



# SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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***Slichos – why at midnight***

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Emil W. Herman ע"ה ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל  
who loved and supported Torah learning.

# Nitzavim

## Slichos – why at midnight

Good Shabbos!

Have you ever heard of “Jewish Time”?

This is a concept that every Jew is familiar with.

What it means is that if someone tells you that an event is scheduled to start at two o'clock in the afternoon, then it means that it will really start at 2:15, or 2:30, or a quarter to three—and that all the invited guests know that there's no reason to get there on time, because it's scheduled to start at 2:00 “Jewish Time.”

But where did this concept of Jewish Time start? Since when are Jews officially always late?

A Jew was once invited to attend the Slichos prayer services. The Rabbi explained to him that it's a prayer that is said a few days before Rosh Hashanah, and is a good time to get into the spirit of Rosh Hashanah. Many of the prayers said on Rosh Hashanah are said during Slichos too. And so, there's no better preparation for the New Year than Slichos.

So this Jewish person heard the rabbi out, listened to him and got excited. He asked the rabbi, “What time will Slichos be held?” The rabbi told him that the first Slichos services will be held Saturday night at midnight. The man looked at the rabbi with a surprised look and said, “Listen—I think that getting into the Rosh Hashanah spirit is a very good idea. But why in the middle of the night? Is it impossible to say Slichos at a more conventional time?”

After all, even on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur itself we don't get up in the middle of the night—so why at Slichos do we need to be stricter than the Ne'ilah prayer, the holiest prayer of Yom Kippur? The fact is that there is no other standardized prayer throughout the year for which we get up in the middle of the night. So why do we get up in the middle of the night for Slichos?

Now, every year on the Shabbos before Rosh Hashanah, we read the Torah portion of Nitzavim.

In the beginning of this Torah portion, Moshe Rabbeinu announces, “You are all standing today before G-d... To pass you into the pact of the L-rd your G-d.”

What this means is that Moshe, on the day he passed away, assembled the entire Jewish Nation and once again enacted a pact between them and G-d—the same pact that he enacted for them at Mt. Sinai.

Chasidic philosophy says that the word “today” in Moshe’s announcement refers to Rosh Hashanah.

This means that each year, on Rosh Hashanah day, we experience anew the pact, the covenant, between G-d and us that we entered at Mt. Sinai. For the same reason, there are things that we do on Rosh Hashanah that remind us of standing at Mt. Sinai—particularly the blowing of the shofar, which is to remind us of “the very strong shofar sound” heard at the Giving of the Torah.

Now, what really happened at Mt. Sinai?

When the Jewish Nation left Egypt at the holiday of Passover, they asked Moshe Rabbeinu when they would be getting the Torah. Moshe told them that in another 50 days, G-d will reveal Himself to the entire Jewish Nation.

Out of great anticipation and excitement, the Jewish Nation began counting the days: One day, two days, three days, and so on. From that later came the tradition of Counting the Omer. And so, they counted 49 days—and when they finally got to that fateful night on which G-d descended on Mt. Sinai and revealed Himself to the Jewish Nation, none of them waited at the foot of Mt. Sinai. The entire Jewish Nation slept—and that night, the Midrash tells us, they slept well. Mosquitoes didn’t bite them. They were tired from all their Torah-getting preparations and they fell asleep.

In the Tanach (Yeshayahu 50:2), the Prophet says, “Why have I come and there is no man, have I called and there is no response?”

As a matter of fact, G-d needed to wake them up with “thunder and lightning... and a very strong shofar sound, and the entire nation in the camp shook” (Shmos 19:16)—on which Rashi comments, “this teaches us that G-d was early because of them.”

We thus have it that at the very first event in Jewish history, after the Jewish Nation was chosen as a special nation at Mt. Sinai, at the “wedding” between the Jewish Nation and G-d, the Jewish Nation shows up at the event late.

And thus, ever since then, we became chronic procrastinators.

And so every year, before we get to Rosh Hashanah and the annual “Stand at Mt. Sinai,” we don’t want to make the same mistake that our ancestors made over 3,000 years ago. So this time, we get up in the middle of the night and don’t wait for the night of Rosh Hashanah. Rather, we start several days earlier, turning to G-d and saying, “Bimtzoei menuchah, kidamnu tichila”—“at the departure of tranquility,” meaning when the Shabbos day of rest is over, “We precede you first”—meaning that this time, we showed up first.

This story also gives rabbis a good amount of consolation. Ever since the Giving of the Torah, any rabbi who shows up to give a class and no one shows up can take consolation from the fact that when G-d Himself showed up, no one was there waiting for Him and He still dismissed the slight and woke up the Jewish Nation. Therefore, the rabbi can certainly forgive the slight and wake up the community members.

On the verse we read in last week's Torah portion of Ki Tavo, "Because you did not serve the L-rd, your G-d, with happiness and with gladness of heart" (Devarim 28:47), the Arizal explains that happiness is the most important ingredient in serving G-d. And if that's true all year 'round, it's all the more true when it comes to Slichos.

The Rebbe stressed many times that when it comes to Slichos, a Jew must show up happy—with a great sense of happiness that G-d loves him and is prepared to give him a good year once again. And so, while there is a widespread custom among Jews to go to sleep for a bit and then get up at midnight for Slichos, Chasidim have a special preparation for Slichos. Chasidim start the traditional farbrengen, a spiritual group discussion of sorts, while it's still Shabbos. They say "L'chaim!" They sing and discuss and then go into Slichos singing and dancing. A newcomer visiting the central Chabad synagogue at 770 Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn back in the day would not know if it was the night of Slichos or the night of Simchas Torah—the joy would reach the heavens.

We might also say that besides what happened at Mt. Sinai, when the entire Jewish Nation fell asleep on the night of the Giving of the Torah and G-d Himself in all His Glory needed to wake them up, it's also possible to explain that the Jews were tired because of all their spiritual preparations for the Giving of the Torah.

But what happened 40 days later was far more serious. Moshe Rabbeinu had gone up Mt. Sinai for 40 days, and while he was still on the mountain, the Jewish Nation went ahead and made the infamous Golden Calf.

And that night, too, was a fateful night. The Jewish Nation had approached Aaron and said, "Make for us a god... because this man Moshe, we don't know what happened to him." Now, Aaron tried to buy some time and postpone things until Moshe returned, and so he announced, We will do it tomorrow.

But what happened then was the complete opposite of what had happened the night of the Giving of the Torah. The verse continued, "They woke up the next morning"—on which Rashi comments, "The Satan motivated them so that they would sin." So they got up in early in the morning, "and the people sat down to eat and drink, and they [then] got up to frolic" (Shmos 32:6).

And so when Moshe came down the mountain, the Torah tells us, "And Yehoshua heard the sound of the people in their shouting," on which Rashi comments, "for they were shouting, rejoicing and laughing" (Shmos 32:17).

Two verses later, the Torah tells us, "And when it was that he drew closer to the camp and saw the calf and the dances, Moshe's anger was kindled, and he flung the tablets from his hands."

Thus, it was this dancing that caused the breaking of the Two Tablets.

And so perhaps we can say that if we want to correct and compensate for the misplaced celebrating and dancing at the Sin of the Golden Calf, if we want to balance the scale, it's not enough to just get up in the middle of the night and recite Slichos with teary eyes and a face that looks like it's Tisha B'Av. Rather, we need to get up and be wide awake, to farbreng and be happy, and thus go into Slichos.

And then, we will know that our joy and happiness will sweeten any harsh heavenly verdicts, and that G-d will give each and every one of us a good and sweet New Year.

Good Shabbos!

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