

Turn the Holidays on High Workshop with Chava

Elul – Week Four (Class #5 on 9/17)

Elul 22

The Strength of Giants

As we approach the final week of *Elul*, when we begin to recite *Selichot*, the special prayers for forgiveness, we have the confidence that, as weak as we may feel, we have tremendous strength nevertheless.

The cumulative *mitzvot* of the past generations gives us that strength. The good that our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents did lives on forever and accumulates, and is our inheritance.

We might be midgets, but we stand on the shoulders of giants. Although we are puny, we can see even farther than the giants, because we are standing on the shoulders of past generations.

Nine generations ago, the Baal Shem Tov would go to a special place on Rosh Hashana, he would light a fire in a special way, say a special prayer, and as a result the entire world would be blessed.

In the next generation, his successors knew the location of the special place and they knew how to light the fire but they forgot the prayers. So instead, they would pray, "Whatever the Baal Shem Tov achieved here with the fire, we should achieve."

The next generation knew the location but they forgot the rest. So they just stood in the location and said, "Whatever the Baal Shem Tov achieved here, we should achieve."

Today, we have forgotten even the location. So what do we do? We tell the story...

We are asked to do only that which we are capable of. We do not have to be like the giants of the past. We just have to do what is in our power—stand on their shoulders. When we do so we lay claim to everything they achieved plus we add our own small part—and that small part, added to the good deeds of our ancestors, might just be enough to tip the scales and bring redemption.

Ask yourself: Do you know what your small part in this world is? What can you add to the cumulative accomplishments of the giants of the past?

Exercise for the day:

Do one small *mitzvah* you have not done before.

Identify something positive that your parent or grandparent did and take it one step further.

Elul Month of Consolation

E“G-d will answer you on the day of distress.” (Psalms 20:2) David knew that the Holy Temple was to be destroyed and that the offerings were to cease. He was aggrieved for the sake of Israel and asked: “How will they attain atonement for their iniquities?” G-d answered: “David, do not be distressed, for I already disclosed to Moses the *sidrei selichah* [the orders of prayers for forgiveness] and I said to him: When troubles come upon Israel because of their iniquities, let them stand before Me as one band and utter the *seder selichah*, and I will respond to them.”

(The Midrash)¹

Elul 22

Countdown

Eight days left to Rosh Hashana. Today is the day of accounting for the month of *Shevat*—when we celebrate *Tu B'Shevat*, the “New Year for the Trees.”

Fri. 9/11/2020

Facts ©

“But if we had not waited so long, we could have returned there and back twice by now.” (*Shavnu zeh paa'mayim*)—Judah's words to his father Jacob urging him to allow Benjamin to be brought before Joseph (Genesis 43:10). *Shavnu paa'mayim*—“return twice”—refers to two types of *teshuvah*: a) The general *teshuvah* of Rosh Hashana, and b) The specific *teshuvah* of Yom Kippur, in which we specify our iniquities. Both these types of *teshuvah* are dependent on the accounting of *Elul*. *Elul* is the same letters as the word *lule* (“but if we had not”). In *Elul* we “wait” and reflect on our actions and behavior, and that prepares and enables us to “return twice,” in the two types of *teshuvah* on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. *Elul* however, is a general preparation; the more specific preparation for Rosh Hashana is in the days of *Selichot*; and the specific preparation for Yom Kippur is in the Ten Days of *Teshuvah* that begin on Rosh Hashana. (Baal Shem Tov)²

Praying for Forgiveness

In our prayers before and during the High Holidays we repeatedly ask G-d to forgive us in three different ways:

selach lanu

mechal lanu

kapper lanu

While these Hebrew words are virtually synonymous—all meaning “forgive us”—they have different implications which shed light on the process of seeking forgiveness from G-d as well as from other human beings.

Selach lanu comes from *selichah* meaning “pardon.” To ask for pardon is to say to the one we have injured: “I am sorry for what I did; I sincerely regret having done it, and I will never do it again.” According to Jewish law, the appropriate response to this request is for the one we’ve injured to believe we are sincere and to respond positively. One who refuses to do this is considered a cruel person.

Mechal lanu comes from *mechilah*, meaning “wiping away.” Here, we are asking the one we’ve injured to wipe away the transgression as if it never happened, and restore the relationship to the former level of warmth and intimacy. For the one who has been injured a positive response to this is naturally difficult.

But it is within each person’s G-d-given powers to forgive to this extent. Hence, one must, according to Jewish law.

Kapper lanu comes from *kapparah*, meaning “atonement” (as in Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement). When we request from the one we’ve injured to grant us atonement, we are saying, in effect, “My conscience will not let me live with myself, because of what I did to you and to our relationship. Please forgive me and take away the guilt and hurt that I feel.” To respond positively to this is beyond human capacity. It is only G-d who can reach inside our hearts and say, “Be consoled.”

Ask yourself: How have you responded when someone has come to you asking forgiveness? Have you forgiven others as completely as you want to be forgiven by G-d?

Exercise for the day:

Make a list of people you have hurt in some way.

Describe what you must do to ask their forgiveness.

Begin.

Elul Month of Consolation

“Pray like a pauper¹—suspend all your sophistication, literacy, and intelligence. Stand vulnerable, with no layers, with your essence exposed before G-d's essence. Stand innocent like a child. Then you will reach and see G-d's face—G-d's essence.” (Baal Shem Tov)²

Elul 23

Countdown

Seven days left to Rosh Hashana. Today is a day of accounting for the month of *Adar*—the joyful month in which Purim is celebrated.

SAT. 9/12/2020

Facts ☉

Teshuvah infuses all your activities (Torah and *mitzvot*) with vitality and a deeper sense of your own essence. Without *teshuvah*, Torah study and *mitzvah* performance can become ordinary and mechanical. *Teshuvah* polishes and refines all your activities and makes them sparkle with the fire of the deepest recesses of your soul, reaching upward, returning to its source.

The Thirteen Attributes of Compassion

As we petition G-d to forgive us, we repeatedly recite the Thirteen Attributes of Compassion.

These Thirteen Attributes of Compassion were revealed to Moses when he pleaded for G-d's forgiveness after the sin of the Golden Calf. And they radiate during the month of *Elul*, when we relive Moses' experience.¹

Moses was dealing with the aftermath of a very grave thing—idolatry, a betrayal of G-d Himself. And this act of idolatry was quite intentional—the Israelites knew the consequences. Nevertheless, Moses asked G-d to restore the special relationship between Himself and His treasured people.

To Moses' entreaty, G-d responded with an unprecedented gift. He revealed His Thirteen Attributes of Compassion—thirteen secrets of G-d's "personality" that only He could have revealed.²

We recite these Thirteen Attributes many times during the High Holidays: "*Hashem, Hashem, Almighty, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in kindness and truth, keeper of kindness for thousands of generations, endurer of iniquity and transgression and sin, and cleanser [of those who repent].*" (Exodus 34:6-7)³

Each one of these words is profoundly mystical and contains enormous Divine energy. The Thirteen Attributes of Compassion are described in the *Zohar*, the classical work of the Kabbalah, as the "thirteen-petalled rose"—the greatest secret of life, the key to repairing whatever is broken.

According to the Talmud (*Rosh Hashana* 17b), G-d told Moses: "Whenever Israel sins, let them recite this and I will forgive them."

The repetition of G-d's name—*Hashem, Hashem*—indicates that G-d is telling us, "I am the same G-d before you sin as I am after you sin and repent." This is a solemn assurance that the invocation of the Thirteen Attributes will never be without effect.

This assurance means that repentance is always possible. The implication is also plain: if we emulate G-d's compassionate ways, He will treat us compassionately in return.

Ask yourself: Do you consciously emulate G-d's compassionate ways? If so, how? If not, why not?

Exercise of the day:

Do one deed today which expresses compassion, especially to someone who may have wronged you. Describe how it felt to do it.

Elul

Month of Consolation



"What is the rose? It is the collective soul of Israel. For there is a rose (above) and a rose (below) ... Just as a rose has thirteen petals, so does the collective soul of Israel have thirteen measures of compassion encompassing it on all its sides." (Opening of Zohar)

Elul 24

Countdown

Six days left to Rosh Hashana. Today is the day of accounting for the month of Nissan—the month of Passover and liberation.

SUN. 9/13/2020

Events

Noah sends forth the dove from the ark for the second time; this time the dove returns carrying an olive branch.

5693 (1933)—*Yahrzeit* of the Torah scholar and Jewish leader Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (1838-1933) of Radin (Poland), author of *Chafetz Chaim* (a work on the evils of gossip and slander and on guidelines to proper speech) and *Mishna Berurah* (a codification of Torah law).

Facts

In mystical texts,⁴ this day—the day before creation on *Elul* 25—is referred to as the "Shabbat" which precedes and blesses all creation.

The Countdown to Rosh Hashana

Less than a week remains until Rosh Hashana, which is called "the birthday of the world." In fact, Rosh Hashana is the birthday of the first humans—Adam and Eve—who came into being on the sixth day of creation. This means that the first day of creation coincides with the 25th of Elul.¹

Today is the day in the Hebrew calendar which carries with it nothing less than the energy of the creation of existence—time, space, matter, darkness, and light. Today we begin preparing the world for its rendezvous with G-d on Rosh Hashana.

If thus far you have not taken full advantage of the opportunities inherent in *Elul* to prepare for the High Holidays, the time to start is now. Preparation is essential for success in anything in life—be it material or spiritual, be it an audit of your taxes, or an audit of your soul.

Imagine yourself arriving in the reception room of a big corporation.

"Can I help you?" says the receptionist.

"Oh, I guess so," you answer yawning and surveying the ceiling.

The receptionist looks quizzically at you.

"Well ... why are you here?"

"I'm not exactly sure."

"Are you here to apply for a job, perhaps?"

"Yes I think that's it."

"Okay, did you bring a resume?"

You look at her feeling a little stupid. "No, I didn't bring anything."

"Well, then perhaps you can come back when you've prepared for this."

If you arrived at a big corporation that ill prepared, you'd expect nothing to happen. Similarly, if you arrive at a synagogue on Rosh Hashana without preparation, without knowing what you are there for, or what this is all about, what can you truly expect?

Moses was on the mountain for 80 days. You don't have to physically go to the mountain, but you have to climb. Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur will be only the sum total of what you do today.

Ask yourself: How well prepared are you for the High Holidays?

Exercise for the day:

Identify the strengths and weaknesses in your preparatory work thus far.

Recreate day one of creation, and bring a little light into your corner of the world.

Elul Month of Consolation



"In the beginning, G-d created the heavens and the earth. The earth was unformed and desolate and darkness covered the face of the abyss. The spirit of G-d hovered above the water's surface. G-d said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light. G-d saw that the light was good and G-d separated between the light and the darkness. G-d called the light day, and the darkness He named night. And it was evening and it was morning, day one." (Genesis 1:1-5)

Elul 25

Day One of Creation Countdown

Five days left to Rosh Hashana. Today is the day of accounting for the month of *Iyar*—the month when we fulfill the *mitzvah* of Counting the Omer and refining our personalities.

MON. 9/14/2020

Events

3761 BCE—Creation of existence

3426 (335 BCE)—The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem—which had been in ruins since the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians 88 years earlier—was completed by Nechemia, as related in the Book of Nechemia (chapter 6).

3862 (102 CE)—*Yahrzeit* of the Talmudic sage Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and of Rabbi Yechiel Michel of Zlotchev (1721?-1786), disciple of the Baal Shem Tov.

Laws and Customs

Selichot (all week)

After reciting the first *Selichot* after midnight Saturday night before Rosh Hashana, we continue to do so each morning at dawn (before the morning prayers) until the day before Rosh Hashana, in preparation for the "Days of Awe."

In these days when the universe was created some have the custom to read each day the chapter in Genesis that corresponds to that respective day of creation: on *Elul* 25 the verses that discuss day one of creation; on *Elul* 26 day two of creation; and so on.²

Cultivating Compassion

Part of the preparatory work of *Elul*—as we recite the Thirteen Attributes of Compassion—is to examine how compassionate we are in our own actions.

Elul is a month when G-d's compassion is flowing. But to tap into this flow of compassion, you must reach up from below to channel it down in your direction.

This is the secret of *Ani l'dodi*, "I am for my beloved"—I take initiative, I show that I am for my beloved, rather than waiting for my beloved to make a move.

It is true that G-d told Moses (Exodus 33:19): "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show compassion to whom I will show compassion." Therefore, sometimes you can experience G-d's compassion without having done anything yourself. But you can't expect it. You still have to do your part.

As compassionate as you may be now you can always be more compassionate. (As they say, if good is good, is better not better?) Compassion is a trait that can be cultivated—you become compassionate when you act compassionately.

Make no mistake, as people often do in the Western world—compassion doesn't mean that you look the other way and ignore crimes

committed against you or others; compassion is not a contradiction of justice. It is true that forgiveness is part of compassion, but compassion is a great deal more than that.

First, compassion means being sensitive to another person's soul; it requires remembering that each one of us—however coarse and imperfect we may be on the outside—is endowed with a perfect Divine soul on the inside. And second, compassion means transcending our own comfort zone out of love for another.

Ask yourself: How sensitive are you to the souls of others? Do you see the Divine soul in others?

Exercise for the day:

Identify what it would mean for you to transcend your comfort zone for the sake of compassion.

Reach out in compassion to someone whose Divine soul you have a hard time seeing.

Recreate day two of creation, by reviewing whether you have healthy boundaries in your life.

Elul Month of Consolation

“G-d said, ‘Let there be a canopy in the midst of the waters and let it separate between waters and waters.’ G-d made the canopy and separated between the waters which were beneath the canopy and the waters which were above the canopy. And it was so. G-d named the canopy heaven. And it was evening and it was morning, a second day.”

(Genesis 1:6-8)

Elul 26

Day Two of Creation Countdown

Four days left to Rosh Hashana. Today is the day of accounting for the month of *Sivan*—the month when Moses began his 120-day journey, and the month in which the Torah was given on Mt. Sinai.

TUES. 9/15/2020

Facts ☉

We recite *Selichot* a minimum of four days (in Ashkenazic communities) because offerings brought to the Temple had to be examined for disqualifying flaws for four days prior to their offering.¹ Another reason is that just as the receiving of the Torah required three days of preparation, so too with Rosh Hashana, the Day of Judgment, the day in which we proclaim and reaffirm the sovereignty of G-d.²

The *Selichot* prayers for forgiveness are divided into three sections: a) the introduction, which is the same every day; b) the conclusion, which is also the same every day; c) the middle part which has selections of various prayers (*piyutim*) mixed in with supplications, including repeated appeals to G-d's Thirteen Attributes of Compassion.

Compassion as Love

Compassion means transcending your own comfort zone out of love for another. Compassion is love in the purest sense of the word.

The Book of Genesis (18:1-2) relates that shortly after Abraham's circumcision, G-d appeared to him while he sat recuperating in the groves of Mamrei. While he was communing with G-d, Abraham noticed, off in the distance, three nomads approaching across the desert. Without so much as an "Excuse me" to G-d, he immediately stood up and ran to greet them and to prepare a meal for them.

From this strange incident, the Talmud derives the equally strange lesson that "welcoming guests is more powerful than welcoming G-d."

The Talmud does not ponder if this was the right thing to do, because clearly Abraham *knew*—without hesitation—that this was the right thing to do.

But how did Abraham know this? How did he know his actions would not offend G-d?

Abraham knew because Abraham was a holy man. Selfishly, he would have liked to spend more time with G-d. He could have asked him a lot of questions. But a holy person doesn't do just what's good for him, he does what's good

for reality. He is capable of transcending his personal comfort zone for the greater good—for the love of others.

The truth is that when Abraham turned to greet his guests, he didn't turn away from G-d—he turned away from one level of G-d to experience a higher level of G-d. This higher level is defined by selflessness, by doing for others.

To love G-d and to love other people is the same thing. Your love of G-d has to bring more love to others. And fundamentally, it goes even deeper than that. When you love G-d, you will love other people more. And that's the whole point of it.

Ask yourself: Do you feel that loving G-d and loving people is the same thing? Have you been able to apply this in your life? With what result?

Exercise for the day:

Demonstrate your love for your neighbor and your love for G-d in one specific act.

Recreate day three of creation by planting a "seed" today that will make things grow—do a good deed that will have perpetual effects.

Elul Month of Consolation



"G-d said, 'Let the waters beneath the heavens be gathered into one place, and let the dryness be visible.' It was so. G-d named the dryness 'earth,' and the gathering of the waters, He named 'seas.' And G-d saw that it was good. G-d said, 'Let the earth sprout grass, seed-yielding herbs, fruit trees bearing fruit of its own kind, with its seed within, upon the earth.' And it was so. The earth brought forth sprouts, herbs yielding seed of its kind, and trees making fruit which has in it seeds of its kind. And G-d saw that it was good. And it was evening and it was morning, a third day." (Genesis 1:9-13)

Elul 27

Day Three of Creation Countdown

Three days left to Rosh Hashana. Today is the day of accounting for the month of *Tammuz*—the month when Moses began his fateful climb to confront G-d, and the month in which we remember some very sad occasions.

WED. 9/11/2020

Events

5616 (1855)—*Yahrzeit* of Rabbi Shalom Rokeach, founder of the Belz Chassidic dynasty.

Facts

Selichot prayers seeking forgiveness go back to the beginning of human history, when Adam, and then later Cain, prayed to G-d for forgiveness. The Torah is replete with supplications on behalf of individuals and the community. Similar prayers, composed in later times, are found in Talmudic texts. The first reference to, and text for, *Selichot* in connection with the "Days of Awe" is found in the early medieval era of the *Geonim*, in the writings of Rav Amram Gaon.

Three days before Rosh Hashana (and the same with Yom Kippur) the one who will lead the prayer service and the one who will sound the shofar should sanctify and prepare themselves and study the intentions of the prayers and shofar sounding.¹ As Rabbi Eliezer said: "My father, Rabbi Shimeon (Bar Yochai) would not listen to anyone leading the prayers on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur unless they prepared themselves three days before." Rabbi Shimeon explained that he did so because these prayers atone for the entire world, and the sounding of the shofar requires a special wisdom to know the mystery of the sound.²

Loving Unconditionally

To build a new structure takes talent and strength. To rebuild a ruin takes compassion—compassion which flows from unconditional love.

Moses rebuilt the ruin of a relationship between G-d and the Jewish people because he so profoundly touched G-d with his unconditional love—both his love for the Jews and his love for the Creator.

In the face of rebuff, Moses simply refused to accept that all was lost. With absolute conviction he believed that despite the break on the surface, both G-d and the people truly loved each other.

In a loving relationship, there will be times, perhaps, where one will want to give up. But the other will say: "We can't give up, we must try again." Love is tested in those times. In many cases it won't hold up to the challenge. But true love passes the test when one person says to the other, "My love for you is unconditional, no matter what you do. Even if you leave me, I will still be there for you."

Most of us don't want to be the ones who are abandoned. As a matter of fact, we try to be the ones who leave first—to be the ones who do the rejecting, not the rejected ones.

Even if we end up being abandoned by the other person, how many of us have had the strength and courage to say in the face of rejection, "I still love you."

But Moses said to G-d, "I don't accept that You say it's too late and the Jewish people can't be forgiven. I will stay here until You relent. I know that you truly love them and they love you." And so he prevailed.

In the final days before Rosh Hashana, to win pardon for our transgressions, we must demonstrate to G-d that we love Him and each other with that kind of relentless, unconditional love. That we forgive each other as we hope He will forgive us, that we are compassionate toward each other as we hope He will be compassionate with us. This is the best insurance for success.

Ask yourself: Can you demonstrate that you have loved others unconditionally—that you have loved G-d unconditionally?

Exercise for the day:

Express unconditional love to someone in your life.

Recreate day four of creation by being a "light" that illuminates and warms other people.

Elul Month of Consolation

F“G-d said, ‘Let there be light in the canopy of heaven to separate between the day and between the night, and they will serve as signs for seasons, days and years. They will be lights in the canopy of heaven to illuminate the earth.’ And it was so. G-d made the two great lights, the large light to rule the day, and the small light to rule the night, and the stars. G-d set them in the canopy of the heaven to illuminate the earth, to rule the day and the night, and to divide between the light and the darkness, and G-d saw that it was good. And it was evening and it was morning, a fourth day.” (Genesis 1:14-19)

In this, the seventh and final week of the Seven Weeks of Consolation, the people reply to G-d’s words of comfort: “I will greatly rejoice in G-d, my soul will exult in my G-d, for He clothed me with the garments of salvation...

“For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be still, until her righteousness shines forth like radiance... The nations will see your righteousness. And all the kings your glory... O Jerusalem, I have set watchmen on your walls. They will never be silent day or night... Behold G-d has proclaimed to the end of earth: Say to the daughter of Zion: Behold, your salvation comes... They will call them ‘The Holy People,’ G-d’s redeemed; and you will be called ‘Sought Out,’ a city not forsaken.

“Who is this that comes from Edom... In all their affliction He was afflicted... In His love and pity He redeemed them; He lifted them up and carried them through all the years.” (Isaiah, chapter 61)

Malchut (“sovereignty”) radiates during this fourth and final week of Elul (the last of the Seven Weeks of Consolation), as we prepare to rebuild malchut on Rosh Hashana.

Elul 28

Day Four of Creation Countdown

Two days left to Rosh Hashana. Today is the day of accounting for the month of *Av*—the month which contains the saddest day in the Hebrew calendar, the 9th of Av.

THURS. 9/17/2020

Facts

On the final Shabbat of *Elul*—the Shabbat just before Rosh Hashana—we always read the Torah portion of *Nitzavim*.¹ The practical reason is in order to separate between the curses of the previous portion and Rosh Hashana.² The Baal Shem Tov says³ that on this Shabbat we don’t bless the new month (as we do during the rest of the year) because G-d Himself blesses it, and this empowers us to bless the other eleven months.⁴

And G-d’s blessing consists of the opening verse of this week’s Torah portion: “You are all standing today...” “Today” refers to Rosh Hashana, the Day of Judgment... You stand fast and upright on this day; i.e., you are judged favorably. This is G-d’s blessing on the Shabbat when we bless the “seventh month,” (a month) that is satiated and satiates all of us with abundant goodness all year round.”