

SELICHOS 1997
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

We all know that we gather together four days before Rosh Hashonna to say Selichos. There has to be at least four days. We always start the Shabbat before Rosh Hashonna. Today we have four days before Rosh Hashonna. In those years we do not have four days, we start Selichos the Saturday before that. It seems strange that we should always have to start on a Saturday. The rabbis say the reason we have to have four days is because on all the other holidays it says, "And you should offer and offering to G-d," but on this holiday we say, "You should make yourself the sacrifice." We know that on Rosh Hashonna Yitzchak was willing to make himself the sacrifice. G-d does not want human sacrifice, but he wants us to learn how to sacrifice. To be a Jew, we have to sacrifice. Abraham, after he took Isaac off the altar, still offered an Ayil. Ayil if Hebrew means a tycoon, a powerful person. It can stand for ambition, a love. To be a Jew, we have to sacrifice those things that are dear to us to maintain our Judaism. We have to make sure we marry within the faith and curb our ambition if it will lead us to do immoral things. We have to know that we have to say no to the world. That is sometimes a very hard sacrifice.

We also know that when we say Selichos we say it because we know that we have sinned. We know that we are not perfect. We have to examine ourselves for defects, just as a sacrifice was examined for defects before it could be offered. The rabbis teach us that in a certain way sin is like Tumah, ritual uncleanness. We read in Selichos, itself, "G-d, cast upon us, sprinkle upon us water and You should purify us as it is said, 'And I shall sprinkle upon you pure waters and you should be pure from all your uncleanness and from all your abominations will I cleanse you.'"

We know that there are two types of ritual uncleanness. There is one type in which we, ourselves, do all the actions. When we come into contact with the ugly things of the world, when we come into contact with a dead rodent, with things which make us feel disgusted, then we know we have to immerse ourselves into a mikvah and come out again fresh. When we come into contact with human death, though, it is not enough to cleanse yourself in the mikvah. You also in the days when the Temple stood, had to be sprinkled with a mixture of the ashes of the red heifer and water on the third and seventh days. You could not cleanse yourself. The rabbis explain that ritual uncleanness really has nothing to do with immorality. It has to do with losing the verve of life, with depression. When a person confronts the ugliness of the world, many times he could feel he has to give up. He can do nothing to change the world. The world is too ugly. The world is too filled with violence. Nothing can be changed. People get filled with a sense of deep depression. This is, of course, multiplied when you come into contact with death because death is a mockery of all our activities. You mean that after we have lived a good life and done all these mitzvahs and helped all these people you are still going to end up dead in the grave? Is that the way things should end up? Is this right? You could be overcome with depression and say nothing can be changed, but that is not the Jewish position. The Jewish position is that you have to be filled with joy and hopefulness and optimism. You could not enter the Temple unless you were filled with this optimism. This is the meaning of the symbolism of going to the mikvah. You can, through your own efforts, transform your depression into optimism. You can look at life with joy again. That's what the Baal Shem Tov tells us, only a happy person

can serve G-d. We know that if a person was filled with depression, he could not serve G-d. It is very difficult to come into contact. I remember for 13 years I performed every Tahara, along with others, in my previous shul. The first few times I did it, it was a very difficult experience, and even later on there were twinges once in a while. You are confronting your own morality and getting filled with hopelessness and helplessness and depression. That is not the way we are supposed to be. We are supposed to be filled with joy and optimism. It is true we are all going to die, but we can leave behind something worthwhile for future generations to build on, and eventually the world is going to be redeemed. Sometimes it is hard to understand that message. That is what we learn through the different types of uncleanness. When we become unclean because of the world and the problems of the world, we have the power within ourselves to transform ourselves, but when we come into contact with death, it is not the same thing. We need the community to help us. We need to come out of our depression.

This is actually the difference between Yom Kippur and the rest of the year. During the rest of the year G-d is waiting for us. In fact, that is even what we say when we say G-d is waiting for us to come back to Him, that He is going to forgive us. He is just waiting for us. We are waiting for our knock on the door. It says, "He opens the gates to those who knock unto repentance," but on this holiday between Selichos and the end of Yom Kippur, it is not the same. We are asking G-d to help us, to take us out of our problems, to extend His hand to us first. At the very beginning of Selichos we say, "Because your right hand You

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have stretched out to receive all those who really want to repent." That is the difference between the Yom Kippur season and the rest of the year. The rest of the year Teshuva is efficacious. The rabbis ask what we do when we sin. We become alienated. We cannot, so to speak, look G-d in the face. When we harm someone we are ashamed in their presence and try to escape from their presence. In fact, many times it is the spouse who harmed the other spouse who wants the divorce because they feel so guilty. They just cannot live with the other person because they did so many bad things to them. Even though the other spouse is willing to forgive them, they just cannot do it because they become estranged and alienated. Sin, too, causes us to become terribly depressed. It is hard when we are overcome to come back to G-d with our own power. Of course, we can. "Seek G-d when He can be found," which is all the time. That is what we read in the Haphtorah on a normal fast day throughout the year, but on Yom Kippur, it is different. On Yom Kippur we are being uplifted by G-d. He tells us, "Listen, I can help you. Let Me in." He is not waiting for us to knock on the door.

There are different kinds of sin. One comes to us because we trip. It is an accident. There is another much more serious problem that is within in. Sometimes we sin by external causes which was really something outside yourself. You really did not look to do this particular sin. That is why it says here, "We will search our ways and examine and return to You because Your right hand stretches out to receive those who return, and not with kindness and not with good deeds do we come before You, but like poor people, needy creatures do we

knock on Your doors." G-d has two doors here. One is for the people who sinned because circumstances were there. They did not sin out of rebellion. We sin many times because of circumstances which are beyond our control. That is one of the oldest parts of the Selichos where we say, "The G-d Who answered Abraham, our father, at Mount Moriah, should answer us." What happened is Abraham was in a quandary. G-d had promised him that the Jewish people would continue through Yitzchak, and now G-d was asking him to sacrifice Yitzchak. How could this be? How could he sacrifice his son? It was a terrible quandary. He was beset by circumstances. That is what happens to many people. G-d sent Abraham an angel to tell him not to sacrifice his son but to uplift him.

We also learn about, who answered Joseph when he was in prison? Why was Joseph in prison in the first place? Because he would not listen to the importuning of Potifar's wife. He could have succumbed. He was a man who did the right thing, and was punished. He spent 13 years in jail, and if it were not for G-d's help, it would have been a miserable existence there. We all know that was preparatory for him becoming viceroy of Egypt. How are we to know these things? Many times we are tempted sorely by outside circumstances. We know people are tempted to do bad things for good causes, people who launder drug money to get money for their yeshivas, not for gain. There are certain sins that are caused outside of us, and those we can overcome ourselves throughout the year through going to the mikvah ourselves, being reborn again, looking at ourselves and saying we will do better. On the other hand, the sins that are ideological sins, sins which mislead us entirely, people then

say they are completely lost and do not believe they can come back, but G-d says, "I will sprinkle upon you the pure waters and you will be pure from all your uncleanness and from all your abominations." You can always come back. G-d has two doors, and on Yom Kippur, especially, He is looking for those people who maybe ideologically thought they could not be Jews anymore. He wants them all back. You can come back.

That's what Rabbi Akiva tells us. He tell us that G-d, on this holiday, is ready to purify us. Therefore, G-d is the Mikvah Yisroel. G-d helps us not only by opening the doors after we knock, but also puts within our hearts the desire to come back. That is why we say, "Adoshem Adoshem," twice because G-d is there before we sin and after we sin. He is waiting for us throughout the whole year to knock at His door, but on Yom Kippur He opens the door and is telling us, "Come in. Come in through both doors. I know that your understanding is finite. I know you are beset many times by circumstances, but you can make it. You can come through the door. You can be a better person. You can shed your depression. You can come close to Me and be close to others because I am there to purify you." Let us all hope and pray that we will all want to be purified during the coming year, and that we will lead good lives, better lives, so that truly the Mashiach will come quickly this year. Amen.