

INTRODUCTION TO SELIḤOT

*The Power and Significance of Seliḥot:
From Recitation to Action**The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy*

The Hebrew Bible uses a form of the words *seliḥa* or *seliḥot* to refer to forgiveness in a number of verses: “I have forgiven in accordance with your words (וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה, סָלַחְתִּי כְּדִבְרֶיךָ)” (Numbers 14:20); “And it shall be forgiven to the entire assembly of Israel (וְנִסְלַח לְכָל־עֵדֻת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל)” (Numbers 15:26); “For with You is forgiveness, that You may be held in awe (כִּי עִמָּךָ הַסְּלִיחָה)” (Psalms 130:4); “But You are the God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate (וְאַתָּה אֱלֹהֵהּ סְלִיחוֹת חַנּוּן וְרַחוּם)” (Nehemiah 9:17); “To the LORD our God [belong] mercy and forgiveness (לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַרְחָמִים)” (Daniel 9:9).¹ But the cluster of prayers that we call *Seliḥot* began to develop as a unit only in the early Middle Ages. By the ninth century, a *Seliḥot* service of some kind had been established. The *Geonim* refer to such a service as something which had already been in existence for a while and not as something new which they introduced.² Rabbi Saadya Gaon composed a commentary on one of the *Seliḥot* texts that is contained in our service (see *Seliḥa* 48).

A fundamental component of this service, from its inception, is the recital of what are known as the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy (יג מדות (הַרְחָמִים)). After the Jewish people sinned by worshipping the Golden Calf, God appeared to Moses, and instructed him to carve a second set of tablets. Moses once again ascended Mount Sinai, and God descended upon it in a cloud and stood with Moses (Exodus 34:4–5). At that point the text continues:

וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה עַל־פְּנֵי וַיִּקְרָא, יְהוָה, יְהוָה, אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן, אַרְךָ אַפַּיִם, וְרַב־חַסֵּד וְאֱמֶת,
נִצַּר חֶסֶד לְאֱלֹפִים, נִשְׂא עוֹן וּפְשָׁע וְחַטָּאת, וְנִקָּה ...

And the LORD passed by before him and proclaimed: “The LORD, the

1. The Malbim (commentary on Psalms 130:4) points out that every form of *seliḥa* found in biblical literature refers to God forgiving a human being; it is never found in the context of one human being forgiving another.
2. The *Seliḥot* recital practices of the *Geonim* Rabbi Amram and Rabbi Hai are cited in the fourteenth century code by Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, the *Tur*. See *Tur, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 581.

LORD, compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in loving-kindness and truth, extending loving-kindness to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin, and absolving...” (Vv. 6–7)

Commenting on the words, “And the LORD passed by before him and proclaimed,” the Talmud (*Rosh HaShana* 17b) states in the name of Rabbi Yoḥanan:

וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה עַל־פְּנֵינוּ וַיִּקְרָא, א”ר יוֹחָנָן, אֱלֹמֵיָא מְקַרָּא בְּתוּב אֵי אַפְשָׁד לְאַמְרוּ.
מִלְמוֹד שְׁנַתְעֵטֵף הַקֵּב”ה בְּשִׁלְיַח צְבוּר וְהִרְאָה לוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה סֵדֶר תְּפִלָּה, אָמַר לוֹ, כֹּל זְמַן
שִׁישְׂרָאֵל חוֹטְאִין יַעֲשׂוּ לְפָנַי בְּסֵדֶר הַזֶּה וְאֲנִי מוֹחֵל לָהֶם.

Were it not [explicitly] written in the verse, it would be impossible to say this [i. e., it would sound like blasphemy]. It teaches that the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, wrapped Himself [in a prayer shawl] like a prayer leader and demonstrated to Moses the order of the prayer. He said to him, “Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them act before Me in accordance with this order, and I will forgive them.”

The Talmud continues in the name of Rabbi Yehuda:

אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה, בְּרִית בְּרוּתָה לִי”ג מִדּוֹת שְׂאִינָן חוֹרוֹת רִיקָם, שְׁנַאֲמַר, הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי
בְּרִית בְּרִית.

A covenant was made with the thirteen attributes that they will not return empty-handed, as it is stated (Exodus 34:10), “Behold, I make a covenant.”

These two ideas – that God demonstrated this prayer to Moses and that God guaranteed that He would respond to it – are found elsewhere in rabbinic literature.³ It is this passage in the Talmud that stands at the core

- See *Midrash Lekah Tov*, Exodus 33:19; Rabbi Menahem M. Kasher, *Torah Sheleima* 22 (Jerusalem, 1967), 58–59, n. 48. For a similar, albeit slightly different source, see *Midrash Tanhuma*, Ki Tisa 32. There is an interesting disagreement among rabbinic authorities as to the manner in which God appeared here to Moses. According to Rabbeinu Nissim (on *Rosh HaShana* 4b [*dapei haRif*]) and Rabbi Yom Tov ben Abraham Asevilli (Ritva, Commentary on *Rosh HaShana* 17b, s.v. *melamed*), it was a prophetic vision. See too *Teshuvot HaGeonim*, ed. Yaakov Musafia (Lyck, 1864), 35b, 117; *Maharsha*, *Rosh HaShana*, ad loc., s.v. *ilmalei*. Some *Geonim* (see B. M. Lewin, *Otzar HaGeonim*, vol. 5 [Jerusalem, 1933], *Rosh HaShana*, 82) and Rabbeinu Hananel (commentary on *Rosh HaShana*, ad loc.) maintain that it was not God Himself at all who appeared to Moses but, rather, God commanded an angel to appear this way before him.

of the *Seliḥot* service that we commence a few days before Rosh HaShana and continue reciting through Yom Kippur.

The description of God's encounter with Moses presented in these rabbinic texts is the central theme of the two introductory prayers that are consistently recited prior to uttering the thirteen attributes. The first refrain contains an oblique reference to it:

אֵל אֲרֹךְ אַפַּיִם אַתָּה, וּבְעַל רַחֲמִים נִקְרָאת, וּדְרֹךְ תְּשׁוּבָה הוֹרִית... בַּתְּחִלָּה וּבַתְּפִלָּה
פְּנִיךָ נִקְדַּם, בְּהוֹדְעַת לְעֵנּוּ מִקְדָּם

You are a God slow to anger, You are called the Master of Compassion, and You have taught the way of repentance.... We come before You in plea and prayer, as You in ancient times showed to the humble one [Moses].⁴

We remind God that *He Himself* made these words known to Moses (“the humble one”) and we therefore ask Him now respond to them.

In the second refrain, the reference is more explicit:

אֵל מֶלֶךְ יוֹשֵׁב עַל כִּסֵּא רַחֲמִים, מִתְנַהֵג בְּחַסְדֵי דָוָד. מוֹחֵל עֲוֹנוֹת עַמּוֹ... אֵל, הוֹרִית
לָנוּ לֵאמֹר שְׁלֹשׁ עֲשָׂרָה, וּזְכַר לָנוּ הַיּוֹם בְּרִית שְׁלֹשׁ עֲשָׂרָה, בְּהוֹדְעַת לְעֵנּוּ מִקְדָּם, כְּמוֹ
שִׁכְתוֹב: וַיֵּרֶד יְהוָה בְּעָנָן, וַיִּתְיַצֵּב עִמּוֹ שָׁם, וַיִּקְרָא בִשְׁם יְהוָה. וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה עַל-פְּנֵי
וַיִּקְרָא, יְהוָה, יְהוָה, אֵל רַחוּם וְרַחוּן, אֲרֹךְ אַפַּיִם, וְרַב-חַסֵּד וְאֱמֵת, נָצַר חַסֵּד לְאַלְפִים,
נִישָׂא עֵינָיו וַפְּשַׁע וַחַטָּאָה, וְנִקְּהָ.

God, King who sits upon a throne of compassion, who acts with loving-kindness, who pardons the iniquities of His people.... God, You taught us to speak the thirteen attributes: recall for us today the covenant of the thirteen attributes, as You in ancient times showed the humble one [Moses], as is written: “The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and he proclaimed in the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed by before him and proclaimed: The LORD, the LORD, compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in loving-kindness and truth, extending loving-kindness to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin, and absolving [the guilty who repent].”⁵

4. See below, pages 20–21, 86–87, and more.

5. See below, pages 32–33, 94–95, and more.

We repeatedly say to God, “After all, *You Yourself* taught us to recite these words, with which You established a covenant with us, assuring us that You will respond to them.” And so we ask, “Please do so.”

There is yet another refrain repeated during the *Seliḥot* service, that also includes the statement that God revealed these words to Moses:

כִּי עַל רַחֲמֶיךָ הַרְבִּים אָנוּ בְּטוֹחִים, וְעַל צְדָקוֹתֶיךָ אָנוּ נִשְׁעָנִים, וְלִסְלִיחוֹתֶיךָ אָנוּ מְקַיִּים,
וְלִישׁוּעָתֶךָ אָנוּ מְצַפִּים. אֶתָּה הוּא מֶלֶךְ אוֹהֵב צְדָקוֹת מִקְדָּם, מֵעֲבִיר עֲוֹנוֹת עִמּוֹ וּמְסִיר
חַטָּאת יִרְאִיו, בּוֹרֵת בְּרִית לְרֵאשׁוֹנִים וּמְקַיֵּם שְׁבוּעָה לְאַחֲרוֹנִים. אֶתָּה הוּא שׂוֹרֵת
בְּעֵנַן כְּבוֹדְךָ עַל הַר סִינַי, וְהִרְאִיתָ דְרָכֵי טוֹבְךָ לְמֹשֶׁה עַבְדְּךָ, וְאַרְחֹת חֲסִדֶיךָ גִּלִּיתָ
לּוֹ, וְהוֹדַעְתּוֹ כִּי אֶתָּה אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן, אֲרוּךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חֲסֵד וּמְרַבֵּה לְהֵיטִיב, וּמְנַהֵג
אֶת הָעוֹלָם כְּלוֹ בְּמִדַּת הַרְחָמִים.

For it is in Your great compassion that we trust, and on Your righteousness that we lean; and for Your forgiveness that we hope, and for Your salvation that we wait. You are the King, who always loves righteousness; who forgives the iniquities of His people, and removes the sins of those who hold Him in awe; who has forged a covenant with ancestors, and still keeps His promise to their last descendants. It is You who descended in a cloud of Your glory to Mount Sinai, and You showed the ways of Your goodness to Moses Your servant; and you revealed the ways of Your loving-kindness to him and told him that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in loving-kindness and abundantly doing good, and directing all the world through Your attribute of compassion.⁶

And, finally, this idea also appears in other *Seliḥot* texts as well. For example:

מִדַּתִּי כִּנְיַתִּי בְּסֹדֵר אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ... חֲזַקְתָּ חֵק חֲקֵת, עָשָׂר וְשָׁלֹשׁ בְּמִדְבָּר, מִחֲזִיקֵם
וְלֹא רִיקֵם.

I recite the attributes in the order that He set.... You decreed that those who repeat the thirteen attributes will uphold [Israel] and not return empty-handed. (*Seliḥa* 16)⁷

6. See below, pages 18–19.

7. See below, pages 270–71, 274–75.

אִמְץ יוֹסִיף טָהָר יְדִים וְכַחוּ וַיִּגְדֵּל וַיִּישָׁר, בְּמִקְרָא אֱלֹמֵלֵא כְּתוּב לְאָמְרוּ אֵי אֶפְשָׁר,
גָּאָה נִתְעַטֵּף בְּשִׁלְיָח צְבוּר וּשְׁלֵשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה מִדּוֹת הַכֶּשֶׁר, דְּבַרְתָּ יִקְרוּ הַעֲבִיר וְהִרְאָה
לְמוֹשֶׁה קֶשֶׁר הַמִּקְשָׁר. הִזְהִירוּ וְאָמְרוּ לוֹ בֶּל זִמְן שְׁחוּטָאִין בְּנֵי, וְכַפְדָּר הִזָּה יִהְיֶה עוֹשֵׂין
לְפָנַי, זֶה הִיא הַמַּדָּה לְסִלְיָח.

May the Pure-Handed increase courage; may His power grow in might. Were it not written in the Torah, we would not dare say it: the Exalted One wrapped Himself [in a *tallit*] like a *hazzan* when He pronounced the thirteen attributes. He moved His hand and showed Moses the knot of tefillin. He cautioned him and told him, “Whenever My children sin, if they enact this service before Me, with this Attribute forgiveness will be granted.” (*Seliḥa* 91)⁸

יְהוָה, יְהוָה, אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנוּן, אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם, וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת, נֹצֵר חֶסֶד לְאֱלֹפִים, נֹשֵׂא
עוֹן וּפְשָׁע וְחַטָּאָה, וְנִקְיָה ... תַּמְכֵּתִי יִתְדוֹתַי בְּשִׁלְשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה תִּבּוֹת

The LORD, the LORD, compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in loving-kindness and truth, extending loving-kindness to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin, and absolving ... I pin my hopes on the thirteen words. (*Seliḥa* 93)⁹

דְּרַכֶּיךָ הוֹדַעְתָּ לְעַנּוּ לְהוֹרוֹת, יָדַעְתָּ שְׁלֵשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה סְדוּרוֹת, הִבְטַחְתָּ שְׂאִין רִיקָם
חַזְרוֹת.

You showed Your ways to the humble one, that he may teach them; You taught him the thirteen attributes, and promised him that they will never go unanswered. (*Seliḥa* 99)¹⁰

Over and over we make reference to God’s covenant with us, namely, that He will respond to these thirteen attributes.

There are three questions I wish to raise in connection with the recitation of *Seliḥot* in general, and these thirteen attributes in particular, and I would like to suggest one overarching principle that resolves them all.

First, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher quotes the opinion of Rabbi Natan Gaon, that the recitation of the thirteen attributes requires the presence

8. See below, pages 1126–29.

9. See below, pages 1140–43.

10. See below, pages 1202–203.

of a *minyan*.¹¹ He himself, however, questions this position because he considers the one reciting the thirteen attributes to be “as one who is reading from the Torah” and not as one uttering “an expression of sanctity (דָּבָר שֶׁבְקִדְשָׁהּ),” and, therefore, no *minyan* should be necessary. Unlike one who utters “an expression of sanctity,” simple “reading from the Torah” requires no *minyan*. Rabbi Jacob is joined by others who also reject Rabbi Natan Gaon’s position and maintain that a single individual can also recite these words.¹² My first question is: What, indeed, is the justification or rationale for Rabbi Natan Gaon’s position? Why would he require a *minyan* for the recitation of the thirteen attributes?

Second, Jewish law insists that verses from the Torah need to be recited in their entirety. The Talmud (*Taanit* 27b; *Megilla* 22a) states that we may not divide any verse that Moses did not divide. Yet, surprisingly, this principle is blatantly ignored when it comes to the recital of the thirteen attributes during the *Selihot* service. Our custom is to end with the word “and absolving (וַיְקַח).” But how can we do so, given that this word appears right in the middle of a verse (Exodus 34:7) and, indeed, in the middle of a phrase! The verse continues, “but does not absolve completely (לֹא יְקַח).” Does not the sudden stop violate this principle of not artificially dividing verses?¹³ How can we justify stopping here in the middle of a verse, especially considering that doing so changes the meaning?

11. See *Tur, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 565, end. Note that this ruling appears in the Laws of Fasting, not of Rosh Hashana. For other references to Rabbi Natan Gaon’s position, see Daniel Goldschmidt, ed., *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* (Jerusalem, 1971), 97; B. M. Lewin, *Otzar HaGeonim*, vol. 5, *Rosh HaShana*, 31; *She’ilot UTeshuvot Ri Migash*, 83; *Maḥzor Vitry* (Jerusalem, 1963), 232, 271; *Siddur Rashi* (Jerusalem, 1963), 545; *Shibbolei HaLeket* (New York, 1959), 14b, *siman* 29; Rabbi Avraham ben Rabbi Natan HaYarḥi, in Yitzḥak Refael, ed., *Sefer HaManhig*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1978), 275. See also Rabbi Shlomo Kluger, *HaElef Lekha Shlomo*, vol. 1 (Bilgoraj, 1931), 10b, *Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 44.
12. See, for example, *Terumat HaDeshen*, 8; *Taz, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 565:5; *Magen Avraham, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 565:6. See also Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Igrot Moshe, Yoreh De’ā* 3:21; the rationale proposed by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik cited in Rabbi Mikhel Zalman Shurkin, *Harerei Kedem*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 2000), 3–4. For more on this issue, see Rabbi Yaakov Yehoshua Hamburger, *Sefer Shaarei Raḥamim* (Brooklyn, 2009), 70–75.
13. In fact, this matter of dividing verses in ritual recitals differently from the way they are divided in the biblical text is raised in a number of different contexts: the text of the *Kiddush* on Friday night and Shabbat morning, the prayer recited when the Torah is lifted after it is read and when it is returned to the Ark, the text of *Kedusha, Kiddush Levana*, the *Musaf Avoda* service on Yom Kippur, the Circumcision ritual, and more. For sources dealing with some of these issues, see *Hatam Sofer, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 10; *She’ilot UTeshuvot Maharam Shik, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 124; *Arukh HaShulḥan, Oraḥ Ḥayyim*

Third, there are many different customs for the earliest day on which the pre-Rosh HaShana *Seliḥot* can be recited. Various *Geonim* (Rabbi Amram, Rabbi Kohen Tzedek, Rabbi Hai) and Rambam write that *Seliḥot* are to be recited only during the Ten Days of Repentance.¹⁴ Rabbeinu Nissim presents three different customs: In Barcelona and its surrounding communities, *Seliḥot* recitation began on the twenty-fifth of Elul. In Gerona and its surrounding communities, *Seliḥot* were recited only during the Ten Days of Repentance, in accordance with the view of the *Geonim*. In yet other, unnamed communities, the recital of *Seliḥot* commenced already on *Rosh Ḥodesh* Elul,¹⁵ the beginning of the forty-day period when Moses ascended Mt. Sinai to receive the second tablets of law which he brought down to the Jews on Yom Kippur, the day God grants atonement for our sins.¹⁶

Yet other rabbinic authorities offer additional dates: For Rabbi David Abudarham, *Seliḥot* recitation begins on the fifteenth of Elul;¹⁷ for Rabbi Simḥa ben Samuel it is the *Motza'ei Shabbat* prior to Rosh HaShana;¹⁸ for Rabbi Tzidkiya HaRofeh no single date is offered but, rather, a complicated procedure is used to determine when to start.¹⁹ North African communities followed an entirely different practice. They recited *Seliḥot* on twenty-three nights: eight Monday and Thursday nights during the

289:3; *She'eilot UTeshuvot Maharsham*, vol. 3, 359; *Mishna Berura, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 289:2; *Rav Pe'alim*, vol. 1, 11; *She'eilot UTeshuvot Zeikher Yehoseif, Oraḥ Ḥayyim*, vol. 1, 38; Rabbi Gedalia Felder, *Siddur Yesodei Yeshurun*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1981), 332–33; *She'eilot UTeshuvot Tzitz Eliezer*, vol. 9, 17:10; vol. 19, 7; *Minḥat Yitzḥak*, vol. 7, 41; Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1991), 164–67; vol. 3 (Jerusalem, 1994), 95–96; vol. 4 (Jerusalem, 1995), 295–96; Mordechai Breuer, “He'arot BeMinhagei HaTefilla,” *HaMaayan* 40:2 (2000): 56; Rabbi Menahem Adler, “BeInyan Kol Pesuka Delo Paskei Moshe,” *Yeshurun* 7 (2000): 617–34.

14. B. M. Lewin, *Otzar HaGeonim*, vol. 5, *Rosh HaShana*, 31–32; Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuva* 3:4; *Tur, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 581.

15. See too Shulḥan Arukh, *Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 581:1. See *She'eilot UTeshuvot Rabi Menahem Azarya MiFano*, 79, who insists that *Seliḥot* recitation should commence the day after *Rosh Ḥodesh*.

16. For these three dates, see Rabbeinu Nissim, *Rosh HaShana* 3a (*dapei haRif*). Rabbeinu Nissim is cited in *Biur HaGra*, ad loc. See also B. M. Levin, ed., *Otzar HaGeonim*, vol. 5, *Rosh HaShana*, 31.

17. “Seder Tefillat Rosh HaShana UPeirusha,” *Abudarham HaShalem* (Jerusalem, 1963), 260.

18. *Mahzor Vitry*, 313.

19. *Shibbolei HaLeket* (New York, 1959), 133a–b, *siman* 282. For some of these opinions, see too Rabbeinu Asher, *Rosh HaShana* 4, end.

month of Elul, four Shabbatot in Elul, erev Rosh HaShana, and the Ten Days of Repentance.²⁰

Remarkably, the accepted practice in Ashkenazi communities is different from every one of these customs. Rabbi Moses Isserles begins his ruling on when to begin the *Seliḥot* recitation with a time reminiscent of that suggested by Rabbi Simḥa ben Samuel, namely, the *Motza'ei Shabbat* prior to Rosh HaShana, but he then adds that if Rosh HaShana falls on a Monday or Tuesday (it cannot fall on a Sunday),²¹ the beginning date is moved back to the previous *Motza'ei Shabbat*.²² And so, my third question is: What is the basis for this seemingly strange Ashkenazi custom of beginning to recite *Seliḥot* the previous week when Rosh HaShana falls on a Monday or Tuesday?

There are two themes I want to underscore regarding the thirteen attributes that provide answers to these questions.

First, Judaism regards all *mitzva* observance as consisting of two components. In the words of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “There are two aspects to the religious gesture in Judaism: strict objective discipline and exalted subjective romance. Both are indispensable.”²³ In another more famous passage Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote:

I learned from her [my mother] very much. Most of all I learned that Judaism expresses itself not only in formal compliance with the law but also in a living experience. She taught me that there is a flavor, a scent and warmth to *mitzvot*. ... The laws of Shabbat, for instance, were passed on to me by my father. ... The Shabbat as a living entity, as a queen, was revealed to me by my mother. ... The fathers *knew* much about the Shabbat; the mothers *lived* the Shabbat, experienced her presence, and perceived her beauty and splendor.²⁴

20. See Rabbi Shaul HaKohen, “Hakdama,” *Sefer HaSeliḥot HaMeduyak Siftei Renanot* (Bnei Berak, 2001), 13–14. They recited *Seliḥot* even on Shabbat. See *ibid.*, 14–15, for a spirited defense of this custom. *Tur, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 602, notes that this was the custom in Spain. While he finds it strange, *Beit Yosef*, ad loc., s.v. *venohagim bisefarad*, tries to defend it.
21. See *Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 428:1.
22. Rama, *Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 581:1. See *Tur, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 581. The custom of commencing the Saturday night before Rosh HaShana is already found in *Maḥzor Vitry*, 313.
23. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships* (2000), 40.
24. *Idem.*, “A Tribute to the Rebbitzin of Talne,” *Tradition* 17:2 (1978): 77.

We are obligated to perform various *mitzva* acts and, in addition, to do so with feeling and intention. A robot can also shake a *lulav* or immerse in a *mikve* but, as human beings, we are engaged in a relationship with God and need to bring the fullness of our humanity into that relationship. *Mitzva* observance is two-fold: act and affect, motion and emotion, external and internal, formal compliance and living experience; it consists of both “religion in manifestation” and “religion in essence.”²⁵

After positing that there are “two aspects to the religious gesture in Judaism: strict objective discipline and exalted subjective romance,” Rabbi Soloveitchik goes on to provide examples: “For instance, the commandment of *Shema* requires, on the one hand, an inner act of surrender to the will of the Almighty. On the other hand, this subjective experience of submission must be translated into a physical act of reciting the *Shema*. The same is true of prayer. It consists of both experiencing the complete helplessness of man, his absolute dependence upon God, and the performance of the ritual of prayer, of reciting fixed texts.” Prayer, after all, is “worship of the heart (עבודת הלב)” and, as such, its inner dimension is obvious and self-evident.²⁶

25. These two phrases come from the title of a book written by G. Van Der Leeuw, a Dutch Gentile scholar first published in 1938. I was introduced to it in an article by my teacher, Dr. Isadore Twersky. See his “Religion and Law,” in S. D. Goitein, ed., *Religion in a Religious Age* (Cambridge, 1974), 69, and 78, n. 2. Dr. Twersky goes on to state that “Halakha is the indispensable manifestation and prescribed concretization of an underlying and overriding spiritual essence.” In an earlier article Dr. Twersky also reflected on this duality by writing, “Halakha itself is a tense, vibrant, dialectical system which regularly insists upon normativeness in action and inwardness in feeling and thought.” See I. Twersky, “The Shulḥan Arukh: Enduring Code of Jewish Law,” *Judaism* 16:2 (1967): 157.
26. For the centrality of this idea – that *mitzva* observance consists of these two separate components – in the thought of Rabbi Soloveitchik, see my essay, “Tazri’a: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Marriage, Mitzvot, and a Jew’s Relationship to God,” in Naftali Rothenberg, ed., *Wisdom by the Week: The Weekly Torah Portion as an Inspiration for Thought and Creativity* (Jersey City, 2011), 324–31; Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, “The Rav at Jubilee: An Appreciation,” in idem., *Leaves of Faith: The World of Jewish Learning*, vol. 1 (Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 2003), 201–202; Jeffrey R. Woolf, “Time Awareness as a Source of Spirituality in the Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik,” *Modern Judaism* 32:1 (2012): 54–75. A book outlining Rabbi Soloveitchik’s views on prayer is entitled *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer* (Jersey City, 2003). Dr. Twersky considered this to be central to his own understanding of Judaism. See Carmi Horowitz, “Halakha and History, Intellectualism and Spirituality: Professor Isadore (Yitzhak) Twersky’s Academic-Religious Profile,” in Meir Y. Soloveichik, Stuart W. Halpern and Shlomo Zuckier, eds., *Torah and Western Thought: Intellectual*

If this is true of prayer in general, it is especially true of the *Seliḥot* service. While it is necessary to recite the words that constitute this service, mere recital is clearly insufficient. In addition to articulating the words, as one approaches God before Rosh HaShana, and between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, one needs to be emotionally connected to the words, to recite them with sincerity, with *kavana*, sincerely asking God for His help and His blessing. The inner emotional component of *Seliḥot* recitation is essential.

This central notion of *Seliḥot* is echoed in a number of sources. Rambam writes, “During these Ten Days [of Repentance] the custom is for everyone to rise during the night and pray in the synagogue with words of supplication and appeasement (וְלִהְתַּפְּלֵל בְּבִתֵּי כְנִסְיֹת בְּדַבְּרֵי תַחֲנוּנִים וּבְכַבּוּשֵׁין) until day break.”²⁷ Note first that Rambam presents the recital of *Seliḥot* as prayer (לְהִתְפַּלֵּל), and that the venue for that prayer is in the synagogue. But he describes it as more than prayer. *Seliḥot* are described as “words of supplication and appeasement” which bespeak feeling and sincerity, an engagement of the heart and of the emotions in addition to the recital of proscribed words.

Rabbi Mordekhai Jaffe goes so far as to frame the *Seliḥot* service as a mini “order of prayer (סֵדֵר הַתְּפִלָּה).” He writes that the introductory verses correspond to *Pesukei DeZimra*; the recital of the thirteen attributes, which he describes as the core of the *Seliḥot* service, corresponds to the Eighteen Benedictions (the *Amida*) (וְהַסְּלִיחוֹת עִם הַיְּגֵי מִדּוֹת שְׁאוּמְרֵין בֵּין כָּל אַחַת) (וְאַחַת, הֵם בְּמִקּוֹם תְּפִלַּת יוֹחַ, שְׁעָקְרוּ הַתְּפִלָּה הוּא יְיָ מִדּוֹת); and the *Seliḥot* service that follows corresponds to the rest of the daily *Shaharit* service.²⁸ Just as it

Portraits of Orthodoxy and Modernity (New Milford and Jerusalem, 2015), 249–80; David Shapiro, “Introduction,” *Torah of the Mind, Torah of the Heart: Divrei Torah of the Talner Rebbe, HaRav Yitzhak (Isadore) Twersky, Bereishis – Shemos* (Jerusalem and New York, 2020), 16, “[The Talner Rebbe] emphasized that *mitzvos* must be performed with awareness, joy and enthusiasm; that the external form of the *mitzva* (*ma’aseh ha-mitzva*) must be accompanied by the experience of its inner dimension and of its personal meaning.”

I have also dealt with this duality in the context of the thought of Dr. Norman Lamm. See my “The Discipline of Law and the Subjectivity of Spirituality,” *Tradition* 53:3 (2021): 232–39.

27. *Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:4.

28. *Levush HaHur, Orah Hayyim* 581. See Rabbi Mikhel Zalman Shurkin, *Harerei Kedem*, vol. 1, 1–2.

is found in the formulation of Rabbi Joseph Caro's *Shulhan Arukh*. He states that "It is not proper for a single person to recite the Thirteen Attributes as a prayer and request for mercy (דָּרַךְ תְּפִלָּה וּבִקְשָׁת רַחֲמִים) for they are an expression of sanctity (דְּבָר שֶׁבִקְדוּשָׁה הֵם)."³²

Another answer to the first question may be deduced from a statement in the Midrash, "David knew that in the future the Temple would be destroyed and that sacrifices would be abolished as a result of the sins of Israel. David was distressed for Israel [and said], 'What [then] will atone for their sins?' The Holy One, Blessed-is-He, said to David, 'When calamities will befall Israel as a result of their sins, let them stand before me together in one group (וַיַּעֲמֵדוּ לִפְנֵי יְחָד בְּאַגְוֵדָה אַחַת), confess their sins before Me, and recite before Me the order of the *Seliḥa* and I will answer them."³³ In order for the thirteen attributes to be efficacious, Jews need to be united, as one people, standing before the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, "together in one group." Perhaps this too can be understood as providing another source underscoring the centrality of a *minyan* for the recital of *Seliḥot*.

The notion that *Seliḥot* need to be recited as words of supplication and appeasement, deliberately, slowly, and with *kavana*, is utilized by Rabbi Abraham Gumbiner to answer the second question presented above. After all, does not the sudden stop in the middle of the verse presenting the thirteen attributes violate the principle against artificially dividing verses? He writes that this principle, that we may not divide any verse that Moses did not divide, applies only when they are being "read." But if they are being recited as prayer, they are exempt from this principle. If one reads parts of verses as expressions of "supplication and request," it is permissible (בֵּינָן דְּקוֹרֵא אוֹתָם דְּרַךְ תְּחִנָּה וּבִקְשָׁה שְׂרִי).³⁴

Rabbi Gumbiner here echoes a similar principle presented centuries earlier by Rabbi David Abudarham who ruled that the normal principle prohibiting changes in the formulation of verses from singular to plural and vice versa does not apply where they are being recited as part of a

the text in Rashba's responsum does not read "they are an expression of sanctity (דְּבָר שֶׁבִקְדוּשָׁה הֵם)" but rather "they are like an expression of sanctity (וְדְבָר שֶׁבִקְדוּשָׁה הֵן)." For a different justification of Rabbi Natan Gaon's position, see Rabbi Shlomo ben Rabbi Shimon Duran, *Sefer HaRashbash*, 191.

32. *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 565:5.

33. *Tana DeBei Eliyahu Zuta* (Warsaw, 1912), 35b, *siman* 23.

34. *Magen Avraham, Orah Hayyim* 282, beginning.

prayer service. Rabbi Abudarham writes that when the intention is not to “read” these verses, but to “plead as in the manner of prayer and expressing request (להתחנן דרך תפלה ובקשה),” such changes are permissible.³⁵ This same reasoning used by Rabbi Abudarham to justify switching back and forth from singular to plural in prayer is used by Rabbi Gumbiner to justify stopping in the middle of a verse while praying, and is very reminiscent of the language of Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret as to why *Seliḥot* require a *minyan*.³⁶

The message is clear. The recital of *Seliḥot* cannot be perfunctory and rote; it must be heartfelt and meaningful, real and sincere. *Seliḥot* recital involves not just “strict objective discipline” but also “exalted subjective romance,” not only “formal compliance with the law” but also the law as “a living experience.”

The second idea I want to underscore with regard to the thirteen attributes is that, for many, their real efficacy lies not in merely reciting them, even with the appropriate feelings of heartfelt sincerity, but in acting in accordance with them. Proper *Seliḥot* also require actions and deeds, not just words or thoughts, however meaningfully and sincerely they may be expressed.

For example, in commenting on the few words that conclude and follow the list of the thirteen attributes in the Torah, Rashi writes that God absolves only those who repent and not those who do not repent. Clearly some behavior is necessary; mere verbal declaration is insufficient.³⁷ Immediately prior to codifying the custom to recite *Seliḥot* during the Ten Days of Repentance, cited above, Rambam writes that the custom is that all Jews give a lot of charity, perform many good deeds, and are occupied with *mitzvot* during these times. This is the first step. Only after

35. Rabbi David Abudarham, “Seder Shaḥarit shel Ḥol UPerusha,” *Abudarham HaShalem*, 99.

36. For another answer to this question, see “Iyun Tefilla,” commentary on *Siddur Otzar HaTefillot*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1960), 48a.

For other issues relating to the application of the principle of “we may not divide any verse that Moses did not divide” to *Seliḥot*, see Rabbi Menahem Mendel Brim, “He’arot veHaarot beSeder haSeliḥot (1),” *Kovetz Beit Aharon VeYisrael* 33:6 (2018): 105–109.

37. Rashi, Exodus 34:7, s.v. *venakei lo yenakeh*. See also the commentary of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, ad loc.

drawing attention to these actions does Rambam go on to mention the recital of *Selihot*.³⁸

Furthermore, a number of rabbinic authorities wonder about the nature of the covenant made in connection with the thirteen attributes, “that they will not return empty-handed.” They point out that often people recite these words and are not favorably answered; that, in fact, they do “return empty-handed.” To explain this apparent discrepancy, they note that the talmudic formulation regarding the thirteen attributes cited above is *not* that God told Moses, “Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them *recite before Me* (יִאמְרוּ לְפָנַי) in accordance with this order, and I will forgive them,” but rather “Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them *act before Me* (יַעֲשׂוּ לְפָנַי) in accordance with this order, and I will forgive them.” For them, it is not enough to *say* these words; we must, rather, *act* in accordance with the thirteen attributes of God outlined here: “Just as He is compassionate and merciful, so too should you be compassionate and merciful.” One must act compassionately and mercifully; simply reciting the words is, indeed, no guarantee. This is reminiscent of the famous passage in the Talmud (*Sota* 14a; also *Shabbat* 133b) obligating one to imitate the traits of God outlined in the thirteen attributes, namely, *to act* in clothing the naked, visiting the sick, comforting the mourners, and burying the dead. The deep profound personal engagement central to *Selihot* includes action as well as the recital of words.³⁹

This emphasis on behavior is highlighted in a talmudic statement

38. See above, n. 27.

39. See, for example, Rabbi Avraham Saba, *Tzeror HaMor* (Warsaw, 1879), Exodus, 27b, s.v. *vayered Hashem be'anani*; Rabbi Elijah de Vidas, *Reishit Hokhma* (Munkach, 1942), 214a (“*Shaar HaAnava*,” chapter 1); Rabbi Moshe Alshikh, *Torat Moshe: Bemidbar* (Warsaw, 1860), 16a (on Numbers 14:17); idem., *Romemot El* (Bnei Brak, 1995), 323 (on Psalms 103:7), cited by Etz Yosef commentary on *Ein Yaakov, Rosh HaShana* 17b, s.v. *vaani emhol lahem*; Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Epstein, *Kitzur Shenei Luhot HaBerit*, “*Shaar HaAhava*,” end; *Eitz Yaakov* on *Ein Yaakov, Rosh HaShana* 17b. See also Rabbi Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel: Hilkhot Rosh HaShana* (Jerusalem, 2001), 93–94, n. 8.

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hakohen, at the beginning of his introduction to *Ahavat Hesed* (Warsaw, 1893), cites eight verses where the obligation to perform acts of kindness appears in one form or another.

Others, however, disagree and maintain that recital of these words suffices. Some base this on the formulation of “God, You taught us *to recite* the thirteen attributes (אֱלֹהֵינוּ הִלְמִדְנוּ לְרַבּוֹתֵינוּ לְעַשׂוֹת אֵת הַתְּרֵיסָן שְׁלֵשׁ עָשָׂר הַזֵּה).” See, for example, Rabbeinu Bahya, *Be'ur al HaTora*, Exodus 34:6–7, who writes that whoever understands the core meaning of these thirteen attributes and recites them with *kavana*, will be answered “unless he has sins that block

preceding the one about the thirteen attributes cited above. The Talmud (*Rosh HaShana* 17a) cites in the name of Rava that those who forgive others for injustices done to them will have their sins forgiven by the heavenly court. The proof text cited is the verse, “He pardons sin and overlooks transgression” (Micah 7:18). The first part of the verse is interpreted as a reference to God, the second part to a human being. Whose sins does God pardon? The sins of those who overlook the transgressions that others have committed against them. The Talmud continues by relating a story about Rabbi Huna, son of Rabbi Yehoshua, who became sick, and Rabbi Pappa went into his home to inquire about his well-being. When Rabbi Pappa saw that Rabbi Huna was dying, he said to his attendants, “Prepare his provisions [his shrouds].” In the end, Rabbi Huna recovered. Rabbi Huna’s friends said to him, “What did you see when you were lying there suspended between life and death?” He answered, “Indeed, I was truly close to dying, but the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, said to the heavenly court, ‘Since he does not stand on his rights [he is ready to waive what is due him], you too should not be exacting with him in his judgment, as it is stated: “He pardons sin and overlooks transgression.” Whose sins does He pardon? The sins of one who overlooks the transgression of others for injustices committed against him.’”⁴⁰ The message is clear: One cannot simply recite the words of the thirteen attributes; people’s sins are forgiven when they live by them, pardoning those who wrong them.

The power of proper and appropriate interpersonal behavior, and the need to follow the principle of “just as He is compassionate and merciful, so too should you be compassionate and merciful,” is also illustrated by a striking comment made by Rabbi Yoshiya Pinto, a seventeenth-century Damascus rabbi and scholar. The Mishna (*Yoma* 8:9) states: “For sins committed between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones. For sins committed between one person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases the other person.” The Mishna then continues and cites Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya who taught this principle from the verse (Leviticus 16:30), “From all your sins you shall be cleansed before the LORD (מִכָּל חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה תִּטְהָרוּ).” And, he continues, “For sins

this [from happening].” See also Rabbi Tzvi Elimelech of Dinov, *Benei Yisaskhar*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1983), 172b–173a (“Maamarei Ḥodesh Elul, Maamar 2”).

40. See also *Megilla* 28a for a similar statement, also in the name of Rava.

committed between a person and God [לְפָנֵי יְהוָה], Yom Kippur atones [תְּטַהֵר]. For sins committed between one person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases the other person.”

This passage is cited by Rabbi Levi ibn Habib in his *Ein Yaakov* collection of homiletical passages from the Talmud. In his commentary on that work, Rabbi Pinto wonders what Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya is adding to the immediately prior opinion cited in the Mishna. If it is to provide a textual basis for that comment, why did the Mishna not simply state the following: “For sins committed between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones. For sins committed between one person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases the other person. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya said, ‘From whence do we know this? From the verse “From all your sins you shall be cleansed before the LORD”’?” Why was it necessary for Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya to repeat verbatim the statement already made in the Mishna, “For sins committed between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones. For sins committed between one person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone until he appeases the other person”?

Rabbi Pinto provides a most striking and far-reaching answer. He suggests that even though the words are identical, there is a fundamental disagreement between the first statement in the Mishna and the opinion of Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya. The first statement states that there are two kinds of sins, those between a person and God and those between one person and another. With regard to sins between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones. Those sins are forgiven. However, when it comes to sins committed by one person against another, Yom Kippur does not forgive. In order to achieve forgiveness for that category of sin, the perpetrator must directly seek forgiveness from the aggrieved. However, suggests Rabbi Pinto, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya disagrees. In his view, Yom Kippur can atone for sins committed by a person against God, but if a person does not seek forgiveness from someone whom he hurt then not only does Yom Kippur not atone for that sin, it will not even atone for sins committed against God. For Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya there are not two separate categories, each with its own independent mechanism of atonement. Rather, in his view, “For sins committed between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones. For sins committed between one person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone *for any sin, even those committed against God,*

until he appeases the other person.” If people do not ask others to forgive them for having wronged them, Yom Kippur is totally meaningless and irrelevant. It will not provide them with atonement even for sins they committed against God.⁴¹

But why is this so? Why is asking forgiveness from another person so central and so crucial that without it, even sins committed against God, that have nothing to do with another person, will not be atoned? Does this not seem extreme? Rabbi Ḥayyim Palache, an eighteenth-century Turkish rabbi, suggests that rules outlining both behavior between a person and God and between one person and another are specified in the Torah. For example, the same Torah that commands the laws of kashrūt commands “love your neighbor as yourself.” And so, violating the latter commandment is also a violation of Torah. Why, then, suggests Rabbi Palache, should God forgive one for violating laws between a person and God if not asking forgiveness from other people for sins committed against them is a violation of the same Torah? Rabbi Pinto’s interpretation of Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya’s position is thus clarified. “For sins committed between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones. For sins committed between one person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone *for any sin, even those committed against God*, until he appeases the other person.”⁴²

Another explanation of Rabbi Pinto’s position suggested by Rabbi Saul Löwenstamm, Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam in the second half of the eighteenth century, is most relevant here. An introductory comment is necessary to appreciate the import of his answer. There is a striking passage in the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Makkot* 2:6): “They asked Wisdom (חֵכְמָה), ‘What punishment is due the sinner?’ She said to them, ‘Evil pursues sinners’ (Proverbs 13:21). They asked Prophecy (נְבִיאָה), ‘What punishment is due the sinner?’ She said to them, ‘The soul that sins – it should die (הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַחַטָּאת הִיא תָמוּת)’ (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). They asked the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, ‘What punishment is due the sinner?’ He said to them, ‘Let him repent and he will be atoned.’” The message here is a profound one. By any measure repentance is conceptually impossible. After all, a sin was committed. Where does it go? How can it be rescinded or erased? The act was done and the one who did it must be held responsible. And,

41. Rabbi Yoshiya Pinto, *HaRif* (acronym for his name) on *Ein Yaakov*, ad loc.

42. Rabbi Ḥayyim Palache, *Tzavaa MeiḤayyim* (Jerusalem, 1995), 45.

in the view of Reish Lakish (*Yoma* 86b), repentance is so great that even willful transgressions are not only considered as errors but even as merits! How is this conceivably possible? Indeed, both Wisdom and Prophecy state the obvious: Sinners need to be held responsible for the sins they commit. Period. It is only God who allows for the efficacy of repentance. Yes, it is illogical; yes, it defies reason, but it is simply a gift to us from God. “Repent, sincerely regret your misdeeds and undertake not to repeat them and,” says God, “I will forgive you.”⁴³

But why should God give us what is clearly nothing other than a gift? Rabbi Löwenstamm notes that one normally speaks of human beings acting like God, following the ways of God, “Just as He is compassionate and merciful, so too should you be compassionate and merciful.” But, he suggests, in this case it is God who models His behavior after ours. When God sees that we forgive others for wrongs they committed against us, He does the same for us. After all, a wrong was committed against another person. Where does it go? How can it be forgiven? The act was done and the one who did it must be responsible. But yet the aggrieved party is prepared to forgive, somehow to put that event in the past, and move on. And so, says God, I will do the same.

Rabbi Löwenstamm suggests that this is the rationale behind the position of Rabbi Pinto. When will God forgive those who sinned against Him? When he sees them forgiving others who perpetrated wrongs against them. If we don’t forgive our fellow human beings for wrongs they did against us, why should God forgive us for wrongs we did against Him?⁴⁴ Once again, the recital of words is wholly insufficient; simply reciting the words of the thirteen attributes is meaningless. What makes all the difference is the way one behaves toward someone else, how one lives the behaviors described in the thirteen attributes.

We are now in a position to answer the third question posed above. When Rosh HaShana falls on a Monday or Tuesday, what is the basis for

43. See Pinchas H. Peli, *On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Northvale and London, 1996), 248–58.

44. Rabbi Saul Löwenstamm, *Binyan Ariel* (Jerusalem, 1985), 117a.

For a discussion of Rabbi Pinto’s position, see Rabbi Ovadya Yosef, *She’eilot UTeshuvot Yehaveh Daat*, vol. 5, 44; Rabbi Yaakov Hayyim Sofer, “BeNyan Aveirot Shebein Adam LeHavero Ein Yom HaKippurim Mekhaper,” *Kovetz Torani Hilkhati Mevakshei Torah: Yamim Noraim* 16–17, vol. 3 (1995), 378–82.

the Ashkenazi custom to begin the recital of *Seliḥot* at the beginning of the previous week? Rabbi Mordekhai Jaffe, the sixteenth-century Polish rabbi, explains that “most of the world” has a custom to fast at this time of year for ten days, including Yom Kippur, corresponding to the Ten Days of Repentance. Since one cannot fast on four of those days – two days of Rosh HaShana, Shabbat Shuva, and Erev Yom Kippur – the custom developed to fast for four days prior to Rosh HaShana. It was on account of this, he suggests, that the recitation of *Seliḥot* was instituted on those days. This equivalence makes sense since the goal of reciting *Seliḥot* is similar to that of fasting, to focus attention on introspection and repentance.⁴⁵ And so, if Rosh HaShana falls early in the week, it is necessary to begin reciting *Seliḥot* the previous week.⁴⁶

45. See Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Taaniyot* 1:2.

46. This, however, still does not explain why it is necessary to start on a *Motza’ei Shabbat*. Rabbi Jaffe wrote, “In order that there always will be an established day for the beginning” of the recital, “to avoid error,” we always commence recital on the first day of the week. Therefore, if Rosh HaShana falls on Thursday or Shabbat, there are four days available for *Seliḥot* recital that week and we can commence at the beginning of the week; if it falls on Monday and Tuesday, we need to go back and commence at the beginning of the previous week. See Rabbi Mordekhai Jaffe, *Levush HaḤur, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 581:1, cited in *Taz, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 581:2. It is interesting to note that in citing this passage from the *Levush*, the *Mishna Berura (Oraḥ Ḥayyim 581:6)* writes that “many (הרבה)” have the custom to fast for ten days, not “most of the world (רוב העולם)” found in the original text.

Rabbi Yosef ben Moshe, a student of Rabbi Yisrael Isserlein, author of the *Terumat HaDeshen*, suggests that the reason the recital of *Seliḥot* always begins on a Saturday night is to take advantage of all the Torah customarily studied on Shabbat. “It is, therefore appropriate to begin on the first day [of the week] because the nation is happy for the *mitzva* [of studying] Torah, and also because of the joy of Shabbat “(עונג שבת).” He writes that we therefore follow Shabbat immediately with *Seliḥot* because, the Talmud (*Shabbat* 30b) states that the Divine Presence rests upon a person imbued with the joy of a *mitzva*. See Rabbi Yosef ben Moshe, *Leket Yosher* (Berlin, 1903), 117–18. *Shaare Teshuva (Oraḥ Ḥayyim 581:1)* writes, however, that *Seliḥot* cannot be recited on Motzaei Shabbat until *ḥatzot* because the sanctity of Shabbat extends until then. Just as it is inappropriate to recite *Seliḥot* on Shabbat, so must one wait until *ḥatzot* after the conclusion of Shabbat. Rabbi Yeḥiel Mikhel Epstein suggests that since the creation of human beings to serve God was the goal of creation, we begin the *teshuva* process on the first day of creation. See *Arukh HaShulḥan, Oraḥ Ḥayyim 581:3*. Rabbi Elijah of Vilna suggests something simpler, that remembering a particular day of the week is easier than keeping track of a day of the month. See *Biar haGra, Oraḥ Ḥayyim 581, s.v. beyom eḥad*. See also Rabbi Ephraim Greenblatt, *Sefer Rivevot Ephraim, Oraḥ Ḥayyim*, vol. 4 (Brooklyn, 1985), 281, 144:2. But this does not explain why, specifically, the first day of the week was chosen. For the custom to recite *Seliḥot* even on Shabbat, see above, n. 20.

The point made earlier about the importance of acting in accordance with the thirteen attributes, “Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them *act before Me* (יַעֲשׂוּ לִפְנֵי) in accordance with this order, and I will forgive them,” provides the frame for a second explanation for the Ashkenazi custom to begin the recital of *Selihot* four or more days prior to Rosh HaShana. Jewish law requires that sacrificial animals require examination for blemishes four days before they are brought on the altar. Now, regarding the *Musaf* sacrifice on holidays in general, the formulation used (Numbers 28:27; 29:8, 13,36) is “And you shall *offer* a burnt offering (וְהִקְרַבְתֶּם עֹלָה),” but with regard to the *Musaf* sacrifice on Rosh HaShana, the text (Numbers 29:2) reads, “And you shall *make* a burnt offering (וַעֲשִׂיתֶם עֹלָה).”

Rabbi Menahem Mendel Auerbach, author of the *Ateret Zekeinim* commentary on *Orah Hayyim*, takes this to mean that we should prepare *ourselves* as if *we ourselves* were the sacrifice. We need to envision ourselves as a sacrifice, and since a sacrifice requires four days of examination prior to it being brought on the altar, we require at least four days of *Selihot* recitation to examine our behavior and make sure we do not enter Rosh HaShana with any blemishes.⁴⁷ Once again the emphasis is on doing, acting. *Selihot* require that we recite, that we feel and, finally, that we act.

In summary, by recognizing that engaging with *Selihot* requires more than mere recitation, we can understand the answers to all three questions posed above. Because they need to be recited in a special way, “as prayer and requests for mercy,” they require a *minyan* – this grants it the status of “an expression of sanctity” (Rashba); because it needs to be read as expressions of “supplication and request,” it is not bound by the principle that we may not divide any verse that Moses did not divide (*Magen Avraham*); because it requires action, seeing oneself as a sacrifice, it needs to be recited at least four days prior to Rosh HaShana (*Ateret Zekeinim*).

Rabbi Yosef ben Moshe writes that the person who is designated to lead the prayers on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur must lead the *Selihot*

47. Rabbi Menahem Mendel Auerbach, *Ateret Zekeinim, Orah Hayyim* 581. *Mishna Berura (Orah Hayyim 581:6)* cites this explanation in the name of the author of the *Eliyahu Rabba*. For a development of this notion, see Rabbi Yeruham Olshin, *Yerah LeMoadim, Yamim Noraim*, vol. 1 (Lakewood, 2014), 319–25.

service because if he fails to do so he “is comparable to a person who wants to visit with the king but has the inner key and not the outer key.”⁴⁸ While he is addressing the role of the prayer leader, I believe that this image applies to each of us as well. As we approach God in this season, the *Seliḥot* service serves as our outer key. We need to utilize it – properly, appropriately, and effectively – to begin to make our way into Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. We need to successfully use the key to the outer door to have a chance of approaching the inner door with any degree of success.

In the merit of our sincere recital of the thirteen attributes, and our readiness to act upon them, may this new year bring joy and fulfillment to us, to the entire household of Israel, and to all mankind.⁴⁹

* * *

In addition to the thirteen attributes, a number of other themes appear, and reappear, throughout the *Seliḥot* service that are worthy of attention.

Akeida

The biblical story of the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham, presented in the twenty-second chapter of the Book of Genesis and known as *Akeidat Yitzḥak*, is repeatedly mentioned throughout the *Seliḥot* service. In addition to scattered references, beginning on Erev Rosh HaShana and through the Ten Days of Repentance until Erev Yom Kippur, one entire *Seliḥa* recited each day and technically known as an “*Akeida*,” is devoted to it.⁵⁰ Over and over again, the enormous faith in God demonstrated by both Abraham and Isaac at the *Akeida* is underscored, and the merit of the behavior of these Patriarchs is consistently invoked as a source of protection for the Jewish people when they will sin and need forgiveness. Each reference to the *Akeida* story in the *Seliḥot*

48. Rabbi Yosef ben Moshe, *Leket Yosher*, 117.

49. For additional sources on the thirteen attributes and their connection to the *Seliḥot*, see Rabbi Yaakov Yehoshua Hamburger, *Sefer Shaarei Raḥamim* (Brooklyn, 2009); Rabbi Ezra Bick, *In His Mercy: Understanding the Thirteen Midot* (New Milford and Jerusalem, 2011); Avraham Grossman, “Maalatan shel Shelosh-Esrei Midot HaRaḥamim BeMidreshei Hāzal,” *Derekh Agada* 12 (Jerusalem, 2013), 33–45.

50. See *Seliḥot* 39, 52, 65, 74, 83, 92. For other references, see, for example, *Seliḥot* 4, 5, 55, 100.

service reflects, in poetic form, many of the insights found throughout rabbinic literature on various aspects of this story, a few of which I will highlight here.

For example, the Midrash describes Abraham's heartfelt prayer to God after the episode had concluded:

Rabbi Bibi bar Abba said in the name of Rabbi Yoḥanan: Our father Abraham stood in prayer and supplication before the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, and said to Him: "Master of the Universe, it is manifest and known to You that at the time when You told me (Genesis 22:2) 'Take your son, your only son,' there was something in my mind that I could have responded to You and there was something in my mind that I could have said. [Just] yesterday You told me (21:12), 'For it is through Isaac that offspring will be considered yours,' and now You tell me (22:2), 'Bring him up there as an offering'? However, just as I had what I could have responded to You but I controlled my inclination and did not respond to You, 'like a deaf man I do not hear, like a mute who does not open his mouth' (Psalms 38:14), so too when the children of Isaac will come to perform sins and bad deeds, recollect for them the binding of their father Isaac and rise from the throne of judgment to the throne of mercy and, filled with compassion for them, have mercy on them and change for them the attribute of justice to the attribute of mercy."⁵¹

This text concludes by associating this request for compassion and mercy with a specific day, Rosh HaShana.⁵²

Here the conversation was entirely one way; we are not told about God's response to Abraham's plea. But another version of this story does record His response in which He assures Abraham that He will, indeed, forgive the Jewish people. After the angel conveyed to Abraham that God made an oath (Genesis 22:16), Abraham said to Him:

"You swore, and I swore that I will not descend from the altar until I say everything that I need [to say]." Said He to him, "Speak." "Did You not

51. *Vayikra Rabba* 29:9.

52. See *Bereishit Rabba* 56:10; *Midrash Lekah Tov*, Genesis 22:14; *Yalkut Shimoni*, Vayera 101; *Pesikta Rabbati* 40; *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Taanit* 2:4; *Targum Yerushalmi* and *Targum Yonatan ben Uziel*, Genesis 22:14.

say to me (15:5), ‘And count the stars if you are able to count them ... so shall be your offspring?’” He said, “Yes.” He said to Him, “From whom?” He said to him, “From Isaac.” He said to Him, “In my heart I had a response to You, telling You, ‘Yesterday You told me (21:12), “For it is through Isaac that offspring will be considered for you,” [and] now You tell me (22:2) “to bring him up there as an offering”’ And [yet] I conquered my inclination and did not respond to You. [Just as I acted this way], so too when the children of Isaac will sin and face calamity, may the binding of Isaac be invoked on their behalf. May it be considered before You as if his ashes are piled up on the altar. Forgive them and redeem them from their calamities.”

The Holy One, Blessed-is-He said to him, “You had your say, and I will have mine. In the future Isaac’s children shall sin before Me and I will judge them on Rosh HaShana. But if they request that I search for a merit for them, and remember for their sake the binding of Isaac, let them blow before Me with this shofar. ... Let them blow before me with the horn of a ram and I will save them and redeem them from their sins.”⁵³

And in yet another passage we are told that the Jewish people will, indeed, be forgiven upon their blowing the shofar. “Rabbi Ḥanina ben Yitzḥak said, ‘All year long Israel is grasped by sin and entangled in calamities, and on Rosh HaShana they take a shofar and blow it. They are remembered before the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, and He forgives them.’” And not only are they remembered and forgiven by God in the present but, the text continues, the shofar will also be the instrument of their future redemption. “Rabbi Levi said, ‘Because our forefather Abraham saw the ram extricate itself from one thicket and become entangled in another thicket, the Holy One, Blessed-is-He said to him, “So will your children in the future be entangled in kingdoms, from Babylonia to Media, from Media to Greece, and from Greece to Edom. And eventually they will be redeemed with the horn of a ram”’.”⁵⁴

53. *Midrash Tanḥuma*, Vayera 23. For additional related sources, see Rabbi Menahem M. Kasher, *Torah Sheleima* (Jerusalem, 1992), on Genesis 22:13, 901–902, n. 149. For more on the phrase, “as if his ashes are piled up on the altar,” see below.

54. *Bereishit Rabba* 56:9. See also *Vayikra Rabba* 29:10; *Midrash Lekah Tov*, Genesis 22:13;

Note that in this case God is not responding to a request from Abraham, but He, on His own, proactively tells Abraham that He will redeem the Jewish people in the merit of the *Akeida*. Here it appears that this outcome from the *Akeida* story was preordained as part of God's plan from the very beginning.⁵⁵

The lasting impact of the *Akeida* story is also described in another Midrash:

They said: At the moment Abraham, our father, bound Isaac his son, the Holy one, Blessed-is-He, instituted [the sacrifice of] two lambs, one in the morning and one in the evening. And why all of this? For the moment Israel sacrifices the daily [sacrifices] on the altar, and reads this verse, “on the northern side of the altar before the Lord (צִפּוֹנֵה לְפָנֵי יְהוָה),” the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, remembers the binding of Isaac.⁵⁶

The word צִפּוֹנֵה here, referring to the sacrifice of a ram, is interpreted by the Midrash as hidden away (צָפֵן) before God who will remember the sacrifice of the ram in the *Akeida* story and will utilize it to redound to the favor of the Jewish people.

In addition, another passage in the Midrash indicates that the existence of the entire world was made possible as a result of the behavior of both Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah:

When the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, wanted to create the world, the ministering angels said to Him, “What is man that You have been

Yalkut Shimoni, Vayera 101, end; *Talmud Yerushalmi*, Taanit 2:4, and the sources cited in Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem, 1975), 502–504. In addition, see Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial* (New York, 1967), 51, 57–58, 72–74, 89–99, 115, 151. This book is an English translation by Judah Goldin of an article first published by Spiegel, “MeAgadot HaAkeida: Piyut al Shehitat Yitzhak UTehiyato leR' Efrayim MiBona,” *Sefer HaYovel Likhvod Alexander Marx, Helek Ivri* (New York, 1950), 471–547. Arnold J. Band, “Scholarship as Lamentation: Shalom Spiegel on ‘The Binding of Isaac,’” *Jewish Social Studies* 5:1–2 (1998–1999): 80–90, places Spiegel's work squarely in the context of the aftermath of the Holocaust.

55. See also the passage from the Midrash cited below, at n. 56.

56. *Vayikra Rabba* 2:11. See also the sermon by Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov cited in Marc Saperstein, “A Sermon on the Akedah From the Generation of the Expulsion and its Implications for 1391,” in *Exile and Diaspora: Studies in the History of the Jewish People Presented to Professor Haim Beinart* (Jerusalem, 1991), 106, n. 9. One of the *Seliḥot* focuses specifically on the daily sacrifices mentioned here. See *Seliḥa* 44.

mindful of him?” (Psalms 8:5). The Holy One, Blessed-is-He, said to them, “You say ‘What is man that You have been mindful of him?’ because you are looking at the [evil] generation of Enosh. But, behold, I am showing you the glory of Abraham ‘about whom you should be mindful’ as it says (Genesis 19:29), ‘And God remembered Abraham.’” ... He said to them, “In the future you will see a father who slaughters his son and a son who is slaughtered for the sanctification of My name.”⁵⁷

Indeed, a number of other important events in Jewish history were attributed to the merit of the *Akeida*: The Jewish first-born sons were saved on the night of the exodus from Egypt;⁵⁸ the Red Sea split;⁵⁹ the city of Jerusalem was saved from destruction after the inappropriate census conducted by King David;⁶⁰ and the Jews were saved from Haman by Esther.⁶¹

The biblical chapter describing the story of the *Akeida* was deemed so significant that it was included at the beginning of the daily *Shaharit* service and was preceded and followed by special prayers asking God to suppress His anger at His children just as Abraham suppressed his compassion for his son to do God’s will.⁶²

As already indicated, the story of the *Akeida* is particularly relevant on and around the festival of Rosh HaShana. The Talmud (*Megilla* 31a) rules that this story serves as the Torah reading on the second day of Rosh HaShana, and the reason suggested is “in order to recall the merit of the binding of Isaac.”⁶³ The Talmud (*Rosh HaShana* 16a) states, “Rabbi Abbahu said: Why does one sound a blast with a shofar made from a ram’s horn on Rosh HaShana? The Holy One, Blessed-is-He, said, ‘Sound

57. *Midrash Tanḥuma*, Vayera 18.

58. *Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael*, *Masekhet DePisha*, *Parashat Bo*, *Parasha 7*, s.v. *vera’iti et hadam*.

59. *Bereishit Rabba* 55:8; *Shemot Rabba* 21:8; *Kohelet Rabba* 10:1; *Yalkut Shimoni*, Vayera 98.

60. *Berakhot* 62b.

61. *Bereishit Rabba* 56:1. In addition, the lamb of the Paschal sacrifice (Exodus 12:3–5) is associated with the lamb at the *Akeida* (Genesis 22:8; see *Shemot Rabba* 15:12); the power of the Priestly Blessing is in the merit of the *Akeida* (*Bereishit Rabba* 43:8).

62. See *Shulḥan Arukh*, *Orah Ḥayyim* 1:5; *The Koren Siddur* (Jerusalem and New Milford, 2009), 32–35.

63. *Mishna Berura*, *Orah Ḥayyim* 601:1.

a blast before Me with a shofar made from a ram's horn, so that I will remember for you the binding of Isaac, son of Abraham [in whose stead a ram was sacrificed], and I will ascribe it to you as if you had bound yourselves before Me.” In fact, a Midrash states that the story of the *Akeida* actually took place on Rosh HaShana.⁶⁴

The connection between the story of the *Akeida* and Rosh HaShana is manifest in a most moving – and harrowing – story told about an event that occurred in Auschwitz on the eve of Rosh HaShana, 1944. The Nazi commander there determined that only those boys who were able to work would be kept alive and all the others would be killed. Each boy in the camp would be forced to pass under a horizontal bar; if his head touched the bar, he could live. After this “test” was administered, some fourteen hundred boys who failed this “test” were placed in a special block guarded by Jewish kapos to be sent the next night to the gas chamber.

Word of this action spread through the camp and the next day, the first day of Rosh HaShana, desperate fathers pleaded with the kapos to release their sons from this certain death. But the kapos refused, explaining that they were responsible for delivering the precise number of boys to the Nazis and if one was missing, they would be killed. Finally, they did agree to release some of the boys in return for bribes but, to ensure that the exact number was maintained, they grabbed other boys who had been spared and put them in the block to be killed. A prominent rabbi and *posek* then in Auschwitz, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Meisels, recounts how that morning he was approached by a distraught father “who looked like a simple Jew from the Oberland” who inquired of him if, under these circumstances, he was permitted according to Jewish law to pay a bribe to redeem his son. Rabbi Meisels begged the Jew not to ask him such a question because he was unable to rule on it, lacking any presence of mind,

64. *Pesikta Rabbati* 40. This tradition is cited in some medieval sources. See, for example, Abudarham, “Seider Tefillat Rosh HaShana UPeirusha,” 269; Rabbi Asher of Lunel, *Sefer HaMinhagot*, 16b. See also *She’eilot UTeshuvot Divrei Yatziv, Likutim VeHashmatot*, 56. For other sources, see Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 55, n. 14.

This association is by no means universally accepted. The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 15:11) states that it occurred in the month of Nisan. Others claim that it occurred on Yom Kippur. For this, see Levi Ginzberg, “LeḤadashim Yevaker,” *HaTzofeh MeEretz Hagar* 3:4 (1914): 186–88.

For more on this connection, see Dov Noy, “Rosh HaShana VeAkeidat Yitzhak,” *Maḥanayim* 49 (1960): 40–47.

books to review, and colleagues with whom to consult on such a weighty matter. The man insisted on an answer and Rabbi Meisels repeatedly begged him not to press him and told him to do what he himself thought was right. Finally, the father said:

Rebbe, I have done mine, what the Torah has obligated me to do. I have asked a *she'eila* of a *rav*. There is no other *rav* here. And since you cannot answer me that I am allowed to ransom my child, it is a sign that you are not prepared [to say] that the Halakha permits it. For were it permitted without any question, you would certainly answer me that it is permitted. I consider this as a *psak din* that I am not allowed [to do this] in accordance with Halakha. And for me this is enough. So my only child will be burned in accordance with Torah and Halakha. I accept this with love and joy. I will do nothing to ransom him for the Torah has so instructed.

No entreaties on the part of Rabbi Meisels could change the mind of this father and the rabbi reported how that entire day, the day of Rosh HaShana, the father “walked around murmuring to himself with joy that he merited to sacrifice his only son to God ... and [prayed] that it be esteemed by God like the binding of our father Isaac which also took place on Rosh HaShana.”⁶⁵

This theme of the *Akeida* is also prominent in the *Musaf Amida* on both days of the holiday. The second of the three middle blessings featured there, called *Zikhronot*, includes the following prayer:

And let the image of that binding,
when our father Abraham bound Isaac his son upon the altar,
be present before you;
when he suppressed his compassion, to do Your will wholeheartedly.
So, too, let your compassion wrest Your anger from us,
And in Your great goodness may Your anger be turned away from
Your people, Your city, Your land, and Your inheritance.⁶⁶

65. Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh Meisels, *She'eilot UTeshuvot Mekadshei Hashem*, vol. 1 (repr. Jerusalem, 2008), 3–6. This story is described in Irving J. Rosenbaum, *The Holocaust and Halakha* (1976), 3–5; Esther Farbstein, *Hidden in Thunder*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 2007), 226–27, n. 118.

66. *The Koren Rosh HaShana Maḥzor* (Jerusalem and New Milford, 2020), 792.

Rashi points out that the verses we recite in both the *Zikhronot* and *Shofarot* sections of the Rosh HaShana *Musaf Amida* are meant to be reminders of the *Akeida*.⁶⁷ This notion, that the merit of the heroic behavior of Abraham and Isaac at the *Akeida* should redound to the benefit of their children, is a central theme of many of the *Selihot* we recite.

In addition, it is important to note that a significant shift of the identity of the primary protagonist of the story of the *Akeida* appeared in rabbinic literature and reached its climax in the twelfth-century *Selihot* that focus on that event. In the biblical description of the narrative, it is Abraham's faith and obedience to God's will that is the central feature of the story. He is the hero as opposed to Isaac. In the words of Abraham ibn Ezra, "There is nothing in the text about Isaac."⁶⁸ By contrast, in post-biblical Jewish sources the perspective is almost reversed and it is Isaac's behavior that occupies equal, and in some cases even central, stage. After all, unlike his father, he did not hear what was expected of him from God and, unlike his father, he had no experiences with any previous tests that might have prepared him for this one.⁶⁹ These later sources go out of their way to ascribe a much more active role to Isaac than would appear from the biblical narrative. For their authors, Isaac is the real hero for, after all, he was the one prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice.⁷⁰

For example, in commenting on the verse (Genesis 22:1) that introduces this story, "And it came to pass after these words and God tested Abraham," the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 89b) records a disagreement between Rabbi Yoḥanan and Rabbi Levi:

Rabbi Yoḥanan said in the name of Rabbi Yosei ben Zimra: [This means] after the statement of Satan, as it is written (Genesis 21:8), "And the child grew, and was weaned [and Abraham prepared a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned]." Satan said before the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, "Master of the Universe, this old man, you favored him with a product of the womb [i.e., a child] at one hundred years

67. Rashi, Leviticus 23:24, s.v. *zikhron terua*.

68. Commentary on the Torah, Genesis 22:4.

69. For this last point, see Menaḥem Hakohen, "BaDerekh LaAkeida," *Maḥanayim* 49 (1961): 49.

70. See George Foot Moore, *Judaism*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1927), 539; the secondary literature cited below, n. 109.

[of age]. From the entire feast that he prepared, did he not have [even] one dove or one pigeon to sacrifice before You [as a thanks-offering]?” [God] said [to Satan], “Did he prepare [the feast for any reason] but for his son? If I say to him, ‘Sacrifice your son before Me,’ he would immediately slaughter him.” Immediately, [after these matters, the verse states] “And God tried Abraham.”

... Rabbi Levi says: [This means] after the statement of Ishmael to Isaac [during an exchange between them described in the verse (Genesis 21:9)], “And Sarah saw the son of Hagar mocking.” Ishmael said to Isaac, “I am greater than you in [the fulfillment of] *mitzvot*, as you were circumcised at the age of eight days [without your knowledge and without your consent] and I at the age of thirteen years [with both my knowledge and my consent].” [Isaac] said to [Ishmael], “And do you provoke me with one organ? If the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, were to say to me, ‘Sacrifice yourself before Me,’ I would sacrifice myself.” Immediately, “God tested Abraham” [to confirm that Isaac was sincere in his offer to give his life].

Combining these two opinions yields the conclusion that both Abraham and Isaac are highlighted here as the focus of this story.⁷¹

This double focus is also reflected elsewhere in the Midrash. In commenting on the two verses (Genesis 22:6, 8), “And the two of them went together (וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם יחדוֹ)” the Midrash states, “This one to bind and this one to be bound, this one to slaughter and this one to be slaughtered (וְזֶה לְעַקֹּד וְזֶה לְעֻדָּה, וְזֶה לְשַׁחֵט וְזֶה לְשִׁחֻט).”⁷² Both father and son are equal in this test.⁷³ Another Midrash provides specific details on the nature of this togetherness. It states that Isaac did not object to what he clearly understood was about to happen. “Just like this one was prepared to bring near, so too was this one prepared to be brought near; Abraham was happy to bind and Isaac was happy to be bound; Abraham was happy to slaughter

71. See too *Bereishit Rabba* 55:4; *Eikha Rabba*, *Petiḥta* 24.

72. *Bereishit Rabba* 56:4; *Yalkut Shimoni*, Vayera 101.

73. For another example, see Lewis M. Barth, “Parashat Yom Bet’: Derasha KeMisgeret LaAgada ‘Asara Nisyonot SheNitnasa Avraham Avinu,” *HUCA* 58 (1987): 37–38. See also Meir Givati, “Okeid VeNe’ekad – Mikra UMidrash,” *Beit Mikra* 27:2–3 (1982): 144–54.

and Isaac was happy to be slaughtered.”⁷⁴ This parallel between father and son is sharply formulated in various medieval liturgical texts where they are referred to as “the binder and the one bound (עוקר ונעקר).”⁷⁵

A number of the *Seliḥot* we recite also highlight the role of Isaac, placing it as equivalent to that of Abraham. “By morning the two of them prepared to fulfill Your will (בקר הכינו לבם שניהם לעשות רצונך), Mighty One, the son took wood, the father took a knife for the irreparable slaughter; Bidden, they went wholeheartedly” (*Seliḥa* 39);⁷⁶ “Both kept Your commandments carefully (במצותך שניהם נזהרים), and did not question Your word; Rushing swiftly as can be, to reach one of the mountains. . . . Together, in perfect love (יחד באהבה כליה), they cleared the way in the wilderness” (*Seliḥa* 52);⁷⁷ “Together, rejoicing with whole hearts, they ran to do Your will (יחדו בכל לבם רצו, לעשות רצונך רצו),” (*Seliḥa* 83);⁷⁸ “Joined together, the son and the father (טפלו שניהם הבן והאב), they bowed to the LORD in the splendor of holiness” (*Seliḥa* 92).⁷⁹

In some texts, Isaac’s role is particularly highlighted and underscored. The verse (Exodus 32:13) states, “Remember for Abraham, Isaac, and Yisrael, Your servants (זכו לַאֲבֹרָהֶם לְיִצְחָק וְלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדֶיךָ).” The Midrash associates a different argument with each of these Patriarchs. Moses said to God: “If it is burning that they deserve, remember Abraham who placed his soul into a fiery furnace to be burnt for Your name, and may his burning cancel the burning of his children; if it is killing that they deserve, remember Isaac their father who stretched out his neck on the altar to be slaughtered for Your name, and may his killing cancel the killing of his children; if it is exile that they deserve, remember Jacob their father who was exiled from his father’s house to Haran. May these [sins] be covered by these [acts] (ויצאו אלו באלו).”⁸⁰ In this reference to the story

74. *Pesikta Rabbati* 40.

75. Daniel Goldschmidt and Avraham Fraenkel, eds., *Leket Piyutei Seliḥot Me’et Paytanei Ashkenaz VeTzarfat*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1993), 57, 308; Avraham Fraenkel, Abraham Gross, and Peter Sh. Lenhardt, eds., *Hebräische liturgische Poesien zu den Judenverfolgungen während des Ersten Kreuzzugs* (Wiesbaden, 2016), 103 (see also 97). See also Meir Givati, “Okeid VeNe’ekad”; below, at n. 108; *Seliḥa* 92.

76. See below, pages 576–77.

77. See below, pages 718–19.

78. See below, pages 1044–45.

79. See below, pages 1134–35.

80. *Shemot Rabba* 44:5.

of the *Akeida*, it is solely the behavior of Isaac that is invoked in favor of his children.

Another Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 56:8) states in the name of Rabbi Yitzhak: “When Abraham wished to bind his son Isaac, he said to him, ‘Father, I am a young man, and am afraid that my body will tremble through fear of the knife and I will bring you grief, perhaps the slaughter will be rendered unfit and it will not be counted for you as a sacrifice. Therefore, bind me very tight.’ Forthwith, ‘and he bound Isaac (Genesis 22:9).” The Midrash concludes that since Isaac was thirty-seven [or thirty-six] years old at that time, it would have been impossible for his father to bind him against his will. It could have taken place only because of Isaac’s full cooperation.⁸¹ In another version of this story in the Midrash, Isaac asked Abraham to do this lest out of fear of his impending death he might direct an inappropriate comment to his father and thereby violate the fifth commandment.⁸²

This perspective is also expressed in some of the *Selihot*.

“Please rise, my father, and bind me for slaughter,
lest I shy away from the blade.
Bind me up tight, lest I profane the sacrifice,
to separate that which is holy.”

The cluster of henna broke down into weeping
as he saw his father becoming childless. (*Seliha* 92)

The only son saw that the lamb was he,
and bid his sorely tested father,
“Father, prepare me as you would a lamb –
show no mercy, spare me not.

It is I He desires and craves,
to Him I will bare my heart.
Will you prevent from me such an end –
for Him to gather my spirit and soul?” (*Seliha* 52)

81. *Midrash Tanhuma*, Vayera 23; *Pesikta Rabbati* 40; *Targum Yonatan ben Uziel*, Genesis 22:10.

82. *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 31.

None of these descriptions of Isaac's active role in the unfolding of this story are even remotely hinted at in the biblical text.

Scholars have suggested that the new historical reality of persecution, suffering, and martyrdom in the centuries before and after the destruction of the Second Temple was responsible for the later rabbinic shifting of the focus in the *Akeida* story from the exclusive biblical emphasis on Abraham to a more active and central role for Isaac. In their search for biblical paradigms as sources of strength and resolve to face their challenges, the beleaguered Jews living then, repeatedly facing the immanent reality of dying for the sanctification of the Divine Name, found in Isaac a fitting role model, and reconfigured his role to fit their needs.⁸³

Indeed, these sources even went so far as to claim that Isaac was actually killed, in an attempt to parallel his story as much as possible to their own. Not only was Isaac's exemplary behavior invoked by his children to serve as a source of merit in the Heavenly Court for them down through the ages, it was meant to be actually emulated by future generations. In a celebrated passage explaining the *mitzva* of blowing the shofar on Rosh HaShana, Rabbi Saadya Gaon wrote, "The sixth reason is to remind us of the *Akeida* of Yitzḥak who gave his life for the sake of Heaven. So too must we be prepared to give our lives for the sake of Heaven, for the sanctification of His name."⁸⁴ The second explanation given by Rabbi David Halevi for the daily recital of the *Akeida* story in the morning service is "to subdue one's [evil] inclination like Isaac who gave his life."⁸⁵ Totally absent here is any reference to the heroism of Abraham, the "knight of faith."

As a graphic illustration of this claim, a number of rabbinic sources discussing the events of the *Akeida* include references to the image of ashes of Isaac piled up on the altar to which he was bound. The Midrash (*Tanḥuma*, Vayera 23), cited above, states that Abraham said to God that, in the merit of his submission to His will, "when the children of Isaac will sin and face calamity, may the binding of Isaac be invoked on their behalf. May it be considered before You as if his ashes are piled up on the altar. Forgive them and redeem them from their calamities." True, Isaac

83. See, for example, Dov Noy, "HaAkeida KeAvtipus shel Kiddush Hashem," *Maḥanayim* 60 (1962): 140–44; Meir Givati, "Okeid VeNe'ekad."

84. Cited in *Abudarham haShalem*, 270.

85. *Turei Zahav, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 1:4. For the first explanation, see page xlv.

was not killed; he was spared at the last second. But, said Abraham to God, consider it *as if* he was killed, and not just killed, but actually burned.

This is also found in another statement in the Midrash commenting on the verse (Genesis 22:13), “And Abraham went and took the ram and brought it up as an offering instead of his son.”

“And Abraham went and took the ram and brought it up as an offering.” Is the verse missing anything? What is the significance of [adding] “instead of his son”? Abraham said, “Sovereign of the worlds, regard this as if the blood of Isaac was being sprinkled before You.” He took the ram and flayed it, saying, “Consider this as though I have flayed the skin of Isaac before You.” He took the ram and dried its blood and moisture with salt and said, “Consider this as though Isaac was being dried with salt before You.” He burnt it [the ram] and said, “Consider this as though the ashes of Isaac were being heaped up upon the altar.”⁸⁶

The Mishna (*Taanit* 2:1) states that during the final series of seven fasts that were instituted in response to a serious drought, the townspeople would remove the ark to the main city square and place ashes upon it, upon the head of the *Nasi* and the deputy *Nasi*, and upon each of their own heads.⁸⁷ One explanation offered by the Talmud (*Taanit* 16a) for this practice is that it is meant to remind God of the ashes of Isaac so that the merit of his sacrifice be counted on our behalf. The *Talmud Yerushalmi* adds, “to remind us of the merit of Isaac, and specifically ashes, as we see the ashes of Isaac as if they are piled on the altar.”⁸⁸ *Tosafot* strongly presses this analogy by shockingly requiring that the ashes come from burnt human bones.⁸⁹ Also, in commenting on the verse (Leviticus 26:42), “I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember (וְזָכַרְתִּי

86. *Bemidbar Rabba* 17:2. See also *Bereishit Rabba* 94:5; *Vayikra Rabba* 36:5; *Midrash Tanhuma*, Shelah 14; *Midrash HaGadol*, Genesis 22:19; *Yalkut Shimoni*, Vayera 101, end; *Daat Zekeinim MiBaalei HaTosafot*, Genesis 22:14, s.v. *vayikra sheim hamakom*. For more on the symbolism of “the blood of Isaac,” see *Midrash HaGadol*, Genesis 22:8; Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages*, 502–504; 912, n. 82; Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 46, 51–52, 57–58, 111.

87. See also *Bereishit Rabba* 49:11.

88. *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Taanit* 2:1.

89. See *Tosafot*, *Taanit* 15b, s.v. *venotnim eifer al gabei*; 16a, s.v. *eifer mikle*.

זָכוֹר)”, the Midrash wonders why “remembering” is not stated in the verse with reference to Isaac. One answer is that it is not necessary to mention it explicitly because “He sees the ashes of Isaac as if they are heaped on the altar.”⁹⁰ Although Isaac was not in fact sacrificed, as God provided a ram to be sacrificed in his place, this animal is considered as though it were actually Isaac himself.⁹¹

But two of the *Seliḥot* recited this time of year take this one step further and contain descriptions of Isaac’s ashes in which the word “as if (כְּאִלוֹ)” is absent. “Let his ashes appear before You always (וְאָפְרוֹ תִמִּיד יֵרָאֶה) (לְפָנֶיךָ)” (*Seliḥa* 39); describing Abraham and Isaac, “Remember their sacrifice, its ashes (תִּזְכֹּר מִנְחַת דְּשִׁנְיָהֶם)” (*Seliḥa* 74); “display Isaac’s ashes (וְאָפְרוֹ יִצְחָק יִזְמִין)” (*Seliḥa* 100). In another *Seliḥa* (*Seliḥa* 5), Isaac is referred to as “the heaped one (צְבוּר),” a reference to his ashes being “heaped” on the altar.

These formulations also appear in other rabbinic sources. For example, the Talmud states that at the height of the plague brought upon the Jewish people as punishment for King David having counted them, God stayed the hand of the avenging angel in the merit of the ashes of Isaac which “He saw.”⁹² In presenting the story of the *Akeida*, the verse (Genesis 22:14) uses the phrase, “the LORD will see (יְהוָה יֵרָאֶה).” Rashi comments that it means that God will see this binding and forgive Israel because of it. He continues, “On the mountain of God there will be seen the ashes of Isaac still piled up [as a medium] of atonement [for the Jewish people].”⁹³ A reference to Isaac’s ashes also appears in a number of other twelfth-century liturgical poems: by Rabbi Eliezer bar Yoel (Raavya), “behold his ashes are piled before You (הֲלֵא לְפָנֶיךָ צְבוּר אֶפְרָהוּ);” Rabbi Yosef bar Yitzḥak of Orleans (*Bekhor Shor*), “his ashes are continually heaped before You in a pile (תִּמִּיד אֶפְרוֹ צְבוּר לְפָנֶיךָ בְּגֹדֶשׁ);” Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn, “Gather my ashes, bring them to the city (יֵאָסֵף אֶפְרִי וְיֵבֵא הָעִירָה).”⁹⁴

Another Midrash states that Isaac was burned on the altar “and his

90. *Vayikra Rabba* 36:5. See too *Yalkut Shimoni*, Beḥukotai 675; Rashi, Leviticus 26:42, s.v. *vezakharti et beriti Yaakov*.

91. For more references to “as if the ashes of Isaac are heaped on the altar,” see *Midrash Tanḥuma*, Toledot 7; *Yalkut Shimoni*, Vayigash 152.

92. *Berakhot* 62b. For a similar description, see *Zevaḥim* 62a. See also *Sifra*, Beḥukotai 8:7.

93. Rashi, ad loc., s.v. *hayom*.

94. See Daniel Goldschmidt and Avraham Frankel, eds., *Leket Piyutei Seliḥot me’et Paytanei Ashkenaz VeTzarfat*, vol. 1, 59, 273 (see also 220, 307, 423; vol. 2, 439, 440); Shalom Spiegel, “MeAggadot HaAkeida,” 543; idem., *The Last Trial*, 148.

ashes were strewn on Mount Moriah. Immediately the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, brought dew upon him and returned him to life. ... Immediately the angels proclaimed, ‘Blessed are You, LORD, who revives the dead.’⁹⁵ This passage was cited in various thirteenth-century Ashkenazi sources.⁹⁶ Indeed, the reference to “the ashes of Isaac” became so much a part of the *Akeida* narrative that it is referenced in a short story by the twentieth-century writer, Shmuel Yosef Agnon.⁹⁷

Later authorities struggled with these more graphic images which flatly contradicted the plain sense of the biblical narrative. Abraham Ibn Ezra simply asserts that “those who say that he slaughtered him and left him, and that afterwards he came to life are contradicting Scripture.”⁹⁸ Other commentators offer different explanations. Maharsha explains that Isaac was not actually sacrificed as a burnt offering, but we consider the ram that was ultimately sacrificed in his place as if it were actually Isaac, and therefore its ashes are deemed to be the ashes of Isaac. Additionally, he suggests that because that was Abraham’s intention, it is considered as if Isaac was burned.⁹⁹ Others are prepared to assert that these passages are to be taken literally, that Isaac was actually killed and burned on the altar, and suggest that Abraham went ahead and acted on his own¹⁰⁰ or that Isaac was burned not by Abraham but by the wood and fire that the

See also Lewis M. Barth, “Parashat Yom Bet,” 41; the prayer preceding the blowing of the shofar on Rosh HaShana, printed in *Siddur Otzar HaTefillot*, vol. 2, 529a.

There is also a reference to the ashes of Isaac in a fifth-century poem. See Dov Sep-timus, “‘Hananto LeMei’a Peri’: Min HaPiyut Hakadum el HaTalmud HaBavli,” *Le-shoneinu* 71 (2009): 85, 93.

95. “Agadat Tefillat Shemoneh Esrei,” in Aharon Jellenik, *Beit HaMidrash*, vol. 5 (repr. Jerusalem, 1967), 54; J. D. Eisenstein, ed., *Otzar Midrashim*, vol. 2 (New York, 1915), 584.

96. See Rabbi Tzidkiya HaRofeh, *Shibbolei HaLeket, Hilkhot Tefilla* 18. See also *Sefer Tanya Rabbati* (Jerusalem, 2011), 18; Rabbi David Luria, “Biur HaRadal,” *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* (Warsaw, 1852), 31:10, p. 71b, n. 59.

For these sources, and others, describing the connection between Isaac and the second benediction of the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer, see Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 28–37; idem., “Pirur MeAgadot HaAkeida,” *Sefer HaYovel LiKhevod Avraham Weiss* (New York, 1964), 553–66. The Cambridge manuscript printed there contains an explicit reference to “his [Isaac’s] ashes strewn on Mount Moriah” (see p. 559).

97. See Shmuel Yosef Agnon, “Lefi HaTzaar HaSekhar,” in *HaEish VeHaEitzim*, in *Kol Sipurav shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon*, vol. 8 (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv, 1962), 9.

98. Commentary on the Torah, Genesis 22:19, s.v. *vayeshav Avraham*.

99. *Berakhot* 62b, s.v. *afaro shel Yitzhak*.

100. See Rabbi Hirsh Reichman, ed., *Sefer Shemen Sasson* (Podgorza, 1901), 28b. This book

bible tells us were arranged on the altar, and that after this he was brought back to life.¹⁰¹

In the twelfth century, this tradition, that it was actually Abraham who killed and burned Isaac, began to be taken literally, and it is this tradition that is highlighted in some *Selihot* passages. In 1096, the Ashkenazi Jewish community suffered greatly at the hands of the Crusaders who attacked them on their way from Western Europe to liberate the holy city of Jerusalem from the “infidel” Muslims. A number of Crusade Chronicles have survived, describing the events that occurred in Speyer, Worms, and Mainz, among other communities. In gripping and graphic terms they tell not only how Jews were killed by the Crusaders, but how they even went so far as to kill one another and themselves.¹⁰² And, in a number of cases, the authors of these chronicles invoked the story of the *Akeida*. “Let the ears hearing this and its like be seared, for who has heard or seen the likes of it? Inquire and seek: Was there ever such a mass sacrificial offering since the time of Adam? Did it ever occur that there were one thousand and one hundred offerings on one single day – all of them comparable to the sacrifice of Isaac, the son of Abraham?” “May the blood of His devoted ones stand us in good stead and be an atonement for us and for our posterity after us, and our children’s children eternally, like the *Akeida* of our father Isaac when our father Abraham bound him upon the altar.” “Compassionate women, in tears, with their own hands slaughtered, as at the *Akeida* of Moriah.” “There was a man there by the name of Meshulam, son of Isaac, and he called out in a great voice to his beloved wife Mistress Zipporah and to all those present: ‘Hear me, adults and children! God gave me this son; my wife Zipporah bore him in her

contains the biblical commentary of Rabbi Abraham Gumbiner, the author of *Magen Avraham*.

101. Rabbi David Luria, above, n. 96.

102. There is a large and growing secondary literature discussing whether or not the descriptions in these chronicles are accurate reflections of what actually occurred. See, for example, Ivan Marcus, “From Politics to Martyrdom: Shifting Paradigms in the Hebrew Narratives of the 1096 Crusade Riots,” *Prooftexts* 2 (1982): 40–52; idem., *Speculum* 64:3 (1989): 686–87; Robert Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade* (Berkeley, 1987), 308–309, n. 21; idem., “The Facticity of Medieval Narrative: A Case Study of the Hebrew First Crusade Narratives,” *AJS Review* 16 (1991): 31–56; idem., *God, Humanity and History: The Hebrew First Crusade Narratives* (Berkeley, 2000); Jeremy Cohen, *Sanctifying the Name of God: Jewish Martyrs and Jewish Memories of the First Crusade* (Philadelphia, 2004).

advanced age. His name is Isaac. I shall now offer him up as a sacrifice as our father Abraham did his son Isaac.”¹⁰³ “On the merit of the *Akeida* at Moriah once we could lean, safeguarded for the salvation of age after age – Now one *Akeida* follows another, they cannot be counted.”¹⁰⁴ But are the events described as having occurred in 1096 “comparable to the sacrifice of Isaac, the son of Abraham?” Is it true that “compassionate women, in tears, with their own hands slaughtered, as at the *Akeida* of Moriah?” After all, Isaac was spared the knife; Isaac was not sacrificed. And so they drew on, and elaborated, the already existing tradition that, in fact, Isaac was sacrificed, that he *was* indeed burned on the altar and was later resurrected. “Is it possible that those who did the sacrificing and those who were the sacrifices in those calamity-laden times imagined that on Mount Moriah also, at the command of his Creator, the father rose up and took his son Isaac, bound him, slew him, then burnt his victim, and the ashes thereof are still in a heap on top of the altar as stored-up merit and for the atonement of generation after generation to the end of time?”¹⁰⁵ “Isaac is not just the tentative victim; he *is* the actual burnt offering.”¹⁰⁶ Indeed, the binding of Isaac became a model for those Jewish martyrs who actually gave their lives in sanctification of God’s name.¹⁰⁷

103. See Shlomo Eidelberg, *The Jews and the Crusaders: The Hebrew Chronicles of the First and Second Crusades* (Madison, 1977), 33, 49, 92, 103. See also 32, 58, 83. For other similar parallels between the Jewish experience during the First Crusades and the *Akeida*, see Avraham Fraenkel, Abraham Gross, and Peter Sh. Lenhardt, eds., *Hebräische liturgische Poesien zu den Judenverfolgungen während des Ersten Kreuzzugs*, 81, 89, 197, 351, 393, 413, 425.
104. Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 21. See also Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle and London, 1982), 38; Shulamit Elizur, “Akeidat Yitzhak: BiVeichi O BiSimha: Hashpaat Masaei HaTzelav al HaSippur HaMikrai BePiyutim,” *Et HaDaat* 1(1997): 15–35.
105. Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 27. Spiegel pays a great deal of attention to the tradition of “the ashes of Isaac,” both figuratively and literally, providing the context for this reference in a passage in a poem written in the middle of the twelfth century by Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn on the *Akeida* (p. 148). See, for example, pp. 4, 33, 37–38, 41–44, 61, 77, 100, 110.
106. Arnold J. Band, “Scholarship as Lamentation,” 85.
107. For other references to the *Akeida* in the literature written in the wake of the First Crusade, see A. M. Haberman, *Sefer Gezeirot Ashkenaz VeTzarfat* (Jerusalem, 1946), 62, 70, 71, 100; Shimon Bernfeld, *Sefer HaDemaot*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1923), 199, 200, 202, 209. For a reference to it in a *Seliha* written in the wake of the massacre in Blois, France in 1171, see Daniel Goldschmidt, *Mahzor LeYamim Noraim*, vol. 2, Yom Kippur (Jerusalem, 1970), 553.

Another example of the centrality of Isaac in the *Akeida* story in the context of the reality of the martyrdom exhibited by Jews in the Middle Ages – this time in Spain – appears in sermons delivered there toward the end of the fifteenth century. It has been suggested that these sermons need to be placed in the context of the Jews killing family members and committing suicide during the persecutions they suffered there in 1391. “Behold, many killed their children and grandchildren and then their wives, and then they killed themselves to sanctify the Name in public. How can this not be accounted for them as a merit greater than the *Akeida* of Isaac about which we pray every Rosh HaShana (וְאֵיךְ לֹא נִחַשְׁב) (להם) לְצִדְקָה גְדוֹלָה יוֹתֵר מֵעֲקֵדַת יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר אָנוּ מִתְפַּלְלִים בְּכָל יוֹם ר”ה.” Here too we find that Isaac’s role was considered equal to that of his father. “The father and the son made themselves sacrifices to the Name, may He be blessed. For the father, although he was the binder was also bound, and if Isaac was the bound one he also bound his father (כִּי הָאָב, אִם הָיָה עוֹקֵד הָיָה נֶעְקָד, וְאִם) (יִצְחָק הָיָה נֶעְקָד, הָיָה עוֹקֵד לְאָבִיו), for Abraham overcame his mercy to act in accordance with the desire of his Creator with a full heart. And so too Isaac.” In fact, the preacher of this sermon went so far as to assert that “Certainly the merit of Isaac was greater than the merit of Abraham for he was giving himself over to death without the command of God [directed] to him.”¹⁰⁸

Thus, while in the biblical version of this story the focus is exclusively on Abraham as the central figure of this story, in rabbinic literature it shifted long ago to Isaac whose readiness to martyr himself for God became the focus of much attention. Later in the Middle Ages, when martyrdom took center stage in the personal experiences of Jews both in Ashkenaz and Sepharad, the focus on Isaac followed suit. It is then Isaac who served as the paradigm for his children who, thousands of years after

It is also interesting to note that the Crusade Chronicles also refer to Abraham’s behavior as a paradigm for their own: “Thus the precious children of Zion, the people of Mainz, were tested with ten trials as was our father Abraham. ... They too bound their children in sacrifice, as Abraham did his son Isaac.” See Shlomo Eidelberg, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 32.

108. See Marc Saperstein, “A Sermon on the Akedah,” 103–24, especially, 117, 119, 121, 124. See too the formulation in a sermon delivered by Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov cited there, p. 105, n. 8, “Each one both bound as was bound (וְהָיָה כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד הָיָה עוֹקֵד וְנֶעְקָד)”; above, at n. 74.

the event that took place atop Mount Moriah, sanctified God's name with their lives. And it is this idea, coupled with the more traditional perception of the roles of both father and son, that is particularly highlighted in a number of the *Selihot* we recite.¹⁰⁹

Zekhut Avot and Berit Avot

Rabbi David Halevi wrote that the reason why the *Shulḥan Arukh* recommends reciting the biblical portion describing the story of the *Akeida* daily is “in order to remember the merit of the Patriarchs every day (לִזְכוֹר יוֹם יוֹם) (זְכוּת אָבוֹת בְּכָל יוֹם).”¹¹⁰ Indeed, the notion of *zekhut avot*, or the expectation that blessing will redound to the Jewish people in the merit of the behavior of the Patriarchs, is a fundamental one in our tradition and is reflected in many different rabbinic passages. In commenting on the verse (Isaiah 48:17), “Who guides you in the way you should follow,” the Midrash states:

This may be compared to the case of the king's son who was to be tried before his father. His father said to him, “If you wish to be

109. For other examples of how an author's personal experience of martyrdom was expressed through his use of the *Akeida* theme in his liturgical poetry, see Binyamin Bar-Tikva, “Asara Nisyonot SheNitnase Bahem Avraham BeRe'i HaPiyut,” *Masoret HaPiyut*, vol. 2 (Ramat-Gan, 2000) 136.

For additional helpful secondary literature on these themes of the *Akeida*, and others, see M. Robinson, “Akeidat Yitzhak BeSifrut Halvrit,” *HaShiloah* 25 (1911–1912): 208–13; 312–18; Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (Leiden, 1961), 193–218; Yaakov Rothchild, “Seder HaSelihot,” in Ḥayyim Hamiel, ed., *Measef LeInyanei Ḥinukh VeHoraa (=Maayanot 9)* (Jerusalem, 1968), 447–77; Alter Hilvitz, *Ḥikrei Zemanim*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1976), 36–43; Yaakov Eliyahu Efrati, *Parashat HaAkeida* (Petah Tikva, 1983); Aharon (Ronald E.) Agus, *The Binding of Isaac and Messiah: Law, Martyrdom and Deliverance in Early Rabbinic Religiosity* (Albany, 1988), 33–68; Judith Tydor Baumel and Jacob J. Schacter, “The Ninety-three Bais Yaakov Girls of Cracow: History or Typology,” in Jacob J. Schacter, ed., *Reverence, Righteousness and Rahamanut: Essays in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung* (Northvale and London, 1992), 112–19; Meir Rafeld, “VeAkeidat Yitzhak LeZaro [] Hayom BeRahamim Tizkor,” in Elhanan Ganzel, Aharon Bok, and Elisha Peles, eds., *Beheyoto Karov: Asufat Maamarim LeYamim Noraim LeZikhro Shel Yehiel Shai Finfeter Hy”d* (2000), 215–31.

For the role of the *Akeida* in Zionist thought, see Moshe Steiner, “Bein Akeida LeHitmodedut Gevura: Naftulei Yetzira BeSifrut Halvrit,” *HaUma* 14 (1976): 409–20. Yael S. Feldman, *Glory and Agony: Isaac's Sacrifice and National Narrative* (Stanford, 2010), traces the way the *Akeida* story turned into a secular metaphor that was applied to national military self-sacrifice in modern Israeli history, pre- and post the founding of the State of Israel.

110. *Turei Zahav, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 1:4.

acquitted by me in judgment this day, appoint such-and-such an advocate and you will be acquitted before me in judgment.” So did the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, say to Israel, “My children, if you want to be acquitted by Me in judgment on this day, you should recall the merit of the Patriarchs (זְכוּת אֲבוֹת) and you will be acquitted by Me in judgment.”¹¹¹

The Midrash then concludes, “And when are you to recall the merit of the Patriarchs and be acquitted in judgment by Me? ‘In the seventh month’ (Leviticus 23:24).”

This notion is found in dozens of other references throughout midrashic literature and in hundreds of sources from ancient through modern times. For example:

- ▶ The verse (Exodus 32:13) states, “Remember for Abraham, Isaac, and Yisrael, Your servants (זְכוּ לְאַבְרָהָם לְיִצְחָק וְלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַבְדֶּיךָ).” Earlier, I cited a midrashic passage that associates a different argument with each of these Patriarchs. Moses said to God: “If it is burning that they deserve, remember Abraham who placed his soul into a fiery furnace to be burnt for Your name, and may his burning cancel the burning of his children; if it is killing that they deserve, remember Isaac their father who stretched out his neck on the altar to be slaughtered for Your name, and may his killing cancel the killing of his children; if it is exile that they deserve, remember Jacob their father who was exiled from his father’s house to Haran. May these [sins] be covered by these [acts] (וַיְצַאוּ אֵלָיו בְּאֵלָיו).”¹¹² In his commentary on this verse, Rashi cites this passage and adds that Moses continued, “If the merit of the Patriarchs will not be enough to save them, why did you tell me (32:10), ‘And I shall make you a great nation’? If a chair with three legs [symbolic of the three Patriarchs] cannot stand before You when You are angry, how much more so a chair with one leg [just me]?”¹¹³
- ▶ The Talmud (*Shabbat* 30a) states that when the Jews sinned in the wilderness with the Golden Calf, Moses prayed before God on their behalf but was not answered. “But when he said, ‘Remember [for

111. *Vayikra Rabba* 29:7. See too *Pesikta DeRav Kahana*, “BaHodesh Hashevii,” 23:7.

112. *Shemot Rabba* 44:5. See above, page xl.

113. Rashi, ad loc., s.v. *leAvraham leYitzhak uleYisrael*.

the sake of] Abraham, Isaac and Yisrael, Your servants,' he was immediately answered."¹¹⁴

- ▶ The *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Sanhedrin* 10:1) cites in the name of Rabbi Aḥa that “*zekhut avot* is eternal (לְעוֹלָם קִימָת).”¹¹⁵
- ▶ The Midrash (*Shir HaShirim Rabba* 2:9) refers both to the merit of the Patriarchs (זְכוּת אֲבוֹת) and the merit of the Matriarchs (זְכוּת אִמּוֹת).¹¹⁶
- ▶ In commenting on Leviticus 26:42, the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 36:2) cites the verse (Psalms 80:9), “You caused a grapevine to journey out of Egypt” and provides a number of parallels between the Jewish people and a grapevine. The last one is, “Just as this grapevine rests on dry wood and is itself fresh, so too Israel rests on the merit of their fathers (נִשְׁעָנֵן בְּזִכּוֹת אֲבוֹתָם) even though they are asleep.”¹¹⁷

This concept is also invoked in a number of *Selihot*. See זְכוּת לְאֲבוֹתָם לְיִצְחָק, *Selihot* 40, 41, 42, 44, 59, 73, 79, 83, 84, 88, 93.¹¹⁸

Another related concept, as opposed to *zekhut avot*, the merit of our Patriarchs, also appears in the *Selihot* service and is reflected in a number of biblical verses. For example, “On that day God made a covenant with Abram (בְּיָמֵינוּ הָיָה אֱלֹהִים בְּרִית יְהוָה אֶת אַבְרָם בְּרִית)” (Genesis 15:18); “I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember (וְזָכַרְתִּי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי יַעֲקֹב, וְאֶת־בְּרִיתִי יִצְחָק, וְאֶת־בְּרִיתִי אַבְרָהָם)” (Leviticus 26:42); “I will remember for them the covenant with the ancients (וְזָכַרְתִּי לָהֶם בְּרִית וְאֲשֵׁנִים)” (Leviticus 26:45). A version of the *Zikhronot* blessing discovered in the Cairo Geniza concludes with “Blessed are You LORD, who remembers the covenant of the Patriarchs (זֹכֵר בְּרִית אֲבוֹת),” as opposed to “who remembers the covenant (זֹכֵר הַבְּרִית).”¹¹⁹

114. See also *Shemot Rabba* 44:1.

115. See also Tosafot, *Shabbat* 55a, s.v. *uShemuel amar*.

116. In addition, see *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Taanit* 1:1; *Bereishit Rabba* 60:2, 71:9, 74:12; *Shemot Rabba* 40:4; *Vayikra Rabba* 36:6; *Tanḥuma*, Ki Tisa 32; *Yalkut Shimoni*, Lekh Lekha 67; *Pesikta Rabbati* 40; Rashi, Psalms 106:44, s.v. *beshamo et rinatam*. See also “*Zekhut Avot*,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 21 (2007), 497–98.

117. See also *Shemot Rabba* 44:1.

118. See also Daniel Goldschmidt and Avraham Frankel, eds., *Leket Piyutei Selihot me’et Paytanei Ashkenaz VeTzarfat*, vol. 1, 56; vol. 2, 477, 478.

119. It is cited in Daniel Goldschmidt, *Mahzor LeYamim HaNoraim*, vol. 1 (Rosh HaShana) (Jerusalem, 1970), “Introduction,” 29, n. 7.

The Talmud (*Shabbat* 55a) states in the name of Shmuel that “the merit of the Patriarchs has been terminated (תַּמָּה זְכוֹת אָבוֹת).” Rabbeinu Tam writes that while the *merit* of the Patriarchs may have been terminated, even Shmuel believes that *berit avot*, the *covenant* with our Patriarchs, is still operative, citing the verse from Leviticus 26:42 quoted above.¹²⁰ At the end of the Monday and Thursday *Tahanun* service, we recite, “Remember for us the covenant of our Fathers (זְכוֹר לָנוּ בְרִית אֲבוֹתֵינוּ).” The *Musaf* service of *Rosh Hodesh* contains the phrase, “and remember the covenant of the fathers for their children (וּבְרִית אָבוֹת לְבָנִים תִּזְכֹּר).” In the *Neila* service on Yom Kippur we ask God, “Remember the covenant of Abraham (זְכוֹר בְּרִית אַבְרָהָם).” The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 44:9) adds that just as God established a covenant with the Patriarchs, so did He with the tribes.

The notion of *berit avot* is invoked a number of times in the *Selihot* service as a symbol of the close relationship we Jewish people enjoy with God. Every day we recite, “Remember for us the covenant of the Patriarchs (זְכוֹר לָנוּ בְּרִית אָבוֹת)” followed by the verse from Leviticus 26:42 quoted above. See also זְכוֹר לָנוּ בְּרִית רְאִשׁוֹנִים, *Selihot* 18, 42, 45, 55, 84, 95.¹²¹

Tzidduk HaDin

When we meet disaster and are confronted with misfortune we are enjoined to submit to what we believe to be the will of God. We do not question the inscrutable will of the Almighty and we accept whatever He brings upon us.

At the very beginning of the *Selihot* service every day we quote the verse (Daniel 9:7), “You are right, my Master, and we are shamefaced (לְךָ אָדֹנָי הַצְדָּקָה, וְלִנוּ בָּשָׁת הַפָּנִים).” We begin by acknowledging that although we are about to pray that God grant us mercy and kindness, He is just in

120. *Tosafot*, ad loc., s.v. *uShmuel amar*. See also Rashi, Exodus 33:19, s.v. *vayomer ani aavir*; Isaiah 9:6, s.v. *taaseh zot*; Isaiah 54:10, s.v. *ki heharim yamushu*. In his commentary on that verse in Exodus, Rashi goes on to note that even if the merit of *zekhut avot* has been terminated, God says that he will respond to the Jewish people when they recite the thirteen attributes, relating this theme here to the earlier one I discussed above. For the difference between *zekhut avot* and *berit avot*, see Jacob J. Schacter, ed., *The Lord Is Righteous in All His Ways: Reflections on the Tish'ah be-Av Kinot by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Newark, 2006), 51–56.

121. See also Daniel Goldschmidt and Avraham Frankel, eds., *Leket Piyutei Selihot me'et Paytanei Ashkenaz VeTzarfat*, vol. 1, 743.

all His actions, in whatever he might mete out to us, and we fully accept the justness of God's decrees. We express our shame at our behavior and acknowledge that we have behaved inappropriately.¹²²

The notion of *tzidduk hadin* is a central tenet of our belief system. A moment before reciting the words "You are right, my Master," we say, every day, the verse (Psalms 145:17), "The LORD is righteous in all His ways, and kind in all He does." Aaron the High Priest famously reacted to the tragic death of two of his sons with silence, "*vayidom Aharon*" (Leviticus 10:3). The Mishna (*Berakhot* 9:2) teaches that when one is confronted with the death of a loved one, one makes a blessing acknowledging that God is a "true judge." It goes on to rule that "one is obligated to bless [God] for the bad just as one blesses [God] for the good," concluding that "whatever measure He metes out to you, you are to give thanks to Him" (*ibid.*, 9:5).¹²³ The Talmud (*Berakhot* 19a) states that after the death of a loved one, the mourner "stands and justifies God's judgment, saying, 'Master of the Universe, I have sinned greatly against You, and You have not collected even one one-thousandth [of my debt]. May it be Your will, LORD our God, to mercifully repair the breaches in our fence and the breaches of Your nation, the House of Israel.'"

At the burial of a loved one, the prayer known as *tzidduk hadin* (acknowledging the justness of God's decree) is recited, beginning with the verse (Deuteronomy 32:4), "The Rock! – perfect is His work, for all His ways are just; a God of faith without iniquity, righteous and fair is He."¹²⁴ The Talmud (*Avoda Zara* 18a) relates that Rabbi Ḥanina ben Tradyon was executed in a particularly gruesome fashion. He was wrapped in a Torah scroll, encircled with bundles of vine shoots, and set afire. His heart was covered with wool soaked in water to ensure that he die a slow and agonizing death. When he, his wife, and daughter heard the verdict meted out against them, they all acknowledged the righteousness of what they understood to be God's decree, and he and his wife recited the verse from Deuteronomy quoted above.¹²⁵ The Book of Lamentations

122. For expressions of shame in the *Selihot*, see *Selihot* 35, 69, 85.

123. See *Talmud Yerushalmi, Berakhot* 9:5; my "Introduction" to *Siddur Neḥamat Yisrael: The Complete Service for the Period of Bereavement* (New York, 1995), xi–xiv.

124. See Rashi, *ad loc.*, s.v. *hatzur tamim paalo*. See *The Koren Siddur*, 1055.

125. See also *Sifrei*, Parashat Haazinu 307.

that describes the destruction of the Temple includes a verse toward the beginning (1:18) that clearly reflects our acceptance of the decree of God, “The LORD is in the right for I have disobeyed Him.” We are taught that even on Tisha B’Av, the day on which we commemorate the destruction of both Temples, the blessing of “Blessed be the True Judge” was recited.¹²⁶

The Midrash (*Pesikta Rabbati* 35, beginning) states that God said to the angels, “Come and let me inform you about the righteousness of my children. I have burdened them with many calamities in the world, and I have brought suffering upon them in the world in every generation and in every hour, and they have not trampled upon me. They call themselves wicked and call Me righteous.” The Jewish people affirm that they have sinned, says God, and that I am righteous.

As we begin the *Selihot* service every single day, we embark on a journey of prayer and supplication, asking God to forgive us, to grant us blessing in spite of what we may truly deserve. The first statement we make is “You are right, my Master.” Before we utter one word we state, clearly and unambiguously, that whatever You may decide for us this year, You are right. Full stop.¹²⁷

Confession – אָשָׁמוּנוּ בְּגִדְנוּ

This paragraph is known as the *viduy hakatzar*, the short confession, as opposed to the *viduy haarokh*, the long confession, which is the list of “*Al Heit*” that we recite on, and immediately before, Yom Kippur.

Confession is a central component of the *Selihot* service and the High Holiday prayers. In fact, it is a fundamental component of the repentance process in general. Rambam (*Sefer HaMada, Hilkhot Teshuva* 1:1) writes:

With regard to all the precepts of the Torah, whether a positive one or a negative one, if a person transgresses any of them, whether willingly or inadvertently, when he repents and returns from his sin he is obligated to confess before God, Blessed-is-He, as it says (Numbers

126. *Masekhet Sofrim* 18:7.

127. We continue to express this idea throughout the *Selihot* as well. For example, see *Seliha* 3, “After all that has befallen us, You are certain and just, while we are in disgrace (אֲתָהּ יְיָ אֱתָרֵנוּ בְּכָל הַבָּא וְדָאֵי וְצַדִּיק וְלֵנוּ הַדְּבָרָה),” *Selihot* 9, 15, 30, 59, 61.

For similar expressions in the Crusade Chronicles, see Shlomo Eidelberg, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 31, 45.

5:6–7), “A man or woman who commits any of a person’s sins ... they shall confess the sin that they committed.” This refers to verbal confession. And this confession is a positive commandment.

How does one confess? One states, “LORD, please, I sinned, I transgressed, I committed iniquity before You, and I did such and such. Behold I regret and am embarrassed by my deeds, and I will never return to this again.” This is the core of confession. And whoever confesses profusely and elaborates in this matter is praiseworthy.

It would appear from this passage, “when he repents and returns from his sin he is obligated to confess before God, Blessed-is-He. ... And this confession is a positive commandment,” that the positive commandment is confession, not repentance. Yet, in the preamble to *Hilkhot Teshuva*, Rambam writes that in what follows he will be describing “one positive commandment, and that is that the sinner repent from his sin before God and confess,” thereby indicating that both repentance *and* confession are components of the positive commandment. And, later in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (2:7), Rambam writes that “everyone is obligated to repent and to confess on Yom Kippur.” Which is it? Is only confession a positive commandment or is repentance also a positive commandment?

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik suggested that there are two fundamental components of a *mitzva*, the action or performance of the *mitzva* (*peulat hamitzva*) and the fulfillment of the *mitzva* (*kiyum hamitzva*). Sometimes they are combined, as, for example, the *mitzva* of taking the four species on Sukkot, in which case when one takes them in one’s hands, one fulfills both the act of the *mitzva* as well as its fulfillment. But in the case of other *mitzvot*, like prayer, and the recital of the *Shema*, for example, they are not combined. In those circumstances, the act is one part, but the fulfillment is achieved through “the heart” and is dependent upon achieving a certain level of inner spiritual awareness.¹²⁸ Rabbi Soloveitchik suggested that the *mitzva* of repentance and confession is an example of this second category. Confession is the act or performance component of the *mitzva* (the *peulat hamitzva*) but repentance is its fulfillment (the *kiyum hamitzva*). The process of repentance cannot be reduced to

128. For more on this idea in the thought of Rabbi Soloveitchik, see above, pages xviii–xix.

a verbal declaration alone; it requires thought, feeling, “service of the heart.”¹²⁹

The Special Connection Between God and the Jewish People

Throughout the *Selihot* service we repeatedly remind God of His unique closeness to us, His specially designated people. We ask that He grant us blessings in the merit of that relationship. One way we express this is by noting that the image of Jacob - also called Israel, representing the entire Jewish people - is engraved on God’s own throne. We see ourselves as very close to God, placed directly next to God Himself in His heavenly abode. See *Selihot* 18, 29, 68, 74.

In three of the prayer services we recite on Yom Kippur day – *Musaf*, *Minḥa*, and *Neila* – we make reference to this image of Jacob engraved on the divine throne in Heaven.

מוסף – מְכוּן לְשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּשׁוּמְךָ, מֵאִזְ חֻקְּתָנוּ בְּרִשׁוּמְךָ.

Ever since you established the site of Your eternal home, You engraved the image of Jacob upon Your throne.¹³⁰

מנחה – אֲרָאִים בְּשֵׁם תָּם מִמְּלִיכִים / לְמַלְךְ מְלִכֵי הַמְּלָכִים יִפְּיוּ לְשׁוֹר בֵּינָם הַזֹּלָכִים.

The mighty angels, in the name of [Jacob] the innocent one, crown/ the King of kings/ They pass God’s throne to behold Jacob’s beautiful face engraved there.¹³¹

נעילה – טַבַּע זֵיו תְּאָרָה, יְהִי חֻקְּךָ בֵּינָם יְקָרָה.

The likeness of [Jacob’s] radiant countenance the Lord engraved on His precious throne.¹³²

Interestingly, in each case these phrases are recited during the repetition of the *Amida* in the third blessing, corresponding to Jacob, the third of the Patriarchs. And so, on Yom Kippur we repeatedly appeal to this image

129. See Pinchas H. Peli, *On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Northvale and London, 2000), 67–76. See also Rambam, *Sefer HaMitzvot*, “Mitzvat Aseh” 73; *Sefer HaHinukh* 363.

130. *The Koren Yom Kippur Mahzor*, 816–17.

131. *Ibid.*, pages 1046–47.

132. *Ibid.*, pages 1140–41.

as a great source of comfort for us. For in spite of the fact that we have distanced ourselves from God, we are confident that He will not abandon us. God can never forget us. After all, we are inscribed on, are a part of and an extension of, nothing less than His own divine throne.

There is also a reference to this image at the end of the first *kina* recited on Tisha B'Av morning. There Rabbi Elazar HaKalir wrote, "You engraved the image of Jacob into Your celestial throne (כִּי תָתַם חֶקֶת בְּכֶסֶם אוֹפְנֵיךָ)." Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explains that God chose to engrave specifically the image of Jacob, and not that of either Abraham or Isaac, because Jacob was also named Israel and, as a result, the image here is not just that of one of the Patriarchs but of *Klal Yisrael*, the entire Jewish people. The fact that the Jewish people are, literally, a part of the divine throne is a source of great comfort for us because it demonstrates that the covenant between God and us, His people, is a permanent one. Whatever is engraved on the divine throne is eternal as the verse (Psalms 93:2) states, "Your throne is established from old; You exist eternally." In spite of the fact that God has exiled us from our land and has distanced Himself from us, we are confident that He has not abandoned us. We have not been rejected and discarded. We are, figuratively, always next to God, and we pray that He will be motivated to redeem us and bring an end to our exile.¹³³ Indeed, this image is found in a number of rabbinic sources.¹³⁴

Another manifestation of closeness between God and the Jewish people is found in several rabbinic sources that affirm that the destruction of the Temple affected not only the Jewish people but, as it were, God Himself, in a number of ways. *Hazal* tell us that in the aftermath of the destruction God no longer "laughs";¹³⁵ God Himself mourns;¹³⁶ God

133. See *The Koren Mesorat Harav Kinot*, 212, based on Jacob J. Schacter, ed., *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways*, 48–50, 57, 60.

134. See, for example, *Hullin* 91b; *Bereishit Rabba* 68:12; 78:3; 82:2; *Bemidbar Rabba* 4:1; *Eikha Rabba* 2:2; *Midrash Tanhuma*, Numbers 19; *Yalkut Shimoni*, Vayeitzei 119; *Vayishlah* 135; Numbers 692; Isaiah 452; Lamentations 1023; *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 35; *Targum Yonatan ben Uziel* (Genesis 28:12); and more.

For more on this image, see Elliot Wolfson, "The Image of Jacob Engraved Upon the Throne: Further Reflection on the Esoteric Doctrine of the German Pietists," in idem, *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism, and Hermeneutics* (Albany, 1995), 1–62; Rachel Neis, "Embracing Icons: The Face of Jacob on the Throne of God," *Images* 1 (2007): 36–54.

135. *Avoda Zara* 3b; *Yalkut Shimoni*, Lamentations 1009.

136. *Berakhot* 3a; *Eikha Rabba* 1:45; *Sefer Tanna DeBei Elyahu Rabba* 30.

takes on the behavior patterns of a mourner;¹³⁷ God feels pain;¹³⁸ and, finally, God Himself has the need to be comforted.¹³⁹

Most common is the idea, stated here and found repeatedly in rabbinic sources and in the *Seliḥot* service (see *Seliḥot* 37, 41), that God, as it were, was Himself adversely affected by our going into exile. It is as if God Himself actively joined His Jewish people in exile. The Talmud (*Megilla* 29a) states that the *Shekhina*, the Divine Presence, is with the Jews wherever they may be. “When they were exiled to Egypt, the *Shekhina* was with them. ... When they were exiled to Babylonia, the *Shekhina* was with them. ... And also at a time when they are destined to be redeemed, the *Shekhina* will be with them.”¹⁴⁰ This is, for us, also a source of great comfort. Even in exile we are not alone; our God is with us, accompanying us as we face the challenges of our current existence far from our homeland.

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 8a) writes that God says, “Whoever engages in Torah and acts of kindness, and prays together with the congregation, I consider it as if that person redeemed Me and My children from amongst the nations of the world.” The Midrash (*Devarim Rabba* 2:16) tells a beautiful story about a ship that was carrying many Gentiles and only one Jew. When they came to an island, the Gentiles told the Jew to take money, disembark, and purchase something for them. When the Jew protested, arguing that he was a stranger there and would not know where to go, they responded, “Is a Jew ever a stranger? Wherever you go your God is with you.”

The *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Sukka* 4:3) states:

Rabbi Ba of Serungia expounded: “God will save (יְהוָה יִשַׁע) the tents of Judah first” (Zechariah 12:7); it is written as יְהוָה יִשַׁע, without the *yod*, [namely, “(God) will be saved”]. Rabbi Zikhi expounded: “For now you will leave the city and dwell (וְשָׁכַנְתָּ) in the field” (Micah 4:10); [read it as if it was written] “and My Presence (וְשִׁכְנֹתִי) will be in the field.” Hanania, son of the brother of Rabbi Yehoshua, said, “I am the LORD your God who brought you out (וְהוֹצֵאתִיךָ) from the Land of

137. *Eikha Rabba* 1:1.

138. *Shemot Rabba* 2:5; *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*, 40.

139. *Pesikta DeRav Kahana*, “Nahamu,” 16:9.

140. See too *Mekhilta daRabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai*, Exodus 3:8.

Egypt” (Exodus 20:2); [read it as if it was] written “and I was taken out with you (הוֹצֵאתֶךָ).”

The text continues, citing the teaching of Rabbi Akiva on the verse (II Samuel 7:23), “from before Your people whom You have redeemed (אֲשֶׁר פָּדִיתָ לָךְ) from Egypt.” He comments that it means, “as it were, as if You redeemed Yourself (בְּבִיכּוֹל בְּאֵלֶי עֲצַמְךָ פָּדִיתָ).”¹⁴¹

The concept that God, as it were, joined His people in *galut* is cited often in the Zohar as “*Shekhinta begaluta*,” the Divine Presence is in exile,¹⁴² and, as such, is referred to in other sources as well. Interestingly, in addressing whether or not *Hallel* should be recited on Yom Haatzmaut, Rabbi Ovadya Yosef cites those who are opposed to reciting it based on the argument that, even with all the achievements of the State of Israel, it is still true that “*Shekhinta begaluta*.” Since God, as it were, is still in exile, our collective Jewish spiritual lives are wanting and therefore, they claim, the recital of *Hallel* celebrating the existence of the State of Israel is unwarranted.¹⁴³

Finally, we also reference this notion elsewhere in our prayers. A line in the concluding passage of the *Hoshanot* prayer recited on Sukkot reads, “As you saved us with the declaration (Exodus 6:6), ‘I shall bring you forth (הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם)’ which may be interpreted as ‘I shall be brought forth with you (הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם),’ so please save us now.” We invoke God’s wish that He, as it were, wishes to be saved from exile when He saves us.¹⁴⁴

We remind God of our closeness and therefore appeal to Him for kindness and mercy.

The Power of Repentance

The *Selihot* service includes many references to the power of repentance (see *Selihot* 4, 5, 7, 23, 24, 26, 28, 46, 47, 49, 53, 60, 70, 81, 82, 85, 87, 96), an idea repeatedly underscored in many sources throughout rabbinic literature. The Talmud (*Rosh HaShana* 17b) states, “Great is repentance for

141. See also *Shemot Rabba* 2:5.

142. See, for example, *Zohar*, Parashat Shemot, Parashat Vayakhel, Parashat Pinhas.

143. *She'eilot U'Teshuvot Yabia Omer*, vol. 6, *Orah Hayyim* 41:5.

144. See *The Koren Siddur*, 855.

it tears up the sentence issued against a person.” Elsewhere the Talmud (*Yoma* 86a–b) describes the power of repentance in a number of different ways:

- ▶ Great is repentance as it brings healing to the world;
- ▶ Great is repentance as it reaches the heavenly throne;
- ▶ Great is repentance as it hastens the redemption;
- ▶ Great is repentance as [the penitent’s] intentional sins are counted for him as unwitting transgressions;
- ▶ Great is repentance that even one’s intentional sins are counted as merits;
- ▶ Great is repentance as it lengthens the years of a person’s life;
- ▶ Great is repentance for the entire world is forgiven on account of one individual who repents.

The Midrash (*Sefer Tanna DeBei Eliyahu Zuta*, 22) also stresses the power of repentance:

- ▶ Repentance is greater than prayer because Moses prayed repeatedly to be allowed to enter in the land of Israel to no avail, but the repentance of Rahav the harlot was accepted and she merited to be the progenitor of seven kings;
- ▶ Repentance is greater than charity because charity results in a loss of money unlike repentance;
- ▶ Great is repentance as it heals Israel from its sins.

Similar statements are found throughout the *Yalkut Shimoni*:

- ▶ Great is repentance for it tears up the sentence issued against a person (*Isaiah* 408);
- ▶ Great is repentance for it hastens the redemption (*Isaiah* 484);
- ▶ Great is repentance for it brings redemption to the world (*Isaiah* 498);
- ▶ Great is repentance for it brings healing to the world (*Jeremiah* 269);
- ▶ Great is repentance for even an individual who sins is forgiven (*ibid.*);
- ▶ Great is repentance as [the penitent’s] intentional sins are counted for him as unwitting transgressions and as merits (*Ezekiel* 342);
- ▶ Great is repentance for it lengthens the days of a person (*ibid.*);
- ▶ Great is repentance for it reaches all the way up to the divine throne (*Hosea* 530);

- ▶ Great is repentance as one's intentional sins are counted as merits (ibid.).

The Midrash (*Eikha Rabba* 3:60) states that prayer is likened to a *mikve* and repentance to the sea. Just as a *mikve*, constructed by human beings, is sometimes open for use and sometimes closed (because there is a problem with it), so too are the gates of prayer sometimes open and sometimes closed. But the sea, created by God, is always open, and so too are the gates of repentance always open.¹⁴⁵ Elsewhere the Midrash (*Pesikta Rabbati* 45:6) writes, "Repentance is beloved before the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, for He nullifies His [own] words on behalf of repentance." The example it gives is the biblical law (Deuteronomy 24:1–4) that prohibits a man from remarrying his former wife if she had married another person in the interim. "But the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, is not like this. Even though they [the Jewish people] left Him and worshipped another. ... He said to them, 'Repent, return to Me and I will accept you.'" *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* devotes an entire chapter (*Seliḥa* 43) to the power of repentance. Rambam (*Hilkhot Teshuva*) 1:3 states: "At present, when the Temple does not exist and we have no altar of atonement, there remains nothing but repentance. Repentance atones for all sins. Even someone who was wicked his entire life and who repented at the end will not be reminded of any aspect of his wickedness."

How important is this for us now, as we are about to embark on the High Holiday season. Let us take maximal advantage of the opportunity – the gift – we have been given.

Our Real Desire Is to Fulfill God's Will

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 17a) states that after Rabbi Alexandri prayed, he would say the following:

Master of the Universe, it is revealed and known before You that our will is to perform Your will. And what prevents us? The evil inclination (lit. the yeast in the dough; see Rashi, s.v. *seor sheba'isa*) and our subjugation to kingdoms. May it be Your will that You will deliver us from [both] their hands so that we may return to perform the edicts of Your will with a perfect heart.

145. See also *Devarim Rabba* 2:12.

The Talmud (*Eiruvin* 41b) states that there are three matters that cause a person to act against his own will and that of his Maker: the pressure of Gentiles, an evil spirit, and the depths of extreme poverty. Another passage in the Talmud (*Sota* 3a) states that “a person does not commit a transgression unless a spirit of foolishness enters him.”

The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Beshalah 234) states that as the Jews were going through the sea to escape the Egyptians, Satan challenged God for saving them, arguing that they were idol worshippers in Egypt and therefore unworthy of salvation. Satan then went to “the one appointed over the sea” and wanted to have them drowned. At that point, God responded to him and said, “You colossal fool, did they worship it with thoughtfulness? They worshipped it only in a state of servitude and mental confusion. You [incorrectly] consider an inadvertent act like a premeditated one, and an act done under compulsion like one done willingly.”

The Talmud (*Horayot* 12a; *Karetot* 6a) lists a number of foods that should be eaten at the beginning of the year. The *Shulhan Arukh* (*Orah Hayyim* 583:1) states that when one eats fenugreek (רוביץ) one should say, “May it be [Your] will that our merits should increase (שְׂרִירָבוּ וְזָכִיתֵנוּ).” Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum wonders about this prayer. Why do we pray to God to increase our merits? Is it not up to us to act in a way that would do so? Is this not in our own hands? In response, he cites a passage in Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilkhhot Teshuva* 3:2) which states that only God knows what the relative significance is of the *mitzvot* and transgressions we perform. In some circumstances, known only to God Himself, a sin will weigh more or less than in others. And so we pray to God to take into account the extenuating circumstances that surround our transgressions. Please, God, recognize that we want to follow Your will but we are beset by pressures and mental confusion which afflict us. Please, therefore, decrease the weightiness of the sins we do and thereby increase our merits.¹⁴⁶

In the heart of every Jew is a deep yearning, sometimes undetected and unacknowledged, to connect to God in a meaningful way. During the *Selihot* service we repeatedly invoke this feeling. We state that we want

146. See Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, *Selihot Divrei Yoel*, 519–20.

to properly serve God but we face challenges – from within and from without – that make doing so very difficult (see *Selihot* 3, 35, 67, 72, 84, 90). We pray to Him to remove them from us so we can be in a position to worship Him in accordance with our true desire.

This notion is found in a well-known passage in Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilkhot Geirushin* 2:20) discussing the ruling that, in certain circumstances, a man can be compelled to grant his wife a divorce. Acknowledging that this contradicts the rule that he posed earlier (1:1) that a man must voluntarily initiate a divorce, Rambam posits a fundamental far-reaching principle that is very relevant here:

One applies the concept of being compelled to do something against one’s will only in the case of someone who is being compelled and forced to do something that the Torah does not obligate him to do, for example, a person who was beaten until he consented to sell or give something. But if a person’s evil inclination presses him to negate [the observance of] a *mitzva* or to commit a transgression, and he was beaten until he performed the action he was obligated to perform, or he distanced himself from something that was prohibited to him to do, he is not considered to have been forced against his will. But it is he himself who is forcing himself with his evil thoughts. Therefore, this person who does not want to grant the divorce, since he wants to be part of the Jewish people, he does [in fact] want to perform all the *mitzvot* and remove himself from all the transgressions; it is only his evil inclination that presses him. Therefore, when he is beaten until his evil inclination has been weakened, and he says “I want” [to grant the divorce], he is considered to have performed the divorce willfully.

Rambam is positing here that the fundamental desire of every Jew is to fully observe the Torah and its *mitzvot*. When one behaves in a way contrary to this, it is not a true reflection of one’s real desires, but due to the pressure one is feeling from one’s evil inclination. Once the evil inclination is neutralized, one’s real, true inner desire to be a fully Torah-observant Jew surfaces.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik uses this concept to explain the talmudic passage (*Shabbat* 56a), “Whoever says that David sinned is completely

wrong.” In the face of a number of biblical passages which quite clearly reflect that, indeed, he did sin, Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that what the Talmud means is that “the great David, King of Israel, eternalized in Jewish history, whose image is reflected in all Messianic hopes and redemptive longings ... *that* David never sinned. The one who sinned is a banal person, kidnapping David’s great royal personality and temporarily misrepresenting a king of Israel. A momentary lapse in memory of this historical giant caused the sin.”¹⁴⁷

God, we want to worship You. Really. Please help us make that possible.

Derision of Christianity

As indicated above, and in my brief introductions below, a number of the *Seliḥot* were written under the impact of the persecutions perpetrated against Jews by Christians. As in the case of the Crusade Chronicles, it is not surprising to find bursts of anger, vilification, and contempt directed against those who brought great suffering upon the Jewish community.¹⁴⁸ These sentiments are expressed often and constitute a recurring theme of these liturgical texts. For example, “The cruel enemy is pressing Your treasured ones, to replace their hope in God with the man-made god, the crucified one (literally, the hanged one; *סַבְרָה לְהַמְיֹר בְּתַלְוֵי נֹצֵר*)” (*Seliḥa* 12); “They treat a loathsome tree shoot as a god (*נֹצֵר נִתְעַב לְאֵלֹהִים*)” (*Seliḥa* 14); “Break the arm of those who serve the buried god (*דָּרֹשׁ אֶל הַמֵּת*)” (*Seliḥa* 31); “[demanding] they seek out the dead one (*דָּרֹשׁ אֶל הַמֵּת*)” (*Seliḥa* 54); “does the fool and the vile, the razor-shorn priest (*טָפֵשׁ נֶבֶל וְכֹמֵר תַּעֲרַר הַגְּלָבִים*)” (*Seliḥa* 71). In another case the text was censored. The original text read, “The oppressors of Your people who pray to one who died (*פּוֹרְכֵי עַמְּךָ אֲשֶׁר לִמַּת שׁוֹחֲחִים*)” but the printed text reads,

147. See Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “Jewish Sovereignty and the Redemption of the Shekhina,” *Tradition* 53:1 (2021):3.

148. For examples of this in the Crusade Chronicles, see Shlomo Eidelberg, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 32, “Look and behold, O Lord, what we are doing to sanctify Your Great Name, in order not to exchange You for a crucified scion who was despised, abominated, and held in contempt in his own generation, a bastard son conceived by a menstruating and wanton mother”; p. 35, “the crucified, despicable, and abominable son of harlotry”; p. 38, “You are children of whoredom, believing as you do in a god who was a bastard and was crucified. ... To Gehenna are you and your whoreson god condemned, and to boiling excrement will you be consigned.”

“The oppressors of Your people who pray to foreign gods (פּוֹרְכֵי עַמְךָ אֲשֶׁר (לְבַל שׁוֹחֲחִים)”) (*Seliḥa* 1).¹⁴⁹

Prayers for Revenge Against Our Enemies

This anger against Christians presented in some of the *Seliḥot* also led their authors to pray to God to wreak His vengeance on them, and repay them for what they had done to the Jewish people.

God’s vengeance against the nations of the world at the End of Days as punishment for how they treated the Jewish people through the ages is a central feature of Jewish tradition and is expressed in multiple sources. Isaiah (63:3–4) prophesies, “I trod on them in My anger, trampled them in My wrath; their lifeblood bespattered my garments, and all My clothing was stained. For a day of vengeance is in My heart, and the year of My redemption has arrived.” The Torah (Numbers 31:2) states, “The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Take vengeance for the children of Israel against the Midianites,’” and the Midrash comments: “Israel said to the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, ‘Sovereign of the Universe! You wrote in Your Torah (Leviticus 19:18), ‘You shall not take revenge and you shall not bear a grudge,’ and yet You take revenge and bear a grudge.’ ... The Holy One, Blessed-is-He said to them, ‘I wrote in My Torah, ‘You shall not take revenge and you shall not bear a grudge against the members of your people’ but I take revenge and bear a grudge against the idolators [as it says] ‘Take vengeance for the children of Israel.’”¹⁵⁰ Elsewhere the Midrash states, “It is the same with the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, He made war against Pharaoh, Amalek, Sisera, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Haman, and the kings of the Greeks, but His mind will not be calmed until He will Himself execute vengeance upon Edom.”¹⁵¹ The Talmud (*Berakhot* 33a) states in the name of Rabbi Ami that knowledge is great because it

149. For other references to “Edom,” “Esau,” or “the Edomites,” and other references to Christianity, see *Seliḥot* 7, 20, 27, 30, 33, 50, 54, 64; 66, 89. For references to “Ishmael,” and other references to Islam, see *Seliḥot* 7, 27, 54, 64, 66. See too Avraham Fraenkel, Abraham Gross, and Peter Sh. Lenhardt, eds., *Hebräische liturgische Poesien zu den Judenverfolgungen während des Ersten Kreuzzugs*, 79, 245, 363, 395.

150. *Bereshit Rabba* 55:3.

151. *Bemidbar Rabba* 14:1. See also *Vayikra Rabba* 35:8; *Tana DeBei Elyahu Zuta*, Chapter 19; *Yalkut Shimoni*, Mattot 785.

was placed in a verse between two names of God as in (1 Samuel 2:3), “For God of knowledge is the LORD (אֱלֹהֵי יְדוּעָה).” Rabbi Aḥa Karḥina’a objected that if such a placement of a word in a verse gives it significance, the same should apply to vengeance because it too was placed between two names of God, as in (Psalms 94:1), “God of vengeance, LORD (אֱלֹהֵי נִקְמָוֹת יְהוָה).” Rabbi Elazar responded that, indeed, there are times when vengeance is appropriate, citing Ulla who stated that this is the case when God is avenging evil.

Prayers to God to take vengeance on His/the Jewish people’s enemies were expressed in the early Middle Ages and became especially prominent after the persecutions during the First Crusades at the end of the eleventh century. *Tisha B’Av Kinot*, *Selihot*, *piyutim*, and chronicles composed in the wake of that tragedy all stress the powerful yearning for God to demonstrate His power against those who were persecuting His people.¹⁵²

One example of this is the prayer beginning “Pour out Your wrath (שִׁפְךָ חֲמַתְךָ)” recited following the Grace After Meals at the Passover Seder that was widely included in the Haggada text only in the twelfth century in the wake of the First Crusade. As we begin the second half of that text, we recite a series of verses that are very graphic in their descriptions of the revenge we beseech God to take against our enemies: “Pour out Your wrath on the nations” (Psalms 79:6) ... “Pour Your fury upon them, and let the fierceness of Your anger overtake them” (Psalms 69:25) ... “Pursue them in wrath and destroy them from under the heavens of the LORD” (Lamentations 3:66).¹⁵³ These words were deemed so extreme that, already in the sixteenth century, it was argued that they do not apply to contemporary Christians.¹⁵⁴ However, in the wake of the Shoah, they took on much more immediate and direct relevance.

152. See Yisrael Y. Yuval, “HaNakam VeHaKelala, HaDam VeHaAlila,” *Zion* 58:1 (1993): 34–45.

153. For the background to this prayer, see Daniel Goldschmidt, *Haggada shel Pesah* (Jerusalem, 1961), 62–64; Rabbi Menahem M. Kasher, *Haggada Shleima* (Jerusalem, 1967), 177–80; Yosef Tabori, “Shefokh Hamatha – Mashma’uto VeNisyonot LeShanato,” in Arnon Atzmon, et. al., eds., *Carmi Sheli: Mehkarim BeAgada UBeParshmuta Mugashim LeProf’ Carmi Horowitz* (New York, 2012), 213–21; idem., “Shefokh Hamatha – LeToledot HaMinhag,” in Adam Ferziger, ed., *Darkhei Daniel: Mehkarim BeMada’ei HaYahadut LiKhevod HaRav Professor Daniel Sperber* (Ramat-Gan, 2007), 377–401.

154. See Michael A. Shmidman, “Pour Out Your Fury:” Toward an Understanding of the

This unbridled desire for revenge is a central motif in the *Seliḥot* and is clearly expressed many times:

“Let judgment for their evil come upon them and condemn them,
do to them as they did to us – bring harsh devastation upon them.
Rain down fiery coals upon them as their due portion,
pay them back sevenfold in revenge – destroy them.” (*Seliḥa* 9)

“May curse cling to them as the liver to the lobe,
may fierce wrath come upon them with every kind of wound and ill...
Destroy the foe from their foundations, uproot their kingdom, God.”
(*Seliḥa* 13)

“God, let them fall by their own counsel, those smearers of falsehood;
let their memory be gone, let Your fury befall them;
Swiftly repay their own deeds upon their head, and wipe out
all the nations who have forgotten God.” (*Seliḥa* 30)

“Life – from its book wipe out haughty Geval and Moab,
who bow down, worship, and deify a log of wood.
Show the oppressive wicked no grace – condemn them to ruin,
for they have taunted the ranks of the God of life.” (*Seliḥa* 32)

“Pour Your wrath upon them, blazing fury from Your heights,
show fervent anger for Your name, God – it is desecrated among
the nations.” (*Seliḥa* 66)

“Let Your word come true without delay,
cut off all their descendants, all their goods and wares.
Prepare their slaughter, pierce them and tear them,
for they started a fire and it burned down our land.” (*Seliḥa* 80)¹⁵⁵

Commentary of Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi,” in *Carmi Sheli*, i–xx. Ashkenazi’s position was quoted by the seventeenth century Rabbi Moshe Rivkis in his *Be’er HaGola* commentary to *Shulḥan Arukh*, *Ḥoshen Mishpat* 425:300.

155. For more expressions of this theme, see *Seliḥot* 8; 11, 13, 14, 15, 21, 29, 31, 33, 36, 41, 42, 54, 55, 58, 59, 64, 66, 82, 94, 96, 97. See also Avraham Fraenkel, Abraham Gross, and Peter Sh. Lenhardt, eds., *Hebräische liturgische Poesien zu den Judenverfolgungen während des Ersten Kreuzzugs*, 119, 131, 185, 187, 189, 199, 237, 257, 259, 269, 295, 395, 427, 429, 435, 447.

This prayer for vengeance is also expressed in the Crusade Chronicles. See, for example, Shlomo Eidelberg, *The Jews and the Crusaders*, 33.

Praying to Angels/Intermediaries

There are a number of passages in the *Seliḥot* service which contain prayers to angels or to divine attributes to intercede with God to favorably respond to our prayers. The most famous example is the passage recited every day at the end of the service, beginning with “Agents of mercy, bear our pleas for mercy before the Master of mercy (מְכַנְיֵי רַחֲמִים, הַכְּנִסוּ רַחֲמֵינוּ) (לִפְנֵי בְּעַל הָרַחֲמִים).” See pages 72–73, 128–129, and more.

Other passages also address angels. For example, we recite, “O angels of mercy, who attend the Most High, please entreat before God with eloquent expression” (*Seliḥa* 10);¹⁵⁶ “Michael and Gabriel ... plead now before God” (*Seliḥa* 31);¹⁵⁷ “O angels of mercy, please plead before the Dweller of the thornbush” (*Seliḥa* 33);¹⁵⁸ “Let the great ruling angel [Michael] arise to plead for his people, without cease. ... Let the angel of fear [Gabriel] behind the veil serve as worthy advocate and gather our merits” (*Seliḥa* 44).¹⁵⁹ Another prayer addresses the divine attribute of mercy, “O Attribute of Mercy, wash over us and cast our pleas before Your maker” (*Seliḥa* 93).¹⁶⁰ One *Seliḥa* (*Seliḥa* 68) fully expresses this sentiment; we ask a number of intermediaries to intercede on our behalf. We begin with “May the seat of the throne perched on high plead for our sake to the Exalted Creator.” We then continue asking each of the images on that throne (lion, bull, human, eagle) to plead on our behalf to God and present our prayers to him. We conclude with, “Holy Ones on high, Seraphim and Ophanim, sound our prayers before the Lord of lords.”¹⁶¹ In another *Seliḥa* (*Seliḥa* 77) we address the various “gates of heaven” to “open up” to those who pray “and let their prayers rise up” to God.¹⁶²

Over the generations there were many who objected to these prayers on a number of grounds. The *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Berakhot* 9:1) states that

156. See below, page 156.

157. See below, page 502.

158. See below, page 522.

159. See below, page 648.

160. See below, page 1142.

161. See below, pages 886, 888. For a list of almost three dozen such prayers, recited as part of the *Seliḥot* service and on other occasions, see Shlomo Sprecher, “HaPolmus al Amirat ‘Makhnisei Raḥamim,” *Yeshurun* 3 (1997): 706–11.

162. See below, page 978.

one does not directly approach a human being in power, but first asks intermediaries to intercede on one's behalf. "But the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, is not like this. If someone faces a calamity he should not cry out, not to Michael and not to Gabriel, but he should cry out to Me and I will respond to him immediately."

Others cite the fifth of Rambam's Thirteen Principles of Faith in opposition to this formulation. Rambam states that it is fitting to pray to God alone and not to any other being, like angels, stars, or constellations, nor can one make any of them intermediaries to bring one closer to God. He writes that only He, Blessed-is-He, is rightfully worshipped, magnified, and obeyed.¹⁶³

Still others opposed the recitation of these kinds of prayers on the grounds that one does not find in the prayers of the Patriarchs, Moses, any of the other prophets, or in the liturgical formulations of the Men of the Great Assembly, even a hint of praying to anything other than God Himself.¹⁶⁴

But because some of these prayers were already established in Geonic times, and other such prayers were authored by highly respected rabbinic authorities, much effort was expended in trying to justify them. There already is a reference to the previously noted prayer that drew the most criticism, "Agents of mercy, bear our pleas for mercy before the Master of mercy (מְבַנְיֵי רַחֲמִים, הַכְּנִיסוּ רַחֲמֵינוּ לְפָנֵי בַּעַל הָרַחֲמִים)," in the writings of the *Geonim*, Rabbi Saadya, Rabbi Sherira, and Rabbi Hai,¹⁶⁵ and the earliest source in support of this prayer and others like it was offered by

163. Rambam, *Peirush HaMishnayot, Sanhedrin* 10:1, "hayesod haḥamishi."

164. Rabbi Yaakov Anatoli, *Malmed HaTalmidim* (Lyck, 1866), 68a, cited in Rabbi Moshe Aryeh Bloch, ed., *Sefer Shaarei Teshuvot: She'eilot UTeshuvot Maharam MiRotenberg* (Berlin, 1891), 325–26. See also Ramban, "Torat Hashem Temima" in Rabbi Chaim Dov Chavel, ed., *Kitvei Rabbeinu Moshe ben Nahman*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1963), 171; Rabbi Aharon HaKohen of Lunel, *Sefer Orhot Hayyim* (Jerusalem, 1956), 27a, "Hilkhot Kriyat Shema," 19; *Kol Bo* (Fjorda, 1782), 10. The statement of the author of the *Kol Bo* is cited in *Eliyahu Rabba, Oraḥ Hayyim* 62, end.

165. See Y. Davidson, S. Asaf, and Y. Yoel, eds., *Siddur Rav Saadya Gaon* (Jerusalem, 1970), 357; B. M. Levin, *Otzar HaGeonim*, vol. 5, *Taanit* 15b, pp. 25–26. It is also included in the ninth century *Seder Rav Amram Gaon*. See Daniel Goldschmidt, *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* (Jerusalem, 1971), 159. However, many have noted (see, for example, Goldschmidt's introduction to this work, p. 20) that later generations inserted all kinds of prayers into the text of this work and, as a result, it is virtually impossible to determine what was part of the original version.

Rabbi Sherira who noted that it was an accepted and standard liturgical formulation.¹⁶⁶

A number of leading Ashkenazi authorities took strong positions in favor of these prayers. Rabbi Eliezer of Worms, most well known as the author of the *Sefer Roke'ah*, adduced – in short, almost cryptic form – over a dozen biblical, rabbinic, and kabbalistic sources which he claimed definitively proved that invoking intermediaries to intercede with God is totally appropriate. For example, he cited the talmudic passage (*Taanit* 16a) explaining why the service instituted to pray for rain during a drought included a visit to the cemetery. One opinion cited there is that one goes to the cemetery “in order that the deceased will request mercy on our behalf.” He also cited the talmudic text (*Avoda Zara* 17a) describing the prayer uttered by Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya after he regretted his repeated immoral activities. He addressed the “mountains and hills, heaven and earth, sun and moon, and stars and constellations” and asked them all to pray for mercy on his behalf, and the end of the story is that the Talmud relates that “a Divine Voice emerged and said: Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya is destined for life in the World-to-Come.” Clearly, argued Rabbi Eliezer of Worms, he was not at all penalized for seeking these elements as intermediaries.¹⁶⁷

Rabbeinu Tzidkiya HaRofeh, author of the *Shibbolei HaLeket*, also wrote in support of these prayers. He cites Rabbi Avigdor Kohen Tzedek who references a talmudic passage (*Sanhedrin* 44b) which states that “a person should always pray for mercy that all should strengthen his power [in prayer] and that he should have no enemies [causing him trouble in heaven] above.” The definition of “all” who “should strengthen his power” is the subject of debate among commentators. Me’iri, for example, states

166. See *Teshuvot HaGeonim*, ed. Avraham Eliyahu Harkavy (New York, 1959), 188–90, 373; also cited in B. M. Levin, *Otzar HaGeonim*, vol. 2, Shabbat (Jerusalem, 1930), 4–6.

167. See Rabbi Yosef Shmuel Zachter, “Teshuva LeBaal HaRokeah BeInyan Amirat ‘Makhnisei Raḥamim,” *Yeshurun* 3 (1997): 41–47. Interestingly, this same responsum was printed a year later by Simḥa Emanuel, “Al Amirat HaPiyut ‘Makhnisei Raḥamim,” *HaMaayan* 38:1 (Tishrei 5758): 5–10. For some reason he does not make clear, Emanuel questions the attribution of this responsum to Rabbi Eliezer Roke’ah.

For a similar proof, see *Midrash Tanhuma*, Va’ethanan 6, which describes how Moses reached out to the “heaven and earth, stars and constellations, mountains and hills, the great sea, and the Minister in charge of the Inner [Sanctum]” for support after he was denied his wish to enter the land of Israel, but it was all in vain.

that it refers to friends and loved ones who can provide support.¹⁶⁸ But the author of *Shibbolei HaLeket* cites Rashi's commentary on that passage which notes that it refers to "ministering angels who should help him seek mercy."¹⁶⁹ This interpretation of Rashi is cited by later authorities as a justification for reciting the prayer "Agents of mercy, bear our pleas for mercy before the Master of mercy" and some of the other prayers mentioned above.¹⁷⁰ These sources yield the conclusion that, in fact, one is not praying to the angels directly for mercy; rather one is just asking the angels to intercede with God that He, alone, grant mercy.

Rabbi Yehuda ben Yakar, teacher of Ramban, also justifies reciting this prayer and, as support for his position, cites the talmudic passage explaining why the service instituted to pray for rain during a drought included a visit to the cemetery that was cited above. Clearly, seeking an intermediary to intercede on our behalf with God is appropriate. But, still clearly uncomfortable with the notion of utilizing angels as intermediaries, Rabbi Yehuda ben Yakar suggests that the prayer "Agents of mercy, bear our pleas for mercy before the Master of mercy (מְבַנְיֵי רַחֲמִים, הַבְּנוֹי) (רַחֲמֵינוּ לְפָנֶי בַּעַל הָרַחֲמִים)" refers not to angels but to "the righteous of the generation (חַסִּידֵי הַדּוֹר)" who, as a number of sources indicate, appropriately pray for the benefit of their generation.¹⁷¹

168. Me'iri, *Beit HaBehira, Sanhedrin* 44b, s.v. *kevar yadata*. For Meiri's opposition to reciting this prayer, see his commentary on *Sanhedrin* 38b, s.v. *leolam yehei*.

169. *Sanhedrin*, ad loc., s.v. *leolam yevakesh adam*.

170. See *Shibbolei HaLeket* 282. This same point is made by Rabbi Shmuel Shtrashun in his *Hagahot VeHidushei HaRashash, Sanhedrin*, ad loc. Rabbi Avigdor Kohen Tzedek was a teacher of Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg.

In further support of this position, *Shibbolei HaLeket*, ad loc., goes on to cite a passage from *Midrash Shir HaShirim* which describes how the Congregation of Israel asks the angels who are posted at the gates of prayer and tears to bring their prayers and tears before God and to be an advocate for them before God that He forgive them. There is no assumption here that the angels themselves have any power to affect our fate; we beseech them to use their influence with God who, alone, can influence our fate. I have been unable to identify the source of this Midrash. A work written by a contemporary of *Shibbolei HaLeket*, *Sefer Tanya Rabbati*, 294, also cites Rabbi Avigdor and the passages from Rashi's commentary on *Sanhedrin* and *Midrash Shir HaShirim* presented earlier.

171. Rabbi Shmuel Yerushalmi, ed., Rabbi Yehuda ben Yakar, *Peirush HaTefilot VeHaBerakhot* (Jerusalem, 1979), 73. For a similar argument, see Rabbi Yohanan Treves, "Kimha DeAvishuna," *Mahzor Kefi Minhag K"K Roma* (Bologna, 1541), vol. 2, 14–15. On p. 142 he takes a stronger position and maintains that those who first prayed to God can then ask angels to help usher their prayer into the Divine Presence.

In addition, Rabbi Yehuda ben Yakar and others also cite the rabbinic statement (*Sota* 34b) that Caleb separated himself from the other spies and went to Hebron to prostrate himself on the graves of the Forefathers. He said to them, “My forefathers, pray for mercy for me so that I will be saved from the counsel of the spies.” While Rabbi Yehuda ben Yakar questions the relevance of this source, Rabbi Menaḥem Tziyuni is most definitive about it. He cites this rabbinic passage about Caleb in his commentary to the Torah and concludes, “This passage shuts the mouth of those who say that one should not recite ‘Agents of mercy.’” As further support for this custom, Rabbi Tziyuni goes on to also quote the talmudic passage from *Taanit* cited above. Clearly, he definitively concludes, appealing to intermediaries is eminently appropriate.¹⁷²

In the fifteenth century, a new perspective on this question appears in the sources for the first time. In his *Sefer Nitzahon*, a polemic versus Christianity, Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Muhlhausen strongly opposes anyone invoking intermediaries to intercede with God on their behalf, considering it to be “tending to idolatry.” He notes that no prayer recorded in the entire twenty-four books of the Bible is directed to an intermediary other than those addressed to another human being to whom it is not possible to ascribe divinity.¹⁷³

Rabbi Muhlhausen twice refers to this position elsewhere in his book. He includes it in his list of seven articles of faith, stating that “we reject dualism and intermediaries,” clearly indicating how opposed he was to this mode of prayer.¹⁷⁴ But the explanation for his visceral objection is clear from the first time he addresses this issue, clearly rooting his objection to praying to intermediaries in the fact that this was a Christian practice.¹⁷⁵ There he noted how Christians appeal to saints to intervene on their behalf, similar to the practice of people reaching out to intermediaries to represent them before an earthly king. He considers this to be misguided because it demonstrates either that these Christians believe that without such intervention their god would be unaware of

172. Rabbi Menaḥem Tziyuni, *Sefer Tziyuni* (Lemberg, 1882), 61b, Parashat Shelah, beginning.

173. Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Muhlhausen, *Sefer Nitzahon* (Altdorf-Nurnberg, 1644), 86, 132.

174. *Ibid.*, 83, 127.

175. *Ibid.*, 16, 12.

their behavior, or because it demonstrates that they believe their god is more difficult to placate than are his attendants and that their intervention is necessary to gain favor from their god. Finally, at the conclusion of this passage, he refers his reader to his later opposition to Jews utilizing intermediaries in prayer.¹⁷⁶

An anonymous fifteenth-century author also opposes intermediaries in general, and the recital of the “Agents of mercy” prayer in particular, as a reaction to contemporary Christian practice. He begins his objection to this mode of worship by noting that Gentiles in his surroundings make images of the saints and ask them to intercede before their god. But, he continues, Jews, by contrast, believe that God receives the prayers of all, citing a half dozen biblical verses in support. He then continues, “On the basis of this, those who recite during the Ten Days of Mercy, ‘Agents of mercy, bear our pleas for mercy before the Master of mercy (מְכַנְּסֵי רַחֲמִים, הַכְּנִיסוּ רַחֲמֵינוּ לִפְנֵי בֶּעַל הָרַחֲמִים)’ are making a mistake.”¹⁷⁷

One other fifteenth-century author, Rabbi Avigdor Kara (d. 1439), similarly argued that these prayers were inappropriate, also citing the passage from the Jerusalem Talmud in *Sanhedrin* quoted above. But, he reluctantly allows their recitation since they have become so widespread. “Having said all this, we must elucidate the well-known practice, which is spreading everywhere, of saying ‘Angels of mercy,’ ‘O quality of mercy,’ ‘O gates of heaven,’ ‘And the throne will intercede,’ and so forth – for since it is already an accomplished fact, it is permitted, for we cannot deviate from the practice of our forefathers.” He goes along with these formulations because he sees them as prayers to God to cause these intermediaries to help him.¹⁷⁸

Similarly, Rabbi Israel Bruna (d. 1480) simply assumes that such prayers are appropriate. He notes that these appeals to advisors of the king in his presence reflect a sentiment of “lowliness and servitude

176. For a description of Rabbi Mulhausen’s position, see Frank Talmage, “Angels, Anthems, and Anathemas: Aspects of Popular Religion in Fourteenth-Century Bohemian Judaism,” in idem., *Apples of Gold in Settings of Silver: Studies in Medieval Jewish Exegesis and Polemics*, ed. by Barry Dov Walfish (Toronto, 1999), 400–402.

177. Cambridge University manuscript, Add. 1022.1, 113b–114b. See Simḥa Emanuel, “Al Amirat HaPiyut ‘Makhnisei Raḥamim,” 10–11.

178. Rabbi Kara’s responsum is still in manuscript in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. It is discussed in Frank Talmage, “Angels, Anthems, and Anathemas,” 15–16.

(שְׁפִלוֹת וְעִבְדוּת)” on the part of those embarrassed to directly approach the king and do not constitute involving an intermediary at all. What is true of a human king is also true of the divine King.¹⁷⁹

The debate continued in the next century. After voicing strong objections to it, Rabbi Judah Loew ben Betzalel (d. 1609), known as Maharal, suggests that it is not a prayer directed to the angels but rather to God, asking that He allow the angels, who are the “agents of mercy,” to arouse His mercy on us.¹⁸⁰

In the first part of the eighteenth century this issue was the subject of a major heated controversy in Trieste, Italy involving many contemporary rabbinical scholars. It is presented in great detail over some fifty densely printed pages in Rabbi Isaac Lampronti’s *Pahad Yitzhak*, a fourteen-volume encyclopedia of Jewish law and practice. Rabbi Lampronti presents both sides of the issue, outlining a host of arguments in favor and opposed to this custom, many of which have been presented above.¹⁸¹

During this period, this issue was also discussed in western Europe. Specifically addressing the *Seliḥa* which includes the words, “O Attribute of Mercy, wash over us and cast our pleas before Your maker” (*Seliḥa* 93), Rabbi Netanel Weil (d. 1769) argued that it – and presumably other prayers like it – violated the fifth of Maimonides’ thirteen principles of faith.¹⁸² There is a very interesting disagreement regarding how this statement of his was understood. Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg wrote that Rabbi Weil made it clear that this phrase should not be recited¹⁸³ while

179. *She'eilot UTeshuvot Mahari Bruna*, 275.

180. Maharal, *Netivot Olam, Netiv HaAvoda* n. 12.

Rabbi Moshe Sofer explained the position of Maharal in detail and concluded that while he personally does recite the passages in the *Seliḥot* service that refer to angels, he leaves out the first one, “Agents of mercy, bear our pleas for mercy before the Master of mercy (מַכְנִיֵּס רַחֲמִים, הַכְנִיֵּסוּ רַחֲמֵינוּ לְפָנֵי בֵּל הַרַחֲמִים).” See *Sefer Hatam Sofer, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 166. For a very spirited defense of the appropriateness of reciting these prayers, with reference to the position of Ḥatam Sofer, see Rabbi Yehuda Asad, *Teshuvot Yehuda Yaale* (Lemberg, 1873), 9a, n. 21.

181. See Rabbi Isaac Lampronti, *Pahad Yitzhak*, vol. 11 (Lyck, 1874), 33v–58r. For discussions of this controversy, see Shlomo Sprecher, “HaPolmus al Amirat ‘Makhnisei Raḥamim,” 719–21; David Malkiel, “Between Worldliness and Traditionalism: Eighteenth-Century Jews Debate Intercessionary Prayer,” *JSIS (Jewish Studies Internet Journal)* 2 (2003): 169–98.

182. Rabbi Netanel Weil, *Korban Netanel on Rosh HaShana*, end chapter 1, n. 3.

183. Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg, *Iyun Tefilla* (Jerusalem, 2016), 266.

Rabbi Ḥayyim Ḥezkiyahu Medina understood his remark as simply indicating his displeasure with this formulation without insisting that it should be avoided.¹⁸⁴

In the nineteenth century this issue assumed a new level of significance when it became part of the defense of tradition against the attacks of reformers who sought to undermine it. Advocates of Reform Judaism saw these prayers as relics of a past that needed to be removed in accordance with Jews becoming modern and enlightened. Consequently, arguments in support of these prayers were not only objective analyses of the sources, but polemical attempts to hold the line against these reformist tendencies.¹⁸⁵ The issue was still being debated in England in 1885, and Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote a letter to his son-in-law there, Rabbi Michael Levy, who sought his support in opposing those who wanted these prayers removed from the service.¹⁸⁶ And the issue continued to be addressed in the twentieth century.¹⁸⁷

Because of the controversial nature of these formulations petitioning intermediaries to plead on our behalf, various textual changes were made. For example, Maharaḥ, cited above, suggested that instead of the text reading “Agents of mercy, bear our pleas for mercy before the Master of mercy (מְבַנְיֵי רַחֲמִים, הַבְּנִיּוֹת רַחֲמֵינוּ לְפָנֵי בַּעַל הָרַחֲמִים)” it should read “Allow the agents of mercy to bear our pleas before the Master of mercy (מְבַנְיֵי רַחֲמֵינוּ, יְבַנְיֵנוּ).” Also, in the original text of the *Seliḥa* beginning “Thirteen are the attributes (שְׁלֹשָׁ עֶשְׂרֵה מִדּוֹת),” the petitioner asks them to plead on their behalf. For example, the first stanza reads, “Please, You who epitomize each attribute, plead before your King in supplication (חַלֵּי מַלְכְךָ בְּתַחֲנָה) to search for the merit of those called the lily.” The second stanza reads, “Please, You who epitomize each attribute, plead for mercy for them (בְּקִשֵׁי רַחֲמִים עֲלֵיהֶם).”¹⁸⁸ But by contrast, the text in this volume of the *Seliḥot* service reads, “Please, You who epitomize each attribute, I plead before my King in supplication (אֶחְחֶלֶה פָּנַי מַלְכִי בְּתַחֲנָה) to search for the

184. Rabbi Ḥayyim Hezkiyahu Medini, *Sedei Hemed*, vol. 8 (New York, 1962), “Asifat Dinin,” “Maarekhet Rosh HaShana” 1:2, s.v. *ubesiman*. For more on this, see “Mavo,” *Siddur Otzar HaTefillot*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1960), 7b–10b.

185. See Shlomo Sprecher, “HaPulmus al Amirat ‘Makhnisei Raḥamim,” 721–25.

186. *Ibid.*, 726–29.

187. See, for example, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, *Igrot Moshe*, Vol. 8, *Orah Ḥayyim*, 43:6.

188. See Daniel Goldschmidt, *Seder Selihot KeMinhag Lita* (Jerusalem, 1965), 106.

merit of those called the lily”; “Please, You who epitomize each attribute, I plead for mercy for them (אֲבַקֵּשׁ רַחֲמִים עֲלֵיהֶם).”¹⁸⁹

However we formulate these prayers during these centrally important days, we recognize the sovereignty of God and pray to Him for mercy and forgiveness.¹⁹⁰

Our Search for God

Throughout the *Seliḥot* service we repeatedly describe our yearning to find God and experience a sense of closeness to Him. Toward the end of the daily *Seliḥot* service we recite, “Let us find You when we seek You, as it is written (Deuteronomy 4:29), ‘And if from there you seek the LORD your God, you shall find Him, when you seek Him out with all your heart and with all your soul (וּמְצֵאתֶם אֹתוֹ כִּי תִדְרְשׁוּ בְכָל-לְבַבְךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּמְצֵאתֶם אֹתוֹ כִּי תִדְרְשׁוּ בְכָל-לְבַבְךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ).”

Note that the verse begins in the plural (וּבַקְשֶׁתֶם) and continues in the singular (וּמְצֵאתֶם). One could suggest that many people start off wanting to seek God but only a few are able to put in the effort necessary to be successful. Rabbeinu Bahya ben Asher, however, presents an opposite

189. See pages 564–65.

190. For more arguments and sources about this issue, see Daniel Goldschmidt, *Seder Seliḥot KeMinhag Lita*, 11–12; Yeshaya Tzvi Braver, *Shomea Tefilla* (New York, 1997), 280–88; Shlomo Sprecher, “HaPolmus al Amirat ‘Makhnisei Raḥamim,” 706–29; reprinted, with some additions, in *Yeshurun* 36 (2017): 828–62; Rabbi Aharon Levi, *Yashmi'einu Salaḥti Seliḥot* (Jerusalem, 1998), 26–28; Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford and Portland, 2004), 78–86; Rabbi Yaakov Weingarten, *Seder HaSeliḥot HaMeforash HeḤadash* (Jerusalem, 2016), 38–42; *Seder Seliḥot Hamevoar: Metivta* (2019), 21–24, 114–15.

This issue was also raised in the context of visiting a cemetery to pray either at the graves of loved ones or those of universally acknowledged righteous Jews. The concern raised by many is that it would be inappropriate to direct prayers to them as opposed to God. There is a large literature addressing this. See, for example, Rabbi Yeshaya Tzvi Braver, *Shome'a Tefilla*, 224–26, 236–38; Elliot Horowitz, “Speaking to the Dead: Cemetery Prayer in Medieval and Early Modern Jewry,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1999): 303–17; Moshe Halamish, “Hishtathut al Kevarim BeElul UBETishrei,” *Beheyoto Karov*, 77–86; Lucia Raspe, “Sacred Space, Local History, and Diasporic Identity: The Graves of the Righteous in Medieval and Early Modern Ashkenaz,” in Ra'anana S. Boustán, Oren Kosansky, and Marina Rustow, eds., *Jewish Studies at the Crossroads of Anthropology and History: Authority, Diaspora, Tradition* (Philadelphia, 2011), 148–51; Rabbi Shlomo Refael Daichovsky, “Kivrei Tzaddikim,” *HaMaayan* 61:1 (5781): 26–32.

perspective. He writes that had the verse concluded in the plural, one would think that God responds only to the prayers of a group which seeks Him, due to the merit of approaching Him with numbers, citing the talmudic statement (*Berakhot* 8a) that “The Holy One, Blessed-is-He, does not despise the prayer of the masses.” Regrettably, one would have the impression that He would not respond to an individual person. It is for this reason, he continues, that the verse concludes in the singular, to teach that God will also respond to individuals when they seek Him with all their heart and all their might.¹⁹¹

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik reflected on this verse in the following way:

The word *bakashateinu* does not mean “our request”; it means “our search.” We plead with God to answer us, but what *are* we searching for? We are searching to be close to God. Every person wants to feel the touch of the hand of God on his shoulder. In our ceaseless quest for God, we plead that He permit Himself to be found. We pray that it should be easy to find God. The recitation of *Selihot* is not complete without the statement of **הַמְצִיא לָנוּ בְּבִקְשָׁתֵנוּ**. It is the last plea before we stand for the solemn prayer of *Shema Koleinu*, and it is the purpose, objective, and ultimate end of *all* prayers. We pray that God should establish a relationship with us; that He should not be transcendent beyond man’s reach and that man should not flee from him.¹⁹²

Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, asks two questions. First, the verse begins with the verb “seek (וּבִקְשָׁתֶם),” as in “And if from there you seek the LORD your God,” which presupposes conscious effort and deliberate work, and then it continues with the verb “find (וּמְצִאתָ),” as in “you shall find Him,” which connotes happenstance or serendipity. Is a positive response to our search dependent on our effort or is it forthcoming almost automatically? Secondly, how comforting is this promise if the verse clearly predicates finding God on the condition that “you seek Him out with all your heart and with all your soul.” Who can possibly reach such a high bar, seeking God so purely and so fully?

191. *Be'ur al HaTora*, Deuteronomy 4:29. See Netziv, *Haamek Davar*, ad loc., for a different interpretation.

192. See *The Koren Mesorat Harav Kinot* (Koren: Jerusalem, 2011), 243, based on Jacob J. Schacter, ed., *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways*, 108.

Rabbi Teitelbaum suggests that in order to grant us the ability to approach God in prayer, even though we know that we could never fully “seek Him out with all your heart and with all your soul,” God promised us that if we make an effort to seek Him “from there (מִשָּׁם),” from whatever level of sincerity we can achieve on our own, He will help us to “find” this higher level of full engagement with Him. We recognize that we could not possibly achieve that level on our own, as a result of our “seeking”; rather, it will only be possible with the help of God. We will only be able to “find it” as a result of a gift from a caring and compassionate God.¹⁹³

We express this desire to connect with God in a personal and meaningful way often in our prayers. In the *Kedusha* prayer we recite as part of the Shabbat *Shaharit* service we beseech God to reveal Himself from His place and reign over us “for we are waiting for you.” We long for God to come close to us, for us “to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting upon my frail shoulders.”¹⁹⁴

This notion appears elsewhere in the *Selihot* service as well. For example, toward the end of the daily service, we recite that we, “Your people and Your portion hunger for Your goodness, thirst for your loving-kindness, [and] crave Your salvation (עֲמֹךָ וְנַחֲלֶתְךָ רַעֲבֵי טוֹבָךָ, צְמֵאֵי חֶסֶדְךָ, תְּאֲבִי) (שִׁעֲרֶךָ).” We also state, “I am shattered by longing, like a deer for flowing streams (גִּרְסָתִי לְתַאֲוֶתְךָ כְּאַיִל עַל אַפְיקִים) (Seliḥa 6);¹⁹⁵ “our innermost source yearns for You (מְקוֹר קוֹרוֹת לְךָ עוֹרֵג) (Seliḥa 22).¹⁹⁶ We don’t just want to connect to God; we *long* for God and we *yearn* for God. Let us try, with all the sincerity we can muster, to reach out to God and, in the merit of that genuine effort, be granted the gift of “finding” Him.

It is clear that much effort has been invested in formulating the most meaningful and appropriate words with which to approach God during these crucially important days. May we recite them with the thoughtfulness and intention that they deserve, and may God see fit to respond to our prayers, for ourselves, our families, our communities, our people, and our world.

193. See Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum, *Selihot Divrei Yoel*, 62–63.

194. For this formulation, see Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, “A Tribute to the Rebbitzin of Talne,” 77.

195. See below, pages 98–99.

196. See below, pages 382–83.

It is now my pleasant task to acknowledge those who have made this introduction and subsequent commentary to the *Seliḥot Minhag Lita* possible. First, my thanks to Rabbi Reuven Ziegler who invited me to undertake this project. I am very grateful to him for his confidence that I would be able to produce a work worthy of the Koren imprint. Thanks also to other members of the Koren team led by publisher, Matthew Miller, Aryeh Grossman, Avishai Magence, Esther Be'er, Ashira Firszt, Shari Fisch, Dvora Rhein, and Rachele Emanuel. In particular, I would like to express my profound gratitude to Caryn Meltz for all her work in facilitating the completion of this volume. I am honored to join the Koren family.

It has been a real privilege for me to partner with Sara Daniel in the production of this volume. Anyone who has ever recited *Seliḥot* knows how very difficult they are to understand. Like much of liturgical poetry in general, the texts are complex and demand of the reader a great familiarity with biblical and rabbinic literature from which so many words and phrases are drawn. Daniel's English translation of these very challenging texts is poetic, lyrical, masterful, and simply exceptional.

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I also want to express my thanks to Mr. Zvi Erenyi, Reference Librarian at the Mendel Gottesman Library of Yeshiva University, for his constant unflagging help with all my requests, especially when regular access to the library was severely limited during the COVID epidemic.

My commentary is thematic, not literary. My interest is in sharing perspectives that will enhance the reader's experience while reciting the *Seliḥot*, providing confidence, hope, and optimism as the new year is

about to dawn. I have benefitted from many *Seliḥot* editions in preparing the introduction and comments. Among the ones most helpful are: Rabbi Aharon Blum, *Seder Seliḥot Meforashot* (Jerusalem, 1990); Rabbi Aharon Fisher, et. al., *Seder Seliḥot HaMevo'ar: Metivta* (2019); Rabbi Aharon Glatzer, *Nefesh Mordekhai: Seliḥot Mevo'arot* (Jerusalem, 2017); Daniel Goldschmidt, *Seder HaSeliḥot KeMinhag Lita* (Jerusalem, 1965); Rabbi Aharon Levi, *Yashmi'eini Salaḥti Seliḥot* (Jerusalem, 1998); and Rabbi Yaakov Weingarten, *Seder HaSeliḥot HaMeforash HeHadash* (Jerusalem, 2016). I am very grateful to the authors of all these books. I learned a lot from them.

I have also identified the author of each *Seliḥa*, to the extent that this information is available, and have added a minimal amount of biographical information about them. In most cases, definitive information is not available; I based what I wrote on the scholarly consensus found in the following books: Ḥayyim Schirmann, *Mivḥar HaShira Halvrit BeItalya* (Berlin, 1934); Avraham Grossman, *Ḥakhmei Ashkenaz HaRishonim* (Jerusalem, 1981); idem., *Ḥakhmei Tzarefat HaRishonim* (Jerusalem, 1997); Ezra Fleischer, *Shirat-HaKodesh Halvrit Bimei-HaBeinayim* (Jerusalem, 2007); Elisabeth Hollender, *Piyyut Commentary in Medieval Ashkenaz* (Berlin and New York, 2008); and Ephraim Kanarfogel, *The Intellectual History and Rabbinic Culture of Medieval Ashkenaz* (Detroit, 2013). I also prepared a brief synopsis of each *Seliḥa* which appears before the *Seliḥa* text and translation.

I conclude with a prayer that we “recite the *Seliḥot* deliberately, slowly, and with *kavana*,” with feeling and with sincerity, and that the Holy One, Blessed-is-He, hear our prayers and bless us all with good health and peace, this year and for all years to come.

Jacob J. Schacter
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WITH INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY BY

Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter

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