

The Month of Elul:

Final Spiritual Tune-Up as the Year Comes to a Close

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Editing the Video of our Life

The dear month of Elul which Hashem granted us to come close to Him in preparation for the High Holidays is coming towards an end. It seems like this month is too short. There is so much we need to accomplish to better ourselves and give ourselves a final tune-up. Last Shabbat during my birthday *farbrengen* (get-together) I shared words of Torah from the *Netivot Shalom*, who explained that the main character trait of the month of Elul is *יראה/yirah* – awe. This is one of the reasons why we blow the shofar during the month of Elul – and no that is not only a *sefardi* custom, as some of the women thought. The *Netivot Shalom* quotes the prophet: “Shall the Shofar be blown in a city, and the people not tremble? (*Amos* 3:6). I read about the mitzvah of erecting a fence on the roof of a new house, which alludes the opportunity to build ourselves a new completely before the New Year. The fence corresponds to awe of G-d and the numerical value of fence *מעקה/ma'akeh* counting one for the word itself equals the word for fear or rather awe – *יראה/yirah* (216). Through developing awe of G-d during the month of Elul, we prepare ourselves to crown Hashem the King over each and every limb in our body on Rosh Hashana. One of the women commented that she was so grateful for this opportunity to learn about the month of Elul, as it flies by so fast, and often the opportunities it offers are lost, as the High Holidays hit upon us suddenly. Without us being properly prepared we may feel as if we missed the boat. So what is *Yirat* Hashem? Awe of G-d and how do we develop it asked another of the women? I opened the “floor” for everyone to share and different women shared their insights. *יראה/yirah* consist of the same Hebrew letters as the word *ראה/re'iyah* – to see. Developing awe of G-d is about visualizing G-d before us always, in whatever we do. “The eye sees, and the ear hears, and all your deeds are written in the book” (*Pirkei Avot* 2:1). By way of extending these words of *chazal*, an even stronger imagery is visualizing how all our actions are recorded in a video. When we come to the world of truth – until 120 – we will watch two videos, the one recorded of our life in action, and the other video is how our life could have been, recording our unfulfilled potential. The pain of purgatory in the afterlife is the pain of experiencing the gap between these two videos (Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *If You Were G-d*). We need to work on building our awe of G-d during the month of Elul as this is the foundation and beginning of our subsequent teshuvah, both during Elul and the High Holidays. Through this *teshuvah* ב"ח we can edit the video of our life and make it more congruent with the video of our potential.

Don't Miss the Boat of Teshuvah: Practical Steps of Confession

I identify with the words of Rav Kook, “at the time before the beginning of the year, the attribute of teshuvah awakens within us. This is the clear recognition that Israel is a holy nation. We begin the New Year only after we have completed the previous year with *חשבון הנפש/chesbon haNefesh* – soul accounting during the month of Elul and the days of *shelichot* (*Moadei HaRe'eya*, p. 58, bottom). Now is the time for *shelichot* – asking Hashem for forgiveness for every way we have been short in fulfilling our potential in serving him. I personally have a hard time with going to organized



communal *shelichot*, which are always very late at night or very early in the morning. Even if women are exempt from synagogue prayer, those who are able to attend surely merit and receive reward (see *Babylonian Talmud Sotah 22a*). Women, like me or those whose family situation doesn't allow for them to leave their home, may still take advantage of the month of Elul for our personal *shelichot*. Rambam writes that the first step in teshuvah, for any kind of sins including unintentional, is to confess before Hashem as it states in the Torah, "Speak to the children of Israel: If a man or woman commit any sin that people commit against Hashem... they must confess the sin that they committed... (*Bamidbar 5:6-7*). Verbal confessing is thus a positive mitzvah from the Torah. The way to do it explains the Rambam, is simply to say "Please Hashem I unintentionally sinned, I transgressed, I committed iniquity before You by doing the following [here we insert the specific transgression...] I regret and am embarrassed about my actions, I promise never to repeat this act again." These are the essential elements of the confessional prayer. Whoever confesses profusely and elaborates on these matters is worthy of praise (Rambam, *HaYad HaChazakah, Laws of Teshuvah 1:1*). By these words I inspired myself to write myself a list of confessions from various actions from which I want to repent.

Does a Written Confession Count?

Since I spend most of my day at the computer, it is natural for me to also make my confession through the computer. Yet, I felt somehow that this was not enough. I was wondering what the halacha says regarding confession, can we confess in writing or must it be orally? When asking my husband where there is a source that confession must be done orally, he answered to look in the Rambam, the laws of Repentance. I glanced through all of the ten chapters of the Laws of Repentance but didn't find a definite answer to my question. Rambam mentions "verbal confession," in Hebrew וידוי דברים/*vidui devarim* – but also a written confession is verbal. Finally I found the *Sefer Chinuch* which is clear that confession has to be orally through the mouth. Confessing orally by pronouncing our transgression with our mouth will help us to integrate our repentance and protect us from repeating the transgression. "The root of the mitzvah is that by means of confessing the sin through the mouth, the person who sinned reveals that he in truth believes that all his deeds are revealed before Hashem. Mentioning the particular sin and regretting committing it helps him become more careful to avoid this transgression next time even inadvertently. After having expressed with his mouth, "I did the following... I acted foolishly," he will be protected from repeating this act (*Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 364*). It seems to me that repentance must be with our entire being: thought, speech and action. Therefore, written confession as has been the custom in other religious bypass the realm of speech, going directly from the realm of thought to that of action. For a full teshuvah we need each of the three following steps: Regret – the realm of thought, Confession – realm of speech, Mending our way – the realm of action.

Building Vessels for the Lights of Elul

Yirah – awe helps us build vessels for all the lights available during the month of Elul. Through developing our awe of G-d we will become more careful in keeping the minutia of the mitzvot correctly. Working on paying more attention to detail in action builds our vessels to hold our light of wisdom and spirituality. Each of the months of the year is associated with a specific permutation of

Hashem's four lettered name, the permutation of Elul is *Heh/Heh/Vav/Yud*. In this permutation the two letters of *heh* precede the *vav* and the *yud*. The letters *heh* are the vessels, for the Divine lights of *yud* and *vav* coming down into the world. Rav Shlomo Carlebach teaches that so much light is coming down into the world, and it just gets lost because we have no vessels for it. What's the greatest joy in the world? When we make vessels for G-d's light, and not one ounce of it is getting lost. Sometimes you love a person so much you open your heart like two million miles, and they come with a one-inch vessel. It's the most painful thing. I want to pick up G-d's light the way it's in heaven. The first *heh* is a vessel for the *yud*, and the second *heh* for the *vav*. The lower *heh* is the way G-d's light comes down into the world. The higher *heh* is I don't want G-d's light to even come into the world and then pick it up I want something so heavenly. The greatest *simcha* is when first there's the vessel and then the light is coming. *Chodesh* Elul is first the two *hehs*. I'm longing – give me a taste of heaven. Master of the World, make me a vessel, until the *vav* – the way the light comes down unto the world. Hashem, give me a taste of both, and eventually *mamash* of *yud* – which is the smallest light but it's the highest light in the world. The *tekiah* (blowing) of the shofar is the greatest longing in the world. The two *hehs* – I am crying. When children cry they don't know why they are crying. They are just crying. You know why children touch our heart so deep, because they don't say anything. They are just crying.

In the End of the Year in Elul We Will All Come Around

So in Elul its ok to cry, cry for all the unfulfilled love and potential. Cry for the yearning for something deeper, holier, higher than this world of pain and temptation. I came across a very comforting Torah of the *B'nei Yissaschar*. "You shall therefore keep the commandment, and the statutes, and the laws, which I command you this day, to do them" (*Devarim* 7:11). This implies that we must not procrastinate but keep the mitzvah at our earliest opportunity, "today" rather than tomorrow. The following verse reads, "It shall come to pass, because (*ekev*) you listen to these laws, and keep, and do them... (*Devarim* 7:12). The word עקב/*ekev* means both 'because' and 'heel.' This implies that even if you push off the mitzvah rather than doing it right away "today," in the end, at the 'heel of time' it will come to pass that you will listen." At the end of the year, during the month of Elul we will learn to listen; for there is no Jewish person who does not awaken spiritually to think thoughts of repentance during these times. This is why our Torah verse reads וְהָיָה/*v'haya* – "It shall come to pass" in the past form with the conversive *vav* which turns past into future. Whenever the Torah writes this form it denotes happiness (*Ohr HaChayim Devarim* 21:1). There is no greater happiness than receiving a spiritual tune-up as we become aroused to repentance during the month of Elul. When we experience this Spiritual Awakening from Heaven, all we need to do is to hold on to this arousal without letting go, then even just at the heel – in the end we will learn to listen. Then we will experience the greatest happiness when the continuation of the Torah verse will be fulfilled: "...Hashem your G-d will keep the covenant and the kindness that He swore to your forefathers (*Devarim* 7:12), (*B'nei Yissaschar*, the Month of Elul, 1:20).