

Duality of Desire: Elul

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles

Summary by Channie Koplowitz Stein

The Ramchal zt"l notes that from the beginning of creation, every time period, indeed every day, has its own unique energy. The month of Elul is designated as yemei ratzon, days of extra graciousness, of added desire. But what does that mean?

Before creating the world, Hashem created the concept of time and the calendar, imbuing each day with its own unique energy. By providing specific examples, Rabbi Berkowitz shlit"ah, based on the Ramchal zt"l, explains. We think we celebrate Pesach because it is the time we were freed from slavery. But that reasoning is backward, erroneous thinking. In truth, this day has embedded within it an innate energy of freedom that includes an orbit of influence. Our emancipation from Egypt, and the time it was destined to occur, was already preordained for the day within which the energy of freedom was already manifest. Thus, each day, and certainly each holiday, is connected to the energy of that day, waiting for the release of that specific energy.

What is the energy of Elul? We know that while Adam was created on Rosh Hashanah, the process of creating the entire world actually began six days earlier in the middle of Elul. Hashem desired to create Man and give him the gift of light. Hashem created that light in Elul, gifting it to Man with the mandate of spreading light in the world. But we need to be open vessels to accept the light and thus grow to our potential as human beings and as Jews. That is the work of the month of Elul.

Growth takes effort. Challenges and struggles present opportunities for growth. We need to want to grow. We need to plan on how we can approach these opportunities. Hashem has presented us with this opportunity during the month of Elul, a gift, a time when He is available, when He awaits us and wants to create a stronger relationship with us. He knows our potential; it is up to us to work toward actualizing that potential.

Rabbi Berkowitz presents an analogy. Someone has won an opportunity to spend ten minutes in a superstore. Whatever he takes out during those ten minutes is his to

keep. Surely, he will prepare for those ten minutes by studying the layout of the store, preparing a strategy to gain the most from this opportunity. Similarly, we are given the opportunity during the month of Elul to prepare to enter Rosh Hashanah. So much is at stake. Will we grab the opportunity to prepare to get as much as we can in anticipation of Rosh Hashanah itself? Will we examine our character, determine what we can improve on and what we need help in controlling? Will we work on our desire to match Hashem's desire for me to reach my potential?

We need a plan. As the Sifsei Chaim, Rabbi Friedlander zt"l, notes, a builder does not begin construction until he has a blueprint in place. If we want to "build ourselves up," to grow, we also need a plan. What will I work on and acquire to continue growing? As Rabbi Zundel of Novardok zt"l explains, we are on a train traveling on the tracks of life. The conductor checks our ticket and informs us that we took the train going in the opposite direction from our destination. Do we get up and just change seats to face the other direction, or do we get off the train and get on the right train that is actually going in the right direction? Further, every day is different, with new opportunities to move forward.

But while we would like to strategize for growth, the yetzer horo is strategizing to block our growth. One of its most effective weapons, writes Rav Zev Smith, quoting the Mesilat Yesharim, is tichbad avodah, overwhelming us with work. Even Pharaoh understood this concept. When Moshe and Aharon approached Pharaoh with the request to let Bnei Yisroel have a brief respite to serve Hashem, his response was to double their workload so they would have no time for thoughts of freedom. We may be truly concerned for our livelihood, but often it is just "busy work," the need to constantly check our phones, to "check out" the latest trends, the latest news. Whatever these thoughts, when they occupy our minds, we have no room left to contemplate self-improvement. They rob us of time to study Torah, of time to spend with family, and time for pursuits that add real value and growth.

We are often told to take on some resolution. Rebbetzin Smiles suggests that whatever resolution you make, whatever kabbalah you take on, be aligned with growing the particular middah you are targeting. If you want to grow in chesed, perhaps you will smile at least one stranger every day; if it is to study more Torah, resolve to spend ten or fifteen minutes every evening on Torah study. Small steps that actualize your desire for growth and connection.

Rabbi Wolbe zt"l suggests that a person must dedicate some time every day toward solitude and introspection. You need to know who you are and where you want to be, to integrate your entire self toward your goal. As Rabbi Tatz explains, a truck driver who has successfully navigated all the roads on his journey, made the round trip safely, but has forgotten to deliver the goods has accomplished nothing. Just checking boxes is meaningless unless your focus and attention is greater than on the individual boxes; your focus must be on approaching the goal, on delivering the goods.

While these days of Elul already had the potential as days of desire and graciousness, it was Bnei Yisroel that unlocked this potential, writes Rabbi Bernstein. It was after Moshe ascended from Sinai for the third time on Rosh Chodesh Elul and he and Bnei Yisroel beseeched Hashem for forgiveness and for reestablishing the loving relationship after the sin of the golden calf, that the power of the month of Elul was released. The desire originating from our nation continues to today and brings Hashem's reciprocation.

But Rabbi Bernstein points out, we had already been forgiven when Moshe descended from Sinai the second time, the day before Rosh Chodesh Elul. While that forgiveness freed us from punishment, it had not yet reestablished the joy of our connection to Hakodosh Boruch Hu; it had not repaired the relationship. That is what Elul is about. That is what Tehillim 27 is all about. We recite that chapter the entire month of Elul through Yom Kippur because it is replete with longing to connect to Hashem, to "reside in His house..." That desire begins with me, Ani l'Dodi, I am to my Beloved, and Hashem responds, u'Dodi li.

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Don't think that we, as human beings, are too lowly to connect to Hashem. In fact, that connection is already within us, in the neshamah He implanted within us. Every morning when we arise, we attest to that truth when we thank Hashem for returning that soul to us. And we add, "Rabbah emunasecha." Not only do we have full faith in You, but You, Hashem, having returned our souls to our bodies and given us another day of life, You have tremendous faith in us, in our potential, writes Rabbi Kestenbaum. That connection and godliness is already implanted within us, but we must desire it, adds the Sefas Emes.

How do we maintain that connection? It is not limited to Elul, teaches us Rabbi Pincus zt"l. Invest in mitzvah performance so that they go beyond rote. Really think about the standard prayers we say daily, all the blessings we thank Hashem for. In Grace after Meals alone, we thank Hashem for fifteen unique gifts, from grace, kindness, and mercy to life, peace, and every goodness.

More than the mitzvah itself, Hashem desires the heart. Rabbi Kestenbaum presents a wonderful metaphor. The mitzvah is a gift to Hashem. Is it solid gold or merely gold plated? A mitzvah done with a full heart, although possibly with minimal expense, is more precious to Hashem than an elaborate donation done by rote or for ulterior purposes.

Rabbi Garfunkel presents a related metaphor. When a kallah receives a bouquet from her chosson, she looks for the love note stuck inside. She cherishes that note more than the largest bouquet of the most exotic flowers. And if that note says, "My mother told me I should send this," or, "A chosson is supposed to send flowers..." the bride's heart drops, for she is looking for his heart, missing in the message.

So what are we working toward in this month? Is it basically for physical and material blessings, or is it for spiritual connection? Can we transform the physical activities of our daily lives into vehicles for a spiritual connection? This too is the work of the month of Elul.

On Mondays and Thursdays, before the Torah is returned to the Ark, the chazzan recites five requests. The first four begin with, "Yehi ratzon... May it be Your will..." In contrast, the final supplication omits that introduction. It begins with "Acheinu, our brothers," and pleads for Hashem to deliver them from darkness and affliction. Rabbi Brazile, quoting the Sar Shalom of Belz zt"l, provides insight into this change. When we feel responsibility for each other, when every Jew becomes our brother and we feel his distress, when we pray for them, we are already tapped in to Hashem's love for Bnei Yisroel.

The month of Elul is an opportunity to tap into this dynamic. Through unity, friendship, and love for each other, we can awaken the energy Hashem implanted in this time and arouse Hashem's desire and love for us.

Rabbi Mintzberg zt"l provides a framework for creating this unity and friendship. Caring for others is most often not a matter of providing monetary aid. It is more often a matter of validating the other. As Yom Kippur draws to a close, we ask Hashem to forgive us so that we can "withdraw our hands from oppression... meiosishek yodeinu." Rabbi Mintzberg explains that this does not mean we should not use our hands physically to hurt another. Rather, it means that when someone extends his hand in greeting, we do not shun it. In fact, we should try to greet him first. If we do not return the greeting, we are robbing him of dignity. During this month especially, we should look for opportunities to validate and uplift each other.

The month of Elul is a month dedicated to finding favor in the eyes of Hashem and in the eyes of others. When we value our relationship with others while working on ourselves and our personal relationship to Hashem, that reciprocal love powers the energy already inherent in the month of Elul, as we dedicate ourselves to Hashem and He to us.

Hilchot Teshuva

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Shimon Isaacson

Is Rosh Hashana a holiday of joy or awe? There seems to be a dichotomy. The Shulchan Aruch says one should eat, drink, and rejoice. Yet the Terumat Hadeshen rules that one can fast and the Shulchan Aruch permits the recital of *Tzidkatcha* in davening because it's not a *yom tov* in the classic sense. The Rama disagrees and says the custom is not to say it. The Rambam solves this seeming conflict by noting that although these are days of joy, there should not be excessive joy. This is in keeping with the Gemara that says that Hallel is not recited on Rosh Hashana because the books of life and death are open.

The *shofar* too has this element of contrasts. On the one hand it reminds us of the joy of

the giving of the Torah, the redemption, and the ultimate triumph of *akeidat Yitzchak*. On the other hand it commemorates the tears of Sistra's mother and is shaped in a bent and submissive fashion to awaken us to repentance. The prayers on Rosh Hashana reflect this paradox too. The most intense part of the *Mussaf tefilah* is *Unetane Tokef*. Yet immediately after, the mood is transformed from fear to joy. Rosh Hashana is not really a time of repentance. It's a day when we crown Hashem king. We don't say *vidui* or *selichot* because we cannot begin the process of *teshuva* before affirming that Hashem is the ultimate Ruler. It's a frightening and awe inspiring day, yet it's also a time when we can rejoice with the knowledge that Hashem loves us. The Navi tells us, "*Ivdu et Hashem b'yirah v'gilu bir'ada.*"

Serve Hashem with fear and rejoice in trembling. Rosh Hashana is when we are meant to feel the pain of how far we've strayed. Along with that, we're also meant to sense the intimate connection we have with the Creator which should lead us to true simcha.

In Elul we repent from the outside in. On Rosh Hashana we repent from the inside out. Elul is knocking down the structure brick by brick. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is uprooting the foundation. As we proclaim Hashem king, we can reach into the depths of our souls, break through the barriers, and begin building anew.

Insights of the Chassidic Masters: Standing Before G-d -Class #1

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Moshe Weinberger

The Baal Hatanya, in his introduction to his essay, "*Atem Nitzavim*" explains the Torah's ambiguity about Rosh Hashana. He writes that Rosh Hashana is the day we were created. It is the beginning of man's existence. Therefore, Hashem wanted us to strain to understand it, to uncover the starting point within each of us, to remember the struggle and to recapture the magic of this very pivotal moment. This is compared to a couple remembering their wedding, and to parents recalling the birth of their first child.

When we study the Torah, *mussar*, *chassidut*, or *halachot* relating to a particular holiday, it is critical to understand its central core. All learning and prayer connected to a particular holiday shines forth from this point. The Torah does not specify the theme of Rosh Hashana, but Chazal tell us that "*Hamelech*" sums up the essence of the day. In fact, old Chabad chassidim would call Rosh Hashana the "Day of Coronation," for on this yom tov we crown Hashem as king over us.

The Gemara writes, "On Rosh Hashana, Hashem tells us, 'Say before me these prayers: *Malchiyot*, so you will accept my kingship, *Zichronot*, so that I will remember you in a good way. How does one accomplish this? With the shofar. From this passage we understand that the essential theme of Rosh Hashana is accepting Hashem's kingship, and the shofar is the means to attain this. Additionally, if we examine the prayers of Rosh Hashana, we will find that they revolve around the theme of kingship. The writings of *Chassidut* explain that our mission on Rosh Hashana is to reconstruct the *malchut* of Hashem by making ourselves worthy of crowning Him.

Rav Sadya Gaon lists several reasons why we blow shofar, but the inner meaning of the shofar is kingship and coronation. We verbalize and actualize our acceptance of Hashem's kingship through the shofar.

In Tehilim, King David writes, "*Bakshu fanei, es panecha avakesh.*" Hashem says, "Seek my face." *Panei* is related to *penimiyut*. Our *avoda*

on Rosh Hashana is to reveal the deep inner connection between our soul and the essence of Hashem. For a person to say "*Hamelech*" on Rosh Hashana and ignore the King is not only absurd but dangerous. If Hashem is really our King what kind of effect has He had on our life? Accepting the yoke of Hashem's kingship as a means to fulfill one's responsibilities as a Jew is a very important outgrowth of Rosh Hashana but it is not the core. The essence is making Hashem a part of life during the year; knowing what "*melech haolam*" means when we say a *bracha* and developing a real connection with malchut Hashem. This will all depend on how we crowned the King on His coronation day. The call of the shofar jolts us awake and the prayers of Rosh Hashana helps us realize that nothing rules over us except Hashem. Our "*Hamelech*" is not Wall St, Elvis Presley, our boss, or our physical desires. We answer to a Higher Authority. By tapping into the power of "*melech*" in everything we do, we will become stronger more dedicated servants of Hashem.