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# Neilah – Too Excited to be Scared

**Rabbi Ira Ebbin**

Congregation Beth Zion, Montreal

It is Neilah time- The Closing Act for Yom Kippur, where we imagine the heavenly Gates of Repentance slowly closing in front of us. For many years I approached Neilah with the traditional anxiety and unease. I have this clear childhood memory of the Rabbi in my shul, emphasizing that at this moment we should be filled with fear, as this is our final chance to change our fate. I recall the seriousness and serenity in his low voice as if he were speaking to me personally. He was pleading with me to finally seize the moment. Even if I had failed to do *Teshuva* up until right now, even if I had just woken up and realized the significance of the day just for the first time, the “All-Mighty” will accept my penitence, as long as I somehow I find the strength and drive to approach Him with sincerity.

So now I’m the Rabbi, and I’m supposed to take that role of scaring everyone the moments before Neilah. But, in reality, it is hard for me to be scared during this so called time of our national trepidation. Granted, if I had waited until the very last minute to try to change my ways - yeah, I guess I would be scared, and anxious. However, I would hope that here is nobody in this room who has procrastinated until this point, and that none of us find ourselves in that very grave situation.

I would expect that most of us have not just boarded the train, but rather that this has already been a very long journey. We have spent the last forty days preparing for this moment, the last ten days priming ourselves for right now, and the last 24 hours immersing ourselves in prayer and personal thought, abstaining from nearly all physical needs in order to maintain that constant reminder of the seriousness of the task in front of us.

So, how should we be feeling at this moment before Neilah? If not fear, which emotion is appropriate during the closing moments of Yom Kippur? Rather than a feeling of fear of what’s to come, perhaps during Neilah the focus should be the

present moment. Perhaps the ninety minutes of this prayer should be filled with enjoyment and appreciation, as we absorb and savor every single second of this incredibly special time.

In **Rabbi Soleviitchick’s** work “*Before Hashem You Shall Be Purified*” he shares a beautiful story from his childhood.

Not far from where our family lived there was a Modziter shtiebel where I would occasionally go for shalosh seudos. The Hasidism would be singing Bnei Heikhala, Hashem Ro’i Lo Ehsor, again Bnei Heikhala, again Hashem Ro’i Lo Ehsor. It occurred to me that they weren’t singing because they wanted to sing, they were singing because they did not want to allow Shabbat to leave....

I remember an encounter in this shtiebel as a small child. One of the men, who had been singing most enthusiastically, wearing a Kapota consisting of more holes than material, approached me and asked if I recognized him. I told him that I did not, and he introduced himself as Yankel the Porter. Now during the week, I knew Yankel the Porter as someone very ordinary wearing shabby clothes walking around with a rope. I could not imagine that this individual of such regal bearing could be the same person. Yet on Shabbos he wore a Kapota and a shtreimel. That is because his soul wasn’t Yankel the Porter, but Yankel the Prince.

Well, after nightfall, I naively asked him “When do we daven Ma’ariv?” He replied, “Do you miss weekdays that much, [that you can’t wait to daven Maariv?]”

You see, as much as I try, I really can’t be scared. – I’m just too excited to be scared. As we have talked about numerous times during last month or so, the

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role of repentance goes way beyond saying ‘I’m sorry’ or even changing our ways. As Rabbi Soloveitchik explains, part of the punishment of sin, is the sin itself. The sin itself creates an impediment in the sinner’s personal relationship with G-d. As Dovid Hamelech cries in Psalm 51 following his sin with Batsheva – “*Al Tashlicheynu Milfanecha, Veruach Kadshicha al Tikach Me’menu.*” Please G-d, don’t send me away from You, and don’t take Your Holy Spirit from me. We have spent the last forty days trying to clean our hearts to make them pure once again, to reestablish the Lev Tahor that G-d had once given to us. Only then can we feel that closeness to Hashem, the warmth of being embraced by Him.

And now, as Rav Soloveitchik conveys in his story, now that we have it, now that we’ve gotten there after challenging ourselves for the last forty days, now is the time to enjoy it. Now is the time to embrace the incredible feeling of being watched, being cared for, and being loved by Hashem. When we blow that shofar, we will follow it with singing and dancing, my personal favorite moments of the year. It is these euphoric moments that are so other-worldly that we will continue to celebrate just a little bit after sundown, since we never really want to end.

But as beautiful as these moments are for us right now, as incredibly spiritual and connected as we feel presently, it will ultimately have to end. The dancing and hugging will stop, the kittels will fly off, and we’ll be rushing through Maariv and then breaking our fast. This, I think, is the other purpose for our Neilah.

In his beautiful work *Kaddish*, Leon Wieseltier shares with us some of his personal discoveries while observing one of G-d’s more enigmatic creatures, the firefly.

“When I left shul this evening, I walked over to the park. The heavy summer air was filled with fireflies, hundreds of them, burning and vanishing, burning and vanishing. The park was a field of floating passing intensities. I sat for a while and watched the little eruptions of brilliance. Whenever I looked, there was the beginning and ending of light. No light lasted long, but there was not a moment of total darkness. This, I thought, is another

ideal of illumination. The glow passes, but the afterglow need not pass. The problem is that its survival is in our hands. Unlike the glow, the afterglow is not an experience; and we prefer an experience.

I have read of people whose lives are transfigured in an instant. I do not believe that such a transfiguration can happen to me. For what changed those people was not only the instant, but also their subsequent fidelity to that instant.”

In our forthcoming Neilah prayer, perhaps our purpose is to find a way to capture how we feel today, and transfer that into how we are tomorrow. These moments, so often, like the firefly, are so fleeting, shining for a moment then gone the next. If we hope to translate this incredible feeling into something genuine, if we hope to incorporate this *Dveykut* into our daily lives, right now is the time to make that real.

These are the closing moments of Yom Kippur, the Final Act. But I am not afraid; - I’m way too energized and excited. Enjoy every bit of this time, and make commitments to yourself to ensure that the emotions that you feel now will endure. For me, these are my favorite moments of the year. I’m looking forward to sharing them along with you.