

Rabbi Lester Bronstein

Bet Am Shalom, White Plains NY

“Closing Time”

I.

First, a Mishnah, a nugget of Rabbinic wisdom, and this will set the tone for my remarks tonight. This is from Rabbi Tarfon, a great rabbi in the Land of Israel in the 2nd century CE. Rabbi Tarfon’s voice, along with Rabbi Akiva’s and Rabbi Ishmael’s, shapes the Jewish mind and Jewish world-view in those crucial years following the destruction of the Temple and the fall of the Jewish Commonwealth. His teaching becomes the Judaism of survival and flourishing in an uncertain future. Rabbi Tarfon frames our approach to the immediate world we *can* control, even while we are situated in a bigger world over which we have *little* control.

He begins, “hayom katzer/The day is short.” Then he pushes us into a paradox: “v’ham’lacha m’rubah/And the task is huge.” Then, as if we could not already guess what he was referring to, he adds, “v’hapo’alim atzeylim/And the workers are goofing off too much.” Guess who he means? And this incentive for getting on track: “v’ha-s’char harbeh/But the reward is great.” And finally, a stinger that makes the message all the more sobering: “u-va’al habayit dokhek/And the master of the house is pressing.” Or, demanding, pushing. Breathing down our neck. Hocking our chainik. Knocking at the gate.

Then he softens the tone a bit: “lo alecha ham’lacha lig’mor/It is not incumbent upon *you* to do all of the work.” “v’lo atah ben chorin l’hibateyl mimena/But neither are you free to desist from it.”

Well thank goodness! The work is huge, the time is short, the reward is great but we are too lazy to work for it, and the boss is pressing us onward at a steady pace. Yet we don’t have to do the whole assignment, whatever it is, and we don’t have to do it alone. Others will help, and others will pick up where we left off. But again, time is running out.

II.

Now, a modern Mishnah, if you will. It came to me near the end of summer in the form of a secret, mystical, kabbalistic text encoded into my Tanglewood lawn ticket:

“Gates open at 12 noon
 Grounds close at 6:30pm
 No Refunds, Rain or Shine”

All of the elements of Yom Kippur are here, just as the Rabbis bequeathed them to us. The “gates” open at a certain time. They stay open for a good long while. While they are open, we may come and go at will. We may enjoy the pleasures available within, to our heart’s content. At a certain time the grounds close. At that point, we are still encouraged to reflect upon what we’ve experienced and enjoyed, but no further activity will be permitted. We must leave the premises.

And should we want to complain that we did not get our money’s worth, or that conditions were not adequate to meet our expectations, we will nonetheless be granted no refund. If our time was dampened by inclement weather, too bad. No refunds. If it was too hot or too cold, too bad. No refunds. Too crowded? No refunds. If circumstances caused us to have to leave early, too bad. No second chances. No make-ups.

We get one shot. One ticket. It’s good for the time listed on the front, at the published price. So enjoy. Or not. But, no refunds. And when the gates close, the show is over and we must vacate the grounds.

P’tach lanu sha’ar b’eyt n’ilat sha’ar ki fana yom

Open the gates for us, at the time of the *closing* of the gates, for the day is passing away.

Hayom yifneh hashemesh yavo v’yifneh navo’ah sh’arecha

The day is turning away, the sun is returning to set. May we now come into your gates?

Ana el na, sa na s'lach na, m'chal na chamol na

We pray, gentle One, we pray. Forgive us, we pray. Have compassion for us, we pray.

Rachem-na, kaper-na, k'vosh chet v'avon

Have mercy, we pray. Let us atone now, we pray. Help us conquer our wrongs, we pray.

Many of you recognize this as a piyyut, or liturgical poem, from the Ne'ilah service. Ne'ilah means "closing time." "Last call." To my ear, this also sounds like a piyyut for the final service of Yom Kippur:

"Gates open at 12 noon

Grounds close at 6:30pm

No Refunds, Rain or Shine"

III.

The Hebrew word for "gate" is *sha'ar*. A *sha'ar* is a limited, limiting space. It allows a certain amount of passage, and it also limits traffic through it. Especially when it is entirely closed. It keeps things in, and other things out. In the Rabbinic period it became the image par excellence for the Days of Awe. A gate we try to get through. A gate we attempt to hold open a bit longer, like a quickly closing subway car door. And do we hold that door for one another, or just for ourselves?

From the root for gate, shin-ayin-resh, we get the Hebrew word *shi'ur*. A *shi'ur* is a measure, like a measure of time. A teacher offers a lesson, a *shi'ur*, which is a fixed measure of time, information, and inspiration. "I attended the rebbe's *shi'ur*," we say.

The Mishnah tells us that many of the mitzvot on our to-do list have a *shi'ur*, a limit. We must fast on Yom Kippur, but there's a limit. If we continue to fast on the following day, it is a meaningless act. Likewise the strictures and pleasures of Shabbat. The lighting of a Chanukah lamp. Affixing a mezuzah on the door. The blessings before and after a meal. We do them, and we're done. *Genug shoin*.

The Mishnaic Rabbis must have enjoyed compiling their other list: holy acts that have NO shi'ur. Elu d'varim she-eyn lahem shi'ur. These are the things that have no limit. No gate. No closing time.

The Rabbis' list of mitzvot without a shi'ur is one of the neatest little packages in the whole tradition. Rabbi Fredda Cohen calls it her daily checklist. Here are some of my favorites:

Peah/Leaving the corners of the field for the poor: Yes, there's a shi'ur or limit on the size of the corner, but no shi'ur on how many harvest seasons we need to observe the dictum over the course of our lives. "I gave my share, my shi'ur, last year" is not in the Jewish dialogue box. Last year, yes, but not this year. Or next year, for that matter.

Kibbud av v'em/Honoring our parents: Everyone has felt the joy of providing dignity to our parents when there otherwise might be none. But all of us have felt that frustrating tightness in our throats as we say: enough is enough. And most of us, in our role as parents, have caused that sickening feeling. But we can never show enough honor, enough kavod, to the persons who brought us through the helplessness of childhood, especially when they become as helpless as children themselves.

Iyyun tefilah/Seriousness in prayer: Interesting that there's a limit on the number of prayers are asked to recite, but no limit on the effort we need to make to find depth of meaning in those prayers, in our *act* of prayer.

And so forth. *Bikkur cholim*/visiting the sick; *hakhnasat orkhim*/Welcoming the stranger; *halvayat ha-met*/Respecting the dead and comforting the mourner. Dowering the bride. Getting to the shi'ur at the house of study early.

V'hava'at shalom beyn adam lachavero/And exerting the effort to bring peace between one person and another. No limit on this one, either. No shi'ur. No fixed time when the gates of diplomacy close and we no longer have the obligation to seek yet another avenue to peace, even

if peace only means the cessation of hostilities, or the protection of ancillary peoples from violence on account of the lack of peace.

Not that violence is not inevitable from time to time. But even intentional violence must always be resorted to with the unceasing goal of getting all parties to stop killing each other, which we'll call for lack of a better term, *shalom*. This, because violence has its own way of breaking through every sha'ar, every gate and confine. It is hard to stop a streak of violence once it has broken through the gate.

V'talmud torah k'neged kulam/And the study of Torah leads to them all. There is no limit on how much Torah we should learn, unless of course the act of learning becomes an obsession and keeps us from acting on the Torah we've worked so hard to acquire. Learning for its own sake, *torah lish'mah*, is a beloved Rabbinic phrase, but it's probably a ruse. They don't really mean it. Maybe we can learn some things for the sheer joy of learning, but not Torah. Torah always has a point.

Like this favorite of the Rabbinic tradition: "Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving *shalom* and pursuing *shalom*, loving our fellow human beings and bringing them closer to Torah." Torah always has a point, and usually it is the bringing of humanity toward *shalom*.

Learning Torah always pushes us to the paradox of Jewish accountability, and here comes the point of my talk tonight: First, that there is no shi'ur, no sha'ar, on the number of sacred acts we must perform, and in fact the expectation upon us is superhuman and unrealistic. And second, that the sha'ar is closing fast. We are running out of time.

Our earth is running out of time.

Our hopes for holding back chaos and bringing combatants to the table – in Syria, in Iran, in Sinai, in Ramallah and Jerusalem, in the United States Congress – all are running low on time.

Our great American social project of bringing all our citizens out of poverty and into opportunity – our shi'ur is stretching thin. Our sha'ar is creaking as it closes.

Why do we even have Yom Kippur in the first place? To play out, over the course of a simulated life-span in these twenty-five hours, the drama of this paradox. We are charged with innumerable responsibilities, and we are running out of time to do them. We are commanded to do more than anyone can do in one life time, and we are given less than an adequate length of time to do them.

It's unfair. We want to hang around the grounds longer. We don't want to be rushed. We don't want such a big burden. And we're considering asking for a refund, or a do-over, or a rain check. The fat book in our hands says we always deserve another chance, and that our prayers can keep the gates from slamming shut on our nose.

But we know better. The Tanglewood ticket is correct. Welcome to this lovely life. Stay on the grounds all day. But when the gates close, good-bye. And rain or shine, no do-overs. So it's time to get serious. You think Yom Kippur is long? It's gone before we know it. Go ahead, have a bagel and a piece of babka. Too late for anything else.

IV.

Fortunately, our tradition found a nicer way to say all of this. I'll give you one more text, a gentle and loving version of the same message. There is a passage in the Song of Songs, the *Shir Hashirim* from the Hebrew Bible, though originally it may have been a popular pastoral poem about sensuality and romance. I invite you to read it the way our romantic Rabbis read it, especially Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarphon and their chevra. It goes like this:

Ani y'shena v'libi 'er/I am asleep, but my heart is wakeful
 Kol dodi dofek/And the voice of my beloved is knocking [like knocking on a closed gate]
 Pitchi li achoti ra'yati/Open up for me, my sister, my friend
 Yonati, tamati/My dove, my pure one
 She-roshi nimla tal/For my head is drenched with dew
 K'vutzotai r'sisey laila/My locks with the damp of the night

Obviously it's a thinly veiled metaphor for the call to intimacy. The Rabbis knew darn well what the poem was about. Yet they also wanted it to serve as the guiding principle for our complex, paradoxical relationship with the unknown One of the universe who seems invisible yet always comes knocking, demanding, calling.

As Heschel boldly puts it in *God in Search of Man*, the Holy One comes looking for us not to rebuke us or make our lives miserable. Rather, the One of Being comes knocking because we don't. Comes seeking us because we don't go seeking first. Comes to create not an arrangement of subjugation, but a relationship of love and trust. Comes to wake us up from our slumber, to help us realize that time really is limited [for us], and that so much is achievable if only we would transform our daily activity into sacred acts and duties, the *d'varim she-eyn lahem shi'ur*, that list of assignments that have no gate or limit.

The one calling for the gates to open turns out not to be us. It turns out to be our Lover, who has come to wake us from our lazy slumber.

V.

Our whole lives could be a love story: all too short, but so powerfully passionate and awake and aware! Yom Kippur is like an anniversary, when we sit and remember how the love affair got started in the first place. Yom Kippur is our chance to revive that passion, to wake ourselves up once again.

Hayom katzer/The day is short

V'ham'lacha m'rubah/And the task is huge

Ani y'shenah/And I am asleep

Kol dodi dofek/But my beloved knocks at the gate, calls out my name

V'ha-s'char harbeh/The reward is so very great

Kol dodi dofek/My beloved is knocking at the gate.