

# Selichos

## NATIONAL JUDGMENT AND PERSONAL REPENTANCE

**T**his period of time on the Jewish calendar is the time of *Selichot*, when penitential prayers are recited in the early morning before the actual Shacharit morning services. The Ashkenazim will begin the recital of *selichot* this coming Saturday night/Sunday morning while the Sephardim have been reciting *selichot* since the beginning of Elul. The *selichot* that precede Rosh HaShana are of a national character. These prayers, developed over the past 1500 years, deal mainly with the abject plight of the Jewish people, living in exile from their ancestral homeland and subject to unrelenting persecution and discrimination. In this time of Rosh HaShana, the day of judgment of individuals, societies and nations, we beseech God to redeem Israel from its troubles and its exile. The nations who attempt to destroy us should be judged and found wanting in the scales of God's justice while those who befriend Israel should be rewarded and safeguarded. These *selichot* then deal with national issues, with the imperative of Jewish survival, of protecting the little lamb surrounded by seventy wolves.

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A product of the exile of Israel, these *selichot* are mournful in tone and in their prose. Most of these *selichot* are of medieval origin, though very little that has happened in the modern era would change their mood and outlook. In this respect, the *selichot* preceding Rosh HaShana, the national prayers of Israel, bear a great resemblance to the *kinot* - the elegies and lamentations - of Tisha B'Av, the national day of Jewish mourning.

Not so the *selichot* that form the services for the Ten Days of Repentance following Rosh HaShana. These *selichot* on the whole are intensely personal, inner-directed and self-assessing. They are prayers for wisdom and forgiveness, and for the ability to improve and better oneself spiritually and morally. Though Yom Kippur is also a day of judgment when the books of life are sealed, it is primarily a day of forgiveness, repentance, contemplation and self-analysis. The *selichot*, which mark the time from Rosh HaShana to Yom Kippur, reflect this changing emphasis from the national to the individual. In a way, national

redemption is easier to contemplate and even achieve than personal repentance and self-improvement. Rabbi Yisrael of Salant, the holy founder of the mussar Movement of nineteenth century Lithuania (which focused on ethics) once said: "The loudest sound possible in the universe is that of breaking a habit!" The *selichot* of the Days of Repentance are therefore immensely powerful and intensely personal. They are the expression of man searching for meaning in life and discovering his relationship with the Creator. These *selichot* resonate with the anguished human cry for fulfillment and eternity. They are less concerned with the greater Klal Yisrael and concentrate instead upon the individual Mr. and Mrs. Israel.

These two series of *selichot*, before and after Rosh HaShana, become the backdrop to the *selichot* of Yom Kippur itself. Every one of the prayer services of Yom Kippur - *Maariv*, *Shacharit*, *Musaf*, *Mincha* and *Neilah* - contains a *selichot* component. Some of these *selichot* are repetitions of *selichot* recited during the Days of Repentance. However, most are special for Yom Kippur, intended to evoke the holiness of the day itself and to challenge us to exploit this God-given moment for renewed religious experience and commitment. The *selichot* of Yom Kippur represent the culmination of the soul of Jewish liturgy and poetry, reaching out to God by reaching deep within us. The *selichot* of the High Holy Days are a progression from national existence and salvation to personal assessment and deep personal commitment and renewal. All of these types of *selichot* are necessary in order to bring about the desired blessing, both physical and spiritual, for the coming new and good year. The genius of the authors of all of these *selichot* commands a hold upon us, centuries after their authorship. For human nature and its attendant problems have remained constant throughout all time. These *selichot* services are as relevant to us in our time as they ever were in past generations and historical situations. We should utilize this opportunity to study and recite them in this holy period of the year.

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## SELICHOT POETRY

The custom of reciting such *selichot* prayers is an ancient one, dating back at least to the sixth century in Jewish Babylonia. Almost every major rabbinic figure through the fifteenth century tried his hand in composing *selichot*. Out of the literally thousands of poems written, a few hundred have actually been incorporated into the standard ritual of the various groupings of Jews. The Sephardim naturally favor the poems of the great Sephardic poets such as Yehuda HaLevi, Avraham ibn Ezra, Shlomo ibn Gavriel (Gabirol) and Donash ibn Lavrat. The list of Ashkenazic poets of *selichot* poems includes Rashi (Rabi Shlomo ben Yitzchak), Rabi Shimon of Mainz, Rabenu Tam (Rabi Yaacov ben Meir, Rashi's grandson, Rabi Shmuel ben Meir (another grandson of Rashi) and other notable French, German and Austrian scholars. Suffice it to say, the rabbinic elite, the great men of Israel, all took part in this project of *selichot* poetry and prayer.

Poetry was once an important aspect of Jewish religious life. It was also part of Jewish

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culture. In the world of the Sephardim during the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry and thereafter, Hebrew poetry flourished. The great Hebrew poets of Spain mentioned above did not restrict their poetic talents to liturgy and sacred poems. They also wrote secular and general poems, even about romance and nature. However, poems of this nature were practically unknown in the Ashkenazic Jewish world until the time of the Haskala in the nineteenth century. Poems of a secular or even a general nature were never accepted in Ashkenazic religious circles as being necessary or even positive. The

fact that most if not all of the poets of the Haskala were no longer observant Jews undoubtedly colored this attitude of rejection of all secular poetry. In the religious world of Ashkenazic Jewry, poetry was strictly restricted to those of a spiritual and liturgical nature. The nature of poetry itself was far different in the Ashkenazic world than amongst the Sephardim. Style, elegance of phrase and meter, and the rhythm of the sound of words combining with each other were all hallmarks of the Sephardic poetry, expressed even in their religious and liturgical poetry. Learned and ethical content were stressed in the Ashkenazic poetry, and style took a back seat to substance. However, both in Sephardic and Ashkenazic *selichot* poetry, the use of acrostics, alphabets and Biblical quotations as being the chorus of the poem, all are usual components. The name of the poet himself is often hidden in the poem itself by the use of those devices just mentioned. Also, the poem always contained an intriguing mystery of authorship and other subliminal messages waiting to be deciphered by those who read and recited the poem as part of the *selichot* services.

In the Ashkenazic world, there were three main compilations of *selichot* that became fixed in tradition over the years. One is called the liturgy of Lithuania and is the one basically in use in the Lithuanian yeshivot and the non-Chasidic synagogues of Jerusalem and the world. The second compilation is that of Poland and is used extensively by the differing Chasidic groupings. There is also a compilation that follows the liturgy of the holy Ari (Rabbi Isaac Luria of sixteenth century Tzfat) that is used by certain Chasidic groups. The Sephardim also have many variations of their basic *selichot* liturgy, depending upon their original countries of origin. The choice of which poems to include in the liturgy of the *selichot* service is apparently one left to the popularity of the poem and/or the poet in the eyes of the worshippers. The liturgical poem, *Keter Malchut* (The Crown of Royalty) written by Rabi Shlomo ibn Gabirol is recited on the night of Yom Kippur in many Sephardic congregations. This long poem of approximately one hundred stanzas is one of the true classics of all Hebrew poetry, both in stylish elegance and holy content. *Selichot* provided an outlet to the genius and creativity of the Jewish muse.

## TWO RALLIES

A few years ago on a Saturday night, two different gatherings took place in my Jerusalem neighborhood. One was a rally for "peace" sponsored by the Geneva initiative and led by Yossi Beilin. This group met outside of the house of Prime Minister, barely two blocks from my residence. The Prime Minister was not home since he was busy meeting with his Security Cabinet, planning a response to the barrage of Kassam rockets fired at towns inside Israel (1948 Israel) over the day. The "Peace" rally nevertheless continued apace following the timeworn script of all such rallies. A popular singer sings a soothing song about the rewards of peace, a stirring speaker - this time Yossi Beilin himself - delivers a harangue about how the Palestinians really want to live next door to us in peace, but it is the Israeli refusal to accommodate their demands for Jerusalem, the right of return and the freeing of the murderers of innocents from prison that prevent the Garden of Peace from being revealed. All of this on a day when countless Israelis had to flee their homes in Sderot to avoid the rockets being fired by our peace partners. The schools in Sderot have been forced to close temporarily. A "work accident" killed many Palestinians in Gaza on Friday when a truck loaded with Kassam rockets exploded in the midst of a Hamas parade. Many Hamas militants were killed by their own hand in that event. Of course, that event is also Israel's fault, for if Israel did not exist, why would they need those Kassam rockets in the first place? Yet I have a hunch that even without us being around they would find use for those rockets on their own fellow Muslims who would dare to disagree with them. Look at Iraq! All of this self-apparent logic is completely lost on the Geneva gang who persist in living in their well financed, well-publicized but utterly unrealistic dream world.

Too bad for them, and too bad for the rest of us also.

By my unscientific judgment to the naked eye, the "peace" rally was poorly attended. Its organizers placed a brave face on this, declaring that more people came than was expected, whatever that means. We all want peace and crave quiet and serenity. But we would also like to live and survive and be able to raise our children and grandchildren in our own homeland in security and confidence. If the Geneva organizers could figure out a practical and realistic way to accomplish this without giving away the store, they would find a great outpouring of popular support for their program amongst the Israeli public, including me. However, as the current situation really is, the Geneva platform and its "peace" rally is just a caricature of itself.

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The other gathering on Saturday night was the beginning of the season of *selichot* by Ashkenazic Jewry. These *selichot* gatherings far outdrew the "peace" rally. The Days of Awe are approaching and Jews are searching for some spiritual sustenance to nurture them in these dark and dangerous times.

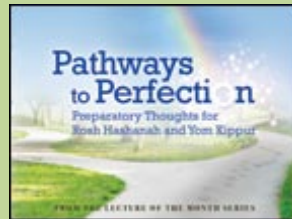
In my synagogue, I noticed people at the *selichot* services that I had never seen before. I don't know the import of that. I just know that without some sense of spirit, tradition, attachment to Judaism and its people, land and history, life is very lonely, scary and empty. I therefore found the op-ed article about the unrepentant Jew that appeared in the Sunday issue of the Jerusalem Post very revealing. Here is the "empty wagon" personified. But the villain of the piece is naturally the Jewish religion. It is what makes the writer of the piece wander all over the world, stateless without ideals, purpose and hope. Estranged from his people and past, he lashes out at a religious coercion that is practically non-existent here in Israel. The "peaceniks" say: "If only Israel would concede everything to the Palestinians, the struggle would finally end." The rootless, estranged and embittered post-secularist Jew says: "If only there was no Judaism, then Israel would be an attractive place to live." To say that both have put the cart before the horse in their assessments of the reality of Jewish existence, survival and accomplishments is a gross understatement. It is precisely Judaism that fuels the State of Israel and gives it and the Jewish people as a whole the strength and resilience to survive and triumph in the face of overwhelmingly negative odds. The angst of the Jew who has separated himself from his people and heritage will not be easily assuaged by wandering from Paris to New York or South America. The call of *selichot* and the *shofar* of this season is a call to one's deeper inner self. Estrangement from that self is a loss for that person himself or herself, but it is also a loss for all of us Jews and to the cause of Judaism itself.

LISTEN UP! YOU MIGHT FIND THESE INTERESTING:

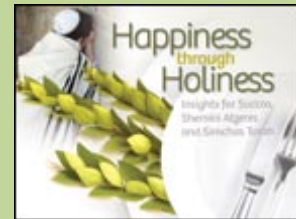
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