

Gates, Books

*I want a god who is like a window I can open
so I'll see the sky even when I am inside.
I want a god who is like a door that opens out, not in,
but God is like a revolving door; which turns, turns on its hinges
in and out, whirling and turning
without beginning, without end.*

Yehuda Amichai

The Book of Memory

My life is a series of
comings and goings,
of twists and turns.

I tread upon the
struggles, difficulties,
and disappointments.

I walk the path of courageous living.
These cobblestones are uneven.

Tallit be my cape,
Prayer is my secret source of power.

Heart be my wings.
I know who I am, I remember now.

I am beautiful.

A Humble Servant

טָרַם אֶעֱנֶה אֲנִי שֹׁגֵג וְעַתָּה אִמְרָתְךָ שְׁמַרְתִּי:
טוֹב־לִי כִי־עָנִיתִי לְמַעַן אֶלְמַד חֻקֶּיךָ:

*Before I was humbled, I went astray, but now I keep Your word.
It was good for me that I was humbled, so that I might learn Your laws.*
Psalm 119:67, 119:71

Afraid, the prophet scrambled up a faraway mountain, hoping to hide. He came upon a cave seeking safety. An imposing Presence went to the mouth of the cave and whispered, *What are you doing here, Elijah?*

And the question lingers until today, heavy as the air of faith. What am I doing here? Who am I? And I am shaken by the wind, and cracked open by the quake, and singed by the fire. And still, the question.

Did you know that “humiliation” and “humility” are linguistic sisters and that “cumulus cloud” is a distant cousin? All are rendered from the same root, “flattened.” On that imposing day centuries before, I imagine a cloud hovered in the distance, hinting, humbling. *What are you doing here, Elijah?* In the many answers that I will offer in my lifetime, I will oscillate between humiliation and humility until the day—maybe today—I will understand that it is I who chooses between the two.

And today, as the gates begin to close, I sing *Havdalah*, the prayer of separation, and I beckon Elijah and the question of the quest of the centuries.

What are you doing here?

I am here, I answer. Leveled and lowly. A humble servant of the highest good.

The Story Is Told: Before the Law

Before the law sits a gatekeeper. To this gatekeeper comes a man from the country who asks to gain entry into the law. But the gatekeeper says that he cannot grant him entry at the moment. The man thinks about it and then asks if he will be allowed to come in later on. "It is possible," says the gatekeeper, "but not now." At the moment the gate to the law stands open, as always, and the gatekeeper walks to the side, so the man bends over in order to see through the gate into the inside. When the gatekeeper notices that, he laughs and says, "If it tempts you so much, try it in spite of my prohibition. But take note: I am powerful. And I am only the most lowly gatekeeper. But from room to room stand gatekeepers, each more powerful than the other. I can't endure even one glimpse of the third."

The man from the country has not expected such difficulties: the law should always be accessible for everyone, he thinks, but as he now looks more closely at the gatekeeper in his fur coat, at his large pointed nose, and his long, thin, black Tartar's beard, he decides that it would be better to wait until he gets permission to go inside. The gatekeeper gives him a stool and allows him to sit down at the side in front of the gate.

There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be let in, and he wears the gatekeeper out with his requests. The gatekeeper often interrogates him briefly, questioning him about his homeland and many other things, but they are indifferent questions, the kind great men put, and at the end he always tells him once more that he cannot let him inside yet. The man, who has equipped himself with many things for his journey, spends everything, no matter how valuable, to win over the gatekeeper. The latter takes it all but, as he does so, says, "I am taking this only so that you do not think you have failed to do anything." During the many years the man observes the gatekeeper almost continuously. He forgets the other gatekeepers, and this one seems to him the only obstacle for entry into the law. He curses the unlucky circumstance, in the first years thoughtlessly and out loud, later, as he grows old, he still mumbles to himself. He becomes childish, and since in the long years studying the gatekeeper he has come to know the fleas in his fur collar, he even asks the fleas to help him persuade the gatekeeper.

Finally his eyesight grows weak, and he does not know whether things are really darker around him or whether his eyes are merely deceiving him. But he recognizes now in the darkness an illumination that breaks inextinguishably out of the gateway to the law. Now he no longer has much time to live. Before his death he gathers in his head all his experiences of the entire time up into one question that he has not yet put to the gatekeeper. He waves to him, since he can no longer lift up his stiffening body.

The gatekeeper has to bend way down to him, for the great difference has changed things to the disadvantage of the man. "What do you still want to know, then?" asks the gatekeeper. "You are insatiable."

"Everyone strives after the law," says the man, "so how is [it] that in these many years no one except me has requested entry?" The gatekeeper sees that the man is already dying and, in order to reach his diminishing sense of hearing, he shouts at him, "Here no one else can gain

entry, since this entrance was assigned only to you. I'm going to close it.”

Franz Kafka

The Shadows Fall

שָׂאוּ שְׁעָרִים רָאשֵׁיכֶם וּשְׂאוּ פִתְחֵי עוֹלָם וַיָּבֹא מֶלֶךְ הַכְּבוֹד:

*Lift my weary head to the eternal gates, lift me high that
the majesty of God may be ever present.*

Based on Psalm 24:9

Once again, the shadows fall. Let these be the shadows of a day well spent in prayer and contemplation. Let them be a sign of the day's end and not the shadows of my tired spirit. We were born into goodness and have gone astray. *N'ilah*. We come before the gates of prayer, the gates of repentance, the barriers of our heart.

Is this a feeling of isolation, abandonment, or banishment? Estrangement for sure. For many years we have formed an armor that was supposed to protect us, and I suppose it did. Until it didn't. It served us when we were tender. It protected us and allowed us to build inner strength and resilience. Our armor is the habits we have learned to wear. But we have been saved from the cruelty that attacks innocence. Perhaps we no longer need the shields and weapons of our youth .

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Trust the strength and fortitude of your years. Rely on the wisdom of passing time. What once cast us down to the ground now offers a new pose. May we kneel on the holy ground of humility. Forgiven. Forgiving.

And now as we search for the way back home, we must ask—haven't our childhood protections stiffened us, distanced us, kept us sequestered rather than protected? Older, stronger—aren't we ready to stand firm in vulnerability?

Less defensive, we can learn a new language. Less turbulent, we can speak in softer tones. More open, may we speak words of kindness and love.

I implore You, Source of mercy. I lay down my weapons, strip down, lower my armor. I stand at the gate of repentance, willing, forgiving, repentant. Open, open the gate, open with loving compassion. I bear no arms that can harm but only embrace. Open, open the gate. Open the gates of righteousness and I shall enter.

God of Records, God of Memory

נְדִי סִפְרָתָהּ אֶתָּה
שְׂיִמָּה דְּמַעְתִּי בְּנֹאדָךְ
הֲלֹא בְּסִפְרָתְךָ:

*You keep count of my wanderings,
put my tears into Your flask.
Are they not in Your book?*
Psalm 56:9

*On Rosh HaShanah, it is written; on Yom Kippur, it is sealed.
Un'taneh Tokef*

There is the Book of Life, and there is the Book of Death, and in between, the Book of Memory.

And in these books is the great drama of our lives, written with recurring themes of loss and love and anguish and joy and loneliness and belonging and passion and compassion and pain and healing.

And though the God of records is for me a metaphor, there is a permanence to what we have done, what was done to us, and who we have become. For what was will always be. Memories are living beings sometimes living in our conscious mind, sometimes living in the unaware. Mostly warped and bent by time. Memory is not an accurate reporter. Remember returning to your childhood home? It was so much bigger then. And yet, memories form and inform. They are a record of sorts, referenced and considered.

I dance a tango with fate and destiny. *Who shall live and who shall die?*

Fate, the mysterious undertow, appears suddenly, pulling at us, making us struggle to stay afloat or not drift too far from the shore. Fate is beyond our doing. Larger than what we can know or understand. It is the playmate of the Unknown Forces that impose themselves upon our lives and our loves.

Who shall live and who shall die?

But our destiny unfolds from the fine threads of choices that are woven and knotted and stitched into the cloth that sets our table. Choice is the most powerful spiritual practice of all. We choose to react or not, to step forward or retreat; we choose to be angry for a very long time or not long enough; we choose to be positive and to fight the cynical view that we are not enough, don't have enough, will never be enough. Or not. We choose the company we keep; they reinforce our choices or enlighten us or challenge us or bore us and love us. Or not. Our destiny unfolds from the life we live, leaning toward righteousness, living in quiet contemplation, practicing generosity.

And through *t'shuvah*, return to the right path; through *t'filah*, prayer; through *tzedakah*, righteous living, fate's harshness can be softened.

These are days of memory, contemplating and analyzing, noticing and revealing how our fate and our destiny bump and bounce against each other and what we shall do about it. Fate and destiny are coauthors of the Book of Our Lives. We write the story by tending to what is within our control and releasing the rest to the mystery. Choosing to live a little better, a little kinder, a bit more forgiving, awake and aware.

*Rabbi Sh'muel bar Nachman said to Rabbi Chanina bar Papa,
the gates of prayer are sometimes open and sometimes closed,
but the gates of repentance are always open.
D'varim Rabbah 2*

*Prayer is like a mikveh, and repentance is like the sea.
The mikveh is sometimes open and sometimes closed,
just like the gates of prayer are sometimes open and sometimes closed,
but the sea, the sea is always wide open, just like the gates of repentance are open wide.*

Eichah Rabbah 3

Eternity's Edge

A person should always view themselves as leaning toward death. Death may find them at any time, even in a state of sin. Therefore, they must always repent and should not say, "When I grow older, I will repent." For death may find them before they grow older. The wise Solomon says, "At all times, your clothes should be white" (Ecclesiastes 9:8).

Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 7:2

The moment I truly see, know, and understand that I always live at eternity's edge, I am powerfully filled with life, a life that should be regarded with gentle purpose. I know my place is sacred yet fleeting. Always at the edge of eternity, I know my place is sacred yet fleeting. When we see, know, and understand that this life is but a moment, then we are gifted.

On the sands of the Mediterranean Sea, the shore is calm at twilight. Every setting sun, spectacular. There is a gentle play of white foam approaching, retreating, approaching, retreating, drawing near, withdrawing. Whenever possible, I spend my days there, in the presence of twilight, at the edge of the sea. I feel peace at the edge, the life force within every breath, every wave. Until one day, it's not. For what is a woman's life but a moment in time. This is my moment. My time. And yours.

I do not know where death will find me. But I know where life finds me. And you.

What a shift of perspective to live within the consciousness of our mortality rather than the delusion of immortality. That shift is a gift. For what are our days if not a command to live with grace and wonder and to be kind and humble? And what are these days, the High Holy Days, if not a reminder of our mortality? We don't like archaic words like "sin." But we do sin. And we don't understand the concept of repentance, but we must repent.

And when we are honest with ourselves, we know. We know so much when we pause in the silences and majesty of life.

The Ten Days of Repentance is an extended pause. We do not rise from the seat of contemplation until we are closer to knowing. Knowing who we are and the ripple effect of our behaviors. Knowing who we want to be and the unending power of love. Knowing not where death will find us. Knowing the constant play of the waves upon the sea and that every sunset is spectacular. Seeing, knowing, understanding this moment—this moment, this sacred moment.

Reckoning

*Heaven can be reached
by those who weave with its blue,
walk on miracle as on stairs,
and know the way of the secret.*

Kadia Molodowsky

My Sacred Regard

This is my spiritual reckoning, my sacred regard.

My reconciliation with the sun and moon and joy and tremendous beauty that surrounds me, entering into the crevasses even when my soul was weeping.

This is the moment when my sorrow is great, for I am sorry for so much. Though I do not regret my failures or the insults and assaults that come with living a life—I have been a faithful student of it all—I regret, so truly repent, the times that I was impatient, judgmental, and unkind. I am sorry.

And I am also delighted—lit up by the brightness of the world. Enlightened and infused by the light of my faith. And I'm grateful. And now understand when my elders, some gone from sight, used to sigh and say, *I am blessed, I have been blessed in my life*. I understand the all-pervasive feeling of blessing. I understand the sigh.

I lean toward the mist of never more. I feel it in the balance of things and in my bones and blurred eyes, and in my ambitions, now quieter than ever before.

This is my call to the Invisible, the testament of my will, though not my last.

I will tarry in the days ahead, noticing it all. The pinches and the thrills. The noise and the song. The boredom and the fear. The prancing of youth and their unabashed desire to bend and break and disregard the rules that often constrict and confine. And the curiosity I hold so dear. And the creative gifts of my muse. And the God whispers. And the rock and roll of exuberance. And the wistful longing, my heart wistfully longs for beauty. And the quiet that comes with time.

For whatever time I have left, I continue to unfold in the wonder of it all.
Unfolding.