
The Essence of Neilah: Patient Process vs. Radical Transformation

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The *Neilah* prayer which we recite at the close of Yom Kippur has the potential to be the most concentrated, intense prayer of the year. *Ki fanah yom*, the day is turning away, and our collective and individual fates hang in the balance. On the other hand, however, what is left to accomplish? As the end of the process which began forty days prior at the beginning of the month of Elul draws near, what more can we really do? Everything that we could have and should have done is done.

The story is told of how Alfred Nobel founded the eponymous prize, which carries his name. Nobel was the inventor of dynamite and from that creation he earned his fortune. It is told that after his brother died tragically in a car accident, the local papers mistook him for his brother and published his obituary in his brother's place. On that fateful morning, Alfred Nobel read his own obituary...

What is the intent of the word *neilah*?

According to one opinion in the Talmud, it reflects the locking of the gates of the Temple as the Yom Kippur services came to an end; according to another it reflects the locking of the gates of heaven. We feel this, we know this. We can see the opportunity of Yom Kippur fading away. But what is it in the experiential sense?

In the *Machzor*, *neilah* stands in opposition to the other prayers of Yom Kippur in two major ways:

1) In all of the other prayers, we recite two *viduyim*, confessions. The *viduy hakatzar*, the short confession which only includes the *ashamnu*, general

categories of misdeeds, and the *viduy ha'aruch*, the long confession, which includes the detailed delineation of the different mistakes we have made and missteps taken. Paradoxically, at this critical moment, as the gates close, we only recite the short confession, the *ashamnu*. It seems counterintuitive. We should not be abbreviating; we should be elongating. Is this not our last chance?

2) A second notable difference is the addition of a remarkable, reflective, self-deprecating passage. We cry out, "*Mah anu, What are we?*", "*Meh chayeinu? What are our lives?*" We acknowledge and accentuate the futility of our lives, of our existence. There is no counterpart to this passage in the other prayers of the day. Why now? And, after 40 days of preparation and 25 hours of angelic purity and prayer, don't we know this already?

In order to appreciate both differences and, consequently, the experiential nature of the *neilah* prayer, we need to investigate two paradigms of *teshuvah*, repentance, and the way each was accomplished.

Oftentimes what precipitates repentance is a gnawing sense that our beliefs and values are not true. We question our patterns, we reassess our priorities. Change begins and continues piece-meal and fragmented. For example one starts to watch how he speaks, what he says and gradually reduces his *lashon hara*, slowly. This is the model of *Avraham Avinu*. The **Rambam**, Maimonides, in the *Laws of Idol Worship* describes how Avraham Avinu started to

probe, to analyze, and to wonder and over the course of a decades-long process arrived at the belief in one God who created and continues to create and guide the world.

The other paradigm of repentance is sudden and spontaneous. There is a sudden, frightening awareness that our lives are not the way they should be. It is dramatic and intense. There is no process. The model for this *teshuvah* is Reb Elazar ben Durdaya. The Talmud tells us that Reb Elazar ben Durdaya had been with all the prostitutes in the world. When he found out that there was one remaining at a distant location, he traveled there and paid a large sum of money to be with her. As he was about to be with her, he passed wind. The prostitute said to him, "Just as this wind will not return its place, so too Elazar ben Durdaya will never have his repentance accepted." This shocked him. It sent him in to a frenzy. There was no process; rather, a chaotic upheaval of his internal world.

One other distinction between the Avrahamic and Durdayic paradigms is the impetuses that lead each toward change. Avraham looked outside himself, calmly appraised and assessed his surroundings and knew that there was God. He found *external* objective truth. But, *teshuvah* often evolves looking internally. Who are we? Who ought we be? Reb Elazar ben Durdaya scrutinized himself. He looked internally. The Talmud there continues that he reached out to the world to help him repent, but ultimately concluded, "*The matter is solely dependant on me. He placed his head between his knees and exhausted himself with crying until his soul left him.*"

The obituary in the French newspaper read, "Le marchand de la mort est mort, The merchant of death is dead, - Dr. Alfred Nobel, who became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before, died yesterday."

Perhaps he asked himself, "Is that who I am? Is that the life that I lead? Is that what my legacy will be?" It was dramatic and it was internal. He decided that his legacy must be different. This was not who he was. Ultimately, he bequeathed in his will the 2007 equivalent of over \$100,000,000 to the founding of the Nobel Prize.

It has been a slow, deliberate, 40 day ascent from *Rosh Chodesh Elul* to the climactic moment of *Neilah*. Indeed, all the gates, below and above, are about to close. There is no more time for process. There is no long *viduy*, no delineated confession. That is too specific and it belongs to the realm of piecemeal *teshuvah*. This *viduy hakatzar*, short confession, bespeaks the Reb Elazar ben Durdaya model of wholesale *teshuvah*. And that leads us to the second expression as well, an expression of self-discovery. We look inward and painfully, poignantly and powerfully ask, "What are we? Who are we?" We strip ourselves of our delusions of grandeur. We cease to flatter ourselves, "What really are our kindnesses?" And, after 40 days of process and one intense moment of transformation, we hope that the potent combination of preparation and process will sustain the intense introspective instant and continue to impel us toward becoming whom it is that we really can be throughout the year and throughout our lives.