

SELICHOS: IT PAYS TO BE 'FIRST IN LINE'

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 560, Selichos. Good Shabbos!

Selichos: It Pays to Be 'First In Line'

The opening poetic composition of the Motzaei Shabbos [Saturday night] Selichos liturgy (the very beginning the pre-Rosh Hashana Selichos) begins with the words "B'Motzaei Menucha Kidamnucha techila" [With the going out of (the day of) rest, we are first to greet you]. The Izbitzer Rebbe notes that the two words "Kidamnucha techila" [we are first to greet you] introduces the entire idea of Selichos.

Why, after all, do we say these penitential prayers 4 to 10 days before Rosh Hashanna? This is not, formally, the "High Holiday period," which technically begins on Rosh Hashanna and runs through Succos. What does Selichos accomplish in this period that is neither -- strictly speaking -- a period of either judgment or atonement?

The Izbitzer Rebbe explains that the idea behind Selichos is that the earlier we get started asking forgiveness from the Almighty, the more successful we will be. The Izbitzer Rebbe cites a proof to this idea from a Biblical incident.

Dovid HaMelech [King David] had a very tumultuous life. One of the indignities that he suffered was having his monarchy overthrown by his son, Avshalom. In one of the most pathetic chapters of the entire Tanach [Shmuel II 15], Dovid HaMelech had to leave Jerusalem with his family and entourage to flee from his son who took over the throne. In this moment of great personal tragedy, Shimee ben Gerah took the opportunity to add insult to injury. He laced into the King and bitterly cursed him. Shimee figured that at this point, Dovid HaMelech's kingship was ended. Shimee, who had a personal grudge against Dovid HaMelech, mercilessly cursed the fleeing monarch.

Dovid HaMelech eventually retook the monarchy and returned to Jerusalem. All the people who sided with the wrong side, and especially Shimee ben Gerah who had cursed the king, were fearful for their lives. In fact they were deserving of death, for in the times of the Biblical monarchy, one who rebelled against the king (mored b'Malchus) was deserving of the death penalty. The Rambam rules

that the King can personally -- without trial -- execute such rebels.

Shimee ben Gerah knew that he was a 'dead man'. So what did he do? "Shimee son of Gera, the Benjamite who was from Bahurim, hastened and went down with the men of Yehudah to greet Dovid HaMelech." [Shmuel II 19:17] He reached the King and told him "...For your servant knows that I have sinned, and here I have come today, first among all the House of Yosef, to come down and greet my master the king." [Shmuel II 19:21].

Shimee emphasized that among the thousands of people who were asking Dovid HaMelech for mechila [forgiveness], he was one of the first. "I know I did wrong. I know I sinned against you. I know that I should lose my life for it. I apologize and I am sorry. I am not even going to wait in line to tell you this. I want to be the FIRST person that has the opportunity to express my remorse."

The Izbitzer Rebbe says that this exactly parallels what we are doing in our pre-Rosh HaShana Selichos.

Strictly speaking, one could wait until Rosh HaShannah to approach the Almighty with these requests. Theoretically, one could even wait until Yom Kippur. There are procrastinators in life -- such as the fellow who always files his (U.S.) income tax forms on the night of April 15th! The Jewish counterpart of the April 15th tax filers are those who wait until Neilah (the final Yom Kippur prayer) to make their sincere request to the Almighty for Forgiveness and for Mercy.

The difference is that the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) does not care if the tax forms are filed on February 1st or just before midnight on the 15th of April. As long as the envelope is post-marked by April 15th, it is all the same to the IRS. However, if one is wise enough and spiritually sensitive enough to try to "catch the Master of the Universe early" -- to be "first in line" -- that does make a difference! Even if one's sins are as incriminating as those of Shimee ben Gerah against Dovid HaMelech -- humiliating and abusing the king -- nevertheless it pays to be "first in line."

Shimee ben Gerah should have been a 'dead man'. But his haste to see the king paid off. Dovid HaMelech did not kill him. He did not even direct his son Shlomo [Solomon] to kill him. Why did this wicked person merit such merciful treatment? Shimee ben Gerah merited merciful treatment because he knew the secret of "coming first" to plea for his life.

This year, there are eighteen days between the start of Selichos (on the night following September 24th) and Yom Kippur (October 13th). One might ask -- why do we need to recite Selichos this Motzai Shabbos? What is the rush? We have plenty of time!

But there is significance to coming early. This tone of Selichos is set with the opening words of the first Selicha-poem recited on the Motzaei Shabbos when we begin to recite the first penitential prayers: "B'Motzaei Menucha kidamnucha techila." At the conclusion of resting, we are first in line to greet you.

It is all a matter of showing up early to sincerely say and demonstrate "I am sorry!" Let us be like

Shimee ben Gerah regarding this one matter of showing up first, rather than waiting for the masses to come and present their requests for forgiveness.

The Kohen Who Will Be In Those Days

Parshas Ki Savo contains the mitzvah of the Declaration accompanying the bringing of the First Fruits (Mikra Bikurim). The verse [pasuk] says: "You shall come to the Kohen who will be in those days and you shall say to him, 'I declare today to Hashem, your G-d, that I have come to the land that Hashem swore to our forefathers to give us.'" [Devorim 26:3]

Rashi on this pasuk makes a comment that he also makes elsewhere in a similar vein: Rashi is bothered by the expression "the Kohen who will be in your days." (Obviously one would not go to a Kohen who was not living in his time!) Rashi explains: "You have none but the Kohen in your days, as he is."

Rashi makes a similar comment on the earlier pasuk "You shall come... to the judge who will be in those days..." [Devorim 17:9]: "Even if he is not like the other judges who were before him, you must listen to him. You have none but the judge who is in your days." This is the idea of 'Yiftach in his generation was like Shmuel in his generation.'

Rashi's words seem to make more sense in the earlier pasuk (in Parshas Shoftim). When one goes to a judge, he needs to seek out a Talmid Chochom, a scholar. It makes sense that one would think he requires the greatest personality of intellect and knowledge to properly adjudicate a dispute (Din Torah). A person might understandably be tempted to say, "The people today are not of the caliber of the people who once were -- even a generation ago!"

One of the ubiquitous comments made at the Siyum HaShas every seven years is - "Look who is no longer with us! Remember who graced our presence at the last Siyum Hashas!" This is the nature of the "yeridas hadoros" [decrease in generations]. Therefore, regarding judges, we understand that Rashi had to remind us "We can only look to the judges who are before us in our generation."

However, a Kohen is a Kohen! Who cares about his level of scholarship? As long as he has the proper lineage, he meets our needs! We are not asking him to rule on any halachic matters (pasken shaylos). All he needs to do is accept the Bikkurim fruits. What is Rashi pointing out to us?

I saw an interesting interpretation in the Shemen HaTov by Rabbi Dov Weinberger: Many times, we are asked to do acts of kindness and to give charity. Most of us like to give charity to nice, neat, clean, presentable individuals. However, when we are asked to give donations to unkempt, scraggly looking individuals, we do not get that same feeling of satisfaction. This is particularly true regarding the mitzvah of Hachnasas Orchim. One can host a truly enjoyable guest or one can host a guest whereby he feels that he is doing a real chessed [kindness] just to have the guest sit at his table.

The pasuk is teaching that if all the Kohanim in our time and place are not like Kohanim used to be -- they are not elegantly dressed, they do not carry themselves with the full dignity of their office -- it does not make a difference! Regarding tzedakah and chessed, the less appealing the person, the bigger the mitzvah. The less enjoyable the performance of the mitzvah, the better it is for the one performing the mitzvah (assuming of course the recipient is truly worthy of the kindness and charity).

Rav Pam once mentioned that his father was a Rav in Europe. The custom on Friday evening was that poor people would gather in the back of the shul. It was the job of the Gabbai to circulate and find places for all the poor people to eat. As is always the case, certain 'guests' were more in demand than others. Some of the people looked nice; they looked presentable and honorable (b'kavodik). The Gabbai always had an easy time finding places for the decent looking people.

However, it was not so easy to place the people who looked like "schleppers". Who wanted to have such a person at his table? When the Gabbai couldn't find a place anywhere else -- for the worst looking person in shul -- the senior Rav Pam would have the 'privilege' of hosting him.

One time, the Gabbai apologized to Rav Pam's father saying, "I'm sorry I have to give you this guest, but I couldn't find anywhere else for him." Rav Pam's father told the Gabbai: "On the contrary. I am not looking for a chavrusa. I am looking for a person who can eat a meal. This guy looks like he can really handle a meal!"

This is what the pasuk is teaching: "You shall come to the Kohen who will be there in those days." He might not be the greatest Kohen who ever lived. He may be an ignoramus. He may not live up to the standards of past Kohanim. That is not what we are looking for in dispensing the priestly gifts: We give Bikurim to the Kohen in need who is before us in our generation.

The Blessing Of Sitting Back And Being Able To Enjoy One's Blessings

The pasuk in this week's parsha says, "And all these blessings will come upon you and they will overtake you (v'heeseegucha)" [Devarim 28:2]. There are many interpretations and insights regarding the meaning of the word "v'heeseegucha" in the context of the blessings mentioned in this chapter. In previous years we have quoted several of them.

I recently came across a new interpretation: There are people who become very successful financially. They earn a significant amount of money. Unfortunately many times -- if not most of the time -- these people do not know when to stop. They just keep on going and going and going. They have made enough money for themselves and their children and their grandchildren. This is the nature of mankind -- "One who loves money will not be satisfied that he has enough money" [Koheles 5:9].

Our Sages say that every person dies without having achieved even half of his material desires [Koheles Rabbah 1:13]. Therefore, this pasuk is teaching that all these blessings will come upon us

and we will have time to enjoy them. We won't be so preoccupied with another deal and another investment and another venture that we won't have time to sit back and enjoy what we have already achieved. The blessing of v'heeseegucha is that our other blessings should be satisfactory to us. We should be able to say "I've had enough."

We thank G-d after eating a meal. We come to the point where we say "I'm full" and we stop eating. One's stomach can only take so much. If people continue eating more and more, there comes a point when they will simply regurgitate. However, money is different. We never become "full". Therefore, we are blessed with the added dimension of v'heeseegucha, so that just like our appetite has limits, our desire for wealth should reach a point where we feel that we have already achieved all that we need to achieve.

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