

The Month of Elul: Rectifying the Sense of Action

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

Time for Self-searching and Divine Goodwill

The month of Elul is in the air, in the abundant morning dew with its silvery haze and in the red ripening of the pomegranates promising a fruitful year. Since Tub Av I feel an increasing tug in my heart, waking me up and urging me to sharpen and fine tune my path. The name of the upcoming month, Elul, shares the same root as the Aramaic translation for spying or searching. Targum Unkelus translates וַיִּאֲלֶלְנוּ/v'yallelun – “that they may spy out” as וַיִּאֲלֶלְנוּ/V'yallelun (Targum Unkelus on Bamidbar 13:2), as you see this word has the same letters as the Hebrew word אֶלּוּל/Elul. The meaning of the word Elul imparts upon us self-searching and spying out our own character in order to discover its weak points that need to be rectified. It is a favorable and inspirational time for self-discovery and return to G-d. This process entails putting into practice the improvement we know we need to make but which are generally so hard to do. During Elul it becomes easier to improve our character. It's as if Hashem is waiting with open arms for us to become all that we can become so we may receive all that He wants to give us.

Elul is the time of רַצּוֹן/ratzon – goodwill because this is the month in which Hashem created the world for the sake of us human beings keeping His precepts. Hashem Who is perfect created the world through His goodwill in order to benefit us on the 25th of the very first month of Elul. Since then the energy of goodwill characterizes the month of Elul, and this is why Moshe Rabbeinu ascended Mt. Sinai during this month in order to receive the second tablets of the Ten Commandments, signifying Hashem's benevolence and forgiveness (B'nei Yissaschar, *Article for the Month of Elul* 1:4).

We are all familiar with the following acronym of the month of Elul ...אָנִי לְדוֹדִי וְדוֹדִי לִי/Ani l'Dodi v'Dodi li – “I am for my Beloved and my Beloved is for me” (*Song of Songs* 6:3). First we raise ourselves up towards Hashem (*Ani l'Dodi*) then Hashem comes towards us (*v'Dodi li*). Yet, it is actually more of a dialectic process that takes place during the month of Elul when Moshe ascended and stayed on Mount Sinai for a third period of 40 days. During these days G-d forgave the Jewish people for the sin of the golden calf. Therefore the small *gematria* (numerical value) of אֶלּוּל/Elul = 1+30+6+30=67 6+7=13 alluding to the 13 principles of Divine mercy revealed during this month. B'nei Yissaschar explains that during Elul, Hashem's right hand is outstretched to receive our repentance. This is in spite of the fact that since eating from the Tree of Knowledge each person includes both good and evil, and often the evil within us fools us to think it is good because of its clever camouflage. Although Elul is time for our “arousal from below,” it also reveals the energy of Hashem's upper will, which arouses the Jewish souls to *teshuvah* in the first place. When we repent from the evil, we draw this energy of Hashem's goodwill towards ourselves even more. Thereby we gain the knowledge to distinguish between the good and evil in our lives and become accepted in perfect repentance.

Since the astrological sign of Elul: Virgo is the only sign which is a woman our sages connected the month of Elul to the following verse: "He who finds a wife finds a great good, and obtains goodwill (רַצוֹן/*ratzon*) from Hashem" (*Mishlei* 18:22). Finding the good points within ourselves and pushing away the evil during the month of Elul is compared to finding a good wife, and this brings about the personal attachment to the Divine goodwill which permeate the month of Elul. It is also interesting to note that the first set of Ten Commandments were missing the letter ט/*tet* (the first letter of the word טוב/*tov* – good). This is in order that Israel shouldn't think that, G-d forbid, the good had ceased from the world with the breaking of the *luchot* (tablets). Therefore, on the second tablets, that Moshe ascended to receive during the month of Elul, when Hashem was appeased with Israel, included the clause: "In order that it should be good (יִיטָב/*yitav*) for you" (*Devarim* 5:16). Thus we learn that no matter what, good remains within the world forever (B'nei Yissaschar, *Article for the Month of Elul* 1:3). Therefore, now during Elul is a special favorable time of the year when we receive and ability to search our own character to distinguish between true good and evil camouflaged as good. Let us take advantage of this opportunity to carry out our self-discovery into action!

Pure, Feminine, Earthbound, Insightful, Virgo in Action

I'm really happy to have been born during the month of Elul because this is truly one of my favorite months filled with movement and action. It follows the month of Av when we worked on rectifying of the sense of hearing and learned the importance of rectifying our actions from the historical hardships connected with the month of Av. The element of the month, earth, infuses people born during this month with love of the land, and with appreciation for working to perfect the physical realm. Earth is also connected to realm of action, the 'sense' of the month. During Elul we are called to fuse perception and thought with their proper association in the realm of action within this lower world.

According to astrology, a Virgo has a natural inclination to analyze phenomena in great detail and sometimes to attend importance to minor details. Since understanding and insight are feminine attributes, the astrological sign of Virgo is represented in the feminine form. There is a general tendency toward perfectionism, constant, introspection and coldness towards emotion. If these traits are not channeled properly, they may lead to small minded compulsiveness, worry and lack of self-confidence. However, when these tendencies are channeled through the Torah, they enable us to rectify ourselves in a most detailed way. Fittingly, the virgin symbolizes modesty and purity, essential traits of true return to G-d. Deep inside our heart there is a place untouched, which is always beautiful, always Holy, and always so good. During this month we need to renew our purity, to make our virginal quality clear by nullifying the evil deeds of our past.

The virgin is G-d's beloved bride, Israel, the bride and beloved of Song of Songs. The word 'virgin' (*betulah*) appears for the first time in the Torah in praise of our matriarch Rivkah (*Bereishit* 24:16). The union of Yitzchak with Rivkah symbolizes *tefilah* – prayer and devotion to G-d. This is alluded to in the numerical value of their names which together add up to the word תְּפִלָּה/*tefilah* (יִצְחָק/Yitzchak + רִבְקָה/Rivkah=208+ 307=515= תְּפִלָּה/*tefilah* – prayer). The verse, "I am my beloved's and my Beloved is mine," refers in particular, to the service of prayer of the month of Elul.

Getting the Point of the Humble Letter *Yud*

זכר ונקיבה. המליך אות י' במעשה וקשר לו כתר וצרפן זה בזה וצר בו בתולה בעולם ואולול בשנה ויד שמאל בנפש
 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 in the Universe, Elul in the Year, and the left hand in the Soul (*Sefer Yetzirah* 5:8).

According to *Sefer Yetzirah* the month of Elul was created through the letter *yud*. The *yud* is the smallest of all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, denoting self-effacement and humility. In order to truly return to G-d, which is what the month of Elul is all about, we must humble ourselves to make room for the Divine presence. When we feel that things are disconnected from us, our Torah, our children and our Rabbis, the letter *yud* is what gives us the ability to connect things back to ourselves. In Hebrew we indicate the first person personal pronoun (my child, my book, my food etc.) by adding a *yud* at the end of the noun. For example, the word for child in Hebrew is ילד/*yeled* if we want to say 'my child' in Hebrew we only add a *yud* in the end of the word for child. This way ילד/*yeled* – 'child' becomes ילדי/*yaldi* – 'my child' with the letter *yud* at the end of the root word.

The letter *yud* is the first letter of the Divine Name and alludes to the attribute of wisdom and thought (*Arizal, Sha'ar HaKavanot, Drushei HaPesach* 2). This month is the time to make a resolve to have our actions coincide with our thoughts. Every Hebrew letter begins with a *yud*. Actually, all created form begins with an essential point of energy and life force, which is alluded to by the shape of the letter *yud* – a point. The *yud* is only one small point. The point of the month of Elul is to get the point! – The most essential thing. This teaches us the necessity of building our lives' processes starting from true beginnings and roots. The end of the creative process is as well a point of consummation and satisfaction, again alluded to by the form of *yud*. Elul is the month of action when we come full circle of both completing the year as well as starting new things. I always look forward to the Elul session at Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin when we kick in the new school year with excitement and renewed love of learning after the summer vacation.

You would think that since the 'sense' of the month of Elul is action, the letter of the month would also be connected with this physical world of action. Surprisingly, this physical world is created with the letter ה/*heh* whereas the world to come is created with the letter *yud* (*Sefer HaShelah Hakodesh, Toldot Adam Beit Yisrael* 7). This teaches us about the inherent influence of our physical actions on our spiritual world to come, and reminds me of Scott Peck's statement in *The Road Less Travelled*. He wrote something like, taking care of the physical needs of others is one of the definitions of spirituality. That really hit home with me, and I truly value people who are involved in taking care of the physical needs of others, and try to do my share as much as I can. I definitely have experienced how true elevation may take place while being involved in physical actions such as food preparations, cleaning and giving *zedakah*. This is also reflected in the fact that when we write the letter *yud*, it appears at the upper section of the line. Let us lift ourselves upwards towards Hashem and the spiritual realm through proper interaction within the physical world of action!

A Left Handed *Teshuvah* that Touches the Heart of our Unconscious

The organ of the month of Elul is the left hand, which fits in with the shape of the letter *yud*, the name *yud* itself shares the root of the word *yad* – hand. The left, in this context, indicates materiality and action, which must be connected to the letter *yud* indicating wisdom. Generally the right hand brings close through giving while the left pushes away (*Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 47a*). In Elul, when we focus on “*Teshuvah, Tzedakah and tefilah*” which removes evil decrees, we need to give indiscriminately with both the right and the left hand.

It is the left hand, which touches the heart. This teaches us that all rectified action derives from the good emotions and intentions of the heart. We put *tefillin* on the left hand. The right hand is what we do consciously. The left hand is what we do unconsciously. We’re just doing it. But it comes from a much deeper place in our heart (Rav Shlomo Carlebach on the Month of Elul). We need to do *teshuvah* on our unconscious to the extent that even our reflexes will automatically do the right thing. The deepest depth is what we are doing unconsciously, without thinking, without worrying about living up to social pressure and without making a picture of ourselves. It is possible to be very holy consciously, but unconsciously rotten to the core. When we are angry, our whole unconsciousness is coming out. It takes a lifetime to fix our unconsciousness, because it’s so deep. Elul is the last month of the year, that’s when we fix that which is most distant from our consciousness. In Elul we can do *teshuvah* for the things we did unconsciously (Rav Shlomo Carlebach).

The world was built with the right hand, but the Beit Hamikdash was built with both hands as it states, “In the place, O Hashem, which You have made for You to dwell in, in the sanctuary, O Hashem, which your hands have established” (*Shemot 15:17*). The right hand judges, but the left hand I don’t know anything. The *bedeken* (lifting the veil) of the *Kalah* (bride) is with the left hand. To let her know, don’t ever think I will judge you.

While the right hand brings close, the left hand pushes away. We must use the left hand to push away all the negative deriving from our evil inclination that we want to eliminate from our being, as we go through this spiritual cleanse during the month of Elul. The constellation of this month is the Virgo, which likewise symbolizes purity and virtue. Even the attribute of the month of Elul, which is sickness, is connected with purity. Sickness is only the outer manifestation of the purification process, which takes place inside the person. When we become sick we get rid of all the toxins and waste-products which have accumulated in our bodies, and the healing which follows leaves us rejuvenated and refined. On another level when we repent during the month of Elul, we allow ourselves to become purified from all our sins and iniquities, thus penetrating the barrier which separates us from G-d. Elul is the last year of the month. At this time we naturally find ourselves reviewing, assessing and evaluating the accomplishments, challenges, and shortcomings of the entire year. Please join me on a tour of self-examination as if we were spies to find both our weak points to strengthen and our strong points to reinforce!