

SELICHOS 1995
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In the Selichos that we say every day now until Yom Kippur, with the exception of Rosh Hashonna, we say, "O G-d, forgive the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Thy mercy and according as Thou hast forgiven this people from the days of Egypt even until now," and G-d said, "I have forgiven according to My word." This is actually a quote from the Torah because when the Jewish people sinned at the time of the golden calf G-d was about ready to destroy the people. Moshe Rabbeinu intervened and asked G-d not to destroy the Jewish people and G-d said that He would not destroy the Jewish people. However, any time the Jewish people got in trouble again Moshe should say the words "Adoshem Adoshem El Rachum V'Chanum, O 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, transgression and sin and acquitting all those who repent." We see that when the Jewish people sinned during the time of the spies and G-d was once again going to destroy the Jewish people because they had refused to enter into the land of Israel, Moshe Rabbeinu said this prayer and he said, "G-d, merciful G-d, Who is abundant in kindness, Who forgives sin..." and then he says, "Forgive, please, for the sin of this people by the greatness of Your kindness like You have forgiven this people from Egypt until now," and G-d said, "I have forgiven you according to your words." It is very difficult to understand why it said according to **your** words. It should be according to my words. I am the one who told you how to say this. In fact, the rabbis in a Medrash say that when G-d first taught Moshe these words when Moshe went up to get the second tablets it was as if G-d wore a tallis, and the question is asked, what does it mean that it was as if G-d wore a tallis? Why did G-d have to wear a tallis? After all, G-d does not have any form, but the rabbis say that G-d was teaching Moshe something about the plea that the Jewish people must make in front of G-d in order to get forgiveness. We know that the tzitzis stands for all the 613 commandments. We have the word tzitzis, tzadek, 90, yud is 10, tzadek is 90, yud is 10, and tof is 400, which is 600. Then you have 8 strings

and 5 knots. Now we all know that originally there was a blue thread that was there made of a special type of sea creature. Just recently we have learned what it was. For 2000 years this sea creature was kept away from us, we did not know what it was, so, therefore, all our tallisim have had only white strings. However, there has always been blue, either a dark navy blue or a blue on the pattern of the tallis to remind us that the tallis had to have this blue and white. The rabbis explain that the blue reminds us of the sea, reminds us of the throne of G-d, and, therefore, it talks about the mystery of life, those things which we really cannot understand. In fact, that is what we mention here, too, when we speak about the mystery. We say, "Oh, G-d, Who is enthroned on the seat of mercy." There is mystery in life. There are things that we have to take just based on faith, and then there are the practicalities. The white stands for the practicalities of life, the rational things of life. We know that most decisions we make in life, the important ones anyway, are based more on faith rather than on rigorous functional analysis. After all, when a person decides to marry and chooses a spouse they do not interview billions of people. They could not. We do not have the time, but it is more an intuitive grasp of the situation. The same thing is true when you choose your occupation. You do not go through the 3000 lists of occupations listed by the United States Department of Labor. You sort of choose your occupation as you go into it. There are many things that we take on faith. Therefore, we base our life, a large part anyway, on this faith, but, at the same time, we also have to take into account practicalities. It may be that we want to marry a particular girl but maybe it turns out that she has a life threatening disease which would make it impossible to live together as husband and wife, or it is possible that she has just suffered from being hospitalized because of a drug condition. Maybe you would not want to take a chance on a girl like that. Maybe she comes from a particular background in which there are many criminals in her family and maybe you would not want to get your children

mixed up with these criminals. We also modify our faith in this particular person with practicalities. So when we come to make decisions we have to balance the practicalities with faith. We know that that is exactly what the strings of the tallis are supposed to do. The Rambam, being a rationalist, out of the 8 strings he had only one blue one which represented faith. The Raivitz said there had to be two. Rashi said there had to be four, four white and four blue. We also know that sometimes faith requires a great struggle and it is very hard for us to come to the right conclusions. The Rambam said the blue was the azure blue of midday. Rashi says, no, it was navy blue, the black of approaching night. We know that one of the oldest parts of the Selichos is the part which speaks about the one who answered to Abraham. We say, "G-d, may he answer us." "May the one who answered Abraham, our father, on Mount Moriah, may He answer us." What was the big problem there? The big problem there was that Abraham had been told by G-d that he would have children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren all descended from Yitzchak, and here G-d was telling him to sacrifice Yitzchak. He was in a terrible situation. He did not know how to deal with it. The practicality of the situation said you cannot sacrifice your son, but faith required him to do it, but, of course, thank G-d, there was a higher faith in the sense that Abraham misinterpreted G-d's instructions and G-d wanted him to elevate Yitzchak, not sacrifice him. At the same time, the one who answered Yitzchak when he was sacrificed on the altar. How could Yitzchak believe in this religion after it almost cost him his life? Is this a good religion? Again, the one who answered Jacob in Beth El. Here he had to leave home. He was pursued by his brother Esau to kill him. Is this the religion that he should believe in? Many times we are caught in a trap where the practicalities require one thing and faith requires another. You know we have it in Israel today. After all, who wants to rule over 2 million Arabs? We Jews have never been oppressors. On the other hand, we cannot commit suicide, so what are you going to do? Arafat, to this

very day, is talking about wiping out all the State of Israel, not just about taking Ramala and Janine but taking Tel Aviv and Haifa, so what are you going to do? You are caught in a quandry. You do not want to rule over 2 million Arabs, but, at the same time you also do not want to endanger your life, so we are caught in all sorts of situations. We are forced to make very difficult decisions. This is what we remind G-d. That is why G-d donned the tallis. G-d, listen, You put us in all sorts of difficult situations. We do not know how to react. We have learned that throughout all Jewish history. There was this evil king Menasha that was caught in a vice. If he did not let the cultural institutions of Assyria into Israel, into Judea, Judea would be squashed by Assyria, but if he let the cultural institutions of Assyria in there was idol worship. The people were going to be drawn away from G-d. What are you going to do? It is a very difficult situation.

The same thing is true now, too. Maybe Rabin is under terrible pressure. He will not have American arms. You will not get jet fuel. You will be completely isolated. Israel will be boycotted if you do not show some progress with the PLO. It is a difficult situation. Of course, everybody knows my opinion. I think we would be foolish to make a second agreement with Arafat if he does not keep the first agreement.

Therefore, Moshe Rabbeinu, when he came before G-d the second time when the Jewish people had sinned by listening to the spies and not going to the land of Israel, he reminded G-d, "You put these people in a terrible situation. You put a slave people who does not understand many of the practical things of life and You are telling them to go ahead and fight battles based on a faith commitment." Of course, this was the reason why Moshe Rabbeinu did not pursue the matter further. At the time of the golden calf when the Jewish people sinned and G-d said, "All right, I will not wipe them out, but My presence will not go up among them," Moshe Rabbeinu prayed again. He said, "G-d, if Your presence does not go among us, do not take us out from here." G-d relented and His presence did go among them, but here in the case

of the spies when Moshe Rabbeinu told G-d to forgive the people and G-d said, "I will forgive them but they will all die in the desert," Moshe did not say anything. Why didn't he say something? Why didn't he say, "G-d, then don't take us up from here if You are not going to let us go into the land of Israel," but Moshe knew that this was a slave people yet. They did not know how to balance faith and practicalities. They were not ready to take upon themselves the conquest of the land of Israel. This is the best that he could do.

In life we have to balance the practicalities with faith and this is a very difficult thing. This is our first plea to G-d. The second plea that we give to G-d is to remind Him that we are finite. That's why we say, "G-d, You are compassionate. You understand everything that is going on. Our understanding is finite." That, of course, is why, too, we can ask G-d for forgiveness because if we realize that we are finite and G-d is infinite, G-d knows everything and G-d can understand every situation, but if we realize that we are finite then we have to realize, too, that we can be wrong. If we can be wrong, then we can get along with our fellow human beings because if we can admit we are wrong and they can admit they are wrong then we can compromise our differences, but if we always think we are right then we can never compromise our differences. If the other partner always thinks they are right then he or she can never compromise the differences, so our plea to G-d is, "G-d, remember we are finite. We do not understand everything in the world and sometimes we do things that are not right and proper. Many times we do it because we misjudge the situation." That's why it says He forgives Avon, which is doing a sin on purpose but only out of weakness. Pesheh you are doing a sin on purpose but you are doing it really because you think it is the right thing, it is a rebellion. Chatoh is you meant to do the right thing but you did the wrong thing. Many times it happens that the mountain looks different from different sides, so, therefore, you made a comment to a person thinking it was a joke and that person was very sensitive because that person had just had a terrible operation and almost died and talking about operations

will cause that person a great deal of anguish, and so, therefore, you sin but you sin because you are finite. Sometimes we do things just because the girl is too beautiful, the money is too alluring. G-d, You have to realize that we are finite, that we are subject to all sorts of temptations, so You must forgive us, G-d. Then sometimes people do things on purpose. They mean to do them and they do them many times, too, because they are also pushed into doing them. Ambition is just so strong. G-d, You gave us this ambition. I know it is the wrong thing to do to say bad things about another person so I can get that position, but look how much good I can do in that position and we rationalize it away. G-d, You have also given us the capacity to rationalize, so, in a way, G-d, it is Your fault, too. You have created us as finite human beings who are able to rationalize, so, please, G-d, forgive us for our sins. Allow us to start fresh the day after Yom Kippur.

That is why, too, we say here and that is why at the very beginning of Selichos we plead our case before G-d and we say, "Not with kindness and not with deeds do we come before You but with we are Kadalim. We are like poor people and we are like needy creatures. We knock on your doors." What does that mean, Kedalim? Kedalim means that we are poor people. We are caught in circumstances between faith and practicality. Kedalim can also be read also like we are evil people. In other words, G-d, we cannot help it. You create us to be weak. You made us finite creatures. We are knocking on your doors. We have these two pleas, G-d. Please, listen to us. Please forgive us. Don't let us go away without having the opportunity of getting close to you. Please, G-d, let us have another chance. We will try to do better next time. This is what Selichos is all about. Selichos is about reminding G-d that we are finite and reminding G-d that He has called upon us to balance faith and practicalities and that is a very difficult task. We all hope and pray that we will all have a good year and a healthy year and a prosperous and self-fulfilling year because G-d has listened to our prayers because we really mean it when we say we are going to reexamine all that we have done in the past and try to do better

in the future. Let us all hope we will do so so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.