The Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 581:1, states:

נתונים להемые בבית עיון בלאו, ולאו
upalות התתוגנים, מראות ישראל את פניהם
עד יום הבקר. הנה: מנהיג בן אשכנז ואינו
כנכ, אלא מראות ישראל את פניהם לפני
ההר המצלמת שחרית ... ומעידים בכסמורת.
ולמים סליחות בטר א Ipsum שלפנינו א建材.
אם ולא ראו השנahan שא (לא) שלפנינו א建材.
מאמינים מימי ראו השנahan שלפנינו.

The custom is to awake before dawn to recite Selichot on the Sunday before Rosh Hashanah. If Rosh Hashanah is on Monday or Tuesday, we begin on Sunday one week earlier.

Ashkenazi practice is to begin recitation of Selichot at least four days before Rosh Hashanah. The Mishnah Berurah (6) provides two reasons for this. First, there are people who fast for ten days before Yom Kippur. We may not fast on the two days of Rosh Hashanah, Shabbat or erev Yom Kippur. Therefore, we add four days before Rosh Hashanah to allow those fasting to recite Selichot together with their fast. In order to standardize the start time, it was instituted that Selichot always start at the beginning of the week. Second, a korban requires four days of bikur (inspection).

Regarding the mussaf korbanot of all the holidays, the Torah states “v’hi’kravtem olah”—you shall offer a burnt offering—but with regard to the korban mussaf of Rosh Hashanah, it states “va’asitem olah”—you shall make a burnt offering—meaning that we shall prepare ourselves as if we were the korban. Therefore, we inspect all our sins four days prior to Rosh Hashanah and repent for them.
Kidmnucha Techilah: We First Approach You Ahead of Time

The pizmon, the central prayer for the first night of Selichot for Ashkenazim on Motzei Shabbat, begins:

"בַּצֶּדֶק נֶעֱקַד, וְנִשְחַט תְמוּרוֹ אָיִל. גְנוֹן נָא גִזְעוֹ, וַיִשְמְעוּ אֶת קֹלְךָ שָמַעְתִי בַגָּן לְרוּחַ מֵמָרוֹם, יוֹשֵב תְהִלָה. לִשְמֹעַ אֶל־הָרִנָה וְאֶל־הַתְפִלָה: אֶת־יְמִין עֹז עוֹרְרָה, לַזַעֲקָם בְעוֹד לָיִל."

They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the man and his wife hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. The Lord God called out to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” He replied, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.” Then He asked, “Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?” The man said, “The woman You put at my side — she gave me of the tree, and I ate.”

Bereishit 3:8-12

Hashem asks Adam, “Where are you?” and the man should have given his precise location within Gan Eden, but instead he answers, “I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.” He never answers the question he was asked. Hashem then asks, “Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?” This is a yes or no question. Did you eat from the tree or not? Here, too, he doesn’t answer the question but blames his wife. Hashem never asked him about his role and yet he uses her to give an evasive answer. Adam ruins his relationship with his wife by blaming her, and he ruins his relationship with Hashem because he wouldn’t answer the questions he was asked.

Accepting Responsibility

Adam lost his ability to remain in Gan Eden because he didn’t know how to say one word: selicha — sorry. If he would have used this one word, he would have remained. Everything is contingent on this one word because selicha means, I accept upon myself responsibility for my actions and therefore I regret what I did.

Parashat Nitzavim opens with a description of a covenant between Hashem and the Jewish people:

"אתה נعجبוׁו יִשְׂרָאֵל לְךָ כִי עֵירֹם אַתָה הֲמִן הָעֵץ אֲשֶּר נָתְנָה לִי מִן הָעֵץ וָאֹכֵל. לְעׇבְרְךָ בִבְרִית ה' נַעֲקַד, וְנִשְחַט תְמוּרוֹ אָיִל. גְנוֹן נָא גִזְעוֹ, וַיִשְמְעוּ אֶת קֹלְךָ שָמַעְתִי בַגָּן לְרוּחַ מֵמָרוֹם, יוֹשֵב תְהִלָה. לִשְמֹעַ אֶל־הָרִנָה וְאֶל־הַתְפִלָה: אֶת־יְמִין עֹז עוֹרְרָה, לַזַעֲקָם בְעוֹד לָיִל."

Hashem and the Jewish people: Ateh nissaneh Yisrael lechem lachi, alkolcha are sikol Yisroel. Teimhu avod baakol Hashem veisheh velishom yisheh.

You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God — your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer — to enter into the covenant of the LORD your God, which the LORD your God is concluding with you this day, with its sanctions.

Devarim 9:9-11

When telling us that the Jewish people were standing before Hashem, why did the Torah use the word “nitzavim” and not the more common word for standing — “omdim”? The Ohr Hachaim explains that the word “nitzavim” implies an acceptance of responsibility. We find in Megillat Rut that Boaz talks to the “nitzav al hakotzrim” — the person supervising the farmers. Nitzav means responsible. As such, each of us has a personal responsibility for our own actions and for the actions of others that we can influence. Chazal (Shabbat 54b) tell us that one who can influence others and doesn’t do so is responsible for their sins. Therefore, when we say “selicha,” we are accepting responsibility for what happened.
Selach Lanu

Reciting Selichot in Elul means saying sorry, even though it’s not easy to do. In our Yamim Noraim liturgy we recite, “selach lanu, mechal lanu, kaper lanu” — forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement. What is the difference between selicha and mechila? Selicha means I am sorry for what I did. Mechila as a noun means a tunnel. As a verb it means to dig. If we say we are sorry, Hashem helps us dig a tunnel to get to a place of atonement.

In our Yom Kippur Amidah, we refer to Hashem as Melech mochel v’soleach la’avoneinu — the King who pardons and forgives our sins. Why is the order reversed? Why does mechila come before selicha? Because from Hashem’s perspective, mechila can come first. If He sees that we are interested in selicha, He opens a path for us to reach selicha and then atonement.

The Thirteen Midot

Harachamim

It is very difficult to ask for forgiveness. Our hubris prevents us from lowering ourselves to the level of begging for forgiveness. How do we get to a point where we can properly say that we are sorry? The answer is the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.

The Gemara, Rosh Hashanah 17b, states:

> וְיָד תִּהְיֶה לְךָ מִחוּץ לַמַחֲנֶה וְיָצָאת שָמָה
> לְאֹיְבֶיךָ לְפָנֶיךָ וְהָיָה מַחֲנֶיךָ קָדוֹשׁ. צֶרֶךְ לָךְ לְרָאֹב לְעַרְוַת דָבָר וְשָב מֵאַחֲרֶיךָ.
> רַע ... וְיָד תִּהְיֶה לְךָ מִחוּץ לַמַחֲנֶה וְיָצָאת שָמָה
> לְאֹיְבֶיךָ לְפָנֶיךָ וְהָיָה מַחֲנֶיךָ קָדוֹשׁ. צֶרֶךְ לָךְ לְרָאֹב Lְעַרְוַת Dָבָר Wְשָב MֵAַחֲרֶיךָ.

The verse states: “And the Lord passed by him, and proclaimed” (Exodus 34:6). Rabbi Yochanan said: Were it not explicitly written in the verse, it would be impossible to say this. The verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, wrapped Himself in a prayer shawl like a prayer leader and showed Moses the structure of the order of the prayer. He said to him: Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them act before Me in accordance with this order and I will forgive them. The verse continues: “The Lord, the Lord,” I am He before a person sins, and I am He after a person sins and performs repentance, “God, merciful and gracious” (Exodus 34:6). Rav Yehuda said: A covenant was made with the Thirteen Attributes that they will not return empty-handed, as it is stated in this regard: “Behold, I make a covenant.” Translation adapted from The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud

Rabbeinu Chananel adds:

> הה’አי ואהא קור께서 הרדאה אדראהبيع
> בברבר הניחני הניא Lahore ששתきてאדרא.
> וישמש הבשר הה’ الكامل בלא אשה.

The Lord, the Lord, I am [the Lord] before a person sins and it is still written in the Book of Life and I am the Lord after a person sins and repents. [Hashem] accepts him as if he never sinned.

The Thirteen Attributes teach us that through teshuva, Hashem accepts us as if we never sinned.

The Torah gives us the following instruction when we go to war:

> ﻞأ ياء ﻹحوآ ﻫ ﻶو ﻻس موا ﻻو ﻰ ﻰ ﻢو سو ﻫو ﻢو ﻰ ﻰ ﻢو سو 
> ﻰ ﻰ ﻢو سو ﻰ ﻰ ﻢو سو ﻰ ﻰ ﻢو سو ﻰ ﻰ ﻢو سو ﻰ ﻰ ﻢو 
> ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو 
> ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو 
> ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو 
> ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو 
> ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو 

The verse states: “Behold, I make a covenant.” (Exodus 34:6). Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary • The Benjamin and Rose Berger CJF Torah To-Go Series • Rosh Hashanah 5781

The Ba’al Haturim comments:

> יזהת מתיהו על אנereco. בטובל החרה על אתנה.
> אנה. קלמר עי מתיהו ויי אלוי של.
> “With your gear you shall have a stake” is the same numerical value as “My attributes shall be with your gear.” Meaning that the Thirteen Attributes should be your weapon.

Our weapon during the Yamim Noraim is the Thirteen Attributes. Based on this, we can understand the closing selicha for Ashkenazim at Neilah:

> ﻞأ ﻫأا ﻪروآ ﻫو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو 
> ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو 
> ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو 
> ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو ﻢو 

I plant my stakes with the Thirteen Attributes [of God], and rely on the gates of [penitent] tears, which are never joined; therefore, I have poured out my prayers before Him, Who searches hearts. I trust in these, and in the merit of the three Patriarchs.

The Thirteen Attributes are our stake. Just like a stake holds down a tent so that it doesn’t blow in the wind, our stakes, the Thirteen Attributes, keep us grounded. This is why we recite the Thirteen Attributes seven times during Neilah. These Thirteen Attributes don’t provide forgiveness from Hashem nor are they a request from Hashem. Rather, through these, we understand the Creator of the World. He has so many reasons not to forgive us. We have asked for forgiveness so many times, and even
after accepting not to sin, we continue to sin. The Creator has given and continues to give so many chances. However, in His abundant mercy, He has compassion on us after our sins as before our sins. The Thirteen Attributes bring us to understand that we don’t deserve anything. Everything we receive from Hashem is a gift. This idea is found in the *pizmon* on the first night of Selichot:

"And I shall show favor when I choose to show favor, etc." At this particular time G-d showed Moses all the kinds of reward in store for the righteous, each one in accordance with the deeds he had performed while alive. Moses would look at the various treasures and ask: "Whose treasure is this?" G-d would answer that it was in store for those who perform the commandments. Of a different kind of treasure G-d would say that it was in store for those who raise orphans. There were a number of these treasures. Eventually, G-d showed him another treasure greater than any of the previous ones. When Moses inquired who this treasure was for, G-d answered, "people who had various merits to their credit would receive their reward (part of the treasures Moses had been shown first), those who did not have such merits would receive part of this great treasure for free." This is what is meant by the words: "I shall show favor to the ones I choose to show favor to," to those I decide to favor. Similarly, "I will have compassion to the ones I choose to show compassion." 

Shemot Rabbah, Ki Tisa no. 45
(adapted from a translation by R. Eliyahu Munk)

Hashem will give us from this great treasure if we realize that we don’t deserve anything. Therefore, at Neilah, we recite “l’ma’an nechdal me’oshek yadeinu” — so that we may refrain from the theft of our hands. Are we really calling ourselves thieves? The idea is that many times we feel that this belongs to me, "My own power and the might of my own hand have created this wealth for me." In this way, we are stealing from the Almighty because He was the one Who gave us everything. Rather, we must feel that this is all from the “free treasure” because we are undeserving.

Chazal tell us the following:

And I shall show favor when I choose to show favor, etc.” At this particular time G-d showed Moses all the kinds of reward in store for the righteous, each one in accordance with the deeds he had performed while alive. Moses would look toward G-d. It had a ripple effect on the entire creation. The fact that the land doesn’t produce as easily and the rain doesn’t come as easily is all a result of his failure to apologize. Therefore, mankind must apologize for desecrating what was created on the first day, on the second day and so on.

This is what we mean when we say, “After the departure of the Sabbaths, we first approach You ahead of time.” We are not reciting Selichot early. Rather, we are acknowledging that part of our request for forgiveness is not just from Hashem, Who created us on the sixth day, but we are asking forgiveness from the entire creation. Our sin on the sixth day changed the whole order of the universe and that was all our fault.

We can’t give anything to Hashem. We can only try to restore what we ruined. Recognizing that He is the Giver of everything removes our hubris. Then we can feel like a pauper who knocks on the door to receive charity, who knows definitively that whatever he receives is only because it was a gift. Only with this perspective can we request “milfanecha Malkeinu reikam al teshiveinu” — Before You our King, please don’t turn us away empty.

The days we are engaged in teshuva are days of grace. Hashem wants us to say one word — *selicha*. Then, it is possible to enter Rosh Hashanah with *simcha* as it says:

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