

Preface

THE PARADOX

The High Holiday season has always been a paradox for me.

On the one hand, these are awesome days, full of tradition and history. Days, we are told, that determine the destiny of our lives. Days when our prayers can reach the highest places. Days when our shofar sounding and heartfelt prayers pierce the very heavens. Even in our assimilated and secular society today, Yom Kippur evokes a sense of awe and sanctity.

On the other hand, how many of us experience the High Holiday season as awesome, holy or even memorable? How many of us are *truly* transformed on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur? Not just inspired for a moment, but actually transformed forever?

Speaking with thousands of people from vastly different backgrounds throughout my travels, I hear the same painful story—the High Holidays are a serious let down.

I cannot tell you how many men and women have shared with me the frustrated distance and irrelevance they experience on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. People *want* to find some connection and meaning in the holidays and go to synagogue in desperate search for some insight, some inspiration—anything that will touch them. Instead, they are subjected to the same hollow sermons, long and unintelligible prayer services, and superficial social interactions—anything but warm, inviting spirituality.

If religion has in fact proven to be a huge disappointment in this generation, then it is in the High Holiday season that this disappointment is most keenly felt.

Even those who *have* had positive experiences relate that they cannot keep up with the pace of all the prayers or understand their significance, do not understand the meaning of many of the

traditions, and above all, they do not find personal and spiritual relevance in the services and holiday customs.

Even traditional Jews who are fluent in the Hebrew prayers, who are well versed in all the holiday laws and customs and the meaning behind them, who have been praying for years and celebrating all the finer aspects of the holidays—even they are often challenged to experience each holiday anew, with freshness and vitality. We are taught that the Torah's commandments must be fulfilled “every day as a new experience.” Mechanical Judaism is considered an insult to G-d.

EXCAVATING TREASURES

While these are legitimate complaints, truth be told, there are definitely individuals who immerse in the holiday experience and emerge as new people. These individuals know how to delve into the depths of the holidays and excavate its treasures. And there are others, who even though they relate to the High Holidays on a simplistic level, nevertheless demonstrate a beauty of character by their sheer persistence and dedication to the holiday traditions. As our Sages tell us, even if you don't always *feel* the benefit of your actions, just by making the effort, you open up doors in heaven.

Yet, these people are, unfortunately, the minority. The majority does not find much relevance in the holiday season. Thus, we see the inevitable drop in synagogue attendance and the ensuing alienation from one's roots. As one young woman once told me, “I find it more meaningful to stay home on Yom Kippur reading my favorite Zen poems.”

My heart broke when I heard her words, because I realized what she was saying: when you don't find spiritual and psychological relevance in your own “backyard” of Jewish traditions, you will ultimately turn elsewhere for inspiration.

But the real tragedy is even greater, because the truth is that Judaism *does* offer us something we cannot find anyplace else—the most sophisticated, relevant blueprint for our lives. But many of us are simply unaware of it.

This is the greatest tragedy of all—that we have a treasure and we don't know it. We have wings to fly and we don't know how to use them.

Equally troubling is the complacency of many observant and traditional Jews, who don't find personal significance in the prayers and holiday traditions, except for the nostalgic component, and their commitment is often mechanical, driven primarily out of obligation, guilt or habit.

This is what compelled me to create this book for all the thousands of people looking to rejuvenate their High Holiday experience and discover transformative resonance in this most profound and sophisticated of psycho-spiritual systems called the Jewish High Holiday season.

This book, *60 Days*, is meant to provide a hands-on, companion guide to the powerful two Hebrew months of *Elul* and *Tishrei*. This is not a new prayer book, not a new *Siddur* or *Machzor*, but a day-by-day, item-by-item workbook that guides the reader along the most fascinating and beautiful journey of the High Holiday season.

The end goal is to revitalize and invigorate the holiday experience, both to those new to the experience and those who have become all-too familiar with it, for the non-affiliated and the affiliated, the initiated and the uninitiated.

For me, this book is a personal journey as well—a journey that has opened up my eyes to the endless wealth of knowledge and experience lying within the holiday season. As I researched the material explored here, I was astounded by the eloquent beauty and the complex infrastructure of literally every detail of the prayers, commandments, laws and customs. I have studied Judaism

all my life, yet I have never appreciated the power of these months as I do today, and hopefully, will appreciate even more tomorrow.

For this I thank all my students and readers—you have taught me how to truly appreciate our rich tradition with all its spiritual power. I am forever grateful. In return I hope that I can convey some of what I have learned.

It is, therefore, with great satisfaction that I offer you this book as a guide that can perhaps open your eyes as well to a treasure that has been given to us all—a treasure that empowers us with the tools and the abilities to transform our lives for the better, forever.

(Rabbi) Simon Jacobson
New York
July 2003

Introduction

The ENERGY of TIME

The Hebrew calendar is like no calendar that exists in the world today. It is not a highway that progresses from past to future in linear fashion as does the Western calendar familiar to all. It is a spiral staircase that winds around, cycling the events of history, drawing their energy ever upwards.

As we travel through each year, we revisit the energy of ancient days—energy of time and beyond time—energy of freedom, of destruction, of mourning, of forgiveness, of empowerment, of joy. We use that energy to uplift events from our lives that inevitably parallel the lives of those that came before us.

In the spring—in the month of *Nissan*, the month of Passover—we gain access to the energy that freed our ancestors from bondage in Egypt in order to set ourselves free from whatever it is that enslaves us. In the summer—in the month of *Av*, the month of destruction and mourning—

we come to terms with the ruins of broken homes, broken marriages, broken dreams, and learn to draw comfort and consolation from others and from G-d. In the winter—in the month of *Kislev*, the month of Chanukah—we use the light of victory and holiness to illuminate the darkness in our lives.

In this workbook we are concerned with two of the most powerful months of the Hebrew calendar—the month of *Elul* and the month of *Tishrei*. *Elul* precedes the High Holidays and is a month of preparation for them. *Tishrei*, which is the holiest month of the entire year, contains the monumental holidays of Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Hoshana Rabba, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah.

These two months embody the energy of renewal after destruction, rebirth after loss, the energy of love and forgiveness, of empowerment and joy. *Elul* and *Tishrei* capture the very story of life itself.

In this 60-day workbook we concentrate on accessing the power of *Elul* and *Tishrei* to maximum spiritual benefit. We want to use it to remove whatever obstacles hamper our lives; we want to use it to get closer to G-d; we want to use it to improve our relationships, to start the New Year with renewed vigor, to make our lives better and to help build a better world.

Indeed, this 60-day period in time—as reflected in this book—is really the story of each one of our lives, as expressed in perhaps the biggest question of all: Is there hope after loss, can we rebuild after destruction? It's one thing to find happiness and life affirmation when we escape to a mountain; it's quite another to be able to experience it when we are immersed in a cruel, material life. Can we really find truth in a corrupt world? Can we reach the highest places from our limited place? Can we taste eternity as mortal creatures? Can we touch heaven even as we stand on earth? Can we, as people and as nations, ever discover true peace?

The 60-day story of *Elul* and *Tishrei* resolutely answers these questions with a resounding and unequivocal “Yes.” Yes, there is hope. Yes, we can rebuild. Indeed, we can find an even greater love than the original one. Yes, we can marry heaven and earth. And yes, our entire world can unite in one magnificent symphony, each of us contributing our particular melody.

"60 DAYS" a WORKBOOK

The two Hebrew months of *Elul* and *Tishrei* have their own built in structure, with their specific obligations and customs. This workbook brings alive the 60-day *Elul-Tishrei* experience. It taps into the deeper meaning of each of these days—and their elegant sequence—illuminating the profound power contained in these months.

"Sixty Days" is thus structured like a sixty-day journey, paralleling the rich days of *Elul-Tishrei*. This is a journey toward finding hope, love, fulfillment, and the realization of your deepest aspirations and dreams—a journey to discover your calling and to make your peace with G-d.

Each day of this book is one leg of the journey. Yet, like every journey, each day has its own "life." You can, therefore, feel free to begin at any point and stay on any page for as long as you like. Optimally, it would be best to move along this journey from day to day, step after step. But this book is structured so that every day is both self-contained as well as part of a sequence.

Every day of *Elul* and *Tishrei* is rich with meaning, with history and tradition. Thus each day consists of two side-by-side pages. The page on the right is a daily calendar—it includes a daily quote, a listing of historical events that occurred on that day, and relevant laws and customs. The page on the left consists of an inspirational thought and a practical exercise for the day.

Though this season has universal themes and customs, the focus in this book is to personalize your experience. Each of the pages of *Elul* is meant to help you assess your life, to account for the past year and to prepare for the new year. The pages of *Tishrei* continue, at a heightened pace, the journey of *Elul*, with special focus on each holiday: Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Hoshana Rabba, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. In effect the holidays are like milestones on the journey. Finally, the book ends with the post-holiday season, covering the last days of *Tishrei* and the beginning of the next month, *Cheshvan*, as we enter and integrate the holiday season into our daily lives during the entire year.

At the end of the book a special section has been included that deciphers and personalizes the powerful holiday prayer services. This is meant to be used as a companion guide to the holiday prayer book (a *Siddur* or *Machzor*).

Finally, the endnotes offer sources, additional details, and more complex applications of the material found in the actual days of the book.

(Though this book is filled with the laws and customs of *Elul* and *Tishrei*, by no means should this book be seen as replacing the *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish Law that defines our obligations and customs. Any question of Jewish Law should be posed to a qualified rabbi.)

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

Start a journal for the work you will do in these 60 days. On the first page of your journal create a list of items you want to change in your life.

To help you along, create three columns, labeled:

“Things I want to work on”

Between me and G-d

Between me and other people

Between me and myself

Below these columns, list the areas you want to work on:

Intellectual—Torah

Emotional —Prayer

Action oriented — *Mitzvot*

Other

Now divide the rest of your journal into 60 sections or pages, each page corresponding to its respective page in this workbook.

On each page of the workbook there are questions and an exercise for each day.

As you move from day to day, write down in your journal the answer to each day's questions, and what you have done to implement the exercise.

You can also refer back to your first page, and connect your answers and exercises to the general areas in your life you want to change.

Continue this process day after day and you are guaranteed to be blessed with a transformative 60 days!

**May you have a sweet and happy year,
written and sealed for the most revealed blessings!**

Introduction

END of the YEAR

The Hebrew month of *Elul* (which generally falls in August or September) is the last month of the Hebrew year—as opposed to the month of December, which is the last month of the year in the Christian/Western calendar. It is considered the month of self-examination and accounting in preparation for the new year and the High Holidays that come at that time—Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. In this regard, it is considered a month of *teshuvah*, of returning to G-d in repentance, with hope that it is never too late, that destiny can be changed by prayer, and that forgiveness is inevitable.

Elul is a month of Divine grace, because in this month Moses began his last 40 days on the mountain praying for G-d's compassion and forgiveness. On the mountain, Moses came the closest any human being ever came to knowing G-d, and G-d revealed and taught him the secret of His "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy" (Exodus 33:18-34:8). The days of *Elul* are therefore called "days of grace" or days of "compassion" because in this period G-d was open to listening to Moses—and Moses was successful in his appeal for forgiveness and renewal. Ever since, the month of *Elul* has served as the month of Divine mercy and forgiveness.

This is why *Elul* has such power—it is the month when the “King is in the field and receives all people pleasantly and with a smiling countenance”—the Thirteen Attributes of Compassion radiate to each one of us. *Elul* brings to the surface the intense love between G-d and His people. For this reason this month—and the entire 40-day period concluding with Yom Kippur—is dedicated to special prayers, shofar sounding, soul searching and *teshuvah*.¹

The spiritual energy of *Elul* is hinted at by the many meanings of its name, each of which reflects an aspect of the spiritual work that is meant to take place at this time.

WHAT'S in a NAME

In the mystical terminology of the Kabbalah, a name is an intermediary between heaven and earth. It can be compared to film which has been threaded through a projector in order to give shape and color to the white light that shines through it. The light shines from the projector as it did before the film was threaded in; the light has not been compromised—it's still white light. But an intermediary has been introduced between the light and the screen which defines and shapes the light.

PERSONALIZING ELUL

In this month we have the ability to recreate Moses' experience on the mountain. Each of the 29 days of *Elul* (beginning with the first day of Rosh Chodesh, the 30th of Av, for a total of 30 days) we relive each step of Moses' journey—his prayers, his pleading, his hope. We work on breaking the “golden idols” that we worship and that fill our lives—the false idols that don't allow us to access our true selves. Each day, as we rebuild another aspect of our relationship, we grow as Moses did. After 30 days of preparation we are ready to enter into a renewed relationship with G-d—and a renewed relationship with our own souls—on Rosh Hashana. We continue to build the relationship for the first 10 days of *Tishrei*, concluding with Yom Kippur, when we finally are ready for complete reconciliation as we stand under the *chupa* with our Divine “spouse.”

To help us along, *Elul*—and Moses' journey during these days—provides us with a specific day by day plan, that covers the entire spectrum of human experience and addresses the different areas of work necessary to reconcile and rebuild our relationship with our soul and with G-d.

Change breeds change. If you change an attitude—it will precipitate other changes in your life.

Would you like to change something in your life? Now is the time. *Elul* is a month when the doors are open. Special energy radiates in this month. And by our actions we create containers that channel this unique radiance into our lives.

Think of aspects of your life that you want to change. To make this manageable choose the most important things that you want to change. Perhaps you want change in a relationship—to make it better or get out of an unhealthy one. Or you want to change your single status and find your soulmate.

Perhaps you want to change a psychological pattern that you seem to get stuck in time and again.

Perhaps you want to change your job, your place of residence, your status.

Whatever it is you want to change—*Elul* is the time for it. Unprecedented doors open up for you now, opportunities that do not come very often.

Act. Now is the time.

“I carved out two tablets like the first and I climbed UP the mountain with the two tablets in my hand... I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights, just like the first time, and G-d listened to me this time, agreeing not to destroy you.”

(Deuteronomy 10:3;10. Exodus 34:1-4)

Preparing to Take Stock

Today is the first day (of two days) of Rosh Chodesh *Elul*, (which actually falls on the last day of the month of Av).

Elul is called *chodesh hacheshbon*, "a month of accounting," as it comes at the end of the spiritual fiscal year. It's also considered the month of preparation for the new spiritual year that begins with Rosh Hashana. The two themes of *Elul*—accounting and preparation—are interdependent, because how we account for the past is how we prepare for the future.

In *Elul* (the word in Aramaic means "searching") we examine the mistakes of the past year in order not to repeat them. In particular, this means taking an honest look at what is trapping us and preventing us from truly moving forward.

Obviously, fundamental changes do not happen instantly. But self-transformation is possible, and it is possible to the extent that we want it, that we examine ourselves and identify issues that need work, and that we invest ourselves in that goal.

In short, what will happen to each one of us on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur has a great deal to do with how we prepare for these great days.

We can be certain that if G-d created life, He gave us the power to change life. If G-d gave us the ability to get into patterns and habits, then He must also have given us the power of the soul to get out of the habit. Just like we got in, we can get out.

Any faith in G-d has to include faith in hope and faith in transformation—faith that we will be forgiven for past mistakes and faith that we can change.

Ask yourself: Do you believe that self-transformation is truly possible? Do you want to change? Are you prepared to resolve to do so?

Exercise for the day:

Open the journal you have prepared for the accounting work that you will do this month, and in it record your answers to the above questions.

Elul

Month of Accounting and Preparation

Av 30

1st Day of Rosh Chodesh Elul



"The *mazal* (sign) of the month of *Menachem Av* is the *Aryeh* (Leo), an acronym for *Elul*, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Hoshana Rabba²—four milestones in this time period,³ all built from the pain and destruction of *Av*. This parallels Moses' efforts to rebuild our relationship after the sin of the Golden Calf."

(The Shaloh)

Events	Laws and Customs
<p>2448 (1313 BCE)—Moses carves the second set of tablets of the Ten Commandments to replace the tablets which he had shattered upon witnessing Israel's worship of the Golden Calf.</p>	<p>Rosh Chodesh Observances.</p> <p>Today is the first of the two days of Rosh Chodesh ("Head of the Month") of <i>Elul</i>. (When a month has 30 days, both the last day of the month and the first day of the following month serve as the following month's Rosh Chodesh). Special portions are added to the daily prayers:</p> <p>Hallel (composed of Psalms 113—118) is recited following the <i>Shacharit</i> morning prayer.</p> <p>The Yaaleh V'yavo prayer is added to the <i>Amidah</i> prayer and to Grace After Meals.</p> <p>The additional Musaf prayer is said.</p> <p>Tachnun (confession of sins) and similar prayers are omitted.</p> <p>Many have the custom to mark Rosh Chodesh with a festive meal and reduced work activity. The latter custom is prevalent amongst women,</p>

who have a special affinity with Rosh Chodesh—the lunar month being the feminine aspect of the Jewish calendar.⁴

Some of the special *Elul* practices (see also *Elul* 1) begin on this day:

Psalm 27 is recited at the end of the morning and afternoon prayers (this special addition is recited throughout the month of *Elul* and the High Holiday season, until Hoshana Rabba—for a total of 51 days) (See *Elul* 2 and *Tishrei* 21).

Although the daily sounding of the **shofar** (ram's horn) officially begins on the second day of Rosh Chodesh *Elul*—announcing the opening of the gates of compassion—it is customary to practice sounding the shofar on the first Rosh Chodesh, introducing the *Elul* atmosphere of soul-searching and repentance.⁵

Breaking Damaging Patterns

Moses' *Elul* journey actually begins seven generations earlier, with Abraham's journey.

In the Book of Genesis (12:1), G-d speaks to Abraham and says: "Go from your land, your birthplace, the home of your parents, to the land that I will show you."

This is very strange because when you tell someone to travel, you specify the *destination* in detail, but you don't describe over and over again the point of departure. After all, the person knows where he/she is leaving from.

But here G-d tells Abraham to leave his land, his birthplace, and the home of his parents—three descriptions of his present location—and then, when it comes to the destination, He only tells him to go "to a land," without naming it or even hinting at where it is.

Chassidic thought, which gives voice to the inner dimension of the Torah, explains that in truth this verse is really a commandment issued by G-d to each of us: "Go on a journey of self-discovery. Leave behind anything that might hold you back. And then I will show you the landscape of your Divine soul—the true you."

If you want to discover your higher self, this is the secret.

Many people get inspired and motivated to go on such a journey; they actually pack their bags—literally or metaphorically—and set out on their way. But after a while, they end up coming right back where they started, repeating the same old patterns.

Good intentions are pure and real. When you decide to leave, you really want to get someplace. But you have so many things weighing you down, so many "golden idols." So the key to meaningful change is not so much knowing how to get to a new place, it's knowing how to unload the past, so that it shouldn't shape your future and bring you back to your old patterns.

Ask yourself: In what areas of your life are you repeating old patterns? In what ways are they damaging to you?

Exercise for the day:

Identify and describe one damaging pattern that you want to break in the coming year.

List one thing you must do in order to break that pattern.

Elul

Month of Accounting and Preparation

Elul 1

2nd Day of Rosh Chodesh Elul



"In the *shtetl* of Lubavitch, on the Shabbat preceding the month of *Elul*, though summer still lingered and the day was bright and sunny, there was a change in the air; one already smelled the *Elul*-scent, a *teshuvah*-wind was blowing."

(The Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak)¹

Events

2448 (1313 BCE)—Moses ascends Mt. Sinai for the third time to pray and beseech G-d to forgive the people.² He will remain there for 40 days, descending on Yom Kippur, when he finally succeeds in his mission. The shofar was sounded when Moses ascended on Rosh Chodesh *Elul* and every day afterwards. This is why we sound the shofar every day of *Elul*.³ We recreate these 40 days beginning from the first day of Rosh Chodesh *Elul*.⁴ These 40 are hinted to in the 4 *yuds* (4x10) at the end of the words
ani l'dodi v'dodi li.⁵

Laws and Customs

Every day of *Elul* the shofar is sounded as a wake-up call, reminding us that these are special days of compassion, open to receive all our prayers and *teshuvah*, as did Moses on Mt. Sinai. The shofar also elicits awe, like thunder before the rain, and prepares us for Rosh Hashana.⁶

We recite three additional chapters of Psalms each day, from the 1st of *Elul* until Yom Kippur (on Yom Kippur the remaining 36 chapters are recited, thereby completing the entire Book of Psalms). This is a custom instituted by the Baal Shem Tov.

In the Sephardic tradition, *Selichot* (special prayers for forgiveness) are said beginning from the first day of *Elul*, through Yom Kippur. In the Ashkenazic tradition they begin in the week before Rosh Hashana (See *Elul* 21).

Today is Rosh Hashana of *Maaser Bebeima*, tithing of the livestock (*Rosh Hashana* 2a).⁸

From Rosh Chodesh *Elul* until Yom Kippur it is customary, when corresponding, to wish one another a *Kesiva vechatima tovah*, a happy and healthy new year.⁹

It is customary to increase charitable giving in the days of *Elul*.¹⁰

Identifying Personal Biases

By telling Abraham, "Leave your land, your birthplace, the home of your parents, and go to the land that I will show you," G-d instructed us, his descendants, that there are three forms of subjectivity we need to leave behind when we set out on the journey of self-discovery:

'Your land' represents the first level of subjectivity—the influence of society, community and peer pressure, which affect us in deep and profound ways. We all want to be liked and accepted by others, and we adjust our behavior accordingly.

The 'home of your parents' represents the second level of subjectivity—parental influence, which can be so subtle that we don't even recognize it. Often, we don't realize how deeply the attitudes of our parents permeate our own attitudes and behavior, for good and for bad.

'Your birthplace' represents the third level of subjectivity—inherent self-love. Each person is blinded by his or her selfish interests; no one is immune from that.

This does not mean that we must completely discard all good things that we have learned from our parents or our community, but it means that, first of all, we must become aware

of how these influences affect our behavior, our opinions, and our thought patterns. Only then can we begin to know who it is that we are and what it is that we think, know and believe.

Similarly, personal bias or self-love—which isn't a crime in itself—becomes a crime when we don't acknowledge it, and when it begins to distort our vision.

Ask yourself: Are you able to identify where you blindly follow convention (or politically correct opinions) and where your path is truly your own, arrived at by you through careful consideration?

Exercise for the day:

Select one significant event of the past day and identify how your reactions and behaviors were shaped by each of the three levels of subjectivity named above.

Describe what role the damaging pattern you identified yesterday played in these reactions and behaviors.

Elul

Month of Accounting and Preparation

Elul 2



"The entire work of *Elul* and *Tishrei* is comparable to cleaning, repairing and rebuilding a soiled or broken container. Rosh Chodesh *Elul* is the time for soul accounting. Through our tears during *Selichot* we wash out our 'containers.' On Rosh Hashana we repair the container, reaching the epitome with the sounding of the shofar."

(The Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak)¹

Events

5315 (1555 CE)—The first printing of the *Shulchan Aruch* (the definitive Code of Jewish Law) by Rabbi Yosef Caro (1488-1575) is completed in the Holy Land.

Laws and Customs

During *Elul*, even those immersed full time in Torah study, take off some time from their study to increase their prayers and supplications.²

Facts

The custom of reciting King David's Psalm 27 ("By David, G-d is my Light and my Salvation") each day of *Elul* until Hoshana Rabba³ is based on the *Midrash*⁴ which associates the "Light" of David and the "Light" of all human beings with Rosh Hashana, when by the light of the soul G-d searches out the deepest recesses of the human being. The *Midrash* associates the "Salvation" of David and of all human beings with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when everyone is redeemed. The theme of this psalm is also related to the revelation of the Thirteen Divine Attributes of Compassion which radiate during *Elul*.⁵ Indeed, the psalm mentions G-d's name 13 times.⁶

Learning to be Free

Identifying damaging patterns and personal bias is an essential step on a journey to freedom from our personal bondage.

In one way or another, we're all enslaved—by our psychological demons, or by social standards, by our parents' words and attitudes, or by our responsibilities, by the consequences of the mistakes we've made, or by our careers, employers, or employees.

Learning how to be free is what is called in the Torah "leaving Egypt."

The Hebrew word for Egypt is *Mitzrayim*, which literally means "narrow" and which represents all forms of enslavement, be it dependency, conformity, subjectivity—whatever it may be in your life that sets up obstacles, limits or constraints.

To be free, you must leave your personal *Mitzrayim*. But freedom is not enough. You can be free for a while and then be enslaved again. This is why fifty days after the Israelites left Egypt and tasted freedom for the first time, they received a guidebook—the Torah—on how to maintain freedom.

Look at your own life. There were undoubtedly many times you felt free, you felt inspired, you felt you could do anything, but then old patterns and biases took over. You couldn't maintain that inspiration. The resolve to change was there for a moment, but you couldn't sustain it.

This is where you need the guidance of the Divine Torah blueprint. It tells you how to access your soul, how to achieve freedom in every part of your life, from the moment you wake to the moment you go to sleep, and even while you're asleep.

Ask yourself: To what extent have you used the guidance of the Torah to access your soul? To what extent are you familiar with what the Torah teaches in this regard?

Exercise for the day:

Identify one area in your life where you badly need the objective guidance of the Torah because you have not been able to make meaningful progress on your own.

Elul

Month of Accounting and Preparation

Elul 3



"He made the letter *Yud* king over action, and He bound a crown to it, and He combined one with another, and with them he formed *Virgo* [*Betulah*] in the universe, *Elul* in the year, and the left hand¹ in the Soul, male and female."²

(*Sefer Yetzirah* 5:8)³

Facts

Elul and Torah are intrinsically connected:

- 1) Moses spent all of *Elul* receiving the second set of Tablets of the Ten Commandments.
- 2) In the verse of the *Song of Songs*, "I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me; he feeds among roses;" 'feeds among roses' refers to Torah study.
- 3) The Thirteen Attributes of Compassion (the thirteen petals on the rose) parallel the Thirteen Rules of Biblical Interpretation.⁴
- 4) One of the acronyms of *Elul* is connected to refuge.⁵ Torah provides refuge from our own subjective blind spots and other forces in our lives that tend to cloud our judgment.

Every hour in the month of *Elul* is considered like a day; it has the power to atone for a day of the year. Hence, all the days of *Elul* (each day x 12 day-time hours) is more than all the days of the year.⁶

The Truth Within

The *Ethics of the Fathers* teach, "No one is free except the one who is immersed in Torah study," in effect identifying the practice of religion—the study and observance of Torah—with freedom.

Yet many people don't think of religion as freeing. They think of it as limiting, dogmatic, oppressive.

This is because the religion they have been exposed to is an invention of human beings. The religion they know is not the religion of G-d; it is not the religion of the Torah.

If your experience of religion is not freeing, then you have fallen into a man-made trap.

Freedom is Divine; it cannot be human. As soon as it's human, then there's someone who's in control of it, someone who wants to sell it to you and own it. That is when religion becomes another form of slavery; it becomes oppressive because it has lost its Divine nature.

That's why the Torah was given—so that there would be a permanent record, a source that everyone could refer to. As a result, Judaism has remained a religion of uncommon strength, one that over and over again has defied being hijacked by people.

The Talmud teaches that every one of us is taught the Torah before we are born. Its meaning is ingrained in our psyches, and upon birth we're made to consciously forget. But the truth resonates. So when we hear it, we know. Great masters or teachers can't give us anything we don't already possess; they can help us in one thing only—to open our own pathway to the truth within.

Ask yourself: To what extent do you see religion as oppressive? To what extent is the religion in your life man-made or self-made? Have you gone to the source? Have you had the experience of hearing the truth resonate in your heart? Did you embrace it or reject it?

Exercise for the day:

Commit to regularly attend a Torah class that will help you in at least one area of your life (which you identified yesterday) where you have not been able to make meaningful progress on your own.

Elul

Month of Accounting and Preparation

Elul 4

“And the tablets were the work of G-d, and the writing was G-d's writing engraved on the tablets.”

(Exodus 32:16)



“Read not ‘engraved’ but ‘freedom’—for there is no free person, except for one who occupies himself with Torah study.” (Ethics of the Fathers 6:2)

The key to true freedom involves ensuring that the truth of the Divine letters is engraved in your spirit and not just superimposed like letters written on parchment.

Laws and Customs

During the month of *Elul* it is customary to have *tefillin* and *mezuzot* checked, as well as to review other *mitzvot* that require evaluation (*Mateh Efraim* 581:10).

Following the Shabbat *Mincha* afternoon service, some have the custom to continue studying *Pirkei Avot* (“Ethics of the Fathers”) on each Shabbat of the summer (as we did on each Shabbat between Passover and Shavuot). The 1st Shabbat of *Elul* we read chapter 6; the 2nd Shabbat chapters 1-2; the 3rd Shabbat chapters 3-4; the 4th Shabbat, preceding Rosh Hashana, chapters 5-6.

Facts

During the month of *Elul* we read the portions in the Torah: *Shoftim*, *Ki Teitzei*, *Ki Tavo*, *Nitzavim-Vayeilech* (when Rosh Hashana falls on Monday or Tuesday we divide *Nitzavim* and *Vayeilech* into two separate weeks). We also read the last four Haftorahs of the “Seven Weeks of Consolation,” which follow the “Three Weeks of Affliction.” For seven weeks, beginning with the Shabbat after the Ninth of *Av* (*Tisha B'Av*), the Haftorah readings consist of prophecies describing G-d's consolation of His people and the rehabilitation of their relationship.

On the first Shabbat of *Elul*¹ we read *Shoftim*, which commands us to establish a judicial system. This is a major theme of *Elul*: preparing for the cosmic Day of Judgment. This is followed by the 4th Haftorah of the Seven Weeks of Consolation, in which G-d says: “It is I, I Myself come to comfort you.” (See *Elul* 6.)