

OPEN THE GATES

With the lighting of our candles tonight we have entered into a special dimension of sacred time. This period from Rosh HaShanah through Yom Kippur is known as the Days of Awe. Our rituals of prayer, reflection, and fasting are designed to disrupt our normal patterns and rhythms. Our thoughts, our hearts, our gaze are redirected from the limitations that confront us every day to the expanse of possibilities evoked by the very focus of this day: the creation of the world.

Jewish tradition has always understood the universe as an ever-expanding multi-dimensional realm of wonder. The divinely created order was designed not to confine us but to liberate us to explore, to innovate and create. Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden not for the crime of disobedience but for the sin of indolence, for their lack of ambition to grow beyond their pampered and privileged state. The Tower of Babel was destroyed not because humanity was storming the gates of heaven but because they were building walls of insularity. This is a season of the year that urges us to push open the gates, to cross boundaries of unnecessary limitations, whether self-imposed or imposed by others. This is not only how we enter into the divinely imagined world. This is also how God enters this world. Our liberation frees God to be more present in the world. The psalmist cries out: “O gates, lift up your heads! Lift them up, you everlasting doors, so the Sovereign of glory may come in!”

The Torah calls upon us to go on a journey of self-discovery and communal responsibility. Yet, who exactly is this “us” that is called? You? Me? The person sitting next to you? The person walking down Loma while we’re having this service? Let’s re-experience that Biblical moment when a people stood up to a tyrant. When they cast off the shackles of slavery. When they turned their backs on a civilization of enslavement and marched into the open space of freedom, heading toward a promise of noble purpose. Who responded to that divine call? Let’s place ourselves in the story and see who is there.

At the beginning of the book of Exodus I see, rising up out of Egyptian chains, the children of Jacob, now grown into multitudes across twelve tribes. Tens of thousands of them fill the streets and alleys and parade grounds of Ramses, a city

they had helped to build with their slave labor. Moses and Joshua lead the way toward the outer walls of the city. At the last moment they step aside and allow the oldest, those whose flesh was most scarred from the whip of the taskmasters, to be the first to lay their hands on the gates. With a prayer of gratitude on their lips and a gleam of wonder in their eyes, they push open gates that had been designed to contain them. They will be imprisoned by them no more.

Yet, the children of Jacob are not alone. Our story tells us that joining the descendants of Jacob is a mixed multitude. They are men, women, and children not born into the inheritance of this freedom promise. They are people of other nations pressed into servitude by Egyptian conquest. They are Egyptian citizens who have heard tales whispered by Hebrew midwives of a world soon to be birthed where one could choose one's destiny rather than suffer the confines of the caste one had been born into. Some are even the privileged of the palace, who, like Moses, have grown shocked and shamed by the culture of the whip.

Like tributaries, they flow from different parts of the city into the surging stream of people who are sweeping aside the last obstacles before them, crashing open the gates of mighty Ramses, and washing away their restraints.

Our story does not identify who exactly this mixed multitude is. It does, however, give us some evidence of how they were welcomed. The Torah portion that gives us the Ten Commandments begins with the report that Jethro, priest of pagan Midian, Moses' father-in-law, had heard how God had brought Israel out of Egypt.

He journeys out into the wilderness to behold this wonder himself. And Moses, now the leader of tens upon tens of thousands, does not sit imperiously on some high place waiting for Jethro to come to him. No, Moses goes out to meet *him*. He bows low to *him*. And kisses him. Moses then pleads with Jethro: "Come with us and we will be generous with you, for God has promised so much to us." When Jethro responds, saying that he is going to return to Midian, Moses persists: "Please do not leave us. You know things about this journey that we do not. Come with us and we will share all of our bounty with you." The Torah text does not report Jethro's reply to Moses' second entreaty. However, the very next verse does say: "They marched from the mountain of Adonai a distance of three days."

Perhaps this is meant as a clue that Jethro was now a part of the “they” marching alongside the Ark of the Covenant.

The mixed multitude emerging out of Egypt and Jethro and his Midianite tribe were not the only non-Israelite born who were actively welcomed into the community of Torah. Scholars tell us that by the first century of the Common Era 10% of the population of the Roman Empire identified as part of the Jewish community. This extraordinary figure could not have been the result of the Jewish birth rate alone. It was due to the increasing allure of the Jewish way of wisdom and to the open embrace of seekers by Jewish communities.

First Rome and later the early Christian Church responded to Judaism’s growing appeal by boarding up points of entry into the Jewish way of life. In 135 C.E. Rome made the public teaching of Torah a capital crime. Sixty years later Emperor Severus outlawed conversions to Judaism. Emperor Constantine in 315 passed an edict outlawing the proselytizing of Judaism. And in 339 converting to Judaism became a capital offense. This drive to make Judaism a closed option for those not born into it intensified during the Medieval period and into modern times, culminating in the most vile form of it: the Holocaust.

The custom that you may have heard of, that a potential convert is to be turned away three times before being embraced into the community, does not reflect Judaism’s disinterest in welcoming new participants. Quite the opposite. It developed in the context of this oppression and social marginalization as a way to make the person aware of the dangers and difficulties they were assuming. They would be exchanging a relatively more privileged social status for a more restricted and tenuous life.

Today, we are witnessing an extraordinary shift in the religious landscape. In the United States over the past 7 years the portion of the population that identifies as Christian has dropped almost 8 percent. Those who identify as spiritual but unaffiliated with any denomination have increased by almost 7 percent. During this same period, there have been small increases in the percentage of those belonging to either the Muslim or Hindu or Jewish faith.

Unlike in Western Europe, where religious disaffiliation has resulted in an expanding secularism, those exiting denominational life in the United States are looking for a spiritual home. And for those separating from traditions that emphasize doctrine over conduct, absolute truth over evolving notions of truth, and single opinions over respect for multiple points of view, the Jewish community has great allure.

We need to prepare ourselves to welcome those who are searching for the kind of open spiritual home that Judaism offers. And, to be clear, I am referring not only to those who wish to formally embrace Judaism. Increasingly, Judaism will become a site for many looking for meaning in their personal lives and for community in their social lives who will not formally become Jewish but who will attach themselves to this community, which will be enriched by their engaged presence.

Like the mixed multitude who left Egypt, there will be people who have grown disenchanted with the narrowness of a prior path; there will those who have felt the harshness of a theological doctrine; there will be those seeking to breathe more freely in an atmosphere that nurtures questioning and interpretation.

And, hopefully, like Moses we will realize that those who have come out in wonder to experience this path of freedom and justice have so much to offer us along our journey together. We will change one another. For that is the very essence of any sacred relationship.

We conclude our Days of Awe on Yom Kippur crying out: “Open for us the gates of righteousness; Open the gates; open them wide...the gates of benevolence and compassion, of generosity and hope, of insight and joy, of kindness and love....Open the gates, O God; show us the way.”

Let us be the ones to open the gates, for all those seeking Torah’s path of meaning and purpose, of justice and love. Together we shall cross the threshold and create a new realm of revival and promise. Let us be the ones who lift up the everlasting doors, so the Sovereign of glory may come in!