SELICHOS 1996
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In a few moments we will be saying Selichos. We always say the first Selicos at midnight on Saturday night. It seems strange that we should do this since, according to the Kaballah, night is the time of judgment. Morning is the time of mercy. Why is it that we should say the Selichos in the evening the first night? Why should we say it especially Motzi Shabbos? After all, we only have to say it four days before Rosh Hashonna. Why don't we just count four days before Rosh Hashonna and start? Why do we always say Selichos the first time on Motzi Shabbos, and why do we say it at night?

Perhaps the answer to this question can be found in the fact that when we left Egypt we left at midnight. The Angel of Death came through Egypt at approximately midnight and the Jewish people were then ordered to leave Egypt by Pharaoh. We say in our prayers on Selichos, "Forgive us, please, for the sin of this nation like the greatness of Your kindness as You have forgiven this nation from Egypt until now." So we remind ourselves that we were in Egypt and we left Egypt, and when we left Egypt we left a little after midnight. We left our homes and began to congregate so that the next morning we actually left Egypt in mass.

We also know that all the Jewish holidays start on the evening. They do not start in the morning. The reason for this, many rabbis say, is to teach us about hope. Hope is the most important thing in this life. We are going to go through bad periods. We are going to go through night, but every night opens up into the day. We are not concerned that many times the day is followed by the night. What we are more concerned with is that when we are in the middle of night, in the middle of problems, we should always realize that there is hope

and that there will be a new day. That is what we are talking about here on Selichos, about how we are mired in the darkness of our own trangressions and that many times many of us would give up. We would say that it is not important for us to try to change because we just cannot change. It is too hard to change, but Selichos, being at midnight in the first Selichos, teaches us that we should never feel that way. We should never give up on ourselves. There is always hope. There is hope in the tzores that the Jewish people have found themselves in throughout the generations, and we now see with the rebirth of Israel, that the faith of our ancestors was fully justified and that there is hope for our personal conditions. None of us should ever feel that we cannot change. No one should ever feel that they cannot be better because the night is always followed by the day, and our holidays always come out of the night. The Egyptian slavery was a terrible slavery. So many children were killed. So many people were humiliated and oppressed, but, yet, out of that slavery we came into the light and received the Torah.

That is also why when we say the main pizmo from this holiday we say, "to listen to the joy and to the prayer". What does it mean listen to the joy? Joy means we are filled with hope. We have optimism. In order to be a Jew you have to be optimistic. G-d, we are optimistic about our future. G-d, we know that we can change. G-d, listen to our joy. G-d, listen to our optimistic appraisal of our future. We have hope. Things can be different. We will change, although we know that it is hard to change.

In fact, in the Torah portion Nitzavim, which we have just completed reading, we talk about two types of teshuva. It says, "And you shall turn to your heart and all the nations which G-d your G-d shall push you there." Then it says, "And you shall return to the Lord your G-d." First you are turning to your heart and then you are turning to the Lord your G-d, and you shall listen to His voice. Then it says, "And G-d shall turn your captivity and have mercy upon you, and then He will return again a second time and gather you from all the nations." Now, of course, this is just a correct description of what happens to people when they are mired in their own sins, when they do not realize that they are making a mistake, but they are uneasy. In fact, G-d has told us in the Torah portion Vayelech that, "I will hide My face". If the people of the world do not need G-d or want G-d, G-d says okay. You can rule your affairs the way you want to rule them. Unfortunately, every time we do that we get into a lot of trouble. Every time we tell G-d we do not need Him and He withdraws terrible evils break out into the world. Many times we feel uneasy. We know that something is wrong. We have told G-d to leave but we do not even know what is wrong. We do not know that it is because of our lack of having G-d in our lives that we are feeling this way. That is why there is the expression G-d is hidden. He hides Himself and then we do not even know what is wrong. We do not even know where to turn. If we turn to Hashem He would help us and we would feel better, but we do not know to do that. We do not know what is wrong. Therefore, so many people turn to fads and other causes in order to try to still the alienation or the bad feeling they suffer from. Therefore, the first aspect of teshuva is to turn to your heart. Are you really happy with what you are doing? Is it really

the right thing you are doing? Then afterwards when you feel what it is that something is wrong, then G-d will turn and help you and then you will turn to G-d. This is the second stage. This is similar to smoking. We all know that smoking is a terrible habit and can kill you, but it won't kill you right away. It will kill you down the road, maybe 20, 30, 40 years from now, but smoking will kill you statistically. There may be one or two people who smoke and can reach the age of 100 but most people cannot do that. Most people will shorten their lives considerably by smoking, but smoking is like the evil that we do. G-d has told us that when we do good we are blessed immediately, and that is why the word asher is used when it refers to the good things that will happen to us when we follow G-d's command. We will not become multimillionaires or maybe not great successes but we will have better interpersonal relationships and our health will feel better. We will feel better about ourselves and have self-esteem. These things are tangible benefits that we will gain, but many times when we do evil, when we take the wrong path we do not feel it right away. It takes a long time before we feel it. That is why the expression eem is used. Many times people will sacrifice their relationships and act in a greedy way and betray their friends and get to the top and what good is it? They will feel lonely and depressed and they will not have gained anything. They do not even know that they are cursed until eventually they get to the top.

This happens, too, many times when we take the wrong path. When we smoke cigarettes we do not realize originally that this is going to lead us into death and destruction. In fact, I

remember when I was growing up if you wanted to be glamorous and be like the movie stars (every movie star smoked), if you wanted to be grown up, you started to smoke. Thank G-d, I never like smoking. I tried it once and I did not like it at all, but other people, other children, other teenagers got hooked on smoking and it shortened many of their lives. They got lung cancer from it and heart disease. We all know that many times it is not apparent right away that the road that we are taking is the wrong road, and sometimes it takes a while before we can figure it out, and then when we figure it out it is so hard to change the path. That is why we say when we begin the Selichos, "To You, G-d, is righteousness and to us is shamefacedness." He says, "What can we plead before you? What can we say and how can we justify ourselves? Let us examine our paths and we will search them and we will return to You, to teshuva, we will return to You." It is important that we realize that G-d has set out markers for us, but many times we do not follow the markers. We do not see that we are being harmed in any way. It is like so many people who gave up so many Jewish practices. They did not realize that it was these Jewish practices which were allowing them to live moderate and good lives, which allowed them to be good parents and good children, and which allowed them to have support from their family, which gave them moral support and not only moral support but was a place where you could bring your achievements. Therefore, G-d, You were just. You gave us right things, wonderful things, and what did we do? What can we say? We thought we would deviate from the path a little bit, and, after all, it was not noticeable at the beginning that anything was different. It is just like smoking. The first few years it does not seem that you are doing anything to yourself, but twenty or

thirty years down the line we will notice what it is. Therefore, we have to turn to You, and when we turn to You we realize finally when something is wrong. We have to turn. We have to make an effort. We have to try to quit smoking. G-d will aid us in that endeavor, but it is not an easy process. We have to feel, though, that we have hope, that we can change, that things can be better.

That's why in the next sentence we say, "Because Your right hand You have stretched out to receive those who are turning." We can change. We can be something different than what we are today. Yes, it is difficult. We have taken a path and we are going to have to reverse the path, and sometimes it takes a while to go backwards to our starting place so that we can assume the duties that we know that we should do. Therefore, there is a second turning. After we have turned back from the wrong path we have to assume the right path. Then it says, "And we shall unto the Lord your G-d." That's why it says in the first place when it says G-d is going to turn our captivity, we are captive in the wrong path. He is going to have mercy upon us, and then He is going to turn us and gather us from all the nations. He is going to give us the moral authority to be different. We do not have to worry about what other people think of us. We know that we have a Jewish path that is right. We do not have to feel inferior before any other peoples because the path is right. That is the second stage when we talk about teshuva, about returning. It is not with kindness and not with good deeds that we come before You because we are like poor creatures and needy creatures who are banging on Your doors. What does that mean? It means we are like poor creatures. We are

poor in mitzvahs. G-d, many times we did not do all the mitzvahs that we should have done. We have not assume responsibility for ourselves and for others as we should have done and for You, also, G-d, for the Jewish people and for the Jewish religion. Also, many times we are poor actually in resources. We did not have the learning that we should have gotten when we were a child. Sometimes we not have financial resources to make the turn back to the ways that we know that we should do. Many times we do not have the mental capacity or the years have dulled our senses a little more, but, G-d, we are knocking on Your doors. G-d, please, let us come back. Let us, first of all, retrace the old path and then let us take the new path that we know that is out there. We ask G-d, we are knocking on Your doors, G-d, and, please, don't turn us back empty from before You because You hear our prayers.

That is, too, why we say Selichos on Motzi Shabbos when Shabbos is over. What happened on the first Shabbos? Adam was created on Friday. He sinned on Friday. He was forgiven on Friday because G-d had originally said that if Adam was going to sin they would die that very day, but they did not die that very day. Adam lived to be 930 years old. G-d forgave him but G-d told him he could not stay in the Garden of Eden, that he would have to be expelled from the Garden. G-d allowed Adam and Eve, though, to stay in the Garden for Shabbos. It came Motzi Shabbos and G-d said they had to leave. Adam said, "I can't leave. It is dark outside. I am scared. I can't make it. It is too hard. It is night. I have too many obstacles to overcome." G-d said, "I will give you a gift. I will give you fire." That is why we have the Havdallah candle. The Havdallah candle is the hope that G-d has given us.

He has given us the fire of Torah, the fire of creativity, the fire of controlling nature. He has allowed us to make the world that He kicked us out into from the Garden of Eden like a Garden of Eden. That's why we also have the besomeem, which stands for the smell of the Garden of Eden. We can make our world a Garden of Eden. G-d has given us the tools, but it is a hard job. We are going out into the night but we have hope. G-d gave us hope. G-d said, "You can do it. Never feel that you cannot do it. You certainly can do it." That is what Adam was told by G-d, and that is why we have the first Selichos on midnight after Shabbos because we, too, are filled with hope that we can overcome the night that is within us and without us, and that we can be much better people.

That is why, too, in the Torah portion Nitzavim it says, "You are standing today," and it mentions the word standing three times. Why is this? The reason is that each of us today can do it. Many times people have an alibi like it is too hard to change, but, no, you are standing today. Today is different from yesterday. You can change. There is hope for you. Don't give up. Then there are other people who say it is so hard that they might as well give up because they can resist temptation today but tomorrow they will not be able to. Don't worry about tomorrow. Worry about today. You are able to resist it today. You are able to be better today. Continue to be what you know that you should be able to be. That is what we all learn on Selichos. We learn that there is hope in the world, that G-d will open the doors for us. We are banging on the doors, people poor in mitzvahs and maybe poor even in Torah learning and other resources, but G-d will open the doors for us as long as we have

hope, as long as we are willing to turn because if we will turn, if we will realize that it is our job to make this world a Garden of Eden, it is our job to make us upstanding, right people, we can do it. That is what we proclaim here when we tell G-d to listen to our hope and listen to our prayer. May G-d listen to our hope and to our prayer so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.