

Selihot Study Session

The Thirteen Attributes

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KOACH
on campus



The United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism

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The following materials have been created by **KOACH** for the enhancement of your on-campus programming. They are designed to be adjustable based on the desires of the students and the available session time. Each packet contains a text sheet that is ready to be photo copied. The education materials are designed to help create conversations around the materials and to create connections between the materials and today's life. You might want to have Tanakhim available so students can look at the verses in the book. If we can be of additional help please contact us at estrin@uscj.org.

Background Materials

Selihot Service

According to *Sephardic* custom, *Selihot*, special penitential prayers are said every morning during Elul (beginning this year on August 17th). In this way the *Sephardim* recite *Selihot* for a period of 40 days, paralleling the 40 days Moses spent on Mount Sinai. The prevalent *Ashkenazi* custom is to recite *Selihot* for at least four days beginning on the Sunday prior to *Rosh HaShanah* (or on the preceding Sunday if *Rosh HaShanah* is on Monday or Tuesday). For *Ashkenazim*, the first *Selihot* are recited late Saturday evening (this year September 11) (usually at midnight), and every morning thereafter (except *Shabbat* and *Rosh HaShanah*) until *Yom Kippur*, prior to the daily *Shaharit* service.

Selihot Prayers

Selihot prayers, mentioned in *Mishna*¹, originated as prayers for fast days, several of which happened in preparation for *Rosh HaShanah*.² Although the poems recited may change from place to place and from tradition to tradition, the basic structure of the prayer service remains the same. The pattern of the penitential prayers is fixed and includes *piyyutim* (liturgical poems, differing each day), selected biblical verses, the Thirteen Attributes and a short confessional.

The Thirteen Attributes

The prayers and hymns of the *Selihot* liturgy are structured around the recurrent recitation of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy (*shelosh esreh middot harahamim*) from *Shemot/Exodus* 34:6-7.

Halakha (Jewish Law) of the Thirteen Attributes

A minyan should be present for the recitation of the Thirteen Attributes although the *Mishna Brurah*³ (on *Orah Hayim* 565:5) states that an individual can recite alone if necessary if done in *Torah trope*. The section should be recited while standing.

¹ The *Mishna* is used as the name of the codex of laws compiled around 400ce by Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi (R. Judah the Prince), and has come to be recognized as an authoritative statement of the "Oral Law".

² *Mishna Taanit* 2:1-4.

³ *Mishna Berurah* was compiled by Rabbi Ysrael Meir Kagen in the 1900s & contains Jewish laws from the *Shulhan Arukh* (Rabbi Yosef Caro 1565) and commentaries on those laws, primarily by the *Ashkenazi* Rabbi Moshe Isserles (1530-1572).

Selihot Study Session

The Thirteen Attributes

Shemot/Exodus 34:6-7

Future packets will contain the Hebrew for you.
Please paste the Thirteen Attributes from your
Humash or a Selihot packet.

Adonai! Adonai! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger,
abounding in kindness and truth, extending kindness to the thousandth
generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and acquitting....

Adonai! Adonai! Ely rahum v'hanun, ereh apa-yim v'rav hesed ve-emet.
No-tzer hesed la'alafim, noseiy avon va-fe-sha v'hata-a v'nakey.

Tosephot Rosh HaShanah 17b (Rabbenu Tam France 1000-1071):

1. Adonai: The Lord is merciful before a person sins
2. Adonai: The Lord is merciful after a person has sinned and repented
3. El: He is all-powerful
4. rahum: He is compassionate
5. v'hanun: and gracious
6. erekh appayyim: He is slow to anger
7. verav hesed: He is abounding in kindness
8. veemet: even after His scrutiny of our conduct
9. notzer hesed la'alafim: His kindness extends to future generations
10. noseiy avon: He forgives sins committed willfully
11. vafesha: He forgives sins committed in defiance of His will
12. v'hataah: as well as those committed unwittingly
13. venakkeh: He acquits the repentant sinner.

Facilitator Guide

Adonai! Adonai! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and truth, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and acquitting....

--Shemot/Exodus 34:6-7

Questions/Discussion Starters:

- 1) Read only the text from Exodus and discuss each of the attributes. What do they mean? Have students come up with their own meanings. Why does text say Adonai twice?
- 2) Now read through the Rabbenu Tam text (on the text sheet) to compare and contrast his definitions and what the students came up with.
- 3) Additional commentaries on various names/attributes of God that you can use in your discussion are:
 - a. **El**: Rashi explains (on Psalm 22 verse 1) that El refers to the consoling aspect of God: *Eli Eli* ("My God, my God, why have You abandoned me?"), is a call of pain to a God of mercy rather than to one of strict justice
 - b. **Rahum v'hanun**: note that in the Decalogue (10 Commandments) (Shemot/Exodus 20:5-6) the order is reversed presenting judgment before kindness.
 - c. **Hesed v'emet** often come together in the Torah - *hesed* involves an obligation that flows from a legal relationship while *emet* encompasses liability, durability, and faithfulness. Together they express God's absolute and eternal dependability.⁴
- 4) Why does the text say **Adonai** twice?
 - a. The Talmud states (Rosh HaShanah 17b):

"Adonai, Adonai" - I am the same before one sins and after one sins and repents.
"A God compassionate and gracious...." Rabbi Yehuda said: A covenant has been made concerning these thirteen attributes. They [The People of Israel] will never be turned away empty handed.

The Talmud is stating that Adonai is written twice to teach us the God is the same regardless of our actions and it is our actions that change us not God. What does this mean to the students? Some ideas: That it is us who move closer and farther from God; that God's love is constant.

⁴ Humash Etz Hayim on Shemot 34:6.

- b. An alternative understanding is that the first “Adonai” belongs to the previous section of the pasuk (verse). Read the entirety of verse 6 in Shemot/Exodus 34. Remember there are no commas or periods in the Torah. It is possible that the first Adonai belongs to the previous part of the verse, **then** a comma and then the attributes. Does this change anything? How?
- 5) Look again at Shemot/Exodus 34 verse 6 in the Torah. The verse begins “The Lord Passed by him and proclaimed”. God was saying these words to Moshe. Why?
- a. Talmud states (Rosh HaShanah 17b):

Were this not an explicit verse We could not have said such a thing. It tells us that the Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped Himself (in a tallit) like the prayer leader (hazzan) and showed Moshe the order of prayer. He said to him: Whenever Israel sins, let them perform this order and I shall forgive them.⁵

- b. Why does this section of Talmud show God in this way?
- A way for us to emulate as we recite the attributes?
- 6) Look at Shemot/Exodus 34: 7 in the Torah. The end of the verse is excluded from what we read during *Selihot*. It concludes “but who will be no means clear the guilty; punishing the iniquity of the third and to the four generation.” Why might this section be excluded from the *Selihot* prayers?
- a. To emphasize the quality of mercy over that of judgment.
- b. It was a choice of the Rabbis to not use the end section in a hope that all would be forgiven.
- 7) In the end these are simply names and attributes of God not a prayer. So why do we use it as a prayer?
- 8) How can we emulate the Thirteen Attributes?
- 9) Why is this section of Torah included in the *Selihot* prayers?
- 10) If you have a few copies of a published *Selihot* service -- In the *Selihot* prayers what follows the Thirteen Attributes? Why do you think?

⁵ This section occurs just prior to the previous section.

Additional Resources

- Entering the High Holy Days. By Reuven Hammer, Jewish Publication Society, Jerusalem. 5758/1998.
- SELIHOT: Prayers for Forgiveness. Compiled by Rabbi Morris Silverman and Rabbi Hillel Silverman. The Prayer book Press of Media Judaica.
- http://learn.jtsa.edu/topics/diduknow/jrpguide/12_part3.shtml
- <http://www.ou.org/chagim/elul/selichotattrib.htm>
- <http://www.vbm-torah.org/roshandyk/13-eb.htm>
- <http://www.targum.com/excerpts/yamim.html>