

Elul: Entering and Exiting

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles
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As we approach the Days of Awe, we struggle with the paradox our Sages struggled throughout the ages: Every year we regret our past sins and resolve to do better. Yet, here we are again, not having met our past aspirations. How can we not feel despair and what can we do to be more successful in the coming year?

During the month of Elul, we listen to the sound of the *shofar* daily. Yet, why on *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, do we not blow the *shofar*? King David asks in Tehilim 27, "...That I dwell in the house of Hashem all the days of my life; to behold the sweetness of Hashem and to visit in His Sanctuary." Although he says he is asking one thing, he seems to be making two requests. In addition, if I am already sitting in God's house why do I also ask to visit His Sanctuary?

To understand our goal in Elul, it's important to understand its historical perspective. Moshe ascended *Har Sinai* three times. First, on *Shavuot* he ascended, brought down the first *luchot*, but smashed them when *Bnei Yisroel* sinned with the golden calf. He ascended for a second forty day period, descending on *Rosh Chodesh Elul*, and bringing down the second set of *luchot*. But the relationship between Hashem and *Bnei Yisroel* had not yet been fully repaired. Moshe ascended a third time, on *Rosh Chodesh Elul* and descended on *Yom Kippur* with Hashem's promise of "*Solachti kidvarecha*! have forgiven as you/Moshe have said." It is within this context that we interpret **ELUL** as an acronym for (E)Ani Ledodi (U)Vedodi Li/I am to my Beloved (Hashem) and my Beloved is to me. *Elul* is also an acronym for the verse discussing the cities of refuge for one whose negligence caused someone's accidental death. "*VehaElokhim Ena Leyodo (U)Vesamti*

Lach.../And Hashem 'forced his hand' and I [Hashem] have placed for him [a place of refuge]." On *Rosh Hashanah*, we don't recite *Hallel* for we are filled with awe at our imminent encounter with Hashem. But He has prepared this safe place in time so that we can less fearfully approach Him on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, in spite of our sins.

What is the connection between Elul and the atonement on *Yom Kippur*? While Hashem gifted us with the first set of Tablets, formed by His hand, these could not survive in a flawed, human society. The second set of *luchot* were chiseled by Moshe's human hand, representing an "arousal from below," the stirring of humanity toward the relationship with Heaven. Humanity has to prepare for itself the "Tablets" to receive the writing of God. That connection would be permanent, culminating in the forgiveness on *Yom Kippur* and the repair of the relationship. Our task during *Elul* is to prepare our personal *luchot* so that Hashem's presence can come down into this world, and into ourselves.

When we first accepted the Torah, we were on the level of total perfection of Adam before the sin, fully ready to accept God's presence. While we no longer have the *luchot*, they are symbolically contained in our hearts, writes Rabbi Wolbe. But those original tablets were broken, and we must prepare to imprint them again on our hearts. While Moshe was preparing the physical stones for Hashem's writing, *Bnei Yisroel* were also doing *teshuvah* to prepare to receive Hashem's word anew. Hearing the sound of the *shofar* helps us prepare down below to receive Hashem's Sovereignty from Above.

Our *teshuvah* did not end on *Rosh Hashanah*, when Hashem again revealed Himself to us,

but on *Yom Kippur*, when we received the second set of *luchot*. Both revelation and receiving the *Torah* were one combined experience on *Shavuot*, but the experience of the second *luchot* was divided into two stages, Revelation of God's Sovereignty on *Rosh Hashanah* followed by a recommitment to *Torah* on *Yom Kippur*. Rabbi G. Rabinowitz explains that *David Hamelech* was not asking for two separate things in Tehilim 27 but making one request with a necessary corollary. As king, he was involved with many issues of state and could not study *Torah*, day and night. So, he requested that no matter where he was, he would always feel Hashem's Presence beside him and keep building the relationship.

Begin with resolving to not speak *loshon horo* for only five minutes. This can be the hole Hashem enlarges to a wide open gate to help you overcome this negative tendency further. We do not return to the same point of the *teshuvah* process each year, writes the *Tallelei Chaim*. The process is a spiral from year to year. We may return to the same shortcoming, but we can see some improvement from year to year. We don't sound the *shofar* right before *Rosh Hashanah* because this month has been dedicated to following through from last year's *Rosh Hashanah*. Hence, the *shofar* of *Elul* is a reminder of the commitments we made last *Rosh Hashanah* when we heard the *shofar*, and we break for a day, before we encounter the *shofar* of this year's *Rosh Hashanah*.

Elul gives us the opportunity to save face, to exit the year on a regained high. We can now focus on the second half of our initial verse, not only to dwell in Hashem's house, but also to visit. It is difficult to maintain a constant momentum, but at least let me visit to reignite the relationship with God once more.

Elul in our Times Part II

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller-Gottlieb
Summary by Devora Kaye

A step forward in the avodah of *Elul* is changing your name. Your name brings you back to your core self. We learn this from the Gemara which says that parents are given divine inspiration when they name their child. Changing your name even on a rationalistic level could change things for you on a spiritual level. It could also change the way people see you. If in the past, others viewed you at a lower level, you can alter that by not being afraid to stretch your comfort zone, by saying- "I don't eat this or wear this anymore." A further step would be changing your place. If you're living in an area that isn't conducive to spiritual growth, consider moving, even if it's expensive and difficult. Changing your place means you've decided not to let yourself be defined by your environment, but rather by what Hashem wants of you.

The Gra says we were put on this world to rectify ourselves, the world, and to affect other people. If you've harmed someone in the past, you have to rectify it. Part of teshuva is telling Hashem- This isn't who I am anymore. When you harm another person, you diminish their sense of self. Their self- esteem is impacted by their feelings of being victimized and vulnerable. You cannot really know to what degree you've negatively affected another person. If you harmed someone financially, you owe them money. You also don't know how many other people did the same and what will bring the lender to make the decision to stop lending money to people.

Let's say you harmed someone emotionally by demeaning them. People believe what you say. You have to seek forgiveness. The best way is to pick up the phone or email the

person. People are usually generous at forgiving minor things. For more hurtful things, you might have to speak to the person a few times or involve his friends. If the person still doesn't want to forgive, past a certain point, you have to let it go because the longer you hold on to it, the more defensive the other person will become and the more frustrated you'll become. If you harm someone materially you have to pay them back. If you hurt someone physically you have to deal with the repercussion of your choices.

In summary we mentioned five ways to draw close to Hashem in Elul- *teshuva*, *tefilah*, *tzedakah*, and changing one's name and place. The Gemara says these are factors that will determine how Hashem will view you. He responds to what you become through your choices.

Travelling Through Life Accompanied by Tehillim Part 12

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn
Summary by Devora Kaye

In Tehillim, Chapter 148, *David Hamelech* analyzes man's role and potential, specifically as a Jew. He discusses the Jewish people and their relationship with Hashem and calls all of creation to praise Hashem. What is the connection?

When Hashem created the world, He alone existed. There was no one to recognize Him. But if we would have been there then we would have had a clear revelation of Him. The physical world created a different reality, a universe where Hashem is hidden. This enables us to have free choice. We can look at the world and choose to see only physicality or the Divine Hand that lies behind it. Creation and the process of concealment happened in stages. Every day Hashem created more physicality and less clarity of Him. The heavenly creatures, the angels and legions of Hashem are spiritual because they live in the higher realms of creation where there's no physicality and they have no free choice. Still *David Hamelech* calls upon them to praise Hashem and he gives three reasons why. First, the privilege of fulfilling the will of Hashem is something to praise about.

Second, the opportunity to serve Hashem for thousands of years calls for praise. Third, they are bound by the laws of nature and are there to do exactly what they were created for and this too is praiseworthy. Each time a creation is mentioned, we have the word *halelu* – praise. Why? The Alshich explains that the level of praise each one can give is based on its spirituality. The more spiritual the creation, the more revelation its capable of absorbing and the more understanding and experience of the greatness of Hashem it has and therefore each one praises Hashem differently.

"*Hallelu et Hashem min h'aretz*- Praise Hashem from the earth." Here the word *hallelu* is mentioned only once. This is because all of earth is physical and everything within it is considered as one universe. There is also a call for different creations to praise Hashem. The Malbim explains that the world consists of four main elements- earth, fire, water, and wind. The ensuing verses includes these four categories and some subcategories. It begins with the inanimate, progresses to vegetation, then to animals, and then to humans. When we compare the order of creation mentioned for the heavenly bodies to the ordering of the

earthly group, we see the opposite. With the heavenly group, *David Hamelech* starts with the most spiritual beings and descends to the more physical. With earthly creations, he begins with the lowest inanimate beings and progresses up to the human being, the crown of creation. The Malbim explains as previously mentioned that when Hashem created the world, He added physicality stage by stage and hid Himself more and more, so as to enable free choice. The majority of creation are like the heavenly bodies. They have no free choice. However, man by contemplating the wonders of creation and thereby praising Hashem, elevates the universe and it becomes as if all of creation praises Hashem. The *Midrash* tell us that when Adam was created, Hashem gave him the assignment to name all of the animals. They gathered around Adam and saw his greatness and holiness and wanted to sing praise to him. Adam then said, "*Lechu nerana*- Let us together praise Hashem." Man was given the mission to elevate creation by praising Hashem. Praising means understanding His greatness and feeling gratitude towards Him and always yearning to do His will.