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שמע בקולה

The Spirituality
of Intimacy:
Thoughts on *Selichot*

By Erin Leib Smokler

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The *selihot* service, which we are soon to recite, is a mysterious one. The time of prayer is unusual, the liturgy is opaque, and the overall structure of it has the quality of a tribal chant. Over and over we repeat certain phrases, returning to them again and again, building momentum as the mantra continues through the night and then through the season. “ה' אל רחום וחנון”, we intone, “The Lord, the Lord, a compassionate and gracious God.”

What is the meaning of it all? Why the stirring repetition? Why was the *selihot* service constructed in this way, with every single poem followed by its own recitation of the thirteen attributes of God’s mercy—

ויעבר ה' על פניו ויקרא: ה' ה' אל רחום וחנון ארך אפים ורב חסד ואמת נצר חסד לאלפים נשא עון ופשע וחטאה ונקה...

And the Lord passed before [Moshe] and proclaimed: The Lord, the Lord! A compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in kindness and truth, keeping kindness for the thousandth generation, forgiving of iniquity, willful sin, and error, and cleansing...

These words have echoed through generations of penitents.

A fantastical tale in the Gemara seems to lie at the heart of this practice. We learn in Talmud Bavli, Tractate Rosh Hashanah 17b:

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ויעבר ה' על פניו ויקרא: אמר רבי יוחנן: אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומר. מלמד שנתעטף הקדוש ברוך הוא כשליח צבור, והראה לו למשה סדר תפלה. אמר לו: כל זמן שישראל חוטאין יעשו לפני כסדר הזה ואני מוחל להם.

The Lord passed before [Moshe] and proclaimed. Rabbi Yohanan said: If this Scriptural verse had not been written, it would be impossible to say it! It teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, wrapped Himself [in a tallit] like a leader of prayer, and said to Moshe: Whenever the Jews sin before Me, let them perform this procedure and I shall forgive them.

The passage later continues:

אמר רבי יהודה: ברית כרותה לשלש עשרה מדות שאינן חוזרות ריקם, שנאמר (שמות לד) הנה אנכי כרת ברית.

Rabbi Yehudah said: A covenant was made regarding the thirteen attributes, that they would never return empty—that is, that they would never be ineffective in bringing about God’s favor—as it says [in Shemot 34], I hereby make a covenant.

It seems that according to Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Yehudah, the thirteen attributes really do have mystical powers. Moshe was taught by God at Sinai a formula for forgiveness that was then sealed in a covenant for all time. The prescription for divine exoneration would lie in a verbal incantation that would not fail. Declaring God’s merciful goodness would always yield such goodness.

When the master gives one the key to his own appeasement it behooves one to listen.

The rabbis who authored the *selihot*—mostly *geonim* and *rishonim* who lived from the eighth through the fifteenth centuries—did just that. They inserted the incantation repeatedly into the service, performing the procedure exactly according to the rules. Their fealty to this Gemara is signaled in the liturgy that they composed. Just before we recite the attributes, we recapitulate Rosh Hashanah 17b, saying:

אל הורית לנו לומר שלש עשרה, וזכור לנו היום ברית שלש עשרה, כמו שהודעת לענו מקדם...

O God, you taught us to recite the Thirteen [attributes of mercy], so remember for us today the covenant of these Thirteen, as you made known to the humble one [i.e., Moshe] in ancient times...

Yet confusion still remains. What is left out of the Gemara, as well as this restatement of it, is: Why? Why do these specific words effectuate divine forgiveness? What about them makes them consummate vehicles for *teshuvah*, for the human return to God and the Godly return to humanity? What is the magic of the formula?

I submit to you that the essence of the Thirteen is not to be found in rote recitation, but in contextual examination. We must return to the part of the Torah in which these words were revealed if we are to understand their transformative power.

This grand forgiving encounter between God and Moshe is found originally in Shemot 34: 5-7, in *parshat Ki-Tissa*. There, Moshe received the first set of tablets, smashed the first set of tablets, and punished the people for their egregious sin of the golden calf that took place in the interim. When we meet Moshe again in chapter 34, verse 1, God has just commanded him to carve the second tablets and to await God's presence on Mount Sinai.

ויאמר ה' אל משה פסל לך שני לוחות אבנים
כראשונים וכתבתי על הלוחות את הדברים אשר
היו על הלוחות הראשונים אשר שברת.

And the Lord said to Moshe, Carve you two stone tablets like the first ones, and I shall write on the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered.

Moshe complies in 34:4:

ויפסל שני לוחות אבנים כראשונים וישכם משה
בבקר ויעל אל הר סיני כאשר צוה ה' אותו ויקח
בידו שני לוחות אבנים.

And he carved two stone tablets like the first ones, and Moshe rose early in the morning and went up to Mount Sinai as the Lord had charged him, and he took in his hand the two stone tablets.

The immediate result brings God to Moshe and us to our now familiar verses, in Shemot 34: 5-6:

(5) וירד ה' בענן ויתיצב עמו שם ויקרא בשם ה'
(6) ויעבר ה' על פניו ויקרא: ה' ה' אל רחום וחנון
ארך אפים ורב חסד ואמת.

(5) And the Lord came down in the cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name of the Lord.

(6) And the Lord passed before him and called out: The Lord, the Lord! A compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and abounding in kindness and truth.

Notice the pairing of these sentences. Rabbi Yohanan, in the Gemara, commenting on the words, “And the Lord passed before him and called out,” began the “forgiveness formula” there, with verse 6. But the composers of the *selihot* deviated from the formula! They took us one verse back, to a critical, intimate, profound moment between God and Moshe, in 34:5. “וירד ה' בענן”—God descended from on high to get close to Moshe. This was not to be a revelation through thunder and lightening, fear and trembling. This revelation, this second *matan torah* of the second tablets, was to be the revelation of intimacy, of God coming down to humanity softly, quietly, lovingly. “ויתיצב עמו שם”—God stood with Moshe, united in solidarity and shared purpose, mutuality and reciprocity. Only a few verses back, in 33:21, God had indicated that there was such a possibility, such a place of seamless closeness.

“הנה מקום אתי ונצבת על הצור”—“There is a place *with Me*”—said God to Moshe. “Stand on the rock.” In our verse, we find the fulfillment of that vision in “ויתיצב עמו שם”, only now both Moshe *and* God stand on the rock of Sinai, fortified in their togetherness.

In choosing to add this one verse to Rabbi Yohanan's prescription, the *selihot* writers opened up a whole new meaning for *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah*, repentance, is not about words or pre-written formulas, but about the pursuit of a certain kind of relationship. The thirteen attributes are not a magical recipe for forgiveness, but rather signifiers of a different kind of relationship with God, one most conducive to compassion. In the process of *teshuvah*, the constant refrain teaches us, we ought

to be striving for a spirituality of intimacy wherein God's presence is real and we are fully present. This is the task of real return: The relationship of "ויתיצב עמו שם"—of standing side by side with God because we make ourselves worthy and open to such an encounter.

How do we get there? God tells us this, too: "פסל לך שני לוחת אבנים כראשונים" (Shemot 34:1). Carve the stone and I will write upon it. You do the work. You take the initiative. You assume responsibility. Then, says God, I will join you. The second tablets, alas, were not like the first, which were miraculously handed to Moshe from the heavens. The second tablets were earthly, human. They came from a fallible, flawed world. Moshe brought them *to* the mountain, not *from* the mountain. And yet, these second tablets were the tablets that endured. These second tablets of partnership, of human exertion met by divine sanction—these would stand the test of time. And even more than that, they would forever symbolize the greatest of all possibilities: the possibility of a second chance.

Ultimately, the transformative power of *selihot* and of the upcoming holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur lies in this very message. Forgiveness is real; second beginnings, second revelations, and second selves are attainable. We just need to carve out a little bit of space within ourselves for God to write upon us.

We are told in the Gemara (Taanit 30b) that there were no celebrations in ancient Israel like those on Yom Kippur, for on that day the second tablets were given. Of course such an occasion calls for celebration, we now understand—the celebration of all that we might yet be.

As we enter into the depths of *teshuvah* during this time, as we cry out "ה' ה' אל רחום וחנון", let us remember to revel in the awesome responsibilities and awesome possibilities that lay before us. Let us work hard, so that God might too, and so that we might merit to stand together with God, להתיצב עמו שם.

Shanah tovah

שנה טובה

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Who loved boundlessly

Who lived piously and compassionately

Who, with generous spirit, caring nature and tenacity

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