# Selichot: A time for Reflection and Introspection

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# Background on Selichot:

- Traditions vary if you are a Sephardi or an Ashkenazi Jew.
- Sephardi communities recite *Selichot* (prayers of penitence) from the 1<sup>st</sup> of Elul in the morning. This way there are [approximately] 40 days of *Selichot* prayers recited by the end of Yom Kippur.
- Ashkenazi communities hold a service of *Selichot* on the Saturday evening prior to *Rosh Hashanah*. If *Rosh Hashanah* is less than four days away, then Selichot is held the Saturday prior.
- Today, *Selichot* services generally begin very late in the evening with some aiming to conclude around midnight.
- Mahzor Vitry, an 11th-century work describing the yearly cycle of observances and prayers, tells us that "it is a custom to begin on the Saturday night before *Rosh Hashanah* to rise early to the synagogue, before the sun rises, and beg for mercy."
- Originally, *Selichot* prayers were recited early in the morning, prior to dawn. There was a custom in Eastern Europe that the person in charge of prayers would make the rounds of the village, knocking three times on each door and saying, "Israel, holy people, awake, arouse yourselves and rise for the service of the Creator!" (See below for full text from Maimonides).
- It later became normative to hold the first Selichot service considered the most important at a time more convenient for the general population. Therefore, the Saturday night service was moved forward to midnight. (My Jewish Learning)

### **Texts and Questions for Selichot:**

#### Maimonides reminds us to "wake up"

"[it calls out] 'Awake, awake, O sleeper, from your sleep; O slumberers, arouse yourself from your slumbers; examine your deeds, return in repentance, and remember Your Creator.

The shofar is also said to be our wake-up call. Are there wake up calls that have happened to you this year that could serve as a reminder to pay attention to our actions and prepare for what lies ahead?

One of the central prayers of a Selichot service that is read comes from the Book of Exodus (34:6-7) and is referred to as the <u>13 Attributes of God</u>.

וַנַּעֲבֶּר יְהָוָה וּ עַל־פָּנָיוֹ נַיִּקְרָא יְהָוָה וּ יְהֹּוָה אֵל רַחָּוּם וְחַנְּוּן אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חֶסֶד וָאֱמֶת וּ נֹצֵר חֶסֶדֹ לָאַלָפִים נֹעֵא עָוֹן וָפֶשַׁע : וְחַטָּאָה וְנַקָּה לָא יְנַקָּה פַּקָד וּ עָוֹן אָבוֹת עַל־בָּנִים וְעַל־רְבָּגִי בְנִים עַל־שׁלֵשִׁים וְעַל־רְבַּצִים:



The Lord! The Lord! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, rich in steadfast kindness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment... (Exodus 34:6-7)

\*The kabbalists introduced the custom of also reciting the 13 Attributes of Mercy before taking the Torah from the ark during the three pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot.

How do you view God? If you have a God concept, does this fit with it?

This sounds aspirational. I.e., slow to answer, abundant in kindness. Taking these words personally, could they also be used to describe you? How easy or challenging do you think it is to reach these personality attributes? Has this described how you related to people in the past year?

### Wrapping Yourself in a Tallit for Selichot:

"וַיַּעֲבוֹר ה' עַל פָּנָיו וַיִּקְרָא". אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: אִלְמָלֵא מִקְרָא כָּתוּב, אִי אָפְשָׁר לְאוֹמְרוֹ. מְלַמֵּד שֻׁנִּתְעַטֵּף הַקְּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּהְ הּוֹא לְהֶם "וַיַּצְבּוֹר, וְהֶרְאָה לוֹ לְמִשֶׁה סָדֶר תְּפִלָּה. אָמֵר לוֹ: כָּל וְמֵן שֵׁיִשְׂרָאֵל חוֹטְאין — יַעֲשׁוּ לְפָנֵי כַּסַדֶר הַזָּה וֹאָנִי מוֹחֵל לָהֶם. The verse states: "And the Lord passed by before him and proclaimed" (Exodus 34:6). Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Were it not explicitly written in the verse, it would be impossible to say this, as it would be insulting to God's honor. The verse teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, wrapped Himself in a prayer shawl like a prayer leader and showed Moses the structure of the order of the prayer. He said to him: Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them act before Me in accordance with this order. Let the prayer leader wrap himself in a prayer shawl and publicly recite the thirteen attributes of mercy, and I will forgive them. (Rosh Hashanah 17b)

\*It is customary to wear a Tallit for Selichot even though you generally don't wear one when it's dark out (except for Yom Kippur or when you serve as Shaliach Tzibur, prayer leader...).

Can you imagine God wrapped in a Prayer Shawl?

Do you own a Tallit, or have you worn one before?

Do you think ritual garb helps us enter into a time for prayer?

This Talmudic text teaches that God will forgive us when we repent and try harder. Do you think that forgiveness is important in your life today?

Are there some people that you need to forgive?

Do you need to be forgiven for something? A time when you missed the mark or acted beneath you?

#### As you prepare for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur ask yourself:

- What are 5 regrets that I have from this past year?
- What are 3 relationships that I want to prioritize this year?
- What are 5 hopes I have for the new year?

