



לעילוי נשמת הרב חיים ארבספלד
תורתך—תורת חיים ואהבת חסד. הנהגותך—הצנע לכת. אישיותך—אצילות, ענוה, יראת ד' ושמחת חיים.

SELICHOT: LEARNING TO SAY SORRY

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

נוהגים לקום באשמורת לומר סליחות ותחנונים, מראש חודש אלול ואילך עד יום הכיפורים. הגה: ומנהג בני אשכנז אינו כן, אלא מראש חודש ואילך מתחילין לתקוע אחר התפילה שחרית ... ועומדים באשמורת לומר סליחות ביום ראשון שלפני ראש השנה. ואם חל ראש השנה שני (או) שלישי, אז מתחילין מיום ראשון שבוע שלפניו.

The custom is to awake before dawn to recite Selichot from Rosh Chodesh Elul until Yom Kippur. Glosses of Rama: This is not the Ashkenazi custom. Rather, from Rosh Chodesh, we begin blowing shofar after morning prayers ... and we 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’hikravtem 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.

Kidamnucha 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:

בְּמוֹצָאֵי מְנוּחָהּ, קִדְמָנוּךָ תְּחִלָּה. הֵט אָזְנְךָ
מִמְרוֹם, יוֹשֵׁב תְּהִלָּה. לְשִׁמְעַע אֶל־הַרְנָה וְאֶל־
הַתְּפִלָּה: אֶת־יְמִינוֹ עַז עוֹרְרָה, לַעֲשׂוֹת חֵיל.
בְּצִדְקַת נְעֻמָּךְ, וְנִשְׁחַט תְּמוּרוֹ אֵיל. גְּנוּן נָא גִזְעוּ,
בְּזַעְקֵם בְּעוֹד לַיִל.

After the departure of the Sabbath, as we first approach You, incline Your ear from on High, You Who are enthroned upon praises, [and] hear our cry and our prayer! Raise Your mighty right hand to act valiantly [against our accusers] for the sake of [Isaac] the righteous one, who was bound [on the altar], and in whose stead a ram was slain — shield his descendants as they cry to You while it is yet night.

Translation adapted from the Metsudah Selichos

The question is: Since we are reciting this prayer close to Rosh Hashanah, not on Rosh Chodesh Elul like the Sephardim, how then can we say, “After the departure of the Sabbath, we first approach You ahead of time”? We aren’t early. We are late. We are waiting until four days before Rosh Hashanah to recite Selichot.

Adam Harishon’s Punishment

Let us answer this question with the following approach: On the very same day that Adam Harishon was created, he was also judged. Our rabbis tell us that he sinned on the same day he was created, and through this sin, he forfeited eternal life in Gan Eden. However, the reason for his punishment was not because he ate from the Tree of Knowledge. Let us examine the *pesukim*:

וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶת קוֹל ה' אֱלֹקִים מִתְּהִלָּה בְּגֵן לְרוּחַ

הַיּוֹם וַיִּתְחַבֵּא הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ מִפְּנֵי ה' אֱלֹקִים
בְּתוֹךְ עֵץ הַגֵּן. וַיִּקְרָא ה' אֱלֹקִים אֶל הָאָדָם
וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אַיֶּכָּה. וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת קִלְךָ שָׁמַעְתִּי בְּגֵן
וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי עִירַם אֲנֹכִי וְאֶחְבֵּא. וַיֹּאמֶר מִי הִגִּיד
לְךָ כִּי עִירַם אֶתָּה הֲמוֹן הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ לְבָלְתָּ
אֲכַל מִמֶּנּוּ אֲכַלְתָּ. וַיֹּאמֶר הָאָדָם הֲאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר
נָתַתָּה עִמָּדִי הִיא נָתַתָּה לִּי מִן הָעֵץ וְאֲכַל.

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 her 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:

אַתֶּם נֹצְבִים הַיּוֹם בְּלַפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם
רְאִשֵׁיכֶם שְׁבֻטֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם וְשֹׁטְרֵיכֶם כָּל אִישׁ
יִשְׂרָאֵל. טַפְּכֶם נְשִׁיכֶם וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּקֶרֶב מַחֲנֶיךָ
מִחוּטֵב עֲצִיף עַד שְׂאֵב מִימִיָּה. לְעֶבְרֶךָ בְּבְרִית ה'
אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּבְאֵלֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ כָּרַת עִמָּךְ הַיּוֹם.
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'avonoteinu* — 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:

ויעבור ה' על פניו ויקרא א"ר יוחנן אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומרנו מלמד שנתעטף הקב"ה כשליח צבור והראה לו למשה סדר תפלה אמר לו כל זמן שישיראל חוטאין יעשו לפני כסדר הזה ואני מוחל להם ה' ה' אני הוא קודם שיחטא האדם ואני הוא לאחר שיחטא האדם ויעשה תשובה אל רחום וחונן אמר רב יהודה ברית כרותה לי"ג מדות שאינן חוזרות ריקם.

The verse states: "And the Lord passed by before 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:

ה' ה' אני הוא קודם שיחטא האדם שכתוב בו בספר החיים ואני ה' לאחר שיחטא האדם וישוב בתשובה שמקבלו כאלו לא חטא.

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:

כִּי תֵצֵא מִחֲנֵה עַל אֹיְבֶיךָ וְנִשְׁמַרְתָּ מִכָּל דָּבָר רָע ... וְיָד תִּהְיֶה לְךָ מִחוּץ לְמַחֲנֶה וְיִצְאֲתָ שָׁמָּה חוּץ. וְיָתֵד תִּהְיֶה לְךָ עַל אֲזִנֶיךָ וְהָיָה בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ חוּץ וְחִפְרִתָּהּ בָּהּ וְשִׁבְתָּ וְכִסִּיתָ אֶת צַעֲרֶךָ. כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִתְּהַלֵּךְ בְּקִרְבְּךָ מִחֲנֶה לְהִצִּילְךָ וְלִתֵּת אֹיְבֶיךָ לְפָנֶיךָ וְהָיָה מִחֲנֶיךָ קְדוֹשׁ וְלֹא יִרְאֶה בְּךָ עֲרוֹת דָּבָר וְשָׁב מֵאֲחֵרֶיךָ.

When you go out as a troop against your enemies, be on your guard against anything untoward ... Further, there

shall be an area for you outside the camp, where you may relieve yourself. With your gear you shall have a stake, and when you have squatted you shall dig a hole with it and cover up your excrement. Since the Lord your God moves about in your camp to protect you and to deliver your enemies to you, let your camp be holy; let Him not find anything unseemly among you and turn away from you.

The Ba'al Haturim comments:

ויתד תהיה לך על אונך. בגימ' מדותיה על אונך. כלומר י"ג מדות יהיו כלי זיין שלך. "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:

תְּמַכְתִּי יִתְדוֹתַי בְּשִׁלְשׁ עָשָׂרָה תְּבוּת. וּבְשַׁעֲרֵי דְמַעוֹת כִּי לֹא נִשְׁלָבוּת. לְכֹן שִׁפְכְתִי שִׁיחַ פְּנֵי בּוֹחֵן לְבוֹת. בְּטוֹחַ אֲנִי בְּאֵלֶּה וּבְזִכּוֹת שְׁלֵשֶׁת אָבוֹת. *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:

יוצר אתה לכל יציר נוצר. פוננת מאז תרף
לחלצם ממוצר. לחוננם חנם מאוצר הפנצרה.
מרום, אם טעצמו פשעי קהלה. נא סגבם מאוצר
המוכן בבזבולך. עדיף לחון חנם, באים אליך.
*You are the Creator of all that is formed,
You prepared from of old, a remedy to
save them from distress, by bestowing
undeserved grace upon them from Your
hidden treasure. Exalted One, if the
sins of Your congregation are great,
strengthen them, we pray from the
treasure stored in Your abode; Your
community [implores You] to grant them
undeserving grace as they approach You.*

Hashem saves us from distress and gives us a gift when we approach Him with the sentiment that we don't deserve anything, "to grant them undeserving grace as they approach You."

Chazal tell us the following:

וחנותי את אשר אחון באותה שעה הראה לו
הקב"ה את כל האוצרות של מתן שכר שהן
מתוקנין לצדיקים והוא אומר האוצר הזה של מי
הוא והוא אומר של עושי מצות, והאוצר הזה
של מי הוא של מגדלי יתומים, וכל אוצר ואוצר,
ואח"כ ראה אוצר גדול אמר האוצר הזה של מי
הוא א"ל מי שיש לו אני נותן לו משכרו ומי שאין
לו אני עושה לו חנם ונותן לו מזה שנאמר וחנותי
את אשר אחון, וחנותי את אשר אחון למי שאני
מבקש לחון, וכן ורחמתי את אשר ארחם.

*"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 "I'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.

Like a Pauper Knocking on a Door

If Adam would have said "Sorry, I sinned," he would not have lost his portion in Gan Eden. The sin of Adam Harishon wasn't just a slight

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 Sabbath, 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:

ויאמר להם לכו אכלו משמנים ושתי ממתקים
ושלחו מנות לאין נכון לו כי קדוש היום
לאדנינו ואל תעצבו כי חדות ה' היא מעצבכם.

*Nechemiah said to them [on Rosh
Hashanah], "Go, eat choice foods and
drink sweet drinks and send portions to
whoever has nothing prepared, for the
day is holy to our Lord. Do not be sad,
for your rejoicing in the LORD is the
source of your strength."*

Nechemiah 8:10