

Turn the Holidays on High Workshop with Chava

Elul – Week Three (Class #4 on 9/10)

Elul 15

אֶלּוּל

Facing Yourself

The Baal Shem Tov¹ taught that everything we see, whether good or bad, is really a reflection of ourselves. If it was not, we'd simply not see it.

This phenomenon is part of a merciful way that G-d has of teaching us lessons in life. Most of us have a difficult time hearing from others that we have a flaw which we ourselves don't recognize. Therefore, G-d sets us up to have a confrontation with a person who exhibits that same flaw in some form. We see it and we say "how terrible." But then it dawns on us that we exhibit the same behavior, though perhaps in different form.

The same is true for positive things. We recognize a positive characteristic in others because we have it in ourselves. If we didn't have any element of it, we wouldn't recognize it.

In other words: You are what you see. And you see what you are.

Many Jews living in Germany in the 1930s didn't recognize the evil of the German people because they had none of it in themselves. They couldn't fathom that anyone could murder them in cold blood. If you are incapable of a crime, it's impossible to imagine that someone else is capable of it.

There are atrocities that we can't even relate to because we're not capable of doing such a thing ourselves.

The same is true for goodness or holiness.

Many of us are cynical because we never met anyone truly holy or truly pure. So we don't believe that it's possible to be that way because it's not part of our own experience.

Ask yourself: Are you cynical about the holiness of others? Do you see the goodness around you? When confronted with a behavior that you dislike are you able to see the same flaw, in some form, in yourself?

Exercise for the day:

Of the events of the past day, select a positive experience and identify how the goodness you encountered is embodied in you.

Of the events of the past day, select a negative experience and identify how this reflects a negative characteristic that you possess.

Elul

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



"*Elul's* unique power (even over *Tishrei*) is that the Thirteen Attributes of Divine Compassion radiate even when we are immersed in the mundane activities of the weekday."

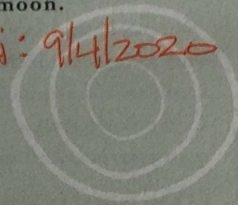
(Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi)²

This fulfills the ultimate purpose of life, but it requires the most powerful energy of all: to integrate the Divine into our material lives.

Elul 15

Full moon.

Fri: 9/4/2020



Facts

Today is the full moon of *Elul*, which symbolizes fullness in all our activities of the month, in our case, fullness in our soul-searching work. What makes the moon full? When the moon is aligned with the sun and earth in the exact angle that allows its entire body to reflect the light of the sun to us on earth. The moon is the embodiment and epitome of *bittul* (suspension of self): Having no light of its own it reflects the light of the sun. *Bittul* is the primary ingredient in our *teshuvah* work in *Elul*. According to Jewish mysticism the full moon represents the fullness of *malchut* ("sovereignty" and "dignity"). As we prepare in *Elul* to rebuild *malchut* on Rosh Hashana, the full moon of *Elul* gives us special power to intensify our work.

A Time of Refuge

Whatever shortcomings you may find in yourself as you undertake the process of facing yourself in the month of *Elul*, know that within G-d's compassion that radiates this month everyone can find refuge.

In the introduction to the month of *Elul*, we noted that it is an acronym for a verse from the Book of Exodus (21:13) which speaks of the "cities of refuge" where those who committed an accidental crime could flee and make a new home: *inah le'yado vesamti lach* ("...deliver into his hand, I shall establish for you...").

By the Torah's command, nine cities of refuge were to be established in the Land of Israel, but not all in the same territory:

three in Israel proper—the Holy Land

three east of the River Jordan—the Wild East where manslaughter was common

three in the Time to Come, when G-d will enlarge the borders of Israel—the Holy Land of the future

This teaches us that G-d provides a refuge for everyone—from the relatively lawless to the holy.

At every stage of our spiritual/religious life there is the possibility of some "crime" (rela-

tive to our unique potential) and there is a safe place where we can take refuge to safely undergo self-examination and endeavor to make atonement.¹

G-d gives us the month of *Elul* as that special time of refuge in the Hebrew calendar.

It is the way of the Western world to make *Elul*—which typically falls in high summer—a time for vacation. But there is another dimension to this: While you take vacation from your material work, you are freed to do serious spiritual work—accounting for the past and returning to your true self and to your mission from G-d.

Ask yourself: Have you made *Elul* a time of introspection in the past? How is this *Elul* different for you?

Exercise for the day:

Dedicate some of your vacation time for spiritual introspection, making the most of the opportunity that this *Elul* offers.

Sincerely express to G-d your desire to return to your Divine mission.

Intensify your intention when reciting Psalm 27 during this month.

Elul

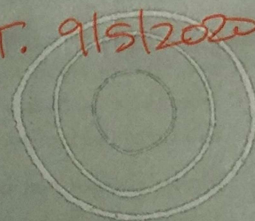
"I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me."



"The sounding of shofar in the month of *Elul* is compared to the trumpet blasts preceding the arrival of a king. Because in this month we prepare ourselves for Rosh Hashana, the day when we coronate G-d as King of the universe."

Elul 16

SAT. 9/15/2020



Laws and Customs

In this month of compassion and love—the *mazal* of *betulah* and the month of the bride—it is customary to perform weddings all month long² (unlike other months when weddings are scheduled only during the first half of the month when the moon is waxing).

Facts ☉

From this day of *Elul* onward the moon continues to wane, until it will take its final "curtain call" and disappear on the last day of *Elul*, only to be reborn with an entirely new face on Rosh Hashana. We count the lunar cycle and emulate its rhythms, by using the next 14 days to clean up and remove any of our old baggage, and thus prepare ourselves for rebirth on Rosh Hashana.

Returning to Our Divine Essence

In our process of returning to our true selves—our Divine essence—we have much to learn from the way Moses reconciled with G-d after the sin of the Golden Calf.

Moses did not just plead. First of all, he took action. After he broke the tablets, he punished those responsible for making the idol, he made order in the Israelite camp, and he motivated the people to repentance. After that, he demonstrated to G-d that he was willing to sacrifice even that which was most precious to him in order to save the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people.

Moses told G-d, "If you don't forgive their sin, then, erase me, I beg you, from the book which You have written" (Exodus 32:32). Moses broke the Divine tablets—G-d's sacred word. He put himself—and his very connection to G-d and Torah—on the line in order to protect the people.

For this reason he is called the Shepherd of Israel—not a scholar, warrior, orator, or anything that generally distinguishes a leader, but a mild-mannered shepherd who cares about every lamb that might have strayed from the flock.

Following the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses knew the stakes were high. Moses wanted

G-d to return to the people, and in so doing demonstrate to the human race that nothing is irreversible, that there is always hope. If you make a mistake, if you err and break something, it is always possible to repair it. Resignation or fatalism is never an option. If you turn away from G-d and betray your true self, it is always possible to return through a process called *teshuvah*.

Moses won this for us, and today we can always prevail even when things seem irreversibly broken.

Ask yourself: Can you recall a time when you were willing to sacrifice something precious in order to win forgiveness for a wrong you had committed? Can you recall a time when you felt this strongly about reconciling with someone you love?

Exercise for the day:

Describe how far you would be willing to go to win total forgiveness from your beloved.

Find an area in your life which you gave up on and make a move to repair the situation with absolute determination. Do something, do anything—never resign yourself.

Elul

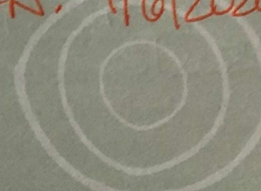
"I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me."



"Of all the great things Moses accomplished, the greatest was breaking the tablets 'before the eyes of all of Israel,' to which G-d said 'thank you for breaking them.' This single act demonstrated Moses' absolute and total *ahavat Yisroel* ("love for the people") even at the expense of breaking G-d's tablets! The sign of a true leader."²

Elul 17

SUN. 9/6/2020



Facts

The five letters of the word *teshuvah* stand for the five paths of *teshuvah*:

T (tav) - *Tomim*, "Be sincere with your G-d"—Sincerity

Sh (shin) - *Shiviti*, "I have set G-d before me always"—Humble Awareness of the Divine

U (vav) - *V'abavta*, "Love your fellow as yourself"—Love

V (bet) - *B'chol*, "In all your ways know Him"—Recognizing Divine Providence

H (heh) - *Hatzne Lechet*, "Walk discreetly with your G-d"—Discretion and modesty³

The Meaning of Teshuvah

The Hebrew word for "repentance"—*teshuvah*—actually implies the opposite. When you repent, the implication is that you're leaving the wrong path, regretting that you ever took that turn in your life. But *teshuvah* literally means "return," which implies that you are not leaving something, you are coming back to something.

This is not to suggest that there is anything inappropriate in repentance. Before you can embrace the right path you *must* leave the wrong path, you *must* regret having taken it, you *must* go away from it.

But return is much more profound. It's not just going away from bad behavior, it is going back to your true self, your Divine soul. It's not just damage control, it is returning to the essence that was always pure—it is returning to G-d.

We can understand this better through the following analogy of two teachers disciplining a student. One teacher reprimands, demanding that the student acknowledge he did wrong and agree to make amends. The other teacher tells the student, "You know, I want to tell you I am very disappointed that you didn't live up to who you really can be. Your soul is much greater than that."

Which teacher is correct? Both are.

You can't just wax eloquent about the soul, you have to acknowledge the error and make good on the damages. There is no way around that. But then you have to see that this is not the real you—the real you is greater than that.

These are the two levels of *teshuvah*. The first level involves cleaning up the mess in your room, so to speak, because your room has to be clean before you can bring something new or fresh in there. This is step one—making order and repairing that which was broken. But step two, the critical step, is connecting to your essence.

Ask yourself: How much about you is an expression of your essence, and how much is added baggage? Can you distinguish between the two?

Exercise for the day:

Identify a few areas that need to be cleaned up in your life.

Identify a few areas that reflect your essence, your higher self.

Listen to music or read something that resonates and helps you recognize what you are really about, what you really want.

Elul

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



"*Chai* (18th day of) *Elul* infuses *chai* (life) into the month and work of *Elul*, and into our efforts toward achieving 'I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me.'"

(The Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak)¹

Elul 18

Countdown

Twelve days left to Rosh Hashana. Today is the day of accounting for last year's Rosh Hashana and last *Tishrei*—the High Holiday season.

Mon. 9/7/2020

Events

Noah sends out the dove from the ark for the first time. (See *Elul* 10.)

5369 (1609)—*Yahrzeit* of Rabbi Yehudah Loewe, the Maharal of Prague (1525-1609), outstanding Torah scholar, philosopher, Kabbalist and Jewish leader. Popularly known for creating a *golem* (clay man) to protect the Jewish community of Prague from the frequent threat of blood libels.

5458 (1698)—Birthday of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), founder of the Chassidic movement. After many years as a member of the society of "hidden *tzadikim*," living under the guise of an ignorant clay-

digger, Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov was instructed by his masters to reveal himself and begin to publicly disseminate his teachings. This he did on his 36th birthday, *Elul* 18, 5494 (1734).

5505 (1745)—Birthday of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), founder of the "Chabad" branch of Chassidism. He was born on the same day as the 47th birthday of his "spiritual grandfather," Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (Rabbi Schneur Zalman was the disciple of the Baal Shem Tov's disciple and successor, Rabbi DovBer of Mezeritch). This day is thus called the "birthday of the two great luminaries."

Laws and Customs

The last twelve days of *Elul* correspond to the twelve months of the year. On each of these twelve days we have the ability to reflect on and amend any of our shortcomings in the corresponding month of the past year. *Elul* 18 corresponds to the first month of the year (*Tishrei*); *Elul* 19 corresponds to the second month of the year (*Cheshvan*) and so on.

The Gate of Tears

Judaism teaches that a soul is never damaged. The body perhaps, the psyche perhaps, but the inner core of goodness that is the soul, never. The essence always remains intact.

Although that is true, the damage that we do in our physical lives can create a ruin so big, so high, and so wide that it completely obscures the pure essence underneath.

And yet, Moses taught us that there is never a ruin so big that it can't be rebuilt; there is nothing that breaks that can't be mended.

After the sin of the Golden Calf, in his plea for forgiveness, Moses told G-d, "You created human beings as a flawed race who are bound to make mistakes. You must create a way for them to repair these mistakes. You must tell me that there is a way out, that there is hope."

In response, G-d told Moses, "I created the world in accordance with the laws of cause and effect. For every action there is a reaction. And sometimes the reaction is such that it can't be reversed. You're asking Me to change the natural laws that I Myself created."

But Moses argued, "I'm not asking you to change the laws. I'm asking you to crack open just one door."

And G-d did.

This one door is called the "gate of tears."

Tears are like the spout on a kettle that allows internal pressure out. They have the power to pry open any door.

Moreover our Sages say that "tears bathe the soul." When we cry out to G-d with genuine sincerity, we wash away the muck that obscures our pure essence.

Ask yourself: Have you ever made a mistake so big that you thought there was no way to repair it? What must you repair that was broken in the past year? Do you believe that it can be repaired? Do you believe that G-d will help you in the process?

Exercise for the day:

Identify what is broken in your life.

Take the first step to mend one thing that is broken—either in your relationship with a friend, or a loved one, or G-d.

Allow yourself to cry.

Elul

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



"She weeps for her father and mother an entire month" refers to the month of *Elul*, a time of *teshuvah*; a time of healthy tears."
(The Ari)²

"I firmly rely on the thirteen words [Divine Attributes], and on the gates of tears which are never closed; therefore I have poured out my prayer before the Searcher of hearts; in these I trust, and in the merit of the three Patriarchs. May it be Your will, You who hears the voice of weeping, to store our tears in Your flask, and save us from all cruel decrees, for to You alone are our eyes turned."
(Yom Kippur Neilah prayer)

Elul 19

Countdown

Eleven days left to Rosh Hashana.
Today is the day of accounting for last *Cheshvan*—the beginning of the "regular" year.

Tues. 9/8/2020

Facts

Yet another acronym for *Elul* is *Aron Luchot U'Shivrei Luchot*,³ meaning "Ark (of) tablets and broken tablets." Inside the Ark lay both the second set of Tablets that Moses received on Yom Kippur, and the first set of Tablets that Moses shattered after seeing the Jews worship the Golden Calf. This teaches us that *Elul* has the power to not only achieve renewal (a new set of tablets), but also to transform the broken tablets through *teshuvah*.⁴ This is because true *teshuvah* not only repairs but transforms the past. When our hearts feel like "broken tablets," then the break itself is redeemed and elevated; this awareness of feeling broken brings us to a new and deeper connection to G-d.

The Secret of a Broken Heart

We all make mistakes and break things in our life, but life also breaks us. We've all been broken in one way or another. We have all experienced broken promises or broken relationships; we have experienced the loss of a job or the loss of a loved one.

Different people react in a different manner to the hurt that inevitably accompanies breakage. Some people are devastated. Others grow because of it.

Some people have strength, some don't. And there is a reason why. A tree that doesn't fall over in a storm is a tree that was strong before the storm. The storm just revealed the strength of the tree. But a tree with no roots may be able to stand up in normal weather, but it breaks when a storm strikes.

And yet, the miracle of creation is that, paradoxically, the more broken you are now, the more whole you have the chance to become.

The Rebbes teach that there is nothing as complete as a broken heart. When your heart is broken, you are in a place that is real.

Why is a broken wall the holiest place for Jews? Why do Jews stand and pray at a broken wall when there are such beautiful edifices around? Because, Jews know that this

isn't a perfect world. As long as the world is not perfect, Jews cannot stand in a beautiful edifice. Jews can only stand and cry at a broken wall.

The illusion of perfect edifices in an imperfect world makes us feel good. But it is an illusion nevertheless—good for Hollywood and Broadway, but it's not reality.

The reality is that the world is a broken place—it's a broken place full of broken people whose job is to mend what is broken.

Ask yourself: When is the last time you felt that your heart was broken? Did you feel more alone or closer to G-d when you acknowledge that to yourself?

Exercise of the day:

In your prayers today, describe to G-d your broken heart and explain why it is broken.

Elul

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

The Seven Weeks of Consolation continue and accelerate. In this sixth week the Prophet Isaiah (chapter 60) tells of G-d's even greater consolation and of the vision of the world's Redemption.

"Arise, shine for your light has come, and G-d's glory has risen upon you. For, behold, darkness will cover the earth and thick clouds the peoples, but G-d will arise over you and His glory will be seen upon you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising...

"Aliens will build up your walls...The sons of your oppressors will come bending to you, and all who despised you will bow down at your feet. They will call you, 'The city of G-d, the Zion of the Holy one of Israel.' Though you were forsaken and hated with no one passing through you, I will make you an eternal majesty...

"Violence will no longer be heard in your land, neither desolation nor destruction within your borders...Your sun will no longer set, nor will your moon wane. For G-d will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning will be ended. Your people will all be righteous; they will possess the land forever; the branch of My planting, the work of My hands... The smallest will become a thousand, and the least a mighty nation; I, G-d, will hasten in its time."

Yesod ("bonding") radiates in this third week of Elul (the sixth week of the Seven Weeks of Consolation).

Elul 20

Countdown

Ten days left to Rosh Hashana. Today is the day of accounting for last *Kislev*—the month of Chanukah.

WED. 9/9/2020

Facts

On the third Shabbat of *Elul*¹ we read the Torah portion of *Ki Tavo*, which opens with the commandment to enter the Promised Land and bring *bikkurim*, the first-fruit offering—appropriate as we prepare to enter the new year by offering of our own "first" and best fruit toward G-dly ends. This is followed by the sixth Haftorah of the Seven Weeks of Consolation.

Ezra decreed that *Ki Tavo* be always read before Rosh Hashana (with a break of Parshat *Nitzavim-Vayeilech*) in order to emphasize that before the new year all the curses (discussed in this Torah portion) come to an end.² The Rebbe Dovber once fainted upon hearing the curses read in this portion. Later he explained why he had never fainted before. "When my father reads, I only hear blessings..." The year he fainted, his father did not read the portion.

Faith in G-d's Mercy

Moses had faith. Although he knew that the Jews had sinned and that there was no excuse for it, he had faith in G-d's mercy. And his faith gave birth to hope.

As a result, we human beings have the faith inside of us that we can achieve the impossible—build a machine that can fly; find the cure for any disease; walk on the moon. And Moses was the first one who brought this absolute faith into the cosmic consciousness.

Faith in G-d's mercy gives us the courage to fight for forgiveness when we have transgressed and are sincerely sorry. Faith means that we bring all our broken pieces and our broken heart to the table and we challenge G-d just as Moses did.

Our faith also gives us the right to challenge G-d when we are suffering. It is actually a lack of faith not to challenge G-d, because it's not being sensitive to the way G-d created us. G-d created us so that when we experience pain or witness suffering, we cry. And our tears give us a right to challenge.

But faith also means that even if we don't get what we want, we still move forward. We don't become bitter and we don't give up.

In October of 1994, the Wachsman family—whose son Nachshon, an Israeli soldier, was kidnapped by Hamas terrorists—mobilized Israel to pray for his rescue. In the end, however, Nachshon was murdered.

Fearing that some who had prayed for their son might have a crisis in faith, Yehuda and Esther Wachsman issued a statement at his funeral: "G-d had answered all the prayers for Nachshon. But G-d's answer was 'no.'"

That is unwavering faith. That is real faith.

Real faith of an intelligent person is a tool that's beyond logic and beyond reason. It's superrational. Reason can only reach so high, faith can reach heaven.

Ask yourself: How strong is your faith? Have you ever challenged G-d to forgive you when you were sincerely sorry?

Exercise for the day:

Examine your faith and identify its strengths and its weaknesses.

Cultivate your faith by looking for examples of things you absolutely believe in that don't have a rational basis—like love, for example.

Elul

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

“G-d is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The L-rd is the strength of my life, whom shall I dread?... [They would have crushed me] had I not believed that I would see the goodness of the L-rd in the land of the living.

Hope in the L-rd, be strong and let your heart be valiant, and hope in the L-rd.” (Psalm 27)

Elul 21

Countdown

Nine days left to Rosh Hashana. Today is the day of accounting for the month of *Tevet*—in the dead of cold winter.

THURS. 9/10/2020

Laws and Customs

During *Elul*, we recite special prayers of forgiveness called *Selichot*. Sephardic Jews recite these prayers from the 1st day of *Elul*; Ashkenazic Jews begin reciting these prayers on the Saturday night before Rosh Hashana, after midnight (when the severities of night begin to wane).²

When Rosh Hashana falls on a Monday or Tuesday, we begin saying *Selichot* on the Saturday night of the preceding week (*Elul 22* or *Elul 21*), thus there are seven or eight days of *Selichot*. When Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbat there are six days of *Selichot* (beginning on *Elul 24*). When it falls on Thursday there are four days of *Selichot* (beginning on *Elul 26*).

Selichot are begun at a time that would provide at least ten opportunities for their recitation before and including Yom Kippur. This is based on the custom, once prevalent, to fast for ten

days (eating at night, of course) before and including Yom Kippur. During the period from and including Rosh Hashana through Yom Kippur, there are four occasions when fasting is inappropriate (the two days of Rosh Hashana, the Shabbat between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and *Erev* Yom Kippur).

Since in the Ashkenazic tradition, *Selichot* always commences Saturday night, the first prayer begins “At the end of the Day of Rest, we approached You first.” *Selichot* begin with and are generated by the spirit of Shabbat—not with sadness, but with joy and pleasure.³ On subsequent days, the custom is to recite the *Selichot* in the early morning hours, before the morning prayers, because this time is considered a specially favorable time, in terms of G-d’s presence and closeness to us.⁴

Facts

The awe of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur can begin being felt on the first night of *Selichot*. An hour after midnight we solemnly gather to recite these special prayers, which include the Thirteen Divine Attributes of Compassion. The *Selichot* prayers are recited with the same serious hushed tone as the prayers of the Days of Awe. In effect, the *teshuvah* of *Elul* intensifies with *Selichot* as we get closer to Rosh Hashana.