

About the Selichot Prayers

Rabbi Gil Nativ



According to the tradition of Sephardic Jews, "Selichot" (Jewish penitential prayers) are customarily recited from the beginning of the month of Elul and onward. According to the tradition of the Sages, it was on this date in the Hebrew calendar that Moshe ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Tablets of the Law for a second time, immediately after God had forgiven the People of Israel for their transgressions. According to the tradition of Ashkenazi Jews, "Selichot" prayers are said starting from the Saturday night preceding Rosh Hashana. (If Rosh Chodesh falls on Monday or Tuesday, the prayers are started earlier, on the Saturday night of the preceding week.) Some say Selichot after midnight, and there are those that recite them at dawn, before morning prayers. Customs differ in assorted Jewish communities as to whether the shofar should be blown during the Selichot, or at their conclusion.

Many biblical texts express the belief that the Lord is a forgiving God, and that a person can seek forgiveness and change his verdict: Moses makes God forgive the People of Israel after the sin of the golden calf; he prays that God heal his sister Miriam from leprosy that she received as punishment for defamation; David pleads to God after he sinned with Batsheba and following the sin of the census. According to the biblical texts, God does not abolish punishment, but moderates it. The most famous of the stories of forgiveness is that of the people of the city of Nineveh in the Book of Jonah, who hear the prophecy of Jonah's destruction and repent, and then God forgoes the punishment that had intended to give them. However, there are situations in which God does not accept the petition for forgiveness or does not repent: Samuel says to Saul "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or repent; for He is not a human being, that He should repent" even though Saul repented and asked forgiveness (Samuel 1:15-29). Balaam also notes this attribute of God: "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that He should repent" (Numbers 23:19).

In the first place, forgiveness is the attribute of God and is a gift of mercy to the person who confesses and repents for his sins in speech and in deed, as the Scriptures say: "the Lord our God, the merciful and the forgiving" (Daniel 9: 9) or "you are a forgiving God, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love" (Nehemiah 9:17).

In ancient times, "Selichot" were probably recited during days of public fasting (and on Yom Kippur) i.e., at times when there was a special need to confess sins and ask for forgiveness and atonement. In the description of the Mishna [Tractate Ta'anit, chapter 2], a combination of fasting, prayer at the center of the community (outside the synagogue) a sermon of rebuke ("Divrei kabbushin") the addition of blessings to the "shmone esrei" prayer and sometimes also the blowing of the shofar are all mentioned.

However, the prayers asking for forgiveness seem to have originated with a public recitation of verses from the Bible that mention God's kindness and mercy. It is possible that the recitation of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy several times during prayer was formulated later on. In later generations the religious poems (piyyutim) of Selichot eventually took the place of the biblical verses.

It appears that the reciting of the Selichot consisted of prayer leader reading out loud, with the congregation responding repetitively or rhythmically. To this day we can see evidence of this structure in the language of some of the Selichot.

Over the course of the generations, various Selichot services developed in the Diaspora, however, in my opinion it is difficult to know when Selichot began to be recited as prayers in themselves and not necessarily as an addition to the weekday "Amida" prayer. During the period of the Geonim, the ten days from Rosh Hashana (the Jewish New Year) until the end of the Day of Atonement were determined to be the days on which the Selichot were to be recited. In the "Selichot" service as it developed from that time forth, we may find confessions, supplications, recitation of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy and religious poems and hymns intended to invoke God's kindness, mercy and forgiveness. Many of the Selichot have become some of the most valuable permanent assets of Hebrew poetry. The Selichot hymns that were composed by famous Jewish liturgists and sages (for example, Rabbi Gershom ben Judah, "The Light of the Exile" and Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki) usually have a sophisticated structure and rhythm, with rhyming at the end of the lines. Occasionally the liturgists introduced new grammatical forms and words to match the rhythm and rhyme.

Rabbi Dr. Gil Nativ served as the rabbi of the Masorti congregations in Haifa, Beer Sheva, Omer and Karmiel, he has recently retired.