SELICHOT 2002

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

Tonight we say Selichot. We call these prayers Selichot and not Mechilos or Kaporas. We know that when we sin, when we do things beneath us, we do three things. We make ourselves liable for restitution, which is why we need Kaporas. After all, we could have destroyed a person's property or reputation. We make ourselves liable for punishment, which is why we need Mechilos, and we also become impure, which is why we need Selichot. We aim for the top. We just do not aim to be able to make restitution or to avoid punishment, but we also ask G-d to make us pure, to allow us to continue to have a relationship with Him.

That's why in the Psalm, the Dovid Ori, which we say starting from the first of Elul until Shmini Atzeres, we say Achas Shealti Me Hashem. There is one thing we ask from G-d, and that is to make us pure, to be able to sit in the house of the Lord all the days of my life. It is true that this Psalm starts out with, "G-d, My light, " which refers to Rosh Hashonna, "and my salvation," which refers to Yom Kippur, " and in it we learn that G-d should hide me in His succah, but the meaning of this Psalm is that we want to be able to maintain a relationship with G-d, that we want to be made to feel that we are

pure.

In the Ashkenazie tradition, we always start Selichot four days before Rosh Hashonna because when it talks about the sacrifices for all the holidays, it says, "And you shall offer a sacrifice," but when it talks about Rosh Hashonna, it says, "You shall make yourself a sacrifice." We have to examine ourselves so that we are worthy, so to speak, to be in G-d's presence, as the sacrifices were. We open the Selichot by saying, "How can we plead before Thee? What can we say? How can we justify ourselves? Let us search our paths and examine and return to You."

We know that there are three types of sins. There is a Chait, which means that we are missing the ark. We mean to do well, but we missed the mark. We hurt somebody terribly. I remember once at a meeting they talked about giving a certain person a position, and although I almost never say things like this, I said, "How can you do it? That man is stupid." One of the committee members looked at me and said, "That man is my father." I did not mean to hurt him, but I know that I hurt him terribly. I was really trying to give an honest evaluation of the person's abilities. I, however, should never have used that word, stupid, and been more tactful.

We all, many times, miss the mark. We mean well, but it comes out terrible. That usually is what happens in a shul where many times members try only to do good things, but different members want conflicting things, and they end up in needless arguments.

We also know that there is another type of sin, or Avon. This sin we do on purpose, but not because we think we are right. We do it because we are weak. The girl was too pretty. The money was too tempting. We know we did wrong, and we resolve never to do it again.

There is also a third type of sin called Peshah in which we purposefully, rebelliously flaunt our contempt for moral principles or for Jewish law. It is like in the last generation where Jewish socialists would eat ham in front of the synagogue on Yom Kippur or have Yom Kippur dances, or where people would purposefully on stage do certain sex acts which were in contravention to all good taste and morality. We need to feel pure from all these different acts.

That's why we say when we open the Selichot prayers, "How can we justify

ourselves? Let us search our paths and examine and return to You." What does it mean, search our paths and examine and return to You? The prayer continues by saying, "Not with deeds do we come before You. We come like poor and needy creatures knocking at Your doors." Many times our deeds have not been what they should have been, and that's why we must search our paths.

It was once asked of a Chassidic rabbi, who is considered a more righteous individual? A person who is on the 80th rung or the 20th rung of the ladder rising up to spirituality The Chassidic rebbe answered that it depends upon what direction the person is going. If a person who is on the 80th rung used to be on the 90th rung and is now making his way down, then he is not as spiritual as the one who is on the 20th and used to be on the 15th and is making his way up. The important thing is, what direction are you going? We, first of all, say that we should search our paths. Is our direction positive or not? Are we trying to add to our sensitivity and doing our good deeds or not? There are many people I know who at one point in their life were very religious, sensitive people, but who, because of circumstances and their own ambitions, have now turned into self-absorbed, selfish people who do not care about anybody but themselves. We must first search our direction and then

we examine our deeds. We do not go before G-d just with our deeds. We come before Him with our sense of direction, too. That's why it says like poor and needy creatures do we knock on Your doors.

What is the difference between poor and needy creatures? They tell the story of a shammus in a shul who was very poor. He hardly could put food on the table. In that same town there was a rich widow who was all alone who never had children and had no family. One was poor and the other was needy for relationships. The rabbi was able to match the shammus with the widow. There are some people who are very poor in mitzvahs. They do not know how to do the mitzvahs. They are ignorant or much of Judaism, but their direction is right. There are others who are filled with mitzvahs, but they are stagnant. They are not growing spiritually, or they are headed in the wrong direction. There are two doors that G-d has in front of us.

There is a beautiful Medrash which says that G-d gives us all the key to the inner door, but we must on our own obtain the key for the outer door. G-d is there to help us. That's why in this opening prayer it says, "Your right hand is extended to receive all who want to return." Some of us have lost our direction, and others of us want more spirituality, but we do not know how.

The outer door is our direction. G-d said, "I have given you the Torah. It is there. You can learn, but you have to want to climb the spiritual ladder." We know that Judaism there are 613 commandments. The numerical value of the letters in the word Torah equal 611. There are two commandments that are dependent upon us. They are the two that we heard at Sinai. Do we want to engage in a spiritual dialogue with G-d? Do we want to take the direction of spirituality? If we do, G-d is there to help us. We can rise high on the rungs of the ladder. We can aim high.

That's why this is called Selichot and not Mechilos or Kaporas because we want to feel pure, to overcome the three kinds of sins: Chai, Avon, Peshah. We want to establish a close relationship with G-d. Rav Cook asks, what does Teshuva do anyway? Most people are filled with enthusiasm to do better in the coming year, but after a few days or weeks, maybe even after Yom Kippur, they backslide. Rav Cook said that Teshuva is still important even if people backslide because it shows they still want to go in the right direction. It may be that there are impediments in their path which are hard for them to overcome, but they still want to go in the right direction. Eventually, they or their children will be able to do so. Let us all hope and pray that we will all go in the right direction so the Mashiach will come

quickly in our day. Amen.