SELICHOS 1987
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

We are gathered here together tonight to say Selichos. This begins the High Holiday season. The rabbis tell us the reason we say Selichos is because on all the other holidays it says "V'Heecraftem Olah - you should bring a burnt offering" and on Rosh Hashonna is says "V'Haseesim Olah - you should make yourselves the burnt offering. In order for an offering to be brought to the Temple it had to be inspected for four days before it was offered in order to make sure it had no defects in it. We, too, have to examine ourselves four days also before we bring ourselves as the offering on Rosh Hashonna.

The question can be asked, though, why do we always begin on Saturday night? Why don't we begin at another time? After all, sometimes we begin Selichos many more than four days before Rosh Hashonna. This year we do begin four days before Rosh Hashonna, but if Rosh Hashonna came earlier in the week we would start the previous Saturday night. Why is it that we always start Selichos on Shabbos? What's more, when we look at the Selichos prayers, themselves, why is the focus of the prayers, "Adoshem Adoshem El Rachum", on "G-d, G-d, Who is gracious and compassionate"? Why should that be one of the major focuses of Selichos? What's more, why do we say "Don't cast us away before You. Let the spirit of Your Holiness, do not take from us." Why should we mention these prayers on Selichos, and why are they actually the focal point of the Selichos? What's more, we have a prayer that we say in Selichos which sees to be incomprehensible. We say, "Ashan Mikolom - We have trespassed more than any other peoples. We are bowed down by shame more than any other generation." How can we say such a prayer? In Judaism we know we are supposed to tell the truth. We are not supposed to lie. We have a positive relationship with G-d. We say we are supposed to have dignity and self-respect when we stand before G-d. We are, after all, G-d's junior partner in creation. G-d has created the world maybe 95%, 97%, 98% complete and

He has asked us to help Him complete this job of perfecting the world. That is why, too, we do not bow down in services. You are not allowed to bow down in services. The only place the Jews could bow down was in the Temple, itself, and even on Rosh Hashonna and Yom Kippur when many people bowed down during certain prayers, the rabbis did not like it because we are not supposed to bow down when we pray. They arranged for us to do it by finding a technicality, a loophole, that if you do not bow down directly on the ground, on a stone floor, if you have a mat or rug in front, then it would be all right. Also, when we say our prayers, when we say "Baruch Atah" and we bow when we come to "Adoshem", we just bow our head. When we come to Adoshem we must stand up straight because G-d causes us to stand up straight. Therefore, how can we say such a prayer?

It is true that we learn that when the Torah was given to the Jewish people it was not given on Mount Lebanon but was given on Mount Sinai, because we are not to be haughty and arrogant, and Mount Sinai is a little mountain, not a big mountain like Mount Herman or Mount Lebanon. Yet, if we are to be so humble, why wasn't the Torah given in a valley? The rabbis say we are not supposed to be that humble. We are not supposed to be arrogant and haughty, but we are supposed to have self-respect and dignity. Every Jew is a prince or princess, so how can we say such a prayer that we have trespassed more than any other peoples? We know that it is not so. We have committed a Holocaust or taken people, as was done in the Crusades, and put them in their houses of worship and burned them alive. We have not initiated an Inquisition. How can we say such a prayer?

Perhaps the answer to these questions can be found in the very first paragraph of the Selichos where we say "Kadaleem Rasheem Dofachnee Losecha - Like the poor and needy creatures we knock on Your door - Noatsheevainu L'Chum V'Necha - G-d, don't send us away, cast us aways empty from before You." The whole theme of Selichos

is that we want to establish a relationship with G-d. We do not want to be cut off. We want to be made pure. That is the reason this is called Selichos and not Mechilas because you know that there are two consequences of committing a sin, one you Mechaiyev and one you Metame. Every time we commit a sin we become obligated for punishment. If you insult someone in public they are going to pay you back. For every action there is an opposite reaction. What's more, we also feel bad about ourselves. We feel guilty. We do not feel good about ourselves. We, in effect, defile ourselves, we Metame ourselves. When we pray on the High Holidays we ask not just that we should be forgiven and should not be punished, but we ask that we should be made to feel pure. Therefore, on Yom Kippur we say "Slach Lono Mechal Lono Chapear Lono - G-d, first make us pure. We ask for the maximum. G-d, if You cannot make us pure, at least Mechalono, free us from punishment, and G-d, if You cannot free us from punishment, at least accept our restitution, Kapear Lono, so our punishment should not be so hard." On this night we ask for the maximum. We ask for Selicha. We want to be made pure. We want to be able to have a relationship with G-d and man.

That is, of course, what Teshuva. Teshuva does not just mean to be sorry for the sins you have committed. Teshuva also means that you have not lived up to your potential, and you are sorry you have not lived up to your potential, not that you have done anything wrong, but you have not done everything you could have to help others, everything you could to follow the Torah way of life. Teshuva also means to return to the source, not to be lonely. On this day when we say Selichos we do not want to be lonely. Loneliness is the worst curse that could possibly happen to us. We want to be able to establish a relationship with G-d and with man, with ourselves. We do not want to be ashamed of ourselves. We know one of the main consequences of committing a sin is to feel disgusted with yourself, not to feel holy and pure with yourself. That, of course, is what happened to Odom HaReeshom.

We know that Rosh Hashonna, itself, is not the creation of the world. Everyone agrees it is not the creation of the world. Even those who want to say that when it says one day and two day and three days of creation in the chapter of the Torah that it really means one day or two days, yet they will all agree that Rosh Hashonna happened on the sixth day, that the 25th of Elul was the day the world was created. Of course, the Kabalah says the world is billions of years old. Rosh Hashonna celebrates the creation of man as we know him today. This is the day man was created and sinned and was judged. Therefore, this became the day of judgement. Adam and Eve were judged on this day. The rabbis tell us that originally Adam was man and woman, hermaphrodite, that he was lonely and could not stand his loneliness, and, therefore, G-d divided him in two. The rabbis ask, why was Adam lonely? After all, he had the angels to talk to. The angels would do anything for him. That was true, but man, Adam, could not do anything for them. He was not needed. They did not need anything from him. Therefore, he was lonely. He had to be able to connect to others, contribute to them, to help them. To make sure his contributions were worthwhile he had to be needed. Loneliness means you are not needed. Adam needed Eve and Eve needed Adam, and, therefore, their loneliness was dissipated. When they sinned in the Garden of Eden, what is the first thing they did? "And Adam and his wife hid from before G-d in the midst of the trees of the garden." He severed his relationship. When we do Avairas, when we do things beneath human dignity, we sever our relationship with G-d and with man. G-d, then, was calling to him and saying, "Where are you? Why have you severed your relationship with Me? Where have you gone? Why are you hiding?" The man was ashamed of himself. He did not feel pure within himself, and, therefore, he was hiding. He said he was ashamed and disappointed in himself. That, of course, is a terrible thing when people are ashamed and disappointed in themselves.

When we come to this High Holiday season what we want to do is reconnect with G-d and with others and with ourselves. We want to be able to look in the mirror and not be ashamed of ourselves. Adam had to reconnect with G-d in order to feel pure about himself. The same thing happened to Cain, but Cain dealt with it better than Adam, because when Adam was confronted with sin, what did he do? He blamed the sin on his wife. He said, "It's not my fault. It is the woman who You gave me. She is the one who caused me to sin. She is the one who caused me to do all this." The woman, too, blamed the serpent. Many times when we are confronted with our sin we react in a negative way. We become angry. It is not our fault. It is someone else's fault, or else we become very angry at ourselves and become very depressed, but we do not usually take the blame. We do not say, "I am sorry. I won't do it again." We do not do that, and, because we do not do that, the guilt mounts and harms us physically and mentally and destroys us. Cain did differently. After he killed Abel he could say, "It's not my fault. I did not know anything about killing. It is true I meant to hurt my brother, but there was never murder before me. I did not know this would kill him." But Cain did not do it. He said, "Great is my sin from bearing. I can't stand my sin. G-d, forgive me." He did not make excuses, and, therefore, G-d gave him the mark of Cain, which in Jewish tradition is a positive thing and not a negative thing. It means that from now on he could re-establish with G-d and with man and with himself.

That is, of course, what we all want to do on this High Holiday season. We just do not want Mechila, that our punishment should be foregone. Of course, we would like that, too, and that is a minimum requirement. We hope that if we insulted somebody in public that he would forgive us. Of course, the best way is to apologize to that person in public, too, but we hope you will forgive us. But more than that, we have to feel pure with ourselves. We have to say that we are

people who we can be proud of, that we can look at ourselves in the mirror and can be proud of ourselves. So many people are so depressed. This happens especially to teenagers today because they are not proud of themselves. They are ashamed and disappointed in themselves. That is, of course, what "Boshaish - shame" means. Another meaning for shame means that you are disappointed in yourself. That is why we say, "A gracious G-d, compassionate, slow in anger." Why do we repeat the name G-d? Because G-d is still our G-d before we sin and after we sin. We can re-establish our relationship to Him. G-d is calling to us, "Where are you? Return. Return."

That, of course, is why, too, one of the main prayers of the Selichos is the Shma Kolaynu. "G-d, don't cast us from before You. Your Holy Spirit, do not take from us. G-d, we want to have a relationship with You. We do not want to be lonely. We do not want to be cut off." The worst possible thing that can happen to a person is to be put in solitary confinement. We need relationships with others in order to grow. In order for us to be complete we have to be needed. We have to give. We cannot do it if we are cut off. Being cut off depresses us and destroys us and makes us angry. "G-d, let us be connected once again to You."

That's why, too, when we say these prayers on of the most important of them is, "To listen to the joy and to the prayer." Why should we say "to the joy"? G-d, listen to our prayers. Why do we have to say "listen to the joy"? This is in the same prayer where we mention that we always start Selichos on Shabbos. "At the close of the Shabbos we come before You first." Why do we come to G-d before Him Motzi Shabbos, when Shabbos is over? Because we remind G-d that we have just seen Shabbos. We have just seen the way things should and could be if we would work a little bit harder. We have had a taste, so to speak, of Gan Eden. We

have within us the capacity, the potential to be good. We know we can be good. We do not have to be depressing and depressed creatures. G-d, look at us and remember us for good. G-d, remember that we can be people who give joy to others and give joy to You. That is the proof that you are relating to others when you can give them joy and when you know you are accepted for yourself. That is why we begin on Shabbos because we say, "See, G-d, we know what it is. We know how to reach up to our potential. We know that we can be pure and good. We have felt that joy before, and we can work to achieve all throughout our life." Therefore, we start Selichos always on Motzi Shabbos.

Why, though, do we say we have trespassed more than all peoples, we are bound by shame more than any other generations? The reason is not because we really are worse than all peoples. After all, we did not make the Holocaust or burn people in their houses of worship or start an Inquisition. The reason is because we have had a special relationship with G-d from Sinai. We know what it is to have this beautiful relationship. Yet, many times we pull away from it. We do things which soil us and soil this relationship. We become not only obligated for punishment but become inside impure and vile. We know better. After all, if a person never had a diamond cannot be blamed if he does not appreciate its worth, but a person who has had a diamond and has treasured it and throws it in a dung heap, that person can be judged and blamed, because that person should have known better. That is what we say. We have had this relationship. We can reclaim it. We can learn more Torah, do more Mitzvahs, be better people. All we have to do is turn to You, G-d. You have promised to accept us once again if we will turn to You with sincerity and a full heart. G-d, make us pure. Give us Selicha. Let us now only be free from punishment. Let us also feel pure inside because we will not be alienated and lonely and will have a relationship with You and with others and with ourselves. Because of this relationship may we merit a

good year. That is what a good year means: the opportunity to have a relationship with You and with others and to feel needed.