

SELICHOS 1991
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We are about to say Selichos. We always say Selichos at least four days before Rosh Hashonna because in the Torah it says usually on a holiday "you shall offer a sacrifice" and here on Rosh Hashonna it says "you shall make a sacrifice". On Rosh Hashonna we learn that we are the sacrifice. G-d does not want us to sacrifice our life, but He wants us to sacrifice our bad habits. He wants us to investigate ourselves thoroughly, to determine whether or not we are worthy of being His servants. Just as an animal had to be investigated and inspected four days before it was offered on the altar, so we, too, must inspect ourselves at least four days before Rosh Hashonna in order to prove that we are worthy to stand before our King, to stand before G-d.

We always begin Selichos on Saturday night because Shabbos is our inspiration. Shabbos is a whiff of Gan Edin, of the world to come. On Shabbos we learn how to react properly with our family, with our friends. We learn how to renew ourselves, how to study Torah. We learn how the world should be after we have completed it. Therefore, we have a standard against which to judge ourselves. Are we truly bringing Shabbos or are we bringing acrimony? Are we truly bringing the world to come or are we making this world worse? We have to look deep in our hearts and we have to determine whether or not we are truly fit to stand before G-d, whether we are truly fit to be His partners in creation.

This service is called Selichos. There are actually three words for forgiveness in Hebrew, which seem the same but are not the same. We have Slach, Mechal, and Kaper. We have the famous phrase, "Shlach Lonu, Mechal Lonu, Kaper Lonu." On this day of Selichos we ask for the maximum. We ask for Selicha. Selicha means to be made to feel pure. We can forego punishment. We can have our punishment foregone. We can even make restitution but yet we can still feel dirty inside, feel polluted inside. We want to feel pure. G-d, we ask that You

make us feel pure again, that You do not make us feel disgusted with ourselves. G-d, let us look into the mirror and say that we can be proud of ourselves again. We ask for the maximum on this day. On Rosh Hashonna we ask for Mechila. We say no Selichos on Rosh Hashonna at all. We ask that G-d forego punishment. G-d is a Melech, a King on Rosh Hashonna. We do not refer to Him on that day as a father primarily but as a king, and a king can forego punishment. A king cannot make you feel pure again. Many times people come to a rabbi, not because a rabbi can punish them for their sins, but they come to a rabbi because they think that the rabbi represents the tradition and Judaism and even Hashem, and they feel that the rabbi can make them pure again. Of course, many times a rabbi has to tell them things they do not like to hear. He has to tell them they cannot be made to feel pure again unless they stop doing what they are doing. They have to be better spouses. They have to treat their parents better. They have to treat their children better. They cannot make right wrong and wrong right. They have to lead decent life. They cannot say it does not make any difference if they treat someone this way because it won't kill them. They have to stop their actions. They have to do Teshuva. They have to repent. A king can forego punishment but a king cannot make you feel pure inside.

On Yom Kippur we ask for Kapora. We say, "G-d, if YOU cannot make us feel pure, G-d, if You cannot forego punishment, at least accept our restitution." Kaper means to cover over. Accept our restitution so there is no further punishment. Yes, we know that in Jewish law if a thief comes to court and admits he has stolen something before witnesses come and testify against him, all he has to do is restore the lost object. Of course, it does not end there. He is still in

public disgrace. People look askance at him. His reputation has been tarnished, but he has no further punishment. On Yom Kippur we say, "Accept our restitution, G-d." It is true that we are not made whole again, pure again. It is true that we still suffer because we are not branded, but, G-d, at least accept that. On this day we ask for Selicha. We ask to be made pure, and on Rosh Hashonna we say, G-d, at least forego punishment, and on Yom Kippur we say we will even settle for G-d accepting our restitution. But why is this service called Selichot, plural? Why isn't it just called Selicha?

We know in the Selichos we stress hearing. Shma Kolaynu, hear our voice. We stress this over and over again hearing. Throughout all the Selichos we say, G-d, hear our prayers, G-d, listen to our prayers. There are only basically two places in which we ask G-d to see, to look. Otherwise it is all hearing. We repeat one of these twice so there are really three places. We say, "Incline, G-d, Your ears and listen, and Your eyes should see our desolation in the city in which Your name is called upon." Another time when we mention about sight we say, "Please, let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes look at Your people, Israel." The theme of the High Holidays is actually hearing, because hearing stems from inside a person. Hearing is more important than seeing. With seeing you can only see surfaces. You can be deluded. In America we put great store in surface impressions, but surface impressions many times mislead us, and that, of course, we know all too well. People sacrifice real things for delusions, for surface appearances. They run after things that really do not count, fancy homes, but they are just for show. We need more than that. We need deep relationships. WE need the love of spouses, love of children, love of parents. We need things that cannot be seen but can only be felt. You need things

which stem from within a man, and that, of course, is what the sound of the shofar symbolizes.

We also have to be attentive to others in order to grasp their meaning. Until very recently you could not grasp sound, you could not immortalize it, internalize it. Pictures could be drawn and you could look at the picture after the event occurred but there is no way to recall the sound. The sound is more than words. It is also intonation and inflection. Sometimes in order to understand what a person really means you have to really be attentive. The same words can be used in different ways. It is like the famous story they tell about a young man in college who wrote a note to his father asking for more money. The father could read Yiddish but not English, and when the note came the father turned to the young man's sister who was running out the door for a date and was in a big hurry, and he said, "Please, read this note from your brother." She really did not want to, but she did anyway. She said, "Dad, send me money quick," and she ran out. He was so upset that he then went to his wife and said, "See the way your son talks to his father." The mother took the note and said, "Dear Dad, Please send money," and he looked and he said, "That's my son. Now he is talking like a mensch." Words have inflections and tones and meanings. We know that a little powder and a little paint makes a gal what she ain't. It is true that surface impressions are needed to get our attention, but it is the real person beneath that draws us close and causes our relationships to grow and blossom and renew themselves and to be ever beautiful. Hearing is what we need. We have to be sensitive to the plight of others. We have to see beneath the surface. Therefore, we stress hearing. Shma Kolaynu, hear our voice, G-d. See who we really are. Yes, we may put on a show, but

really we mean it when we say we are going to try to improve and try to be better.

Why, then, do we mention sight these two times? If you notice the sight we mention only when it comes to the people, Israel. When it comes to individuals we stress hearing, because we Jews have two kedushas. We have the kedusha, the sanctity of a human being which we share with all human beings, and we have a sanctity because we are a Jew. As a Jew we are a symbol of G-d's presence on earth. Sometimes we do not deserve to be this symbol but we are. Sometimes we do not want to be this symbol. Sometimes we do not live up to this symbol, but the nations of the world recognize that we are this symbol. They know that when they want to attack the moral law, when they want to attack the Ten Commandments, they want to attack G-d, they attack the Jewish people. Hitler said this explicitly. I hate the Jews with their semitic G-d with His thou shalt and thou shalt not. We are accused of being a sentimental people. On Rosh Hashonna we are judged not only as an individual, but also as a member of Clal Yisroel, as a member of the Jewish people. That is why it is called Selichos because we want to feel pure in both ways. Rav says that the day of Yom Kippur, itself, forgives. How could that be? How could just coming to shul on Yom Kippur forgive us if we have wronged a fellow human being, and the answer is that coming to shul on Yom Kippur, observing Yom Kippur does not absolve us from crimes we have done against our fellow human. We have to make restitution and ask for forgiveness, but it does bring us forgiveness for our acts or non-acts as a Jew, for not helping our people, for not doing all we can to preserve Jewish life and the Jewish people. When we come to shul

on Yom Kippur we reaffirm our link with the Jewish people. We declare proudly that we are still a member of the Jewish people who want to see the Jewish people survive. When it comes to our acts as an individual, G-d looks inside us. He knows what our intentions are, what we feel, but when it comes to how we relate to the Jewish people it is look, see what we have done. Look at the surface things that we have done. This year especially we have such a great opportunity to help our people. We have seen miracles this past year. Who would ever have thought that communism would have collapsed so quickly? Who would have ever thought that the Russian Jewish people would be allowed to leave Russia? Who would have thought that Jewish schools could be set up freely now in Russia after being banned for 75 years? Who would have thought that our people would return to its heritage, that our people would want to once again reassert its Judaism after all its years of persecution? We have a wonderful opportunity to help. We can assert our identity as Jews by helping, by contributing generously to Operation Exodus to make sure that those Jews who want to can go to Israel, by affirming our solidarity with them. We have a wonderful opportunity. Today in Russia the Jews are still in danger. Communism has collapsed, but something else has taken its place, and that is nationalism. A Jew in nationalist Russia or nationalistic Lithuania or Latvia has no place. In Europe a Jew could live for hundreds of years in a place but he is never considered to be a permanent resident of that place, never. Even in Britain, a tolerant country, a Jew could live for 350 years since Cromwell let us back in, and still not be considered an Englishman. In the foreign service of England Jews are still not considered Englishmen. A Jew in Russia can never be considered a Russian. In America it is different because we are

a land of immigrants, although who knows how long that will last?

The Jews are still in danger. We must help them.

On this night of Selichos we ask G-d that we should be made pure, pure as individuals and pure as a member of the Jewish people. Let us always look deep in our hearts and see how we can improve, for we are that Korban. We must bring our life to be judged by G-d on the altar of G-d. We will also be judged by how we responded as a Jew to the plight of our fellow Jews. We begin Selichos by saying, "Happy are those that dwell in Your house. They shall praise You forever. Happy is the people who act justly. Happy is the people whose G-d is G-d." Yes, we can all achieve happiness, a happiness which comes by knowing that we are pure, that we are worthy, that we can accomplish good things, but in order to achieve this feeling of purity we have to look within ourselves and improve ourselves and we also must strengthen our bond with the Jewish people by helping our people no matter where they are and especially this year in Russia. May we do so so that the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.