

Selichot

By: Cantor Paul Kowarsky

In the same way that Friday, the sixth day, is the day of preparation for Shabbat, so the month of Elul, the sixth month, is the period of preparation for the solemn High Holy Day month of Tishri. Preparation takes the form of a keener awareness of sin, sounding the shofar every morning, and special *selichot*, penitential prayers, recited before day-break, beginning at least four days before Rosh Hashanah and continuing through Yom Kippur.

The term *selichah* (plural: "*selichot*") means literally "forgiveness", and is therefore applied to prayers for forgiveness.

Why at midnight?

It has become customary to begin the recital of *Selichot* on Saturday at midnight, four days before Rosh Hashanah. If, however, the first day of Rosh Hashanah falls on a Monday or Tuesday, so that there are less than four days left in which to recite the *Selichot* prayers, it is customary to begin a week earlier.

The idea of a midnight service is based on Psalm 119:62:

"At midnight I will rise to give thanks unto Thee for thy righteous judgments",

and is in keeping with the opening words of the central pizmon (hymn with a refrain) for the first Selichot service:

Bemotsa-ey Menucha Kidamnucha Techila - "At the outgoing of the Sabbath, we first approach Thee".

Origin of the Prayers

The *Selichot* prayers are essentially based upon biblical poetry, and are, in a sense, a continuation of the Psalms. In part, however, they belong to the age of the Talmud. According to the *Mishna*, tractate *Taanit*, Chapter 2, the service on public Fast Days (such as the Tenth of *Tevet* and the Fast of Esther), was opened with verses and prayers exhorting the worshippers to repentance. These may be regarded as the earliest Selichot composed for use in the synagogue.

The penitential prayers are part of the effort in Jewish tradition to prepare the human heart for the experience of the High Holy Days. They dwell on our need for G-d's mercy and forgiveness. They summon us to probe our lives, and to lay bare our sins and failures, so that we may strive more resolutely after righteousness. These prayers are the most stirring expression of man's dependence on G-d, and of his need for penitence before Him, that we have in the treasury of Jewish Prayer.

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Categories of Prayers

Selichot can be grouped into four broad classes:

(a) The *Tochachah* (admonition), in which we are called upon to consider our destiny and purpose, is based upon themes such as shortness and variety of life, the value of penitence, the "Day of Judgment", the conflict between reason and passion and between spirit and body.

(b) The *Akedah* (sacrifice of Isaac), the moving story of our patriarch, Abraham, who was prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac, in compliance with the Divine instruction. In most cases, the story is used to represent the martyrdom of the millions of Jews who were sacrificed merely because they were Jewish. Each of them is likewise considered an *Akedah*, and the merit of these martyrs is invoked as a plea to G-d to forgive the sins of His people for the sake of the martyrs.

(c) The *Techinah* (supplication), and;

(d) The *Bakashah* (petition), both represent the relationship between G-d and Israel. The wishes and desires of the individual are here merged with those of the community as a whole, for it is not the individual alone who pleads, but the congregation in its entirety.

Selichot Music

The music used for the chanting of the *Selichot* prayers is specifically selected in an endeavour to give full expression to the meaning, mood and tone of the service. The haunting melodic themes which permeate the penitential prayers are meant to charge the congregation with religious fervor, and thereby enable the individual worshippers to elevate themselves to the intense level of spiritual inspiration required to communicate with our Maker deeply and sincerely at such a crucial time.