

Turn the Holidays on High Workshop with Chava

Elul – Week Two (class #3 on 9/3)

אלול
Elul 8

Taking Initiative

It takes initiative to go out to meet G-d, even when He is in the field, close and available. It takes initiative to extend yourself and it takes love.

G-d gave us the power to love each other—the power to unite the Divine image which was split at the time of creation of the world into male and female—because He wanted us to learn through that how to love Him.

We learn how to love through our interactions with one another, and we also, sadly, learn how not to love. We hurt each other sometimes. But in the healthiest sense, when we learn to love another person, it's the first step towards learning how to love G-d as well.

After the hurt and loss—which we remember in the month of Av—love must begin on our initiative. We have to show—down here below—that we are ready for G-d's love to shine on us from above.

Elul is the time in the Jewish calendar when we take the first step. One of the acronyms of *Elul* is: *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li*, meaning "I am for my beloved, and my beloved is for me." (*Song of Songs* 6:3)

In *Elul* "I" initiate and "my beloved" responds in kind.¹

The Torah teaches that it is guaranteed—G-d will respond. That doesn't always mean that the results will be what we want. But something will happen, because there's nothing more powerful than taking initiative.

When the Jews reached the Red Sea and were despairing, one man named Nachshon took the risk and walked into the water. The water reached his nose and then the sea parted. When you take initiative, the seas part.

Ask yourself: How often do you take the initiative in your life? How often do you take the initiative in your relationship with your beloved? And with G-d?

Exercise for the day:

Find a new way today to express your love to your beloved.

Don't wait—initiate something beautiful.

Find a new way today to express your love for G-d by doing something that G-d wants of you.

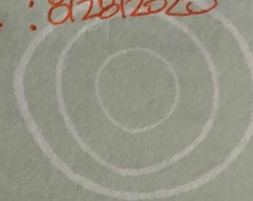
Elul The King is in the Field



"Open up for me the eye of a needle and I will open for you the most expansive corridors of the Great Hall." G-d asks of us only one thing: "I don't ask you to change your entire life; I ask only that you open up for me the eye of a needle. Dedicate to Me, one moment, one space, one corner of your life. But this moment, this space, this corner should be only for Me..."²

Elul 8

Fr. : 8/28/2020



Laws and Customs

Some synagogues have the custom to announce on each day of *Elul: Shuvu Bonim Shovivim* ³ "Return my children, return," echoing the daily heavenly call that summons everyone to *teshuvah*.⁴ Though our ears may not hear the call, our souls do hear it.⁵ It behooves us to cup our ears, absorb the call and act on it.

Facts ☉

The month of *Elul*, whose astral sign is *betulah* (Virgo) is the month of the bride, a month in which the love between the Divine groom and His bride Israel is at its height. "I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me." *Elul* is a time when the initiative comes from our side of the relationship, and the Divine response to our love is one that relates to us as finite material beings and embraces our natural self and personality. We, the "bride" purify and refine ourselves in preparation for the "wedding" with the Divine that occurs on Rosh Hashana and particularly on Yom Kippur.⁶ This is also symbolized by the *yud* (the letter of this month), the purest and simplest of letters, and also the origin of all letters. *Yud* is also the first letter in the essential four-letter Name of G-d.

Seeing G-d

Perhaps the most dramatic experience that happens atop Mt. Sinai is when Moses asks to meet G-d face to face: "I beg you, show me your glory." (Exodus 33:18).

G-d responds, "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live ... [but] I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by, and I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back..."

This exchange is puzzling. How could Moses not have known that one can only come face-to-face with G-d in the next world? And why does the Torah document G-d's rejection of his request?

The answer is that Moses' request was not rejected. In the language of metaphor Moses asked to understand G-d. G-d responded by saying that it is impossible to see His essence in this world, but it is possible to see its reflection. In effect, G-d told Moses, "you'll see My face by not looking."

There are things we see in life by looking directly at them, and there are things we see with our eyes closed. There are things that we hold onto by grasping them, and things that we hold onto by letting go.

Creative people know that when they let go that is when the creativity starts flowing. When they try to control it or force it, it does not come—the channels of creativity are blocked. For creativity to emerge requires letting go. The same thing is true of "seeing G-d."

G-d said to Moses, in effect, "You will see Me when you stop looking. You will see Me when you get yourself out of the way."

Ask yourself: How often can you get yourself out of the way to achieve a higher goal? Do you "see" G-d in your life? Have you learned to see by not looking?

Exercise for the day:

Recall an event in your life when you were able to gain something by letting go. Examine the process—how did you get yourself out of the way in order to make it happen?

Elul

The King is in the Field



"G-d would speak to Moses face to face, just as a person speaks with a close friend."

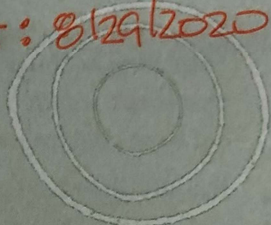
(Exodus 33:11)

"No other prophet like Moses ever rose in Israel, who knew G-d face to face."

(Deuteronomy 34:10)

Elul 9

SAT: 8/29/2020



Events

Birth and passing of Dan.¹

5027 (1267)—Nachmanides (Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 1194-1270) arrived in Jerusalem (after being forced to flee his native Spain) and renewed the Jewish community there. The synagogue he established is functional today, having been restored following the liberation of the Old City during the Six-Day War in 1967.

Laws and Customs

During *Elul* students should be focusing their studies on books and topics that discuss *teshuvah* and personal introspection and refinement.

Elul is at the beginning of the new school season. All efforts should be made to ensure that every Jewish child be enrolled in a proper Jewish school, where he/she will receive a healthy Jewish education and learn about Torah and *mitzvot* as a way of life.

Letting Go and Diving In

Elul requires letting go. This is what the verse from *Song of Songs* which gives it its name—*Ani l'dodi, v'dodi li* ("I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me")—teaches us:

The initiative begins with the self—"I am."

The self turns toward "**my beloved**" (I don't exist for me—for myself—I exist for my beloved).

And the beloved responds—"my beloved is for me" precisely because "I" let go of "me."

In Hebrew, "letting go" is called *bittul*, which really means "suspension of self."

Someone who knows how to suspend himself or herself has the ability to hear what another person has to say, has the ability to love, can "see" G-d. It is something we all want to master, so why is it so hard?

It is so hard because, metaphorically speaking, even when we know how to swim we are often afraid to dive. We find ourselves standing at the edge of the pool and counting to ten, then to twenty, then to fifty ... and never getting up the courage to just jump. Our fear is of letting go. We are terrified of the moment of suspension, when our feet leave the ground but do not yet hit the water.

Often, the only way we get past our suspension phobia is when somebody comes along and pushes us in. This is why we all need help from the outside—why we all need mentors.

In the moment when you must let go, talking yourself into it is not likely to work because a brilliant mind cannot speak to a vulnerable heart—they don't speak the same language. So you must invite someone to push you—someone you trust.

Ask yourself: Do you have a mentor who pushes you from time to time? If not, do you know someone who you could trust to do so with wisdom and care?

Exercise for the day:

Identify an area, from the work of *Elul* you have done so far, where you would benefit from the friendly push of a mentor.

Elul The King is in the Field

“Only one thing I ask of G-d, this I seek: May I dwell in the house of G-d all the days of my life, to behold the pleasantness of G-d and to visit in His Sanctuary.” (Psalm 27)

Powerful requests—the most powerful ones—are single and intimate in nature. We don’t ask for many things, but the request we make is absolute, complete, all encompassing. The more intimate the request the more intense is its singularity and simplicity.

Elul 10

SUN: 8/30/2020

Events

1657 (2103 BCE)—After 40 days of the Great Flood waters subsiding and the mountaintops appearing (on *Av* 1), Noah opens the ark window and sends forth the raven.¹ Seven days later, on *Elul* 18 he sends the dove and it returns with an olive branch in its beak. Another 7 days pass, and on *Elul* 25 he sends the dove for the final time. This time it does not return. Finally, after another 7 days, on Rosh Hashana (*Tishrei* 1), the land begins to dry and Noah opens the ark to see the drying land. It would take another 57 days, on *Cheshvan* 27, for the land to dry completely and Noah and his family would leave the ark—an entire solar year after they had entered it.²

Facts

The Divine compassion in *Elul*—the month of *teshuvah*—is also reflected in the fact that this month has the power to finally subdue the devastating effects of the Great Flood. This is similar to Moses repairing the damage of the Golden Calf and the Seven Weeks of Consolation bringing us comfort after the destruction of *Av*.

Yet, true *teshuvah* does not just escape or even repair the past; *teshuvah* transforms the past. It’s not merely damage control, but a process that redeems and elevates past wrongdoings, turning them into enormously powerful assets. *Teshuvah* turns our past mistakes into fuel for growth.

By sending out the dove—symbol of peace and compassion—Noah was testing to see whether it was an *Elul* atmosphere, if the severities (*gevurot*) of the flood had ended, the world was cleansed of its corruption, and the time had come for reconciliation with G-d. And indeed, the time had arrived. With each passing day in *Elul*—in seven-day cycles—the raging waters subsided, until the world became ready for its rebirth and renewal on Rosh Hashana.

Focusing on your Destination

At times when you must let go and you ask someone to push you, you must know where you want to be pushed. You must know your destination.

Rabbi Mendel Futerfas, who spent many years in a Siberian *gulag*, tells how he learned a great lesson from a tightrope walker who was also imprisoned there.

The rabbi asked the tightrope walker about the secret to his art. "What does one need to master? Balance? Stamina? Concentration?"

The tightrope walker's answer surprised him: "The secret is always keeping your destination in focus. You have to keep your eyes on the other end of the rope. But do you know what the hardest part is?"

"When you get to the middle?" the rabbi ventured.

"No," said the tightrope walker. "It's when you make the turn. Because for a fraction of a second, you lose sight of your destination. When you don't have sight of your destination that is when you are most likely to fall."

Life is something like a tightrope. To navigate it successfully you must have your destination in focus. You must know where you are going. When the time comes to make a turn, and for a

moment you cannot see where you are headed, you have to have your destination in your mind's eye.

The ultimate destination—the final goal of all human efforts throughout history—is called *geula* ("redemption"), when the world will realize its purpose and reach ultimate refinement. The Jewish people have always kept their eyes on this destination; it gave them the power and freedom to forge ahead, despite all difficulties.

Geula is not a destination you can see by looking in front of you, you can only see it by looking inside of you.

Real focus is not physical, it is transcendental. Real focus is your relationship with your Divine mission. If it is well developed, it can guide you past the moments of danger, and keep you moving with confidence even in moments of the greatest fear and darkness.

Ask yourself: Do you have a real focus in your life? Do you have a larger goal?

Exercise for the day:

Identify your personal mission in life. What do you believe is your calling in this world?

If you have difficulty with this, identify the steps you must take to discover your mission.

Elul The King is in the Field

Elul is called the Month of *Teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* means "return." We return to our Divine essence, and we return all of existence to its appropriate place. *Teshuvah* can be read as *toshuv heh*. The lower *heh* of G-d's Divine name (the essential four-letter Name of G-d, the Tetragrammaton) is manifest in our world. Through *teshuvah* we elevate and return the *heh* and everything it energizes to its true source." (Rabbi Schneur Zalman)¹

Elul 11

MON: 8/31/2020



Facts

Every successful journey needs a clear and defined destination. *Geulah* is the destination. If *teshuvah* illuminates all of the three pillars with a deeper connection (see *Elul 17*), then *geulah* (alluded to by the fifth acronym of *Elul*) infuses them all with a sense of destiny. All our Torah study, prayers, *mitzvot* and acts of love and compassion, which are infused with the refined spirit of *teshuvah*, come to fruition when we keep our eye on the destination.

Moses on Mt. Sinai always kept sight of his goal and destination: complete and absolute reconciliation with G-d under a *chupa*. Every prayer he recited, every effort he made during the 40 days on the mountain was directed toward his goal, and his goal infused each day, each moment, each act with the power of the big objective.

Elul is not just about the details; it also includes the larger goal and objective. We recognize that every act, every effort, no matter how small or large, is a "building block" of a larger structure called Redemption.² We know that all our efforts are leading to something, and that destination in turn infuses each moment with eternal meaning and power.

Relating to G-d

The Kabbalah suggests that the biggest challenge for us human beings is to maintain our individuality and at the same time have a relationship with G-d.

G-d is an all-encompassing reality, and if we were consciously aware of G-d's reality, we would cease to exist. But we do exist, because G-d concealed His light in order to make space for another entity called us.

And yet transcendence—that is, crossing the line of the reality where G-d is concealed to the reality where G-d is revealed (but we continue to exist nevertheless)—is possible. Heaven and earth can be married, can unite, and we can become one with G-dliness. A defined existence like ours, with physical parameters, can become one with that which is completely undefined.

This can happen because we were created in the image of G-d—we have holiness within us. And we can connect to the G-d within us by getting our selfish selves out of the way so that the holiness can surface.

The only thing that is eternal is a thing that is not driven by its own self, its own fuel. Whatever is driven by its own fuel, though it can be very powerful, is limited. This is why we

aim to get past the self in order to connect to the eternal so that we too can become eternal.

And we do so by acting like the holy beings that we are.

We are commanded in the Torah—our guidebook to life and our guidebook to freedom from slavery to the physical aspects of life—to be holy, like G-d. “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your G-d, am holy.” (Leviticus 19:2)

This means being compassionate, because G-d is compassionate. It means being patient, kind, just, loving, creative. When we become holy like G-d, we connect with G-d.

Ask yourself: Do you want to connect to the Divine image within you? Is being holy a goal in your life? How often do your actions approach holiness?

Exercise for the day:

Consider what it would take for you to connect with the part of you that is holy.

Do something holy today.

Elul The King is in the Field

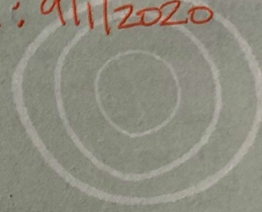


"*Anochi Anochi hu menachem chem*.¹ Not messengers, but I Myself comfort you. Why? Because 'if a fire gets out of control...the one who started the fire must make restitution.'² Since G-d is the one who 'started the fire' that destroyed the Temple, G-d Himself comes to comfort the loss."³

The Ten Commandments open with only one *Anochi*, but here we have a double *Anochi*, because to build requires only one *Anochi*, but to rebuild after loss takes double the energy.

Elul 12

Tu: 9/1/2020



Events

4954 (1194)—Birth of Nachmanides ("Ramban," Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 1194-1270)—Torah scholar, Kabbalist, philosopher, physician and Jewish leader—in Gerona, Spain.

Facts

Elul is an acronym of *Oy L'rasha V'Oy L'bechanoi*,⁴ "Woe onto a wicked person and woe onto his neighbor."⁵ The efforts and prayers of Moses infused *Elul* with the power of *teshuvah* to transform the negative energy of the "wicked" and also its "neighbor," the preceding month of *Av* (See *Av* 30). The *Zohar* explains⁶ that three months were given to Jacob (*Nissan*, *Iyar* and *Sivan*); Esau should have also received three months (*Tammuz*, *Av*—when the Temples were destroyed by Esau's descendants—and *Elul*). In actuality, Esau only received *Tammuz* and part of *Av* (until the 9th). Moses turned the month of *Elul* and a large part of the sad month of *Av* into positive energy and thereby took it away from Esau's domain.⁷

Inner Holiness

The essence of each one of us is good and holy because it is a part of G-d. The challenge is to recognize this holy part of ourselves—which resides deep on the inside—and to allow it to shine on the outside.

Even when we recognize our own inner glow, it is hard to actualize it. It's not easy. Because we live in a world that doesn't respect goodness and holiness; it respects wealth, success and power, the acquisition of which often demands the abandonment of holiness and goodness.

But Torah teaches us that we have the ability to access the inner part of ourselves and actualize it in everyday life, without changing everything about ourselves and our work. We have to learn how to discover our own soul and bring it into the world that we're living in and working in.

Whether you work in the world of music, business or the sciences, whether you are a doctor or a lawyer, whatever sphere you're trained in, your mission is to reveal your soul in that environment. The soul is not meant to replace the body and not meant to replace your life; its mission is to reveal your inner dimension and integrate it into your life in order to elevate it, and to bring out the best in both your body and soul.

If you are on a spiritual journey and it's completely annihilating your life, there's something wrong. A sign of a healthy spiritual path is integration and transformation, not annihilation.

Ask yourself: Are you able to recognize your inner holiness? Is your spiritual path helping you or hindering you? Are you able to balance your spiritual and your social life? Do you live/work in an environment which respects holiness? Are you able to reveal the things you hold sacred in this environment?

Exercise for the day:

Choose a simple act of holiness and demonstrate it in an environment which is usually oblivious to holiness. (This simple act could take the form of expressing gratitude, demonstrating patience/graciousness in a stressful situation, saying a blessing when eating, consoling a sick person, or giving charity.)

Resolve to make this a regular practice throughout *Elul*.

Elul The King is in the Field



"I don't want your Paradise, I don't want your World to Come, I want only You—You alone"
(Rabbi Schneur Zalman)¹

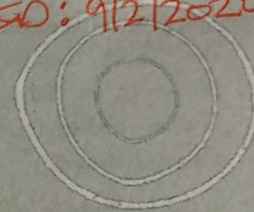
In the Haftorah of week five, G-d continues his consolation, which progressively grows more powerful²: "Sing barren one, you who have not given birth. Break into a song and cry aloud... for the children of the abandoned are more numerous than the children of the married... Enlarge the place of your habitat... for you will expand abroad to the right and to the left, until your descendants possess the nations and populate the desolate cities.

"Do not fear, for you will not be ashamed... You will forget the shame of your youth and the reproach of your widowhood... For your Creator is your husband... The Holy of Israel is your Redeemer. He will be called the G-d of the whole earth. For G-d called you as a wife abandoned and grieved in spirit. Can a wife of youth be rejected? says your G-d. For a brief moment I forsook you, but I will gather you with great compassion. In an outburst of wrath, for a moment I hid my face from you; but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you." (Isaiah, chapter 54)

Hod ("humility") radiates in this second week of Elul (the fifth week of the Seven Weeks of Consolation). See Elul 6. Do something today with deep humility. Be humble in one area of your life today. In an area where you are usually aggressive, act humbly today.

Elul 13

WGO: 9/2/2020



Events

5669 (1909)—*Yahrzeit* of Rabbi Yosef Chaim of Baghdad (1835-1909), the renowned Sephardic Halachic authority and Kabbalist, known as *Ben Ish Chai* after his work by that name.

Facts

On the second Shabbat of *Elul* (which falls on either *Elul* 9, 11, 13 or 14) we read the Torah portion *Ki Teitzei*, which opens with the theme of waging war against any adversary. "When you will go out to wage war above your enemy..." The Divine compassion of *Elul* teaches and empowers us to "go out to wage war" because all our battles are *outside* of our true selves, and we always remain *above* our enemies.³

Unmasking the Soul

We tend to think of the English word "face" as describing the outer layer of a person. However, in Hebrew, the word for face—*panim*—comes from the same root as *pnim* meaning "interior."

In the Hebrew language—the holy language of creation—things are named for their essence. And here Hebrew teaches us that the essence of a face is the opposite of what we think of ordinarily.

For many of us, our face has become a mask for our feelings rather than an expression of our higher self, our inner holiness. We have learned how to put on a smile while feeling terrible inside, or how to shed tears as a manipulation or pretense when we are not truly sad. In this instance, Hebrew is telling us what the face is supposed to convey, not what we do with it.

A mark of a holy person is that the inside is the same as the outside. And we recognize this. It is common, when we meet such a person to say that he or she has an aura—a special glow. Ecclesiastes (8:1) states: "The wisdom of the person shines in the face." We see this as a light of a holy person's face, because the face reflects that person's soul.

We're told that the great 16th century Kabbalist, the Ari, could read people's faces. And many people, when they would pass him on the street, would cover their faces because they felt that he saw past the mask and they were ashamed.

Ask yourself: If the Ari was walking the earth today, would you want him to see your face? Would you be ashamed to? To what extent is your face a mask for feelings you want to hide? To what extent does it reveal your inner core of holiness?

Exercise for the day:

As you interact with people today be conscious of what your face projects and to what extent it is an expression of your inner self.

At least once during the day try to feel a connection to the holiness inside and let it shine on your face.

Make a special attempt to smile at people today. Remember that everything is projection and reflection—your smile elicits a smile, etc.

Elul

"I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me"

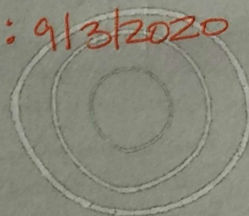


"My heart says to you, seek out my countenance, Your countenance, G-d, I seek." (Psalm 27:8, recited twice daily during Elul)

"As water reflects a face, one heart reflects another." (Proverbs 27:19)

Elul 14

TH: 9/3/2020



Laws and Customs

Today marks two weeks before Rosh Hashana and thirty days before the festival of Sukkot. Moses taught that we should begin preparing for a holiday thirty days earlier by studying its laws.¹ This is especially important in preparation for the upcoming month of *Tishrei*, which is filled with many holidays: Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah.

It is also appropriate to prepare for the holiday by doing everything possible to provide for the needy, enabling them to properly celebrate the holiday and fulfill the *mitzvah* on Rosh Hashana to "eat delights and drink sweets and send gifts to others in need." (*Nechemia* 8:10).

Facts ☉

Elul acronym (word ends): *Lo yachail divoroi k'chol* (*hayotzei m'piv yaaseh*), "If a man makes a vow to G-d or makes an oath to obligate himself, he must not break his word, all (that he expressed verbally he must fulfill)." (Numbers 30:3). We derive from this that in the month of Elul we absolve ourselves of our vows.² [See also *Elul* 29.]

A vow reflects our respect for the inherent sanctity of the universe. We absolve our vows because we don't have the power to detach ourselves from the universe, but through our *teshuvah* in *Elul* we receive the power to transform the universe. This is because in these 40 days Moses was able to prevail on G-d to forgive the people for the sin of the Golden Calf and empowered them to transform their immersion in the material world into an even deeper spirituality.