

There's a story of a man who got on a bus. He wanted to go to Detroit. When he arrived, he asked directions to Woodward Avenue and was told there was no Woodward Avenue. He was indignant. He knew Detroit. Of course there was a Woodward Avenue. Then he found out he was in Kansas City. It took a while before he would admit that in spite of his best intentions to go to Detroit, he had caught the wrong bus. This sounds so farfetched that we are tempted to think it couldn't possibly happen. But one Groome driver told me about a woman who ended up in Macon when she thought she had taken the shuttle to Chattanooga. She had been on the phone with a friend and boarded the shuttle automatically without noticing the huge letters on the front window.

It takes a certain amount of unconsciousness; of rotely doing something that we've done lots of times before to make that kind of mistake. We forget to pay attention to where we are and what's in front of us. We have the best intentions but suddenly make a terrible mistake. As we know this is what Yom Kippur is all about.

We start out, believing and wanting to get to a place we have in mind, a place that we believe will fill us with happiness and contentment. Whether it's an education, a relationship, the birth of a child, a new job, we begin with a clean slate and with the belief that everything will work out exactly as we planned.

As our lives continue, we sometimes find that the bus we boarded didn't go where we thought it would. And we have to either take another bus or accept where we are and make the best of it.

If we don't create the life we wanted, we may feel disappointed. Or even worse if we do create exactly what we want, we may in fact still be disappointed.

We arrive at this point of the Yom Kippur service wondering what the next year will hold for us. And with a question, is it too late to change? Is it too late to get what we actually want?

Yom Kippur is the only holiday that has five services. It has the usual four: maariv, the evening service; shaharit and musaf, the morning services and minhah, the afternoon service. But on Yom Kippur we have a fifth service—Neila, which means 'closing.' The closer we get to the end of Yom Kippur, we feel the gates of prayer closing. Those gates open on Rosh Hashanah, remain open throughout the days of awe and at Neila, as the final light drifts away, they close. During this service we have our last chance to repent and be forgiven.

There is a prayer in the Neila service [p. 114] which talks about how urgent it is for us to pray during this service. "P'takh lanu shaar, b'ayt neilat hashaar - Open for us a gate whenever a gate is closed." Rather than seeing this service as the last chance for redemption, my friend and colleague Rabbi Perry Netter has another way of understanding this verse. He thinks this verse means: "Dear God: as I pass through the stages of my life, as one gate closes on me, let another gate open."

According to Rabbi Netter, we do not face just one gate but many gates. Every time we have a life decision to make, we face several closed gates. Each gate signifies a different direction we could take. Opening some of them will bring us great success and joy and opening others will bring us failure and loss.

But each time we succeed and each time we fail, we can still ask God to open another closed gate for us.

George Bernard Shaw once said: "There are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it."

If we don't achieve our heart's desire, we could live a life with the burden of disappointment, with great sadness and feelings of failure because of our unfulfilled hopes

and dreams. We may live with the mantra ‘if only...’ If only I was smarter. If only I was better looking. If only I had married someone else. If only I had different parents. This is not the life I had planned. We may be tempted to think our life has not been worth the effort we put into it. And as Shaw says—that would be a tragedy.

But there may be tragedy in achieving our dreams. Sometimes what we get is not really what we need and not really what we wanted. As my Hebrew students told me this past week, we need to feel sadness in order to appreciate our joys. We need to feel physical pain in order to appreciate our good health. And even if we receive and create everything we have ever dreamed of, we may realize that it wasn’t enough. We may still look for another gate to open; we may still want to find more meaning from our lives.

That is why Neilah is so powerful. This service is not about the tragedy of a gate closing. But rather during Neilah, it’s the closing of the gate that gives us hope. This is not the last gate that will close in front of us. When one gate closes, God always opens another one. During a day that is filled with the drama of loss and uncertainty, this is a message of optimism, anticipation and excitement for what may still lie ahead.

Our bus traveler didn’t make it to Detroit. But Kansas City is also a great destination. Often ending up in a place that is different from what we expected, is a blessing and not a tragedy.

Hopefully we can all look back on the gates that opened and closed for us and feel at least some level of satisfaction, some sense that what we have done so far is enough. We are truly wise when we understand the meaning of the word enough. Then we can say I am good enough at what I do. I’m good enough in my career, I’m good enough as a parent, I’m good enough financially. We don’t have to continually strive to be the best. As that gate, the gate of achieving exactly what we thought we wanted closes, we can open other gates that lead us to experiences we never imagined possible.

The world can become a place of wonder and awe, rather than one to be conquered and controlled. We can let go of our need to have all the answers and look at the questions that never occurred to us before. We have time to dream the dreams we were too busy to pay attention to. And we can pass our wisdom down to those who need to hear it.

As we let go of the notion that life is a destination, we come to understand that life is a journey. As with our bus traveler, we learn that we are not always in the driver’s seat. Sometimes we just have to accept what is given to us.

As the gates of Neila close, let’s take the time to reflect on what gates may be opening for us in the year to come. And let us decide to take the time to walk through a few of them.

Gmar hatima tova. May we be sealed in the Book of Life.