



Partners In Torah
San Diego-Los Angeles
Study Guide

תשפג לול Elul

Authored by Rabbi Avi Cohen
Partners Detroit

8/29/2023

Partners In Torah

Mission Statement:

Hello, Welcome!

Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.

Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.

Partners in Torah has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.

Thank you for coming!

Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.

Rosh Hashanah, which falls on the 1st day of the month of *Tishrei* (this year, Friday night, September 16th) marks the beginning of the new year 5784. This counts the years since the world's creation, which happened on the 1st of *Tishrei*, year 0. Interestingly, *Rosh Hashanah* does not celebrate the creation of the physical world. The first of the six days of creation was on the 25th day in the month of *Elul*--the month before *Tishrei*. The 1st of *Tishrei* was the sixth and final day of creation on which Adam, the last thing to be created, came into being. When Hashem created Adam, everything was in place and ready for him. Since Man is the purpose for creation, the Torah considers the 1st of *Tishrei* the day that Adam was created as the first day of creation. That was also the day on which Adam and Eve sinned by eating from the tree of knowledge of good and bad and were judged. As a result, the 1st of *Tishrei*, *Rosh Hashanah*, is also the day of judgement for all their progeny.

The month that precedes *Tishrei* – *Elul* - is the month of preparation for *Rosh Hashanah's* awesome judgement, which is just over the horizon.

Early in our History, *Elul* became a month that symbolized mercy and forgiveness for the Jewish people. This was when, on the 17th of *Tamuz*, 39 days after the revelation at Sinai, the Jewish people saw that Moshe did not return from heaven with the tablets as they expected, and they made the golden calf. Moshe returned with the tablets the very next day, as planned, and upon seeing the people with the golden calf, he threw down the tablets that were in his hands and smashed them. For this, Hashem wanted to destroy the Jewish people, but Moshe intervened and saved them from Hashem's wrath. The next day, the 18th of *Tamuz*, Moshe went back up to heaven and pleaded with Hashem to forgive the Jewish people. He remained there for forty days, from the 18th of *Tamuz*, until the last day of the month

of Av. On that day Hashem forgave the Jewish people and agreed to give them a second set of tablets. Moshe came down from heaven, told the people that they had been forgiven and hewed a second set of tablets from stone. The next day, the 1st of Elul, Moshe went up to heaven again, this time with the tablets that he had hewn to have Hashem write the ten commandments on them. Moshe stayed in heaven for the next forty days to receive the second set of tablets, returning with them on *Yom Kippur*.

Therefore, the forty days from *Rosh Chodesh Elul*, the 1st day of *Elul*, until *Yom Kippur*, viz, the days that Moshe was in heaven receiving the second set of tablets, are days set in the Jewish calendar as days during which Hashem showed extra mercy to His people. Giving us the second set of tablets represented Hashem's ultimate forgiveness.

Imagine the following scenario.

You are invited to your friend's son's wedding. There is excitement in the air. The hall is filled with family and friends, and the rabbi, witnesses, bride and groom are all standing proudly under the chuppah.

Suddenly, the bride turns around, looks down from the stage, and spots a handsome young man standing in the back of the hall. In a flash, she bolts from the stage, runs down the aisle towards the young man, and leaves the building hand in hand with him.

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

The Jewish nation acted exactly like the bride in this story.

The Talmud tells us that Mount Sinai suspended over the heads of the Jewish nation served as a chuppah, and the Tablets were the wedding ring. Shortly after the Chuppah, when Moshe was about to give them the ring, they were dancing with the golden calf, a different suitor. And yet, a mere 40 days later, Hashem was prepared to renew His relationship with the Jewish nation once again. What supreme forgiveness!

The extreme forgiveness that Hashem granted us then, repeats itself every year at this time, therefore, though Hashem is always ready and willing to accept our repentance and grant us forgiveness for our misdeeds, during the month of Elul and the ten day between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (the "*Aseret Yemai Teshuva*"), He is much more accessible and much more forgiving.

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

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

- 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 that you made the last time that Moshe ascended the mountain.

The message of that shofar blowing is truly relevant to us also, to remind 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. Use the time wisely! The shofar also warns us to better our deeds and not do the sins that we have become accustomed to doing. What a great message with which to start each day of Elul.

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

(א) לָדוֹד אֲדָרְךָ אֱלֹהֵי וְיִשְׁעֵי מִמֶּנִּי אֵיךָ דָּד מְעוֹז חַיִּי מִמֶּנִּי אֶפְחָד

*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*” refers to Rosh Hashanah. “*My salvation*” refers to Yom Kippur.

How are we to understand this explanation? The Sages use a parable to help us understand the concepts.

What is the difference between sitting for a portrait and going to a doctor for a checkup?

When a person sits for a portrait, even the most unkempt person in the world cleans himself up for the picture. Meet my friend Joe. Generally, Joe has stains on his shirt, his tie is askew, his jacket is always creased, his hair is a mess, and he always needs a shave. Despite all that, before sitting for the portrait he will clean himself up. He will don his best suit- freshly cleaned with no creases, put on a fresh clean starched shirt, and a new tie. He'll be sure to take a haircut and a shave. Then he will stand in front of the mirror, making 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 generally have the world's most sour disposition, but for the camera he wiput on his most charming smile.

When you would take one look at the picture of Joe on his wall you would burst out laughing. Is that you, Joe? You never looked like that a day in your life. Who are you fooling by dressing up and posing like that for the photo? Who are you fooling?

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

On the other hand, just the opposite obtains when a person goes to the doctor for a checkup. They put him in a room, and after handing him a flimsy robe they tell him to take his clothing off and put on the robe. When the doctor finally comes into the room, he bares himself and his soul to the doctor, telling him all his aches and pains. "And when I lift up my arm like this, it hurts right here!" He doesn't want to leave anything out, because he wants the doctor to heal every last pain that he has.

Rosh Hashanah is אורי - *my light*- a *portrait*. Think of it as the flash of the camera taking your portrait. In that flash of light you want to look your best. Even though you may look sloppy during the year, on Rosh Hashanah you want to show Hashem what you *can* look like.

Curiously, on Rosh Hashanah we make no mention our sins at all. Instead, the prayers are about Hashem being the King of the universe, and as we proclaim Hashem the King of the world, we coronate Him as our king. This is what a picture - perfect Jew looks like – a servant of the King – Hashem - ready to serve.

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

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

On *Rosh Hashanah* we sit before Hashem for a portrait; on *Yom Kippur* we visit Hashem, the doctor, to heal all our ailments.

The Sephardic Jews prepare for Rosh Hashanah in a quite 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. Instead, they say special prayers that ask for forgiveness called סליחות (*slichot*). The Ashkenazim also say *slichot* just prior to *Rosh Hashanah* through *Yom Kippur*, but the Sephardim say them for the entire month of *Elul* through *Yom Kippur*.

The Sephardic *slichot* are very different than the Ashkenazic ones. While the Ashkenazim will have a different set of *slichot* for each day, the Sephardim say the same *slichot* every day for almost 40 days. During the days between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, the עשרת ימי תשובה, “*Aseret Yemai Teshuva*” – *Ten days of Teshuva* - a few extra paragraphs are added. But otherwise, they say the same *slichot* every day. They are beautifully poetic yet easy to understand making it very meaningful to say them.

Additionally, over time, tunes and melodies have developed, and many of the *slichot* are sung in unison by the congregation. This creates a powerful feeling of unity in the congregation. 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 that has many hints in Scripture. The key is the four letters א ל 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 for 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*) – The Song of Songs, composed by King Solomon. (6:3)

(ג) אָנִי לְדוּדִי וְדוּדִי לִי הִרְעָה בְּשׁוֹשָׁנִים

3) 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 clear: it must all start with us, and it must arise from love. But, when we properly reach out to Him, He will respond immediately and bring us close.

There is another verse in Deuteronomy (30:6) that also has four words in a row whose first letters spell אלול.

(ו) וּמָל יְדוּד אֱלֹקֶיךָ אֶת לְבָבְךָ וְאֶת לֵבב זְרַעְךָ לְאַהֲבָה אֶת יְדוּד אֱלֹקֶיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ לְמַעַן חַיֶּיךָ :

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 informs us that not only will Hashem bring us close to Him in the month of Elul, but He will also help us to be better by removing the offensive part of our hearts and the hearts of our children so that we can serve Him better.

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

Exodus (21:13) contains yet another verse with four consecutive words whose first letters spell אלול.

(יג) וְאֶשֶׁר לֹא צָדָה וְהֶאֱלָקִים אֲנִהּ לִידּוֹ וְשִׁמְתִּי לָךְ מִקּוֹם 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 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 be protected from the consequences of our sins. In this month, our *teshuva* (repentance) is accepted much more easily and it is easy to escape from the sins in our hands.

The next hint is from a verse in the Megillah of Esther that we read on Purim. (9:22)

וּבְשִׁלּוּחַ מְנוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ וּבְמִתְנּוֹת לְאֶבְיוֹנִים :

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

This verse gives us another clue how to achieve a good judgement - by giving gifts and presents to the poor.

Proverbs (10:2) tells us

וְצַדִּיקָה תִצְּלִיל מִמָּוֶת :

2) 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.

Of the many hints to the month of Elul in Scripture, we have seen only a few as a sampling to teach us some valuable lessons.

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

די לחכימא ברמיזא ולשטיא בכורמיזא

A hint is sufficient for a wise man, and for a fool even a sledgehammer 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 use it to the fullest. These ideas will be inaccessible to the fool who lacks the motivation to think into 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 and use it to prepare ourselves for the Days of Awe that are rapidly approaching.