

MEDITATIONS FOR ELUL



Adonai is compassionate and gracious, endlessly patient, loving, and true, showing mercy to thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and granting pardon.¹

RAV HESED V'EMET ABUNDANT IN LOVINGKINDNESS AND TRUTH

¹ Taken from Yom Kippur liturgy based on Exodus 34:6.

Each and **everyone** of us is a baal **teshuvah**², regardless of our history; for every day we choose **anew** whether or not we will be in a **relationship** with the Almighty. however trifling, is done for itself alone, but all is typical of something yet to come.”³

The following meditations are taken from *Repentance - The Meaning And Practice Of Teshuvah* by Dr. Louis E. Newman. As we move through the month of Elul may we more fully embrace and celebrate teshuvah as a loving gift from our Heavenly Father.

ELUL - 1

Teshuvah begins with the self, but it must not end there; it would be only half a prayer. Teshuvah is neither divine grace segregated from human works nor human works amputated from the arms of grace.

ELUL - 2

More than a static being, the human begin is a constant becoming. Teshuvah celebrates the competence and capacity and courage to overcome, to change, to grow, to begin and begin again.

ELUL - 3

Through teshuvah we come to know our lives as marked by both radical responsibility and radical freedom, as products of our past yet capable of forging a new future for ourselves.

ELUL - 4

Our transgressions against one another have cosmic consequences. What is at stake in our moral interactions with others far transcends the effects that we can observe. When we hurt others, we not only affect them, but we also make this earth a place in which G-d's presence is less palpable to precisely that extent...Sins thus not only offend G-d, but they also diminish G-d.

ELUL - 5

Doing teshuvah, turning away from sin, is about choosing G-d over idolatry, truth over deception (including self-deception). All that is required is a fearless, unwavering commitment to truth - both about our individual lives and about human life in general. It is about refusing to pretend that we are more powerful, more entitled, more invincible than we really are. It is also about refusing to hide - from ourselves and from those we have hurt - the truth of what we have done. To place truth and honesty at the very enter of our lives, continuously and courageously, is the very opposite of idolatry. It is to worship what is genuinely ultimate, unconditional, and unchangeable.

ELUL - 6

Our responsibility for what we do is both unconditional and inescapable, for our moral duties derive from G-d and are enforced by G-d...There is no possibility of evasion -

² One who repents and turns one's heart to G-d and His Word.

³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge

not by dissembling, negotiating with, hiding from, or outliving the One before whom we are accountable.

ELUL - 7

G-d sees us, knows what we have done, and calls us to account. This, too, is clear from the earliest biblical story, which records that Adam and Eve attempt to “hide themselves” in the garden when they sense G-d’s presence (Genesis 3:8). Of course, this too is an unworkable strategy for avoiding responsibility. There is nowhere to hid, no place to put ourselves that is beyond G-d’s ken. This further heightens the sense of human accountability, for even our most secret transgressions are not secret. Our responsibility for what we do is both unconditional and inescapable, for our moral duties derive from G-d and are enforce by G-d, who does not share this role with others...There is no possibility of evasion - not by dissembling, negotiating with, hiding from, or out living the One before whom we are accountable...

When we begin to live our lives as if we stand continually before G-d, who sees us at all times, then we are ready to assume a kind of infinite responsibility for all our deeds. We are also ready to recognize our inescapable need for teshuvah.

ELUL - 8

The notion that I am destined for some terrible fate or that the choices I have already made condemn me to a future I cannot change is here (see Isaiah 55:6-7) completely negated. I am free to choose against my own past, and not only this, but G-d promises to meet me more than halfway when I do.

ELUL - 9

Teshuvah—returning—is the name Judaism gives to this process of retrieving our sense of direction. Repentance is the ultimate form of return. After turning our gaze away from G-d and straying from the straight path, we can still find our way back. And it is as simple as taking just one step in a new direction. For turning in a new direction, by as little as one degree, will lead us over time to a wholly different destination.

ELUL- 10

Many times we are willing to acknowledge the fact that we did the deed in question (agency), but in the same breath deny that we are really at fault (culpability). Someone else made us do it, so we really have no liability for what we did...Teshuvah is only possible for those who can acknowledge both that they are guilty of some misdeed and that they alone are responsible for their moral failure.

ELUL - 11

The process of teshuvah culminates in a moral transformation that encompasses both an inner reorientation and a change in outward behavior.

ELUL - 12

We are not “less” because of our misdeeds; however, we do impoverish ourselves spiritually and morally when we fail to accept ourselves, faults and all.

The simple act of accepting ourselves enables us to accept responsibility for the times we slighted a friend, took something we weren’t entitled to, or responded harshly to a co-

worker when we should have been kinder. When we accept ourselves in this way, we do not have to hide from ourselves or others. We are free to take responsibility for all of what we do.

ELUL - 13

Remorse is the crux of the inner process of repentance. It looks both backward and forward; it presupposes a willingness to assume moral responsibility and points to the need for further moral transformation; it couples sadness with hopefulness. If repentance is “turning,” then remorse is the pivot of that turn, for it is the emotion that we inevitably feel when we stand posed between the awareness of our past transgressions and the resolve to do something about them.

ELUL - 14

It is only when we see ourselves - and allow others to see us - as we really are that we can reach a level of self-acceptance that is the very prerequisite for...teshuvah.

ELUL - 15

The need for sincere apology is an integral component in genuine teshuvah...when we return again and again to express our remorse and attempt to make peace with our neighbors, we gain a healthy respect for the power of our misdeeds and the difficulty of compensating for them. And that awareness, once acquired, serves both to deter us from further transgressions and to prompt us to deeper levels of self-examination.

ELUL - 16

We must never turn away from the awareness of our faults precisely so that we can turn away from them. The goal is a kind of remembering that leads to forgetting. For penitents know that it is when we hide our faults from ourselves that they retain their hold over us, but by examining them thoroughly, we assert our freedom from them.

ELUL - 17

Flawed creatures that we are, we continually struggle with our yetzer ha-ra.⁴ No matter how much soul reckoning we have done, no matter how well trod the path of repentance may be, we may yet lose our way.

The task is infinite. The work of teshuvah is never done.

ELUL- 18

Only the repentance of love, motivated by the desire to grow ever closer to G-d, has the power to transform our transgressions into merits, for the sin itself has now become the impetus to cleave to truth and righteousness.

ELUL - 19

Our mortality reminds us of the need to repent and of the ways in which repentance can make this time-bound life meaningful. “Repent one day before your death” - cultivate every day the awareness that death may be imminent, and certainly inevitable, and you will be drawn to the daily practice of teshuvah.

⁴ The evil inclination.

ELUL - 20

Seeing goodness in others, perhaps especially in those who cannot see it themselves, is an extraordinary gift. It is often precisely the gift they need to begin the process of teshuvah.

ELUL - 21

Hope is the spiritual foundation of teshuvah. But this doesn't mean that our faith in the possibility of renewal must be rock solid before we can begin rebuilding our lives. Sometimes just a ray of hope is enough to convince us that teshuvah is possible, and that, in turn, enables us to take small steps along the path of repentance.

ELUL - 22

Teshuvah reminds us that moral development and renewal occur in the contest of renewing our relationship with G-d. Moral "turning" and spiritual "turning" are part of an integrated whole, so that the best (perhaps the only) way to overcome our moral failings is to reawaken to certain spiritual realities.

ELUL - 23

The power of atonement is precisely that it offers transgressors the possibility of clearing the slate, reclaiming their good name. What was done is undone. The past can be redeemed and, as it were, made to disappear. But this very idea - that transgressions can be wiped away - is potentially dangerous, for it threatens to undermine a key principle of justice: moral accountability. If teshuvah lets me off the hook for my misdeeds, how will I also be accountable for them? If I know that expiation is available to me, no matter what I do wrong, why not continue in my hurtful ways? The more we acknowledge the power of teshuvah, the less the gravity of our sins seems to matter.

The Rabbi's recognized this problem, and in this text they address it directly. Teshuvah, they tell us, cannot be abused. It is not a crutch on which we can rely as we continue to engage in inappropriate behavior...this is to misconstrue the nature of teshuvah, which does not magically or automatically undo what we have done...The person who imagines that she can continue to sin while relying on the option of repentance is never really capable of repentance. Such a person understands neither the nature of sin nor of repentance...Sin is not so trivial nor repentance so effortless...teshuvah requires the hard work of the soul reckoning...the real goal is radical transformation...

ELUL - 24

Some barriers to teshuvah are psychological - we tend to minimize the significance of small misdeeds or underestimate how easily we can become habituated to wrongdoing. Teshuvah, as we know, requires a very highly developed sense of our own weak spots and regular vigilance about the ways to resist temptation.

ELUL - 25

Some of us walk around with a highly inflated idea of ourselves...Others of us are deeply insecure and suffer from perennially low self-esteem...In truth, both these two groups of people, though they appear to be opposites, are one and the same...When we engage in *cheshbon hanefesh*⁵, we attempt to break out of these dysfunctional cycles and put ourselves in proper perspective...we are neither as all-important or as pitiable as we

⁵ An accounting of the soul.

may be inclined to think...the goal of gaining perspective on our lives can be put in terms of seeing ourselves as G-d sees us..."little lower than the angels" (Psalm 8:6) and "mere dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27).

ELUL - 26

Like water, teshuvah is both destructive and creative. It dissolves the person you were but simultaneously provides the moisture you need to grow anew. It erodes the hard edges of your willfulness but also refreshes your spirit. It can turn the tallest barriers of moral blindness into rubble while it also gently nourishes the hidden seeds of hope buried deep in your soul. Teshuvah, like water, has the power both to wash away past sin and to shower you with the blessing of a new future, if only you trust it and allow yourself to be carried along in its current.

ELUL - 27

Teshuvah forces us to take responsibility for the past, even as it promises us freedom from that past. It seems, in fact, that our ability to overcome the mistakes of the past increases in direct proportion to our determination to own them. Paradoxically, we can escape the burdens of our past only by running toward them, rather than away from them...the person who has been burdened with guilt and habituated to moral failing can be reborn, emerging as a person of integrity, self-awareness, and moral insight.

ELUL - 28

There is an alchemy in teshuvah. It turns the dross of human souls into gold...The turning from evil to good is in some ways the simplest of acts. But then, so too is breathing. Any physician can readily explain the mechanism by which we inhaled and exhale, exchanging oxygen and carbon dioxide. But the fact that we are living, breathings creatures at all - that human life in all its splendor and complexity exists in the first place - that is not finally explicable in material terms alone. As Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, the fact that there is anything at all rather than nothing is a source of radical amazement.⁶ So, too, is the reality of teshuvah.

ELUL - 29

Our lives are not marked by our achievements, or certainly not by them alone, but rather by how we deal with our failings. Revealing to the world only our virtues, our achievements, the things that make us "proud," contributes to our moral impoverishment. For when we do not bring all of ourselves, our faults in particular, into the open, we not only conceal ourselves from those we love most, but we also become partially invisible even to ourselves. Worse yet, we come to believe that what is concealed in this way does not really matter, that the facade of goodness and rectitude that we present is the whole of who we are. Then, in those quiet moments of self-reflection when the lights on the stage of our lives have gone dark and we find ourselves alone with our thoughts, we confront the harsh truth - that we live bifurcated lives, that our lives lack wholeness and integrity. We not only deceive and falsify from time to time, but in a fundamental way we also live a lie.

It is into this dark and painful reality that teshuvah comes with its startling message of hope - that there is a way out of this truncated and stultifying life; indeed, that there is but one way out...Teshuvah in this sense is a true homecoming, which is simultaneously a turning away from transgression and brokenness and a turning toward the ones we have

⁶ Abraham Heschel, *G-d In Search Of Man*, pg. 47

harmed, turning inward to ourselves but also toward G-d, who loves us even in our waywardness and calls us to truthfulness and wholeness.