

SELICHOS 1998
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We all gather here this Saturday night to say Selichos. It is Motzi Shabbos. Shabbos has just ended a little while ago. Why is it that we always have the first Selichos on Motzi Shabbos? We all know that the reason we have Selichos is because on all the other holidays it says, "And you shall offer a sacrifice," but on Rosh Hashonna it says, "And you shall make yourself a sacrifice." In other words, what we are supposed to do is examine ourselves so that we have no defects when we come into the holiday of Rosh Hashonna, or at least we have no defects that we have not espied and are not ready to correct. We all know that no sacrifice could be offered on the altar unless it had no defects. In fact, that is one of the ways that the Roman emperor knew, or thought he knew, that the Jewish people were going to revolt in the year 66 when they refused to accept his sacrifice. He used to bring a daily sacrifice to the Temple, and a Jewish ^{traitor} ~~trader~~ slit the lip of the animal before it was to be sacrificed, and, therefore, ~~it~~ made it unfit for Jewish sacrifice, although that would not have made it unfit for Roman sacrifice, ~~and~~ ^{and} it was not accepted, and the Roman emperor thought the Jewish people were going to revolt.

We know that we have to say Selichos four days before Rosh Hashonna, but why start it on Saturday night? We know that if Rosh Hashonna comes on Sunday night, we wait two Saturdays before Rosh Hashonna, which is many more than four days. If it would come on Wednesday night or Friday night, we all know then that we would start Selichos the Saturday immediately preceding Rosh Hashonna. Why should it have to be on a Shabbat?

It is true that Selichos talks about Teshuva, and some people say that the root for Shabbos and Teshuva are actually the same, that Shabbos has the same root as Shin Bet, and therefore it is talking about return. Therefore, we want to start the Teshuva process right after Shabbos. That seems far fetched in certain ways, because others will disagree that that is really not the root of Shabbos. However, if we look carefully, we will find that there is a special Medrash which perhaps can give us a hint as to why it is that we always start Selichos on Motzi Shabbos. It says Cain went out from before G-d, and Adam met him and He said to him, "What happened in your judgment?" After all, Cain was the first murderer, although he could always claim he did not know he could murder anybody. After all, there was no murder before. He said, "I did Teshuva and I was forgiven," so Adam slapped himself on his face and said, "So great is the power of Teshuva and I did not know about it." Immediately, Adam stood and he said the Psalm that we say every Shabbos. This Psalm is called the Psalm for the Daily Sabbath, although it is hard to understand why it is called this. It does not mention Shabbos in it at all. It says, "It is good to give thanks to the Lord, and to praise Thy name on high, to proclaim Thy goodness in the morning and Thy ???? at night with a ????? to the sound of the harp, for Thou the Lord has made me glad, through Thy work I will sing for joy for all Thou has done. How great are Thou works O Lord, how deep are Thou designs." It goes on and on, but why should it be that this, first of all, is a song about Shabbos and has nothing to do with Shabbos? It has to do with G-d's creation. It would seem that it would be more fitting for one of the six days of creation, and not for the Shabbos. In fact, the ending says, "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree. They will grow like a cedar

unlimited. G-d, in the House of the Lord, they should flourish in the courts of our G-d. They should yield from even???? But first they shall be to proclaim that the Lord is just. He is my stronghold and there is no wrong in Him.” There is nothing in here about Shabbos at all. Why is it that Adam should have made this particular psalm, and why is it that he should say that this is for Shabbos? To this very day we say it on Shabbos.

Perhaps the reason Adam did not understand that he could do Teshuva and be completely forgiven, the way Cain was, although Cain still had to wander on the earth and he had a sign, although the sign was for his protection so nobody would take vengeance on him. Perhaps he did not understand that Teshuva would cleanse his soul completely, and would also allow nature to be cleansed. You know that when you sin you do two things. You M'Chavev and you M'Tamay. M'Tamay means you make yourself ugly and unclean to yourself. You no longer feel worthy. It is hard for you to look yourself in the mirror. The second thing is you also soil, so to speak, the environment around you. After all, you make yourself liable for punishment, and you cause those you have wronged to look for opportunity to get back at you. Therefore, you corrupt society around you. You make somebody else angry. You cause somebody else to be ready to take it out on you. What's more, we know that we also pollute our environment. We know that if we do bad things with our environment, especially today, there are repercussions. For every action there is an opposite and equal reaction. If we are a polluter, we are going to make it harder for ourselves. We know that general society is going to have a lower moral tone. We know that if we do not take care of our obligations to nature, nature will turn against us. We learn that from Noah where it says, “This refers

to the corruption of society,” and it says, “When it was corrupted all flesh its way on the earth,” that refers to the external world. So how could the animals be accused of sinning? They do not have any free will. It means we, ourselves, can, by experimentation, by doing all sorts of things we should not do, we can cause the animal world to itself turn into a more vicious and violent type of world. This is what happened in the time of Noah, and that is why a flood came and destroyed the world. The rabbis explain that a comet came near the earth and caused a huge tidal wave. Whatever happened, we know that the people before had corrupted nature. We do that again today, too, with our experiments of putting human genes into animal genes. Who knows what we are going to do today? We know that we do cause great repercussions when we sin that are far beyond ourselves. Therefore, Adam thought that he could not do Teshuva, but what about nature? What about society? What about the consequences of the sin? G-d said, “Don’t worry.” Sin is really superficial. Our soul is really pure. Even though we say that the difference between Adam before his sin and after his sin was before his sin, so to speak, the Yetzer Hora was outside him. Of course, he knew about it, and, of course, he had to choose between good and evil, but now, so to speak, the Yetzer Hora was in him and now it was very difficult for him to tell what was good and what was bad. That’s why you have to study Torah: to learn the difference between good and bad. Our soul is pure, but we are no longer in Gan Eden. We were kicked out of Gan Eden because of our sins. We had a bad influence on nature, but we should never think that our soul is corrupted, like other religions believe, or we should not believe that our environment is so corrupted or our society is so corrupted that it cannot be changed. We can do it. It is all up to us.

That is why we learn before, too, that any time the Yetzer Hora becomes internalized in man, it still remains foreign to our inner soul. We also learn in the Torah portion Nitzavim that it says that this mitzvah is not far from you, and it refers to Teshuva. It is not too onerous for you. The Rambam says you can always do Teshuva. The Torah also compares Teshuva to milah. Just as in circumcision you take away an extraneous piece of flesh you really do not need, the same thing is true with Teshuva. You take away all sorts of things within you that you do not need. You can still be a great and wonderful person. This is the concept. The concept is that we can always come back, that our soul is yearning to come back, that G-d is there for us before we sin and after we sin, and that we should not despair. In fact, there is the story of Achair. Who was Achair? Achair was actually Elisha Ben Nevua who was a great colleague of Rabbi Akiva. He is quoted in the Mishnah. One day he saw a father order his son to climb a tree and shoo away the mother bird and take the eggs. The boy did so, and as he was coming down the tree, he slipped and fell and hit a rock with his head and was killed. Now there are only two places in the Torah where you are given a reward for doing a commandment. One is honoring your parents, and the other is for shooing away the mother bird. Here, this boy did both of them and he died. So Elisha Ben Nevua said, "There is no judge," and he became a heretic. His great student was Rabbi Meyer. He even learned Torah with him after becoming a heretic. People asked how he could do so, and he replied, "Well, I take the seed and throw away the rind." He always tried to get Achair to do Teshuva. Once Achair was going to do Teshuva, but he heard a heavenly voice saying, "There is no Teshuva for Achair," although at the end of life, Rabbi Meyer said he still did Teshuva,

but Achair misinterpreted it. There is no Teshuva for Achair, but there was Teshuva for Elisa Ben Nevua, for that other person, for that thing that he has put upon his soul that he thinks he cannot return. For that, there is no Teshuva, but you get rid of that, and there is always Teshuva. When we do sins we change our personalities, but we can change back. We do not have to stay that way. This is what he was talking about.

That's why we say, too, in the Selichos, "The soul is yours, O G-d, and the body is Your work, and mercy upon Your Torah, Your creation." The soul is a piece of G-d within us all. We cannot besmirch it completely. We cannot say it is so bad that it cannot become pure. Of course it can. It is encased in G-d's hallow work, too, our bodies. We do not believe that the soul is good and the body is bad. It is possible we can do it. We can make ourselves better. We have the potential to make ourselves better. Both the body and soul, G-d, are Your creation. That, of course, is what we learn here, "Because you have made me happy in Your work." What is Your work? Your work is us, G-d. "And the words of Your hands I will sing. How great are Your deeds, G-d. Very deep are Your thoughts." In other words, "G-d, we are Your work." That is what Shabbos is all about. Shabbos is all about finding our potential, realizing that we are G-d's handiwork, knowing that we can be more than we are today, knowing that we do not have to besmirch our soul. If we have besmirched our soul, we can come back. We do not have to stay tainted. We do not have to stay embarrassed. We do not have to stay in the depths. We can rise up, and Shabbos gives us that opportunity to do so. It gives us the opportunity to regenerate our soul every single week, to realize what is really important in life. Unfortunately, so many Jews, especially since we were given these opportunities

in America, have rushed to the material things in life and have forgotten all about the spiritual. Many times they feel trapped and caught, but they can always refresh their soul. There is nothing wrong with material things. G-d made our body, too, but the soul is yours. We have to make sure to keep our soul pure and fresh. We have to remember that we can change, that we can be better, that we can accomplish many wonderful things. That is why this Psalm ends with, "The righteous will flourish like the palm tree." It does not say they are going to be rich. It does not say they are going to be powerful, but it will be like the palm tree standing up straight, producing fruit, producing shade, being there as an example for others because you can be seen. They should grow like a cedar in Lebanon, which also grows proud and straight and which also produces shade and which also can be used to build spiritual things. We can build spiritual things, not only for ourselves but for our communities. Cedars were used to build the Tabernacle. What's more, we can affect nature. After all, because we have a good society which is moral and where people can concentrate on learning things about society. We have air conditioning here in Houston. Who could ever live in Houston without air conditioning? What we do in a moral sense also affects our society as a whole because without a moral and just environment, if there are constant wars, then we never have effort and time to develop those inventions which allow us to live and enjoy each other's company without just barely eking out an existence and hardly living and always being sick. We know that when man lives together in peace and directs his energies towards spiritual things and towards the secrets of the universe as well as the secrets of nature, that he lives a healthier and better life. "So plant in the House of the Lord, and they shall flourish in the courts of our G-d." That refers to us if we live spiritual things, if we refresh our soul, if we

regenerate ourselves. "Therefore, vigorous and fresh they shall be to proclaim that the Lord is just. He is my stronghold, and there is no wrong in Him." That is why we start Selichos on Saturday night, Motzi Shabbos to remind us that we have the power to rejuvenate ourselves. We have the power to reach our potential. That power is given to us by Shabbos. That power is given to us when we realize that we are not just material creatures; we are also spiritual creatures. That is, of course, what the number seven and Shabbos represents. We live not just in the physical dimensions of north, south, east, west, up, and down but also in the spiritual domain as well. Let us all hope and pray that we will realize this so that we will truly do Teshuva and truly cleanse our souls and ourselves from anything which is causing us not to be able to cling to G-d and our fellow human beings. Let us hope we will do this so we will have a greater and better spiritual life and physical life so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.