



Jewish Justice Resources

BY AJWS

Closing of the Gates: Inspirations for Neilah

Below is a ritual reflection designed to be added to the Neilah service—or to any time during Yom Kippur—linking the closing of the gates of heaven with the closing of U.S. borders to asylum seekers and immigrants. Sections of this material can be used to lead a guided meditation, a communal prayer, or a reflection prior to singing “Pitchu Lanu Sha’arei Tzedek—Open for us the gates of justice.”

Introduction:

In this holy moment, as we beseech God to keep open the gates of justice and mercy for our congregation, tens of thousands of people on our southern border are beseeching the United States government to do the same. We proclaim, “Open the borders of justice and mercy and allow all people through, as we all seek safety, security and a better life.”

Meditation:

The sun is in the treetops. It’s *Neilah*, and we’re watching as the gates of heaven slowly begin to close, holding a mixture of hope and trepidation. Have we changed enough this year, this day, for our prayers to break through into the heavens? Will the gates close before we can plead our case?

Across the river, beyond the border, a young migrant couple stands in line, waiting for an appointment with the migration office to claim asylum from the violence and terror that have come to characterize their daily lives. As the sun sets, the line ahead crawls slowly. Holding a mixture of hope and trepidation, they wonder, will our prayers break through? Will the gates close before we can plead our case?

Song:

Pitchu lanu sha’arei tzedek, navo vam, nodeh ya. פתחו לנו שערי-צדק נבוא בם נודה יה:
Open for us the gates of righteousness that we may enter and give thanks to God.

Prayer:

Avinu malkeinu, Imeinu malkateinu אבינו מלפנו אמנו מלפתינו,
Our parent in heaven,
p’tach sha’arei shamayim litfilataynu. פתח שערי שמים לתפלתנו.
open the gates of heaven to our prayers.¹

God, hold open the gates of compassion and the gates of migration. The gates of justice and the gates on our borders. In this moment of judgment, when my life hangs in the balance of Your judgement, and their lives hang in the balance of ours, let compassion reign.

¹From Avinu Malkeinu, traditional High Holiday piyyut.

We know what it is to flee for safety, for a better life. Jacob's family fled famine in Canaan. The children of Israel fled slavery in Egypt. And our fathers and mothers and grandparents fled Spain and Germany, Syria and the Soviet Union. Many were turned away—sent back to instability, oppression and even death. Our people were sent back, as today's migrants are sent back—to murder and violence, corruption and impunity, poverty and destitution.

*P'tach sha'arei tzedakah va'chesed.
Open the gates of justice and mercy.*

פְּתַח שַׁעְרֵי צְדָקָה וְחֶסֶד.

We know what it is to be held captive—as Joseph was held in the pit in the wilderness, and in the dark prison of Pharaoh in Egypt. As you did for Joseph, shelter those who are being held captive today, in open air prisons and cages and concentration camps.

Let our experience of persecution, of captivity, of fleeing in search of freedom, push us to action:

*Lema'an nechdal me'osek yadenu, venashuv
eleicha la'asot chukei retzonecha belevav shalem.
"May we withdraw our hands from oppression and return to you,
to carry out the decrees of your will wholeheartedly."²*

לְמַעַן נִחְדַּל מֵעֹשֶׂק יָדֵנוּ, וְנָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ
לְעֲשׂוֹת חֻקֵי רְצוֹנְךָ בְּלִבָּב שְׁלֵם:

To overcome this oppression, we must urge our leaders to act with compassion. God, teach us to see the root causes of this suffering, the injustices in Central America that propel people to our doors: Poverty. Corruption. Gang violence and military brutality. Authoritarian rule that renders people powerless and makes them afraid.

Open the eyes and open the hearts of our leadership, so we may rebuild societies torn apart by war and exploitation, rather than persecuting the victims of this violence.

*Hayom yifneh, hashemesh yavo ve'yifneh.
Navoah sheareicha.
This day will fade away, the sun will set and be gone,
let us come to your gates.³*

הַיּוֹם יִפְנֶה. הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ יָבֹא וְיִפְנֶה. נְבוֹאָה
שַׁעְרֶיךָ:

The sun is in the tree tops, and the gates are closing as the darkness comes. Will God hold open the gates of compassion? Will we?

Sing together:

*Pitchu lanu sha'arei tzedek, navo vam, nodeh ya.
Open for us the gates of righteousness that we
may enter and give thanks to God.*

פְּתַחוּ לָנוּ שַׁעְרֵי-צְדָקָה נְבוֹא בָּם נוֹדֶה יְהוָה:

²From the Amidah for *Neilah* in the traditional Ashkenazi Machzor.

³From *Open the Gate for Us* a piyyut found in *Neilah*.