

SELICHOS 1986
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

In a little while we will say Selichos. In the Ashkenazic tradition we begin Selichos at least four days before Rosh Hashonna. When it comes to Rosh Hashonna we use a different word regarding the sacrifices. We use the "Aseesem Olah - you should make an olah". With the other sacrifices we use the words "Yeefractem Olah - you should offer an olah". When it comes to Rosh Hashonna we, ourselves, are the sacrifice. We have to examine ourselves, look at ourselves and make sure we come before Hashem Mishporach free from all defects, that we have examined ourselves and we are determined to cure those defects we did find so we will come before G-d as a pure sacrifice.

Rosh Hashonna, of course, requires preparation. That's what Selichos stands for preparation. We have to prepare ourselves for the High Holidays. We cannot come to the High Holiday with no preparation. Selichos comes also on Saturday night, on Motzi Shabbos. We begin the first Selichos on Motzi Shabbos. Why don't we just start Selichos four days before Rosh Hashonna whenever that four days is? For example, this year we say Selichos more than four days before Rosh Hashonna because Rosh Hashonna comes on a Friday and we start Selichos on the previous Saturday night. Sometimes we can even say Selichos for more than a week when Rosh Hashonna comes out early in the week because we start not the Saturday before Rosh Hashonna but the Saturday night before the Saturday night of Rosh Hashonna. We all understand that it is important to have preparation. Why must we always start the Selichos on Saturday night? Why don't we just start four days before Rosh Hashonna? Preparation is essential in Judaism in order to appreciate a Mitzvah. If a person does not prepare Erev Shabbos, then his Shabbos is not half as beautiful and elevating as when he prepares. The same thing is true of Pesach if a person does not remove his chometz, Pesach is not Pesach. Every Mitzvah requires "Hachona - preparation".

When it comes to Rosh Hashonna there are three things we do to prepare for the holidays. One, we say Selichos. Two, we blow the shofar every day for the month of Elul until just Erev Rosh Hashonna when we do not blow the shofar, but every other day beginning

with the second day of Rosh Chodesh, or the first day of Elul, we begin blowing the shofar. Third, we read the Psalm: "L'Doveed Adoshem Oreeveeishee". The question can be asked, why do we read this particular Psalm? This Psalm does not tell us about creation, like Psalm 8. It does not talk about the Lord being our shepherd, like Psalm 23. This Psalm does not talk about G-d's power and majesty, but instead it talks about "The Lord is my light and aid. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life? Of whom shall I be afraid?" In other words, this Psalm does not really talk about the theme of the High Holiday. It talks about a person in distress. "Surely you will hid me within His own Tabernacle in the day of distress. Hear, O Lord, my voice when I call and be gracious unto me and answer me." In other words, this Psalm could be talking about any time of the year, not just Rosh Hashonna. Why should we say this Psalm Rosh Chodesh Elul. "Teach my Thy way, O Lord, and guide me in the straight path" is not something unique to Rosh Hashonna. There are so many other Psalms that strike a more responsive chord when it comes to the major themes of this holiday, like repentance and Teshuva, etc. It seems to me the reason this Psalm was chosen was because it really does talk about "Hachona - preparation" for the holiday.

There are some who say that when it refers to "G-d is my light and my salvation", it is referring to Rosh Hashonna and Yom Kippur, and when it refers to "G-d will shiled me in the succah in the day of evil", it refers to Succos. These are just passing illusions that can be interpreted many different way. However, I think this Psalm deals with something basic to all human beings. It is something we all need to think about before approaching the High Holidays. The first need we have is that we should not be afraid. We need to have a certain sense of security in life. Without this security we falter and fail and do not have the courage to face life's problems. The second need is the need not to be lonely. We want to always realize we can have relationships with others and G-d. Loneliness leads to alienation, criminal and anti-social behavior. Finally, we need to have a clean conscience. We need to know what is right and wrong in the world. Without a clean conscience it is very difficult to face life and overcome

its problems. This, basically, is what this Psalm is talking about. "The Lord is my light and aid. Whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers press against me to eat at my flesh, my enemies, my foes, it is they who stumble."

In other words, the theme of this Psalm is we do not have to be afraid. There is a G-d in the world. There are problems and evil things in the world, but G-d will give us the necessary strength to overcome all our problems. That is, too, why we blow the shofar on the month of Elul. We do not just blow one note. We blow the Tekiah, the Shvrim, and the Teruah. The Tekiah stands for a person who holds his head up high. He is not afraid of life and its problems. Many people refuse to give charity because they are afraid they will run out of money. Many people are afraid to keep Shabbos because they will not be able to earn a living. Many people are afraid to act honestly in business because they will not be able to make it. Fear is a great destroyer of the human being. We all know about the neurotic, people who are afraid to do anything. Fear stops a person from developing himself and being a true partner with g-d. That's why we blow the Tekiah, a strong note of assertion. It says, "G-d, I can be your partner in creation." Associated with the Tekiah note is the Malchuyos. G-d wants each of us to be a king, a queen, to realize that we can act. We have power to act. Nothing can deter us if we determine to do the right and good thing. G-d gives us the confidence that we can overcome all problems. There may be momentary setbacks but we can overcome.

That, too, is why we are not supposed to continue bowing after we say "Baruch Atoh". We should stand up straight because G-d does not want us to cower before the problems of the world. He wants us to overcome these problems with dignity and self-respect. That's why, too, Jews do not bow. We are not allowed to bow in services. The rabbis did not like it when the people were bowing on Rosh Hashonna and Yom Kippur, when the people had the cantor or rabbi bow on Rosh Hashonna and Yom Kippur. In fact, they

made the rule that there had to be something covering the floor, otherwise you were not allowed to bow. The people insisted that they bow, especially the rabbi and chazan, so they do bow now, but the rabbis do not look favorably upon bowing because they want us to stand straight and realize we are partners with G-d. That's the first preparation we learn. We cannot be G-d's partner if we think we are worthless creatures. We must have dignity and self-respect.

The second theme of this Psalm is overcoming loneliness, that G-d will always be there.

"Seek ye my presence. My presence, O Lord, I do seek. Hide not Thy face from me.

Turn not Thy servant away in anger. Thou Who has been my help, do not abandon or forsake me, O G-d, my Saviour, for my father and mother have forsaken me. The Lord will take care of me." We learn from this that G-d loves us and cares for us and is concerned for us, that G-d will never forsake us. People have always asked me, why do we have this phrase "My father and mother have forsaken me"? Jewish parents do not forsake their children. What does that mean? It means they leave us against their will. Life goes on and death takes us all. All of us are destined to be orphans. Our parents may leave us, our spouses may leave us, our children, brothers, and sisters may leave us, but G-d is always there. He loves us and cares about us and is concerned about us. He wants us to realize we are never alone. He is with us. It is hard to be alone. Loneliness leads to alienation, a feeling of helplessness and futility and a feeling that nothing is worthwhile. G-d tell us, do not feel that way. I am always with you.

Finally, the last theme of the Psalm is, "Teach me Thy way, O G-d, and guide me in the straight path." We have to come to Rosh Hashonna nad Yom Kippur with a clean conscience.

In order to have a clean conscience we have to know what is right and wrong. We have realize there is a morality outside ourselves. We cannot be the sole judge of morality and decide if it feels good, I will do it. I visited a young man in jail who had beaten up an old woman. I asked him why he did it. He said, "Rabbi, you don't want me to

be a neurotic, do you? I felt like it." Feelings are no way of judging whether we are doing the right or wrong thing. G-d has taught us through the Torah how to act properly and with dignity and self-respect, always considering the feelings of other people. We have to lead moral lives. Our conscience has to be clean when we come before G-d on Rosh Hashonna and Yom Kippur.

That's, too, why we have the Shvrim note. It stands for the cry from within, to hear the sobs of other people. Can we relate to other people? Do we realize they are lonely, too, and we should come close to them and help them and treat them with dignity? We have the Teruah note, which stands for Mount Sinai. G-d gave the Torah with the Teruah. The Teruah is the sign of morality, and that is, of course, why we need to act always in a moral fashion. We have to always act in G-d's ways. We have to come before G-d on Rosh Hashonna and Yom Kippur with a clean conscience. We blow the shofar Zechakona, we say the Doveed Hashem Zechakona, and we begin Selichos on Saturday night. Why Saturday night? Because if a person observes Shabbos, then he has already made most of his Hachona for the High Holidays. The person who has observed Shabbos, is surrounded by his family, demonstrates he does not need to work on Shabbos, realizes that G-d will help him. He sits at the table and enjoys the company of family and friends. He is not lonely on Shabbos. Finally, by celebrating Shabbos we remember the Exodus from Egypt, we remember to remember the Sabbath and observe the Sabbath, and therefore, we will always remember to act morally. Shabbos teaches us what is the proper Hachona, what is the proper preparation for Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashonna.

That's, too, why the major theme of the Selichos, itself, is "Adoshem Adoshem Eorachum V'Chanu" which we call the 13 Mites, the 13 qualities. Why 13? Because we have the 10 Commandments, which the Teruah stands for. We also have the 3 principles we are talking about, that if we lead lives that are informed by Yiddishkeit, we will not be consumed by fear, by loneliness, or by a guilty conscience. G-d has told us he has created the world with 10 words, that we will be able to be worthy of a good life.

G-d has told us, "My children just as when you go into a room it is dark, and you turn on a light, you are no longer afraid because that light illuminates everything, if you will observe my Torah which is the light of the world, you need not fear anything, you need not be lonely, and you will not have a guilty conscience because you will know what is right and wrong, and you will be able to face the world with dignity and self-respect."

As we enter the High Holiday season, let us all hope and pray that we have done the correct Hachona, the correct preparation, that we will say our Selichos with the proper "Kavona", with the proper intention, so that we will come to G-d standing straight, without fear, loving and relating to our fellow human beings, and knowing that we have to do the right thing. If we do that, then G-d has assured us that He will give us a Shana Tova. May we be inscribed in the Book of Life.