

## Awaken! The High Holidays are Coming: Elul Practice & Us

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### Elul

The Hebrew month of Elul comes after the month of Av, a time of mourning for us. Both the First and the Second Temple were destroyed in the month of Av. “[Elul embodies the] energy of renewal after destruction, rebirth after loss, the energy of love and forgiveness, of empowerment and joy”. 60 Days A Spiritual Guide to the High Holidays Simon Jacobson p.xi

The ‘seven weeks of consolation’ start the shabbat after the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av and includes the whole month of Elul. The Haftorah for each of these weeks is from the Book of Isaiah and describes how God will comfort the people and reconcile with us.

Customs during the month of Elul:

- a. Sound the shofar every morning.
- b. Recitation of Selichot [forgiveness] prayers
- c. Recitation of Psalm 27 at end of each morning and afternoon service
- d. Visit the graves of family and friends
- e. The Ba’al Shem Tov had a practice of reciting three chapters of psalms a day from the beginning of Elul until completed on Yom Kippur.
- f. Each shabbat afternoon of Elul (after minchah) read sections of Pirkei Avot [Sayings of the Fathers]. Chapters 6; 1 & 2; 3 & 4; 5 & 6.

The letters of the name of the Hebrew month Elul, aleph, lamed, vav, and lamed have been used to form acronyms where each letter is the first letter of words in biblical verses. Two of these are:

1. Inah le-yado v’samti l’cha “I will assign you a place to flee [refuge]”. Exodus 21:13

The month of Elul is a time to ask oneself, where is my refuge?

A traditional answer is: “the words of Torah are a refuge”. B.Talmud, Makkot 10a

2. Ani le-dodi ve-dodi li ; אֲנִי לְדוּדֵי וְדוּדֵי לִי “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine”. Song of Songs 6:3

*Ani l’dodi v’dodi li* is an invitation to prayer—Service of the Heart—*ha’avodah she’ba’lev*. “What is service of the heart?” ask the rabbis. “It means prayer” (*Ta’anit 2a*).

Believing that the “beloved” [dodi] refers to God, the sages take this verse to describe the particularly loving and close relationship between God and Israel. Elul, then, is our time to establish this closeness so that we can approach the *Yamim Noraim*, or Days of Awe, [and God] not out of fear, but out of love. Entering the High Holy Days, JPS

The Aruch HaShulchan [by Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein (1829-1908)] suggests, “Now is the time that all my thoughts should be directed towards my Beloved (God) then, my Beloved is also to me; my Beloved helps, assists, and cares for me.” . . . Mishna Berura [581:1] states, this alludes to the forty days from the beginning of Elul until Yom Kippur for during these forty days repentance is [more readily] accepted so a person should bring their heart near to their Beloved [God] with repentance, and then the Beloved will be close to them to accept the repentance with love. [The last Hebrew letter of each of the four words is *yud*.  $Yud = 10 \times 4 = 40$ ]. <http://www.etzhayim.com/resources/articles/elul.php>

**The King is in the field:** [Traditional imagery. Try substituting with: Queen/Sovereign]. During the season of repentance, and particularly on Yom Kippur, God is envisaged as Father and King. Hasidic reflection sees God as, “the king in the field” during Elul, drawn out of “concealment” and approachable. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi in his *Likkutei Torah* explains the Hasidic teaching of the approachful-ness of God during Elul. The teaching takes the form of a parable. A king normally lives in a palace, separated from and unapproachable by ordinary people—this is how our relationship with God seems as we become bound up in the world with its distractions, frailties and concerns. During Elul, however, the king (God) might be experienced as having left the hiddenness of the palace and having entered into the field (i.e., that place where ordinary people are) and so becoming available to his subjects. Rabbi Shneur Zalman *Likkutei Torah* <http://www.etzhayim.com/resources/articles/elul.php>

“During Elul ‘the king is in the field’ and everyone who so desires is permitted to meet him, and he receives them all with a cheerful countenance and shows a smiling face to them all.” Rabbi Schneur Zalman (1745 to 1812). *Likkutei Torah*, Re’eh 32a

### **Shofar**

Psalm 47.6 “God has ascended with the blast, [t’ruah], YHVH with the sound of the shofar”.

The sound of the shofar announces that the gates of compassion are open. “And YHVH ascends to the blasts of the horn, and God is filled with compassion for [Israel], taking pity on them and changing for them the attribute of Justice/Judgment to Mercy”.

Leviticus Rabbah 29:3

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik [about the sounds of the shofar]:“the Shofar melts away God’s strict, disciplinary judgment and leaves only His overriding love and mercy and sensitivity”. Joseph B. Soloveitchik *Israel’s Hidden and Revealed Teshuvah*, <http://www.etz-hayim.com/resources/docs/elul.pdf>

## **Elul, Moses & the Journey to Forgiveness**

Tradition teaches that Elul was the month when Moses ascended the mountain for the second time and remained there for forty days after the incident of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32; 34:27-28). Jewish tradition recounts that Moses spent the period between the new moon of Elul (*Rosh Chodesh Elul*) and Yom Kippur (10th day of the month of *Tishrei*), i.e., 40 days, praying for God's forgiveness for the people of Israel, only descending when the period of repentance was complete. (B. Talmud: *Baba Batra* 121a).  
<http://www.etz-hayim.com/resources/articles/elul.php>

Moses' 40 days on the mountain ended with God revealing the Divine 13 attributes: "The One, The One, God loving and compassionate, slow to grow angry, who abounds in love and truth, preserving love up to the thousandth generation, forgiving sin, transgression, and wrongdoing, washing clean the slate." [Ex.34: 6 – 7 translation from Reconstructionist High Holy Day Machzor, *Kol Haneshamah*].

"Whenever Israel sins, let them recite this [the 13 attributes] and I will forgive them".  
B. Talmud Rosh HaShannah 17b.

## **Selichot: Prayers for Forgiveness**

A special set of prayers asking for forgiveness. The Sephardim [Jews originally from Spain] recite them beginning the first day of Elul. Ashkenazi Jews [from Germany, Russia & Eastern Europe] recite them starting the Saturday night [after midnight] before Rosh HaShannah. The Selichot prayers always include the 13 attributes.

## **Chesbon HaNefesh: An Accounting of the Soul/Person**

"This is the season of reflection, introspection and personal growth. We think about our lives, and ourselves and we take our own inventory. Where have we shown up exactly the way we expected, living up to our values and our beliefs? Where have we stumbled and done the wrong thing at the wrong moment? How about our relationships, do we owe someone an apology or need to work through a challenging situation that occurred in the past? One relationship that we often forget to think about and may need some attention and repair work is the one with ourselves. Balance is a perfectionist's dream, but how far out of whack are our lives?" [Rabbi Deborah J. Brin, NM Jewish Link, September 2017].

"A tale is told of one who sat in study before the zaddik Rabbi Mordecai of Nadvorna, of blessed memory [19th cent.], and before Rosh ha-Shanah came to obtain permission to be dismissed. That zaddik said to him, 'Why are you hurrying?'

"Said he to him, 'I am a Reader, [prayer leader], and I must look into the festival prayer book, and put my prayers in order.'

"Said the zaddik to him, 'The prayer book is the same as it was last year. But it would be better for you to look into your deeds, and put yourself in order.'" [Days of Awe](#) S.Y. Agnon

This accounting is traditionally done every day, not just during Elul.

“Judaism is not a religion of saints: it understands the difficulty of changing one’s behavior, of raising the bar for oneself. The Hasidim tell of Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, who used to say, before he went to sleep at night, “Master of the Universe, today I didn’t do so well. I promise that tomorrow I’m going to do better.” Immediately he would chide himself. “But Levi Yitzchak, that’s what you said last night!” “Ah, but tonight,” he’d reply to himself, “*tonight* I really mean it.” It’s a beautiful teaching tale. We have no better way to overcome the sabotaging that we do to ourselves . . . than to try to adjust the “I mean it” a little each day. Each day, we unravel one more particle of the self-sabotage.” (Jewish with Feeling Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, p.142).

“Before one goes to sleep there is a time for *chesbon hanefesh*. Some have suggested that this be done by beginning from the morning and going through the day’s activities. I want to suggest an alternative model, one that was taught to me by Eve, my wife, which she learned from a friend who is a psychologist. She suggested that I begin with the evening, and then work backwards through the day. When I do it this way, I can more clearly recall my thoughts, actions, and conversations, and return to the moments of each day which need a *tikkun* [repair].” Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi  
Excerpted from the CLAI “Kavannah for Living” Series @2000

“One who wishes to create an inner life of the spirit and prayer must make the *Sh’ma* before bedtime its devotional basis. This prayer is designed to be said in solitude. . . . Basically, this prayer is an examination of conscience . . . “. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi  
Gate to the Heart

“We continued to take personal inventory [*chesbon hanefesh*] and when we were wrong promptly admitted it”. 10th Step from a 12 Step Recovery Program

"As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison." In 1990, Nelson Mandela walked out of Victor Verster Prison after nearly 28 years.

**A thought for the challenges of our day:** “There is nothing wrong with a traffic law which says you have to stop for a red light. But when a fire is raging, the fire truck goes right through that red light, and normal traffic had better get out of its way. Or, when a man is bleeding to death, the ambulance goes through those red lights at top speed. . . . Disinherited people all over the world are bleeding to death from deep social and economic wounds. They need brigades of ambulance drivers who will have to ignore the red lights of the present system until the emergency is solved. Massive civil disobedience is a strategy for social change which is at least as forceful as an ambulance with its siren on full.”

Martin Luther King Jr. "The Trumpet of Conscience," 1967