SELICHOS 1988
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We are all gathered here today to say Selichos. According to the Ashkenazic rite, we are supposed to say Selichos at least four days before Rosh Hashonna. In the Torah when it mentions sacrifices for all the other holidays, it says, "And you shall offer an Olah." ON Rosh Hashonna it says, "And you should make a Olah," which the rabbis interpret to mean that you should make yourself an Olah, which means that just as a sacrifice has to be looked at four days before it is offered to make sure it has no defects, so we, too, should look at ourselves four days before the holidays to make sure that we have no defect. Therefore, if Rosh Hashonna starts at the end of the week we start the Shabbos before Rosh Hashonna. If Rosh Hashonna starts on a Monday or Tuesday, as this year, we then start the week before, not the Shabbos but the Shabbos of the week before like we are doing this year. Why should we do that? If the reason why we say Selichos is because we should examine ourselves four days before Rosh Hashonna, why don't we just start four day before Rosh Hashonna? Start on a Wednesday or Thursday. Don't start on Saturday before. Why should we start on Saturday? What's more, in the special prayer that we say, "that Almighty G-d Who sits on the throne of mercy, Who governs with kindness and pardons the iniquitiews of the people," we say, "He caused to pass away the first and the first." What does that mean? He forgives the first and the first, increases pardon to sinners and forgiveness to transgressors, but what does is this "Navi Reeshon Reeshon"? What does that mean? Furthermore, we say in our prayers that not only we have sinned but our forefathers have sinned. "We and our fathers have sinned." How can we say such a thing, that our fathers have sinned? Why do we bring them into the picture? Furthermore, when we say the special Peezmon for the day, whose refrain is, "to listen to the joy and to the prayer", why do we mention "listen to the joy"? Reena means joys. Why should we say "listen to the joy and and to the prayer"? We should just say "listen to our prayer".

It seems to me that the answers to these questions are found in a very beautiful Hassidic story. It is actually, I believe, even a Medrash. We learn how one day a king called his servant to his side and he said, "I have this vault. In this vault is gold, silver, and precious jewels. I am giving you a key to the inner door of the vault so that any time you want to enter this vault, anytime you have need of the jewelry and the gold and the silver that is in this vault, you can open the door." The servant looked at the king and said, "But how is that possible? This vault has two doors. It has an outer door and an inner door, and although you have given me the key to the inner door, how can I get to the inner door? I have no key for the outer door." The king looked at him and said, "The key to the outer door is readily avaiable. I am sure that when you want to enter the vault you will be able to open both doors." That is why we say on Selichos in the very first paragraph, "Like the poor and mean creatures we knock on your doors," plural. "We are knocking on your doors, Merciful and Gracious. Don't turn us back empty."

When it comes to leading the decent and the moral and the good life, there are two doors. G-d has given us the key to the inner door. He has given us mitzvahs. He has given us the Torah, but that is the key to the inner door. We also need another key. We need a key to the outer door. The outer door is sensitivity to other people. We have to know how to be sensitive to them. We have to know how to read them properly. We have to know how to conduct ourselves with respect and with dignity and with humbleness. We say, "Everything is in the hands of heaven except Yerushamaya." There are many people who do mitzvahs, but they do mitzvahs forgetting about the first door. People have come me and given me charitable donations, but how did they receive their money? By cheating their customers. By acting in a terrible and deceitful way to their partners. By cheating

the government. They have amassed their fortune through all sorts of chicanery. They cannot come now and claim that their mitzvah is pure and whole because, although they may have not broken any rules legally, they have come pretty close to the line. They have failed to abide by Yerushamayim, by the moral code by which we should all behave. Even people who work for the shuls sometimes indulge in tactics, even though they think it is for the good of the shul, which are reprehensible. When it comes to being close to G-d, to opening the vault and coming close to Him, we have to open the outer door, too.

That is, of course, what we are talking about here. That is what we are talking about on this holiday: how to get close to G-d. Teshuva means a turning. We want to turn back to G-d. One of the worst possible things in this world is to be alone, to be alienated. Teshuva causes us to be reattached to G-d, to be reattached to our fellow human beings. One of the worst possible punishments that can come upon a person is to be put in solitary confinement. In order to endure that solitary confinement people have to feel that they are close at least to G-d. That was how Nathan Scharansky was able to survive. He was a man who had no Jewish education whatsoever, but he knew how to be close to G-d. He had the key to the outer door. Later on, if he had the key to the outer door he could get the key to the inner door because he wanted to be close to G-d. The Shoma is Yours, G-d. We want to live a decent and a beautiful life and then the body will do Your mitzvahs. That, of course, is what we must do. We have to open both doors, the inner door and the outer door.

That is why we read in the Torah portion Nitzavim twice, "And you shall turn to your heart," and then it says, "and then you will turn to the Lord your G-d." There are two processes that are involved in doing Teshuva.

One is to turn to your heart, not necessarily to turn to G-d but to turn to your heart to be a sensitive, kind, caring, compassionate individual. You can do mitzvahs and be hard hearted and mean. You forget about the outer door. Then after you have returned to your heart, to sensitivity, then you return to the Lord your G-d, and then you can assume the mitzvahs and you will do them in a correct and proper way. That is why also it says, "And G-d will turn back your captivity." First G-d turns back your captivity and He does mercy upon you, and then He returns and gathers you from all the nations." First when a person is alienated, when a person feels that he is in prison and jail and cannot make contact with other people, it is terrible, but G-d says, "I will return your captivity." What does captivity mean? When you are in chains, when you cannot make contact with people, when you are overwhelmed by your problems, where you have nobody to share them with, where you have this existential loneliness which is all embracing which, of course, leads many young people who have not found themselves and found their niche in life to commit suicide. That's why the second leading cause of death among teenagers is suicide. We must turn, get the key to that outer door, and turn back to G-d, turn back to our better things, to our better nature into sensitive, caring human beings who will not do things that will besmirch our image, who will not try to rationalize acts that are beneath us, and then we are ready to observe mitzvahs the proper way. Of course, it is good to observe mitzvahs even if we do not have the outer key, because it will bring us back to the first door.

That's why we say, "We have sinned and our forefathers have sinned." How have our forefathers sinned? After all, they did more mitzvahs than we have in our generation. I remember in yeshiva the most heartbreaking Selichos was said there among the Reuben. What did the Reuben do wrong? They did

steal. They did not murder, but they knew that they did not live up to their potential, that they had not done all the mitzvahs in the right way, that they had not been as sensitive and caring as they could have been. They could have improved. They could have responded. Teshuva also means to respond, to respond to the challenges at hand even better. They were sensitive to the fact that we must do the mitzvahs. They are our treasure. They are our link to G-d. They cause us to feel life's meaning and purpose, but they must also be done in a caring and compassionate and sensitive way. Sometimes they slipped. Today most Jews do not even know that they have not done mitzvahs in a sensitive way. They do not even know about mitzvahs. They are lost. In the Torah portion Vayelech we learn that when we decide we do not need G-d, G-d says, "Okay, I'll withdraw. You take care of the world the way you want to take care of it." Of course, then we make a mess of it. It is like a supervisor at a playground. The kids say, "We do not need you here," so the supervisor leaves. Then they fight and gang up on each other and cannot play games, and then they want the supervisor back. In our case G-d has left and most of the Jews do not even know He has left, but they know something is wrong so they get involved in diets and cults and fads and unnecessary things. They even divorce their wives and abandon their children. They do not know that if they will try to re-establish their link with G-d, if they will turn that their problems will be eased. There are two keys, and the Jews today do not have keys for either door it seems. G-d has told us that He is waiting for us to turn. That is why it says, "I will remove the first first." G-d tell us to turn. Try to do mitzvahs. I will remove the impediments, the first one and the first one. If the difficulty is that you are not sensitive, I will help you realize that. I will remove, I will forgive, I will wipe away that insensitivity, and you will be able to do mitzvahs with love and compassion and care. That is also why it says, "listen to

the joy and then the prayer." G-d, we have found the first key. We have a joyful, optimistic, compassionate view of the world. Yes, G-d, listen to our joy and then to our prayer. Let us come and reattach ourselves to you. Let us find that treasure of life of knowing that we are important and that you are counting on us, and that we need to be attached to You and to others.

That is, of course, too, why I believe we start Selichos on Saturday night because Shabbos can be observed 100% without feeling what Shabbos is all about. You can observe everything on Shabbos and not violate any of the rules of Shabbos but not have a satifying Shabbos because you do not learn Torah with your children. You are not engaged in enjoying your family and sitting with them. You do not feel the spirit of Shabbos at all. You have not violated Shabbos. You kept the mitzvah of Shabbos, but you forgot about the spirit of Shabbos. You need both. You cannot have one without the other, and, therefore, G-d reminds us that just as Shabbos is just not working and coming to shul, Shabbos is much more. It is an attitude. It is being man the appreciator, man appreciating his family, man singing Zemiros, man learning Torah. If you do these positive things you will have a real Shabbos. You will have a foretaste of Gan Eden. This is the same with all the mitzvahs. Not only must we do the mitzvahs, but we must do them in a caring and compassionate and loving way. If we do that, then our life will truly be blessed and we will be worthy of a wonderful year.

The rabbis taught us, in fact it says so in the Torah, itself, that punishments came upon the Jewish people not because they did not do mitzvahs, but they did not do them joyfully. Let us hope and pray that this year we will not only have the key to the inner door but also the key to the outer door, that we will do mitzvahs in a joyful and sensitive way so that we

will truly be worthy of a Shana Tova.