SELICHOS 1994
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In the Gemorah Rosh hashonna we learn how when the Jewish people sinned by the golden calf G-d told Moshe that he should say the keynote of the Selichos prayers, which are, "Adoshem, Adoshem El Rachum LeChanum. The Lord the Eternal is a merciful and gracious G-d, slow to anger, abounding in loving kindness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands of generations, forgiving iniquity, trangression and sin and acquitting all those who truly reprent." It says in this Medrash that G-d even donned a tallis to show Moshe how to say this prayer so that any time the Jewish people would sin and G-d would hear Moshe pray this prayer in the correct way G-d would forgive the Jewish people.

Later on we learn that the Jewish people sinned with the spies, how they refused to enter into the land of Israel, but instead followed the advice of the spies and murmurred in their tents and did not want to go up to the land of Israel, that G-d was very angry with them and had decided that He was going to wipe them out and start a new people from Moshe, but Moshe Rabbeinu would have nothing of this. He said this particular prayer and after he said this particular prayer G-d said, "And I will forgive them." There is a big difference between this first sin of the golden calf and the second sin of the spies. When the Jewish people sinned by the golden calf and G-d said that He was going to wipe them out and start another people from Moshe Rabbeinu, Moshe prayed and G-d at that time listened to his prayer, but He said that His presence would not go with the Jewish people, but Moshe Rabbeinu was not satisfied with this and he prayed again and he said, "G-d, if Your presence does not go out with us, don't take us out from this place." Moshe was not satisfied with what G-d had just said, and he wanted to make sure that G-d's presence would also lead the Jewish people, so he prayed again and G-d listened to his prayer and G-d's presence did go up with the Jewish people and G-d promised Moshe that he could always tell whether or not G-d's presence was with the Jewish people by whether the Jewish people were distinguished or not, whether they produced great leaders and scholars and

intellectuals and musicians, etc. Therefore, we could tell whether G-d's presence was still among us, but when the Jewish people sinned at the time of the spies and G-d laid down their punishment that they had to wander in the desert for 40 years until that generation died out after He had first said that He was going to wipe them out, but Moshe prayed and G-d relented and He said that their punishment would now be that they would just have to wander in the desert for 40 years, which meant that most of them filled out their life span because if you were 20 you lived to age 60. Moshe did not at this time protest. He did not pray again and ask G-d to relent and to free the Jewish people from this punishment as he had during the time of the sin of the golden calf, so the Jewish people had to fulfill then this punishment.

It seems strange. Why did Moshe Rabbeinu pray at the time of the golden calf, which seems to be a much more serious sin because it seemed like the Jewish people were deserting G-d at that particular time, while at the time of the sin of the spies it did not seem like the Jewish people were deserting G-d. In fact, the rabbis say that the spies that went to the land were great men and that their reason for not wanting the Jewish people to enter into the land of Israel was because "the people are strong in the land" and they explain that Oz means Avudazor, that the Jewish people by entering into history and the world were going to be subjected to all sorts of pagan influences and that many of them would succumb to these pagan influences and that many of them would become idolators and the Jewish people would suffer great losses. It would be better that the Jewish people should stay in the desert and study Torah. It is important that the Torah should be a great intellectual exercise for them. G-d was supplying them water, manna, their food, their clothing, etc. It was better if the Jewish people stayed in the desert. It is too hard to try to implement the Torah's teachings into the world. It should be just a theoretical system for scholars and we should

study Torah and get the merit for the studying of the Torah, but we know that that is not what G-d wanted. We even have this famous phrase, "It is not the study that is the main thing; it is the deeds." Of course, you have to study to know how to do the right deeds but G-d wants us to be active in the world and participate in the world and to change the world and make this world a moral and just place. This we do by trying our best to make a model society. Therefore, these people sinned, although what they wanted to do was sit and study Torah. In fact, we have the same message given when we learn about the fruits that were on a new tree. We know that for the first three years we cannot eat the fruits of a new tree, that you cannot use them at all, and only at the fourth year you take them up to Jerusalem and you eat them there, and on the fifth year you eat them at your home. It is interesting to note that it is only in the fifth year that they are called Cheeluleem, called praiseworthy and good fruits and that they are fulfilling their function. The first three years is similar to the Kabalistic system to Bereeah and Aseeah and Yitzeerah, that a person has to grow physically and has to gain the necessary strength in order to influence things in the world. Then you have to have a spiritual component. You have to have the Ketar to go up to Jerusalem, but then the highest form where it is Cheeluleem, holy praiseworthy things, is when you take them in the fifth year and you eat them in your own home. You eat them where you live. In other words, you are implementing the teachings of the Torah, the spiritual teachings in a physical way in the world, and that is what G-d wanted.

What was the great sin of the spies? Their great sin was that they lost faith. They said Judaism was no match for the pagan ideas, that the Jewish people would quickly succumb completely and that Judaism would be lost completely. Therefore, they wanted to distance themselves completely from the world. They lacked faith, faith that G-d would help the Jewish people overcome these problems, and sometimes

the problems are not easy. Sometimes the problems are very difficult and we know that it is a great trial many times to observe Judaism in a world which does not seem to appreciate it. The rabbis say that oldest part of the Selichos prayer and the second theme of the Selichos prayer is that when G-d will answer us, that "just as G-d answered Abraham, our father, on Mount Moriah, He will answer us." Just as G-d answered Yitzchak, his son when he was bound on the altar, He will answer us, and just as He answered Jacob in Beth El, so He will answer to us." In other words, Abraham tried to implement Jewish teachings in the world, but he was confronted with a terrible contradiction. Here G-d said that Judaism would descend from his seed, from Yitzchak, and here it seemed that G-d was asking him to sacrifice Yitzchak. How could this be possible? In life we sometimes take 6 steps forward and then 3 steps backwards and sometimes we take 6 steps forward and 7 steps backwards. It is very difficult in life to implement Jewish teachings. These great leaders of the Jewish people knew it and they would rather not have this task thrust upon them. We know, too, that in the case of Jacob he was the only Jew left in the world. His father was blind and the rabbis say that a blind person is almost like he was dead in those days because he could not really communicate properly and correctly to the people around him. His brother Esau had become a goy. He was the only Jew left and here he had to run away. Later we learn about his son, Joseph, who was put in prison. How could you believe that you would be able to overcome all the problems in the world and implement Judaism if you have all these problems ahead of you, so these great men were afraid that Judaism would be lost. They did not have faith, so Moshe did not pray for them. It is better to stay in the desert and let another generation come, but when it came to the sin of the golden calf that was an altogether different sin. They did not even say when Moshe hesitated or delayed coming down that they should go back to Egypt. They just said they needed new leadership. They said they needed someone else to lead them. Moshe was not there any more to lead them so, therefore, they had not given up faith in Judaism. They just thought they

needed new means in order to implement the Jewish teachings, that they thought that what was happening int he past would no longer work because Moshe Rabbeinu was no longer there, so they said, "Come, make for us gods that will go before us because this Moshe is the man that brought us up from Egypt. We do not know what happened to him." They had not lost faith actually in the Jewish message, but they thought that they needed different means in order to implement this Jewish message and this we have seen throughout Jewish history where Jews have not given up faith in the Jewish message but they thought that it had to be changed or modified somewhat in order that it should be accepted and that they felt that if you made this change or that change that Judaism would be strengthened not actually weakened. Therefore, Moshe prayed for them because they had not actually given up. They had not give up faith in the basic Jewish idea, but they thought that they had to implement it in different ways and you had to use different techniques and maybe incorporate some of the ideas of the culture in which you lived, some of their religious ideas, in order for Judaism to make an impact. That is why Moshe felt that G-d's presence should still be among them because they had not given up faith. It was just that they had felt that it was necessary to use different means to implement the Jewish faith in the world.

We see that also here today, that there are many Jews who still want to be Jews, but they do not really know how to go about being Jews and many times they make errors, the same errors as the people of the golden calf where they feel that they have to introduce this idea into Judaism or that idea into Judaism or they are negligent of basic Jewish concepts, but they still have that Pintele Yid in them. They still feel that Judaism can make a positive impact on the world, but they sin. They made mistakes. Therefore, they ask G-d for forgiveness and we all ask G-d for forgiveness on this particular night of Selichos.

That's why, too, when G-d told Moshe Rabbeinu that he should pray this prayer, Adoshem, Adoshem, which means I am G-d before your sin and I am also G-d after your sin.

I am also your G-d. You may think that you are using good means in order to effect My teaching, but I am still there for you. I may be a little bit more distant but I am still there for you. My presence is still there for you. Moshe Rabbeinu was to pray this prayer and he had to pray it while donning a tallis. The question is, why donning a tallis? The tallis, itself, stands for the 613 commandments of Judaism. The word tzitzis stands for 600, tzadek is 90, Yud is 10, and we repeat it twice, so that is 200, and then you have Tof, which is 600, and you have 8 threads and 5 knots, which is 613, and the 613 commandments are all necessary in order to promulgate Judaism, but also the 613 if you add up 6, 1 and 3 it adds up to 10. We have the ten basic principles of Judaism which have been explained as the Ten Commandments but they really mean the 10 basic principles of Judaism. They are everything that is necessary for Judaism to survive and we cannot be like the generation of the golden calf and try to change this and that in order to modify the Jewish message so that it will be accepted. We have to recognize, too, that many times people still have that little Pintele Yid in them. They have that faith in thema nd they are wanting and trying to do the best. They have not retreated. They have not said that Judaism cannot survive in the world so, therefore, we have to retreat to a monastery or desert enclosure. Therefore, G-d told Moshe Rabbeinu, "Don a tallis." Why also a tallis? Because a tallis has in it a blue thread, at least in the olden days it had a blue thread, and that blue thread, the rabbis say, stands for the blue of the ocean, the blue throne of G-d, which stands for the rationality in Jewish belief. In other words, we know that the white thread stands for trying to implement Judaism in a rational way, but the very basis of Judaism is irrational. How can we believe that right is what really makes might? How can we really believe that the world will be perfected? How can we really believe that all sickness and pain and suffering and even death will be overcome? But that is what we do believe. It is irrational almost in the world to be a Jew. It is irrational to believe that a Jewish people can return to its homeland, that surrounded by 200 million enemies we can build a

wonderful state, that in a strip of land which really has no natural resources we can create a thriving economy, that we can create a thriving state when most of our neighbors will not even trade with us, that we can build a thriving state from Jews that come from a hundred nations each speaking a different language and with a different culture. It is an irrational belief almost that Jews could still go back to farming and military service which they have discarded for a thousand years, but yet we see that this belief is what animates the Jewish people today, even though many of our Jews do not really observe everything that they should observe. We know, too, that since World War Two Jewish life has been going forward step by step, but we know that that is not always going to be the case. We know that before World War Two Judaism was going backwards. We know that we suffered huge losses in traditional orthodox Judaism before World War Two, that we had so many great defections then the Holocaust came and destroyed so much of our people that in the course of Jewish history there are many ups and downs and we should never lose faith. Since World War Two we seem to be going steadily forward. In the last two years it seems that we are having a few reverses happening in Jewish life, but we should not lose heart and we should not try to force G-d's hand. We should not even try to retreat from a good year to force G-d's hand, as some people are trying to do by not having enough faith in G-d that eventually things are going to work out so they may even use immoral means in order to try to make G-d's word come true. Abraham Oveinu, when he was confronted with all sorts of conflict, still did not give up his belief in G-d. When Yaacov was the only Jew and he had to run away he still did not give up his Emunah, and when Joseph was in prison and he realized that he, too, was the prime carrier of the Jewish religion he did not give up hope. He still continued to persevere and all the people that are mentioned in this Misheonah it is the same story. They did not give up in spite of the ups and downs that they have incurred. Jewish history is never a straight line, and these great men who were spies did not realize it. They thought that the Jewish people would enter the land of Canaan and deteriorate

and be gone forever, but this has not happened. Judaism deteriorates to a certain extent it is true, but then it flourishes like a seed that rots in the ground and then produces new flowers. We have to remember that G-d is there and willing to help us. Yes, as long as we still have faith in Judaism, even though we may have have changed it somewhat, like the people of the golden calf did. Even though we may not be observing everything correctly, we may not be keeping kashruth the way we should or Shabbos the way we should, the holidays we should. We may have also slighted some of the commandments between man and G-d and not have been as honest and filled with integrity as we should, yet, we tell G-d on this night of Selichos, "Look, we are donning this tallis. We know that it is irrational to be a Jew. We know that it is very difficult to be Jewish." In fact, that is why so many Jews in America are deserting us. After all, why should we continue to be Jewish when we can disappear without even having to convert? We can just let nature take its course. Why should we spend thousands of dollars on Jewish education? Why should we spend thousands of dollars in helping our brethren in Israel and throughout the world when we can melt away into the populace of America easily? But we tell G-d we have not lost our faith. Yes, we have not done everything properly. Yes, we have not observed all the commandments that we should do, but forgive us, Our Father, because in our following we have gone astray, so forgive us, please, Our King, because our sins are many. Yes, but we still have that Pintele Yid. We still have the Emunah. We have not lost that Emunah the way that the spies did at the time of Moshe Rabbeinu. That is our great strength. G-d, please look down from Your heavenly abode and give us another chance to continue to do Thy work so that we can continue to make Your name great on this earth. That is, too, why we say at the middle of the Selichos, "Don't cast us off when our strength has weakened." Or we say, referring to us as a people because we are a 3500 year old people, we ask G-d, "Don't cast us out in our old age." When the Jewish people are facing troubles and problems and they still want to continue, they still want to keep the name Jew, they still want to preserve

the Jewish heritage even though they may not be observing it completely, yet, G-d, give us the strength to continue to do so. Don't cast us off. Forgive us our iniquities and let us continue on because we still have that little bit of faith that the world needs Judaism and that the Jewish message will eventually be accepted. For this merit, G-d, let us be forgiven so that truly we can be Your faithful servants in the coming years so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.