

Selah to Selakh: Psalms in Selichot

סֵלָה – Selah

- Usage: Associated with Psalms; occurs 71× in Sefer Tehillim and almost nowhere else
- First verse in Ashrei (Od yehalelucha **selah**), recited 3x a day and begins Selichot service
 - Other Psalms traditionally recited in selichot (130, 6, 15) do not contain “selah”
- Meaning is a mystery: some say it’s a **musical marker** (“lift up,” “pause,” “crescendo”), others a liturgical **cue for prostration or repetition**.
 - Joey Weisenberg (from notes on album “Selah”): Selah (סֵלָה), a word that appears dozens of times throughout Psalms, is an ambiguous term that’s often left untranslated. Typically found at the end of a verse, the word signals a pause to allow the echoes of prayer to resonate in our spirits. By lifting up this moment of praise, the song reverberates without end.
- Root unknown. סִלַּל (“to lift up”)? speculative

סֵלַח – Selach

- “Selichot” means “forgiveness” and is from the root: סִלַּח = to forgive, pardon.
- Usage: the verb used for God forgiving sins. Examples:
 - Tanakh: (“Vayomer Hashem, *salachti kidvarecha*” – “I have forgiven according to your word,” Numbers 14:20).
 - Liturgy: סֵלַח לָנוּ אֲבִינוּ, כִּי חָטְאָנוּ (*Selach lanu avinu Ki Chatanu* “forgive us our Father for we have sinned”)

One letter apart: ה and ח

Hey (ה) →

- Effortless breath, symbolizing creation
- Numerical value **5**. Symbol of openness, breath, divine revelation; 5 books of Torah
- Represents the **hey** added to Avram → Avraham and Sarai → Sarah
- Mystically: part of God’s four-letter name (Y-H-V-H), linked to presence in the world; abbreviation for HaShem: **הי**
- Teshuvah / repentance: Teshuv (return) + **ה** (HaShem) - “God created the opportunity for the sinner to return to Him through teshuva, repentance. That’s why the left leg of the hey is not attached to the letter’s roof. A small opening is left near the top, symbolizing that space always remains through which a repentant sinner can return and be drawn into **הי**, Hashem, again.”

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Chet (ח) →

- A closed arch — boundary, intensity, inner life-force; bridge (two zayins joined, connection between worlds), gate
- Numerical value **8** - transcendence beyond cycles (7+1), on a plane above nature; associated with covenant (*brit milah* on the 8th day) and divine mercy.
- Life (*chayim*): חַי - “alive”. Prominent “chet” in Torah passage including Jacob’s death.
- Sin (chet): “The shape of the Chet also alludes to sin, for the top of the Chet (as it is written in the Torah scrolls) is not straight but has a wavering line that rises and falls, alluding to the inconsistent spirit of a sinner.” (R. Munk, p. 115)

Psalms in Selichot Service: Reflection

What themes can we observe in the traditional Selichot psalms? 130 (p. 5), 6 (p.45) , 15 (p.52)

Why do we say Psalm 145 (Ashrei) during Selichot? Why do we say two lines from Psalm 44 (ending with “Selah”) before Psalm 145?

Teshuvah (Teshuv + ה) transforms sin into elevation (ח)

יְרִידָה צֶרֶךְ עֲלִיָּה **Yeridah tzorekh aliyah** - “A descent is for the sake of an ascent.” (Chassidic teachings)

שֶׁבַע יָפֹל צַדִּיק וְקָם (*Sheva yipol tzaddik v'kam* – “The righteous one falls seven times and rises again”). *Mishlei* (Proverbs 24:16)