**“Open for Me the Gates of Righteousness”**

**Based on a sicha by Harav Yehuda Amital *zt”l***

Translated by Kaeren Fish

I sleep, but my heart wakes: hark, my beloved is knocking, saying, “Open for me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled; for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night.” I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I soil them? My beloved put in his hand by the latchet of the door, and my heart was thrilled for him. I rose up to open for my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, and my fingers with flowing myrrh, upon the handles of the lock. (Song of Songs 5:2–5)

This is as it is written in the Midrash. “‘I rose up to open for my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, and my fingers with flowing myrrh, upon the handles of the lock’ (Song 5:5). ‘I rose up to open for my beloved’ – This alludes to *Shacharit* [of Yom Kippur]. ‘And my hands dripped with myrrh’ – This alludes to *Musaf*. ‘And my fingers with flowing myrrh’ – This alludes to *Mincha*. ‘Upon the handles of the lock’ – This alludes to the *Ne’ila* prayer.” (*Rabbenu Bachya, Kad HaKemach, Kippurim* [2])

The *Ne’ila* service adds an additional dimension to the prayers of Yom Kippur. Here we try to respond to God’s “knocking,” to open our hearts to the “Beloved” who has “put in His hand by the latchet of the door.” The feelings of uplift experienced throughout the day are themselves the sound of the Beloved knocking at the door. Our feelings are not a response to the voice of the Beloved, but rather the voice itself. This is how the Holy One, blessed be He, asks us, “Open for Me, My sister, My love.”

The disciples of both the Vilna Gaon and the Baal Shem Tov taught that the heavenly voice declaring, “Return, return, O wayward children” (*Chagiga* 15b), finds its way to the consciousness of every Jew who entertains thoughts of repentance.

In the words of the psalm, “Of You my heart has said, ‘Seek My face.’ Your face, O Lord, I seek” (Ps. 27:8). In our hearts we hear a voice that says, “Seek My face.” Rashi explains that this voice issues at God’s bequest:

“Of You” – From You, in Your service, my heart says, “Seek” – all of you, all of Israel – “My face.”

We are called to respond to that inner voice, and to reply, “Your face, O Lord, I seek.” Of course, in order to hear the voice that issues from God, we have to peel away all of the outer layers and open our hearts.

Happy is the person who hears the voice of the Beloved declaring, “Return, return, O wayward children.” But there are some who, like Elisha b. Avuya, also hear the closing words of that call: “Return, return, O wayward children – except for Acher” (Chagiga 15b). Elisha b. Avuya did not understand that this call was directed at him, challenging him to exert himself and repent. Elisha b. Avuya gave up. One who feels that his heart is deaf to that heavenly call, that he has no way of repenting, someone who is told, “Everyone should repent – but not you,” must understand that this feeling is itself a call to exert special efforts and to lift himself to the point where he can repent.

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Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will go in to them, and I will praise the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord into which the righteous shall enter. (Ps. 118:19–20)

It is taught in the name of the Baal Shem Tov that a righteous person stands before the gate and pleads, “Open for me the gates of righteousness.” The response that comes from heaven is, “This is the gate of the Lord” – you are standing before a locked gate, and this sense of gates being locked is itself “the gate of the Lord.” This teaching discusses the righteous, but is also relevant to each and every one of us who stands at the climax of this holy day and pleads, “Open us a gate at the time of the locking of the gate.”

In order to merit the opening of the gates of heaven, we have to open the gates of our heart. With the words of the prayer “Open us a gate,” we request divine assistance that will allow us to open our hearts – even just the tiniest opening:

“My Beloved is knocking, saying, ‘Open for me’” – R. Yissa said, “The Holy One, blessed be He, says to Israel, ‘My children, open for Me just one opening of repentance, be it as tiny as the point of a needle, and I will open for you openings [so wide] that wagons and carriages could pass through.’” (Song of Songs Rabba 5:2)

We must open our hearts to our true identity, our true calling and destiny, instead of trying to run away from it as Jonah tried to run away from God. It is said in the name of the Shelah (*Kitzur Shelah* 101) that there is special merit in reciting a verse at the end of one’s daily prayers that begins and ends with the same letters as one’s own name, in order to remember one’s name on the Day of Judgment. This teaches us the danger that a person may forget his name on the Day of Judgment; he may deny his true identity. Throughout the year, throughout one’s life, a person can conceal his real “I,” and present an artificial self, while the real “I” is in exile, in the sense of “I was in the midst of the exile” (Ezek. 1:1, and as Rav Kook explains the verse in *Orot HaKodesh* III:97).

But on the Day of Judgment and the Day of Atonement, we try to identify our true nature, our inner essence. On the Rosh Ha-shana and on Yom Kippur a person stands with his real name. Our efforts during Ne’ila need to express that true inner self.

King David declares:

Hear the right, O Lord; attend to my cry, give ear to my prayer, from lips without deceit. Let my sentence come forth from Your Presence, let Your eyes behold the right. (Ps. 17:1–2)

The Midrash explains:

Why does David mention these five things in this verse, and then conclude, “Let my sentence come forth from Your Presence”? David said, “Master of the world, if my judgment is concluded on Yom Kippur in the morning, I will not be able to stand [in prayer for the rest of the day]. Rather, after I say Shema and pray four prayers – then ‘let my sentence come forth from Your Presence.’” (*Yalkut Shimoni* I:670)

Let us pray from the depths of our hearts and the inner chambers of our souls, and plead, “Purify our hearts to serve You in truth.”

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