YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**SHABBAT SHUVA**

**SICHA OF HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL**

**Truthful Repentance**

We commence the Selichot prayers by declaring, "To you, God, belongs righteousness, and to us, shamefacedness." These words alone would suffice if only we sincerely meant them. The gemara teaches us (Berakhot 12b): "Rava Bar Huna the Elder said in the name of Rav: Anyone who commits a sin but is then ashamed of it receives forgiveness for all of his sins." All that is required is simple embarrassment before the Holy One, standing before Him submissively.

The gemara (ibid.) learns this from the episode of King Shaul and the sorceress (I Shemuel 28:15): "Shemuel said to Shaul, 'Why have you so disturbed me, to call me up (from the dead)?' And Shaul answered, 'I am extremely distressed, for the Philistines make war against me and God has departed from me and no longer answers me, neither by prophets nor dreams. Therefore I call to you.'" Shaul does not mention that he had inquired of the "Urim and Tumim" but had received no reply because of his sin of killing the Kohanim of Nov. That is, Shaul is embarrassed to mention his earlier behavior. "And how do we know that God forgave Shaul? As it is written: 'Tomorrow you and your children will be with Me.' Rav Yochanan said: 'With Me' - within My domain."

Shaul knows well that Shemuel is aware of the crime perpetrated at Nov, but he nevertheless is fearful, embarrassed, humiliated, and does not mention his shameful act. Similarly, when standing before God, who knows our actions and our innermost thoughts, we too must feel shame. How human is this feeling, how unique to the experience of humanity! One stands completely exposed before the Heavenly Throne, struggling to comprehend that "To you, God, belongs righteousness, and to us, shamefacedness."

Embarrassment does not relate to sins alone, but rather is much broader. When one contemplates his mitzvot and good deeds, explains Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzato in Mesillat Yesharim, he must "search his deeds: or some say, sense his deeds." Searching means to see the good acts and the bad; sensing refers to the mitzva acts themselves. One should contemplate how much he invested of his soul, how much love and fear of God characterized his mitzvot, how many moments of truth accompanied him. It is not enough to go through the motions of fulfilling the mitzvot; we must serve God in truth, in sincerity, with a whole heart. As the Chiddushei Ha-rim said in the name of Rav Simcha Bunem: The Evil Inclination desires only to steal from man the kernel of truth he possesses; afterwards, he no longer needs to steal anything else.

We approach the Holy One, Blessed be He, in fear and trembling, saying "Our Father, our King;" but do we hear the fearsome words of the prophet (Malakhi 1:6) echo in our ears: "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. But if then I am a Father - where is My honor? If I am a Master, where is My awe?" It is easy to say "Our Father, our King;" it is far less easy to recall that "if I am a Father - where is My honor? If I am a Master, where is My awe?"

We request of God, "May our supplications be as pleasant to You as a burnt offering." Our prayers are our sacrifices. Just as a sacrificial animal must be perfect and any blemish disqualifies it, so too with prayer. And we, what lame, defective creatures we are! How can we find, in truth and sincerity, a perfect prayer?

We study Torah, and always seek to understand what the Torah wants to teach us. When the gemara suggests a particular formula or application, we dissect it and raise every possible difficulty regarding it. But with regard to ourselves, there are no difficulties, no challenges, no critical analysis! We forget that in the gemara there are rejected and accepted assumptions, obvious and difficult conclusions. And sometimes when we seem to have reached the appropriate understanding of the matter, room remains for clarification and further analysis.

The essence of the Selichot are the Thirteen Divine Attributes: "'And God passed over him and declared…' - God said to Moshe: At all times that the Jewish People sin, act before Me in this manner and I will forgive them" (Rosh Ha-shana 17b). Rashi explains, "'Act before Me in this manner' - wrap yourselves [in a tallit] like a prayer leader."

It is not enough to recite the Thirteen Attributes. One must wrap himself like a prayer leader - to stand before God with such an utter sense of communal responsibility, to struggle with the conflicts of personal aspiration versus community needs. For this reason the prayer leader wraps himself in a tallit - in order to conceal his "self," to prevent consideration of his private will; to turn himself into a true emissary of the community, with its whole variety of problems. This consciousness of being an emissary of the community is required also of every individual when he stands before God. Only then the promised covenant applies, that we will not return empty-handed.

Each of the Thirteen Attributes has a unique meaning, and it is everyone's obligation to learn them during the Ten Days of Repentance, in order to understand how to imitate God's ways and how to fulfill our communal responsibility. "God is close to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him truthfully." The Holy One expects sincerity. He is indeed close, but demands the element of truth.

First and foremost, it is our duty to feel ourselves united to Klal Yisrael. Let us band together in mutual love and respect, and with collective force we will pray to the Holy One that we merit a year of mercy and peace, a year in which the People of Israel will rise upward. Let us indeed acknowledge that "God is close to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him TRUTHFULLY." Then we will merit a year of life and peace, and a ketiva va-chatima tova.

(Summarized by Yisrael Wohlman; translated by Mordechai Weinstein and Ronnie Ziegler. This sicha was delivered on the first night of Selichot, 5744.)

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