

From the Rabbi's Desk
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פתח לנו שער – **"Open for Us the Gate!"**

With appreciation to my friend Rabbi Fabian Werbin, "Compañero de Encierro."

D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

5779



The other day, searching the internet, I came across useful tips on what to do when you are locked out.

The tips included: Ask for help, look for unlocked windows, grab a credit card (not to pay for a new door but to insert it between the frame and the door to force your way in), take off the door knob (too difficult for me, who just learned how to use a hammer last week), and last but not least, call a locksmith.

I don't dread being locked out that much. Yes, it is annoying; but when you have a few congregants who make a living making keys, changing locks, and opening doors, you don't have to worry too much.

What I really fear is being locked in. Spending more than the necessary time in closed spaces, like elevators, airplanes, and subways, triggers a high level of anxiety in me. Throughout my life I have been locked in a handful of times, mostly, in uneventful circumstances.

Last month, however, I experienced a unique locked in experience.

Every year, before the High Holy Days, AIPAC organizes a two-day rabbinic symposium in Washington DC. Rabbis arrive from all over the country to learn Torah

together, to build bridges, to foster camaraderie, and to come face to face with an increasingly complicated Middle East.

The program starts with a festive dinner in a cool place. Two years ago, the dinner was at the Library of Congress, last year at the National Archives, and this year the dinner was at Nationals Park, the home ballpark of the Washington Nationals, the city's Major League Baseball franchise.

The fancy Kosher dinner took place in one of the large executive dining rooms in the stadium and was attended by hundreds of rabbis. When the last speaker finished his presentation at around 9:30 PM, the organizers offered a private tour of Nationals Park for those who were interested. My friend and host, Rabbi Fabian Werbin, wanted to take the tour, so we joined two dozen rabbis roaming throughout an otherwise empty stadium. Our guide was the main tour guide of Nationals Park, an elderly gentleman who was delighted to show us around.

The highlight of the tour was exploring the visiting team locker room and stepping onto the field itself. Since it was my first time on a baseball field, I wanted to take a few pictures, and didn't realize that the elderly gentleman, who was eager to finish the tour (after all, it was 10 PM) had led the group off the field and left us locked inside. One of our colleagues, Rabbi Steven Kane, realized we had been left behind and came to open the door for us. However, when we tried to catch up with the group, we lost our way and got locked inside Nationals Park.

The good news was that we had the entire baseball park for the three of us. The bad news is that nobody was around to show us the way out. We started running back and forth and up and down only to encounter closed gates and a huge place, which was getting darker and darker.

After ten minutes of fruitless search for an exit, my friend started yelling: "Help! Help!" but nobody was there to hear him.

After twenty minutes, when we thought that we were going to sleep in the stadium, my friend was able to reach another colleague who was on his way to the hotel, and he was able to locate the right person to open the door for us.

How crazy is it to get locked in, in a place with a capacity for 41,313 spectators and hundreds of staff members and maintenance workers?

What do you do when you get locked in?

First of all, you try to get out by yourself. You use your brain, your intuition, and your experience, to find the exit. However, when these things prove unsuccessful, you knock at the gate and ask for help: Get me out of here! Show me the way out!

The truth, dear friends, is that small places are not the only ones where you can get locked in. As I learned from first-hand experience, you can get locked in, in a huge place as well.

The Torah reading from this morning tells us about a mother and a son who got locked in, in the wilderness of Beer-Sheba.

"Now, God remembered Sarah, and she conceived and bore Abraham a son, Isaac, at the appointed time, which God had spoken" (Genesis 21:1-2).

As you know, Sarah demanded that Abraham expel Hagar and Ishmael. Although the matter distressed Abraham, at the end he acquiesced to Sarah's request.

"Abraham rose early in the morning, took bread and water and gave it to Hagar and Ishmael and sent them away. Hagar lost her way in the wilderness of Beer Sheba and the water came to an end, and she threw the child under a shrub. She sat away from him, saying "Let me not look upon the death of the child. Then she cried" (Genesis 21: 14-16).

Hagar tries to find her way in a vast wilderness. She is at the end of her rope. She might be able to make it, but what about her son... "Let me not look upon the death of the child," she cries.

What a terrible feeling it is being locked-in to the suffering of your loved ones, to the suffering of your children. The wilderness of Beer Sheba is such a vast place, but the chest gets compressed with pain and anguish.

Hagar and Ishmael, not unlike the three rabbis locked in at Nationals Park, could no find the way out. Without external help, Hagar and Ishmael would have died from thirst in the Wilderness of Beer Sheba, and three rabbis would have experienced the feeling of sleeping on hard concrete floors in an empty stadium.

"But God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid! For God has already

heard the voice of the boy ... And God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water” (Genesis 21: 17-19).

The well was there, all the time. In her distress, Hagar could not see it and she needed God to open her eyes. At the Nationals Park, we were shown the exit. It was always there, but we were unable to find it. Not without help.

You see, the truth is that most of us live locked-in. We live locked-in to old stories, or to stories that don't belong to us. We live locked-in to the impossibility of enjoying what we have by being too concerned with our neighbor's greener yard. We live locked in to toxic relationships, to unfulfilling routines, and to meaningless activities.

פתח לנו שער – “Open for Us the Gate,” we cry to Hashem.

The Sages teach us that even though the gates of prayer might be locked, the gates of tears are always open.ⁱ When all the doors are locked, a cry for help has the power to open them.

When you are locked-in, it is very difficult to find the way out. Not without help. The Torah reminds us that it is Ok to cry for help, that we don't have to figure out everything on our own. The Torah is teaching us that it is Ok to accept help, and that things can, and will, hopefully, get better. All we need is someone to show us the exit, to open our eyes.

The Book of Joshua (Joshua 6:1) tells us that “the Gates of Jericho were securely closed, no one went out and no one came in,” and yet the cry of the shofar brought the walls down.

פתח לנו שער – “Open for Us the Gate!”

On Rosh Hashanah we come to hear the cry of the shofar to be reminded that it is possible to bring the walls down, that God and those around us care, and that the strength of a synagogue resides not in its bricks, but in its ability to create a community of empathy, kindness, compassion, and love.

Master of the Universe: פתח לנו שער – Open for us the gate. Free us from the shackles that prevent us from enjoying all the beauty around us, the miracle, which is the gift

of the life you gave us. We wander through the wilderness of life, thirsty for meaningful connections, for love and compassion, for a glimpse of your presence. Do not turn us away empty handed.

As we begin together this spiritual journey, help us grow in insight and understanding, so that we can exit these High Holy Days transformed into more sensitive and thoughtful human beings.

May the sound of the shofar lead us in the right direction and may it be Your will to bless us, our families, and all our loved ones with health and sustenance, with joy and peace, with a good and sweet year.

ⁱ Ta'anit 59a - Rabbi Elazar says: Since the day the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer were locked, as it is stated: "Though I plead and call out, He shuts out my prayer" (Lamentations 3:8). Yet, despite the fact that the gates of prayer were locked with the destruction of the Temple, the gates of tears were not locked, as it is stated: "Hear my prayer, Lord, and give ear to my pleading; keep not silence at my tears" (Psalms 39:13).