

SELICHOS 1989  
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

In a little while we will be saying Selichos. We say Selichos in the Ashkenazic rite at least four days before Rosh Hashonna. The reason for this is because in the Torah when it speaks about all the other holidays it says, "And you should offer a sacrifice," but when it talks about Rosh Hashonna it says, "And you should make a sacrifice," which the rabbis explain that you should make yourself a sacrifice. You should examine yourself carefully to make sure that you have no defect within you because anything that went on the altar of Hashem had to be perfect without any defect, so when the Temple stood all the lambs or the sheep or the goats or cattle had to be inspected for four days before they could be offered, so we, too, are to inspect ourselves to make sure that we are proper to come before G-d. We should try to look at ourselves critically and improve the defects that we have in our being.

This is why Selichos must be at least four days before Rosh Hashonna, but why, though, do we always start on a Saturday night? Because we must start on a Saturday night, some years we say Selichos many more than four days before Rosh Hashonna. In the Sephardic rite they start actually saying Selichos on the first of Elul. Elul is a special month. "I am my beloved and my beloved in mine." That is what the rabbis explain the initials of Elul stand for. This is a month in which we should look into our souls and look into our actions and try to improve them. Even in the Ashkenazic rite we start out on the first of Elul by saying a special Psalm which we say all the way through to the end of Shimini Atzeres. This Psalm, Mizmor L'Dovid, is a Psalm for David and not all the 150 Psalms were written by David. Some were written by the sons of Korach, some by Moshe, etc. but this was the Psalm of David. It says, "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?" The rabbis say that light refers to Rosh Hashonna and salvation refers to Yom Kippur. "The Lord

is the stronghold of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid? When evildoers do battle against me to consume my flesh and my enemies and my oppressors come against me they will stumble and fall." This is a great poem which speaks about G-d's protection, how when we trust in G-d He will surely help us, that if they encamp against me that my heart will not fear and if war will come upon me of this I am assured. Only one thing do I ask from G-d, do I request: that I shall live in the House of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the graciousness of the Lord, to visit in the sanctuary. Because G-d shields me in a succah in the day of evil, G-d will protect me in the secret place of His tent. In His rock He will exalt me.

The rabbis say that we refer to Succos here, too. Therefore, we read this Psalm throughout Succos. This is a Psalm in which we say that G-d is our protector, that G-d will help us overcome our troubles and problems, that we must trust in Him, that we must lead a good life and a kind life and a compassionate life and surely G-d will help us. This is a basic Jewish belief.

Later on we read in another Psalm that King David said something altogether different in the Songs of the Scent. He says, "I will lift up my eyes to the hills and where will my help come? My help will come from G-d, the maker of heaven and earth." It is hard to understand how King David who, in Psalm 27 that we say throughout the month of Elul until the end of Shmini Atzeres in which he is so confident that G-d will always be our help, how come he says now, "I will lift up my eyes to the hills and from whence will my help come?" And he answers, "My help will come from G-d who makes the heaven and earth." Why does he have to say "Who makes the heaven and earth"? Perhaps, though, in this Shiramalos, Psalm 121,

David is not really asking a question. He is not really saying, "From where will my help come?" We all know that in Psalm 27 that help comes from G-d, but he saying something actually different. MeAyin in Hebrew means not only from whence, where, but it also means from nothing will come my help. In other words, man should never consider himself insignificant, that man has within himself the power to do great things. He has the power to stand before G-d as a worthy creature who has respect and dignity, as a worthy junior partner with G-d in perfecting this world. "From the smallness, almost nothingness, from the puniness of man, himself, you will be able to come because my help comes from G-d, Who made the heaven and the earth." G-d made me as He has made the heaven and the earth. As long as I try to do the right thing, as long as I try to live according to the ideals of the Torah, as long as I am a moral person, G-d has endowed me with the capacity to overcome, with the capacity to make this a wonderful world. That, of course, is why we believe that man has dignity, that we should never cop out and never say, "What difference does it make if I do the right thing or the wrong thing? After all, I am a puny creature. I cannot affect the cosmos if I look at all the great storms that hit man's proudest achievements." Hugo just hit the South Carolina coast and tore up all man's work for several hundred years, that it does not really make any difference whether we are good or bad; our end is all the same, but that is a cop out. That is not true because G-d had made us small as a little baby. When we born as a little baby we cannot do anything. We cannot feed ourselves, change ourselves, dress our selves. We are totally dependent upon our parents to take care of all our needs, but as we grow and we learn how to respond to the environment in which we live and learn how to assume more and more responsibility then we become a creature who is able to influence the events of the world, who is able

to create a just society, who is able to turn this planet into a Garden of Eden. We should not be overwhelmed by the transitoryness of life either because we all know that after people reach a certain age many times their powers deteriorate. Unfortunately, we have all been confronted with brilliant people who have contracted Alzheimer's or other forms of disability, but that should not cause us again to despair because G-d has made the heaven and the earth. G-d has given us the capacity to produce future generations, too, who will carry out our work even after we are gone.

In Jewish life there are two distinct periods of mourning. There is "Aneenut", which is a period before the body is buried. From the time a person hears of the death until the body is buried a person is freed from all positive commandments. He does not have to pray, put on tephillin, say brochas. All positive commandments he does not have to do. The reason for it is that man is overwhelmed with despair at that time, and G-d recognizes the fact that we are human beings who are subject to all sorts of feelings, and these feelings at that particular time become overwhelming. A person would say, "What good is it? Man is like a beast. He lives, he dies. What difference does it make? We do not accomplish anything really."

During this period of time man can put aside his positive accomplishments. He does not stand before G-d with dignity and power by telling G-d that he can help Him create a Garden of Eden. All man does at this particular time is be overwhelmed with his grief, but this changes. After the body is buried, then "Availloos" sets in, a second period of mourning, and during this time of mourning man is visited. Shiva starts. People come to visit him to remind him that he is not alone, that he is a member of Kinessis Israel, that the Jewish people does not die, that the Jewish people is eternal, that his accomplishments and the accomplishments of those that have gone before him are eternal. We have just finished reading the Torah

Vayelech in which we learn how Moshe's death is imminent and how he crowns, so to speak, Joshua to be his successor. And it says, "And Moshe went," but it does not say where Moshe went. Moshe went into the hearts and minds of all the Jewish people. As long as the Jewish people continue the ideals of the Torah, MOshe lives. His accomplishments are still real. He has the ability through his teachings to mold and shape future generations.

That, of course, is what we should all realize, that we have dignity, that it counts what we do. We have power, limited power it is true, but as a partner with G-d and as the Jewish people's partner with G-d we have great capacity to change the world. We Jews throughout the ages have known that. We have always stood for those forces in the world which try to improve the world. Therefore, in almost every do-good organization you find a disproportionate number of Jewish people. On this night of Selichos we stand before and we tell G-d, "Yes, we have erred. We have failed, but, G-d, forgive us and allow us to continue standing before You to do Your work to help perfect his world." We begin perfecting this world, of course, by perfecting ourselves also.

On this day we say Selichos. We do not just ask for Mechilas or Kaporas. Selichos means to be pure inside. We ask G-d to allow us to continue this great work, to shed all feelings of guilt, all feelings of inadequacy and to attack the task at hand with renewed zeal and energy. Mechila just means to forego punishment, and Kapora means to make restitution. Of course, if G-d will not make us pure, at least let us forego punishment so we can get on with the job of perfecting this world, and if He will not forego punishment, at least accept our restitution so that again we can go on being His partner in creation.

Why do we make sure that the Selichos always start on Saturday night?  
We always start on Saturday night because we have just come out of Shabbos.  
We tell G-d, "We know what kind of world we want to build. We know what type of world it should be." We have just come out of Shabbos. Shabbos is the intimation of Gan Eden. It is our taste of the Garden of Eden in this world. We tell G-d, "Give us another chance. Let us continue this job. We will not fail You. We will not say we are puny and inconsequential and cannot accomplish anything anyway. We will not say that."

There also is a problem here. Why do we say in the Selichos that "we are ashamed more than any other people". It says that we are more guilty than any other people and we are ashamed more than any other generation. How come we are saying that here at this time? What's more, why do we say that, "G-d, we are not so brazen and obstinate to declare before Thee, 'O Lord, our G-d, and G-d of our fathers, we are righteous in our sin. Truly, we and our forefathers have sinned'." What chutzpah is this to say that our forefathers have sinned, too? And why should we say that we are the most guilty of all people? We have not made a Holocaust. We did not during the Crusades take members of other religions and throw them into their houses of worship and burn them alive. How can we say such things? What do we mean we are more ashamed than all generations? The answer is that we know better. We were given the Torah. We know when we have failed. We realize mistakes have been made in the past. Therefore, this current generation is more ashamed than any other generation because if we repeat the mistakes of the past we have not learned, and we admit our forefathers have sinned. We do that so we can say that we have learned from their mistakes, that we will not repeat these mistakes. On this day we stand before G-d not with a copout that we are puny, insignificant creatures, but we stand before G-d telling Him that we are ready to assume

the task that He has given us, that we cannot, though, assume these tasks if we are overwhelmed with guilt or overwhelmed with the mistakes of the past. We say that we are going to overcome any guilt we had before, and, G-d, You will help us by making us feel pure, and we will overcome the mistakes of the past by learning from them.

On Rosh Hashonna between now and Yom Kippur are the only days that we do not say Selichos. We say Selichos before Rosh Hashonna, we say Selichos after Rosh Hashonna, we say Selichos on Yom Kippur, but on Rosh Hashonna we come before G-d with the idea that we have the capacity to help Him perfect this world and perfect ourselves. We do not say Selichos on this day, on the day of Rosh Hashonna, because on Rosh Hashonna we come before G-d as a partner. We need, though, to have this inner confidence that we can stand before G-d as a partner, that we can accomplish, that we can change, that we can make things different, that we can make a difference. That we achieve tonight by saying Selichos before Rosh Hashonna, by telling each of us, by convincing each of us, and by also announcing to G-d that we are assuming our rightful responsibilities as Your partner, G-d, that we can overcome the errors of the past, that we can make this world a Gan Eden, overcome its environmental problems, overcome its moral problems, overcome its interpersonal problems, overcome its national problems, overcome our personal problems. G-d, we have the capacity. Maybe not in one generation or two generations, but that our community does not die, that the Jewish people does not die, that if we will assume our responsibilities that we will be able, maybe not this generation or next generation but certainly at the end of many generations, to make this a perfect world. We come before Rosh Hashonna not asking for any more special dispensation, but just asking to be given the task of helping You, G-d, to perfect this world. After Rosh Hashonna we realize, too, that we need G-d's help and

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we return to say Selichos, but on Rosh Hashonna G-d is King and we are His faithful servants to help Him carry out His plan to make this a better world. May that plan soon be realized and the Mashiach come. May we all enter the High Holiday season pure. May it be G-d's will.