

Kinot Instead of Selichot

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A key component of prayers on a fast day, including Yom Kippurim, is the recitation of Selichot. The exception is Tisha B'Av, when Kinot are recited until mid-day while Selichot are omitted. "Kina" is mentioned in Yirmiyahu and in the Haftorah that we read on Tisha B'Av morning, and is associated with mourning. The Talmud (Taanis 30a) points out that Tisha B'Av is a day of mourning as well as a fast day. While all four national fast days are connected to the destruction of the temple, only Tisha B'Av marks the date of the actual destruction of both temples.

The contrast between Shiva Assar B'Tammuz and Tisha B'Av is found even in the earliest events that are associated with both fast days. On Shiva Assar B'Tammuz Moshe broke the tablets when the Israelites worshiped the golden calf. It was a terrible tragedy, but the Jewish people were forgiven and received the second tablets. On Tisha B'av the Jews adopted the report of the majority of the spies; that generation was no longer permitted to enter the land of Israel. The latter event led to a punishment that was not revoked.

On the night of Tisha B'Av, Eicha is recited and a few Kinot are said. The words of Yirmiyahu are so powerful that they need little addition. The tone of the day has been established through the Eichah reading; it will be reinforced as the bulk of the Kinot are recited in the morning.

There is a revealing example of parallel texts on the two fast days, one a Kina said on Tisha B'Av and the other a Selicha said on Yom Kippurim. Both discuss the midrash of ten martyred scholars killed by the Romans; the story is essentially the same, differing only in details. The Selicha, "Eilu Ezkara," has a refrain while the Kina, "Arzei Halevanon," does not. The refrain, "chatanu Tzureinu slach lanu yotzreinu," stresses that we sinned and asks God to forgive us, while in the Kina the account of the tragedy is given without comment.

Aside from any distinctions in the words of the Kinot and Selichot, there is a fundamental difference in context. Selichot are introduced by recitals of the thirteen attributes of Divine mercy and conclude with Vidui, an alphabetic listing of sins. Both elements are absent in the recital of Kinot.

On a day of mourning for national tragedy Divine mercy is not apparent and its absence is felt. We can understand why we do not say the thirteen attributes of Divine mercy. What is more surprising is the omission of Vidui. Confession is a critical element of repentance. But on the morning of Tisha B'Av, when we are to re-experience communal tragedies, it is premature to

even hint about repentance which we hope will lead to forgiveness. The recital of Kinot helps us feel the full extent of loss though these events took place thousands of years ago. It is difficult to say the Kinot for the entire morning without introducing any other theme, but that is exactly the point.

The mood lightens when mincha is prayed in the afternoon of Tisha B'av. The Torah reading is about the prayers of Moshe after the Jews sinned through worshipping the golden calf, and includes the initial mention of the thirteen attributes of Divine mercy. Moshe carves out the second tablets where the Ten Commandments will be written again. Strikingly, these events occurred on Shiva Assar B'Tamuz. The possibility of Teshuva (repentance) is introduced, though without confession. Selichot are not said to balance or reduce the impact of hours of reciting Kinot.

Part of our tradition is the ultimate reversal of Tisha B'Av from a national day of mourning to one that will celebrate the final redemption, but this is inferred while the mourning is explicit. As individuals we should evaluate our actions and privately confess our sins, but to do so publicly would reduce the absolute sense of bereavement and tragedy.

Selichot also relate to tragedy and sin, but in a context where there is hope for forgiveness. On Tisha B'Av we need to acknowledge the full measure of the tragedies in Jewish history without diluting our sense of loss. From this perspective we can understand the inclusion of Kinot for other tragic events that took places on other days in the Jewish calendar, culminating with Kinot written to commemorate the Holocaust.