

## **'WHEN IS SELICHOT?'**

by Fred M. Raskind, Rabbi

*Selichot* is not just tonight's service. *Selichot* are penitential prayers, traditionally recited before the morning service during the last week of month of *Elul*, the current month. They are also said between Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur.

When a sacrifice was brought to the Temple in Jerusalem, it was examined for four days before to ensure it had no blemishes. The sages felt that we should feel like sacrificial offerings the week before Rosh Hashanah and do sincere self-examination to lead us to do *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* is more than repentance. It is from the Hebrew word "to return." It is not enough to say we are sorry. We need to fix the wrong that we have done, if possible, and not do it again. It's more like 'rehabilitate'. We are taught that God has forgiven a sin when we no longer do that sin.

The traditional *Selichot* service is from a collection of liturgical poets who lived during the millennium following the close of the Talmudic era (circa 500 CE to 1500 CE). Originally, the service had groups of biblical verses, which emphasized the 13 attributes of God that we are to emulate. In time, the service adopted forms of other services with multiple *Kaddishes*. Confessional & Psalm 145 were added.

It is also traditional to have a study session before the service, at which some aspect of the meaning and the purpose of the High Holy days is discussed.

In America, since people were used to staying up late on Saturday night, the custom began to have the service at this time, dawn on Sunday morning, rather than at night.

In recent years—perhaps a decade or two—the significance and impact of *Selichot* has sharply dwindled in many Reform & Conservative congregations. Some have used social programming to encourage attendance, like welcoming new members, or as we have, programmed a Movie Night. But is that really the point & purpose of *Selichot*?

Perhaps we should consider returning to an early morning *Selichot* service on Sunday morning, prior to religious school, even including children, parents and teachers? Since we don't follow the practice of a midnight *Selichot* service, we might find it more meaningful to conduct the service on the day of *Selichot* itself.

Saturday 9/24/2011