

Ha'Chazarah - החזרה



Rosh Chodesh ELUL

May it be Your will, O LORD, our G-d and the G-d of our forefathers, that You inaugurate this month of *Elul* upon us for goodness and for blessing.

Abba, Father, may You give us long life,
a life of peace – *Shalom*
a life of goodness – *Tovah*
a life of blessing – *Bracha*
a life of sustenance - *Parnassa*
a life of physical health – *Hilutz Atzamot*
a life in which there is a fear of heaven and fear of sin - *Yirat Shamayim ve' Yirat Chet*
a life in which there is no humiliation – *Ein Busha u'Chlimah*
a life of wealth and honor – *Osher ve'Kavod*
a life in which we will have love of Torah and awe and reverence of G-d
- *Ahavat Torah ve'Yirat HaShem*
a life walked more fully for Your glory in *Adoneinu Yeshua*, our Messiah and Lord.
Amen. *Selah*.

¹ Baruch Nachshon, Israel

A. Preparation for the Days of Awe

Though summer still lingered and the day was bright and sunny, there was a change in the air. One smelled already the *Elul*-scent; a *teshuvah*-wind was blowing. Everyone grew more serious, more thoughtful.... All awaited the call of the shofar, the first blast that would announce the opening of the gates of the month of mercy.²

The month of *Elul* is considered a particular time for repentance and reconciliation with G-d. The name of the month is a reminder that this season of repentance (*teshuvah*) and spiritual reflection is not to be a time of morbid introspection or conducted with heaviness. E,l,u,l (*aleph, lamed, vav, lamed*) is an acronym for the Hebrew verse, Song of Songs 6:3,

Ani le'dodi ve'dodi li.

I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.

There are forty days between the first day of *Elul* and *Yom Kippur*. These correspond biblically with the forty days between the day (1st *Elul*) Moses saw the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf and broke the first set of tablets carrying the Ten Words or Commandments of G-d and, after ascending Mount Sinai to intercede and plead for G-d's Divine pardon, the day (10th *Tishrei*) he returned with the second set of tablets. In response to Moses' heartbroken and persistent intercession, G-d forgave the sin of idolatry and the gift of His Word was evidence of His forgiveness. This manifestation of Divine pardon has marked these forty days as a time for self-examination and repentance, and for giving and receiving forgiveness.

The first tangible symbols of justice, the Holy Law of G-d, are the two stone tablets that bore the words inscribed by "the finger of G-d" (Ex. 31:18). We can only imagine the depth of emotion Moses experienced when, after experiencing the wonder of the glory of the Presence of G-d for forty days and returning with the gift of His precious Word, he was confronted with the 'carnival' spectacle of the people idolizing the Golden Calf. He smashed the tablets in all-too-human despair. However, the holiness of the fragments did not disappear when the tablets were broken; they still carried the letters written by G-d. Although not stated in Deuteronomy 10, Rabbinic literature supposes that they

² Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn

were gathered and placed in honor in the Ark of the Covenant together with the rewritten tablets.

That compelling supposition is a great encouragement. Sometimes we can despair at the brokenness of the sinful world, often evident in our own lives as in that of others, and yet each broken piece is holy. It was created and written on, as it were, by the finger of G-d and is precious in His sight. Our Father, through the work of His Son and the power of His Spirit of holiness, is actively restoring, regathering and redeeming all the scattered pieces. In all we do, we have the honor and sacred calling to participate with Him in that healing work.

Pause and Reflect 1.

We have always considered ourselves to be an inseparable part of humanity and we were never ready to accept the divine challenge, 'Fill the earth and subdue it.' We have never proclaimed the philosophy of *contemptuous* or *odium seculi*. We have steadily maintained that involvement in the creative scheme of things is mandatory.³

- (a) Consider ways in which we can partner with G-d in His healing work, *tikkun olam*, which means healing of the world.
- (b) By analogy, the month of *Elul* is when we meet G-d in the field.⁴ As believers this represents our daily walk with Yeshua. Can you think back to being a child⁵, out in nature free from work and distractions, filled with joy. Does that image match your walk with the Father?

³ Rabbi Soltoveitchik, 'Confrontation', in Norman Lamm and Walter Wurzbarger, *A Treasury of Tradition*, p. 69

⁴ *Likkutei Torah*, the Alter Rebbe describes the tightening of the bond between G-d and the man in the month of *Elul* with the following parable:
Before a king enters his city, its inhabitants go out to greet him and receive him in the field. At that time, anyone who so desires is granted permission and can approach him and greet him. He receives them all pleasantly and shows a smiling countenance to all....

⁵ Mark 10:15; Luke 18:17



B. Teshuvah - Repentance

Repentance cannot be comprehended rationally; it does not really make sense. Even the angels do not understand what repentance is.⁶

The month affords us a special opportunity to turn our heart to G-d in love. We are reminded that *teshuvah*, repentance, is a loving gift from our faithful Father. It is, in fact, a supernatural gift – a process that is above the forces of nature. The Creator set the laws of nature in place, day follows night, time marches on, death follows life and penalty follows sin. *Teshuvah*/repentance, however, demonstrates that the same Creator is able to counteract His laws of nature. As Jewish author Avraham Finkel describes:

Time is reversible, the past can be undone, a wasted life can be restored; “G-d is close to all who call to Him – to all who call Him with sincerity” (Psalm 145:18).⁷

Teshuvah enables the light of G-d’s Presence to enter any areas of darkness in our hearts, to allow purification and illumination. The Baal Shem Tov⁸ uses a beautiful analogy to explain the concept of repentance:

When you enter a dark room carrying a burning lamp, the darkness vanishes without leaving a trace. So too a *baal teshuvah* [one who repents and turns to G-d and His Word] even though until now he lived in the total darkness of sin, when the light of Torah begins to shine in his soul, all the darkness is gone.⁹

⁶ Rabbi Joseph B. Soltoveitchik

⁷ Avraham Yaakov Finkel, *The Essence of the Holy Days, Insights from the Jewish Sages*, p. 2

⁸ Israel Baal Shem Tov (1700 – 1760), founder of the Hassidic movement in Eastern Europe.

⁹ Avraham Yaakov Finkel, *The Essence of the Holy Days, Insights from the Jewish Sages*, p. 12.

Teshuvah is always linked with *tzedakah*, charity. In this respect, the commentary *Bnei Yissaschar* states: “Behold, *Elul* corresponds with the tribe of **Gad**.”¹⁰ The Sages record that the letter of Gad’s name – *gimmel, dalet* – stand for *gemol dalim*, which translates as: Bestow kindness upon the poor. As G-d blesses and prospers us, we need always remember to give and to share what we have with those less fortunate.

Pause and Reflect 2.

After John was put in prison, Yeshua came into the Galilee proclaiming the Good News from G-d: The time has come, G-d’s Kingdom is near! Turn to G-d from your sins and believe the Good News! Mark 1:14-15

- (a) How did Yeshua speak of the “good news” of repentance and its inextricable connection with His life and mission? How does this affect a person’s past, present and future?
- (b) How is *teshuvah* like “putting away childish things” and growing up? (1 Corinthians 13:11)



C. Know Before Whom You Stand

The idea of man having been created in the image of G-d was interpreted, it seems, not only as an analogy of being but as an analogy of doing. Man is called upon to act in the likeness of G-d. “As He is merciful be though merciful.”¹¹

¹⁰ Bnei Yissaschar, *Ma’amarim Chodesh Elul* 1:8.

¹¹ Rabbi Joshua Abraham Heschel and Fritz A. Rothschild, *Between G-d and Man*, p. 38

The weekly Torah portion of *Nitzavim* – ‘We are Standing’ (Deuteronomy 29:9 - 30:20) is always read during the month of *Elul*, specifically on the *Shabbat* before *Rosh HaShanah*. The opening verse is a clear, resonant reminder of the central theme of *Elul* and the Days of Awe: “Today you are all standing before G-d your LORD”.

In the authority of Messiah Yeshua, our great High Priest who constantly is interceding on our behalf, we have the guarantee that we can approach the Throne of G-d in full and free forgiveness. He is our Redeemer, the powerful “right hand” of G-d stretched out in grace and mercy to receive all who repent and, in the mighty love of the Father, to draw them into the Kingdom of G-d in full standing as His beloved children.

In connection with the injunction to “know before Whom you stand,” the Hebrew word *le'da'at* (to know) means to have intimate knowledge of. It is not only learning about, or storing up facts on a subject, it is an experience that involves one’s emotions. A giving and receiving, an inter-connectedness, a dynamic relationship with; one that is alive and growing and that requires one’s awareness and intentional co-operation.

This intimate knowledge of G-d is what should affect our knowledge of others; our spouse, children, family, friends, in fact whoever G-d brings into our life or across our path. Abraham Heschel describes this beautifully, “To meet a human being is an opportunity to sense the image of G-d, the presence of G-d. According to a rabbinical interpretation, the Lord said to Moses : “Wherever you see the trace of man, there I stand before you...”¹²

Here’s an exercise for you. “Biblical piety may be expressed in the form of a supreme imperative: Treat yourself as a symbol of G-d.”¹³ “Now close your eyes for a moment, and visualize yourself. You are looking at an image of G-d. How do you treat yourself? Can you offer yourself the reverence due G-d? Now open your eyes and turn and face one person sitting next to you. Can you offer this person the reverence due G-d? And look about you at all the people in this sanctuary. Can you offer them the reverence due G-d?”

¹² Abraham Heschel, *No Religion Is An Island*; 7

¹³ Abraham Heschel, *Between G-d and Man*; 235

Pause and Reflect 3.

- (a) Does the dimension of 'knowing' inherent in the Hebrew *le'da'at* describe our relationship, our 'knowing' of our G-d and Lord? Our relationship with one another?



The Torah portion *Nitzavim* also carries a Divine promise of the joyful time when the hearts of all Israel will return to G-d and will yield to His will in loving obedience:

“You will do everything that I am commanding you today; you and your children will repent with all your heart and with all your soul” (30:2).

On that day the great Shofar of G-d will sound with a triumphant blast to announce the arrival of the King of kings before whom every individual will stand to give an account of his life. The shofar is thus sounded at the morning and evening services every day through *Elul* in the hope that its stirring blasts will awaken those who are “asleep” in the stupor of sin. The clarion call moves us to repent and turn again to the Almighty; to receive the power to break any negative patterns of the past and walk forward in new hope and inspiration.

Pause and Reflect 4.

Beyond all agony and anxiety lies the most important ingredient of self-reflection: the preciousness of my own existence. To my heart my existence is unique, unprecedented, priceless, exceedingly precious, and I resist the thought of gambling away its meaning.¹⁴

¹⁴ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who Is Man?*, p. 35

- (a) A tool of the enemy of our soul is to induce a sense of forgetfulness and apathy. He would love for you to forget that you are *bat ha'melech* (a daughter) of the King. You were created *b'tzelem Elohim* (in the image of G-d) and have infinite value and beauty. In this season of *Elul*, what is the shofar waking you up to?
- (b) How is the shofar in this season of *Elul* like an instrument of spiritual warfare? (Numbers 10:9)



This Hebrew month of *Elul* let us take the opportunity to draw aside spiritually, to press in to the Presence of our Beloved. Let us “be still and know.” As Dwight Pryor reminds us: “We live in such frenetic times that we are ill inclined to ‘stand still’ and even less to ‘see’ with any clarity what is going on in our own lives. But the approaching High Holy Days give us the opportunity to quiet the noise of our busy lives and to pay attention to the course we are taking—in order to see anew our G-d and to effect profound and lasting changes in our lives.”¹⁵

We can rejoice and rest in the knowledge that we are forgiven and can stand confidently before the “Judge of all flesh” when the shofar resounds on *Rosh haShanah*, the Day of Trumpets, and on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:24;27). We then can eagerly anticipate another year of devoted service in joyful worship of our G-d and King.

D. Psalm 27

The LORD is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? ...For in the day of trouble He will conceal me in His tabernacle; In the secret place of His tent He will hide me;¹⁶

¹⁵ Dwight Pryor, *Stand Still and See!*

¹⁶ Psalm 27:1a, 5a

Psalm 27 is read every day during *Elul*. Orthodox Jews recite it morning and evening through both *Elul* and *Tishrei*, until the close of *Sukkot* (the Feast of Tabernacles). It is a worthwhile exercise to write it out in your own hand, also in Hebrew if you are able, and keep it available for easy access.

The psalm reminds us, in view of the approaching Day of Repentance, *Rosh HaShanah*, that the Lord is our Light. When we repent, His light dispels any darkness in our lives and the light of His Truth guides our feet into and through the coming year.

As we look towards *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, we proclaim that G-d is our Redeemer and in Messiah Yeshua is our salvation. And we know, as enacted on *Sukkot*, that He literally hides us in the tent, or tabernacle, of His Presence (*yitzfeneini b'sukka*). He protects us from all harm and, as we allow the powerful truths of this season to infuse our innermost beings, He leads us forward and will guide our steps through the coming year *b'orach yishor*, on a straight path of integrity. What joy to realize, as David proclaims, that one can "...dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life!"

Pause and Reflect 5.

- (a) What nuances of our relationship with G-d does this Psalm reveal?
- (b) How does Psalm 27 impress upon one that *teshuvah* is a lifestyle and not a one-time experience?
- (c) David never says in Psalm 27 that he is not afraid. Fear is a normal emotional reaction - a cancer scare, an unknown illness, loss of a job, a lost child, fear of our own hearts... but when this natural fear is wrapped in the absolute knowledge, *da'at*, of our G-d who is good, we are enabled to fear [in awe and reverence] the only One who is to be feared;¹⁷ and then Fear becomes a fortress and refuge for us. David feared G-d and lived under the fortress of His love. Is your fear disabling or a fortress?

¹⁷ Luke 12:5



Ani le'dodi ve'dodi li.

I am for my Beloved and my Beloved is for me.