



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## DEVARIM > Shoftim

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August 10, 2013

Shoftim

**Are You a Procrastinator?**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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## ABSTRACT

Which of these two statements sounds like you: a) “Why do something today, if I can do it tomorrow?” Or: b) “Why do something tomorrow, if I can do it today?”

If (b) fits you better, you are likely living life to the fullest. If (a) fits you better you are likely a procrastinator.

But don’t despair. If you are a procrastinator, you have lots of company. In our society, procrastination is quite common. But all kidding aside, it’s generally not a great thing. Procrastination is a silent enemy, whose far-reaching consequences often remain hidden forever. Because how can we know what would have been if a person had acted more quickly? How many opportunities may have been lost due to dawdling?

But then again, not everything has to be rushed. There are times when we need to deliberate carefully and take our time before making a decision. How then do we distinguish between unhealthy procrastination and necessary deliberation?

We have just entered the last month of the Hebrew year, Elul – our last chance to account for the year and repair any errors – a time of urgency (when there is no longer time to procrastinate) as well as introspection.

This sermon analyzes an enigmatic verse on the Torah about waiting and cites the Baal Shem Tov’s fascinating explanation which refers to the month of Elul. As such it presents the ultimate antidote to procrastination, and also teaches us a new form of procrastination: the healthy sort.

If not now, when?

## ARE YOU A PROCRASTINATOR?

### NO TIME TO WAIT

#### 1. Procrastination Anonymous

Which of these two statements sounds like you: a) “Why do something today, if I can do it tomorrow?” Or: b) “Why do something tomorrow, if I can do it today?”

A number of years ago I heard this hilarious ad on the radio for Norwegian Cruise Lines. It was depicting a type of 12-step meeting of a group called PA - Procrastination Anonymous. The ad went something like this:

“Hi, I’m Jim. I have been procrastinating now for five years, three months and 21 days. [The group responds, “welcome Jim, nice to meet you”].

“I finally hit rock bottom when I read this announcement for Norwegian Cruise Lines stating that they are running a special sale, and you have until November 1st to get a steep 30% discount.

“Now, I’ve always wanted to go on a cruise but couldn’t afford it. Here was my chance.

“But... due to my procrastination addiction, I kept pushing it off, and I called their number on November 2nd, missing the deadline for this discount by just one day.

“That was it! I realized that I am a serial procrastinator and my whole life is out of control. I must do something about it.

“So here I am - attending my first PA meeting. Maybe this will help me ...”

If you are like Jim, then your answer to the question above is (a): Why do something today, if I can do it tomorrow?”

But don't despair. If you are a procrastinator, you have lots of company. In our society, procrastination is quite common. But all jokes aside, it's generally not a great thing. Procrastination is a silent enemy, whose far-reaching consequences often remain hidden forever. Because how can we know what would have been if a person had acted more quickly? How many opportunities may have been lost due to dawdling?

Question to a procrastinator: Are you a procrastinator? Answer: I'll get back to you on that.

Various theories have been posited as to the psychological roots of procrastination – anxiety ... low self-esteem ... a self-defeating mentality. Some psychologists see it as a mechanism for coping with the tension associated with starting or completing any task or decision. Others associate it with the search for perfection.

One thing is sure – procrastinators are never lacking in excuses and justifications for their behavior, which is often an irritant to others and sometimes harmful.

To counter any smokescreens, scholars have proposed three criteria for a behavior to be classified as procrastination: it must be counter-productive, needless, and delaying.

But once we identify such behavior is there anything that we can do about it? Or is it hard-wired into our systems, with little hope of change – and the procrastinators among us are doomed forever to be late, to miss deadlines, to disappoint others?

## 2. Deadlines and the Jewish Calendar

In truth, one could argue that all deadlines are just man-made inventions – superimposed and unnatural – to ensure productivity and efficiency. If we had no timelines and cut-off dates, most of us (and maybe even all of us) would never finish any project.

Yet, despite the possible truth in this, the Jewish calendar does have a built in structure of beginnings and endings. Time, according to Jewish thought, is energy. Every moment of time – every year, month, week, day, minute and second – has its own unique power, waiting to be tapped. And if the moment passes we cannot (usually) retrieve the opportunity. Says the Zohar,<sup>1</sup> “Every day has its purpose,” and when the day designated for a particular purpose passes, the opportunity of that day is lost.<sup>2</sup>

Each Hebrew calendar year also introduces a unique unprecedented energy into existence – that will never again be repeated. “Every new year,” Jewish mysticism explains, “there descends and radiates a new and renewed light which has never yet shone ... a new and superior light is elicited ... a new and more sublime light that has never yet shone since the beginning of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

As such, the last month of the year, Elul – which began this past week – is not just another month; it is a time when we have the ability to conclude any unfinished business, and take advantage and ensure that the energy of the past year has been utilized to the fullest.

As the conclusion of the year nears, Elul is the deadline – urgently declaring that there is no more time to wait, for (in the classic words of the Ethics) if not now, when?<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Novel Interpretation

The great Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, illuminates for us the urgent call of Elul with a novel interpretation of an enigmatic statement in the Torah: *Ki lule hitmahmahnu ki-atah shavnu zeh fa'amayim*. “But if we had not waited so long, we would have returned twice by now.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Zohar III 94b.

<sup>2</sup> See *Berachos 26a: ovor yomo, botol korbono*, when a day passes you no longer can bring the offering for that day.

<sup>3</sup> *Tanya Igeret HaKodesh* ch. 14. See the *Arizal in Pri Etz Chaim, Shaar Rosh Hashana ch. 1. Shaar HaKavanot, D'rushei Rosh Hashana. Siddur Arizal*. See *Likkutei Torah Netzavim* 51b.

<sup>4</sup> See *Pirkei Avot* 1:14.

<sup>5</sup> *Genesis* 43:10.

Let's explore the background to this statement, which was made by Judah to his father Jacob:

Some time before this, ten sons of Jacob had decided to get rid of their brother Joseph, the eldest of two sons by Jacob's favorite wife Rachel. Driven by jealousy, they first considered murdering him, but then sold him into slavery instead. Joseph ended up in Egypt and ultimately rose to power and became the viceroy of the empire, controlling the grain supply for the entire region.

As a great famine spread across the land, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to purchase grain the family desperately needed to survive. When Joseph recognized his brothers (though they did not recognize him), he took his brother Simeon hostage, on condition that the others bring their youngest brother, Benjamin, to him.

The brothers had no choice but to comply. However, their father Jacob was not willing to go along. In fact, initially Jacob strongly resisted allowing Benjamin to travel to Egypt. "Is it not enough that I lost one son?!" he cried "And now you want to take Benjamin! ... His brother is dead, and he is all I have left of Rachel. Something may happen to him along the way, and you will bring my white head down to the grave in misery!"

Judah then stepped forward and assured his father that he will be the guarantor for Benjamin. "Send the boy with me ... I myself will be responsible for him."

And Judah added: *Ki lule hitmahmahnu ki-atah shavnu zeh fa'amayim.* "But if we had not waited so long, we would have returned twice by now."

If we did not know better, these words could be interpreted as disrespectful, as if Judah was reprimanding his father for procrastinating ... True, Judah was concerned about the famine, but the way he phrased this seems out of order. What did Judah want to emphasize here?

#### 4. Elul Introspection

According to the Baal Shem Tov, Judah was addressing two critical points: 1) the need to use the time well, and 2) that waiting has a positive side when it involves a prolonged introspection, which facilitates re-turning twice.

And this is how it relates to Elul:

*Shavnu zeh faa'mayim* - "return twice" - refers to two types of *teshuvah* (return in repentance): 1) The general *teshuvah* of Rosh Hashana when we "accept the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven," and 2) the specific *teshuvah* of Yom Kippur, when we confess our iniquities in order to cleanse ourselves and be purified. Both these types of *teshuvah* are dependent on the soul-searching of Elul.

The letters of Elul rearranged are the same letters as the word *lule* ("if we had not"). *Lule hitmahmahnu* then means - "when we deliberate (wait) and reflect on our actions and behavior in Elul (*lule*), then *shavnu zeh faa'mayim* - our prolonged soul-searching determines, prepares and enables us to "return twice," by doing *teshuvah* on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.<sup>6</sup>

The Baal Shem Tov, in effect, turns the entire meaning of the verse on its head. According to him, instead of criticizing the tarrying, Judah is actually saying that the wait is vital. *Lule hitmahmahnu* does not mean "had we not delayed," but that "in Elul we must delay" and prolong our soul-searching.

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<sup>6</sup> This Torah insight from the Baal Shem Tov was passed on to us by Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the Alter Rebbe, on the Shabbos that blessed Elul in the year 1795 (Keser Shem Tov hosafos section 17. A letter, printed in the back of Tehillim p. 204. Igros Kodesh Admur M'huRayatz vol. 4 p. 131). See Likkutei Sichos vol. 2 p. 622. Sichas Shabbas Parshas Netzovim-Vayeilech 5723.

## 5. Two Kinds of Procrastination

But how do we reconcile this interpretation with the literal meaning of Judah's words?

We can say that Judah was saying two things at once: We should not wait any longer, the time has come to act. We must grab the opportunity, move quickly and not procrastinate in time, by delaying the process. However, even if we don't procrastinate in time, we do need to wait and reflect in spirit – in a deliberate and qualitative examination of our soul.

On a deeper level, Judah's resolve to take Benjamin to meet Joseph and his confidence "if we had not waited so long, we would have returned twice by now," was driven by much more than the need to simply acquire grain for their physical survival. The reunion of Joseph, Benjamin, Simeon and Jacob had cosmic significance.

Chassidic texts explain how the return and reunion of Joseph with Jacob, as well as the return of Benjamin and Simeon, all reflect a spiritual reunion, which is similar to the "return" (*teshuvah*) of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

## 6. We Will Live

Judah sensed that he would prevail and have both Simeon and Benjamin return and be reunited with their father. He even unconsciously predicted that Joseph would return to his father – "Judah said to his father, 'Send the lad with me, and we will get up and go, and we will live and not die, both we and you and also our young children.'" With the additional words "and we will live," Judah, unknowingly, was presciently telling Jacob that his spirit will be revived when he reunites with Joseph.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> As Rashi explains: "the Divine Spirit flickered within him. [Judah was saying to Jacob] through this trip, your spirit will be revived, as it is said: "and the spirit of their father Jacob was revived [when he reunited with Joseph.]" (Genesis 45:27)



The return of Joseph, Benjamin and Simeon to Jacob – after all the anguish caused by their separation – cosmically reflects the return (*teshuvah*) we all experience on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, after we wandered away and may have betrayed our own souls.

Elul is the time of year when we take stock and deliberate (in a healthy way) through intensive soul-searching – preparing us for the return, the two returns – *shavnu zeh faa'mayim* – of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

Thus, Judah's determination to take Benjamin and go back to Joseph in Egypt, reflected not just the need for physical survival, but carried far higher stakes – spiritual survival, with the future hanging in the balance.

## 7. The Work Ahead

Armed with this empowering message, we enter the month of Elul with a new perspective on the work ahead of us.

Elul tells us that the time is now – there is no room for procrastination. It is the last month of the year and now is the time to act. At the same time Elul beckons us to “procrastinate” in the positive sense – to deliberate and look deep into our souls and to make an account for the year. By doing so we prepare the ground to “return twice” in *teshuvah* – on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

So Elul calls out to all of us procrastinators: Hear ye, hear ye. There remains only one month to this year. No longer is there time to delay. Now is the time to act.

Elul also calls out to us: Use this time well. Ponder your life. Peer deeply into your soul. Take time to reflect on your choices and actions during the past year.

Elul is a wake-up call to all of us, especially the procrastinators: The time has come to make a move.

If not now, when?

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