

Selichot to Havdallah – Self-Reflection to Separation
NFTY-Missouri Valley LTI | September 3-5, 2010 | Kansas City, MO
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Touchstone Text:

"If one says: I shall sin and repent, sin and repent, no opportunity will be given to him to repent. If one says: I shall sin and the Day of Atonement will bring him forgiveness, the Day of Atonement will not bring him atonement. For transgressions between man and God the Day of Atonement brings atonement."

- Talmud in Tractate Yoma 8, p. 2

Goals:

This program is an opportunity to introduce teens to the period of repentance and reflection during the weeks before the High Holidays. The program gives them an opportunity to reflect on the past year and consider opportunities for change in the coming year.

Objectives:

Learn about the concept of forgiveness.

Discuss the effect of their actions on others.

Identify goals and opportunities for change in the coming year.

Materials:

Elul Self-Evaluation Worksheets

Pens

Space Needed:

Any space where participants can spread out and have space to write.

Detailed Procedure:

- 00:00-00:05 Introduction and framing with text from Appednix A
- 00:05-00:15 Readings of texts and stories about Selichot, repentance, forgiveness, Appendix B (multiple readers strategically placed around the room)
- 00:15-00:20 Introduction to Elul Self-Evaluation Worksheet, Appendix C
Teens break into chevruta study groups to discuss texts on the sheet
- 00:20-00:35 Teens work independently to complete the Elul self-evaluation worksheet
- 00:35-00:40 Closing reading from Zohar about light being sown for the righteous, Appendix D
Connecting monologue about havdallah being separation, and Selichot being the opportunity to separate our choices of the past and how we will reinvent ourselves in the future
Immediately transition into lighting Havdallah candle and Havdallah
- 00:40-00:50 Havdallah
- 00:50-00:55 Shehecheyanu – for this new group of leaders in a new year, may they be blessed on their journeys
- 00:55-1:00 Transition into Siyyum or closing circle

Sources and Credits:

Selichot - A Time For Reflection, USY Online Program Bank; written by Shelly Hoffman, Denver Chai USY and Debbie Berman, Beth El, Minneapolis. EMTZA Region.

Elul Self-Evaluation Worksheet, adapted from an original work by Rabbi Andrew Davids, former Co-Director, URJ Youth Division, Appendix C

Tomer Devorah, a work by Rabbi Moshe Cordovero on the Attributes of God.

Breaking Bad Habits, by Shira Markowitz

Appendix D Texts (Buber, Baeck, Zohar), Gates of Repentance, p. 4

Appendix A – Introduction and Framing Texts

Selichot are special prayers for forgiveness.

They are said during the month of Elul preceding Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In the Sephardic tradition, Selichot are said beginning with the month of Elul, through Yom Kippur. In the Ashkenazic tradition, they are begun about one week before the holiday.

The Selichot prayers are made up of petitions and supplications for forgiveness. The days of Selichot are considered days for taking stock of oneself, and repentance in anticipation of the high holidays. The idea of repentance and the concept of free choice appear together in Parshat Nitzavim, in the Book of Deuteronomy, in order to teach us that doing repentance comes from our belief that each human being has been given free will.

"I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your family may live." Deut. 30, 19

Personal choice and responsibility for our actions are seen by Judaism as the primary path to repentance. The power of choice allows a person to open a new page in his life and truly change it. We learn in the Talmud in Tractate Yoma 8, page 2:

"If one says: I shall sin and repent, sin and repent, no opportunity will be given to him to repent. If one says: I shall sin and the Day of Atonement will bring him forgiveness, the Day of Atonement will not bring him atonement. For transgressions between man and God the Day of Atonement brings atonement." This process of Teshuvah demands of us to be authentic and honest and express ourselves from the very depths of ourselves. Another important principle related to asking for forgiveness between people also appears in Tractate Yoma. "For transgressions between man and his fellow, the Day of Atonement does not bring any atonement, until he has asked forgiveness of his fellow." Thus, if I hurt someone else, it is not enough to just be sorry about it, or to pray to God: "Please forgive me". I must ask forgiveness from the person I hurt and make sure that he/she forgives me.

Appendix B – Poems and Readings for Selichot

A prayer for Selichot:

God of Forgiveness
Searcher of hearts
Revealer of deep thoughts
Proclaimer of righteousness
Good and benevolent to Your creatures
Knower of all secrets
Provides for the righteous
We have sinned before You
Be merciful with us.
From the Selichot prayers

To Forgive:

It's not easy to forgive
It's very difficult to give in.
The heart refuses to forget
The heart sometimes bears a grudge.
Sometimes the pain cuts us into pieces,
Sometimes it is difficult to resolve.
How, if God is forgiving.
We sure can do the same.
by Hannah Nir

Three Levels of Forgiveness:

(based on a "Tomer Devorah" class by Rabbi Yaacov Haber)

There are three Hebrew synonyms: Selichah, Mechilah, and Kapparah, all related to the idea of "forgiveness". What does each mean?

Selichah, usually translated as "forgiveness" is the first step which must be taken if someone has committed a sin, whether it is against God or against Man. To ask for forgiveness is to say to the "injured" party, "I am sorry for what I did; I sincerely regret having done it, and I will never do it again." The appropriate response to this request is to believe that the petitioner is sincere and "open the door" for him or her to "come in." A person who refuses to do this is considered a cruel person.

Mechilah, usually translated as "wiping away" is the response to the request "Can we put our relationship back on the level which it was on before I sinned against you?" A positive response to this is difficult, but within the Godly powers given the human being, and is required.

Kapparah, is usually translated as "atonement," as in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. This is the response to the person who says, "My conscience will not let me live with myself, because of what I did to you and to our relationship." To respond positively to this is beyond human capacity. It is only God Who can reach inside a person and say "Be comforted." "Kapparah" is the climax of this three-part process, and is accomplished on Yom Kippur.

Breaking Bad Habits:

by Shira Markowitz

Elul is a time of Teshuvah.

The process can seem overwhelming. There are so many areas that need improvement. Teshuvah does not mean trying to change everything at once. It is the beginning of a process that allows us to realistically change our behavior.

One suggestion for doing teshuvah effectively is to pick one small area and make a concerted effort to

change it. The smaller the behavior the easier it is to change.

Rabbi Volbe presents the following parable. If a plane flies too high in an air combat zone, it will be spotted on enemy radar and shot down. The solution is flying below the radar. Similarly, if we try to change too much, we are likely to fail. If we only take small steps to improve, our Yetzer Hara's (Evil Inclination) radar will not think it is in danger and will not bother giving us a problem.

There are forty days between Elul through Yom Kippur. Forty days is very significant in Judaism. According to our Rabbis it takes forty days to form a fetus, the flood lasted forty days, and Moses got the Torah after being on Sinai forty days and nights because it takes forty days for a person to transform him/herself into a new being.

Between the forty days of Elul and Yom Kippur, take one small deed and try to improve. It can be saying a bracha (blessing) with added kavannah (concentration), saying a kinder good morning to a spouse, or not speaking Lashon Hara (negative comments about an individual, family or institution) for fifteen minutes a day. Whatever it is, that small step can make the difference.

Print out the calendar to help keep track of your commitment to change.

And remember... A Journey of a Mile begins with One Small Step.

A Story for Selichot:

Over one hundred years ago in the town of Belz there was a very holy Rabbi called Rav Shalom of Belz. He had tens of thousands of followers and his name was famous throughout the Jewish world. One year on the first night of Selichot, instead of going to the large synagogue to signal the beginning of the prayers he ordered his synagogue to harness the horses as they were going into the woods. The astonished secretary wanted to remind the Rabbi that thousands of followers were waiting in the synagogue, but he knew better than to ask questions and went out to prepare the wagon. After a half hour drive the Rabbi signaled him to stop, they alighted and walked down a narrow path till they saw a small hut in the distance. The Rabbi signaled the assistant to wait for him and he tiptoed alone up to the window and peeked in.

There, inside, sat an old Jewish man alone at a table. On the table was a bottle of Vodka and two small cups, one in front of him and the other before the empty seat opposite him. Through the window the Rabbi couldn't hear what the old man was saying, but he saw him raise his cup in L'chaim, drink it, then he drank the second cup as well. This he repeated two more times at which time the Rabbi tiptoed back to the assistant, they walked quickly to the wagon and the Rabbi motioned him to drive back home.

The followers meanwhile had been waiting for over an hour and were becoming worried. But when the doors of the synagogue opened and the Rabbi entered, the congregation fell silent as all eyes followed him to his place at the front of the Shul, and the room burst into prayer as they began Selichot. When the prayer ended the Rabbi turned to his assistant and said, "There is one old man that came in after everyone and I'm sure he will finish after everyone also. He's the one I saw in the house in the woods. Please wait for him to finish, and tell him I want him to come to my study so I can speak to him alone."

One half hour later the simple Jew was standing in fear and trepidation before the Holy Rabbi. "Sit down Zeleg", said the Rabbi, "I want you to tell me what you did in your house before you came here tonight. What were those two cups of vodka for and what was that strange L'chaim you made?"

"The Rabbi knows that!" he asked, his eyes were bulging out in amazement, he was really shaking now. "How does the Rabbi know?"

"I sensed that something important was going to happen" the Rabbi answered, "so I drove to the woods and peeked in your window, but I want to understand what you did there."

The Rabbi?! The Rabbi peeked in my window!?? How could it be? I am a nothing!" Now the poor man was really confused. He paused a moment and realized that there was no way out, so he sat down and began to explain.

"I'm a poor man, Rabbi. I have no children and my wife passed on years ago. I just live alone with my few farm animals, that's all. That is until a few months ago.

What happened is that one day my cow got sick. So I prayed to God to heal the cow. 'After all', I said to God, 'You create the entire world and everything in it; certainly you can heal ONE COW!'

But the cow got worse. So I said 'Listen HaShem, if You don't heal that cow I'm not going to the synagogue any more!' I figured that if HaShem doesn't care about me, I mean, it's NOTHING for Him to heal one old cow! So why should I care?

But the cow died and so I, I got mad and... I stopped going to synagogue. Then my goat got sick. I said to God 'What! You haven't had enough? Do you think I'm bluffing? Listen; if this goat dies I'm not putting on Tefillin any more!' So the goat dies and I stopped putting on Tefillin.

Then my chickens got ill and I told HaShem that if they die I'm not going to make Kiddush or keep Shabbat, and a week later I was without chickens and HaShem was without my Shabbat.

Well, I held out for over a week until suddenly I realized that the time for Selichot is approaching. I thought to myself, 'What, Zeleg, you aren't going to go say Selichot with the Rabbi? What, are you crazy!??' But on the other hand I was angry with HaShem and I wasn't going to the synagogue.

So I remembered that once I had an argument with Shmerel the butcher. For about a month we didn't even say hello. Then one night he came to my house with a bottle of vodka and said 'Let's forget the past and be friends, enough enemies we have from the goyim why be enemies. So we made three L'chaims, shook hands and even danced around a little together and we were friends again. So I figured I would do the same thing with God. I invited Him to sit opposite me, poured us two cups and said 'Listen HaShem you forget my faults and I'll forget yours. All right?' So I drank my cup and understood that HaShem wanted me to drink His. And after we did it twice more I stood up and we danced together! Then I felt better and came to Selichot."

The Rabbi became very serious. He looked deeply into Zeleg's innocent eyes and said, "Listen to me Zeleg. Before we began Selichot I saw that in heaven there was a terrible decree on our holy congregation. The reason was that, well, you know there are a lot of distractions and other excuses. The congregants were saying the words in the prayer book but they weren't really praying seriously to God.

But you, Zeleg, you talked to God like He is your friend. Zeleg, your simple heart saved the entire congregation!"

Source – unknown

Appendix D – Elul Self Evaluation Worksheet

ELUL – PREPARING YOURSELF FOR RENEWAL

Many people make it a habit to engage in no secular conversation from the beginning of the New Moon of Elul until after Yom Kippur, for there is nothing in the world better for the purification of the soul than the curbing of idle talk. Besides, it is also a great aid to devotion in prayer when alien thoughts do not confuse the worshiper. (*Kav ha-Yashar* XII)

The word Elul has the numerical value of the word *binah*, understanding. Through understanding comes *Teshuva*, as it is written (Isa. 6:10): “And understanding with their heart, return, and be healed.” (*Siddur Rabbi Yaabetz*)

Traditional Rabbinic exegesis considers the Song of Songs to be an allegorical description of God’s love for Israel. The name of the month Elul consists of the four Hebrew letters *Alef, Lamed, Vav, and Lamed*. These four letters were interpreted as referring to the first letters of the words in Song of Songs 6:3: *Ani Ledodi Vedodi Li*, “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.” Therefore, Elul is the period of reconciliation between God and Israel. If Israel will long to turn in a complete *Teshuva* to God who is in heaven, then God’s longing will go out to them, and Israel’s *Teshuva* will be accepted. (*Mateh Moshe*)

Once on the New Moon of Elul, the zaddik Rabbi Levi Isaac of Berdichev was standing at his window. A Gentile cobbler passed by and asked him, “And have you nothing to mend?” At once the zaddik sat himself down on the ground and weeping bitterly cried, “Woe is me, and alas my soul, for the Day of Judgment is almost here, and I have still not mended myself!” (*Zikhron la-Rishonim*)

Midrash teaches us that Moses ascended Mt. Sinai on the first of Elul in order to receive the second set of the Ten Commandments. Since Moses remained on the mountain for forty days, the sages identified this whole period, from the first of Elul until Yom Kippur, as a period of Penitential prayer and repentance. (*Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* 46)

1. What are the elements in my life that I’m ready to leave behind in 5770?
2. What elements are missing from my life that I want to embrace in 5771?
3. During this month of Elul, what steps do I need to take to prepare for the High Holy days?
4. Who am I going to need to speak with to ask forgiveness?
5. What am I going to have to forgive myself for?
6. How can I utilize the next five days to prepare myself as an individual?
7. How can I utilize the next five days to prepare myself to be a spiritual leader?
8. What do I need from other people to accomplish these goals?

On the Day of Atonement in 1967, I put on my dark holiday suit and went to the Old City in Jerusalem. I stood, for some time, before the alcove of an Arab’s shop, not far from Damascus Gate, a shop of buttons and zippers and spools of thread in all colours, and snaps and buckles. A glorious light and a great many colours like a Holy Ark with its doors ajar.

I told him in my heart that my father, too, had such a shop of threads and buttons. I explained to him in my heart all about the tens of years and the reasons and the circumstances because of which I am now here and my father’s shop in ashes there, and he is buried here.

By the time I had finished, it was the hour of “the locking of the Gates.” He too pulled down the shutter and locked the gate, and I went back home with all the worshippers. (*Yehuda Amichai*)

At the cost of abandoning our inner essence, our pure souls, most of us have chosen to protect ourselves with walls and barriers. Often, these not only keep dangers out, they also keep joy out; they keep our selves out. *Teshuva* is coming home to the truest self, to, “I’m sorry I hurt you. I wasn’t myself.” It is an opportunity to peel off the façade and uncover the games we play in an effort to hide our most pure and vulnerable. Essence. (*Debbie Friedman*)

Elul is a time not only for introspection but of inspection. Your state of being should be checked out by professionals – physician, mental-health specialists – and by those important to you – spouse and friends. (*Zalman Shalomi*)

Elul calls us to forgive, to forgive others whom we have wounded wittingly and unwittingly by words, and by actions. She bids us speak words, which stick in our craw like leftover morning gruel clings to the pot, and to ask forgiveness, and to grant forgiveness. (*Vicki Hollander*)

Appendix D – Closing Readings

Ethical life has entered into religious life, and cannot be extracted from it. There is no responsibility unless there is One to whom one is responsible, for there is no response where there is no address. –Martin Buber

Our day is the opposite of finality, of fate.
Our domain is going outward that points to the faraway,
 Our day is the direction that leads into the distance.
All that has come into existence has been given
 Becomes a path to the beyond,
 And to that which is in the process of becoming,
 To the world and to the coming day.
All creation wants to be revelation,
 All of the past becomes the future. - Leo Baeck

“And God said: ‘Let there be light!’” This is the first light God made before making the sun and stars. God showed it to David, who burst into song. This was the light Moses saw on Sinai! At the creation, the universe from end to end radiated light – but it was withdrawn...and now it is stored away for the righteous, until all the worlds will be in harmony again and all will be united as a whole. But until this future world is established, this light, coming out of darkness and formed by the Most Secret, is hidden, “Light is sown for the righteous (Psalm 97.11)” – Zohar

Transition to lighting Havdallah Candle

- Light is sown for the righteous, the tzadikim
- This candle is lit to mark the separation of one week to the next
- It also, for us, signifies the separation of one group a leaders to the next
- It symbolizes the separation of who we were from who we want to be
- The light carries us into a new week, a new year, and new opportunities

Begin Havdallah

Eliahu Hanavi

Shehecheyanu to mark the new week, the new year working together

Closing Circle or Siyyum