

Sephardic liturgy: Adon HaSelichot, Neilah, and Kaddish

In a few days is Yom Kippur, when Jews worldwide fast for 25 hours and gather in synagogues to repent for their transgressions and ask divine forgiveness. Let us focus today on the Sephardic liturgy for this day, specifically on three items: *Adon HaSelichot*, the *El Nora Alilah* song opening the *Neilah*, which is the concluding service, and the *Kaddish*.

There is a dispute in the Talmud about whether the sins we atone for must be listed in detail in the text of the communal prayers, even though not every individual committed every one of the listed transgressions. Rabbi Yehudah ben Baba said to specify them in detail, but Rabbi Akiva said this is not necessary. [Yoma 86b]

The matter is not resolved. So one can do it either way. Ashkenazic Jews went one way, and Sephardic Jews went the other way. The Ashkenazic liturgy lists 44 specific sins: *Al chet shechatanu lefanecha* – For the sin which we have committed before You through speech; for the sin which we have committed before You by disrespecting parents and teachers; for the sin which we have committed before You in business dealings; for the sin which we have committed before You by scheming against our fellow man, etc. etc. By contrast, the Sephardic liturgy lists only six generic sins: For the sin which we have committed before You (1) because we were forced to do it, (2) without being forced, (3) in secret, (4) in public, (5) by mistake, and (6) intentionally.

But Sephardim made up for the shorter liturgy by adding "*Adon HaSelichot*", which asks God's **forgiveness** for all these sins. It is a *piyyut*, or short liturgical poem, dating back to the 11th century. The author is unknown. It was found in a trash can, near the end of the 19th century. That trash can was the Cairo Geniza, that treasure

trove of Judaica material that had been sleeping for centuries in Cairo, Egypt, my hometown. It spread like wildfire in the Sephardic world, and more and more in the Ashkenazic world as well.

It calls God by 22 different names, one for each Hebrew letter, from *Adon HaSelichot*, Master of forgiveness, representing the first letter, *Alef*; to *Temim De3ot*, Complete in knowledge, representing the last letter, *Tav*. Each name ends with "ot", the feminine plural. The congregational response is :

Chatanu lefanecha rachem 'allenu,

meaning:

We have sinned before you, have mercy on us.

Here is how it goes:

Chatanu lefanekha rachem 'allenu (2)

**Adon ha-selichot, bochen levavot
Goleh 3amukot, dover tsedakot
Chatanu lefanekha rachem 'allenu (2)**

**Hadur beniflaot, vatik benechamot
Zocher b'rit avot, choker kelayot
Chatanu lefanekha rachem 'allenu (2)**

**Tov umetiv labriyot, yodea3 kol nistarot
Kovesh 3avonot, lovesh tsedakot
Chatanu lefanekha rachem 'allenu (2)**

**Maleh zakhiiyot, norah tehillot
Soleach 3avonot, 3oneh vatsarot
Chatanu lefanekha rachem 'allenu (2)**

**Po3el yeshu3ot, tsofeh 3attidot
Koreh hadorot, rokhev 3aravot
Shomea3 tefillot, temim de3ot
Chatanu lefanekha rachem 'allenu (2)**

This means:

We have sinned before you, have mercy on us

Master of forgiveness, who examines hearts,
Who reveals depths, who speaks righteousness,
We have sinned before you, have mercy on us

Who is glorious in wonders, who is eternal in consolations,
Who remembers the covenant with our fathers, who delves into
our innermost parts,
We have sinned before you, have mercy on us

Who is good and does good to living beings, who knows
all hidden matters,
Who extinguishes wrongdoing, who wears righteousness,
We have sinned before you, have mercy on us

Who is filled with merit, who is awesome in praises,
Who forgives wrongdoing, who answers requests,
We have sinned before you, have mercy on us

Who works redemption, who sees the future,
Who calls out the generations, who rides in the heavens,
Who hears prayers, who is pure in knowledge,
We have sinned before you, have mercy on us

בוחן לְבָבוֹת	אֲרוֹן הַסְּלִיחוֹת
דוֹבַר צְדָקוֹת	גּוֹלָה עֲמוּקוֹת
חֲטֵאֵנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ רַחֵם עָלֵינוּ:	
וְתִיק בְּנַחֲמוֹת	הַדּוֹר בְּנִפְלְאוֹת
חֹקֵר כְּלִיּוֹת	זוֹכֵר בְּרִית אָבוֹת
חֲטֵאֵנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ רַחֵם עָלֵינוּ:	
יֹדֵעַ כָּל־נִסְתָּרוֹת	טוֹב וּמִטֵּיב לְבָרִיּוֹת
לוֹבֵשׁ צְדָקוֹת	כוֹבֵשׁ עֲוֹנוֹת
חֲטֵאֵנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ רַחֵם עָלֵינוּ:	
נֹרָא תְהִלּוֹת	מֵלֵא זְכוּיֹת
עֹנֶה בַצָּרוֹת	סוֹלֵחַ עֲוֹנוֹת
חֲטֵאֵנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ רַחֵם עָלֵינוּ:	
צוֹפֵה עֲתִידוֹת	פּוֹעֵל יְשׁוּעוֹת
רוֹכֵב עַרְבוֹת	קוֹרֵא הַדּוֹרוֹת
תָּמִים דְּעוֹת	שֹׁמֵעַ תְּפִלוֹת
חֲטֵאֵנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ רַחֵם עָלֵינוּ:	

The second piece I would like to present is *El Nora Alilah*, which opens the concluding service on Yom Kippur, the Neilah. The Neilah was not always part of the liturgy. It was introduced some 2000 years ago, in Talmudic times [Berachot Y 45a]. In the Talmud Yerushalmi, Rabbi Levi said: God said in Isaiah 1:15:

תָּרַבוּ תַפְּלָה אֵינֶנִּי שֹׁמֵעַ יְדֵיכֶם דָּמִים מְלֵאוּ גַם כִּי

Even if you pray profusely I will not answer, [because] your hands are full of blood.
[Isaiah 1:15]

He concluded that IF your hands are NOT full of blood AND you pray profusely, your prayer WILL be answered! It's a promise! He turned the negative-sounding biblical verse into something positive, quite a rabbinic feat. So the Sages added the Neilah to increase the chance that our prayers will be answered on Yom Kippur.

Fifty years ago, I was standing in *Shaar HaShamayim* synagogue in downtown Cairo, Egypt, where I grew up. The people were tired, sleepy, hungry. The prayers were down to a low monotone. They did not want to hear about the origin of the Neilah service. They wanted the Neilah service itself, introduced by the Neilah song. Then the song came. The transformation was something to behold. All of a sudden, everybody woke up and started singing at the top of their voices, with great enthusiasm, with abandon and a feeling of liberation! I have never seen that since then.

What they sang was *El nora 3alilah*, a piyyut written by Moshe Ibn Ezra, 12th-century rabbi and poet from Muslim Spain. It has eight verses, and the first letters form an acrostic spelling *Moshe Hazzak* – “Moses, may he be strong”. It is a plea to God to forgive us before the gates of repentance close. The congregational response is:

El nora 3alilah, el nora 3alilah; hamtsi lanu mechillah, besha3at hanne3ilah

God of Awe, God of Awe, pardon us at this hour when the gates are closing.

It goes like this:

**El nora 3alilah, el nora 3alilah
Hamtsi lanu mechillah, besha3at hanne3ilah**

**M'tei mispar kru-im, lecha 3ayin nose-im
Um-saldim bechillah, besha3at hanne3ilah
El nora 3alilah, el nora 3alilah
Hamtsi lanu mechillah, besha3at hanne3ilah**

**Shofchim lecha nafsham, m'cheh fish-3am v'kha-chasham
Hamtsi em mechillah, besha3at hanne3ilah
El nora 3alilah, el nora 3alilah
Hamtsi lanu mechillah, besha3at hanne3ilah**

**Heye lahem l'sitra, v'chal-tsem mim-era
Vechat-mem lehod ulgillah, besha3at hanne3ilah
El nora 3alilah, el nora 3alilah
Hamtsi lanu mechillah, besha3at hanne3ilah**

**Chon otam verachem, vechol lochets v'lochem
3asseh vahem p'lillah, besha3at hanne3ilah
El nora 3alilah, el nora 3alilah
Hamtsi lanu mechillah, besha3at hanne3ilah**

**Zechor tsidkat avihem, v'chadesh et yemehem
Kekedem ut-chillah, besha3at hanne3ilah
El nora 3alilah, el nora 3alilah
Hamtsi lanu mechillah, besha3at hanne3ilah**

**Kra na sh'nat ratson, ve-hashev sh'erit ha-tson
L'Ahalivah ve-Ahalah, besha3at hanne3ilah
El nora 3alilah, el nora 3alilah
Hamtsi lanu mechillah, besha3at hanne3ilah**

**Tizku l'shanim rabbot, habbanim vecha-avot
Beditsa uv-tsahala, besha3at hanne3ilah
El nora 3alilah, el nora 3alilah
Hamtsi lanu mechillah, besha3at hanne3ilah**

**Michael sar Yisrael, Eliyahu v'Gavriel
Basru na ha-geula, besha3at hanne3ilah
El nora 3alilah, el nora 3alilah
Hamtsi lanu mechillah, besha3at hanne3ilah**

It means:

God of Awe, God of Awe, pardon us at this hour when the gates are closing.

Few are gathered here, looking towards you, shaking in dread,
at the time of Ne'ila.

They pour their souls out to you. Wipe their crimes and their
lies, and find them forgiveness, at the time of Ne'ila.

Be their protector, save them from bane, and seal them for
grace and joy, at the time of Ne'ila.

Pardon them and have mercy, and to all who harm and fight,
do justice, at the time of Ne'ila.

Remember the righteousness of their ancestors, and bring back
their old times, as before, at the time of Ne'ila.

Call this a year of acceptance, and return the remaining flock,
of Aholibah and Aholah [that is: Judah and Israel] at the time of
Ne'ila.

You'll be blessed with many years, you sons and fathers, in
happiness and cheer, at the time of Ne'ila.

Michael, Lord of Israel; Elijah and Gabriel, please announce the
salvation, at the time of Ne'ila.

God of Awe, God of Awe, pardon us at this hour when the
gates are closing.

The Sephardic new year greeting is not *Shana tova* but a line from
this song :

Tizku l'shanim rabbot

which means:

May you merit many years!

The response is

Tizkeh v'tichyeh

which means:

May you merit and live!

Or, in the plural:

Tizku v'tichyu.

אל נֹרָא עֲלִיָּה	אל נֹרָא עֲלִיָּה
בְּשַׁעַת הַנְּעִילָה:	הַמְצִיא לָנוּ מַחִילָה
לָךְ עֵינַי נוֹשְׂאִים	כְּמַתִּי מִסֶּפֶר קְרוּאִים
בְּשַׁעַת הַנְּעִילָה:	וּמִסִּלְדִים בְּחִילָה
מַחַה פֶּשַׁעַם וְכַחֲשָׁם	לְשׁוֹפְכִים לָךְ נִפְשָׁם
בְּשַׁעַת הַנְּעִילָה:	הַמְצִיאָם מַחִילָה
וְחִלְצָם מִמְאָרָה	הָיְיָ לָהֶם לְסִתְרָה
בְּשַׁעַת הַנְּעִילָה:	וְחִתְּמָם לְהוֹדֹר וּלְגִילָה
וְכַל-לוֹחֵץ וְלוֹחֵם	חֹן אֶתֶם וְרַחֵם
בְּשַׁעַת הַנְּעִילָה:	עֲשֵׂה בָּהֶם פְּלִילָה
וְחַדֵּשׁ אֶת-יְמֵיהֶם	זְכוֹר צְדָקַת אֲבִיהֶם
בְּשַׁעַת הַנְּעִילָה:	בְּקָדָם וּתְחַלָּה
וְהִשָּׁב שְׂאֵרֵי־הַצֹּאֵן	קָרָא נָא שְׁנַת רְצוֹן
בְּשַׁעַת הַנְּעִילָה:	לְאַהֲלִיבָה וְאַהֲלָה
הַבָּנִים וְהָאֲבוֹת	וּתְזַכּוּ לְשָׁנִים רַבּוֹת
בְּשַׁעַת הַנְּעִילָה:	בְּדִיצָה וּבְצִדָּה
אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְנִבְרָאֵל	מִיְכָאֵל שֶׁר יִשְׂרָאֵל
בְּשַׁעַת הַנְּעִילָה:	בְּשֶׁר־נָא הַנְּאוּלָה

Let us now turn to the Sephardic Kaddish. It is slightly longer than the Ashkenazic Kaddish. Near the beginning, it adds a reference to the future Messiah:

V'yatzmach purkaneh vikarev m'shicheh

May He cause His salvation to flower, and may He hasten the coming of His Messiah

Near the end, the Ashkenazic Kaddish asks God for two things. It asks for peace and it asks for life:

Yehe shlama rabba min shemaya v'hayyim.

But the Sephardic Kaddish asks God for twelve things. We figure, as long as we have God on the phone, might as well. So, instead of:

May peace abundant descend from heaven, together with life, we say:

May peace abundant descend from heaven, together with life, plenty, healing, solace, liberation, rescue, deliverance, atonement, forgiveness, redemption and salvation.

Here is a Sephardic rendition used at Congregation Shearith Yisrael in New York City, America's first Jewish congregation, founded in 1654 by 23 Jews of Spanish and Portuguese descent:

Yitgaddal veyit-kaddash shemeh rabbah

Be-3alma div'ra khir-3uteh ve-yamlikh malkhuteh

V'yatzmach purkaneh vikarev m'shicheh

Be-chayyekhon uv-yomekhon uv-chayyey d'khol bet Yisrael

Ba-3agala u-vizman kariv, veimru amen

Yehe sh'meh rabba mevarakh le-3alam ul-3almey 3almaya

yitbarakh ve-yishtabbach veyit-paar veyit-rommam veyit-nasse

Veyit-haddar veyit-3alleh veyit-hallal sh-meh de-kudsha brikh hu

Le-3ella min kol birkhata ve-shirata tush-bechata

ve-nechamata da-amiran be-3alma veimru amen

Yehe shlama rabba min shemaya

[v']hayyim vesava3 vishu3ah venechamah

v'shezava urfu'a ug'ullah uslicha ve-khapparah

ve-revach ve-hatzala lanu-ulkhol 3ammo Yisrael veimru amen

3oseh shalom bimromav hu b'rachamav ya3aseh shalom 3allenu ve3al kol Yisrael veimru amen

קריש שלם

יִתְגַּדֵּל וַיִּתְקַדֵּשׁ שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא (אָמֵן). בְּעֶלְמָא דִּי-בְרָא
כְּרַעוּתָהּ. וַיִּמְלִיךְ מַלְכוּתָהּ. וַיִּצְמַח פְּרָקְנָהּ. וַיִּקְרַב
מְשִׁיחָהּ (אָמֵן). בְּחַיִּיכוֹן וּבְיָמֵיכוֹן. וּבְחַיֵּי דְכָל-בֵּית
יִשְׂרָאֵל. בְּעַגְלָא וּבְזִמְן קָרִיב. וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן:

יְהֵא שְׁמֵהּ רַבָּא מְבָרַךְ. לְעָלַם לְעָלְמֵי עָלְמַיָּא
יִתְבָּרַךְ.

וַיִּשְׁתַּבַּח. וַיִּתְפָּאֵר. וַיִּתְרוֹמֵם. וַיִּתְנַשֵּׂא. וַיִּתְהַדָּר. וַיִּתְעַלֶּה.
וַיִּתְהַלָּל. שְׁמֵהּ דְקֻדְשָׁא בְרִיךְ הוּא. (אָמֵן). לְעָלְמָא מִן
כָּל בְּרַכְתָּא. שִׁירְתָּא. תְּשַׁבַּחְתָּא. וַנְחַמְתָּא. דְאִמְרוּן
בְּעֶלְמָא. וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן:

יְהֵא שְׁלָמָא רַבָּא מִן שְׁמַיָּא (חַיִּים). חַיִּים. וְשָׁבַע.
וַיִּשְׁוַעַת. וַנְחַמְתָּא. וְשִׁזְבָּא. וְרַפּוּאָה. וְנִאֲלָה. וְסְלִיחָה.
וּכְפָרָה. וְרוּחַ וְהַצְלָה. לְגוּ וּלְכָל-עַמּוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְאָמְרוּ
אָמֵן:

עֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמְרוֹמָיו. הוּא בְּרַחְמָיו יַעֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם
עָלֵינוּ. וְעַל כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן:

Tizku l'shanim rabbot!
May you merit many years!