

*Shabbat M'Vorchim Chodesh Elul* usually occurs on *Parshat Re'eh* but on years that *Tisha B'Av* falls on *Shabbat*, it occurs *Parshat Eikev*. The concepts of repentance and free will connect these *Parshiot* to *Elul*. The central theme of our penitential prayers, The core of our penitential prayers, סליחות, is the repetition of the 13 attributes of mercy revealed to Moses when he received the second Tablets. Each of the three 40 day periods Moses spent on Mount Sinai was defined by a unique prayer, as described in the union of stories in *Ki-Tisa* and *Eikev*. The first prayer was ויחל, recited prior to descending Mount Sinai with the original set of Tablets, the second when he returned to ask forgiveness for the sin of the Golden Calf and the third when he returned to retrieve the second set of Tablets. Moses said Gd accepted each of his prayers and agreed not to destroy the Jewish People. Why did Moses have to pray three separate times for the same thing? Why was the third prayer necessary if Gd already gave him the second set of Tablets and apparently forgave the Jewish People?

ויחל was a tactical prayer by Moses. How could he ask for full forgiveness if the Golden Calf was extant and the Jews dancing around it? He had to play for time and forestall any quick punishment for their sin that would eliminate them. Moses' petition was that no matter how bad the Jewish People were, the Egyptians were worse. The Jews should not be destroyed lest the Egyptians rationalize their defeat and the exodus by denying Gd's omnipotence and ability to bring the Jewish People to the Promised Land. Gd agreed and suspended the immediate judgement and sentence of destruction.

Upon descending the mountain and seeing the golden calf, Moses decided to break the Tablets. He reasoned that the Tablets were the marriage contract between Gd and the Jewish Community, כנסת ישראל. If they would accept that document they would be bound by the laws of the Sinaitic covenant and would be deemed to have violated them with the golden calf and punishable accordingly. Moses decided it was preferable to leave them un-joined from Gd and broke the Tablets. When the Jews saw what Moses did they realized their sin and began to have thoughts of repentance, הרהור תשובה.

Moses ascended the mountain a second time. His task now was most difficult. Not only did he have to ask for complete forgiveness, he had to convince, *Kavayachol*, Gd to renew the covenant with the people. Moses' original prayer succeeded in suspending the execution of judgement, but he could not ask for forgiveness while the Jews were still dancing around the golden calf, which was tantamount to טובל ושרץ בידו, immersing in a ritual bath while grasping the very object causing the defilement. By breaking the Tablets, the covenant was broken. Upon ascending the mountain the second time, Gd told Moses that he agreed not to destroy them, להשמיד, but He was not obligated to grant them a second covenant. They can exist like any of the many nomadic tribes that roamed the desert, all of whom disappeared and played no role in the divine direction of the world. As to the promise made to the patriarchs to give them a *Torah* and the Land of Israel, Moses' children will eventually multiply and

after many generations they will receive the *Torah*. Moses prayed for 40 days not only should they not be destroyed physically, but this very group should be granted a new covenant and reacquire their status of עם הנבחר, chosen nation, without reservation.

At the end of his exhausting second 40 day effort, again without food or water, Moses was rewarded with a command to hew new Tablets, as Gd accepted his petition and forgave them. They were re-granted their important role in the divine plan. Moses said לא אבה השחיתך, Gd did not desire their destruction. להשחית does not mean to destroy physically. It indicates an undermining and dismissal of someone or something, an emotional or spiritual destruction. For instance an ineffective educator is considered a *Mashchit* as s/he causes a student to abandon his/her potential waiting to be nurtured and developed. The confidence of a person who has invested great effort into preparing a masterful lecture can be destroyed by the words of a jealous colleague, a *Mashchit*. The resulting lack of confidence will cause the next lecture to indeed be inferior.

Our status as עם הנבחר explains the significant role the Jewish people played throughout history, despite our relatively tiny numbers. The world barely pays attention when two obscure nations go to war. India and Pakistan, with a combined population of some 1.5 billion, quarrel over Kashmir, threatening to unleash a nuclear war. Russia and the satellite countries were all major issues in 1956 and continue to threaten world peace to the current day as per Ukraine and the former Soviet countries. Syria, Egypt, Libya, Iraq are all burning. Yet the world and the feckless UN are silent. However, when tiny Israel and the Jews are involved, representing less than 2 tenths of one percent of world population, they become the dominant issue and scapegoat, relegating the other stories to second class status. For the second time in 70 years we are threatened by an enemy who is a direct descendant of *Amalek*, whose raison d'être is defined as לכו ונכחידם מגוי, to obliterate the Jewish nation. How little the world has changed! Moses' second prayer successfully restored the covenant with Gd and reestablished the Jewish People's unique historical status. Our significance has always been a reflection of our quality, עם הנבחר, not our quantity.

The Torah records that Moses again prayed for forty days and nights during his third trip up Mount Sinai. If Moses successfully secured the granting of the second set of Tablets with his second prayer, why did he again pray with the same fervor and urgency he displayed with ויחל and his prayer during the intermediate forty days? Moses recognized that ultimately, the Jews will violate the covenant in the future and they will again be trapped in an existence-threatening situation. Who will persuade them to repent like Moses did when he forced them to recognize their transgression with the golden calf? Gd provided the formula of the thirteen attributes beginning with the repetition of Gd's name. Gd instructed Moses when His children sin, they should perform the order of the 13 Attributes and they will be forgiven immediately. Our Rabbis say this refers to Gd before and after man sins. Gd promised to provide that subconscious calling to the Jew, constantly prodding him to return to Gd, to live a

holy existence. Gd promised to accept the returning Jew and erase the blemish of his sins, as long as he repents. A politician who violates the public trust resigns (or should have the decency to resign) his/her post. He may express remorse, but the community is not required to extend him in his position. A felony conviction remains on record after the convict pays his debt to society. Our covenant with Gd says no matter how far we may stray, we can always return to Gd and reset our relationship. When thousands sinned by attending the parties of *Achashveirosh*, the barely audible sound of Gd prodded them to repent and saved them. A *Kohen Gadol* who sins and commits even major transgressions, may reacquire his status after he repents. Such is the power of תשובה, repentance.

Gd promised to be both father and mother to the Jewish People. Both parents love the child, however the difference between them is that a father will play with the child as long he is clean. Once the child soils himself, father returns the child to the mother, exclaiming, “Here, take your child!”. After the mother lovingly cleans the child, the father will take the child again. If Gd acted only as father, Repentance would not be possible. It is the maternal aspect of Gd, שכינה, that allows us to return completely despite all our defilements and imperfections, and cleanse them all away. The 13 attributes, the formula for *Teshuva* that sustains us to this day as עם הנבחר and is the core of the month of *Elul*, was the result of Moses’ third prayer.

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