

ליל סליחות
LEIL SEUCHOT

Prelude to the Season of Our Renewal

Woodlands Community Temple

According to Jewish tradition, the month of Elul is a time for study, reconciliation and self-examination. During this month, Jews around the world prepare themselves for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur which occur during the following month of Tishri. Traditionally the Shofar is blown throughout Elul and specific psalms and poems are recited daily in order to encourage one to turn both mind and soul toward the Days of Awe.

As the month of Elul draws to a close, it is customary for Jews to assemble in synagogues on the Saturday night preceding Rosh Hashanah near midnight to recite prayers for Selihot. Our service this evening aspires to capture the tone of study and introspection which this season has prompted in our people through the ages.

Once on the New Moon of Elul, the *tzaddik* (righteous person) Rabbi Levi Isaac of Berditchev was standing at his window. A cobbler passed by and asked him, “And have you nothing to mend?” At once the *tzaddik* sat himself down on the ground and weeping bitterly cried, “Woe is me, and alas my soul, for the Day of Judgment is almost here, and I have still not mended myself.”

Chasidic, 18th-19th Century

The body of this service is an amalgamation of materials prepared by Rabbi Avi Magid and those prepared by Rabbi Lisa Eiduson, with additional materials prepared by Rabbi David Gelfand and Rabbi Billy Dreskin.

ON THE MEANING OF SELIHOT

A story is told which takes place on Ben Yehuda Street, one of the busiest pedestrian thoroughfares in Jerusalem. A reporter for *USA Today* is conducting a public opinion poll and approaches four individuals — an American, a Russian, an Ethiopian and a Sabra (which is a native-born Israeli) — all sitting together at one of the outdoor cafes. “Pardon me,” he says, “I’m conducting a public opinion poll for *USA Today*. What is your opinion of the current meat shortage?” In response, the American asks, “What’s a shortage?” The Ethiopian asks, “What’s meat?” The Russian asks, “What’s an opinion?” And the *Sabra* asks, “What’s pardon me?”

In Hebrew, the phrase for *pardon me* is *Selihah*. Literally, it means “forgiveness.” I recall that during my year as a rabbinical student in Israel, having been brought up “right,” if I would accidentally bump into someone or need to maneuver myself around someone in a crowd, I would politely say to them, “*Selihah* — pardon me.” Invariably, they would chuckle, or even mimic my words. Israelis, it would seem, did not much feel the need to say “pardon me;” not to be rude, mind you, but because they found it unnecessary — there were other more important ways to be kind and compassionate. But even though I quickly learned that my words of penitence were unnecessary, I knew that my mother — from some six thousand miles away — was watching over my shoulder and would yank my ear if I ever bumped into someone without saying, “Excuse me.” So I continued to say “*Selihah*,” and my Israeli friends continued to chuckle.

Selihot — prayers to God asking for forgiveness — have been an integral part of Judaism for about a thousand years. Such requests for forgiveness were added to the daily worship service during special public fasts, most notably during periods of drought and persecution.¹ The theology went something like this: Since God is just, our calamities must be the result of Israel’s sins, and the evil may therefore be averted through confession and petitioning forgiveness for those sins.

The custom of reciting *selihot* was extended to the days prior to Rosh Hashanah, deriving from the custom of fasting during the six days leading up to the New Year. Sephardic Jews initiate their recitation of *selihot* on the 1st day of the Hebrew month of Elul — Rosh Chodesh Elul (about three weeks ago) — and continue them for forty days through Yom Kippur. Ashkenazic Jews, on the other hand — which includes most of us — begin the recitation tonight, the Saturday evening before Rosh Hashanah, or (should Rosh Hashanah fall on a Monday or Tuesday) *two* Saturdays prior. It is traditional to begin these prayers of penitence at midnight because of Psalm 119, verse 62, which says: *Hatzot lailah a’kum l’hodot lah ... At midnight, I will rise to give You thanks.*

And this brings us to the pre-High Holy Days ritual we observe tonight — *Selihot*. For many, *Selihot* signals the beginning of *Yamim Nora’im*, the Days of Awe, the High Holy Days. It is a time of preparation for those days during which, we have been told, God opens up the Book of Life and judges each and every human being, deciding who in the year ahead shall live and who shall die.

You can imagine that in times when such imagery was believed to be literally true — namely, that

on Rosh Hashanah, God looks over the deeds we have performed and adjudicates our reward or punishment, and that on Yom Kippur, God seals such decisions — there was quite a bit of incentive to initiate any process by which God's severe decree might be tempered. According to our tradition, it is through *teshuvah* (turning), *tefillah* (prayer), and *tzedakah* (acts of giving) that such tempering of God's decrees might occur.

And so it would be that on the Saturday before Rosh Hashanah, shortly before midnight, the congregation would enter the synagogue, every individual filled already with fear and dread of the decisions that might be rendered in the upcoming Holy Days. The service would begin by invoking the memories of all the important biblical characters from Abraham through Ezra, noting how God showed mercy to each of them, and beseeching God to show mercy to each of us.² Across the centuries, additional *selihot* prayers have been composed as Jewish communities have been forced to confront their own personal tragedies, and have turned to God for aid during those times. The prayers increased in their complexity and assumed a formal structure, but they never lost sight of their primary purpose: to ask God's forgiveness for Israel's sins.

In addition to the many prayers seeking God's pardon, the *Selihot* service also included the biblical passage known as *The Thirteen Divine Attributes* (familiar to us as *Adonai, Adonai*). It appears twice in the Torah, once when the Israelites build the Golden Calf and again when the Scouts return from Canaan with their negative reports about the Promised Land. In each case, God wants to destroy the Children of Israel, but Moses is able to douse the flames of God's anger by recalling God's unbounded attributes of compassion, grace, patience, kindness, faith in Israel, generosity, forgiveness, amnesty and mercy. And if there was one thing that Moses did extremely well, it was to *shmeare* God with praise. In both cases, God relented and the Israelites were forgiven.

So in the very best tradition of Moses the Shmearer, *The Thirteen Divine Attributes* is traditionally recited several times during the *Selihot* service, hoping against hope that, yet again, we will be able to temper God's severe decrees.

It is clear, however, that *shmearing* God is not meant to magically achieve the results we seek. Penitential prayers must be accompanied by contrite remorse. Sins must be confessed. And commitments must be made not to repeat them. *Viddui* — the Confessions of Sins (familiar to many as *Tavo L'faneha*) — is therefore included in the *Selihot* service. Traditionally, only one of the two confessions which appear in the High Holy Days liturgy — *Ashamnu*, but not *Al Het* — is included in *Selihot*. Many contemporary liturgies, however, include either or even both of these passages. In any case, it is important to note that the confessions are made in the plural, rather than in the singular. For any one of these sins may have been committed by someone in the congregation, and the community shares the responsibility to confess and to ask for forgiveness.

All well and good for the Jews who lived centuries ago. But what is the meaning of *Selihot* for us today? What if we do not accept as real the literal imagery of God poring over the pages of the Book of Life? What if we find ourselves living in a world where God does not play a role in reward and

punishment, at least not in the manner that our heritage has left to us?

These are important questions. They go beyond *Selihot*. They go beyond even Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. These are the questions which challenge every thinking individual who resides in the leading edge of the twenty-first century. We know too much. We know the world of science, of natural cause and effect, that there are events which take place in our world which do not illustrate Divine decree, but rather, they reflect everyday laws which Nature must observe. And we know even moreso the *Shoah*, a time when millions of innocents were put to death for no better reason than that they were born Jewish. We know that children could not have sinned to such a degree as to deserve a divinely-ordained death sentence. And we also know that during those dark years, God did not reach out to save us.

And so, knowing what we know, it is impossible for most of us to observe *Selihot*, and the High Holy Days, as our ancestors have done before us. It is impossible for most of us to accept the image of God sealing our destinies in the Book of Life. But we can, nevertheless, observe these days. As modern Jews, we are obliged to find new ways to understand these old images. We must use our knowledge not to demolish faith, not to eradicate hope ... but to do just the opposite. In a world which has shown us, time and time again, that people and natural events can impose great pain upon us and upon our loved ones, we must find the conviction and the strength to insist upon affirming that life is still a blessing, that life is still worth living, and that life is still worth living in a meaningful, value-laden, morally upright manner.

This is the contemporary meaning of *Selihot*. This evening, as our congregation comes together and invokes the ancient images of sin and forgiveness, we can make such images meaningful. We can make such images important. When we recite our litanies of transgression, we can acknowledge that these are indeed the unfortunate, but very real, deeds of many men and women. When we recite our pleas that ask for God's forgiveness, we can understand those pleas as heartfelt, communal expressions of desire, and of hope, that we can *turn our lives around*, that we can perform *teshuvah* and change these hurtful ways in which we too often behave. When we turn to God, we articulate a profoundly moving, and humble, request that our universe be one in which goodness is among its most prized gifts, that evil and hurtfulness are willful attempts to push goodness out of our communities, and that we retain the power to restore such goodness to its rightful position in our world. Jewishly, we view this not as the individual's responsibility alone, but as the concern of our entire community, together.

A parable is told of a traveler making his way through a difficult and perilous countryside, coming to a bank of a river too deep to be forded. The traveler could not return nor could he remain where he was. How, then, was he to get to the other side of the river? Then he remembered the purse which dangled from his belt and contained all his worldly wealth in gold pieces. In the extremity of his need, he began to toss the coins one by one into the river, hoping to raise a pathway over which he might cross. His efforts were for naught, however, as the bag emptied and the river remained impassable. With only one gold piece remaining, the traveler looked about for some other solution.

That was when he saw the ferry boat down the river which, in his panic, he had failed to notice earlier. Regretting that he had wasted his treasure to no purpose, yet feeling fortunate to have one coin left for passage, he hastened to the boat, gave the gold piece to the ferry operator and crossed to the other side without incident, thus saving his life and securing the opportunity to continue his journey.

Bahya ibn Pakuda, the eleventh-century Spanish Jew who told this tale, had *teshuvah* — turning — in his mind as the story's point. Ibn Pakuda was trying to teach us that turning our lives — setting them right — ought to be our first and most important expenditure, but that it proves too often to be our last, the sole remaining device available when all else has been spent.

The *Selihot* service, as it has come down to us, is a tightly constructed, logically designed worship experience. But its most important quality is the profound effect it has had on its participants through time. For us today, as for our ancestors of old, in these days just prior to Rosh Hashanah, *Selihot* provides us with a sense both of the comforting nearness of God, along with the awesome awareness of God's incomprehensible transcendence. At the conclusion of *Selihot*, we feel purified and revitalized, in a state of readiness for *Yamim Noraim*, the approaching Days of Awe.

This *Selihot*, may we find ourselves willing and knowing participants in an ancient, revered and still-meaningful process. May we hear the words shared with us across the centuries, and understand the message they deliver today. With willing spirits and contrite hearts, may we find ourselves ready to begin our High Holy Days, ready to enter the Gates of Repentance ... which are open to all who desire to better themselves and their community.

Rabbi Billy Dreskin

SELIHOT

Prelude to the Season of Our Renewal

הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנָשׁוּבָה חֲדָשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם.

*Ha-shi-vei-nu, A-do-nai, ei-le-ḥa ve-na-shu-va;
Ha-deish ya-mei-nu ke-ke-dem.*

Turn us to You, Adonai, and we will return. Renew our days as of old.

EIGHTEEN THOUGHTS FOR SELIHOT

Meditations on Reaching In — to Ourselves

Days are scrolls. Write on them only what you want remembered.

Bachya ibn Pakuda, 11th Century

At first our failings are like a spider's web; in the end — if we let them — they become as thick as a ship's cable. At first they are visitors; in the end — if we let them — they become masters of the house.

Midrash, 2nd Century

Do not imagine that character is determined at birth. We have been given free will. Any person can become as righteous as Moses or as wicked as Jereboam. We ourselves decide whether to make ourselves learned or ignorant, compassionate or cruel, generous or miserly. No one forces us, no one decides for us, no one drags us along one path or the other; we ourselves, by our own volition, choose our own way.

Moses Maimonides, 12th Century

Every human being is endowed by God with two eyes. With one we are expected to look at our neighbor, fastening our gaze on virtues, excellence and desirable qualities. With the other eye, we turn inward to see our own weaknesses, imperfections, and shortcomings, in order to correct them.

Rabbi Israel Salanter, 19th Century

A tale is told of one who sat in study before the 19th-century *tzaddik* Rabbi Mordechai of Nadvorna, and before Rosh Hashanah came to obtain permission from him to be dismissed. The *tzaddik* said to him, "Why are you hurrying?" Said he, "I am a Reader, and I must look into the festival prayerbook, and put my prayers in order." But the *tzaddik* replied, "The prayerbook is the same as it was last year. Now it would be better for you to look into your deeds, and put yourself in order."

Likkutei Mahariah

When we are dead, and people weep for us and grieve, let it be because we touched their lives with beauty and simplicity. Let it not be said that life was good to us, but, rather, that we were good to life.

Rabbi Jacob P. Rudin, 20th Century



Meditations on Reaching Out — to Others

To do evil toward another human being is worse than doing evil toward God. The person you hurt may leave and go to a place you do not know or are incapable of reaching. While God is always nearby, the person you wrong may not be, and you may not have the opportunity to ask forgiveness.

Amshinover Rebbe, 19th Century

If you see a friend sinning or pursuing an unworthy life, it is a *mitzvah* to try to restore that person to the right path. Let your friend know that wrong actions are self-inflicted hurts, but speak softly and gently, making it clear that you speak only because of your concern for your friend's well-being.

Moses Maimonides, 12th Century

Our sages taught: "One who shames another in public has no share in the world-to-come."

Therefore one must take great care not to shame another in public, whether young or old, either by shameful name-calling or by talebearing.

Moses Maimonides, 12th Century

There is perhaps no phenomenon which contains so much destructive feeling as moral indignation, which permits envy or hate to be acted out under the guise of virtue.

Erich Fromm, 20th Century

One can always find warm hearts who in a glow of emotion would like to make the whole world happy but who have never attempted the sober experiment of bringing a real blessing to a single human being. It is easy to revel enthusiastically in one's love of man, but it is more difficult to do good to someone solely because he is a human being. When we are approached by a human being demanding his right, we cannot replace definite ethical action by mere vague goodwill.

Rabbi Leo Baeck, 20th Century

A person who walks life's path without regard to ethical standards is like someone who is blind and unaware of walking along the bank of a river. The person can at any moment succumb to the dangers of a wrong step, and the odds are more certainly toward being hurt than escaping harm.

Moses Luzzatto, 18th Century

Meditations on Reaching Out — to God

His disciples went to visit Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai as he lay ill. They said, “Master, give us your blessing.” He replied, “May you care for God as much as you care for human beings.” They said, “No more than that?” He replied, “That is more than enough, believe me! Do you not know that when we are about to commit a transgression against someone, we dismiss God from our minds and hope that no human eye may notice us!”

Talmud, 5th Century

Rabbi Baruch’s grandson, Yechiel, was playing hide-and-seek with another boy. He hid himself well and waited for his playmate to find him. After waiting a long time, he came from his hiding place, but the other was nowhere in sight. Now he realized that the boy had not looked for him. Weeping, he came to his grandfather to complain of his faithless friend. Rabbi Baruch’s eyes too brimmed with tears, and he said, “God says the same thing. ‘I hide, but no one wants to seek Me!’”

Hasidic, 18th Century

We shall accomplish nothing at all if we divide our world and our life into two domains: one in which God’s command is paramount, the other governed by the laws of economics, politics, and the simple self-assertion of the group. Stopping one’s ears so as not to hear the voice from above is breaking the connection between existence and the meaning of existence.

Martin Buber, 19th-20th Century

Rabbi Joshua came upon the prophet Elijah. He asked the prophet, “When will the Messiah come?” Elijah answered, “You will find him sitting among the poor. His body, like theirs, covered with sores. The others first remove all their dressings, then apply fresh bandages. But the Messiah never changes more than one dressing at a time, for he thinks, ‘When I hear the call, I must be able to come without delay!’” Rabbi Joshua found him and asked, “When are you coming, master?” And he answered, “Today!” But when the day had come to an end, the Messiah had not arrived. Rabbi Joshua returned to Elijah and said, “He lied to me! ‘Today!’ he said, but he did not come. He lied!” But Elijah responded, “You must understand what he meant. As it is written in the Book of Psalms (95:7), “Today ... if you will only pay heed to God’s voice.”

Talmud, 5th Century

Our great transgression is not that we commit sins, for the temptation is strong and our strength is slight! No, our transgression is that at every instant we can turn to God and we do not turn!

Rabbi Simcha Bunam, 18th-19th Century

It is my desire to do God’s will, not that God do my will.

Rabbi Isaac Meyer of Ger, 18th-19th Century



יְיָ יֵי, אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנוּן,
אֲרֶךְ אַפַּיִם, וְרַב חַסֵּד וְאֱמֶת.

נִצֵּר חַסֵּד לְאַלְפִים, נִשָּׂא עוֹן וּפְשָׁע וְחַטָּאָה, וְנִקָּה.

*Adonai, Adonai eyl ra-hum v'ha-nun,
E-reh a-pa-yim v'rav he-sed ve-e-met,
No-tzeyr he-sed la-a-la-feem, no-seh a-von va-fe-sha v'ha-ta-ah v'na-keh.*

Adonai, Adonai our God, is merciful and gracious, endlessly patient, loving and true, showing mercy to thousands, forgiving our sin, and granting pardon.



BEGINNING

It is nearing midnight as we begin this period of Selichot, penitential prayers to ready ourselves for the High Holy Days. Our tradition tells us that the gates of heaven are open and ready to receive our prayers. Now is our opportunity to begin the process of *teshuvah*, of turning — to change ourselves, and to change our world.

May our prayers at this late hour commence our turning. Cause us, O God, to examine what we have been, and to renew ourselves to what we might yet become. Help us to prepare our spirits for these days ahead.

This Selichot hour is to examine our ways and to ask difficult questions. Were we a joyful presence to our friends and families? Or did we take them for granted, and so were taken for granted by them? Did we perform the kindly deed? Or did we postpone it, until the need had dried up and withered away? Help us, Adonai, to tell ourselves the truth in all these things.

Our God, God of our mothers and fathers, grant that our prayers may reach You. Do not be deaf to our pleas, for we are not so arrogant and stiff-necked as to say before You, Adonai our God and God of all ages, we are perfect and have not sinned; rather do we confess: we have gone astray, we have sinned, we have transgressed.

וְעַל כָּלֵם, אֱלֹהֵי סְלִיחוֹת,
סִלַּח לָנוּ, מְחַל לָנוּ, כִּפּוּר—לָנוּ.

*Ve-al ku-lam, E-lo-ah se-li-hot,
Se-lah la-nu, me-hal la-nu, ka-per la-nu!*

For all these, O God of mercy, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement!



HAVDALAH

Havdalah is not for the close of Shabbat alone; it is for all days. Havdalah means: separate yourself from the unholy; strive for holiness.

Havdalah means: separate yourself from fraud and exploitation; be fair and honest with all people.

Havdalah means: separate yourself from indifference to the poor and the deprived, the sick and the aged; work to ease their despair and their loneliness.

Havdalah means: separate yourself from hatred and violence; promote peace among people and nations.

May God give us understanding to reject the unholy and to choose the way of holiness.

May God Who separates the sacred from the secular inspire us to perform these acts of Havdalah.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרִי
הַגָּפֶן.

Ba-ruh a-ta Adonai, E-lo-hey-nu me-leh ha-o-lam, bo-ray p'ree ha-ga-fen.

Blessed are You, O God, Creator of the Universe, who has created sweetness, symbolized in our tradition by the fruit of the vine.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מִיְנֵי
בְּשָׂמִים.

Ba-ruh a-ta Adonai, E-lo-hey-nu me-leh ha-o-lam, bo-rey mee-nay v'sa-meem.

Blessed are You, O God, Creator of the Universe, who has created the different varieties and textures of life into our lives, symbolized in our tradition by the spices.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מְאוֹרֵי
הָאֵשׁ.

Ba-ruh a-ta Adonai, E-lo-hey-nu me-leh ha-o-lam, bo-rey m'o-ray ha-eysh.

Blessed are You, O God, Creator of the Universe, who has created the many possibilities for how we live our lives, symbolized in our tradition by the lights of fire.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַמְבַדִּיל בֵּין
קֹדֶשׁ לְחֹל, בֵּין אֹר לְחֹשֶׁךְ, בֵּין יִשְׂרָאֵל לְעַמִּים,
בֵּין יוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, לְשֵׁשֶׁת יָמֵי הַמַּעֲשֵׂה. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה
יְיָ, הַמְבַדִּיל בֵּין קֹדֶשׁ לְחֹל.

Ba-ruh a-ta, A-do-nai E-lo-hey-nu me-leh ha-o-lam, ha-mav-dil bein ko-desh le-hol, bein or le-ho-shech, bein Yis-ra-el la-a-mim, bein yom hash-vee-ee le-shei-shet ye-mei ha-ma-aseh.

Ba-ruh a-ta A-do-nai, ha-mav-dil bein ko-desh le-hol.

Blessed are You, Adonai, our God who guides the universe, for separating the sacred from the secular, light from darkness, the House of Israel from other peoples, and the seventh day of rest from the six days of work. Blessed are You, Adonai, who separates the sacred from the secular. Blessed are You, O God, Creator of the Universe, who helps us to create our own futures by teaching us to make distinctions between Kodesh and Hol.

אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַנְּבִיא, אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַתִּשְׁבִּי,
אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַגִּלְעָדִי.
בְּמַהֲרָה בְיָמֵינוּ
יָבוֹא אֱלֵינוּ,
עִם מְשִׁיחַ בֶּן דָּוִד.

Ei-li-ya-hu ha-na-vi, Ei-li-ya-hu ha-tish-bi.

Ei-li-ya-hu, Ei-li-ya-hu, Ei-li-ya-hu ha-gil-a-di.

Bim-hei-ra ve-ya-mei-nu, ya-vo ei-lei-nu.

Im ma-shi-ah ben Da-vid, im ma-shi-ah ben Da-vid.

Elijah the prophet, Elijah the Tishbite, Elijah the Gileadite. May he come quickly to us in our days, and bring with him the Messiah, son of David.

ON TURNING

Now is the time for turning. The leaves are beginning to turn from green to red and orange. The birds are beginning to turn and are heading once more toward the South. The animals are beginning to turn to storing their food for the winter.

For leaves, birds, and animals, turning comes instinctively. But for us, turning does not come so easily. It takes an act of will for us to make a turn. It means breaking with old habits. It means admitting that we have been wrong, and this is never easy. It means losing face, starting all over again, and this is always painful. It means saying, "I am sorry." It means recognizing that we have the ability to change.

These things are terribly hard to do. But unless we turn, we will be trapped forever in yesterday's ways. Adonai, help us to turn — from callousness to sensitivity, from hostility to love, from pettiness to purpose, from envy to contentment, from carelessness to discipline, from fear to faith. Turn us around, Adonai, and bring us back toward You. Revive our lives, as at the beginning. And turn us toward each other, Adonai, for in isolation there is no life.

Rabbi Jack Reimer, 20th Century

CANDLELIGHTING CEREMONY



There are flames that burn within us, flames which diminish life, flames which devour the soul.

To dim and to extinguish these flames is the purpose of our High Holy Days.

Here is **ENVY**. Let it be quenched. Envy enters our soul and gives us no peace. Envy makes small what is our own and magnifies what is our neighbors. We become dissatisfied with our lot, and we yearn for what lies beyond the boundary of our life. Envy's handmaiden is restlessness and together they are the evil taskmasters who destroy the family, deny morality, enslave the spirit and make life a mean and mocking thing.

Let the light of Envy, O God, be quenched.

Here is **HATRED**. Let it be extinguished. Hatred seizes on the heart and corrupts it. It obscures our vision and narrows it. It consumes the blaze, and those who gaze upon it become blind. Hatred's handmaiden is intolerance and bigotry, prejudice and racism. Together they spew forth the poison which causes the human spirit to become diseased and wither.

Let the light of Hatred, O God, be extinguished.

Here is **ARROGANCE**. Let it be put out. Arrogance drives us to tasks which are vanity and toward goals that are emptiness. It substitutes the unimportant for the important, the ignoble for the noble, the valueless for the value-laden. It makes the illusory seem real and distorts the wholesome goodness in life. Arrogance's handmaiden is egocentricity and together they lead people down the path of futility and delusion.

Let the light of Arrogance, O God, be extinguished.

Envy. Hatred. Arrogance.

May their consuming fires be removed from our world forever.

Now, only one great light burns before us. It is the *Ner Tamid*. Set forth in the Book of Leviticus, it has been across the centuries our Eternal Light, burning bright in the Sanctuary and in the heart, sending forth the golden beacons of justice and righteousness to illuminate the habitations of humankind.

The Ner Tamid brings light to an all-too-darkened world. It beckons to us to keep alive our values "in spite of everything," and to hearken to that ancient call — to be "a light unto the nations." The Ner Tamid is the guardian of the Torah which sustains us in all our generations, and by whose word we are instructed to tikkun olam, to repairing our world.

* * *

We have extinguished three lights of destruction. We now kindle three lights of hope.

* * *

First, we kindle the light of **TESHUVAH**, of turning. For the world outside can heal only when there has been a healing within. There can only be peace among others when there is peace in every heart. There can only be respect for others when respect is accorded the self. And there will only be honor for others when each of us becomes true to our own highest self.

Let the light of Teshuvah, O God, burn bright.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מְאוּרֵי הָאֵשׁ.

Ba-ruh a-ta Adonai, E-lo-hey-nu me-leh ha-o-lam, bo-rey m'o-ray ha-eysh.

Blessed are You, O God, Creator of the Universe, who has created the many possibilities for how we live our lives, symbolized in our tradition by the lights of fire.

Second, we kindle the light of **TEFILLAH**, of prayer. *Tefillah* is the ladder which links earth and heaven, day-to-day living with the vision of a world-to-come, our world-as-it-could-be. Prayer is the cup into which we pour our aspirations, the flower born from the seed of faith, the wings on which our spirit soars. It is the hope that, small as we are, we might penetrate the great mystery of God.

Let the light of Tefillah, O God, burn bright.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מְאֹרֵי הָאֵשׁ.

Ba-ruh a-ta Adonai, E-lo-hey-nu me-leh ha-o-lam, bo-rey m'o-ray ha-eysh.

Blessed are You, O God, Creator of the Universe, who has created the many possibilities for how we live our lives, symbolized in our tradition by the lights of fire.

And third, we kindle the light of **TZEDAKAH**, of righteousness. You have commanded us, O God, by the mouth of the prophet: “To loose the fetters of wickedness; to undo the bands of the yoke; and let the oppressed go free. To share our bread with the hungry, to bring into our homes the poor that are cast out, to cover the naked, and to not hide ourselves.” These are not invitations to charity. They are commands to *tzedakah*, to righteousness and justice. Keep our hearts sensitive, O God, to all humanity and all living things, and may the wells of our compassion and humanity never run dry.

Let the light of Tzedakah, O God, burn bright. Let all of these lights burn bright — the lights of repentance, of prayer and of righteousness. May this hour of Selichot prepare us for the New Year, and for all of life’s possibilities and promises.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא מְאֹרֵי הָאֵשׁ.

Ba-ruh a-ta Adonai, E-lo-hey-nu me-leh ha-o-lam, bo-rey m'o-ray ha-eysh.

Blessed are You, O God, Creator of the Universe, who has created the many possibilities for how we live our lives, symbolized in our tradition by the lights of fire.



Soon, these candles will be consumed. They will sputter and burn out, but our faith in God, in humanity, and in the future, will continue to shed light, no matter how impenetrable the darkness of confusion, arrogance and war. We pray that each of us, in the new year ahead, blessed by God with health and prosperity and safety, may help to bring some measure of illumination, warmth, understanding and peace into our troubled world. And because of this faith, we greet the New Year not with despondency, but with hope and joy.

Kee a-nu a-me-ḥa, v'a-ta Mal-kei-nu.

A-nu va-ne-ḥa, v'a-ta A-vi-nu.

A-nu na-ḥa-la-te-ḥa, v'a-ta Go-ra-lei-nu.

A-nu tzo-ne-ḥa, v'a-ta Ro-ei-nu.

A-nu kar-me-ḥa, v'a-ta No-trei-nu.

A-nu ra-ya-te-ḥa, v'a-ta Do-dei-nu.

כִּי אָנוּ עַמְּךָ וְאַתָּה מַלְכֵינוּ
אָנוּ בְנֵיךָ אַתָּה אָבִינוּ
אָנוּ נַחְלָתְךָ וְאַתָּה גּוֹרְלֵנוּ
אָנוּ צֵאֲנֶךָ וְאַתָּה רוֹעֵנוּ
אָנוּ כַרְמֶךָ וְאַתָּה נוֹטְרֵנוּ
אָנוּ רְעִיתְךָ וְאַתָּה דּוֹדֵנוּ

We are Your people, You are our Sovereign.
We are Your children, You are our Parent.
We are Your possession, You are our Portion.
We are Your flock, You are our Shepherd.
We are Your vineyard, You are our Keeper.
We are Your beloved, You are our Friend.

HOW WE MAY BEGIN

To be ready for the High Holy Days, we must consider our actions toward others. Bachya ibn Pakuda, a revered 11th-century Jewish philosopher, wrote:

The heart of the Pious One is generous and his spirit is humble. He is neither vengeful, nor covetous, nor does he speak ill of anyone. He despises greatness and detests acclaim. He is serene, remembers kindnesses, is grateful, self-effacing, and harms no one.

When she is angered, she is not consumed with wrath. Great are her wisdom and her humility. Her decisions are firm. She is not hasty and therefore does not act rashly. She is righteous in anger, and is compassionate when her forgiveness is asked. Her loyalty is strong and her promise faithful.

He seeks to know his Creator's will, and he governs his passion. He does not gloat over the misfortune of his enemies, and does not keep a grudge. He is of little trouble, and of great help to others. His gratitude for kindness is great and is long suffering when injured.

When one wants to borrow from her, she lends. When she is wronged, she forgives. When she is deprived, she is generous. When she is kept at a distance, she brings near. She is helpful to the poor and a champion of the oppressed. She does not humiliate anyone. She does not violate a confidence.

When he sees good, he remembers it. When evil befalls him, he overlooks it. To him every deed is better than his own, and every person is better than he. He recognizes his own defects, is mindful of his sins, loves God and seeks to do God's will. He sits with the poor, loves the righteous, is loyal to truthful people, aids the needy, is a father to the orphan, a protector of the widow, and honors the lowly.

Chovot HaLevavot, Bachya ibn Pakuda, 11th Century

SILENT PRAYER



Ribbono Shel Olam, Ruler of the universe — the universe beyond me and the universe within me — I want to learn how to cease punishing myself and torturing myself with unhappy memories that stab me when I wake and when I sleep, with self-accusation that comes back to me brazenly or in disguise, with guilt and reproach that attack me frontally or strike at me from ambush where I cannot detect them.

I want to learn who I am, at least as much as I know and understand the processes by which I earn my bread. For in my ignorance of myself, the whole tragedy of the world lies exposed.

If I could but find my way back to myself, I would learn to make peace with myself. And then, others who are in my plight could learn to make peace with one another. If I could learn to forgive myself, I might learn, and others might learn, to forgive each other. I know how painfully difficult this is. I know that the quest for inner peace is agonizing, but all that is precious is bought with anguish.

Help me to unlock the gates of self-forgiveness, the gates of salvation — the Gates of Repentance — even as the prisoner goes forth when the time of punishment is past. Amen.

TO TURN OUR LIVES

After the flood, Noah opened the ark and looked out.

He saw the earth desolate, forest and gardens uprooted, corpses visible everywhere.

There was neither grass, nor vegetation; the world was a wasteland.

In pain and dismay, he cried out to his God: "Sovereign of all Creation, in six days You made the earth and all that grows in it. It was like a garden, like a table prepared for a feast.

Now You Yourself have brought the work of Your hands to nought, uprooting all that You planted, tearing down all that You built. Why did You not show compassion for Your creatures?"

God then replied, "O faithless shepherd! Now, after the destruction, You come to Me and complain.

But when I said to you, 'Make an ark for yourself, for I am going to flood the earth to destroy all flesh,' you did not plead for your neighbors!

How differently Abraham will act. He will pray on behalf of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

And Moses, when his people anger Me with their calf of gold, he will offer his life for them.

But you ... when you saw that judgment was about to strike the world ...

You thought only of yourself and of your household, while all else perished by fire and water!"

Then Noah understood that he had sinned.

אֲשַׁמְנוּ, בִּגְדָנוּ, גָּזַלְנוּ, דִּבְרָנוּ דּוֹפִי. הֶעְוִינוּ,
וְהִרְשַׁעְנוּ, זָדְנוּ, חָמְסָנוּ, טַפְלָנוּ שָׁקָר. יַעֲצָנוּ רָע,
כָּזְבָנוּ, לָצָנוּ, מָרְדָנוּ, נֶאֱצָנוּ, סָרְרָנוּ, עֹוִינוּ,
פָּשַׁעְנוּ, צָרָרָנוּ, קִשִּׁינוּ עֶרְף. רִשְׁעָנוּ, שְׁחָתָנוּ,
תַּעֲבָנוּ, תַּעֲוִינוּ, תַּעֲתָעָנוּ.

Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi. He'evinu, vehirshanu, zadnu, hamasnu, tafalnu shaker. Ya'atznu ra, kizavnu, latznu, maradnu, ni'atnu, sararnu, avinu, pashanu, tzararnu, kishinu oref. Rashanu, shihatnu, ti'avnu, ta'inu, titanu.

* * * * *

We abuse, we betray, we are cruel. We destroy, we embitter, we falsify. We gossip, we hate, we insult. We jeer, we kill, we lie. We mock, we neglect, we oppress. We pervert, we quarrel, we rebel. We steal, we transgress, we are unkind. We are violent, we are wicked, we are xenophobic. We yield to evil, we are zealots for bad causes. We have ignored Your commandments and statutes, and it has not profited us. You are just; we have stumbled. You have acted faithfully, we have been unrighteous.

* * * * *

On a winter's morning, a young Hassid came to Rebbe Yisroel of Rizhyn and asked to be ordained a Rabbi. He began to recite his qualifications:

"I dress only in white, I drink nothing stronger than water. I put nails in the soles of my shoes so that I always walk in pain! And from time to time, I go to the Shammas and ask that he give me forty lashes on my bare back with a leather thong! And on the coldest days, I roll in the snow to show my contrition!"

At that very moment, a white horse hobbled into the courtyard, fell into the snow, rolled around, rose to its feet and drank water from a trough. Whereupon its owner came running into the yard, whip in hand. He then beat the horse soundly, and it fled. "You see," said Rebbe Yisroel, "it too is dressed in white, has nails in its shoes, rolls in the snow and receives lashes from its owner. But it remains a horse!"

Rebbe Mendel of Lubavitch used to say: "There are many kinds of pride, but the worst is the pride of piety." We content ourselves with synagogue membership; we pride ourselves on our observance. We boast the apparent evidence of spirituality; but in a person filled to the brim with self, there is no room for God. Where the content is pretense, there is no room for genuine virtue.

The coat of pride has many colors: the plummed purple of arrogance; the crested red of conceit; the clear, pale blue of pretense; the bright orange of brash attention-getting; the dull mauve of meticulous mummery; the colic green of jealousy and, worst of all, the deceptive gray of false humility and feigned piety.

May we pride ourselves in Torah-deeds, not words alone. May we boast the depth of our involvement, not membership alone. May we feel satisfaction to the extent that we have made Torah a part of our lives — an abiding foundation for ourselves and our children.

Do not despair. You are bigger than any of your sins and than all of them. Rise, for though you have suffered setback and hurt, you are not defeated, You possess the resources for triumph. God does not despair of you. You need not despair of yourself.

Rabbi Morris Adler, 20th Century

אָבִינוּ מַלְכֵנוּ, חַנּוּנוּ וְעֲנָנוּ,
כִּי אֵין בָּנוּ מַעֲשִׂים,
עֲשֵׂה עִמָּנוּ צְדָקָה וְחֶסֶד
וְהוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ.

A-vi-nu mal-kei-nu, ho-nei-nu va-a-nei-nu,

Ki ein ba-nu ma-a-sim.

A-seh i-ma-nu tze-da-kah va-he-sed, a-seh i-ma-nu tze-da-kah va-he-sed

Ve-ho-shi-ei-nu.

Avinu Malkenu, be gracious and answer us, for we have little merit. Treat us generously and with kindness, and be our help.

revised September 21, 2011

Do not despair. You are bigger than any of your sins and than all of them. Rise, for though you have suffered setback and hurt, you are not defeated, You possess the resources for triumph. God does not despair of you. You need not despair of yourself.

Rabbi Morris Adler, 20th Century