



ELUL – PREPARING YOURSELF FOR RENEWAL

Many people make it a habit to engage in no secular conversation from the beginning of the New Moon of Elul until after Yom Kippur, for there is nothing in the world better for the purification of the soul than the curbing of idle talk. Besides, it is also a great aid to devotion in prayer when alien thoughts do not confuse the worshiper. (*Kav ha-Yashar* XII)

The word Elul has the numerical value of the word *binah*, understanding. Through understanding comes *Teshuva*, as it is written (Isa. 6:10): “And understanding with their heart, return, and be healed.” (*Siddur Rabbi Yaabetz*)

Traditional Rabbinic exegesis considers the Song of Songs to be an allegorical description of God’s love for Israel. The name of the month Elul consists of the four Hebrew letters *Alef, Lamed, Vav, and Lamed*. These four letters were interpreted as referring to the first letters of the words in Song of Songs 6:3: *Ani Ledodi Vedodi Li*, “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.” Therefore, Elul is the period of reconciliation between God and Israel. If Israel will long to turn in a complete *Teshuva* to God who is in heaven, then God’s longing will go out to them, and Israel’s *Teshuva* will be accepted. (*Mateh Moshe*)

Once on the New Moon of Elul, the zaddik Rabbi Levi Isaac of Berdichev was standing at his window. A non-Jewish cobbler passed by and asked him, “And have you nothing to mend?” At once the zaddik sat himself down on the ground and weeping bitterly cried, “Woe is me, and alas my soul, for the Day of Judgment is almost here, and I have still not mended myself!” (*Zikhron la-Rishonim*)

Midrash teaches us that Moses ascended Mt. Sinai on the first of Elul in order to receive the second set of the Ten Commandments. Since Moses remained on the mountain for forty days, the sages identified this whole period, from the first of Elul until Yom Kippur, as a period of Penitential prayer and repentance. (*Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* 46)

On the Day of Atonement in 1967, I put on my dark holiday suit and went to the Old City in Jerusalem. I stood, for some time, before the alcove of an Arab’s shop, not far from Damascus Gate, a shop of buttons and zippers and spools of thread in all colours, and snaps and buckles. A glorious light and a great many colours like a Holy Ark with its doors ajar.

I told him in my heart that my father, too, had such a shop of threads and buttons. I explained to him in my heart all about the tens of years and the reasons and the circumstances because of which I am now here and my father’s shop in ashes there, and he is buried here.

By the time I had finished, it was the hour of ‘the locking of the Gates.’ He too pulled down the shutter and locked the gate, and I went back home with all the worshippers. (*Yehuda Amichai*)

At the cost of abandoning our inner essence, our pure souls, most of us have chosen to protect ourselves with walls and barriers. Often, these not only keep dangers out, they also keep joy out; they keep our selves out. *Teshuva* is coming home to the truest self, to, “I’m sorry I hurt you. I wasn’t myself.” It is an opportunity to peel off the façade and uncover the games we play in an effort to hide our most pure and vulnerable. Essence. (*Debbie Friedman*)

1. **What are the elements in my life that I’m ready to leave behind this year?**
2. **What elements are missing from my life that I want to embrace this year?**
3. **During this month of Elul, what steps do I need to take to prepare for the High Holy days?**
4. **Who am I going to need to speak with to ask forgiveness?**
5. **What am I going to have to forgive myself for?**
6. **How can I utilize the next five days to prepare myself as an individual?**
7. **How can I utilize the next five days to prepare myself to be a spiritual leader?**
8. **What do I need from the other people to accomplish these goals?**

Elul is a time not only for introspection but of inspection. Your state of being should be checked out by professionals – physician, mental-health specialists – and by those important to you – spouse and friends. (*Zalman Shalomi*)

Elul calls us to forgive, to forgive others whom we have wounded wittingly and unwittingly by words, and by actions. She bids us speak words, which stick in our craw like leftover morning gruel clings to the pot, and to ask forgiveness, and to grant forgiveness. (*Vicki Hollander*)