

In Hilchos YOM TOV

The halachos and Minhagim of Selichos

You have heard the shaylos . . .
Now learn the issues & the opinions

A summary of the weekly Wednesday night shiur by **Rabbi Shmuel Stein** at the Miami Beach Community Kollel / To receive a copy send an email to InHilchosShabbos@gmail.com

The Rambam¹ writes that during *Yomim Noraim* “there is a universal custom among *Klal Yisroel* to wake up while it is still night to recite *Selichos* until the morning arrives.” The Shaarei Teshuva² adds that “During these days, it is imperative to recite *Selichos* with the community, as its recitation is more important than learning Torah. Furthermore, one must recite *Selichos* slowly with great concentration, as it is prohibited to recite the מידות י"ג without concentrating.” In this chapter we will discuss the following *halachos* and *minhagim* of *Selichos*:

1. When to begin reciting *Selichos*
2. The ideal time during the day to recite *Selichos*
3. The מידות י"ג (The 13 Attributes of Mercy)
4. Other halachos of *Selichos*

1) When to begin reciting *Selichos*

The Teshuvos Hagoanim³ writes that the primary time to recite *Selichos* is during the *Aseres Yimei Teshuva*. The Rambam⁴ also writes that “during the ten days between *Rosh HaShana* and *Yom Kippur* it is customary among all of *Klal Yisroel* to wake up in the night to go to shul and daven to Hashem.”⁵ Yet, it is universally accepted to begin reciting *Selichos* even before *Rosh HaShana*. Still, customs vary between *Sephardim* and *Ashkenazim* regarding when to begin reciting *Selichos*:

Sephardim: Reciting *Selichos* from the beginning of the month of *Elul*

The *Shulchan Aruch*⁶ writes that one should begin reciting *Selichos* from the beginning of the month of *Elul*. The days of *Elul* are considered an עת רצון - “favorable days,” and therefore it is appropriate to begin beseeching *Hakadosh baruch Hu* from the beginning of the month of *Elul*.⁷ The *Mishna Berura*⁸ explains that there are several reasons why these are considered favorable:

1. On *Rosh Chodesh Elul*, Hashem told Moshe Rabbeinu to ascend to heaven to receive the second *luchos*. Therefore, these forty days (until *Yom Kippur*, when Moshe Rabbeinu actually received the second *luchos*) are favorable days.
2. The name *Elul* (אלול) are acronym for:
 - a. אני לדודי ודודי לי – “I am to my Beloved (Hashem) and my Beloved is to me.” Furthermore, the numerical value of the end letters of these words equals forty, because during these forty days from *Rosh Chodesh Elul* until *Yom Kippur* one’s *Teshuva* is more easily accepted.
 - b. ומל ה' אל-הך את לבבך ואת לבב זרעך – “And Hashem your G-d will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your children.”⁹

Accordingly, *Sephardim* who follow the ruling of the *Shulchan Aruch*, begin reciting *Selichos* from the beginning of the month of *Elul*.

Ashkenazim: Reciting *Selichos* the Sunday before *Rosh HaShana*

The *Rema*¹⁰ writes that “the *minhag* among *Ashkenazim* is to begin reciting *Selichos* on the Sunday before *Rosh HaShana*. However, if *Rosh HaShana* falls out on Monday or Tuesday, we begin reciting *Selichos* on the previous Sunday.” The *Mishna Berura*¹¹ explains that this is done to ensure that *Selichos* is recited for at least four days before *Rosh HaShana*. Just as a *korban* had to be inspected for blemishes for four days prior to being offered on the *Mizbeiach*, we too must inspect ourselves for blemishes of sin for four days before *Rosh HaShana*, so that we can prepare to do *Teshuva* for our sins. The verse¹² states that on *Rosh HaShana* “You should make an *Oleh* offering,” which is interpreted to mean that on *Rosh HaShana* a person should make himself into an *Oleh* offering, as if he offers himself to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, and we must therefore inspect ourselves prior to *Rosh HaShana*.

The *Mishna Berura*¹³ adds that although *Selichos* could technically begin four days prior to *Rosh HaShana*, the custom is to always begin *Selichos* on a Sunday to have a fixed day each year when we begin reciting *Selichos*. Others¹⁴ explain that we begin *Selichos* on Sunday so that we can begin reciting *Selichos* right after *Shabbos* ends and the holiness of *Shabbos* still somewhat Remains, can have an impact on our *Selichos*.¹⁵

Nevertheless, although *Ashkenazim* do not begin reciting *Selichos* from the beginning of the month of *Elul*, there are several customs that begin in the beginning of the month:

1. **Blowing *Shofar***. The *Rema*¹⁶ writes that we begin blowing *Shofar* from the beginning of the month of *Elul*¹⁷ to awaken us to do *Teshuva*.¹⁸
2. **Reciting *Tehillim***. The *Mishna Berura*¹⁹ writes that some are accustomed to reciting ten chapters of *Tehillim* each day during the month of *Elul* to complete the entire *sefer Tehillim* two times prior to *Rosh HaShana*.²⁰ Furthermore, the three hundred chapters of *Tehillim* one recites over the month of *Elul* has the numerical value of כפר – forgiveness.²¹ After reciting *Tehillim*, the prayer of “*Yehi Ratzon*” (which includes the thirteen Attributes of mercy) is recited.²²
3. **The prayer of *L'Dovid Hashem Ohri***. The *Mishna Berura*²³ writes that the custom is to recite the chapter of *L'Dovid Hashem Ohri* during *Elul* after davening, once in the morning and once at night (some have the custom to recite it by *Mincha*, while others recite it by *Maariv*).²⁴

2) The Ideal times to recite *Selichos*

The Rambam²⁵ writes that “the custom is to awake in the night in order to daven (*Selichos*) in shul.” However, the Rambam does not specify which part of the night is the most ideal time to recite *Selichos*. We will discuss the different options when to recite *Selichos* and whether they are ideal times or acceptable times.

1 Teshuva 3:4 2 581:1 3 Teshuvos HaGaonim Sharei Teshuva 322; also in Seder Rav Amram, Gerash Yerachim pg. 200 (cited in Mikadesh Yisroel, Yomim Noraim p. 52) 4 Teshuva 3:4 5 The Rambam (Teshuva 2:6) writes that “although Teshuva and crying out to Hashem are always desirable, they are especially worthy during the ten days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, and they are immediately accepted.” 6 581:1 7 Mishna Berura 581: Introduction to siman. However, we do not begin reciting Selichos on the days of Rosh Chodesh Elul (Mishna Berura 581:1). 8 581:1 Introduction to siman 9 Devarim 30:6 10 581:1 11 581:6 12 Bamidbar 29:2 13 581:6 14 Leket Yosher (p. 117) 15 See Kovetz Bais Aharon V'Yisroel (73, p. 101). The Ketzos HaShulchan (100: *badei haShulchan* 8) writes that some have the minhag to eat Melava Malka only after reciting Selichos on Motzai Shabbos to ensure that the holiness of Shabbos remains until after Selichos is recited. See also Leket Yosher (ibid) where he gives another explanation why it is preferable to recite Selichos after Shabbos: After Shabbos people are generally more joyous, because of the Torah learning and the *Oneg Shabbos* they have done over Shabbos, and the Shechina resides only on a person when he is joyous. 16 581:1 17 The *Tur* (581) writes that when Moshe went up on Rosh Chodesh Elul to receive the Torah, a Shofar sounded in the camp and announced that “Moshe went up to heaven,” so that Moshe’s ascending would not lead to idol worship (like it did the first time that he ascended to heaven). Therefore, the *Tur* explains, we blow the Shofar from the beginning of the month of Elul. The *Rema* (581:3) writes that we do not blow the Shofar on *erev Rosh HaShana*. The *Mishna Berura* (581:24) gives two explanations for this: Firstly, we want to distinguish between the blowing which is only a custom and the blowing done on Rosh HaShana which is a *mitzva mid'Oraisa*. Secondly, the fact that we do not blow the Shofar on *erev Rosh Hashana* “confuses” the Satan. The *Mishna Berura* (581:3) writes that some begin blowing Shofar on the first day of Rosh Chodesh while others begin reciting on the second day of Rosh Chodesh [as it is really the first day of the month] (*Aruch HaShulchan* 581:1). Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Igros Moshe* O.C. 4:21:5) writes that one should begin blowing the Shofar on the second day of Rosh Chodesh. Therefore, a shul which does not have a specific custom should begin blowing the Shofar on the second day of Rosh Chodesh (*Kovetz Halachos, Yomim Noraim* p. 10) 18 *Tur* beginning of *siman* 581. The *Tur* also writes that we blow the Shofar to “confuse” the Satan. See *sefer Mikadesh Yisroel, Yomim Noraim*, 2. 19 581:3 20 The *Mishna Berura* (581:3) adds that some continue to recite *Tehillim* until Yom Kippur [and by reciting additional chapters of *Tehillim* during *Aseres Yimei Teshuva*] to complete *sefer Tehillim* for a third time. 21 Matei Ephraim 581:8. The *Noda b'Yehuda* (Kama, 35) writes that there is a tradition which says that there is nothing which has the power to destroy the prosecutors in heaven like the words of *Tehillim*. The words of *Tehillim* are called a *Mizmor*, which can mean *pruning*, as they can cut off all the “thorns” that surround the “rose” (i.e., the Jewish people) [*Ketzei Hamateh* (on Matei Ephraim) 581:25]. 22 The *Mishna Berura* (581:1) writes that on the first day Rosh Chodesh Elul one should not recite the thirteen Attributes of mercy after reciting *Tehillim*. (See *Kovetz Halachos, Yomim Noraim*, p. 6) 23 581:2 24 *Ketzei Hamateh* (on Matei Ephraim) 581:17, and *Elef HaMagen* (581:10) 25 Teshuva 3:4 26 581:1 27 See *Mishna Berura* 581, Introduction to *siman*. The *Shaar HaMelech* (*Shaar* 1; end of *perek* 1) writes that one should recite Selichos at the “end” of the last *ashmorah* of the night.

Option #1: The end of the Night

The *Shulchan Aruch*²⁶ states that one should recite *Selichos* during “*ashmoros*” - the end of the night²⁷ (before *alos ha'shachar*²⁸).²⁹ The Magen Avraham³⁰ explains that “throughout the entire day, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* travels through all the eighteen thousand worlds, and during end of the night He travels through this world. Therefore, the end of the night is a favorable time (to daven *Selichos*).”³¹ *Sefer Mekadesh Yisroel*³² writes that one should try as much as possible to recite *Selichos* at this most favorable time, particularly during the days of *Aseres Yemei Teshuva* which are the main days to recite *Selichos*.

Option #2: At Chatzos

The *poskim* discuss whether reciting *Selichos* at *Chatzos* (midnight) is just as ideal as reciting it at the end of the night. Some *poskim*³³ write that *Chatzos* is just as favorable of a time to recite *Selichos* as the end of the night, because we find that *Chatzos* is a favorable time to daven (for the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdash).³⁴ However, others³⁵ argue that although *Chatzos* may be the most favorable time to daven for the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdash, the end of the night is the most favorable time to daven for one's personal needs,³⁶ and since during *Selichos* we also daven for our personal needs (including meriting forgiveness), the most favorable time to recite *Selichos* is the end of the night.

The first night of *Selichos*. On the first night of *Selichos* (on *Motzai Shabbos*), many *Ashkenazim* have the custom to recite *Selichos* at *Chatzos*. Some³⁷ explain that on the first night of *Selichos* there is more of a reason to recite *Selichos* at *Chatzos* than on the rest of the nights of *Selichos*, because we begin *Selichos* on *Motzai Shabbos* so that we can draw from the holiness of *Shabbos*. Therefore, it is beneficial to begin reciting *Selichos* as close to the completion of *Shabbos* as possible, which is at *Chatzos*, and not wait until the end of the night to recite *Selichos*.

Option #3: Reciting *Selichos* in the morning

Although it is ideal to recite *Selichos* at the end of the night (or at *Chatzos*), one may recite *Selichos* the entire day. The *Matei Ephraim*³⁸ writes that “although the most ideal time to recite *Selichos* is at the end of the night, the truth is that the *Selichos* may be said the entire day because the entire month of *Elul* (until after *Yom Kippur*) is considered favorable days.” The *Aruch HaShulchan*³⁹ writes that “Nowadays, in many communities they recite *Selichos* after it is already daytime.”

Option #4: Reciting *Selichos* at night before *Chatzos*

The *Mishna Berura*⁴⁰ writes that “one should never recite any *Selichos* or the *Yom Kippur*” at night before *Chatzos*, except on the night of *Yom Kippur*.” The *Mekubalim*⁴¹ write that the time at night before *Chatzos* is a time when the *middas ha'Din* (strict judgment) is powerful, and when one recites *Selichos* at this time, he “cuts off the branches.” Therefore, the *Matei Ephraim*⁴² writes that “if there are communities which are accustomed to reciting *Selichos* at night before *Chatzos* and recite the *Selichos* at that time, it is appropriate to abolish this custom. Someone who is present while these *Selichos* are said, should not respond along with them.” The *Shaarei Teshuva*⁴³ decries this custom as well.

Nevertheless, some are accustomed to reciting *Selichos* at night before *Chatzos*. The *Mishmeres Shalom*⁴⁴ attempts to justify this practice based on some opinions who hold that the time of the night which is between the “first *ashmora*” and the “second *ashmora*” is also a favorable time (from two hours before *Chatzos*, i.e., after 11:00 pm⁴⁵). Therefore, those who recite *Selichos* at night must at the very least be careful to recite *Selichos* after

11:00pm.⁴⁶ *Sefer Mikdash Yisroel*⁴⁷ writes that “Some communities recite *Selichos* after *Maariv*, and this as a terrible thing. It would be better if they would recite *Selichos* before *Mincha* (for the previous day's *Selichos*) than to recite it after *Maariv*.”⁴⁸

3) The 13 Attributes of Mercy

The *Gemara*⁴⁹ teaches us that after the sin of the *Egel ha'Zahav* (the golden calf), *Hakadosh baruch Hu* wrapped himself in a *tallis*, like a *shliach tzibur* leading the prayers, and told Moshe Rabbeinu “Whenever the Jewish people sin before me, they should recite this prayer of the *13 Attributes of Mercy* and I will forgive them.” Therefore, the most important part of *Selichos* is reciting the *13 Attributes of Mercy*.⁵⁰

The 13 Attributes of Mercy may only be recited with a minyan. The *Shulchan Aruch*⁵¹ rules that the *13 Attributes of Mercy* may only be recited with a *minyan*. An individual may not recite the *13 Attributes of Mercy* as a form of a prayer, because it is a *davar she'be'kedusha* (a prayer of holiness), which can be said only in the presence of ten men.

However, one does not need to begin reciting the *13 Attributes of Mercy* precisely at the same time as the *minyan* does, rather he must be careful to begin reciting the *13 Attributes of Mercy* while there are at least six people from the *minyan* who are still in the middle of reciting the *13 Attributes of Mercy*.⁵² Therefore, if someone is in middle of the introductory prayer (of א-ל מלך יושב) and realizes that if he completes the prayer there will not be a *minyan* (or at least six people) still reciting the *13 Attributes of Mercy* he should skip this prayer and begin reciting the *13 Attributes of Mercy* with the *minyan*.⁵³

4) Other Halachos of *Selichos*

1. Reciting *Birchas HaTorah* before *Selichos*

The *Mishna Berura*⁵⁴ rules that one should recite *Birchas HaTorah* before reciting *Selichos*, because the *Selichos* contains many *pesukim* which one recites. Although one does not recite these *pesukim* in a manner of learning Torah, but as a form of prayer, one must nevertheless recite *Birchas HaTorah* before reciting these *pesukim*. Accordingly, if someone comes late to *Selichos* he must recite *Birchas HaTorah* before beginning *Selichos*, even though he will have to skip a portion of the *Selichos*.⁵⁵

2. Wearing a Tallis

The *Mishna Berura*⁵⁶ writes that the *Shliach Tzibur* should wear a *tallis* when he recites the *13 Attributes of Mercy*, just as *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* wrapped himself in a *tallis* like a *shaliach tzibur* while showing Moshe Rabbeinu the *13 Attributes of Mercy*. Nevertheless, if there is no *tallis* for the *shaliach tzibur* to wear, he may still recite the *13 Attributes of Mercy* without a *tallis*. (The *Mishna Berura*⁵⁷ adds that if it is still nighttime, and it is questionable whether one recites a *beracha* when putting on the *tallis*, he should borrow a *tallis* from his friend and have in mind not to acquire the *tallis*. This way, there is no requirement to recite a *beracha* according to all opinions.)

3. Reciting *Selichos* with *Kavana*

The *Shaarei Teshuva*⁵⁸ writes that “One must recite *Selichos* slowly with great concentration, as it is prohibited to recite the *13 Attributes of Mercy* without concentration.” The *Matei Ephraim*⁵⁹ writes that “It is well known that it is better to recite a bit of *teffila* with *kavana* than to recite many without *kavana*. Especially in this month when we need to ‘cut off the thorns’ and awaken Hashem's mercy.” The *Mishna Berura*⁶⁰ writes that if someone knows that he needs to recite the prayers slowly to have proper *kavana*, and because of this he is not able to complete all of the prayers, *Hakadosh baruch Hu* considers it as if he recited all of the prayers with *kavana*. Therefore, if one needs to recite *Selichos* slower than the rest of the *minyan*, it is preferable to recite the *Selichos* at his own pace with *kavana*, even if this means that he will not be able to say all of the *Selichos* together with the *minyan*. (Other than the *13 Attributes of Mercy* which one must make sure that he recites together with the *minyan*).⁶¹

The intention of this summary is to discuss common practical *shaylos*. One should consult a Rav concerning *p'sak halacha*.

28 See Pri Megadim 581:1 (Igras Moshe O.C. 2:105; Mikadesh Yisroel, Yomim Noraim,19), because regarding all halachos the day begins at *alos hashachar* (Gemara Megilla 20b). However, the Vilna Goan (Biyur HaGra, siman 459) writes that the last *ashmora* ends at *neitz hadama* (see Mikadesh Yisroel, Yomim Noraim, 21). Accordingly, if one cannot recite *Selichos* before *alos hashachar* it is still preferable to recite it before *neitz hadama* (Mikadesh Yisroel, Yomim Noraim,21) 29 Regarding washing *Netilas Yadayim*. The *Matei Ephraim* (581:12) writes that someone who recites *Selichos* before *alos hashachar* should wash *netilas yadayim* with a *beracha* before reciting *Selichos*, then after he completes *Selichos* (after *alos hashachar* has passed) he should wash *netilas yadayim* again without reciting a *beracha*. (See Kovetz Halachos, Yamim Noraim, p. 18, note 5) 30 581:1. See also Mishna Berura 581, Introduction to siman. 31 The *Shaar HaMelach* (Shaar 1; end of perek 1) writes the following: “The *Gemara* writes that the end of the last *ashmura* of the night is the time when ‘an infant nurses from his mother, and a wife talks to her husband.’ This also means that this is a favorable time to daven (*Selichos*) because at this time the *Sechina* (the wife) talks to (her husband) *Hakadosh baruch Hu*, and the infant (Klal Yisroel) nurses from the outpour of *Hakadosh baruch Hu*'s goodness.” 32 Mikadesh Yisroel, Yomim Noraim, 19 33 Divrei Torah (1:76) 34 Magen Avraham 1:4. Rav Moshe Feinstein (Igras Moshe O.C. 2:105); Rav Shmuel Kamenetzky (Kovetz Halachos, Yomim Noraim p.16); *Minchas Elazar* (Divrei Torah, Kama, 7) who write that reciting *Selichos* at night at *Chatzos* is equivalent to reciting *Selichos* at the end of the night. 35 See Mikadesh Yisroel, Yomim Noraim, 23 36 As the Magen Avraham (1:4) writes “The *Rekanti* states that *Chatzos* is the most ideal time to daven for the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdash, and the end of the night is the most ideal time to daven for one's personal needs.” 37 Mikadesh Yisroel, Yomim Noraim, 23 38 Eleph HaMagen, 581:24 39 581:4 40 565:12 41 Teshuvos Rama"z (siman 30); Kaf HaChaim 131:3; 237:9 42 581:20 43 581:1, citing the Teshuvos Rama"z (siman 30) 44 41:4 45 Mikadesh Yisroel, Yomim Noraim, 25 (since we are now in daylight saving time, and 11:00 pm is really 10:00 pm). 46 See Mikadesh Yisroel, Yomim Noraim, 25 47 Yomim Noraim p.63-64 48 See Igras Moshe (O.C. 2:105) where Rav Moshe Feinstein is very hesitant to allow reciting *Selichos* before *Chatzos* and permits this only in a situation where the entire community will not be able to recite *Selichos* at all. See Mikadesh Yisroel (Yomim Noraim p. 64) where he asks on Rav Moshe that there is a clear “danger” by reciting *Selichos* at night before *Chatzos*. See also Kovetz Halachos, Yomim Noraim, p. 17, note 4 49 Rosh HaShana 17b 50 The *Levush* (581:1) writes that the order of *Selichos* is arranged like the order of our *teffila*. The introductory verses of *Selichos* we recite are compared to the *pesukei d'Zimra*, and the *Selichos* together with the *13 Attributes of Mercy* we recite are compared to the *Shemoneh Esreh*, and then we recite *tachanun*, just as by davening. 51 565:5 52 Kovetz Halachos, Yomim Noraim p. 27. See Mikadesh Yisroel, Yomim Noraim 50, who says that so long as anyone from the *minyan* is still reciting the *13 Attributes of Mercy* he may begin reciting it. 53 *ibid*, p. 26 54 9:27 55 Kovetz Halachos, Yomim Noraim, p. 19; Mikadesh Yisroel, Yomim Noraim, 47 56 581:6 57 581:6 58 581:1, citing the *Birkei Yosef* 59 *Kezei HaMateh* 581:25 60 1:12 61 Kovetz Halachos, Yomim Noraim p. 20