

## The Month of Elul

Rosh Hashanah, the first day of the month of Tishrei, marks the beginning of the new year, 5778. It is the counting of years from the creation of the world, which happened on the first of Tishrei. It is interesting to know, that it was not the physical world coming into being that we celebrate on Rosh Hashanah. The first of the six days of creation actually was on the 25<sup>th</sup> day in the month of Elul- the month before Tishrei. The sixth and final day of creation, was the first of Tishrei, and Adam was the last thing created on that day. When man was created, everything was in place and ready for Adam. Since man is the purpose for creation, the Torah considers the first of Tishrei as the day the world was created. It was also on this very day that Adam sinned by eating from the tree of knowledge good and bad, and was judged. Therefore, the first of Tishrei, Rosh Hashanah, is also the day of judgement for all his progeny.

Elul, is designated as the month of preparation for the awesome judgement of Rosh Hashanah, just over the horizon. From the beginning of Jewish History, Elul was a month of mercy and forgiveness for the Jewish people. It started just after the Jewish people had sinned by making the golden calf on the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tamuz. Upon seeing the Jewish people with the golden calf, Moshe broke the first set of tablets that he brought from Sinai. Hashem wanted to destroy the Jewish people but Moshe intervened and averted the imminent destruction. For the next forty days, from the 18<sup>th</sup> of Tamuz, until the last day of the month of Av, Moshe pleaded with Hashem to forgive the Jewish people for the terrible sin they had committed. Finally, the next day, the first day of Elul, Hashem acquiesced and told Moshe to come back up Mount Sinai to receive the second set of tablets. Moshe stayed in heaven for the next forty days to receive the second set of tablets and came down with them on Yom Kippur.

Therefore, the forty days from Rosh Chodesh Elul until Yom Kippur, the days that Moshe was in heaven getting the second set of tablets, are days that have been set in the Jewish calendar as days that Hashem showed extra special mercy to His people. Giving us the second set of tablets, is the ultimate in mercy from Hashem.

Imagine the following scenario.

You were invited to the wedding of the son of one of your friends. The hall is full with family and friends, the rabbi, witnesses and bride and groom stand proudly under the chuppah.

All of a sudden, the bride, turns around and looking down from the stage, spots a handsome young man, standing in the back of the hall. In a flash, she bolts from the stage, runs down the aisle, and leaves the building hand in hand with the stranger in the back.

Can you imagine the embarrassment of the groom and his family? After such a slap, would the groom ever consider this girl as a wife again?

This, with no exaggeration, is what happened with the Jewish nation. Mount Sinai was suspended over the heads of the Jewish nation like a chuppah. The Tablets were the wedding ring. Shortly after the Chuppah, when Moshe was about to give them the wedding ring, they were with a the golden calf, a different suiter. And then, a mere 40 days later, Hashem was prepared to enter into a relationship with the Jewish nation once again. What supreme forgiveness!

Even though Hashem is always ready and willing to accept our repentance and grant us our forgiveness for our misdeeds, during the month of Elul and the ten day of Teshuva, He is ever more accessible, and much more forgiving.

To inspire us to use the month of Elul properly, the Sages have added various components to the daily prayers during the month of Elul to remind us of the importance of the time we are in, and of the impending day of Judgement.

The Ashkenazik Jews, 1) blow the shofar after morning prayers every day except Shabbat, and 2) add Chapter 27 of Psalms after prayers morning and evening.

- 1) The source of the custom of blowing the shofar comes from the day that Moshe went up the mountain on the first of Elul to receive the second set of tablets. On that morning, the shofar was blown to alert the entire nation that Moshe was called up to heaven to receive the second set of tablets, and that Hashem had forgiven them for their sin. It was also a warning message. Do not to make the same mistake you made last time Moshe went up the mountain.

The message of that shofar blowing is very relevant to us also. First of all, it reminds us that this is a time for forgiveness, for during this time many years ago, Hashem forgave the Jewish people for the sin of the golden calf. Utilize the time wisely! The shofar is also a warning to us, to better our deeds and not do the sins we are accustomed to doing. What a great message to start each day of Elul with.

- 2) The addition of Psalm #27 is because of the words in the very first verse which say:

(1) ספר תהילים פרק כז

(א) לְדָוִד יְדֹד אֹרִי וְיִשְׁעֵי מִמִּי אִירָא יְדֹד מְעוֹז חַיִּי מִמִּי אֶפְתָּח

*By David: Hashem is my light, and my salvation, whom shall I fear? Hashem is my life's strength, whom shall I dread?*

The Sages explain “my light” is a reference to Rosh Hashanah. “My salvation” is a reference to Yom Kippur.

How are we to understand this explanation of the sages. Our sages use a parable to help us penetrate to the depths of this concept.

What is the difference between a photographer and a doctor?

When a person goes to have a portrait taken by a photographer, even if he is the most unkempt person in the world who always has stains on his shirt, his tie always askew, his jacket creased, his hair a mess, and always needs a shave, for the portrait, he will shape up. He will put on his best suit straight from the cleaners, a fresh clean starched shirt, and a new tie. He'll be sure to take a haircut and a shave. Then he'll stand in front of the mirror, and make sure that everything looks picture perfect. If he has a pimple on one side of his face, he'll show the other side of his face to the camera. He may have the most sour disposition in the world, but for the camera he is going to put on his most charming smile.

When you would take one look at the picture of him hanging on his wall you would burst out laughing. Who is that? He never looked like that a day in his life. Who is he fooling by dressing up for the photo like that? He doesn't look like that at all!

The answer is, he is not fooling anybody. Everybody knows for a photo you want to look your best.

When you go to the doctor, it is just the opposite. You take everything off, and you tell the doctor all the secrets of what ails you. You don't want to leave anything out, because you want him to heal every last pain you have.

Rosh Hashanah is אורי *my light*. Think of it as the flash of the camera taking a portrait of you. In that flash of light you want to look your best. You want to show Hashem what you are capable of looking like.

On Rosh Hashanah we do not mention our sins at all. The prayers are about Hashem being the King of the universe, and we proclaim Hashem as the King of the world, and accept Him as our king. This is what a picture-perfect Jew looks like.

Yom Kippur is like going to the doctor. Hashem is ישעי *my salvation, my savior from all my ailments*. I want to expose all my ailments and flaws, so the doctor can heal them once and for all.

Therefore, on Yom Kippur we confess all our sins, with the hope that Hashem will forgive them so we can be the person Hashem saw in the portrait on Rosh Hashanah.

On Rosh Hashanah Hashem is a photographer, and on Yom Kippur, Hashem is our doctor.

The Sephardic Jews prepare for Rosh Hashanah in a very different way than their Ashkenazic brothers. They do not blow the shofar after the morning prayers, and they do not add a chapter of Psalms. What they do is special prayers asking forgiveness called סליחות (*slichos*). Just prior to Rosh Hashanah the Ashkenazim also say slichos, but the Sephardim do so the entire month of Elul.

The Sephardic slichos are very different than the Ashkenazic ones. While the Ashkenazim will have a different set of slichos for each day the slichos are said, The Sephardim say the very same slichos every day for almost 40 days. During the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the עשרת ימי תשובה a few extra paragraphs are added. But pretty much, they are saying the very same slichos every day. Those slichos are beautifully poetic, and are also very easy to understand. This makes the saying of the slichos very meaningful, because it is possible to understand everything that is being said and to say it with feeling and meaning.

Additionally, over time tunes and melodies have developed and much of the slichos are sung in unison by the congregation. This creates a feeling of unity in the congregation which is very powerful. All in all it is a very uplifting and holy experience.

There is something very curious about the month of אלול (Elul). It is the only month of the year which has many hints in scripture. The hint is in the four letters ל ו ל א which are found in sequence as the first letters of four words in a sentence of Scripture. Let's look at a few of them and derive a list of instructions of how to prepare ourselves for the day when we will come before Hashem for judgement.

By far the most famous of all the hints is the one in שיר השירים (Shir Hashirim) composed by King Solomon.

(3) ספר שיר השירים פרק ו

(ג) אֶנִּי לְדֹדִי וְדֹדִי לִי הִרְעָה בְּשׁוֹשָׁנִים

*I alone am my Beloved's and my Beloved is mine.*

The word אלול in this verse is telling us, that during this month of Elul, our Beloved, Hashem, wants to be very close to us. When we make overtures to Hashem our Beloved, He will respond in kind and return the closeness to us. But, the instructions are, that it must start with us, and it must be out of love. But, when we reach out to Him, He will respond immediately and bring us close to him.

ספר דברים פרק ל

(ו) וּמִלְּדֹדִי אֶלֶּהֶיָּה אֶת לְבָבָהּ וְאֶת לְבָבִי לְבָבָהּ וְרָעָה לְאֶהְבָּהּ אֶת יְדֹדִי אֶלֶּהֶיָּה בְּכֹל לְבָבָהּ וּבְכֹל נַפְשָׁהּ לְמַעַן תִּיָּדָה:

6. Hashem, your God, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, to love Hashem, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live:

This verse is telling us that not only will Hashem bring us close to Him in the month of Elul, he will help us to be better by circumcising our hearts and the hearts of our children, so that we can serve Him better.

Coupled with the previous hint, once we make the proper overtures, Hashem will actually cut away the blockages and barriers in our hearts of flesh that separate us from connecting to Him.

(1) ספר שמות פרק כא

(יג) וְאֲשֶׁר לֹא צָדָה וְהֵאֱלֹהִים אָנְהָ לְיָדוֹ וְשָׁמְתִי לָהּ מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יָנוּס שָׁמָּה:

13. But for one who had not lain in ambush and God had caused it to come to his hand, I shall provide you a place to which he shall flee:

This verse is telling us that even if we have some inappropriate deeds, in the month of Elul, Hashem has given us a place of refuge where we can hide and be protected from the consequences of our sins. In this month, our teshuva (repentance) is accepted much easier, and it is easy to escape from the sins in our hands.

(11) ספר אסתר פרק ט

וּמְשֻׁלוֹת מְנוּת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ וּמִתְנֻת לְאֶבְיוֹנִים:

22. And sending gifts to one another and gifts to the poor.

This verse is giving us another clue how to achieve a good judgement. By giving gifts and presents to the poor.

The verse says:

(1) ספר משלי פרק י

וְצַדִּיקָה תַצִּיל מִמָּוֶת:

*Charity saves from death.*

By giving charity and presents to the poor, we can sweeten the judgement against us. Hashem judges us based on how we judge others. And if we are kind and charitable to others, Hashem will treat us the same.

There are actually many more hints to the month of Elul in scripture, I have brought only a few as a sampling and to teach us some of the tricks of the trade.

The question is, why does the month of Elul of all the months have all the hints. Maybe the answer can be found in a statement of the Sages.

(1) מדרש משלי - פרשה כב

די לחכימא ברמיזא ולשטיא בכורמיזא

*A hint is sufficient for a wise man, and for a fool even a sledge hammer won't help.*

In other words, when it comes to Elul, only a wise man will pick up on the importance of the month and utilize it to the fullest. These ideas will not be accessible to the foolish who don't have the wisdom to understand the deep ideas that are contained here.

Let us hope that we can count ourselves among the wise, and take the hint from the month of Elul.