

OPEN CLOSED OPEN

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פְּתוּחַ סָגוּר פְּתוּחַ. לִפְנֵי שְׂאֵדָם נוֹלָד
הַכֵּל פְּתוּחַ בְּיָקוֹם בְּלִעְדֵּי. כְּשֶׁהוּא חַי הַכֵּל סָגוּר
בּוֹ בְּחַיָּיו. וְכִשְׁהוּא מֵת הַכֵּל שׁוֹב פְּתוּחַ.
פְּתוּחַ סָגוּר פְּתוּחַ. זֶה כָּל הָאָדָם.

*Open closed open. Before we are born,
everything is open
in the universe without us. For as long as
we live, everything is closed
within us. And when we die, everything is
open again.
Open closed open. That's all we are.¹*

OVER THE COURSE of the High Holidays the ark is opened and closed and opened and closed so often it can feel a little absurd. Why not just leave it open and let us gaze at those beautiful Torah scrolls all day long?

Open closed open. The evocative phrase that appears in this poem by Yehuda Amichai echoes in my head. It is a poem about birth, life, and death—and the echo in my head is a voice assessing my own heart as I relate to the world around me. With each news article or headline, whether big picture update or personal interest story, I assess my heart: open or closed?

Some days my heart is open. On those days the hard stories of the news break me. They reach deep inside, grab hold of my stomach, and squeeze. Each word of the article or speech, podcast or report seeps into my body. I absorb it. My breath slows. I sigh.

Other days my heart is closed. I see a troubling headline flash across the tiny screen in my hand as if it is a million miles away—and then I get my children ready for school, wish them a good day, and head for the subway. “Closed,” the voice will notice. No outrage, no tears.

This is my heart, ever shifting between these postures: open, closed, open.

In Amichai’s poem, “closed” is not a bad thing—an indictment or a flaw. “Closed” is just how we live. Being closed is what it means to be a living person (“for as long as we live, everything is closed”). If I am honest, this has often felt true for me. The more I close myself to the buzz of constant media, the more fully I am able to live my life. I am more present with my children, more productive at work, happier, better able to see beauty and joy around me.

Being closed in one way can lead to a different kind of openness. Our ancestors who carried the ark through the wilderness built an elaborate *mishkan* to host the tablets. We cannot live in the inner chambers, cannot sustain unending direct relationships with God. The same is true of our sanctuaries during our High Holidays. It would be too overwhelming and raw to keep the ark open all the time—not every service can be *Ne’ilah*. There is a place

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for boundaries and distance. Closing ourselves off to the Torah can allow us to think more clearly, center ourselves, and ready ourselves for the next moment of encounter.

It’s okay to close our ark, and even to close our hearts, so long as we don’t lose the ability to ever unlock them again.

At the end of the weekday Amidah, after we’ve prayed for peace, we add personal supplications. There is a paragraph

¹ Yehuda Amichai, from “Ani Lo Hayiti Ehad mi-Sheshet ha-Milyonim. U-Mah Meshekh Hayyai? Patu’ah Sagur Patu’ah,” in *Patu’ah Sagur Patu’ah* (Schocken Publishing House, 1998), translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld, in *Open Closed Open: Poems* (Harcourt, 2000).

there that I memorized in English as a child; it has been a spiritual map guiding me through life. In different years and moments I have called on different phrases to help me find my way.

Today, my prayer is this: פָּתַח לִבִּי בְּתוֹרָתְךָ. I read this phrase in two ways: “Open my heart **to** your Torah,” and also, “Open my heart **with** your Torah.”

Open my heart **to** your Torah: Keeping an open heart to Torah has been harder recently for many Jews. The particular pressures of the world—the painfully tragic wars in Israel and the hatred of Judaism that increasingly surrounds us—make it feel like it might just be easier to close ourselves off to religion, to Torah, to Judaism altogether. We feel our hearts close. We may need this reminder right now to keep our hearts open to Torah.

Open my heart **with** your Torah: Torah is what opens and expands my heart. Torah reminds me that I am part of a larger story, that there is a difference between right and wrong, that this difference matters, that God made this world, that holiness is real. I must continue to open my heart to Torah, so that Torah can continue to open my heart.

We should not live our lives with permanently closed hearts. We need the moments of openness and connection to God that Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are designed to offer us. But we also shouldn’t live with hearts that remain perpetually open. We need closure for stability, for focus, for clarity. As Yehudah Amichai teaches, “Open closed open. That’s all we are.”

But unlike the ark, which must cycle between these two postures, there is a third, perhaps more sustainable option that we encounter when we emerge from the Ten Days of Repentance into Sukkot. In the *sukkah*, there is no open and closed. The *sukkah* allows us to be both inside and outside, simultaneously sheltered and exposed to the world. There are walls that don’t protect from the wind and a roof that doesn’t keep out the rain. From within the *sukkah* we feel the chill, and also the warmth of the clouds of God’s divine protection.

Through our Tishrei holiday cycle we are reminded that there are moments to feel closed—and that’s okay. There are moments to crack our hearts wide open to and through Torah. And as the season begins to wind down, we can sit in our *sukkot* and practice dwelling in the in-between space, in which we must learn to live. ♦