highlighting the shapes of the snowy footpaths through Central Park.

Yom Kippur is the Jewish gates project. This evening as darkness falls we will invoke the opening of the heavenly gates with the words, "Lift up your heads, O gates, lift yourselves up, O ancient doors." (Psalm 24:7) Whether it is the artistic gates in Central Park or our symbolic heavenly gates on Yom Kippur, these gates invite us in, they beckon us to enter.

Today, we stand together before the open gates; before the possibility of the New Year. Right now, at this moment, there is a *p'ticha*, an opening. But the gates on Yom Kippur do not remain open forever. Eventually we will arrive tonight at *Neilah*, literally "closing," our dramatic concluding service of Yom Kippur which gets its name from the final moment when the gates of repentance will swing shut. But in order to reach *Neilah*, these High Holy Days ask us to be open. From the month of Elul leading up to the New Year, to Rosh Hashanah itself, to the ten days of repentance, and through this entire day of Yom Kippur, our tradition teaches us that the gates are wide open. All we have to do is step through. There are three essential gates we ought to consider opening at this season: the gate of the self, the gate of the other, and the gate of the Holy One.

Open the gate to yourself a little wider. Open it enough to see our flaws, to see, as Rabbi Eisner taught us last night, all our little sins. Today is the day to unlock ourselves, to take account of our integrity and our shortcomings.

I want to share a cautionary tale about what happens when we don't open the gate of self and have an honest look inside. Our sage parable comes from the great repository of wisdom, the Peanuts Gang. In an old Charlie Brown cartoon, Lucy does not get what it means to open the self. In a moment of confession Lucy declares to Charlie, "I have examined my life and found it to be perfect. And so I am going to hold a ceremony and present myself with a medal and then I will

give a brilliant acceptance speech, after which I will greet myself in the receiving line. And then I will serve myself refreshments." And then she says, wistfully, "When you are perfect, I guess you have to do everything yourself – and that's no fun."

Lucy didn't get it. Lucy's eye to the self was closed. It is no wonder she is estranged from others. Who wants to be around such self centered, unreflective arrogance? But she is also estranged from herself. She is not open to the possibility that she has flaws, and so she cannot yearn for and achieve becoming the best Lucy she can be. It's actually more fun and spiritually gratifying to be like Charlie, humble, open to our faults, open to assistance, open to change, able to enjoy our accomplishments and successes with family and friends. Charlie ain't perfect, but he knows who he is.

Today is the day to open ourselves to being the best we can be. The reality is we work on the same things over and over, year after year, and strive for small signs of improvement. We miss the mark again and again and still the gates of repentance remain open. In a *midrash* God says, "Make for Me an opening of repentance, an opening as narrow as the point of a needle, and I will make the opening so wide for pardon that camps full of soldiers and siege engines could enter it." We all have this opportunity to march through the gates of forgiveness and acceptance. All those who wish may enter. As the Roman philosopher Seneca put it, "It is not because things are difficult that we do not dare, it is because we do not dare that they are difficult." We must open our eyes, ears, minds, and hearts to all that is possible, to all that we might become.

Open the gate to others a little wider. Every morning, and every time we say a blessing for the food we have just eaten, Jews recite these words from Psalm 145, "*Poteach et yadecha, u'masbiya l'chol chai ratzon* – Open your hand, feeding or sustaining every life to its heart's content." Yom Kippur calls us to open our hands, and extend them toward others.

Israeli poet Yehudah Amichai, blends the themes of this day with the scars of war to paint a picture of what happens when the gates between people remain shut, when our open hands remain closed fists. Listen to his poem:

On Yom Kippur in 1967, the Year of Forgetting,
I put on my dark holiday clothes and walked to the Old City of
Jerusalem.

For a long time I stood in front of an Arab's hole-in-the-wall
shop,

not far from the Damascus Gate,
a shop with buttons and zippers and spools of thread
In every color and snaps and buckles.

A rare light and many colors, like an open Ark.
I told him in my heart that my father too had a shop like this,
with thread and buttons.
I explained to him in my heart about all the decades
and the causes and the events,
why I am now here
and my father's shop was burned there and he is buried here.
When I finished, it was time for Neilah, the Closing of the Gates
prayer.
He too lowered the shutters and locked the gate
and I returned, with all the worshippers, home.

Amichai is open in his heart to the Arab shop keeper, but the decades of history and war cause the gates of real dialogue and true relationship to remain shut. The Arab closes the gate of his store just as the gates of prayer are closing for the Jews at the end of Yom Kippur. The chance to talk, to meet each other, to compare stories, has passed.

Contrast this poem to the story of a friend of my family who lives in Israel. Ron Bernstein, affectionately known in the Reform Movement as "the pomelo man," made *aliyah* in 1977 from New York. He married an Israel woman and they raised their family on Kibbutz Yahel, the first Reform kibbutz in Israel. Yahel is located in the Negev, just north of Eilat. The pomelo groves of Yahel stop at the meager barbed wire fence that separates Jordan from Israel. Years ago, before there was peace between Jordan and Israel, Ron was out in the fields tending to his pomelo trees. He heard some commotion along the border and approached the Israeli soldiers to see what was going on. The commanding officer pointed toward footprints that began on the Jordanian side, continued onto the Israeli side, circled around the trees at Yahel, and headed back into Jordan. It was a hot, sunny, summer day, over 100 degrees. Ron told the soldiers that he was sure the Jordanians had seen the trees, with their big, juicy fruit, imagined how refreshing they would be, took some and left. He asked the soldiers to leave and forget about it.

The next day, Ron put a huge crate with over 400 pounds of pomelos out by the border, with a sign in Hebrew, English, and Arabic, inviting both Jordanian and Israeli patrols to enjoy the fruit. One day, Ron was out in the field, when he saw a Mercedes Benz drive up from the Jordanian side. The car pulled over and the man asked for "Mr. Yahel". It turned out that he was the Jordanian regional governor. They spoke and agreed to meet in the same place the next day with their families. The day after, the two families met. Ron picked up the Jordanian children, and the governor picked up Ron's children. They

shared pomelos and talked. Since then, Ron has always said that if more and more people in the Middle East have interactions like this, peace will be realized.

If more and more people open themselves to each other, our families would be more loving, our communities would be more caring, and the world would be more whole. "*Poteach et yadecha.*" Open yourself to the experience and perspective of others. Open yourself to other's counsel and wisdom. Open your hand to the needy and the stranger. Open yourself and let others in.

Open the gate to the Holy One a little wider. Even during the height of the *Neilah* service, when our stomachs are grumbling, when we are light headed, we offer one more plea to God for openness, "*Pitchu li sha'arei tzedek* – Open for me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter, to praise God. (Psalm 118:19) "Open the gates for us, even now, when the gates are closing, and the day begins to fade." (*machzor*)

Rabbi Alan Lew, of blessed memory, describes an energy, an attractive force, that passes through the open gates of heaven during these holy days. "This is a very subtle energy," he teaches, "and for most of the Ten Days, when the gates are wide open, we don't even notice it. But during the *Neilah* service, as the gates begin to close and the opening becomes narrower and narrower, this attractive energy becomes more and more intense, more and more noticeable. It is precisely this energy which draws us to the *Neilah* service so intensely, and which inspires us to pray so fervently once there." (*This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*)

One year at *Neilah*, the Hasidic master Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev felt an extraordinary urgency in his prayers. Levi Yitzchak ascended the pulpit to begin the *Neilah* service in fear and trembling. He was determined that before the gates of heaven closed he would wrest a promise from God to give his people a year of blessing and happiness instead of the terrible suffering they had endured in recent years. So, he did three things:

First, he pleaded with God, "Look, God, an ordinary person who drops a treasure on the floor will stoop down and pick it up without even thinking about it. But You, dear God, You have called us your treasure, and yet You let us fall from Your hands and You don't pick us up. For two thousand years, You have let us grovel in the dust. Is it too much to ask You to act like an ordinary person acts?" Levi saw his words rise up toward heaven and the gates of heaven stopped closing and actually began to open, but just a little bit.

So Levi Yitzhak decided to throw all his energy into the final *vidui*, the formal confessional prayer. If pleading opened the gates a little bit, perhaps repentance would open them up the rest of the way.

So when it came time to recite the confessional, he began to weep, and he cried out, "Woe to us. We live in a crazy world. We lie and cheat and steal." A bitter cry of remorse could be heard throughout the synagogue. Levi Yitzchak saw the cry rising toward heaven, and it opened the gates of heaven a little bit wider, but still not enough.

So Levi Yitzchak declared war on God! That was the only course of action left. Now a *tzadik*, a righteous person like Levi Yitzchak, doesn't wage war the way a general would, and he doesn't use the same weapons either. A *tzadik* employs an army of the righteous, and their weapons are good deeds. So in his last desperate attempt to open the gates of heaven wide, Levi Yitzchak raised his head and cried out to the heavens, "Let the congregation speak!" "Remember the two rubles the widow Sarah paid her son's teacher, instead of spending them on the dress she longed for. Remember the bowl of soup the student shared with his classmates in spite of his own hunger. Remember the parcel of land Reb Chaim lost because he refused to go back on his word." And so Levi Yitzchak went on and on, listing one by one the simple acts of loving-kindness and unselfishness the ordinary men and women of his congregation had performed in the past year. As the congregation raised their eyes, they could see the gates of heaven open completely, and they saw their prayers become a garland and rest on God's head as the Holy One descended from the Seat of Judgment and ascended the Seat of Mercy.

And so it is with us. When I look out from our *bimah* in the final moments of *Neilah*, I believe that I see what God sees, an army of infinite power. I look from face to face and I see the burdens and the joys, the fear and the hope. We wonder what lies in store for us in the year ahead and wonder what God wants from us. God wants us to be an army of righteous people, armed with our good deeds. Think about how many good deeds are in this room right now. This is what will open the gates of heaven and bring us closer to God.

The Holy One opens the gates of heaven for us, but will we also open our gates to God? As the Hasidic saying goes, "Where do we find God? Wherever we let God in." (Menachem Mendel of Kotsk) It is up to us to open our own gates, to let down our barriers, to let the Holy One in.

Judaism recognizes that it is not always easy to be open to God. We are not always ready to pray. Whenever we stand to recite the *Tefilah*, the central prayer of every service, we first utter six brief words. These preliminary words ask God to enable us to pray; it is a prayer to begin praying. "*Adonai sifatai tiftach u'fi yagid t'hilatecha* – Eternal God, open my lips, that my mouth may declare your glory." (Psalm 51:17) Rabbi Lawrence Kushner asks, "Wouldn't it make more sense to say something like, "Here I am God, ready to begin our

conversation," or "Permit me to introduce myself," or "I know we haven't always seen eye to eye," something that would begin the dialogue of what will follow? (*My People's Prayer Book*, ed. Lawrence Hoffman) Instead, Judaism understands that the essence of prayer is to first be open, ready, and mindful because this is how we begin to welcome the Holy into our lives.

When we are prepared, when we are ready and awake, when we are open, we can receive the bountiful blessings of life. Our plea for *p'ticha* even during *Neilah* is meant to not only invoke the physical imagery of the gates, but also to infuse our souls throughout these holy days and every day with a spirit of openness; an openness to ourselves, to one another, and to the Holy One.

I want to let you in on a little secret. Yes, the Yom Kippur gates will close at the end of the day, but Jewish tradition teaches that the gates of prayer and the gates of repentance, in fact all gates, re-open each day.

In life, there are always gates to open, at all ages, at all moments. We are the gate-keepers; will we open them and walk through or will they remain shut? Will we open the gate of compassion? The gate of righteousness? The gate of goodness? The gate of giving? The gate of forgiving? The gate of listening? The gate of sharing? The gate of commitment to our synagogue? The gate of Torah study? The gate of prayer? The gate of healing? The gate of risking to love more deeply the people we say we love? The gate of courage? The gate of action?

In a few short hours, we will stand arm in arm in the dusk as we make *Havdallah*. At that moment we will have arrived at the true *p'ticha*, the true opening, the blank scroll of 5770 unrolled before us. May we enter it with joy, open to all that the year may bring.