

THE YESHIVA PIRCHEI SHOSHANIM PRESENTS:
THE ROADMAP TO PRAYER PROJECT

The Roadmap to Prayer

Lesson 43

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The Roadmap to Prayer

Lesson

43

Selichos: Getting Close to Hashem Again

Praying Directly to Hashem and the Machnisei Rachamim Selicha

O you who usher in the pleas for mercy, may you usher in our plea for mercy, before [Hashem] the Master of mercy. O you who cause prayer to be heard, may you cause our prayer to be heard before [Hashem] the Listener of prayer. O you who cause cries to be heard, may you cause our cries to be heard before [Hashem] the Listener of cries. O you who usher in tears, may you usher in our tears before [Hashem] the King Who shows favors to those who shed tears.

Exert yourselves and multiply supplication ... Mention before Him ... May He remember their love ... Speedily answer us ...

The above *Machnisei Rachamim* prayer is said right after *Tachanun* and it is part of the standard daily *Nusach* recited in the Ashkenazic version of *Selichos*. However, it is not part of the Sephardic version of *Selichot*.

There is an age-old controversy regarding this prayer, as it appears to solicit the Heavenly Angels as intermediaries for our prayers for forgiveness. Such prayer should be forbidden, because of the prohibition not to engage in the worship of intermediaries.

The *Talmud Yerushalmi* (Jerusalem Talmud) states that it is proper when pleading to a mortal king, to first send a servant inside to announce his arrival and then to arrange for his meeting with the king. Perhaps he will be allowed in to plead for himself, and perhaps not. However, *Hashem*, Blessed is He, expects us to plead with Him personally, and not call upon the *Malach* (angel) *Micha'el* or *Gavri'el* to pray for him.

¹ *Berachos* 9:1

The **Rambam**² writes in the 5th of the 13 Fundamental principles of Jewish faith that it is forbidden to pray for Heavenly Angels to intercede on our behalf by presenting our prayers to *Hashem*. One must be careful to pray only to *Hashem* Himself.

Ramban³ also maintains a similar position to that of the **Rambam**. He writes that even just to ask that Heavenly Angels be our intermediary to carry our prayers to Hashem is a form of idolatry.

Yet, there are many proofs to the contrary.

*Shibalei Haleket*⁴ brings the *Gemara* in *Sanhedrin*⁵ that states in the name of *Rebbe Yochanan* that a person should constantly pray that in Heaven above, the angels should always give strength to his prayers and protect them from the prosecuting angels. The Medrash in *Shir Hashirim* also mentions that *Knesses Yisrael* (The Congregation of Israel) petition the Heavenly Angels that stand by the Gates of Prayer and by the Gates of Tears, that they should be careful to communicate the prayers of the Jewish Nation before G-d's throne as is states in *Iyov*, *If there is but one Malach* (angel) *in a thousand that can defend a person*.

Feeling Worthy of Petitioning

*Mari Brona*⁷ explains that asking *Malachim* (angels) to communicate our prayers before *Hashem* the King of Kings is merely a demonstration of our modesty, for we don't feel worthy of presenting our petition to *Hashem* ourselves.

Praying Directly

The *Ri bar Yakar* in his commentary *Hatefillos Vehaberachos* maintains that we recite the prayer of *Machnisei Rachamim* only after praying directly to *Hashem*. The prayer to the *Malachim* is only that they should make sure to communicate our prayers to *Hashem* without impediment. This is why the *Selicha* of *Machnisei Rachamim* is said

² Commentary to *Mishna Sanhedrin* 10a

³ *Torus Hashem Temimah* (Essays of the Ramban)

⁴ *Simon* 282

⁵ *Daf* 44b

⁶ 33:22

⁷ 275

only at the end of the *Selicha* prayers. It is only after first praying (*davening*) to *Hashem* directly, that we petition the *Malachim* to make sure that our prayers reach all the way to *Hashem*.

Another explanation given by the same author is that when we pray *Machmisei Rachamim* we are actually directing our *tefillos* (prayers) to the venerable Sages of our generation that have passed away, imploring them to act in Heaven on our behalf to protect us from harsh decrees.

Resting on the Shoulders of our Sages

The concept of the protection of the Jewish nation resting on the shoulders of the Sages is derived from the *Gemara* in *Makekos*⁸. There it tells that the High Priest (*Kohen Gadol*) sometimes dies prematurely if he doesn't pray fervently for the benefit of his generation. Thus we see it is incumbent upon the leaders of the generation to pray for the welfare of their communities.

A SAMPLING OF TRADITIONS:

The Chasam Sofer, Tzemach Tzedek and Igros Moshe

The *Chasam Sofer*⁹ personally refrained from reciting the prayer of *Machmisei Rachamim* by protracting the *Tachanun* prayer while the congregation recited this prayer¹⁰. However, he would recite some other portions of *Selichos* that invoke Heavenly Angels to intercede on our behalf, when reciting it together with the rest of the congregation so not to openly disaffiliate himself from the congregation's prayers. In this scenario he based its permissibility upon scripture that *Hashem* doesn't despise or turn away the prayers of a congregation. Likewise there is a verse in *Tehillim* that implies that *Hashem* overlooks our errors in our prayers.

⁸ *Daf* 11a

⁹ *Orach Chaim* 166

¹⁰ It is apparent that in the community of the Chasam Sofer, the custom was for the entire congregation to recite this *Selicha* in unison. In most Ashkenaz *Minyanim* today, it is recited by everyone individually since at that point of *Selichos* everyone is holding at a different spot.

The Tzemach Tzedek's opinion on Not Using Intermediaries

The *Tzemach Tzedek*¹¹ maintains personally that one should not recite any of the *Piyutim* that solicit *Malachim* as intermediaries. Instead he suggests replacing the words of *Machnisei Rachamim* that refers to *Malachim* with the words *Avos Ha'olam* (Fathers of the world, i.e. the Patriarchs) that solicits the Patriarchs to pray on our behalf as this kind of Heavenly intervention is mentioned in numerous *Medrashim* (homiletic writings of the Sages). Despite this, the custom in Chabad remains to recite *Machnisei Rachamim* as well as the prayer of *Midas Harachamim Aleinu Hisgalgelu* (Attribute of Mercy, plead on our behalf; a prayer directed at *Malachim*) without change.

Rav Moshe Feinstein Agrees with the Tzemach Tzedek

Rav Moshe Feinstein ז"ל in his Responsa *Iggros Moshe*¹² also discusses the above topic, pointing out his position in favor of the opinion of not praying (*davening*) to *Malachim*. Nonetheless, he emphasizes the importance of prayer (*Tefilla*) and especially the prayers of the great Sages that live in every generation, who have the unique ability to invoke great mercy on behalf of their fellow people who they pray for, as found throughout the Talmud.

SUMMARY

When reciting the prayer *Machnisei Rachamim* one should bear in mind that one is not petitioning *Malachim* to pray or intercede on our behalf; rather the intention of this prayer is that:

- ☞ We are saying this in a manner of humility, for we don't feel worthy enough of representing ourselves in beseeching *Hashem*.

¹¹ See *Otzar Minhagei Chabad - Elul*, page 28. The third Chabad Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn of Lubavitch (1789-1866), was born on the 29th of *Elul*. Orphaned from his mother at age 3, he was raised by his maternal grandfather, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi. Rabbi Menachem Mendel assumed the leadership of Chabad in 1827, upon the passing of his father-in-law and uncle, Rabbi DovBer of Lubavitch. In the course of his lifetime, Rabbi Menachem Mendel penned more than 48,000 pages of Chassidic teaching and *Halachic* exegesis. He is known as the "*Tzemach Tzedek*" ("a sprouting of righteousness") after his work of *Halachic* responsa by that name.

¹² Volume 5, 43:6

- ☞ We are asking the *Malachim* to intercede on our behalf only after first directing our prayers straight to *Hashem*. That's why we wait to say this prayer at the end of *Selichos*.
- ☞ We are actually addressing the Sages of our own generation who have passed on and are now acting as our messengers to plead to *Hashem* for us.

The Prohibition of Pairing Hashem with Something Else

The *Shibalei HaLeket*¹³ brings up an issue from the *Gemara* in *Sukkah*¹⁴:

The *Mishna* stated that on the festival of *Sukkos* when the *Kohanim* would finish the day's sacrificial services in the *Beis Hamikdash*, they would take leave by saying.

“*It is to G-d and to you, O Altar, that we give tribute*¹⁵”.

The Gemara questions:

That one is prohibited from pairing the Heavenly Name with something else as stated in the verse “*Only to Hashem alone*¹⁶”.

The Gemara answers:

That in fact they recited “*To G-d we admit and acknowledge all the good You do for us, and to you the Altar, we give praise*” separating the two, as we refer to two different characteristics.

Accordingly, it should definitely be prohibited to direct any prayer to *Malachim* thereby equating them with *Hashem*.

The *Shibalei Haleket* dismisses this issue simply by saying that the two issues cannot be compared.

¹³ *Simon* 282

¹⁴ *Daf*45b

¹⁵ This is according to the opinion of *Rebbe Eliezer*

¹⁶ *Shemos* 22:19

It seems that his reason is that when we pray to the *Malachim* we aren't equating them at all with *Hashem*, rather we are giving them the mission of pleading for us in front of *Hashem* because of their closeness with *Hashem*, our Creator¹⁷.

Praying in Aramaic

*Rav Ovadiah Yosef sblit"v*¹⁸ outlines the following on the matter of reciting prayers in Aramaic.

The *Gemara* in *Shabbos* 12b states in the name of *Rebbe Yehudah* and *Rebbe Yochanan* that if one recites his prayers in Aramaic, the Heavenly Angels will not pay attention to his prayers and will not assist him in any way. Yet the *Gemara* states that when visiting the sick *Rebbe Elazar* would sometimes pray (*daven*) for the welfare of the infirmed individual in Aramaic; *Rachmana Yadkerinach Leshalam* (*Hashem* should remember you with peace)? The *Gemara* answers that since the *Shechina* (Divine Presence) is with the sick person as the *pasuk* (verse) states *Hashem yisadeno al eres devoy*¹⁹ (*Hashem* will sustain him on the bed of misery). One is permitted to pray in Aramaic since one doesn't require any assistance from *Malachim*. Accordingly, if one is praying (*davening*) together with a *Minyan*, he too may recite prayers in Aramaic since the Divine Presence is with the *tzibbur* (congregation)²⁰. This principle is clearly stated in the *Gemara Sotah*²¹ that distinguishes between one who is praying with a *Minyan* who may recite prayers in Aramaic and one who is praying without a *Minyan* who shouldn't pray in Aramaic. *Rashi* explains that when one prays (*davens*) without a *Minyan*, he requires the assistance of the Heavenly Angels.

¹⁷ ספר שבולי הלקט סדר ראש השנה סימן רפב ואומרים מכניסי רחמים כו' מכניסי דמעה כו' ואין בזה משום משתף שם שמים ודבר אחר שאינו דומה למה ששינוי ליה ולך מזבח והרב ר' אביגדור כהן צדק זצ"ל הביא ראיה על זה מהא דאמרינן בסנהדרין בפרק נגמר הדין אמר ר' יוחנן לעולם יבקש אדם שיהו הכל מעמצין את כחו מלמטה ואל יהי לו צרים מלמעלה ופי' רבינו שלמה זצ"ל שייסיעוהו מלאכי השרת לבקש רחמים ושלא יהיה לו משטינים מלמעלה וגם במדרש שיר השירים על פסוק השבעתי אתכם אומרת כנסת ישראל למלאכים העומדים על שערי תפלה ועל שערי דמעה הולכי תפלתי ודמעתי לפני הקב"ה ותהיו מליצי יושר לפניו שימחול לי על הזדונות ועל השגגות ונאמר אם יש עליו מלאך מליץ אחד מני אלף וכו'.

¹⁸ *Yechaveh Da'as* Vol. 1:43

¹⁹ *Tehillim* 41:4

²⁰ *Sanhedrin* 39a, the Divine Presence is with a *Minyan* of 10. *Rav Ovadiah Yosef sblit"v* goes on to explain that even without a *Minyan* present there is a level of Divine Presence in a synagogue anyway. However, not all levels are equal and with regard to this *Halacha* only a *Minyan* or in the presence of a sick person may one recite prayers in Aramaic. He compares this to the fact that the *Shechina* never left the *Beis Hamikdash* (Holy Temple) yet the *Gemara* says that during the second *Beis Hamikdash* the *Shechina* was lacking. The explanation is that compared to the level of *Shechina* that appeared in the first *Beis Hamikdash*, it is as if it was lacking during the second *Beis Hamikdash*.

²¹ *Daf* 33a

Therefore, one should omit any prayer in Aramaic when reciting *Selichos* without a *Minyan* present.

According to the above rule the following question by the *Kaf HaChaim* poses no difficulty.

The *Kaf HaChaim*²² asks:

Why shouldn't one pray (*daven*) in Aramaic? Doesn't the verse (*pasuk*) state, *Who is like our G-d for all our pleas are to Him directly?*

However, according to what was just explained, the verse that the *Kaf HaChaim* quotes is referring only when there is a level of *Shechina* presence like when there is a *Minyan* or a sick person.

Based on the above explanation, it seems that in principle, there is no prohibition to pray for *Malachim* to assist us in our prayers. To the contrary, one must always be careful to recite his prayers in the most effective manner, and in the absence of a *Minyan* one should pray only in a language that *Malachim* can understand.

Malachim and Aramaic: Another Approach

Ben Yehoyada to *Sotah* daf 33a explains the reason the *Gemara* is against praying in Aramaic as follows:

When one davens in Aramaic, one doesn't get assistance from the Heavenly Angels to protect one's prayers from being blocked by prosecuting angels who wish to suppress our prayers before they reach their destination at *Hashem's* Throne of Glory. Accordingly, praying in *Lashon Kodesh* (Biblical Hebrew) garners protection from the Administering Angels in preventing the prosecuting angels from standing in the way of our prayers.

According to this explanation we never pray to the angels to act as intermediaries; we wish only that they should ensure that our prayers reach all the way through the heavens to *Hashem's* Throne of Glory. This explanation follows the school of thought that it is actually forbidden for one to enlist help from *Malachim* in our prayer.

In his *Responsa Torah Lishma*, the *Ben Ish Chai* explains the following:

²² *Simon* 581:26

The *Gemara* in *Mesechta Sotah* states that when one prays with a *Minyan* one may pray even in Aramaic since a *Minyan* has greater power to have their prayer listened to by *Hashem*. However, when praying without a *Minyan* one shouldn't pray in Aramaic since the *Malachim* don't pay attention to his prayers. He continues that when an individual prays (*davens*) in Aramaic there is a negative aspect as well. The *Malachim* view this as a sign of arrogance that the individual acts as if his individual prayer is worthy of being accepted by *Hashem* without assistance. This causes one to be scrutinized by the Heavenly court to see if indeed he is worthy of having his prayers listened to. As a result, most likely he will be considered unworthy. However, an individual may recite the singular sections of *Selichos* that are composed in Aramaic since it is a part of a greater prayer, which is in *Lashon Kodesh*, both before and after. However, any *Selicha*, which stands alone and is in Aramaic shouldn't be recited unless there is a *Minyan* present.

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l answers:

The reason that we recite certain prayers that appear to be directed at *Malachim* is because sometimes a *Malach* has certain powers granted to him within certain parameters. Therefore, one is allowed to even pray to a *Malach* directly when it's something within the purview of the *Malach*.

Prayer in Other Languages

In *Simon* 101:4 the Mechaber brings the following 3 opinions with regard to praying (*davening*) in a foreign language:

- ☞ A congregation may pray (*daven*) in any language²³ but an individual may only pray in *Lashon Hakodesh* (the Holy Language i.e. Hebrew)
- ☞ Some opinions maintain that personal requests must be in made in *Lashon Hakodesh*; the standard prayer (*Tefilla*) can be in any language even by an individual
- ☞ Others rule that one may pray even for personal requests in any language except for Aramaic

The *Mishna Berura* concludes that a person may pray (*daven*) in any language he chooses (as long as he is familiar with that language). One should only do so if this will benefit his concentration in prayer. Otherwise, one should always pray (*daven*) in

²³ On occasion only; not as a standard manner (*Mishna Berura* s"t 13)

Lashon Hakodesh which is the language that the *Anshei Knesses Hagedolah* (The Men of the Great assembly) instituted for Prayer and it contains many inherent and esoteric meanings.

*Magein Avraham*²⁴ maintains that it is preferable to pray (*daven*) in *Lashon Hakodesh* even when one doesn't understand the language. However, *Halacha Berura* writes that according to Sephardim that always follow the ruling of the Mechaber, they should follow the first opinion stated above that one may only pray (*daven*) in another language when praying together with a congregation²⁵.

Background to Some of the Selicha Prayers

Selicha 9 - Day 3 (Ashkenaz)

Ani Yom Ira, Eilecha Hashem Ekra (I, on the day I am scared, I call to You)

This *Piyut* was written by the famous *Paytan* (composer of *Piyutim* - prayers in rhyme), *Rav Shlomo HaBavli*. This prayer describes a situation of great oppression and the murder of Jewish people in an effort to convert them to a foreign religion. It describes how *Hashem* has allowed our enemy to torment us for having forsaken Him and His Torah. Nonetheless, seeing our suffering and the haughtiness and arrogance of our enemy, we beseech *Hashem* to bring the enemy's downfall and afford His grieving nation a reprieve.

Although it is difficult to ascertain the specific troubles and intimidation of each of the *Selichos*, this particular *Selicha* is about the same evil decree as *Selicha 7* written by *Rav Shefatiah*, a composer of *Piyutim* (prayers in form of prose) in Italy (Circa 4650 / 870 C. E.)²⁶.

At that time, the wicked *Basvili* decreed upon the Greek communities to convert to a foreign religion. One method of coercion used at that time was to place any Jew who defied their evil decree, into an olive press and to slowly crush them to death if they were not willing to submit. The *Piyut* describes this in the stanza that reads -

²⁴ Ibid. s"v 5

²⁵ See *Halacha Berura* #32

²⁶ According to *Selichos Be'er Yaakov*, in footnote to *Selicha 7*

*This method of theirs has ruined the best of our people; save the remnants from being crushed in the olive press*²⁷.

At that time, *Rav Shefatiah* managed to save 5 communities on the outskirts of Greece when he miraculously healed the daughter of the king who became mentally deranged. Through the miracle of his healing, he was able to win amnesty for those remaining communities who were not yet affected by the evil decree. The *sefer Arugas Habosem* records that the number of communities that were affected numbered 100²⁸.

Selicha 10 - Day 3 (Ashkenaz)

Malachei Rachamim (O Angels of Mercy)

In the common version of the Ashkenaz *Selichos* there begins a prayer that addresses the *Malachei Rachamim* (Angels of Mercy) *Mesharsei Elyon* (servants of the Supreme). In it we beseech them, *Chalu Nab Pnei Keil* (entreat before G-d) *Bemeitav Higayon* (with eloquent expression), another example of a prayer to *Malachim* to pray on our behalf. This is an example where we ask the *Malachim* directly to intercede on our behalf. The author of this *Selicha* is *Rav Shmuel ben Yehudah HaKohen*²⁹ (his name with the additional ending *Yechi*³⁰, is indicated by the first letter of each sentence of each stanza). His opinion must obviously be that it is permissible to pray directly to *Malachim* to intercede on our behalf. However, *Rav Chaim* of Volozhin who maintains that such prayer is forbidden emends this *Selicha* to read as follows: *Avos Ha'olam Chalu Nab Pnei Keil* (Patriarchs of the world entreat before *Hashem*) etc.

Selicha 31 - Erev Rosh Hashanah (Ashkenaz)

Emmes Atta Hu Rishon (Truly, you are the First One)

The author of this *Piyut* is *Rabbeinu Yoel ben Rebbe Yitzchok Halevy*³¹. He was the father of the *Ravija* and the son-in-law of the *Raavan* who are both well known

²⁷ This stanza begins with the letters *Zayin* and *Ches*

²⁸ *Selichos Hamefurash* page 19, 20

²⁹ He lived in Mainz, Germany. He was martyred along with his wife and children during the First Crusade in 1096

³⁰ May he live

³¹ He is also the author of *Selicha* 28, 30 and 54

Rishonim commentators on *Talmud Bavli* (the Babylonian Tractate). *Rabbeinu Yoel* lived in Regensburg in the beginning of the 12th century C.E. (4900 on the Jewish Calendar).

The *Piyut Emmes Atta Hu Rishon* (Truly, you are the First One) begins with the word *Emmes* (truly) at the beginning of each stanza. In one of the stanzas it states the following:

Emmes Pli'im, Bakshu Aleinu La'Hashem Tzevakos etc. - Truly, angels of hidden names; beg forgiveness from Hashem on our behalf. Micha'el and Gavri'el bring our prayers to Hashem Who is Awesome, as a gift. Beg Him to bring near the hidden End of Days and may you give me a sign of truth.

Again we see that in certain *Selichos* prayers, we pray directly to the Heavenly Angels, and in this *Selicha* specifically to the angels *Micha'el* and *Gavri'el*.

Selicha 58 - The Fast of Gedalyah

Torah Hakedosha (Holy Torah)

This *Selicha* is a *Techina* which follows the *Tachanun* prayer at the end the day's *Selichos*. The author of this *Selicha* encodes his name towards the end of the *Selicha*, *Shimon bar Yitzchok Chazak*^{32, 33}.

The *Selicha* reads as follows:

Holy Torah, supplicate in petition, before the Rock revered in His holiness. Pour out a mellifluous prayer and mention the event at Mount Sinai to be able to approach.

In this particular instance we can perhaps justify such a prayer that it doesn't violate the prohibition of praying through intermediaries. Since the *Malach* in this *Selicha* is the *Malach* of Torah, it is really a *Malach* which was created through our own merit of accepting the Torah at Mount Sinai as mentioned in the opening of this *Selicha*. Therefore, it doesn't fall into the category of a *Malach* being enlisted as an intermediary; rather it is our very own merit which we summon to go and plead on our behalf because it is part of our spiritual *persona*.

Selicha 77 - Day 3 Aseres Yemei Teshuvah (Ashkenaz)

³² Be strong

³³ The *Selicha* combines the word *Yitzchok* with the word *Chazak* like this **יצחזק** (*Yitzchazak*)

Shaarei Shamayim, Belulei Eish U'mayim (O Gates of Heaven, Made of Fire Mixed with Water)

*Shaarei Rakia ... Shaarei Zevul ... Shaarei Vilon ... Shaarei Shechakim ...
Shaarei Machon ... Shaarei Ma'on ... Shaarei Aravos ...*

The 7 stanzas in this *Selicha* begin with the 7 different levels of heaven. In order to understand this *Piyut* properly, one must refer to the *Gemara* in *Chagigah*³⁴ according to the opinion of *Reish Lakish*.

In this *Piyut* we petition all the heavens to open themselves up and let our prayers pour through them to *Hashem's* Throne of Glory. In the first stanza we petition all heavens at once. In the following 7 stanzas we petition each specific level of heaven describing each one's unique function.

Although this *Selicha* enumerates the 7 levels of heaven, it does not do so in their proper order. The proper order is *Vilon, Rakia, Shechakim, Zevul, Ma'on, Machon, and Aravos*³⁵.

The authorship of this *Piyut* is attributed to **Rebbe Shimon bar Yitzchok** the author of *Selicha 11 - Day 4 (Ashkenaz)*³⁶. He was one of the great *Paytanim* (composer of such prayers in rhyme) and was also known as *Rebbe Shimon Hagadol* (the great). He was a contemporary of the great Torah scholar *Rabbeinu Gershom Me'or Hagolah* (the Light of the Exile). He lived in the middle of the 10th century C.E. in the city of Magencia, Germany. He was the brother of *Rashi's* mother and was known for performing miracles.

In this *Piyut*, we petition that the heavens should assist our prayers by letting them pass through and reach the Throne of Glory. Accordingly, this *Piyut* is embroiled in the age-old controversy of praying through intermediaries. In fact, in this case it seems as though we cannot apply any of the explanations given for allowing the prayer of *Machnisei Rachamim*. Perhaps since we are really addressing the *Malachim* that govern these heavens, it is therefore the same as addressing the *Malachim* in the

³⁴ *Daf* 12b

³⁵ In some versions, the stanzas have been rearranged to conform with the Talmudic order

³⁶ He also authored *Selicha 58 and 68* (introduction *Selichos Hameforash*)

prayer of *Machnisei Rachamim* which fits according to 2 of the 3 explanations we mentioned in the previous lesson³⁷.

Another opinion on this topic is that indeed we should be careful to recite our prayers in a language that *Malachim* can understand. Therefore, whenever we pray individually without a *Minyan* present, we do not recite our prayers in *Aramaic* as mentioned already in a previous lesson³⁸. Thus we see that sometimes it is permissible to direct our prayer to *Malachim*. However, the difficulty remains, why is it permissible to pray through intermediaries?

Shema Koleinu (Ashkenaz)

The prayer of *Shema Koleinu* is usually said while everyone is standing and with the doors of the *Aron Kodesh* (the Holy Ark) open. The *Chazzan* recites it verse by verse with the congregation repeating each verse after him until *Al tirchak mimeni* (Do not distance Yourself from us). It is a central prayer that is recited in unison, fervently and passionately. In this prayer we call out to G-d to listen to our voices in prayer and find compassion to respond to our *tefillos* (prayers) favorably. The prayer continues with a plea that *Hashem* should assist us to repent properly and renew our closeness to Him as we had enjoyed in previous generations. We ask that *Hashem* grant us good health and continued life which comes from our *Neshama* (soul)³⁹, presumably to study Torah and perform *Mitzvos*.

Sounding the Shofar: The Minhag of Sephardim

Thirteen Attributes of Mercy

The custom amongst *Sephardim* in some communities is to sound the *Shofar* during *Selichos* each time the *Thirteen Attributes of Mercy* are recited. According to other Sephardic customs the *Shofar* is sounded at the conclusion of the *Selichot* by *Kaddish Tiskabal*. In some communities the *Shofar* is not sounded at all.

³⁷ It doesn't fit according to the explanation that *Machnisei Rachamim* is addressing the Sages of our generations that have passed on. According to that, this *Piyut* would not be part of the *Selichos* liturgy. As it is anyway, not all of our current *Selichos* were composed and said at the same time in History; rather it is a compilation of many *Selichos* from many different periods of history.

³⁸ Lesson 41, page 628

³⁹ We pray *Ve'ruach Kodshecha al Tikaah Mimeni* (do not take from us Your holy spirit, i.e. the breath of life that *Hashem* blew into man's nostrils).

Sounding the Shofar: The Minhag of Ashkenazim

The Month of Elul

It is customary amongst Ashkenazim to sound the *Shofar* each weekday morning after prayers (*Davening*) and before the special prayer of *Le'David Hashbem Ori Ve'yishi'o* (By David, *Hashbem* is my light and salvation) from the second day *Rosh Chodesh Elul* until *Erev Rosh Hashanah*. This is done to signify that during this period *Moshe Rabbeinu* ascended *Har Sinai* for a third time for another 40 days to seek full atonement for *Bnei Yisrael's* sin with the Golden Calf (*Eigel Hazaḥavi*). In fact, the culmination of this ascent was on Yom Kippur when *Moshe Rabbeinu* returned to the camp having attained forgiveness and a second set of *Luchos* (Tablets) with the *Aseres Hadibros* (10 commandments) inscribed upon them. Since the *Bnei Yisrael* (children of Israel) sinned by worshipping the Golden Calf at the end of the first ascent of *Moshe Rabbeinu* (Moses our Teacher) to bring us the *Luchos*, it's the custom of Ashkenazim to sound the *Shofar* focusing our attention on the importance of these days. It was sounded as a warning for the *Bnei Yisrael* not to sin again as they did when *Moshe Rabbeinu* ascended the first time to *Har Sinai* (Mt. Sinai). Now too we sound during this month to remind us to do *Teshuva* (repentance) and it is also a method of confusing the Prosecuting Angel (*Satan*) not to bring up derogatory accusations during this time of year.

Both according to the Sephardim and Ashkenazim, the Shofar blasts that are sounded in their respective places are *Tekia*, *Shevarim Terua* and *Tekia*. Both agree with the custom not to sound the *Shofar* publicly in *shul* (synagogue) on *Erev Rosh Hashanah*. During *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah*, Ashkenazim do not sound the *Shofar*; however *Sephardim* continue sounding the *Shofar* throughout the *Selichos* schedule.

The Ashamnu Prayer

In *Nusach Ashkenaz* (the Ashkenazic version) the *Viduy* (confession) of *Ashamnu* is arranged according to *Aleph-Beis* starting with *Ashamnu* (we are guilty) and ending with the final letter *Taf, Titani* (we have been let to go astray). The *Viduy* is said in a bent over position while using the right hand to knock on one's heart with one's fist. In the Sephardic versions, besides the *Ashamnu Viduy* following the *Aleph-Beis* once, there are multiple sin confessions added to the standard version by each letter according to the *Aleph-Beit*.

It is common to recite the *Ashamnu Viduy* three times each morning except on *Erev Yom Kippur* (the eve of the Day of Atonement) according to *minhag* (custom of)

⁴⁰ *Tehillim* 27

Ashkenaz where the *Selichos* is shortened. Some Rabbinical Authorities (*Poskim*) maintain that it should always be recited one time.

Questions:

- 1) What issue is there regarding the prayer *Machnisei Rachamim* that is in the Ashkenazic *Selichos*?
- 2) The *Yerushalmi* gives a specific example regarding this issue. What does it state?
- 3) The Rambam in his 5th principle of the 13 Fundamental principles of Jewish faith states... What does it state?
- 4) What does the verse in *Iyov* state regarding *Malachim*?
- 5) How does the *Mahari Brona* deflect the questions against saying the prayer *Machnisei Rachamim*?
- 6) How does the *Ri bar Yakar* justify praying to *Malachim*?
- 7) What other interpretation does he give to allow reciting *Machnisei Rachamim*?
- 8) What example does the *Gemara* have regarding the prohibition to pair *Hashem* with something else?
- 9) How is the above issue resolved by the *Shibalei Haleket*?
- 10) When would it be appropriate to recite a *Tefilla* (prayer) in Aramaic even though that language is not understood by *Malachim*? (2 situations)
- 11) What negative aspect does the *Ben Ish Chai* explain there to be when a person prays (*davens*) in Aramaic?
- 12) What Aramaic prayers does the *Ben Ish Chai* permit individuals to say when reciting *Selichot* without a *Minyan*?
- 13) When and at what point is the *Shofar* sounded according to Sephardic custom?
- 14) When and at what point is the *Shofar* sounded according to Ashkenazic custom?

Answers:

- 1) The problem with this prayer is that it seems to be asking the *Malachim* to act as intermediaries in fulfilling our requests in our prayers.
- 2) It states that unlike by mortal kings where it is customary to send a servant into the king to help in our requests, *Hashem* is available to us directly without the need to solicit the help of *Malachim* like *Micha'el* or *Gavri'el*.
- 3) He states that one is not allowed to pray (*daven*) to *Malachim* to intercede on our behalf.
- 4) *If there is but one Malach (angel) in a thousand that can defend a person.*
- 5) *Mari Brona* explains that asking *Malachim* (angels) to communicate our prayers before *Hashem* the King of Kings is merely a demonstration of our modesty, for we don't feel worthy of presenting our petition to *Hashem* ourselves.
- 6) Our prayer to the *Malachim* is only that they should make sure to communicate our prayers to *Hashem* without impediment.
- 7) That we are actually directing our *tefillos* (prayers) to the venerable Sages of our generation that have passed away, imploring them to act in Heaven on our behalf to protect us from harsh decrees.
- 8) On the festival of *Sukkos* when the *Kohanim* would finish the day's sacrificial services in the *Beis Hamikdash*, they would take leave by saying "It is to G-d and to you, O Altar, that we give tribute."
- 9) The *Gemara* answers that in fact they recited "To G-d we admit and acknowledge all the good You do for us, and to you the Altar, we give praise" separating the two, as we refer to two different characteristics.
- 10) Either when praying (*davening*) with a *Minyan* of people or by the bedside of someone who's ill, since by both there is a strong Divine Presence.
- 11) The *Ben Ish Chai* explains that one shouldn't pray in Aramaic when praying (*davening*) individually since the *Malachim* view this as a sign of arrogance on the part of the individual who acts as if he's worthy of having his prayers accepted by *Hashem* without assistance.
- 12) One may recite singular sections of *Selichos* that are composed in Aramaic that are part of a greater prayer, which is mostly in *Lashon Kodesh*.
- 13) According to Sephardic custom the *Shofar* is sounded by the recital of the *Thirteen Attributes of Mercy* or at the final *Kaddish*. It is sounded the entire month of Elul until the end of the *Selichot* schedule on *Erev Yom Kippur* (the eve of the Day of Atonement).
- 14) According to Ashkenazic custom it is sounded throughout the month of *Elul* after reciting *Le'Dovid Hashem Ori Ve'yishi* (By David, *Hashem* is my light and salvation) at the end of *Shacharis* (the Morning Prayer).