

Selichot and Rosh Hashanah: The King, the Ledger, and the Crown

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Calendar check: Monday, 7 September 2026 is 25 Elul 5786. Rosh Hashanah 5787 begins at sunset on Friday, 11 September; its first day is Shabbat, 12 September, and its second day is Sunday, 13 September, ending at nightfall. In the Ashkenazic pattern, Leil Selichot was the night of Saturday, 5 September (23 Elul), with the principal service customarily held after halachic midnight. Selichot are therefore already underway as of this draft, not merely imminent. Exact times and local practice must still be checked with one's synagogue. Sephardic communities generally began Selichot at the beginning of Elul.

Selichot are not a soundtrack for guilt. They are a people learning how to stand when the ledger is already open.

That is the hard mercy of these prayers. We do not enter them as customers asking for a spiritual discount. We enter as covenantal people, carrying names, promises, breaches, and obligations. The King in the Field is near, but nearness is not permission to pretend. It is the opportunity to stop running the account through euphemism and bring it into the light.

The famous Elul mashal, developed in Chabad teaching from the Alter Rebbe's *Likkutei Torah*, says that before the King returns to the palace, He goes out into the field. There is no palace gate to intimidate the petitioner; anyone who desires may approach. The image is tender, but it is not sentimental. A king in the field is still a king. Accessibility changes the conditions of approach, not the truth of sovereignty. Elul lowers the barrier to teshuvah; it does not lower the standard of the covenant.

That distinction matters in a season when religious language can become decoration. A near G-d is not a G-d made harmless. The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy in Exodus 34 appear in the aftermath of the Golden Calf, after the covenant has been shattered and Moses has pleaded for the people. Mercy is revealed precisely where the record is ugly. The text does not say that the breach did not happen. It teaches that judgment and relationship can coexist, that the One who knows the charge can still make return possible.

Selichot give this theology a public voice. Their *vidui* does not let me curate my sins into a flattering autobiography. *Ashamnu, bagadnu*—we have trespassed, we have betrayed—uses the first-person plural. The community does not gather to identify the one bad actor standing at a safe distance. We speak as a body. Even when a particular failure is not mine in the narrow sense, I stand inside a people whose speech, institutions, families, and habits can wound. Covenant makes responsibility thicker than private intention.

Ashkenazic custom places the opening Selichot on Motzaei Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah, with the familiar rule that the community should have at least four days of preparation. In this year, because Rosh Hashanah begins on Friday evening and its first day is Shabbat, the first Ashkenazic Selichot fell on Saturday night, 5 September. The service's exact clock time depends

on place and practice; many communities arrange the central penitential prayers after halachic midnight. The calendar is not a vague seasonal backdrop. It tells us that by 25 Elul, the work has begun. We are not waiting for the mood to arrive.

Why begin after Shabbat? One explanation, recorded in the Ashkenazic tradition, is practical and juridical: four days allow the person who is being offered before G-d to be examined, as a sacrificial offering was inspected for blemishes. Another explanation emphasizes the joy of Shabbat. We begin from a condition of *simchah shel mitzvah*, not from self-hatred. The point is not to manufacture misery. A crushed person may be unable to repair anything. Selichot ask for brokenhearted honesty, not theatrical self-destruction.

Pittsburgh knows the difference between a promise and a repair. When a roof leaks, you do not praise the rain and call the stain character-building. You find the breach, move the furniture, replace what is rotten, and check the work when the next storm comes. Jerusalem emunah adds that the roof, the storm, the hands capable of repair, and the covenantal demand to protect the household are not accidents without meaning. Faith does not erase the invoice. It gives us courage to pay it.

Rosh Hashanah then gathers the whole season into two inseparable acts: coronation and judgment. The liturgy's three central movements—*Malkhuyot*, *Zikhronot*, and *Shofarot*—do not offer three unrelated themes. The King is crowned, the world and its deeds are remembered, and the shofar summons us to hear and answer. A coronation without judgment would be pageantry. Judgment without kingship would be a cold audit with no living relationship behind it. Rosh Hashanah refuses both evasions.

The shofar is not theater. It is an interruption. It breaks the smooth story I tell about myself and the smooth story a society tells about its power. Its cry is primitive enough to reach beneath argument, but not so vague that it excuses action. The sound says: wake up, remember, stand. It also says that the court is not a spectacle staged for somebody else. The person hearing the shofar is implicated.

This is where the Haazinu continuity belongs, lightly but firmly. The earlier essay treats the song as a court record in the mouth: witness transmitted through Israel's own speech. Selichot are not a second copy of that essay. They are the response to its pressure. We come before the record and say that we have heard it. Mercy does not mean the file was never written. It means the file remains open to teshuvah, restitution, and a changed future. A covenantal community does not ask mercy in order to escape truth; it asks mercy so that truth can become repair rather than despair.

There is also a civic lesson, though it must remain subordinate to Torah rather than become a campaign slogan. Deuteronomy's law of the king places limits around legitimate power: the king must not multiply horses, wives, or wealth, and must write and read his own Torah. Even a lawful crown is not self-justifying. The ruler stands under a standard he did not invent. Rosh Hashanah's divine kingship is therefore not permission for human domination. It is the opposite pressure: every human claim to rule is answerable to a higher covenant.

That pressure reaches the ordinary field where the King is said to walk. It reaches the family conversation, the business ledger, the synagogue board, the political argument, the phone in the hand, and the person whose dignity is easiest to ignore. Teshuvah that never changes conduct is

an aesthetic experience. Selichot require a next step: name the harm without an alibi, apologize without demanding immediate absolution, return what was taken, set a boundary where one was absent, and build a practice that makes repetition harder.

The days before Rosh Hashanah are short now. Do not wait for a perfect inner state. Say the words slowly. Let *ashamnu* be plural enough to make you responsible and precise enough to prevent borrowed condemnation. Identify one account that needs settlement. Give tzedakah that costs more than a gesture. Call the person to whom you owe an answer. Then enter Rosh Hashanah without theatrics: with the crown above you, the ledger before you, and the stubborn belief that the Judge who remembers also makes return possible.

The King is near. The court is real. The mercy is not cosmetic. Stand up, open the book, and begin.

Sources

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