

Kol Nidrei 5785

## **Gates - In Three Parts**

### Part 1

Tonight is the holiest night of the year – a night we look deep into our souls – a night we reflect, repent, and renew – a night we make vows to ourselves and to the people we love to change for the better, knowing that as hard as we try, we might fail.

Because change isn't easy.

Often true change requires multiple attempts – and multiple times hearing the same message.

That is why it is our tradition at TJ to listen to the haunting music and words of Kol Nidrei, not all at once when we begin the service, but rather three times throughout the service.

And tonight, rather than hearing one sermon at the end of the evening, my message will also be broken into three parts. Each part builds upon the other. My hope is that by breaking it up you will be able to focus on each message with more intention.

That's about tonight.

Now let's talk about tomorrow night. Tomorrow night, at the end of a long, and meaningful day, we will conclude

with a service called, “Neilah” – which literally means “the closing of the gates.”

Sadly, many of you won't be here to experience it.

I get it, it's a long day, and it's a lot of temple, and..... it's hard to say “no” to the tempting invitations to those fabulous break-fast parties that seem to be starting earlier and earlier every year...

However, for those of you who have attended in the past, or if you attend tomorrow night, you will recall that the opening prayer of Neilah is:

“Petach lanu shaar be'et neilat sha'ar”

“Open for us the gate, as the gates start closing.”

I love this image, of a big gate opening, extending an invitation, to walk through it, to pass through a liminal area, an area of change, where you are not in and not out, but rather you are transforming- into someone different, someone new, someone better.

And I know that this image sounds very similar to the descriptions of people who have had “end of life experiences” and came back to describe an image of an open gate and a bright inviting light, a sense of joy from the thought of going through the gate.

And as you can guess - it is no coincidence.

Yom Kippur is supposed to bring us as close as possible to confront our mortality, to create an “end of life

simulation” that invites us to open wide, and walk through the gates, not of death but rather those of change.

The sound of the shofar is like an alarm clock calling on us to awaken- reminding us that we do not have endless time to change. Every time we open the doors of our ark, we are presented with the imagery of a gate opening as an invitation to leave behind the parts in us we no longer need, dead parts that hold us back, to cast off behaviors that stop us from being the best we can be.

For the next 24 hours we will be wearing white, and wrapped with a Tallit - representing the way Judaism teaches us to dress our dead as we prepare them for burial. We refrain from eating, from bathing, from intimacy - from everything that reminds us of life, from all the things we won't be able to do when we are no longer here.

We Jews love the imagery of gates.

Whenever I think about gates, I am reminded of the story of a woman who was the president of her gated community for 20 years, so it was no surprise that when she passed and went to heaven, she was assigned the task of the gatekeeper - her mission very simple, anyone arriving to heaven needs to spell the word “love” and they are allowed in.

Ten years into her assignment she sees her husband who just passed away and is at the gates of heaven. So, she asks him, how did he fare after she passed? He starts telling her about the young woman he met after the

shiva and how he decided that it's about time to do all the things he was too busy to do when they were married, how he finally took time off and they travelled the world, ate in a Michelin restaurant, flew in a hot air balloon, went scuba diving in Australia. He went on and on and on about how beautiful the last 10 years have been. Finally, he asks if he can enter through the gate to heaven.

No problem she says - all you must do is spell a word...Czechoslovakia.

We Jews love the imagery of gates.

Especially here in Florida, the "gated community" capital of the U.S. Where I grew up, there were no such neighborhoods.

I get it - gates give us a sense of protection. They help us understand who is in and who is out, they set boundaries and rules.

But for our ancestors, gates had a very different meaning than they have for us.

Historically, the gate of the town was the weakest part of its defense. Gates were not where you posted guards, but rather - as Isaiah reminds us, guards were on the walls: "And on thy walls, O Jerusalem, have I set watchmen all day and all night."

The gates were a point of vulnerability. The gate was the place where danger lurked, as such, the mezuzah that was considered a sort of amulet which would protect the

inhabitants of a home was placed at the gate- we read in Deuteronomy 6:9: “You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” The place in which we are vulnerable is the best, most proper place to sanctify with God’s words.

It's not easy to be vulnerable - to leave comfort zones, to leave behind the walls we have built around us, to accept the need for change.

It’s not easy to open the gates and walk through them.

And when I say it’s not easy,  
I am especially referring to every time you forget to leave my name at the entrance to your gated community.

Tonight, we receive the opportunity to do exactly that, to let our guards down so that we can open our hearts and walk through some important gates.

Allow me tonight to be your tour guide, something I did for many years in Jerusalem.

I was lucky to grow up in Jerusalem, I spent many weekends roaming the alleys of the old city, going in and out of the eight gates of the old city.

I will let you in on a little professional secret, going into the Old City is a very different experience based on which gate you choose to walk in. Walking through the Regal Jaffa Gate will get you directly to the tourist market, through the decorative Damascus Gate you are in the midst of the bustling Muslim Quarter. Walk in through the

Zion Gate - still with the sign of bullet holes from the battles in 1948 and you will find yourself in the rebuilt Jewish Quarter, a very different experience than walking into the city through the simple unpretentious Dung Gate that brings you immediately to the heart of sacredness Temple Mount and the Kotel.

Different gates, different experiences.

We each have a different gate to open tonight.

Which gate do you need to walk through?

What gate do you need to open to escape the walls that threaten to close on you?

Is it the gate you need to finally close on a toxic relationship, so that you can open a gate to a new much healthier relationship?

Or the gate you need to open for a new career opportunity?

The one you need to open to relocate so that you can be closer to family.

Maybe the gate you need to open is the one finally leading to retirement - to rediscover who you are not only through the lens of what you do to make a living.

Or the gate to embrace your age, letting the gray take over, and giving up on the need to not "look my age?"

The gate to accepting “I can no longer drive.” The gate to accepting “I need help.”

The gate to accepting this disease has no cure and the need to focus on making the best of the little time that I have left.

The gate to realizing you can't change your child, she is who she is, all you can do is be there for her.

And of course, the gate to forgiving ourselves for horrible mistakes we have made and forgiving others for those they have done to us.

Whatever gate it is that you need to open and walk through, I know it's not easy, I know it can be frightening, that's why our liturgy offers a beautiful prayer to be recited during tomorrow's service - Pitchu Li - open up for me the gates. It suggests that God is at the gate, and we turn to God to open it for us, and that God's presence with us on this sacred day will give us the courage, the strength of faith to pass through it.

But I want to offer a different interpretation to this prayer - what if rather than asking and waiting for God to open the gates, what if we saw ourselves as the gates themselves, I believe that this prayer is directed inward, with the intention that we use this day to remind ourselves that the key to the gate is in our own hands, that we, and only we have the ability to open up ourselves?

Adonai, I stand before you today, and before your people who are all, each in their different ways, locked outside the

gate. Adonai, please give us the courage to open the closed gates within us, the gates that hold us back, let the music, the prayers, the words we share today shake us to our cores so that we find the determination to open the gates - walk through and thank you.

## PART 2

One of my favorite things to do as a tour guide in Israel was to lead groups through the Old City. Tonight, I want to ask you to allow me to be your guide – and for anyone who has ever traveled with me – you know I like to cover a lot of ground.

Tonight, we won't have time to cover every gate in the Old City – but I will focus on three – and these gates are very different – but I believe they are critical in today's world.

They represent some of our greatest weaknesses and vulnerabilities, but also opportunities both as individuals and as a community.

I worry for us all that if we fail to enter through these gates, we will never find peace.

The first gate is the Zion Gate, the one that reminds us of our connection to Israel, today I refer to it as “**the gate of apathy.**”

You see, I grew up hearing stories about the days before the Six Day War in 1967 in Israel, about the sense of desperation that so many of you and so many Israelis felt.



The overwhelming feeling was that this war would be the end of Israel.

And today while Israel is much stronger and more powerful than it was 57 years ago - in so many ways - it faces much greater dangers than it ever has. And once again, like 57 years ago, it is literally fighting on multiple fronts for its existence, for its life.

The horrific attacks of October 7<sup>th</sup>, during which over 1,200 people were brutally murdered, raped, burned alive and killed while fighting heroically against thousands of terrorist, and in which many more were seriously injured in body and soul, and 250 taken hostage, and the subsequent events of this entire past year, woke us from a long and false narrative that we have found a way to live side by side with our enemies.

As you all know, the situation in Israel is extremely complex, there are no easy or magical solutions. In fact, not all Israelis agree about what Israel should be doing. and here in the U.S. - disagreements about calls for ceasefire, and the space we allow to acknowledge and act about the suffering of the population in Gaza is a painful issue tearing apart some families and friends.

But this is not a sermon about what is happening in Israel. And it doesn't matter exactly what you believe the best course of action should be.

This part of the sermon is about a gate that every Jew must commit to opening their hearts and minds to – and

that is the gate of your **unconditional support for Israel**. We cannot be apathetic. We cannot as a Jewish community, nor as individuals, sit on the sideline when it comes to our support of Israel. We cannot be numb to the news. We cannot ignore the requests. We no longer have the privilege of rolling our eyes when the rabbi is “once again” speaking about Israel. We must all accept and understand that any threat to Israel is a threat to every Jew.

Yes - our destiny, as Jews, here in America is tied to the destiny of Israel.

Simply said, if Israel ceases to exist, we Diaspora Jews immediately will also face a tremendous danger. Don't fool yourself, if Iran's dream - and the dream of its proxies to destroy Israel – is successful, it is a validation to every antisemitic group that still shares Hitler's dream - that the total elimination of the Jewish population is a REAL possibility.

Antisemitism is already haunting us on an unprecedented level, just think what flames will be ignited in these Jew haters if the Jewish state that was built to protect Jews ceases to exist.

I can't say it any clearer - The destiny of Israel is the destiny of your children and your grandchildren, even if they do not live in Israel.

What happens to Israel directly affects us. And remember - you didn't have to go to temple every week or even once a year, nor to identify as a Zionist, nor love being Jewish,

to be sent to your death, for just being Jewish, just 85 years ago.

But we also must remember, that as Reform Jews, it's not enough for us that Israel survives physically, it's not enough to worry only about the body, we also must fight for its soul. For even if Israel survives, if it becomes anything close to a theocracy controlled by extreme radical Jewish, messianic voices, where orthodox Jews are exempt from carrying their fair share, where intolerance and injustice prevail, then once again, we, liberal Jews in America will find ourselves alone, isolated from the state that we can no longer expect to protect us, and that by its actions might even increase the hatred towards us - and once again - we will find ourselves in existential danger.

Pitchu Li – may each and every one of us recognize the importance of the State of Israel – embracing her with unconditional love– even when we might be disappointed in or disagree with its government. May we fight for an Israel we are proud of, one that shares our Reform values. And may we honor the young men and women fighting for her existence, and their families, and their sacrifices by not taking for granted that they are fighting for us too.

The second gate is the Damascus Gate, the one you enter to the bustling Muslim quarter and immediately think you are in a different world. I want to call it the “**gate of tolerance.**”

I've said this ad nauseum, God willing, on Wednesday November 6<sup>th</sup>, we will know who the next President of the United States will be. I pray for a peaceful transfer of continuation of power. But as I have said so many times before- we all need to remember that 50% of our country will wake up that day feeling like this is no longer their home, feeling this country has gone mad, feeling like we have gone one step too far teetering on the edge of the cliff.

We Americans value sports so much. We are willing to drive our kids and grandchildren all around the country, to sit long hours on the sidelines of the courts, to sacrifice family dinners, and even Hebrew school, so that they can play sports. And we do so even though, deep in our hearts, we know they will not become professional athletes.

So why do we do it? One resounding reason is because we love the values, they learn by being on a team, we love that they know that no matter if you win or lose, you show respect and shake the hands of the players on the opposing side.

Politics has become so much like sports; we choose a team and stick with it no matter how well or bad they perform, or how awesome or terrible the coach is. As such - why is it that in politics, we have such a hard time shaking the hands of the people on the other side of the aisle, it wasn't always like this, and it doesn't have to stay like this.

We come from a 3000-year old tradition that values hard and honest debate, but values unity above all. Adonai Echad.

It really won't matter who wins the election if after the election we keep tearing each other up. If those who lose despair and threaten to leave this country or refuse to accept the results, or, if those who win forget they must govern for all of us not just those who voted them into power.

Pitchu Li - May we open the gate of our unconditional love to each other. Even when we are disappointed, or angry with the outcome of the election. We must bring ourselves to remember that only if we stop seeing the other side as evil, and only if work together, we will be able to get anywhere, leaving our children and grandchildren a better world.

And the final gate I want to guide you through is The Dung Gate - the one leading us to a wall we as Jews yearned to touch for 2 millennia, a place I hope we all have memories of feeling holiness - today I call that gate - **“the gate of purpose”** – the gate of our relationship with our faith and with our God.

Just last week, Bret Stephens wrote an article with a message that is critical for us to hear. He shared,

“There is a moving passage in *“Not I: Memoirs of a German Childhood”* in which the German historian Joachim Fest recalled that his Catholic father, Johannes,

had a personal fondness for their Jewish friends, along with his analysis of where German Jews had gone wrong politically: “They had, in tolerant Prussia, lost their instinct for danger, which had preserved them through the ages.” “I’ve often wondered” - Stephens writes – “whether that isn’t also a fair description of the last two or three generations of American Jewry - that in tolerant America, we had mostly forgotten much of what it meant to be Jewish. Not merely the languages our forebears spoke or the religious rituals they observed but also the visceral understanding that, despite most outward appearances, we were and would always be different. That there will always be those who hate us. That nothing we can do — whether through acts of religious renunciation or cultural erasure or conspicuous achievements or abundant generosity — would ever entirely ease that hatred. If anything, it might aggravate it.

October 7<sup>th</sup> and the worldwide reaction to it began the jarring process of restoring that ancestral knowledge.”

We are all October 8<sup>th</sup> Jews now – whether you want to be or not. And it is up to us to figure out what each of us will do now. One thing is for sure, we cannot simply continue “as is.”

Judaism will not help us, nor will it survive, if all we pass down is an empty shell in the form of a stand-alone Bar Mitzvah, a 30-minute Seder and presents on Hanukkah.

For many years, I have tried to embrace meeting every Jew where they are. Our reality has changed. You might

be able to get through challenging times without Judaism – but I truly believe Judaism will not get through these challenging times without you.

We must open the gate that brings us back to the understanding that Judaism is a beautiful, rich, complex set of ideas, of values and guidance that give meaning and purpose to our lives. Without these tools, without a richer knowledge of our texts and Torah, without living our Jewish values, without seriously embracing its rituals, I believe we will not withstand the challenges ahead of us.

Now is the time to “step it up” and reconnect to your Jewish DNA. We should be proud that we are Jewish. We should honor those that came before us, and we should fight for those that will come after us. Tonight, I stand here and ask you to make three vows.... First, it is every Jew's duty to stand with Israel and to not waiver.

Second, to work to find common ground, to value freedom and justice, and to build bridges with those who might have opposing views.

And third, to fully embrace being Jewish – wake up - learn, care, act. Don't wait for someone else to do it. Don't wait for another year to pass.

Pitchu Li, let us open ourselves to fight apathy, intolerance and to find deeper meaning and purpose in our Jewish “why.”

## Part 3

Finally, I want to take you through one last gate - Shaar Ha'rachamim - the gate of compassion and mercy. And you might know that in the Old City in Jerusalem, there is a gate with that exact name. Only that I can't actually take you through it, for this gate is very different from the other seven as it is physically blocked – covered with stones and bricks which are cemented together. According to our tradition, this will be the gate that when he appears - Mashiach enters from. However, in 1541, the gate was sealed by the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent exactly for the purpose of preventing the Jewish Messiah from entering Jerusalem as prophesied.

I personally, as many Reform Jews understand, the coming of Mashiach not as an actual arrival of a human sent by God, but as the time when we humans will do God's work of creating a world that is nothing but good. When we eliminate hatred and evil, when all people can see others as being created in one image, the image of God, when all people are treated with justice and live with dignity. When all that happens- that means the Mashiach has arrived.

**So, opening this gate should be our top priority. The question is how.**

The Talmud in (Brachot 32b) might give us an idea how: “From the day that the Temple was destroyed the gates of prayer have been closed ... “



What a revelation - The gates of prayer are closed!  
Which means that to witness what is happening all around us and to solely respond by saying “my prayers are with you, or you are in my prayers” is not enough.

The Talmud continues: “but even though the gates of prayer are closed, the gates of tears are not closed.”

Only by feeling the pain, only by feeling the danger, only by feeling the urgency of the moment, only if we remember time is limited, and that we need to open ourselves so that we can walk through our personal gates, the gates of apathy, of intolerance, of finding purpose and of mercy can this gate begin to be cleared.

Let us not waste any more time for the gates are closing, and please remember that gates are always spoken of in the plural. They are always multiple; more than one path is available to us if we wish to enter.

The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder Hasidism, taught that an open heart is the key which unlocks any spiritual gateway. Tonight, we stand again at these widening gates, on the threshold of a splendid sanctuary in time. May the gates represent an opening of our hearts and minds to the extraordinary possibility of life renewed.

Tomorrow, at Neilah, I will open the gates of our ark, and each and every one present gets a chance to come up to the open ark. It's a powerful moment, I invite you to consider experiencing it, and I know that this moment,

when you are standing alone, in front of Torah and God, might look like a small step, but it's not, it's a big step in your journey through the gates.

I want to leave you with the words of Yehuda Amichai:  
Open closed open.

Before we are born, everything is open in the universe without us.

For as long as we live, everything is closed within us.

And when we die, everything is open again.

Open closed open.

That's all we are.

Shanah Tovah.