

At the end of this Shabbat, Ashkenazi Jews will begin *s'lichot*, the penitential prayers and songs that are part of our liturgy before and during the High Holidays. Why on Saturday night? The *Shulchan Aruch*, Rabbi Joseph Karo's 16<sup>th</sup> century compilation of Jewish law, states that *s'lichot* should always begin on Saturday night in order to establish a set time for everyone. If Rosh Hashanah falls earlier in the week, *s'lichot* are moved up a week to ensure that they are recited for at least four days. But if they are prayers of repentance, why are they called *s'lichot*, which means forgiveness? In his 15<sup>th</sup> century *Terumat Hadeshen*, Rabbi Israel Isserlein teaches that we should bring the joy of Shabbat into *s'lichot* to remind us that *Yom Ha-Kippurim* is the Day of Atonement, which means we should remain optimistic as we review our shortcomings of the past year. For that reason, the *s'lichot* and Yom Kippur services emphasize Moses' repetition of HaShem's own self-definition in the wake of the golden calf debacle (Exodus 34:6-7, i.e., the 13 Attributes), which deterred HaShem from destroying the Israelites after the incident with the scouts: "*Adonai, Adonai, eyl rachum v'chanun ... Lord, Lord, benevolent God, Who is compassionate and gracious ...*" And we also invoke HaShem's answer: "*salachti kid'vareicha – 'I have forgiven in accordance with your word.'*" (Numbers 14:20) However, our parashiot remind us that we must never take HaShem's forgiveness for granted. "*Atem nitzavim hayom kulachem lifnei adonai eloheichem – you are all standing this day before the Lord your God ...*" The unusual word *nitzavim* implies standing ready to act. Indeed, the opening words of our parashah still apply to us today, and they include all who consider themselves part of our eternal covenant: leaders, elders, officers, and menial laborers; men, women, and children; native and those who have joined us by choice; eyewitnesses and "those who are not here with us today," i.e., future generations. "... because all the souls were there, even when their bodies had still not been created." (Midrash Tanchuma, Nitzavim 3) We all count, and we are all equally obligated. To those who think they can lead double lives, Moses issues a dire warning, reiterating the words "Perhaps there is among you ..." The first time he continues with "a man, woman, family, or tribe whose heart strays this day from the Lord, our God, to go and worship the deities of those nations." The second time he describes such people as, "... a root that produces hemlock and wormwood." (29:17) In other words, their behavior is a source of bitterness. Rashi explains the repetition as two levels of disobeying HaShem: Serving other deities knowingly and willingly, and momentarily straying off the path. Both the intentional and the impulsive sinner should beware of taking refuge in denial. "He will bless himself in his heart, saying, 'I will have peace in the stubbornness of my heart,' in order to add the [punishment for the] unintentional sins to that of [his] intentional sins." (29:18) Literally, this idiomatic Hebrew text means "sweeping away the watered with the dry" or, according to Rashi, "adding the watered to the dry." In other words, exacerbating the situation by refusing to acknowledge wrongdoing. The Ramban (Nachmanides) focuses on "blessing himself in his heart" – someone who believes he need not fear punishment, because the rules don't apply to him. The deities to which Moses refers have vanished along with their civilizations, but other "deities" always arise in their place: Wealth, power, fame, acceptance, success, comfort, and countless other unhealthy and unethical temptations are the perpetual traps into which people stumble. Every generation has its own lures, its own deceptions, and its own punishments, and the foolhardy of each generation believe they have found new and wonderful ways to express the "freedom" they think they have invented, the rights to which they think they are entitled, and the justification they believe they deserve. Moses has tried his eloquent best to instill in his diverse, impatient, fearful, and stubborn charges the values by which they – and we too – should live. He has reiterated their history with all its ups and downs, he has elucidated all the laws and precepts that are to govern their lives, he has outlined the structures upon which they are to base their society, and he has graphically juxtaposed the consequences of making good choices (upholding our part of our eternal covenant with HaShem) with those of making bad choices (breaking the covenant through lawless behavior). Now, he summarizes, outlining a mutual process of *teshuvah* (return). It is mutual, because if we break our covenant by ignoring the commandments, HaShem will turn away from us. Of course, both HaShem and Israel may always return, but because we are the ones who have strayed, it is up to us to take the first step. Only then will HaShem turn back to us and renew our covenant. Much of this discourse is addressed in the singular form, because as we know, the success of the whole depends on the actions of each individual. And so, as we begin to recite *s'lichot* and enter the final week of Elul, we reflect, we repent, we take the necessary action, and we return. We come back to our deepest, truest selves, guided by our *kol d'mama d'kah*, the "voice of thin silence" (1 Kings 19:12) deep within us, that sweet, tiny Jewish spark calling us home to our roots, to our people, and to HaShem. May you all have a gentle journey and a loving "homecoming."

Shabbat shalom!