



והגדת לבתך
Vehigadet Levitekh
And You Shall Tell Your Daughters...

A D'var Torah for Selichot

By Dina Najman

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and to publicize the work of outstanding female teachers
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increase the number of divrei Torah written by women.*

Selichot: Communal Return Through Personal Introspection

By Dina Najman¹

Since the month of Elul began, we have been listening to the shofar blast and reciting Psalm 27, *“Of David, God is my light and my salvation...”*—twice daily. As we begin to recite *Selichot* (penitential prayers), we feel a sense of trepidation and fear. Did we utilize the previous weeks as a time of reflection to increase our good deeds and spiritual development? On *Selichot* night, one week before Rosh Hashanah, each of us asks: How will I stand before God on *יום הדין*, the Day of Judgment? In fact, the structure of the *Selichot* service prepares us for this awesome encounter.

The organizers of the *Selichot* service structured it with a brief *שבח* (praise) section, a substantial *בקשה* (request) section and then a brief section of *הודיה* (thanksgiving) offered at the conclusion of the service.² The service is anchored by the extensive liturgy of the *בקשה* section in which we ask God to forgive us, to remember us and to bestow mercy upon us.

It is interesting to note which prayer was chosen to inaugurate the *בקשה* section. Every day, whether the *Selichot* are long, as on Erev Rosh Hashanah, or short as on Erev Yom Kippur, the first *בקשה* recited is:

לך ה' הצדקה, ולנו בשת הפנים. מה נתאוונ ומה נאמר מה נדבר ומה נצטדק.
נחפשה דרכינו ונחקרה ונשובה אליך, כי ימינך פשוטה לקבל שבים.
לא בחסד ולא במעשים באנו לפניך, כדלים וכרשים דפקנו דלתיך. דלתיך דפקנו רחום וחנונו,
נא אל תשיבנו ריקם מלפניך. מלפניך מלכנו ריקם אל תשיבנו, כי אתה שומע תפלה.

Righteousness is Yours God, while shame is ours. How can we complain? What can we say? What can we speak? And how can we justify ourselves? Let us search into our ways and examine them, and return to You; for Your right hand is extended to receive those who repent. Neither with virtue nor with good deeds do we come before You, but like the poor and needy, we knock at Your door. Please do not turn us away empty handed from Your Presence, for You hear [our] prayers.³

Why was this prayer, written by Rav Amram Gaon in the 9th century, chosen as the first prayer of *בקשה*? Why not begin with the *י"ג מידות*, the 13 Attributes of Mercy,⁴ which Moshe recited after the sin of the golden calf? On the verse introducing the *י"ג מידות* ויקרא ה' על פניו ויקרא, *“God passed before Moshe and proclaimed,”* our Sages comment⁵ that God was presented like a *שליח צבור* (prayer leader). God showed Moshe the proper procedure for prayer telling him, “Whenever the Children of Israel sin, they shall perform before Me this procedure and I will forgive them.” Therefore, it would seem that we should begin the requests of the *Selichot* service by reciting the *י"ג מידות*, since God has told us to articulate this formula to elicit Divine forgiveness.

Moreover, why not begin by affirming the *Brit* (Covenant) between God and the Jewish people? Shouldn't we begin our requests by mentioning the *Brit*, which connects God to the people of Israel? Instead, we begin by stating that we are inadequate and unworthy of God's forgiveness. We beg for God's mercy while admitting that we lack virtue and are spiritually incomplete.

Throughout the year, we attempt to present ourselves to others and to ourselves as individuals connected to our faith and committed to God. Even if we have theological struggles, we endeavor to observe the commandments and attempt to deepen our closeness to God. Haven't we then succeeded in some measure this past year by continuing to identify ourselves as attentive and committed to God's commandments? And yet, even if we are righteous, we do not come before God with our righteous deeds. As we say in the conclusion of the *Selichot* service:

כי לא על צדקתינו אנחנו מפילים תחנונינו לפניך, כי על רחמיך הרבים.

For not because of our good deeds do we supplicate ourselves before You. Rather, [we can only appeal] to Your abundant mercy.

When we enter the *Selichot* period, we begin by casting ourselves as impoverished individuals. We do not take credit for our accomplishments. We acknowledge that it is God who provides the conditions, the influences and the circumstances which enable our achievements. Despite the Divine efforts on our behalf, we did not attain all that was possible. We did not live up to our potential.

This reflection on our misdeeds and shortcomings elicits a desire for *teshuva* (repentance), a return to the understanding and acknowledgment that a person is created in God's image. When we accomplish *teshuva*, we return to a self-concept that pre-dates what we may have become through wrong choices and poor compromises. We return to a life of constant and conscious awareness of the Divine source. In this בקשה, we declare: נחפשה דרכינו ונחקרה ונשובה אליך—"Let us search into our ways and examine them, and return to You." As *chozrim b'teshuva* (those who return through repentance), we are actually reconnecting with our true selves. The Sfas Emes, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger (the second Gerer Rebbe, 19th Century Poland) explains that "the essence of *teshuva* is not repenting of the sin itself; rather, a person must return to cling to his Divine source."⁶

This is why we begin with ...הפנים ולנו בשת הפנים—"Righteousness is Yours God..." This formulation is not simply an expression of humility. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that we have achieved less than we could have in our relationship with God. If we are capable of shame, then we still have some sense of what we could be, hence, of where we come from. If we were shameless, we would have no hope of reconnecting with God. With arduous self-examination, we can come to understand that this is not our true self, which was created *b'tzelem Elokim*, (in the image of God). It is only then that we can move forward in the process of renewal. The sincere evaluation of our commitment to the *Brit* enables an understanding of what we have rejected by our misdeeds. The *teshuva* process requires recognition that it was far better for the individual when there was a close connection with God (prior to transgressing) in order to appreciate what has now been lost. The prophet Hosea expresses this longing when he describes the Israelites' desire to return to their intimate relationship with God after their infidelity:

אלכה ואשובה אל אישי הראשון כי טוב לי אז מעתה.⁷

I will go and I will return to my first husband for it was better for me then than now.

Encouragement for this return can be found in the *haftarah* which precedes *Selichot*. Taken from the Book of Isaiah, the Shabbat morning *haftarah* is the last of the שבע דנחמתא (the seven *haftarot* of comfort) following Tisha B'Av as well as the prelude to *Selichot*. This *haftarah* describes both the repair of our relationship with God and the potential for a new beginning.

In the *haftarah*, the prophet Isaiah proclaims:

ומשׁושׁ חתן על-כלה, ישישׁ עליך אלקיך.⁸

As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

The rejoicing of a bridegroom over his bride is the deepest form of rejoicing possible. It is the beginning of the most intimate relationship between two people. An expression of this relationship is the well known acronym for Elul, taken from the Song of Songs:

אני לדודי ודודי לי...⁹

I am for my Beloved and my Beloved is for me...

We are reminded in Elul of our bond with God while simultaneously acknowledging that we have been unfaithful. As members of *Am Yisrael*, our individual failings affect not only our personal relationship with God but the communal relationship with God as well. These two simultaneous relationships are interdependent. A rupture in an individual's relationship with God distances the people of Israel from God. Similarly, personal *teshuva* enables both the individual and the community to repair their relationship with God. Our personal *teshuva* becomes preparation for our communal *teshuva*. This is reflected in the *Selichot* liturgy. While ...ה' הצדקה ולנו בשת פנים...ג מידות, the community's prayer, must

be recited in the presence of a *minyan*. These personal and communal elements of the *Brit* between God and the Jewish people, is explicitly expressed in *Netzavim* and *Vayelech*, the weekly Torah portions preceding *Selichot*. As the children of Israel stand on the bank of the Jordan River, God renews the *Brit* with them:

אתם נצבים היום כלכם לפני ה' אלקיכם ראשיכם שבטיכם זקניכם ושטריכם כל איש ישראל.
טפכם נשיכם וגרדך אשר בקרב מחניך מחטב עציך עד שאב מימך.
לעברך בברית ה' אלקיך ובאלתו אשר ה' אלקיך כרת עמך היום.

You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God: your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, every man of Israel; your children, your wives and the stranger that is in the midst of your camp, from the hewer of your wood unto the drawer of water; that you should enter into the covenant of the Lord your God—and into God's oath—which the Lord your God makes with you this day.¹⁰

This *Brit* binds both the nation as a whole as well as its individual members. In these verses the people are referred to collectively as כלכם (all of you), and then individually as כל איש ישראל (every person of Israel). Every Jew, no matter what station, profession, or gender has a unique and personal connection with God.

The yearning to return to a closer relationship with God begins our requests. From the opening paragraph ...הפנים... through the multiple repetitions of the לך ה' העדקה ולנו בשת הפנים... "ג' מידות", the community is propelled forward to the climactic moment of the שמע קולנו—"Hear Our Voice." The ark is open, and we beseech God, ה' אליך ונשובה חדש ימינו כקדם—"Bring us back to You God and we shall return, renew our days like before."

The *Selichot* service positions us personally and as members of our community to return—as the Sfas Emes says—to our Divine source, and repair our relationship with God. We come prepared to stand before the Almighty on יום הדין to pray for the Divine mercy upon each individual, the nation of Israel and the Land of Israel.

May we all merit a healthy, happy and good life and a *ketiva v'chatima tova*.

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- 1 Dina Najman is Rosh Kehilla, Spiritual Leader of Kehillat Orach Eliezer (KOE) in Manhattan. In this position, RK Najman advises the leadership, sets the halakhic standard for the synagogue and represents the synagogue in community-wide events. She received her certification in Bio-Ethics and Medical Humanities from the NYU/Einstein program in Bio-Ethics and Medical Humanities. RK Najman serves on the Executive Board of HODS (Halachic Organ Donor Society) and teaches Talmud at SAR Academy.
 - 2 The *Selichot* service is structured in a similar way to the Mincha service which has a brief praise section, a substantial request section and then a brief section of thanksgiving.
 - 3 *Selichot* service.
 - 4 ה' אל רחום וחנון ארך אפים רב חסד ואמת נצר חסד לאלפים נשא אבן ופשע וחטאה ונקה Hashem, Hashem. God is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and truth. Preserver of kindness for thousands of generations, forgiver of iniquity, willful sin, and error, and who cleanses [those who repent]. Exodus 34:6.
 - 5 'And God passed before his (Moshe's) face and he called out...' R. Yohanan taught: Were it not for the fact that this is written in the Torah, it would be impossible to say it. This teaches us that the Holy One was wrapped like a *shaliach tzibbur* (prayer leader) and demonstrated to Moshe the prayer service. God said to him, 'Whenever the Israelites sin, let them perform before Me a service like this one, and I will forgive them.' Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashana 17b.
 - 6 Sfas Emes, Shabbat Shuva, Parashat VaYeilech 5634.
 - 7 Hosea 2:9.
 - 8 Isaiah 62:5.
 - 9 Song of Songs 6:3.
 - 10 Deuteronomy 29:9-11.

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Dedicated with great love and
admiration to my children,
stepchildren and all their children
who are my teachers and guarantors
of a bright Jewish future.

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