

Shani Cohen
Summer 2020

Reform S'lichot Liturgy: Exploring Mishkan HaLev

Description: The month of Elul is an opportunity to prepare our minds and spirits for the High Holy Days through the tradition of s'lichot. While s'lichot started as a group of poems and prayers added on fast days, it eventually became its own stand-alone service, convened at midnight or in the early hours of the morning in the days leading up to Yom Kippur. Gather with Cantorial Intern Shani Cohen on Tuesday evenings over the course of Elul to learn more about the practice of s'lichot, using the Reform prayerbook for Elul, *Mishkan HaLev*.

Class length: 1 hour

Outline:

1. Elul: A Brief History of *S'lichot*
2. Ani: Drawing closer to ourselves
3. L'dodi: Drawing closer to each other
4. V'Dodi Li: Drawing closer to God

Each lesson includes:

- An opening kavanah
- A section of *Mishkan HaLev*
- A text or reading for closer study/discussion
- A closing song (also from *Mishkan HaLev*)

Elul: A Brief History of S'lichot

Opening: 5 minutes

- Welcome!
- Brief outline of the 4 classes
 - In each one, we will go through a section of MHL
 - We will spend some time studying a text from MHL/s'lichot
 - Balance of both practical knowledge and spiritual reflection

An opening kavanah: 5 minutes

Elul: An Island in the Year (*Mishkan HaLev*, p. 6)

Before we slip too quickly into the Season of the Soul —
let there be a Sabbath of Sabbaths for the heart.

Before the music of Creation's majesty —
let there be a silent praise of existence.

Before the feast of sanctified words —
let there be a poetry of solitude.

Before we enter the palaces of prayer —
let us find within ourselves a place of calm.

Before we revel in the wondrous and sublime —
let there be an honest, inward gaze.

Before the rites and ceremonies of Awe —
let there be quieter days,
an island of attentiveness.

Getting to know each other: 5 minutes

- Go around the "room" introducing each other
- What is one thing you need to do to prepare for the HHDs?
 - I.e. preparing musically and spiritually to lead services

Opening questions: 5 minutes

- What are you hoping to learn in these sessions?
- Have you encountered MHL before? Do you know anything about it?
- What do you know about S'lichot?

History of S'lichot: 15-20 minutes

Origins

- In the old European shtetls, a town crier, or *Shulklopper*, would call worshippers to the S'lichot service at midnight with the sound of the shofar
- Named after the genre of piyyut known as Selicha, which includes penitential prayers, elegies, lamentations, confessions, and petitions
- Started as a group of poems and prayers inserted into or after the Amidah on fast days
- Eventually became its own stand-alone service, convened at midnight or in the early hours of the morning in the days leading up to Yom Kippur
 - It used to be traditional to fast on these days, but became optional and eventually went out of practice
- These preparatory days, focused on forgiveness and *t'shuvah*, became known as the Days of S'lichot, though the exact number of these days is still up for debate
 - Originally, they included only the Ten Days of Repentance, but more days were added on account of the "interruption" of Rosh Hashanah and Shabbat, when they were not allowed to fast
 - Over time, the practice became to start the Days of S'lichot on Rosh Chodesh Elul, forty days before Yom Kippur
- Liturgy of S'lichot is one of the most fluid in Jewish tradition, featuring a litany of psalms and piyyutim
 - Not a single b'racha
 - Even so, the traditional liturgy features three main sets of prayers:
 1. The Thirteen Attributes
 2. K'rachem Av
 3. Ashamnu

Main themes (traditional s'lichot)

- Traditional *S'lichot* service focuses on praising God and recounting of all of God's qualities of mercy, grace, and forgiveness.
- Emphasizes all of humanity and specifically the Jewish people's sin and unworthiness
- Openly admits that the Jewish people caused the exile and destruction of the Temple through their own misdeeds, but pleads to God to be merciful and forgive these wrongdoings for the sake of God's covenant with the chosen people
- We offer a whole host of reasons why God should forgive the people: for the sake of truth, Torah, goodness, the innocent, and revelation at Sinai
- Recurring theme of guilt, saying that the people should press their face down to the ground in shame
- Glimmer of hope, asking God to "renew our days as of old" and fulfill the prophecy "I will deliver them!"

Introduction to MHL:

- This publication of the CCAR Press builds on *Gates of Forgiveness*, the last Reform S'lichot prayerbook from 1980, but has many significant creative additions and changes
- The title of *Mishkan HaLev*, according to the introduction, refers to one of the main themes that the sages saw in the month of Elul: love (*lev*)

- “Ani L’dodi V’dodi Li” from Shir HaShirim 6:3 (Avudraham, The Order of the Prayers of Rosh HaShanah, ch. 1)
- “Our Sages saw the verse as expressing the tender mutual devotion that makes *t’shuvah* possible. If we turn with open hearts to the Holy One, they taught, God is forever ready to embrace us with love” (MHL, viii)
- Look at the Table of Contents
 - 2 main sections: Shabbat evening and S’lichot
 - Starts with Friday night service for the month of Elul
 - In the “S’lichot” section, there are seven sections
- Order is completely different from traditional liturgy
 - We can think about it as an emotional arc, building to a climactic ending
- Themes include reflections on light and darkness, gently offering up the idea of *cheshbon hanefesh* and asking for forgiveness within a loving, safe space
- Questions?

Looking at Outline of MHL (post link in chat): 10-15 minutes

- Take a few minutes to look through it independently
- Focus on the first section, “Arvit L’shabbat”
 - What makes this service different than a normal shabbat? (I.e. “Shofar” section or the “Meditative Amidah for Elul”)
 - What prayers and readings draw your attention?
- Ask for volunteers to share the prayer they studied

A text or reading for closer study/discussion: IF TIME

- Break-out rooms if the class is too big
- Otherwise, ask participants to read out loud
- Group discussion

Psalm 27 (excerpted in MHL, pp. 8 and 108)

א לְדָוִד | יְהוָה | אֹרְחִי וְיִשְׁעִי מִמֵּי אֲיָרָא יְהוָה מְעוֹד־חַיִּי מִמֵּי אַפְתָּח: ב בְּקֶרֶב עָלַי | מְרַעִים לֹאֲכַל אֶת־בְּשָׂרִי צָרִי וְאֹיְבֵי לִי הִמָּה כְּשָׁלוֹ וְנִפְלוֹ: ג אֶם־תִּחַנֶּנּוּ עָלַי | מִחַנְנֵה לֹא־יִירָא לִבִּי אֶם־תִּקְוִים עָלַי מִלְחָמָה בְּזֹאת אֲנִי בּוֹטָח: ד אַחַת | שְׁאֵלַתִּי מֵאֵת־יְהוָה אֹתָהּ אֲבַקֵּשׁ שְׁבִתִּי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה כִּלְיָמִי תִּיגַלְחֶנּוּ בְּנֵעָם־יְהוָה וְלִבְקָר בְּהִיכְלוֹ: ה כִּי יִצְפְּנִי | בְּסִכַּה כְּגֹם רָעָה יִסְתַּרְנִי בְּסִתֵּר אֶהְלוּ בְּצִוֵּר יְרוּמֵמֵנִי: ו וַעֲתָה גְרוֹם רֹאשִׁי עַל אֹיְבֵי סְבִיבוֹתַי וְאֲזַבְחָה בְּאֶהְלוֹ זִבְחֵי תְרוּעָה אֲשִׁירָה וְאֲזַמְרָה לִיהוָה: ז שְׁמַע־יְהוָה קוֹלִי אֶקְרָא וְחַנּוּנִי וַעֲנֵנִי: ח לֵךְ | אִמֵּר לִבִּי בְקִשׁוּ פְנֵי אֶת־פְּנֵיךָ יְהוָה אֲבַקֵּשׁ: ט אֶל־תִּסְתֵּר פְּנֵיךָ | מִמֵּנִי אֶל־תִּטְּבֵאֵף עֲבָהֶךָ עֲזַרְתִּי הִגִּיתְ אֶל־תִּטְּשֵׁנִי וְאֶל־תִּעַזְבוּנִי אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: י כִּי־אֲבִי וְאִמִּי עֲזָבוּנִי וְיְהוָה נֶאֱסָפְנִי: יא הִנְרַנִּי יְהוָה דָּרְבָה וְנַחֲנִי בְּאֶרֶח מִישׁוֹר לְמַעַן שׁוֹרְרֵי: יב אֶל־תִּתְּנֵנִי בְּגִפְשׁ צָרִי כִּי קָמוּ־בִי עֲדֵי־שֹׁקֵר וַיִּפֹּחַ חֲמָס: יג לֹלְאָה הֶאֱמַנְתִּי לְרָצוֹת בְּטוֹב־יְהוָה בְּאֶרֶץ חַיִּים: יד קוֹה אֶל־יְהוָה חֲזוּק וַיִּאֲמָץ לִבִּי וְקוֹהָה אֶל־יְהוָה:

1 Of David. Adonai is my light and my help; whom should I fear? Adonai is the stronghold of my life, whom should I dread? 2 When evil men assail me to devour my flesh— it is they, my foes and my enemies, who stumble and fall. 3 Should an army besiege me, my heart would have no fear; should war beset me, still would I be confident. 4 One thing I ask of Adonai, only that do I seek: to live in the house of Adonai all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of Adonai,

to frequent His temple. 5 He will shelter me in His pavilion on an evil day, grant me the protection of His tent, raise me high upon a rock. 6 Now is my head high over my enemies roundabout; I sacrifice in His tent with shouts of joy, singing and chanting a hymn to Adonai. 7 Hear, O God, when I cry aloud; have mercy on me, answer me. 8 In Your behalf my heart says: “Seek My face!” O God, I seek Your face. 9 Do not hide Your face from me; do not thrust aside Your servant in anger; You have ever been my help. Do not forsake me, do not abandon me, O God, my deliverer. 10 Though my father and mother abandon me, Adonai will take me in. 11 Show me Your way, O God, and lead me on a level path because of my watchful foes. 12 Do not subject me to the will of my foes, for false witnesses and unjust accusers have appeared against me. 13 Had I not the assurance that I would enjoy the goodness of Adonai in the land of the living... 14 Look to Adonai; be strong and of good courage! O look to Adonai!

A section from *Mishkan HaLev*:

Psalm 27/Adonai Ori

God is my light יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי אִנְרִי. Traditionally, this psalm is read every day of Elul. Its verses reflect a range of human emotion and a wavering sense of faith appropriate to these days of spiritual struggle. The speaker’s confident serenity is disrupted by an anxious awareness of surrounding threats. Not certainty but quest is the dominant mood: the search for light, peace, and strength in tumultuous times. The last verse —“wait for Adonai”— suggests the value of repeated recitation of the psalm. Courage and inner peace come with patience, discipline, and development of a spiritual practice.

—Rabbi Janet Marder and Rabbi Sheldon Marder, *Mishkan HaLev: Prayers for S’lichot and the Month of Elul* (CCAR Press, 2017), p. 8.

Have you ever developed a spiritual practice? If so, what elements of that practice do you want to carry with you through this Elul? If not, what do you hope to gain from this spiritual practice for the month of Elul?

A closing song (*Mishkan HaLev* p. 8): Psalm 27 (Chava Mirel)

Sources:

Link to full URJ S’lichot service: <https://vimeo.com/accantors/download/451605520/a21ea0e8a6>

Elbogen, Ismar. *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*. Translated by Raymond P. Scheindlin. Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia and Jerusalem, JTSA, New York and Jerusalem, 1993.

Rabbi Janet Marder and Rabbi Sheldon Marder, Eds. *Mishkan HaLev: Prayers for S’lichot and the Month of Elul*. CCAR Press: New York, NY, 2017.

Wenig, Rabbi Margaret Moers. “Vidui and Selichot.” Notes for class use, 5767.

Ani: Drawing closer to ourselves
S'lichot as an Opportunity for Introspection

Welcome:

- Achat Sha'alti (Mirel)
 - **Question for reflection:** What is one thing you would ask of God?
- Introduce any new people
- Review what we discussed last week (background on S'lichot)
- Any questions from the previous session?

An opening kavanah: *Mishkan HaLev*, p. 96

and they saw repentance . . . the world itself. Repentance is one of the ultimate spiritual realities at the core of Jewish faith. . . . It is embedded in the root structure of the world. . . . Before we were created, we were given the possibility of changing the course of our lives. (Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, b. 1937; adapted) Talmud P'sachim 54a cites t'shuvah as one of the seven entities brought into being before the world's creation.

A section of *Mishkan HaLev*: Focus on introduction to "S'lichot" and "B'shaarei HaS'lichot"

Introduction to S'lichot (p. 96)

- Ask someone to read the *Hakdamah* aloud
 - What are the themes of S'lichot according to this introduction?
 - How does this introduction set the stage/mood for S'lichot
 - How would you want to set up a S'lichot service?
- Skipping Havdalah (not particular to S'lichot)

B'shaarei Ha'slichot (p. 104-111)

Background Information:

- Opens with Hashiveinu, Olam Chesed Yibaneh, and Or Zarua, each carefully curated for the musical settings associated with them
- Excerpts from several traditional S'lichot psalms, along with excerpts from "Haneshamah Lach" and the medieval piyyut "Shomeir Yisrael"
- More standard liturgy is interlaced with English poems and teachings, with notes at the bottom of every page giving historical and thematic explanations for the liturgical inclusions
- Pieces at the beginning of this section focus on light and darkness, connecting themes of light with redemption and *cheshbon hanefesh*
 - "Even in the darkest times of our lives we can retain an awareness of the Divine. Perhaps such awareness can give us the strength to arise from the darkness with a renewed sense of gratitude and praise for the gift of life" (*MHL*, 105)
- One of the main ideas that this section of the liturgy promotes is that we have a right "to ask for divine forgiveness, for we belong in every possible way to the Source of Life" (*MHL*, 110)
- English readings in particular encourage people to consider *cheshbon hanefesh* in the most gentle, loving way possible.

To do:

- Look at Shomeir Yisrael on p. 111
- Sing through (or play) a version while people follow along
- Read through Hebrew and English translation
- Discussion:
 - Why do you think we call God “shomeir Yisrael” at this time of year?
 - Do you agree with this view of God? How do you understand God?
 - What is the connection of this prayer to our regular *Sh'ma* text? What links these two thematically? How is this building on the ideas of the *sh'ma*?
- Look at the bottom readings on p. 111
 - Answer their questions. *Ayeka*, where are you now?
- IF THERE ARE ENOUGH PEOPLE:
 - Take a few minutes to flip through this section independently
 - Choose a psalm or reading to read more closely (10-15 minutes)
 - How does this reading relate to the themes of S'lichot?
 - Why do you think the editors included this text in the opening of s'lichot?

A text or reading for closer study/discussion:

- “For Personal Reflection” on p. 110
- How might our *cheshbon hanefesh* be particularly different/challenging this year?

A closing song (also from *Mishkan HaLev*):

Shomeir Yisrael by Izzy Goldstein or Sara Myerson (p. 111)

- Play recording?
- <https://soundcloud.com/cantor-sarah-myerson/shomer-yisrael?in=cantor-sarah-myerson/sets/weekly-parsha-album>

L'dodi: Drawing closer to each other

Welcome:

- Achat Sha'alti (Mirel)
 - **Question for reflection:** Are there mistakes that you struggle to forgive yourself for?

An opening kavanah:

Notice the River (p. 119)

Notice the Holy One

in blessing and in beauty,

in acts of repair,

in the unearthing of truth,

in eyes that meet,

in the tumult of change,

in words of forgiveness,

in the bridges we build to those we hurt,

in the flow of a year,

in the course of a journey,

in rising and falling,

in the bend of a river,

in the hand we hold out to those who hurt us, in the life we are living

in blessing and in beauty.

Opening questions:

- Introduce any new people
- Review what we discussed last week (background on S'lichot)
- Any questions from the previous session?

A section of *Mishkan HaLev*: Focus on “Hahavtacha Li'Slichah” and “Bigdei Tohar”

Hahavtacha Li'Slichah (p. 112)

Background Information:

- Purpose of S'lichot is to reassure people that God will forgive us, thereby encouraging people to confess and repent (*MHL*, 105)
- This section focuses on trusting God's mercy and compassion, asking for God's help, admitting our wrongdoings, and asking for forgiveness
- New poems are juxtaposed with traditional ones like Psalm 86, K'racheim Av, and Ki Anu Amecha
- Closes with the contemporary English poem, “Notice the River,” which suggests that we find God in nature and connection to others, finding blessing even in the tumult of life.
 - By fostering this sense of gratitude and the divine nature in every aspect of life, we are more likely to believe in “the promise of forgiveness” (*MHL*, 119)

To do:

- Read through bottom of p. 112:
 - S'lichot articulates the promise of forgiveness over and over again in order to reassure us that confession will not hurt us, but will help us restore our relationship with God; and, by analogy, with others as well. The promise of forgiveness makes confession possible. (Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig, b. 1957; adapted)
 - What do you think “confession” means to us as Jews today?
 - Do you agree that confession will not hurt us, but will help us?
 - Can you think of a time in your own life when you ask for forgiveness? How did you feel?
- Look at Ki Anu Amecha p. 117
 - One of the central texts of traditional S'lichot
 - Read through English
 - Sing the traditional tune (everyone join in!)
- Discussion questions:
 - What themes do you see in this prayer?
 - Why do you think it is a central S'lichot prayer?
 - We usually chant this at the end of n'ilah as well. How do you think you will feel hearing these words at the end of YK after studying it now?

Bigdei Tohar (p. 120)

Background Information:

- First time a ritual has been officially created for this custom
- Normally, the Torah vestments just change to the High Holiday white with no witnesses, or during a S'lichot service without any ceremonial component
- Editors have given several options for English or Hebrew readings on the sanctity of Torah and preparing for this holy season, drawing on biblical texts for inspiration
- Begins with the recitation of the Thirteen Attributes
- Ends with the traditional prayer for putting away the Torah, Eitz Chayim

To do:

- Break into groups (or individually) read one of the options pp. 121-122
- Share with the group what you read
- Which one do you prefer for this moment?
- Have you seen this moment during a S'lichot service? Why do you think we change the mantles?
- What is the effect of having different/white Torah mantles at the HHDs?

A text or reading for closer study/discussion: IF TIME

- Look at Isaiah 1:18 (MHL p. 120)
 - How does the use of color help shed meaning on the idea of *t'shuvah*?
 - How do you understand the concept of sin in Judaism?
 - Why do you think this verse is included in the beginning of this section “Bigdei Tohar”?

- Look at Rashi on this verse

A closing song (also from *Mishkan HaLev*): Ki Anu Amecha

V'Dodi Li: Drawing closer to God

Welcome:

- Achat Sha'alti (Mirel)
 - **Question for reflection:** What is one thing you would like to do differently this year?

An opening kavanah:

Adon HaS'lichot — A Song of Forgiveness (p. 126)

God of forgiveness —
You examine the heart,
reveal its depth, speak what is right.

Majestic in wonders,
ancient Source of comfort —
You recall our ancestors' covenant,
seek out our innermost being.

Soul of goodness —
You bestow goodness
and know all mysteries.
Arrayed in righteousness,
You overcome sin.

Music: <https://web.nli.org.il/sites/nlis/he/Song/Pages/song.aspx?songid=85#2,20,458,10851>

Opening questions:

- Introduce any new people
- Review what we discussed last week (background on S'lichot)
- Any questions from the previous session?

A section of *Mishkan HaLev*: Focus on “M'silat T'shuvah/Vidui” and “Shofar”

M'silat T'shuvah/Vidui (p. 124)

Background Information:

- Perhaps the most recognizable section of this service
- Includes some of the “biggest hits” of the confessional liturgy
- Hones in on the theme of t'shuvah
- Texts focus on the search for God, the benefits of struggle, and the confession of sin
- Sephardic piyyutim and secular poems are featured as alternative readings
 - Elul piyyut “Adon Haslichot” (126)
 - Listen to recording
 - Two Yehudah Amichai poems, “Ya Ana” (124) and “Min Hamakom” (132)
- Some of the most well-known High Holiday liturgy, such as Ashamnu and Al Cheit
- Creative English interpretations that attempt to relate these age-old texts to the modern day

- Sh'ma Koleinu has an introductory poetic reflection, "Our Calling" (133), which uses biblical quotes from Elul Torah portions to compile a reflection on our duty to do mitzvot and fulfill our Jewish values
- Order of the traditional prayers in this Vidui subcategory are almost the complete reverse of those in the confessional section of the traditional S'lichot liturgy, which starts with Sh'ma Koleinu and ends with Ashamnu

To do:

- Read "Vidui" on p. 127
 - What is the tone of this piece? How does it make you feel?
 - What S'lichot themes do you see here?
 - When do you feel a sense of belonging? When do you feel isolated?
- Look through the Vidui prayers
 - We also have a vidui service during the HHDs
 - Why do you think these prayers repeat so many times?
 - Why do you think we traditionally beat our chests when reciting "Ashamnu"?
- Video of Helfman "Sh'ma Koleinu" (words on p. 134)

Shofar (p. 134)

Background Information:

- Tone of urgency and drive towards the finish line
 - "Hear o Israel!" (139)
 - "Avinu Malkeinu" (140)
- Avinu Malkeinu is presented in a variety of forms, from the traditional Hebrew to Hebrew-English mash-ups, to a creative English interpretation ending with a shofar blast.
- Shofar is not traditionally part of S'lichot
 - Added for a "High Holiday" effect?
 - Like an exclamation point at the end of a sentence
 - All the reasons that we sound it at Rosh Hashanah
 - Visceral, energizing effect that cannot be replicated by word or song

To do:

- Discussion of Avinu Malkeinu
 - What do you know about this prayer?
 - Read through the Heb/Eng text on p. 141
 - What are the themes of this prayer
 - Why do you think it is a central Slichot and HHD prayer?

A text or reading for closer study/discussion:

The Thirteen Attributes (p. 120)

- Exodus 34:6-7
- Original core of S'lichot — the songs of forgiveness
- "Adonai" = God's compassion

- “Elohim” = divine justice
- Thirteen aspects of divine compassion
- The Talmud (Rosh HaShanah 17b) explains the repetition of God’s name thus: Adonai extends mercy before we sin, and Adonai responds with mercy when we repent after sinning. Compassionate forbearance allows the relationship to continue — a lesson in forgiveness that we might emulate in our own relationships.

Source sheet here: <https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/257989?lang=bi>

A closing song (*Mishkan HaLev* p. 120): Adonai Adonai

Watch “Jerusalem Shofar Blast”

- What do you think it feels like to be in Jerusalem for this shofar experience?
- Have you ever been to Jerusalem?
- How do you think the HHDs are different in Israel?