



The Historical Voice of Selichot

Elul moments provide a platform for the illustrious days of Tishrei, when we stand in awe and judgement before Hashem. Numerous Elul halachot and minhagim create an ambience of heightened religious awareness. During the first Elul in history, Moshe remained atop Har Sinai for forty days, in fervent prayer, putting the finishing touches upon the second luchot, while securing our forgiveness. Each year since, we all climb our own “Elul mountains” searching for expanded religious consciousness.

One of the most powerful Elul minhagim is the selichot experience. The disruption of our sleep schedule, coupled with devout prayers create a mood of solemnity and soulful gravitas.

In addition to rearranging our schedules, selichot also reposition our location. In a famous phrase, Dovid Hamelech captures our collective yearning to never leave the house of Hashem:

שבתי בבית ה' כל ימי חיי

Not all of us are able to forever remain in the house of Hashem, as the demands of this world draw us elsewhere. However, during this solemn month, when our thoughts turn to eternity, we tightly cling to

Hashem and to His house.

Thousands of years ago we spent much of Tishrei in the environs of Yerushalayim and the Mikdash. Absent our Mikdash, we simulate this assembly by augmenting our presence in batei Knesset and batei midrash. Selichot prayers launch a month-long vigil in Hashem's home.

TWO DIFFERENT VOICES

Selichot are constructed upon the core tefillah of “אג מידות הרחמים” or the list of 13 traits of divine mercy. The gemara claims that this list was first articulated by Hashem Himself, as He “personally” demonstrated this supreme form of tefillah to Moshe Rabeinu. Additionally, He assured Moshe that these divine traits would never be completely ignored, but would always elicit a divine response. Essentially, the 13 traits of divine mercy is the only tefillah segment coined by Hashem Himself. During these 40 days we recite this prayer over 100 times, depending upon different minhagim. The 13 middot dominate selichot and imbue them with a voice which desperately pleads for divine pity. Lost in our own futility and failure, we look to Hashem for forgiveness.

A DIFFERENT VOICE

Though the divinely authored list of the 13 traits of mercy provides the foundation of selichot, throughout history, numerous piyutim or elegies were added to this core. Overwhelmingly, these elegiac poems describe our long suffering through our extended exile. To a limited extent these piyyutim voice remorse for sin, sincere confession, and desire for forgiveness. However, primarily, they portray the sadness of Jewish suffering.

The excruciating tone of these dirges is understandable as they were composed during a very gloomy era of our history. Though some of the earlier piyyutim of Ashkenazic selichot were written in the 9th century, and some of the later ones were composed in the 17th century, the majority were written between the 11th and 13th century in Western Europe. The medieval authors of these piyutim bore the violent brunt of crusader hostility, constant inquisitions and expulsions, uncontrollable blood libels, forced baptisms and brutal pogroms. In these piyyutim they vented their pain while looking to Hashem for salvation. These piyyutim are ‘period pieces’ conveying desperation, tragedy, but also endless hope and faith. The dark world was crashing around them, but their faith remained unbroken. These piyyutim are spectacularly defiant in the face of unimaginable monstrosities.

Gradually, the art of piyut faded, newer ones weren't written, and these medieval piyyutim became institutionalized in our selichot. Our selichot are therefore suffused with Jewish suffering and with our legacy of faith and less with the classic



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themes of teshuva and remorse for sin.

BARGAINING WITH HASHEM

This second voice of selichot, sounding the suffering of Jewish history plays a crucial role in our tefillot. When facing personal religious failure we feel sadness, frustration, guilt, and mortification. All these humbling emotions, hopefully, inspire us to resolute commitment for future improvement.

During this painful process of self-examination, we also bargain with Hashem. We look for some excuse, any excuse, to, at least partially absolve our colossal failures. Rabbi Avraham Danzig, the 18th century Polish author of the classic halachik sefer known as Chaye Adam also composed the earnest confessional known as tefillah zakah which is recited as Yom Kippur commences. Toward the middle of this

melancholy viduy and acknowledgement of past religious breakdowns we plead with Hashem to consider our daily struggles when judging us. Part of our religious failure is due to the constant pressure of daily life. We don't invoke these struggles to completely exonerate ourselves of responsibility, but we do ask Hashem to factor these and other personal struggles into His evaluation of our behavior. Similarly, by mentioning past Jewish suffering in selichot we expect Hashem to exercise partial clemency.

SHLIACH TZIBBUR

Though we hope that Hashem considers past Jewish suffering in our personal judgement, we certainly hope that He factors it in when judging our people at large.

Our selichot are patterned after the original encounter between Moshe and Hashem. The gemara portrays Hashem as donning a tallit and praying as a shliach tzibbur. Though we are strongly averse to applying any physical references to Hashem, this image underscores that, when reciting the 13 middos, we are all, like Him, meant to serve as a shliach tzibbur, even if we aren't, officially, the chazan. During this period, we are all expected to pray for others.

There are so many Jews who depend upon us to be their shliach tzibbur. So many Jews are severed and disconnected from Judaism and will not experience the power and the glory of these great days. So many will casually attend services without sensing the grandeur and the majesty of standing in the presence of Hakadosh Baruch Hu. We can't pray only for ourselves, when so many Jews need us to daven for them. They need a shliach tzibur to intercede on their behalf.

IDENTIFICATION

However, to daven for someone you must first identify with them and feel compassion for them. Noach fell silent for 120 years without uttering even one tefillah because he couldn't feel compassion for a sinful generation which had degenerated into moral chaos. By contrast, Avraham opened his humble heart to the outlaws of Sedom and fought valiantly for their survival. To daven for Jews who can't properly daven for themselves we first must identify with them.

However, so many have abandoned our traditions. Sadly, many have even abandoned faith in Hashem and in Jewish legacy. Painfully, many stand opposed to



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our great historical project of rebuilding our homeland. But these are the Jews who need our prayers most. How can we identify with Jews who have wandered so far, in order to genuinely daven for them?

Our selichot about Jewish suffering remind us that so many Jews walked out because of the immense pressures of history. Centuries of unbearable hatred and painful discrimination took a heavy toll on our people. Unfortunately, when Western civilization opened its doors to us in the 19th century, many gladly accepted the invitation, exchanging their faith for admission into general society. When pogroms continued unabated and the nightmare of the Holocaust ripped us apart, so many gave up hope.

We, Baruch Hashem remained faithful, and we are all miracles. But think upon Jews who did leave with mercy, not disdain. Read the selichot, imagine the darkness and the terror, and mourn for those who turned away in horror. We are heroes but they aren't villains. Our ancestors were strong while theirs couldn't summon that courage. Let the second voice of selichot preserve our belief in every Jew and empower us to daven for those who haven't yet found their voice. ■

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