



By: Rabbi Julia Margolis

*“ In the 1930’s, rabbi Mordechai Kaplan, founder of the reconstructionist movement, an offshoot from conservative judaism, wished to eliminate the “Kol Nidre” entirely and instead, set its melody to a biblical psalm to be sung in its place at the erev yom kippur service. He met serious opposition to this idea, but none expressed so powerfully as in the letter sent to him by his very upset mother. In a classic example of jewish guilt and understatement, she writes: “You are destroying judaism. Do you understand what you are doing to yourself? I will not tell you what you are doing to me, and maybe your father in his grave. I am too weak now, I cannot write more. Be well and happy with your family. Signed, your mother.” to his credit, Kaplan made his changes anyway. ”*

*Jewish guilt is a very powerful part of our lives, and this story about Rabbi Kaplan shows us that the preparation for the High Holidays begins a full month before Rosh HaShanah. The entire Hebrew month of Elul is dedicated to readying ourselves for Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. Some congregations follow the custom of sounding the shofar at the end of each weekday morning service during Elul as a reminder of the approaching season.*

*Selichot translates to “forgiveness,” originally, selichot prayers were recited early in the morning, prior to dawn. There was a custom in Eastern Europe that the person in charge of prayers would make the rounds of the village, knocking three times on each door and saying, “Israel, holy people, awake, arouse yourselves and rise for the service of the Creator! It later became common practice to hold the first Selichot service, considered the most important, at a time more convenient for the masses of people. Therefore, the Saturday night service was moved forward to midnight.*

*In many ways, the prayers which make up the Selichot service mirror what we find on the Day of Atonement which follows soon after. The language of these qualities should sound familiar to anyone who has recited the liturgy throughout Yom Kippur when we speak about God’s ability to forgive “transgression, iniquity, and sin.”*





*Now it is a time to begin the process of asking forgiveness for wrongs done to other people. G-d cannot forgive us for sins committed against another person until we have first obtained forgiveness from the person we have wronged. As people mature, they begin to formulate achievable goals, allowing them to later look back and evaluate what they accomplished and where they fell short. The Babylonian Talmud (the repository of Jewish wisdom compiled in the 6th century CE) teaches that at the final judgment, we are asked three basic questions: Did you conduct your business with integrity? Did you set aside fixed times for study? Did you hope for better things to come? (Shabbat, 31a).*

*As the Maharal of Prague said, “All the month of Elul, before eating and sleeping, a person should look into his soul and search his deeds, that he may make confession.”*

*Jewish tradition points to the name of the month as symbolically appropriate – the letters of Elul form an acronym for the words in the verse Ani le dodive dodi li-“I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine” (Song of Songs 6:3).*

*Believing that the “beloved” refers to G-d, the sages take this verse to describe the particularly loving and close relationship between G-d and Israel. Elul, then, is our time to establish this closeness so that we can approach the Yamim Noraim, or Days of Awe, in trusting acceptance of G-d’s judgment. We approach the trial not out of fear, but out of love.*



*May we all have the courage to ask questions, have a real hashbon hanefesh– reflection with ourselves and others near us. May we ask for forgiveness not only on Yom Kippur but when we understand our wrongdoing. May it be a meaningful time for all of us.*

*As we approach a New Year, I extend my personal blessings to you. May your blessings be fulfilled many times over and may you experience a year of fulfilment, joy, health and peace.*

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