



DEVARIM

Shoftim / 4 Elul

Elul: Hope Amid Uncertainty

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HOPE AMID UNCERTAINTY

ABSTRACT

This week we entered the new lunar month of *Elul* – the month of love and compassion. But with the world in the state that it is – take the latest terrorist attack in Barcelona – it may be a bit difficult for some to feel beauty and hope.

No doubt, there is much beauty in the world. Humans continue to demonstrate noble acts of gallantry. In many little corners of the globe unsung heroes shine and illuminate their environments. But collectively we are living in troubled times, as if we needed to be told that.

But that is precisely the inside story of *Elul*, with its history and power going back some 3300 years ago – a story of betrayal and reconciliation, a story of rediscovering love in troubled times. *Elul* is a potent month filled with the power of hope, love and compassion – a month that enables us to find strength and courage in times of uncertainty and fear.

This is a two-part sermon:

Part I: A Month of Compassion – explains how G-d’s mercy is built into *Elul* and how we can use this time to access our true self, our soul, which is a part of the higher reality and the essence of all existence called G-d.

Part II: The Meaning of *Elul* – examines the five hidden messages within *Elul*’s name to help us truly understand the healing power inherent in this period of time.

1. Jokes

A reporter interviewing Rabbi Seligman after a bolt of lightning had struck the synagogue roof and sent it crashing down into ruins, asked, “Rabbi, what was your reaction when you saw the terrible devastation?”

“My first reaction?” the rabbi chuckled. “I thought, thank goodness, we took out insurance against acts of G-d.”¹

Another:

Smart aleck: “When I was small, I used to pray to G-d for a bike. But then I realized that G-d doesn’t work that way, so I stole a bike and prayed for forgiveness.”

¹ Jewish Humor by Joseph Telushkin, p. 145.

PART I: A MONTH OF COMPASSION

2. Entering *Elul*

As we enter the new lunar month of *Elul* – the month of love and compassion – it may be a bit difficult for some to feel beauty and hope.

No doubt, there is much beauty in the world. Humans continue to demonstrate noble acts of gallantry. In many little corners of the globe unsung heroes shine and illuminate their environments.

But collectively and individually we are also living in uncertain times, as if we needed to be told that. The political climate in the USA has never been so polarized. Individually, with all our blessings, we also all face many struggles. Some are afraid about an uncertain future.

On the international front, a deep cloud hangs over the globe – not only for millions of people in the Middle East (though there the unrest is the most palpable), but for populations in virtually every hemisphere. Take the latest terrorist attack in Barcelona. The toxic air can ignite a new upheaval at any moment, in any place. No one knows when and where the next crisis will strike.

For Jews and Israel in particular – no strangers to upheaval – the challenges of ever-increasing Arab hostility, supported by some European countries, continues to feed volatility. Witness the latest debacle around the Temple Mount. What, in general, does the future hold?

Add to the equation the personal and emotional anxieties that people grapple with daily, the psychological forces that drain us, and we have, shall we say, quite a “bundle” (a *pekel* as the good Yiddish expression goes) to deal with. Much, much baggage weighs us down.

The compassionate power of *Elul* can seem very distant to some.

3. Never Easy

But what else is new? *Elul* was never an easy process. The source of this month’s history and power goes back some 3300 years ago and tells the entire story:

Moses climbed Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. After 40 days, he returned, only to find that the Jewish people defied G-d by building the Golden Calf. Moses broke the tablets and returned to Sinai to pray that G-d pardon the people for their grave betrayal. He spent another 40 days on Sinai and his efforts were unsuccessful. But Moses did not give up. Determined, he climbed the mountain for a third time and pleaded for another 40 days.

This third period of 40 days began on the first day of the month of *Elul* and concluded on Yom Kippur. *Elul* is, therefore, a potent month filled with the power of hope, love and reconciliation.

During this time, he was successful. He elicited not merely G-d's forgiveness, but a newfound depth, a more intense dimension in the relationship between the Divine and the people.

4. The Gift

To Moses' entreaty, G-d responded with an unprecedented gift. He revealed His Thirteen Attributes of Compassion contained in the following prayer:

Hashem, Hashem, Almighty, compassion and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in kindness and truth, keeper of kindness for thousands of generations, endurer of iniquity and transgression and sin, and cleanser [of those who repent²].

Each of the words of this prayer is brimming with profound meaning and packs enormous divine energy. The Thirteen Attributes of Compassion are described in the *Zohar*, the chief work of Kabbalah, as the "thirteen-petalled rose" – the greatest secret of life, the key to repairing what is broken.

According to the Talmud, G-d told Moses: "Whenever the people of Israel sin, let them recite this and I will forgive them³."

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.

5. The Power of Elul

The mystics further tell us that the Thirteen Divine Attributes of Compassion radiate during the month of Elul, when we relive Moses' experience.

By way of analogy, the Alter Rebbe explains, that in the month of *Elul* "the King is in the field." The King had been traveling; he had left his palace and gone to a far off land outside his kingdom. And now he is on his way home. He is about to enter his palace (where he will dwell on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur) and he stands outside in the field greeting his people. When the king is in the field every person has the opportunity, without petitioning for an audience, to greet him and ask for whatever he or she needs. The

² Exodus 34:6-7.

³ Rosh Hashana 17b.

king is smiling, he is in his informal mode, and he is predisposed to grant all requests.

All year round there are many layers that conceal G-d's presence, that shroud your soul, which is your essence, from yourself. There is a split between your inner self and your outer self – between who you truly are and what you do, between your spirit and your activities.

In *Elul* many of these layers are stripped. You can access, if you wish, your soul, your true self, since it is part of the higher reality and the essence of all existence called G-d.

Elul is not a simple month. It is a complex period in time when we have the power to find hope even after loss, to discover love even after betrayal and to rebuild what we may have damaged.

All people make mistakes. The question is whether we repeat them and whether we repair them. A trusting, loving relationship is built not on perfection but on accountability. In *Elul* we can correct our errors and reclaim our true legacy.

(Note: If using Part II go to section #7 instead)

6. *Elul's* Relevant Message

Thus, *Elul's* message is relevant today more than ever.

As a frightened world, fearful of an ominous future, enters the compassionate month of *Elul*, is there any more appropriate message?

There may be much to fear. Many mistakes have been made. The future can seem uncertain. But Moses – the one and only Moses – blazed a new path, and it is the road to hope.

The month of *Elul*, which began this week – and the ensuing 40 days concluding with Yom Kippur – gives us the power to begin anew, to learn from the past, to dig deeper and come up with new reservoirs of clarity and strength.

Ahh, Moses. He paved new paths, tread new roads, opened new doors, pioneered new possibilities. All for whom?

For us.

Elul awakens our inner faith, hope and belief in a better future. We may not have an exact strategy, but if we assume a resigned attitude, we will lose even before we begin. Every challenge, every adversary must begin with absolute fortitude and belief in victory. Faith that we will prevail. Thus it was some 3300 years ago, and many times after that, and thus it will be.

The gusts of *Elul* have the power to counter the winds of uncertainty. So open your window, breath the fresh air, smell the roses and feel the hopeful breeze waft through your life. Amen.

the power to comfort each other, and so she wanted to dedicate the Haftorah reading in honor of her son...

PART II: THE MEANING OF *ELUL*

7. What's in a Name

But there is even more to *Elul*, as its name indicates.

In Jewish thought, a name isn't merely symbolic; it contains the "inner" meaning, the "soul," of the entity called by that name. In the mystical terminology of the Kabbalah, a name is an interface 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 is still white light. But an interface has been introduced between the light and the screen which defines and shapes the light.

In this analogy, spiritual energy is the white light, the name is the film. The Hebrew letters of a name give shape and definition to the spiritual energy shining through it. This is why a name has a lot of power.

The name *Elul* is composed of four Hebrew letters – aleph, lamed, vav and lamed. These letters spell out an acronym, each letter standing for a separate word in five different verses from the Tanach, the Hebrew Bible, each of which identifies a different aspect of *Elul's* spiritual energy:

8. A Month of Love

Elul stands for a verse from King Solomon's moving and highly spiritual poem known as the "Song of Songs"

Ani v'dodi v'dodi li – "I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me."⁴

Elul is a month of love. In *Elul* we find our way back to G-d and seek to repair the spiritual damage caused by the mistakes and transgressions of the past year. We feel G-d's love for us as He responds to our initiative. We reach for Him from below, declaring, "I am for my beloved," and He responds from above, showing us that "my beloved is for me." Thus *Elul* defines our relationship with G-d as reciprocal – in other words, a mutually loving relationship.

⁴ Song of Songs 6:3.

9. A Month of Bridging Sorrow and Joy

Elul stands for a verse in the Book of Esther, which speaks of a month that turned from sorrow to joy, from mourning to feasting and sending delicacies to one another and gifts to the poor.

Isb lerei'eibu umatanot la'evyonim – “Each man [sending food] to his fellow and gifts to the poor.”⁵

This verse expresses *Elul's* loving nature – especially the bonding that takes place between people through acts of kindness and charity. It also hints at *Elul's* role as the month bridging the destruction of *Tisha B'Av* with the forgiveness of *Yom Kippur*. As such it is a month of consolation and compassion.

10. A Month of Refuge

Elul stands for a verse from the Book of Exodus which speaks of the cities of refuge, established as places where a person who killed another unintentionally might find sanctuary from the wrath of his unintended victim's family.

Inab Le yado vesamti lach – “[because G-d] delivered it into his hand, I shall establish for you...”⁶

Every transgression against G-d is a “killing.” This is because, like a killing, a transgression is a violation of the essence and purpose of life. It is “unintentional” because each of us is intrinsically good and all transgressions result from a lapse in the awareness of our true will.

This verse hints that *Elul* is a refuge in time established for us in the calendar – it returns every year, under all conditions. It also alludes to *Elul's* connection to Torah, for the sages teach us that the “words of Torah are a refuge⁷.” *Elul* provides a haven, a sanctum for introspection, self-examination, atonement and rehabilitation. It is a month in which we resolve that, from now on, no accidental iniquity will mar the essential goodness of our soul.

11. A Month of Repentance

Elul stands for a verse in the Book of Deuteronomy which speaks of the Jewish people returning in repentance to the Land of Israel after an exile which had been a punishment for their transgressions:

Et Levavcha ve'et levav – “Your heart and the heart [of your children]...”⁸

⁵ Esther 9:22.

⁶ Exodus 21:13.

⁷ *Makot* 10a.

⁸ Deuteronomy 30:6.

This verse hints that Elul is a time of teshuvah, a time of remorse, forgiveness and reconciliation, a time of return to pristine beginnings to rediscover our true self and the spark of G-dliness at the core of our soul.

12. A Month of Hope

Elul stands for a verse (when read backwards) from the Book of Exodus which speak of the song that the Israelies sang at the parting of the sea, a song that alludes to the final redemption at the end of days:

L'Hashem v'yamru leimor asbira – “[This song] to G-d “I will sing...””⁹

Because *Elul* is the last month of the year, it encompasses the entire spectrum of existence. This means the three pillars on which the world stands (Torah, prayer and acts of kindness)¹⁰ and the two foundations (repentance and redemption), which anchor the pillars in vitality and purpose.

But above all, it is a month of hope – that forgiveness and redemption are inevitable because G-d could not have created an imperfect existence and expected from it perfection. For each one of us, forgiveness and redemption are possible – now at this time. And this annual event carries with it a promise of the final redemption at the end of time, the realization of the purpose of our entire existence, which is dependent on our effort today, and which makes our work worth all the effort.

13. *Elul's* Relevant Message (Conclusion)

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⁹ Exodus 15:1.

¹⁰ *Avot* 1:2.

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