

TO HEARKEN TO THE SONG AND TO THE PRAYER

An explanation of the Selichot Service

As we stand at the threshold of a New Year our hearts are filled with a mixture of emotions. We reflect upon the year that has passed, we make resolutions for the future and, above all, we pray. We pray intensely for the next year to be a good and prosperous one for ourselves, our families and the entire Jewish people. The first night *Selichot* Service with its powerful prayers recited and sung to some of the most magnificent music heralds the coming of the *Yamim Noraim* (Days of Awe) and sets the praying mood in motion.

The word *Selichot* is the plural for *Selicha* which literally means ‘forgiveness’. The term *Selichot* refers to the prayers and *piyutim* (liturgical poems) asking for forgiveness and atonement. *Selichot* are recited on fast days during the repetition of the morning Amida and during the High Holydays before the Morning Service.

The Midrash (*Tana Devei Eliyahu, Zuta, 23*) tells us how King David, who foresaw the destruction of the Temple, was distressed over the suffering that would befall the Jewish people as a result of their sins. He wondered how, without the sacrifices, they would be able to atone for their misdeeds.

According to the Midrash, G-d told King David ‘... When trouble shall come upon Israel, they should stand before me, united, confess their sins and recite before me the order of *Selicha* and I will answer them.’

This ‘order of *Selicha*’ refers expressly to G-d’s Thirteen Attributes of Mercy (*Hashem Hashem ...*), mentioned in the book of Exodus (chap. 34 vv. 6-7). According to the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 17b) after the sin of the golden calf, G-d taught Moses this *Seder Tefilah* (Order of Prayer) as the effective way to achieve atonement for future transgressions. The Talmud also states that G-d made a covenant with the Thirteen Attributes that they ‘will not return empty’.

Although the recitation of the Thirteen Attributes is at the core of the *Selichot* Service, there are other components which were added later on.

The earliest source to our *selichot* service’s structure is the *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* written by Rav Amram bar Rav Shashna, head of the Yeshiva in Sura, Babylon and *Gaon* (chief spiritual leader) in the years 853-871. This work, which was written in response to a request from a Spanish community, is considered to be the very first *siddur* (prayer book).

Rav Amram goes through the text of the prayers for the entire calendar adding pertinent *halachic* instructions. We find in it an order of service for *selichot* that consists of biblical verses, the Thirteen Attributes, confessional elements and poetic liturgy in Hebrew and

Aramaic. The themes expressed in these prayers are repentance, forgiveness, the suffering of the Jewish people in exile, and entreaties for redemption.

Some of the *piyutim* are attributed to Rav Amram himself. The main example is the *E-l Melech* (A-lmighty King who sits on the throne of mercy ...), which serves as an introduction to the Thirteen Attributes. Rav Amram concludes that one may add *selichot*, biblical verses and *piyutim* beyond what was instituted by the earlier sages and, in the Ashkenazi tradition, more *piyutim* were added as a liturgical response to bad decrees and persecutions.

There is a dispute in the Talmud as to when the world was created. Rabbi Yehoshua says the creation took place in Nisan whereas Rabbi Eliezer states the world was created on the first of Tishri. The Talmud (Rosh Hashana 27a) says that our text of the Rosh Hashana *Mussaf* prayer reflects the latter view when it describes Rosh Hashana as ‘... the anniversary of the start of your handiwork, a remembrance of the first day’. Rabeinu Nissim, one of the greatest early Talmudic commentators, explains that what Rabbi Eliezer really means is that *Adam* was created on the first of Tishri, which means that the first day of creation was 25 Ellul. This, says Rabeinu Nissim, is the origin for the custom of the Barcelona community to start the *selichot* every year on this date.

Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, the ‘*Gaon* of Vilna’ (1720-1797), says in his commentary to the *Shulchan Aruch* that this is also the basis for the Ashkenazi *minhag*. However, since 25 Ellul can occur on different days of the week this can lead to confusion. Instead, we start on a Sunday (*Motsei Shabbat*) which also relates to the first day of creation.

Nevertheless, if Rosh Hashanah occurs on a Monday or Tuesday, we start on the *Motsei Shabbat* of the previous week since there must be at least four days of *Selichot*. One of the reasons for this is that an animal designated for sacrifice had to be checked for blemishes for four days before it was offered, so we need to look for our own faults and amend them before approaching the A-lmighty.

As mentioned above, the music of the *Selichot*, as of any service, plays a vital role in setting the appropriate mood and giving interpretation and emotional depth to the prayers. In addition, the use of some of the High Holyday hints and motifs gives the occasion the sense of a musical overture to the *Yamim Noraim*.

The *Selicha* mode with its Minor suppliant character and Major closing motif is the foundation upon which cantorial recitatives are based. Here chazzanim and choirmasters found an opening for enriching the repertoire with their beautiful compositions. Here are some examples from our own *Selichot* Service.

The choir begins by humming a haunting *niggun* (melody) arranged by Chazzan Leib Glantz (1898-1964) based on the *Nusach* (specific mode) of the Rosh Hashanah morning service. Then we start with the declamatory *Ashrei* which is followed by the recitative *Einei Chol*, my own composition. Here, again, I start with motifs of the *Yamim Noraim*, moving into the more general *Techina* (supplication) mode, returning to the *Yamim*

Noraim Nusach at the end of the recitative.

Then we move on to the *Kaddish*. The accepted *minhag* is to intone this, exclusively on the first night of *Selichot*, with the same majestic melody used for the *Kaddish* before *Mussaf* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Then we sing the *Lechu Neranenah* by Glantz with its stirring melody in a special arrangement by Marc Temerlies and myself.

We sing the *E-l Melech* in two different fine settings, one of them by Yakovkin. At the end of the *pizmon* (liturgical poem with refrain) *Lishmoa el Harina* (To Harken to the Song and to the Prayer), we sing the famous exhilarating setting by Joseph Rosenblatt (1882-1933).

One of the highlights is the *Shema Koleinu*. Our practice is for me to sing the verses in the style of Mordechi Hershman (1888-1940) and the choir and congregation to respond with the very moving traditional tune.

Two years ago we introduced *Aneinu* (Answer us) by Israel Alter (1901-1979) arranged by Raymond Goldstein. It begins with a beautiful melody. Its rhythmic motif is held hauntingly in the background by the choir as the chazzan progresses with his recitative and then the theme reappears in the chazzan's part towards the climax of the piece.

Perhaps the highest point in the service is the *Shomer Israel* (Guardian of Israel) by Samuel Alman (1877-1947) which is sung in falsetto by the chazzan accompanied softly by the choir expressing deep yearning. We bring our entreaties to a close with the Final *Kaddish* sung to the same lilting melody we sing at the end of the High Holyday services, expressing our hopes for a good New Year.

May the A-lmighty listen to our songs and prayers and may we all, together with the entire people of Israel, merit to all the blessings that G-d has in store for us in the coming year, Amen!

Cantor Moshe Haschel