

THE LITERARY FORMS OF THE סליחות

The סליחות that we recite, before וידוי, confession, during the days before ראש השנה and on the days between ראש השנה and יום כיפור, consist of liturgical poems that were composed following a variety of literary forms. If you play close attention to those literary forms, you will notice that the set of סליחות that we recite during the days before ראש השנה abide by a form order that differs from the form order that is observed during the days between ראש השנה and יום כיפור. On the days before ראש השנה, the form order is as follows:

סליחה;

סליחה;

פזמון.

The one exception to this pattern is found on the first night of סליחות when we open with a פתיחה.

On the days between ראש השנה and יום כיפור, the literary pattern in מנהג ליטא is as follows:

פתיחה;

סליחה;

סליחה;

שלישיה;

שלמונית;

עקידה;

פזמון;

תחינה.

On those days, as part of מנהג פולין, the עקידה and the פזמון are recited in reverse order.

The literary style that each of those terms represents is described by Professor Leon J. Weinberger in his book: Jewish Hymnography, The Littman Library Of Jewish Civilization, 1998:

סליחה

Penitential hymn which originated in the pre-classical period¹.

1. Professor Ezra Fleischer in his book: Hebrew Liturgical Poetry In The Middle Ages, Magnes, 2007, distinguishes between the pre-classical and classical periods as follows: poems with lines that rhyme were not composed in the pre-classical period.

פזמון

The Penitential hymn which originated in the pre-classical period was given new forms by classical poets. Among their innovations were the *piẓmon* (from the Greek *prosomoion*) and the *hata'nu*. The *piẓmon* did not vary much from the regular *selihah* save for its opening versets, which were repeated as refrains after each strophe.

An example:

סליחה ד

במוצאי מנוחה, קדמנוך תחלה,

At the conclusion of Shabbos, we approach You for the first time;

הט אונך ממרום, יושב תהלה,

You who dwell where You are regularly praised, direct You ear from on high,

לשמע אל הרנה ואל התפלה.

To hearken to our cries and prayers.

את ימין עז עוררה, לעשות חיל,

Raise Your mighty right hand to do battle

בצדק נעקד, ונשחט תמורו איל,

In the merit of he who was bound as a sacrifice and in whose place a ram was slaughtered,

גנון נא גזעו, בזעקם בעוד ליל,

Protect his descendants who cry out to You in the middle of the night,

לשמע אל הרנה ואל התפלה.

To hearken to our cries and prayers.

פתיחה

The *petihah* (introduction) thematically related to the *selihah*, was chanted before the first recitation of G-d's Thirteen Attributes (Exod. 34:6-7) during the vigil nights of Elul and the Days of Awe. Characteristically, the *petihah* closed with the verse 'For we rely upon Your exceeding mercy' (*ki 'al rahamekha ha-rabbamim 'anu betuhim*) or a paraphrase thereof. The closing focused on G-d's mercy and led into the introductory formula to the Thirteen Attributes, 'The Lord, the Lord is merciful and gracious G-d.' An example:

סליחה א

(א-להינו וא-להי אבותינו)

איך נפתח פה לפניך, דר מתוחים,

How dare we direct our words to One who dwells so high in the heavens,

באלו פנים נשפך שיחים,

On what basis may we appear before You to empty our hearts,

געלנו נתיבותיך הישרים והנכחים,

We rejected the straight and upright path You laid out for us,

להבין את התפלה

דבקנו בתועבות ובמעשים זנוחים . . .

And instead we involved ourselves in abominations and in evil ways.

שובן עד וקדוש,

G-d who lives forever and who is holy,

צפה בעלבון אנוחים,

Look at the humiliation suffered by those in distress,

תמוכים עליך ובך מתאחים,

Who depend on Your fairness and who share the need to rely on You,

בנוראות ימינך נושע לנצחים,

On the strength of Your right hand, we can always depend,

כי על רחמיך הרבים אנו בטוחים.

It is on Your deep compassion and not on our good deeds that we trust for a rescue.

שלישיה

A selicha built in strophes of three cola.

To appreciate the literary uniqueness of the שלישיה, notice that the last word of each line in each paragraph rhymes with the others:

סליחה סג

א-להים אין בלתך,

G-d, there is none like You,

לדור דורים ממשלתך,

Your hegemony continues from generation to generation,

ולעד קיום בריתך.

And forever You adhere to the covenant You made with our forefathers.

בימינך אין מעצר,

There is no limit to the extent with which You use Your right hand to guard us,

ידך לא תקצר,

You never limit the amount of strength You use to protect us,

א-ל עונה בצר.

G-d who responds to all in times of difficulty.

שלמונית

A selicha built in strophes of four cola.

Pay attention again to the ends of each line:

סליחה סד

א-להינו וא-להי אבותינו:
איך אוכל לבא עדיך,

How can You expect us to serve You properly,

ועובדי זולתך לא עזבוני לעבדך,

When the nations of the world who worship false gods do not permit us to do so,

והמה בקשו להפרידי ממך ומיחודך,

They forcibly seek to separate us from You and from our belief in one G-d,

ואני לא עזבתי פקדיך.

And yet I have not forsaken Your commandments.

איך גליתי ואלך בכל הלך ופלך,

How could it be that we were exiled and have been forced to travel from place to place,

ומלכו עלי ממליכים למלך,

While those who who serve false gods are permitted to rule over us,

והמה דינם עומד ומלכם מולך,

Despite all that, their laws survive and their leaders flourish,

ואני לא נקראתי לבוא אל המלך.

While I am unable to establish a place in which I can follow the way of life of my King.

Rabbi Chayim Funt in his introduction to his commentary of the סליחות adds the following comment to his definition of שלמונית:

סדר סליחות מבוארת-תשנ"ה-מבוא הסליחות-שלמונית-בית שלם, בעל ארבע שורות.
ויש שאמרו ששלמונית נקראת על שם רבנו שלמה הבבלי אשר רוב סליחותיו הם בארבע שורות.

Translation: Shalmonis-a complete paragraph with four lines. Some say that this literary style was given this name to honor Rabbi Shlomo, the Babylonian, who composed most of his Selichos in a literary form in which each paragraph includes four lines.

One additional section of the סליחות has been conferred with a title i.e. זכרונות. They represent the group of פסוקים that introduce וידוי, confession; a collection of פסוקים in which each פסוק opens with the word: זכר:

זכר רחמיך י-י וחסדיך, כי מעולם המה (תהלים כה', ו').

Remember Your compassion and Your kindness, G-d, for they have a long history.

זכרנו י-י ברצון עמך, פקדנו בישועתך (תהלים קו', ד').

When You think of us, G-d, think of us favorably and bring forth our salvation;

זכר עדתך קנית קדם, גאלת שבט נחלתך, הר ציון זה שכנת בו (תהלים עד', ב').

להבין את התפלה

Remember Your People who You acquired even before creation, whom You rescued from Egypt, the nation upon which You endowed Your legacy, and brought to Yerushalayim where You rested Your presence;
זכר י-י חבת ירושלים, אהבת ציון אל תשכה לנצח.

Remember Your love for Yerushalayim, never forget Your love for Tzion;

אתה תקום תרחם ציון, כי עת להננה, כי בא מועד (תהלים קב', יד').

You should arise and have pity of Tzion for it is time to favor her for the appointed time has come;

זכר י-י לבני אדום את יום ירושלים, האומרים ערו עד היסוד בה (תהלים קלז', ז').

Remember the sin of Rome which destroyed Yerushalayim and which said: raze Yerushalayim, raze it to its foundation;

זכר לאברהם ליצחק ולישראל עבדיך אשר נשבעת להם בך, ותדבר אלהם: ארבה את זרעכם ככוכבי השמים, וכל הארץ הזאת אשר אמרתי אתן לזרעכם, ונחלו לעולם (שמות לב', יג').

Remember our forefathers, Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov, Your servants, to whom You swore in Your name and You said to them: I will multiply your descendants so that they become numerous like the stars in the heavens and this land that I promised you, I will give to your descendants and they shall inherit it forever;

זכר לעבדיך לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב, אל תפן אל קשי העם הזה ואל רשעו ואל חטאתו (דברים ט', כז').

Remember Your servants, Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov, disregard the stubbornness of this people, its wickedness and its sin;

זכור לנו ברית אבות כאשר אמרת: וזכרתי את בריתי יעקוב, ואף את בריתי יצחק, ואף את בריתי אברהם אזכר, והארץ אזכר (ויקרא כו', מב').

Remember in our favor Your covenant with our forefathers, as You said: I will recall My covenant with Yaakov, also My covenant with Yitzchok and also My covenant with Avrohom and the land I will remember;

זכור לנו ברית ראשונים כאשר אמרת: וזכרתי להם ברית ראשונים, אשר הוצאתי אתם מארץ מצרים לעיני הגוים להיות להם לאלהים, אני י-י (ויקרא כו', מה').

Recall in our favor Your covenant with our ancestors as You said: I will remember on their behalf My covenant with their ancestors whom I rescued from the land of Egypt before the eyes of the other nations, to be their G-d, I am G-d.

No explanation is given for the choice of literary forms that comprise the סליחות. The following is an early description of the recommended order:

סדר טרוייש² סימן ט' – וזה הסדר נכון: מתחיל פתיחה ואחריה פזמון, סליחה ופזמון ועת לקצר ועת להאריך, לכל הפחות אומרים י"ג מדות. והמרב' בפזמוני' הרי זה משובח, כי

2. Rabbi Menachem ben Rabbi Yosef ben Rabbi Yehuda Chazan (Chazon) was a rabbi in the city of Troyes, in northern France; he lived about a century after Rashi. (Bar Ilan Digital Library)

הלשון צח מאד מר' יהודה מקשטיליא או מאבן עזרא או מן משה, ובסליחות ובפזמוני' היה עיקר, ובחרוזות גבירול, ובאהבות קשטל"י, ובאופנים אבן עזרא; לאחר שהאריך כרצונו יאמר תוכחה ואח"כ עקדה לפני הזכרונות – לשון נופל על הלשון זכור ברית אברהם ועקדת יצחק וגו' – ואחרי הזכרונות הטאנו צורינו, וידוי ג"פ, קדיש בלא תתקבל.

Translation: This is the correct order of the Selichos: begin with an opening poem and then recite a poem that has a refrain, next a Selicha and then another poem with a refrain, some long, some short. At a minimum, recite the Thirteen Attributes of G-d. Include as many poems with refrains as possible; that is a praiseworthy act because the wording of those poems is easy to understand. Take from the works of Rabbi Yehudah from Castille (Rabbi Yehudah Ha'Levi?) or from the Abraham Ibn Ezra or from Moshe Ibn Ezra. The Selichos and the Pizmonim are essential. Include poems from Ibn Gabriol and piyuttim for the second Bracha of Kriyas Shema from the Castillian and the ones for the Kedushah in the first Bracha of Kriyas Shema, from the works of the Ibn Ezra. After the prayer leader has recited his choice of poems, recite a poem of rebuke, then an Akeida, before the verses of remembering-those are verses that are focused on G-d remembering the covenant with Avrohom and the sacrifice that Avrohom and Yitzchok were ready to make at the Akeida. After the verses of remembering, recite: we have sinned our Saviour and then recite confession, three times. Close with the long form of Kaddish and omit the line of Tiskabel.