

SELICHOS 1984
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The prayers for Selichos revolve around two separate themes. One of the themes is found in the oldest prayer book extant by Rav Abram, and the prayers revolve around "Misha'ana" "the One Who answered". The other theme revolves around the sentence "G-d, G-d, compassionate, slow to wrath..." etc. This sentence G-d told Moshe to say any time the Jewish people got into trouble or sinned. This sentence reminds us of the sin of the golden calf, when Moshe Rabbeinu asked G-d to forgive the Jewish people. G-d said He would and He told Moshe that any time the Jewish people sinned they should say this special prayer so that G-d should forgive them. The Medrash elaborates on this and said G-d even donned a Tallis and showed Moshe how to say this prayer, and later when the Jewish people did sin in the incident of the spies by refusing to go into the Land of Israel, Moshe did say this prayer and the Jewish people were forgiven although all those above 20 years of age were doomed to die in the desert and only their children that they had claimed would die from thirst in the desert, were able to go into the Land of Israel. This prayer asks G-d to always consider the circumstances, know what is going on, know the pressures that are brought to bear on people. It is very difficult to judge people because we do not know what the pressures are. Every generation has its own problems. Hezekiah was a very pious king. In fact, the rabbis say he was supposed to be the Mashiach, but he failed to thank G-d after Jerusalem was saved so he was not the Mashiach. He had a son, Menasha, who turned out to be an evil man. In fact, in the Gemorah they debate whether Menasha would ever be worthy of the world to come even though at the end of his life he did do Teshuva. As these rabbis are discussing Menasha and rebuking his memory and his faults, a heavenly voice appeared and said, "If you had lived in Menasha's time not only would you have not rebuked him, you would have grabbed hold of his skirts and run after him." Menasha was under terrible pressure. He wanted to preserve the State of Israel. He did not want it to go under. The Assyrians were the mighty empire of the day and they not only demanded tribute but also that their culture and religion be accepted in the tribute states. Menasha was caught in vicious circumstances. He had to ingratiate himself with the ruling power in order to preserve Israel, plus Assyria, because it was the

world power, had cultural supremacy. It is very difficult to judge people. The rabbis say that Rosh Hashonna comes when it does at the beginning of the month when there is no moon and teaches us how to judge people. It says "Sound the Shofar in the new month B'Kesev." B'Kesev can either mean in the full moon or when there is no moon, when it is hidden. This is to teach us that when we judge others we should judge others by what is hidden, and when we judge ourselves we should judge ourselves by what is revealed. What do I mean by this? Usually, when we judge ourselves we judge ourselves by our intentions. We say, "I meant well" even though the result is disastrous, like making a comment about somebody's brother not knowing he has just died. The result is terrible, but the person excuses himself by saying, "I meant well." However, when it comes to others the person always judges others by the result of their actions. "I have been terribly insulted and I do not like it." We never say, "Well, he meant well." The Torah tells us that when we judge others we should look at their intentions and when we judge ourselves we should look at our actions. It is very important that we not Judaism judge others harshly. We have to consider all the circumstances. That's what we ask G-d to do in the prayer, "G-d, G-d, compassionate and slow to anger..." That's what we ask Him to do in the first theme of the Selichos prayers. In the second theme of the Selichos prayers, the "Misha'ana" "the One Who answered Abraham, our father, on Mount Moriah He shall answer us." We ask G-d to give us the strength to overcome life's contradictions. We ask G-d to remember that we cannot always see clearly the right thing to do. Abraham had thought that G-d had told him to offer up his son as a sacrifice. How could this be possible? G-d had promised that from him, from his seed, his children, the message of Judaism would spread. How could it if he kills Isaac, his only son from Sarah? He was in a terrible quandry. Life was difficult. He had an impossible choice. How could a good G-d ask him to do this unspeakable, vicious thing? Of course, G-d did not use the word "sacrifice". He used the word "Vaha'alehu" "and elevate him." Abraham did not know G-d's true intentions. In all the "Misha'anas" we find the terrible contradictions of life. We believe that might

makes right, that we should always do the good thing, but why should Joseph have been put in prison because he refused to commit adultery with his masters' wife? Why should Joseph have been sold in the first place? How can we understand the seemingly unjust things that occur in the world? Throughout all these Misha'anas the same theme reverberates. "G-d, forgive us because in this world we do not understand everything. Help us to have the courage to believe that might makes right, that goodness prevails even though we see it does not always. Let us act as it ultimately will." We also learn about Jonah in the innards of a fish. Jonah, too, was caught in an impossible situation. He did not want to save the people of Ninevah. After all, they were the Jewish people's sworn enemies. If they would repent it might have harmed his own people. Jonah wanted to evade his responsibilities. In fact, the whole story is replete with ways he tried to evade his responsibilities. First he went to "Yaffa" which means "beauty". He thought he could immerse himself in beauty, literature, and beautiful things and, thus, avoid coming to grips with his responsibilities. It did not work. He then tried to go to "Tarsus" which stands for precious jewels. He thought being rich would help. It did not. It then says he went on a ship, "Onceah" which can also mean "I am G-d" which meant he would make all the moral decisions in the world, but this did not work either. In fact, we learn the captain of the ship looked for him when the storm came up and another word for ship is used, "Sefina." He immersed himself in contemplation and self-meditation. It did not work. He then asked to be thrown into the "Yam" which can mean "Yaish Matireem" "everything is permissible" but then he was swallowed by the "Dag", a fish which can also mean "worry." He was overwhelmed by anguish and despair. The only way to be free of this anguish and despair was to accept his responsibilities. We ask G-d on this night of Selichos to allow us, too, to accept our responsibilities, to give us the courage to be able to do so, to remember in this world it is very hard many times to do the right thing. Our vision is not clear and we do not see everything. On this night of Selichos we ask G-d to forgive us in two ways: to remember our circumstances and to realize that our vision is limited and we always need His help in order to do the right thing. May we be granted this in the coming year.