

Thirteen Keys to Repentance

Rabbi Yaakov Bieler

Ellul, 5763

This week, for the Ashkenazic community, in addition to the ongoing daily blowing of the Shofar and the recitation of Psalm 27 that was begun on Rosh Chodesh Ellul, the final pre-Rosh HaShana ritual begins, the recitation of Selichot. Mishna Berura on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 581, #6 explains that due to the custom on the part of some to fast for ten days during this time of year in order to further impress upon themselves the need for repentance and introspection, and since four of the days during the Ten Days of Repentance—the period of time at the beginning of Tishrei that spans both Rosh HaShana and Yom HaKippurim—are precluded from fasting, i.e., the two days of Rosh HaShana itself, Shabbat Shuva, and Erev Yom HaKippurim, at least another four days prior to the actual start of the Days of Awe are set aside for this purpose. Since fasting as far as Judaism is concerned is not an end in itself, but rather a particular means by which the individual demonstrates how s/he can defer his/her material needs in favor of spiritual activities and goals, special prayers are also to be recited during these days whether or not one is fasting, in order to encourage a further turning towards God and His Tora. While the requirement to fast has not been universally accepted over the ages, the recitation of Selichot has. The reason why each year, the recitation of Selichot is begun on Motzai Shabbat even though this sometimes means that there will be more than four days devoted to these prayers is because of a desire for the standardization of this annual practice.

The central theme of Selichot, repeated a number of times during each recitation of these prayers, is the invocation of a portion of the Tora known “The Thirteen Divine Attributes”, listed in Shemot 34:6-7, “1-HaShem*, 2-HaShem, 3-Keil 4-Rachum 5-VeChanun, 6-Erech Apayim 7-VeRav Chesed 8-VeEmet, 9-Notzer Chesed Le’Alafim, 10-Noseh Avon 11-VaPhesha 12-VeChata’ah 13-VeNakeh [Lo YeNakeh Pokeid Avon Avot Al Banim, VeAl Bnai Banim Al Shilaishim VeAl Riebeim]” (1-The Lord, 2-the Lord, 3-Mighty, 4-Compassionate and 5-Gracious, 6-Longsuffering and 7-Abundant in kindness and 8-truth, 9-Remembering the kindnesses of thousands (of generations), 10-Forgiving iniquity, 11-transgression and 12-sin, 13-Who Will Forgive [Not Forgive the guilty, Visiting the iniquities of the fathers on the children, and on the children’s children to the third and fourth generations].”

Stopping at the word “VeNakeh”, which is called for by the Selichot texts, appears to be grammatically incorrect. This word, rather than affirming God’s Desire to Forgive, is part of a double verb emphasizing how He Will Not Forgive, the complete phrase being: “VeNakeh Lo Yenakeh”, also lending

itself to the parsing of the first word as a rhetorical question, i.e., “Will He Forgive? No, He Will Not Forgive!...” Just because we wish to convince ourselves that God Will always Be Forgiving, and in that way maintain hope that our shortcomings will be overlooked, does not seem to entitle us to misquote a Biblical verse that He Himself Formulated to reflect His Qualities and how He Interacts with His Creation.

Some wish to argue that the accepted reading on the part of the community as part of Selichot services (as well as on fast days, such as the upcoming Tzom Gedalya, when this section of the Tora is read both at Shacharit and Mincha) is based upon a Tannaitic statement in Yoma 86a: R. Eliezer said, “It is impossible to say ‘Lo Yenakeh’ (He Will Not Forgive) since it says ‘VeNakeh’ (He Will Forgive); Nor is it possible to say ‘VeNakeh’ since it says ‘Lo Yenakeh’ . How are these words to be understood? He Forgives those who repent, and Does Not Forgive those who do not repent. Yet does a decidedly homiletic interpretation allow us to quote the Biblical text in a manner in which it perhaps was not intended to be quoted?

R. Baruch HaLevi Epstein, in his commentary Tosefet Beracha, while preferring that either the congregation end its recital with the word “VeChata’ah”, or complete the phrase and cry out “VeNakeh Lo YeNakeh”, so that the words are grammatically correct, nevertheless attempts to substantiate the accepted custom, based upon a contextual argument. He posits that since the first Twelve of the Thirteen Attributes all deal with HaShem’s Kindnesses and Compassion, to understand the final attribute as one of punishment and non-forgiveness would be inconsistent with the other Characteristics cited. Consequently, in order that the last Attribute unambiguously be viewed as complementing those that are listed previously, we stop at the word “VeNakeh” regardless of what follows in the verse. It could even be suggested that the very fact that HaShem Is Ready to Administer punishments when the transgressor is unrepentant, is also a type of Kindness, since this will either act as a deterrent preventing the sin from ever being committed, or in the spirit of Devarim 30:1-2, the ensuing difficulties that will be recognized as arising from sinning against the Tora themselves will serve as a spur to repentance and acceptance of God’s Rulership; however at a moment such as Selichot, when we are offering supplications for Divine Forgiveness, the subtle implication of the end of the verse might prove elusive to the average pray-er.

R. Epstein concludes his comments with regard to these verses by offering an interpretation of a statement appearing in Rosh HaShana 17b: The Holy One Blessed Be He Said to Moshe, “Whenever the Jewish people has sinned, ‘Ya’asu’ (let them ‘make’, as opposed to recite, pray, call out, etc.) this order (the list of the Thirteen Attributes) before Me, and I Will Forgive them.” The commentator is loathe to accept the premise that a mere recitation of a

Biblical formula can win for a sinner atonement, and therefore sees the verb employed, “they shall make” as very specifically chosen, based upon a text in Shabbat 133b. “An individual needs to walk in God’s Path, i.e., just as He Is Compassionate, so should we be; just as He Is Gracious, so should we be...”** Therefore reciting and even studying the Thirteen Divine Attributes can constitute no more than the beginning of the Teshuva process. The Attributes have to be taken to heart, internalized and acted upon in our own microcosmic manner.

May our Selichot prayers inspire us to Teshuva and Ma’asim Tovim at this auspicious time of year.

*Although the first three words of this list are Names of God, with the first two being a repetition of the same Name, the Rabbis, e.g., Rabbeinu Tam in Rosh HaShana 17b, understand each Name as a reflection of a particular, different Divine attribute, i.e., 1-God’s Mercy prior to a person transgressing, 2-God’s Mercy after a person has transgressed and repented, 3-God’s Power to forgive even in situations where forgiveness does not appear to be appropriate.

**See [the Dvar Tora on the KMS website for Parshat Ki Tavo, 5763.](#)