

## Rosh Hashanah Day 5779

Arriving new in a place, one notices little details about it that, with time and routine, become less apparent. New in Malibu is of course to be awed by the mountains and the sea...and I hope the wonder of that view never becomes routine for me. I could list many other things that are delightful about this place in terms of the people, the community, relaxed attitudes, the weather...you name it.

One of the things I've noticed, when I pause to think about it, is that most houses here have a gate at its entrance. I myself am living, for the first time in my life, in a "gated community" over at the Pt. Dume mobile home park. Maybe it's not really so extraordinary, perhaps I'm just noticing gates due to this season of Rosh haShana and Yom Kippur in which the image of "Gates" figures prominently.

One of the prayers we say over and over again during these High Holidays, and which the Cantor will, in particular, make into a major musical theme for our entire day of Yom Kippur worship, is the prayer *pitchu li shaarey tzedek avo vam odeh yah* – "Open for me the Gates of Justice. I will enter them and give praise to God." One of the traditional names for this day of Rosh haShana is Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgement, in which appropriately, the imagery of Sha'arey Tzedek, the Gates of Justice, loom large.

Necessarily, then, as we start the New Year, we also ask for another set of gates to be opened, the *sha'aray rachamim* – the Gates of Compassion - to balance the justice we all probably deserve....Which we ask for on the grounds that at this season

we will ourselves work to go through what the tradition terms the Sha'arey Teshuva, the Gates of Repentance.

That's a lot of gates to get through.

In 10 days, at the end of YK, we will conclude this High Holiday season with the *Ne'ila* service, the service for “closing of the gates”. During *Ne'ila* we dramatically squeeze in our last prayers for atonement as the gates of heaven close, which parallels the gates of the Temple in Jerusalem that were slowly closed at the end of YK on that most holy day in ancient times.

The imagery of gates opening and closing comes from a famous midrash that speaks volumes about what we are trying to do this season at the start of the year. R. Shmuel Bar Nachmani said, “The gates of prayer are sometimes open, and sometimes locked, but the gates of repentance are always open.” [Lamentations Rabba 3:43, section 9]

However, as important as the imagery of all these theological gates in Judaism is at this season, it could be that the walls in which the gates are set are more important in our down-to-earth Jewish life: both physical walls and metaphorical walls. It is these walls in which the gates are set that also demand our attention now.

Let's start with the physical walls we are familiar with in our Jewish tradition: Next week, during *Sukkot*, we will decorate the *d'fanot* - the fragile walls - on our *Sukka*.

The Torah demands that we build a *ma'ake* - a railing - around our rooftops to guarantee the safety of others as well as ourselves.

*Chomot Yerushalyim* - the walls of Jerusalem - and *The Kotel* - the Western Wall in Jerusalem - are visited for prayer by thousands of Jews and tourists from around the world each day. Traditionally, every synagogue faces towards them. We physically turn in that direction when we pray.

The very stones of the Western Wall, also known as the “Wailing Wall”, have been part of the Jewish consciousness for the last 2,000 years: A wall that we’ve longed to stand beside, to touch, a place of prayer into whose crevices between stones we’ve lovingly placed notes with our innermost prayers and secrets. Sadly, in recent times this wall has also been a place of struggle – as the ultra-orthodox establishment in the State of Israel refuses to let the current government recognize the right of non-orthodox Jews like us to pray at the Wall as we believe – in fully egalitarian services. Our prayers for what we hope will come to be in the New Year upon us must include the return of the *Kotel* to its role at the heart of Judaism that unifies, rather than divides, the Jewish People.

...May a Gate of Understanding, of Compassion, of Justice, Equality and of Peace open up in the *Kotel* in the New Year...

But there are also metaphorical walls discussed in our tradition in which gates are set:

It is forbidden to put a *micshol* - a barrier - in front of the blind. We cannot erect stumbling blocks that mislead or cause others to fall in harm’s way. The rabbis instituted many a *siag l’torah* -

enclosures, or fences - around the Torah to help the Jewish people avoid incidental transgressions against the law. To leave these norms of Judaism, then, is called *lifrotz gader* - to “break through the fence”.

I would add that Jewish tradition in general senses the need to define the boundaries for almost every aspect of our lives. For example, we make an effort to mark the start of Shabbat by lighting candles, and again the end of Shabbat by making *havdalah*. It is necessary to clearly define the time of the week - profane time – from the time of Shabbat – holy time.

By the way, walls are important not just for us Jews. In fact, walls are sources of wisdom the world over:

A new initiate to Zen Buddhism, I’m told, will spend hours, days, even weeks doing a meditation exercise known as “wall-staring”. They just stare at a wall until insight comes. In Mahayana Buddhism, the great Bodhisattvas are known, in part, by their ability to walk through walls. The renowned philosopher Emmanuel Kant used the example of how newly-built walls turn an open area into a defined space as an illustration of his theory that space and time are mere human constructs, not inherent parts of reality. It is even a kind of wall that Harry Potter has to walk through at platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  to cross from our world into the world of magic.

But there is a sinister side of walls as well:

What else do walls tell us about human constructs? I once read (although I heard that this is no longer true) that of all the glorious creations of humankind, only one can be seen by the naked eye

from outer space—the great wall of China. Think of the Berlin wall, or other walls like the Hadrian's wall in the borders in Scotland/England: If these walls define anything, they define our human incapacity to live peacefully with one another.

And think of all the walls we put up between ourselves and our friends, between ourselves and our spouses, between ourselves and ourselves, walls we feel are necessary, and walls we build which are for no conscious or purposeful reason we're aware of.

Robert Frost's famous poem, "The Mending Wall" begins "something there is that doesn't love a wall..." and goes on to challenge the accepted wisdom that 'good fences make good neighbors': "But why do they make good neighbors?...Before I built a wall I'd ask to know/ What I was walling in or walling out/ And to whom I was like to give offence/ Something there is that doesn't love a wall/ That wants it down."

Frost was right – there is something that wants a wall to come to down.

Nowhere have walls been more contentious than in Jerusalem:

Since King David infiltrated the walls of Jerusalem more than 3,000 years ago to conquer the city and make it his capital, the walls of Jerusalem have defined the place on earth most beloved by the Jewish People. When Nehemia rebuilt Jerusalem's walls 2,500 years ago, there was a political firestorm of, literally, Biblical proportions. But on those walls the Second commonwealth of the Jewish People in the Land of Israel was established.

The separation barrier built by Israel, beginning in earnest from 2003, was no less of a political firestorm, particularly around Jerusalem. I used to give educational tours along the Jerusalem Barrier. To those who thought “The Wall” was an abomination of human rights, I would point out the real security issues the Barrier addresses and what life was like living in Jerusalem under constant terror attack during the second intifada. We would visit bus stops -several of them - which have become memorial sites. Simultaneously, to those who thought the Barrier was completely justifiable as a security measure exactly as it is, I would point out that in fact the route of the Barrier, and its cost, and its impact on the local population is problematic for many reasons – in terms of human rights, surely, but also in terms of Israel’s own security, efficient city infrastructure, the economy, and theology as well.

In the end, with most everyone at least starting to question their assumptions, I would take them to a spot overlooking a part of the Barrier where the sun strikes to make it appear light on one side and shaded dark on the other. I point out another location further along where you can see that the real color of the wall is a hue of concrete grey. And I remind them that while fences and walls are thin lines of grey between black and white perceptions, this is one fence, for or against, that you cannot sit on.

Of course, all this talk of walls brings to mind the prospect of a wall much closer to us here in the US – the actual physical wall being planned (and in some places already partly built) on our southern border with Mexico. Like the other walls we have been discussing, the wall with Mexico is contentious and we here in our community surely lack consensus about it.

But what we can all agree upon is how devastating the metaphorical walls between us have become, and how viciously divided our country has grown.

Rosh HaShana is a time for us to reflect on our own behaviors and the people we have become versus the people we truly want to be. Can any of us say for sure that we have not been impacted by the walls of hatred erected on every side of almost every issue we read about in our increasingly partisan and one-sided sources of news? Have we been spared infection by the all-too hateful rhetoric? By allowing higher walls – with fewer gates to visit the other side through – to be built between communities, ethnicities, regions, and socio-economic groups, are we in the end - at least in part - responsible for helping to build those walls?

An example close to home for our family – and many families probably, is whether our oldest Yami has to eat his vegetables before dessert. He's been a picky eater since – literally - day one. We're all convinced that vegetables must be eaten right here and right now. How can a child not eat a vegetable ever?! We are convinced that this is a great truth for all humanity right?! It's an axiom, there is no question about it. Well...Yami turned out just fine despite never consuming eat anything green –and yet we were so convinced that we were right, that our interpretation of reality IS IN FACT REALITY. In so many matters great and small, we build walls around us convincing ourselves that ours is the only way, and there is no other...often to the point that we cannot even SEE, or even HEAR the other's experience, the other's perspective.

We need to ask ourselves whether we've helped build those walls by refusing to try, honestly, to understand the other side's perspective, by ignoring or belittling their beliefs or their suffering, by remaining insensitive to their fears or their hopes.

**Are we living in a bubble?** Do we erect literal and figurative walls around ourselves to insulate us from a reality around us that we prefer not to deal with any more than necessary? Why would we rather not see it? Rather not get involved? Prefer to insulate ourselves among like-minded people, people in our similar circumstances?

Have we helped build walls around ourselves by getting sucked into the prevailing discourse of today which posits issues almost exclusively as "us vs. them" instead of "we", by seeing components of our society in competition rather than in collaboration, by looking for the stakes of a zero-sum game instead of the shared interests that make for a win-win victory for everyone?

Just how solid are our walls?... When I just listed all those divisive things happening in our societal discourse, were you thinking "yes, that's what the other side does" more than you were concerned lest that is what your side does... ?

We have to ask ourselves if we've allowed today's divisive political issues to erect walls in our personal lives...  
Between ourselves and our friends,  
Between ourselves and the prospect of other friends whose experience – and therefore understanding - of the world is different from ours,



Between ourselves and our relatives in the widest understanding of the family of humankind that respects and celebrates the variety of languages, cultures, ethnicities, and beliefs that make us all unique.

If we can build gates through all the metaphorical walls we've erected around ourselves politically and socially, perhaps then as a society we can address the hard questions that a physical wall raises and requires answers to before it can be built as a wall of justice, holiness, and peace. We remember that the walls of ancient Jerusalem, like the *kotel* in its ideal, are supposed define and embrace holiness, are supposed to save lives not take lives, and to invite all people to enter through Gates of Compassion, Justice, Repentance, and Peace. Are we prepared yet to build such walls?

Building such walls, setting limits for ourselves, is the basis of our moral self-worth. More than that, our boundaries—where we draw our lines in the sand—define who we are and what we stand for. They are crucially important.

In ancient times, King David inquired of God whether and how to build the walls of the holy city of Jerusalem. King David's prayer for guidance is, in the spirit of this season of a New Year, a helpful guide for us to ensure our politics align with our true values as Jews and as human beings: His prayer is for humility, for the ability to recognize the true motivations of his own heart and to understand the essential values that God aspires all of humanity to live by:

“Be gracious unto me, God according to Your mercy, according to the multitude of Your compassion, blot out my transgressions, wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin, for I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me...Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me...Do good in Your favor unto Zion, God, Build the walls of Jerusalem...” (Psalm 51)

King David is asking to be King, a ruler of himself — only when his soul will be clean, his morals intact, his heart pure. And in the end, he asks God for guidance and help because he recognizes that he struggles to know what the true truth is.

There is holiness in the *HaTikva* - the hope - that, despite the contentiousness all around us, in the coming year we can open gates in the walls of our lives: Gates of Justice, Gates of Compassion, and Gates of Repentance...and more than anything, open once again the Gates of Prayer for Understanding, Humility, Kindness, and Unity.

Ken Yehi Ratzon, May the coming year be a year of Peace and Blessing, Security and Reconciliation, a year of Tikkun and Tikva, Mending and Hope.