

SELICHOS 1999  
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

The Selichos starts out with the prayer, "O, G-d, You are righteous and we are shamefaced. Let us search our ways and examine ourselves and return to You because Your right hand is extended to receive returnees, not with loving kindness and not with deeds do we come before You. We come like poor people, like needy creatures who are knocking on Your doors." Why is everything doubled here? Why do we speak about examining and searching? Why do we speak about ourselves as needy and poor creatures who are knocking on Your doors?

We know that during this period, G-d is close to us, that we are called upon to do teshuva. What is required of us to do teshuva? How is it that we can change and be better than we are now? What qualities do we need within ourselves to summon the courage to do teshuva? The Rambam tells us that we have to confess our sins. We have to admit we have done wrong, be sorry for it, and determine never to do it again. In Hebrew, the word for confess is Viduee. However, we learn in the Torah portion, Ki Sovo, that at the end of every three years, we have to tell G-d that we have fulfilled all our charitable obligations, that we have given to the Levite, to the proselyte, to the orphan, and to the widow. This, too, is called a confession, and is known in our

tradition as Viduee Maser, but it is hard to understand why this should be called a confession. After all, there is no admitting of sin. There is no saying we are sorry for our sin. There is no determination that we will not do it again, yet this is considered a confession. It seems more like a boast than a confession especially when we read the last part of this confession. "I listened to the voice of the Lord, my G-d. I have done all which You have commanded me. Look down from Your holy habitation, from the heavens, and bless Your people Israel." In other words, we are saying, "G-d, we have done our part; now You do Your parts."

Rabbi Soloveitchik answered this question by pointing out that the word confession in Hebrew, Hodah, also means to thank, to glorify, and to praise. There are really two abilities that we must have if we are to change. We must, first of all, have the ability to scrutinize ourselves mercilessly, to realize what our strong points and weak points are. We must always be truthful with ourselves. We must admit our sins, and be sorry for them. However, there are many people who say, "I know I have sinned, but I cannot do anything about it. I am weak." The Torah tells us, "No, you can do something about it. You

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have the power to overcome." That's why it says here, "We have searched our ways. We have looked at our past, and we know that we have erred, and we have examined ourselves and know that we have the power to overcome. Not with kindness or deeds do we come before You. We are not coming before You by trying to claim that everything we did was good and right, and we are not coming before You with the excuse that our deeds are predetermined, and we cannot do any better. We can. G-d, You have given us the power to be better people. We have come before You like poor creatures, people who have sinned, and like needy creatures, people who know we can change if we want to change. We can overcome, especially if You help us, G-d. If we make the first efforts, You will allow us to overcome our inadequacies and be better people."

In the major poem of the first night of Selichos, we say, "To listen to the joy and to the prayer." Why do we ask G-d to listen to the joy and to the prayer? We ask G-d to listen to the joy and to the prayer because each of us is joyful, happy because we know we have the power to be good. As G-d told Cain, "Sin crouches at the door, but you can overcome it." We also say, "G-d, listen to

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our prayer," because prayer in Hebrew also means to judge ourselves. "G-d, we are judging ourselves, and, G-d, we realize we have the power to change. G-d, we know that if we will just start to use this power, You will add to it, and we will surely become better people." Let us all hope and pray that on this night of Selichos we will all examine ourselves and all realize that we have the power to change. G-d has promised us that if we will begin to change, He will help us to become truly good people. Let us hope and pray that we will all do so so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.