

## LITANIES

The סליחות that are recited today by Ashkenazim, whether according to מנהג ליטא, Lithuania, or מנהג פולין, Poland, can be divided into two types; poems and litanies. The liturgical poems appear before וידוי, confession (בגדנו, אשמנו, etc.) and the litanies appear thereafter. The liturgical poems that comprise the סליחות were primarily composed after the year 1000 CE while the litanies appear to have been composed much earlier.

Professor Joseph Heinemann on page 144 of his book, Prayer In The Talmud, De Gruyter, 1977, defines litanies as follows:

Prayers which are made up of a string of brief cries or petitions, all similar, each of which is followed by a stereotype congregation response. Not only the repetition of the response at the end of each line is characteristic of this genre, but also the frequency of that response, on account of the brevity of the individual sentences.

Examples of litanies found in the סליחות today are the following:

עשה למען שמך.  
עשה למען אמתך.  
עשה למען בריתך.  
עשה למען גדלך ותפארתך.

עננו ה' עננו.  
עננו א-להינו עננו.  
עננו אבינו עננו.  
עננו בוראנו עננו.

סליחות books today no longer highlight the congregational responses contained in the litanies. In the first set above, the congregational response consists of the word: עשה or עשה למען. What was once the congregational response is now frequently shown in error as the opening words of each line in the litanies. A similar change befell many of the פיוטים of the ימים נוראים. In the case of סליחות an argument can be made that the congregational responses were omitted to speed up the recital of סליחות. Think about how much longer it would take to recite סליחות if all the litanies were recited responsively. In contrast to the practices of Ashkenazim, those who follow נוסח תימן still recite the litanies of סליחות together with the congregational responses.

The origin of the “litany” style of composition can be traced to תהלים. Professor Heinemann points to two examples: הלל הגדול and הלל. In הלל הגדול the congregational response is: כי לעולם חסדו. In הלל, the congregational response is: הללוי-ה. Professor Heinemann fails to note that both prayers are still recited responsively in some Sephardic congregations. הלל הגדול, with the congregation responding with כי לעולם חסדו, is still recited in that manner in many Sephardic synagogues. Yemenite congregations recite הלל with the congregational response of הללוי-ה on certain days of the year and at the סדר. They have a name for that type of recital- הלל בקירוי.

On page 149 of his book, Professor Heinemann notes that הושענות are among the oldest forms of litanies and can be traced to the בית המקדש:

We have thus identified an important link in the history of Jewish poetry, a link which belongs to that obscure period between late Biblical poetry and the beginnings of the classical piyyut. The link clarifies to a certain extent the evolution of some of the characteristic devices of the piyyut whose origins are enshrouded in mist. We find in the Hosanot three primary elements, meter, alphabetical acrostic and rhyme-all of which are intrinsically related to the litany recited during a procession: meter would be needed to set the pace for marching; an alphabetical acrostic would be necessary to insure the proper recitation of so many similar sentences in some order without any of them being repeated and without any moments of embarrassing silence while the leader searches for the appropriate epithet. The unvarying rhyme scheme, built on identical possessive suffixes, etc., is in fact a gratuitous by-product of the form of the litany itself, for if each line is absolutely identical with its predecessor, save for the alternating epithets or attributes, it is inevitable that all of these equivalent words will end with the same grammatical suffix.

Many of the הושענות that are recited as part of מנהג אשכנז were composed by רבי אלעזר. We know רבי אלעזר הקליר as the composer of many sophisticated פיוטים. That רבי אלעזר הקליר composed litanies as well as sophisticated liturgical poetry demonstrates that when composers of פיוטים began writing more sophisticated poetry that form of פיוט did not supplant the litanies but merely supplemented them.

Litanies may have initially been composed by those who noticed that many verses in תנ"ך share words in common and contain mutual themes. A close look at the verses that currently open סליחות in מנהג אשכנז reveals that we still follow the practice of reciting verses that share words and themes:

שמע תפלה, עדיך כל בשר יבוא.  
יבוא כל בשר להשתחות לפניך ה'.

# להבין את התפלה

יבאו וישתחוו לפניך א-דני, וכבדו לשמך.  
באו נשתחוה, ונכרעה, נברכה לפני ה' עושנו.  
נבואה למשכנותיו, נשתחוה להדם רגליו.  
באו שערינו בתודה, הצרתיו בתהלה; הודו לו ברכו שמו.  
רוממו ה' א-להינו, ודשתחוו להדם רגליו, קדוש הוא.  
רוממו ה' א-להינו, ודשתחוו להר קדשו, כי קדוש ה' א-להינו.  
דשתחוו לה' בהדרת קדש, חילו מפניו כל הארץ.  
ואנחנו ברב חסדך נבוא ביתך, נשתחוה אל היכל קדשך ביראתך.  
נשתחוה אל היכל קדשך ונודה את שמך, על חסדך ועל אמתך, כי הגדלת על כל שמך  
אמרתך.

in his opening to the סליחות created litanies based on words that often appear in פסוקים. In one section, he begins with the following

(תהלים פרק קמ"ד, ג') ה' מה אדם ותדעהו בן אנוש ותחשבהו.

*Translation: Lord, what is man, that You should take knowledge of him, or the son of man, that You should make account of him?*

He then continues by composing a litany around the words "מה אדם" found in the פסוק:

מה אדם, ומה כוחו;

*What is man and how truly strong is he?*

מה אדם, ומה עשרו;

*What is man and how truly rich is he?*

מה אדם, ומה גבורתו;

*What is man and how truly courageous is he?*

מה אדם, ומה קצו;

*What is man and what will be his end?*

מה אדם, ומה ימיו;

*What is man and how much time remains for him?*

מה אדם, ומה חייו;

*What is man and how long will he live?*

מה אדם, ומה שנותיו;

*What is man and how many years does he have remaining?*

מה אדם, ומה חסדו;

*What is man and how many meritorious acts has he truly performed?*

מה אדם, ומה פעלו;

*What is man and what is the value of what he has accomplished?*

מה אדם, ומה עמלו;

*What is man and what is the value of his work?*

מה אדם, ומה יתרון לו.

*What is man and what purpose does he serve?*

In much the same way, the litany of עשה למען שמך originated from the following verse:

ירמיהו פרק יד, ז' – אם עונינו ענו בנו ה' עשה למען שמך כי רבו משובתינו לך חטאנו.

*Translation: O Lord, though our iniquities testify against us, do You it for Your name's sake; for our backslidings are many; we have sinned against You.*

Perhaps one of the most well known litanies comes from the תרגום, the Aramaic translation of the י"ג מידות be recited as part of the סליחות just after the Hebrew version is said. The practice was adopted and is still currently followed by נוסח תימן:

תרגום אונקלוס שמות פרק לד, ו' – ואעבר ה' שכינתיה על אפיה וקרא ה' ה' א – להא רחמנא  
והננא מרחיק רגז ומסגי למעבד טבון וקשוט: פסוק ז' – נטיר טיבו לאלפי דרין שביק לעוין  
ולמרוד ולהובין וסלח.

The following litany was composed based on the Aramaic translation of the י"ג מידות:

רחמנא דעני לעניי ענינא.

G-d, who answers the prayers of the poor, respond to our requests;

רחמנא דעני לתבירי לבא ענינא.

G-d, who answers the prayers of the broken hearted, respond to our requests;

רחמנא דעני למכיכי רוחא ענינא.

G-d, who answers the prayers of the down fallen, respond to our requests;

רחמנא ענינא,

G-d, may You respond to our prayers;

רחמנא חוס,

G-d, may You display compassion towards us;

רחמנא פרוק,

G-d, may You rescue us from the Diapora;

רחמנא שזיב,

G-d, may You protect us from our enemies;

רחמנא רחם עלן, השתא בעגלא ובזמן קריב.

G-d, may You sympathize with our suffering and rescue us as soon as possible.

The manner in which the סליחות are currently recited as part of נוסח תימן are a good indication of how the סליחות were originally said. All of the סליחות are recited by the שליח ציבור word for word. In fact the instructions call for the סליחות to be divided among four שלוחי ציבור. The majority of the stanzas within the סליחות are followed by a refrain which the congregation recites after the שליח ציבור completes each stanza.