Ma Lecha Nirdam? How Selichot Wake Us Up

I Read This Over Shabbos is a weekly newsletter from Rivka Bennun Kay about Jewish book culture, book recommendations, and modern ideas. Receive this free newsletter every week in your inbox by subscribing here. Questions, comments, or feedback? Email Rivka at Shabbosreads@18forty.org.

Now that I live in Jerusalem, I love that going to *Selichot* forces me to experience the city before it has woken up for the day. In the workout class that I attended this morning, women complained about how they were woken up by the sound of the shofar. It doesn't really get more Elul than that.

A sleepy Jerusalem at 5 a.m. in Elul

That’s the thing about *Selichot*: It’s a strange time to ask anyone to think clearly. It’s early, it’s dark, and most of us are standing in shul half-asleep. But over the years, I have taken to focusing on particular phrases, and on the thoughts they prompt. When you sit with the liturgy long enough, you find that it isn’t a random pile of pleading. Even in the opening lines of *Selichot*—in the span of just a few minutes—you can trace movement: from waking up, to finding the nerve to look inward, to actual reckoning, to something that isn’t quite acceptance but is close enough to call hope.

Below is an assortment of my thoughts on just a few lines from *Selichot*—which Sephardim began reciting this week, and will continue through the month (Ashkenazim join in closer to Rosh Hashanah). If some of these words are unfamiliar because you're not used to the Sephardic tradition, I'd invite you to read on anyway. Regardless of your *eidah*, we're all in Elul, so we're all thinking about teshuva (or we're supposed to be). Here are a few stops along that road.

בן אדם מה לך נרדם קום קרא בתחנונים

O, man, why are you sleeping? Arise, call out with supplications!

These words are borrowed from Yonah—the moment the sailors shake him awake in the middle of the storm and demand he pray to his God. Most of us reciting these words at the crack of dawn are not thinking about any storm. We're thinking about how it's the crack of dawn. We are, if we're being honest, a lot like Yonah: sleepy, unmotivated, yet we somehow find ourselves standing before God.

That's sort of the point, though. We're not the sailors in this scene—we're Yonah. And every year we remind ourselves what the simple sailors cried out to him: Do what you can. Pray to your God. How could you possibly be doing anything else right now? Because whether or not we feel it at 5 a.m., we are, each of us, in some storm or other. We are in the trenches. Maybe not this exact week, but somewhere in the year, we have been, or we will be. *Selichot* opens by reminding us that prayer is always available to us, and that we dare not sleep through the opportunity. How can we sleep at a time like this?

Waking up, though, turns out to be the easy part.

עמוד כגבר והתגבר להתוודות על חטאים

Stand like a man and be strong to confess sins.

Shulchan Aruch opens his codex with these words: יתגבר כארי לעמוד בבקר לעבודת בוראו. Throughout the year, we have to be strong like lions in our service of God. In Elul, we have to be strong like people. It takes great courage to wake up each day throughout the year and face the day's challenges. It takes even greater courage to wake up in Elul and face ourselves.

Once we've found that courage, the question becomes what we actually do with it—where we're supposed to look.

נחפשה דרכינו ונחקרה ונשובה אליך

Let us search and examine our ways, and turn back to God.

This line is lifted from the third chapter of Eicha, and I find it fascinating that it's quoted in *Selichot*, because of what that chapter is actually doing. In her book on Eicha, Dr. Yael Ziegler cites the biblical scholar David Reimer, who reads each chapter of Eicha through psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief. Reimer places chapter 3 at the bargaining stage: Somewhere in its middle, the narrator of Eicha—still deep in mourning the destruction of the Temple—starts talking about the need to do teshuva. *We'll return, God, we just can't suffer anymore.* It's a deal.

Is that what we're doing in *Selichot*—bargaining? I don't want to think it is. I think the line is there because in Elul we can't skip the step it names, even if the goal is to outgrow it. I've always understood Tisha B'Av as a necessary station before Elul, not just a sad one. Tisha B'Av is preoccupied with interpersonal failure—with the ways we let each other down. Before we can turn inward and ask questions about our relationship with God, we have to sit with what we did or didn't do for each other. Were we kind this year? Did we make people feel noticed, remembered, important? Did we speak warmly, and think to invite the people who might otherwise not be invited in?

We must search our ways and return to God. Not because we're trying to bargain with God for less suffering (though that may certainly be a part of it), but because we want genuine connection and closeness with God.

השיבנו ה' אליך חדש ימינו כקדם

Take us back, God, to Yourself, and let us come back; renew our days as of old.

This verse is taken from chapter 5 of Eicha, which, according to Reimer, corresponds with the fifth stage of grief: acceptance—not happiness, but resolution. The understanding that this is my situation, and I must now learn to live with it.

Reimer does not find this in chapter 5 of Eicha. Chapter 5 is colored by hope. As Dr. Ziegler writes:

Indeed, the divergence of chapter 5 from Kübler-Ross' model points to a vastly different conclusion reached by the devastated community. Despite its relentless realism and wretched state, Israel maintains an abiding hope in its future. The community never accepts its demise, because it continues to believe in life.

We enter Elul with the prayer: Return us to Yourself, God, and let us return to You. Renew our days as of old. We as a people have suffered greatly, but our prayers still end with a tinge of hope. We have the *chutzpah* to believe we deserve a second chance. And we have precedent for this *chutzpah*. So God, if You will, bring us back to You. Bring us home.

P.S.: Check out *JNS*'s review of David Bashevkin's forthcoming book, *I Read This Over Shabbos: Reading Jewish History in the Parasha*. The book comes out on Sept. 1.