



TEMPLE BETH DAVID

2020 / תשפ"א / 5081

GUIDE TO
CELEBRATING



THE
HIGH HOLY DAYS

ELUL

(EARLY RELEASE)

PART 1:

*ELUL - PREPARING FOR THE HIGH HOLY DAYS

INTRODUCTION TO ELUL

Elul, the final month of the Jewish year, gives us an opportunity to reflect on the past year - the good, the challenging, the beautiful and the difficult. While no holidays take place during the month itself, it serves as a bridge between the outgoing and incoming years and is immediately followed by the High Holy Days of Rosh HaShana (the Jewish New Year), and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). Because the High Holy Days are so important, the days of Elul which lead up to it are seen as an auspicious period - a period in which we have an opportunity to get ready, spiritually, for the High Holy Days.

The Talmud therefore teaches that the Hebrew word “Elul” is understood to be an acronym for “*Ani L’dodi V’dodi Li*” - “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine” (Song of Songs 6:3), as Elul is seen as a time to search one’s heart and draw close, reconnect and reunite with God.

It is customary to blow the shofar every morning during Elul, aside from Shabbat mornings. The shrill, piercing sounds of these blasts are understood to awaken our spiritual side and to inspire us to begin already with the soul searching process (*cheshbon hanefesh*) which we typically associate with the High Holy Days.

However, there is an important difference: while on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur we come before God to plead for our lives to be spared and for us to be granted spiritual wellbeing in the New Year, our tradition teaches that God is not in a position to forgive us for how we have wronged other individuals. Therefore we are first required in the month of Elul to go to others whom we may have wronged and to ask for their forgiveness, before we have the audacity - the *chutzpah* - to present ourselves to God over the High Holy Days and to ask God to overlook all the instances in which we missed the mark in our relationship with God this past year.

And so, Elul is about readiness and about a gradual self-immersion into the space of the High Holy Days in the month to follow. It’s about anticipation of our personal encounter with God.

While this process certainly should be taken seriously, at the same time one need not be consumed with a sense of dread, but rather with deep appreciation that we are given the opportunity every year to wipe the slate clean and to begin anew.

*In 2020, the Jewish month of Elul corresponds with the period from August 21st through September 18th

ACTIVITIES AT HOME DURING ELUL

GETTING READY: ELUL

Before we enter the High Holy Days in the month of Tishrei, we need to prepare ourselves by developing a sense of spiritual fitness or readiness. That is why our tradition teaches us to engage in an “accounting of the soul” - *cheshbon hanefesh* - during the month of Elul.

In the United States, we have become used to identifying February with “Black History Month”, March with “Women’s History Month”, etc. Well, in Jewish life, Elul can similarly be seen as “Accounting of the Soul Month”, or “Personal Reflection Month”.

Here are some ideas to help you reflect on the past year, take responsibility for where you might have made mistakes and do some spiritual accounting:

Reflection Questions

- What am I proud of in this past year?
- What do I regret?
- From whom should I ask forgiveness? What do I need to say for them to be able to really hear me?
- Whom must I forgive?
- What can I release and let go of from the past year?
- What do I want to embrace in the year to come?
- What do I want to notice and focus greater attention on in the New Year?
- What do I want to bring nearer to myself / what do I want to bring myself nearer to in the year ahead?
- What values and intentions do I want to nurture?
- What role does God currently play for me in any of these?
- What role would *I like* God to play for me in any of these?
- What are my next steps towards achieving those goals?

LIVE INTERACTIVE ELUL DISCUSSIONS WITH HOWARD BRILL

JOURNEYING WITH GOD: ELUL 1

Sunday, September 6 at 1:00pm

THE MONTH OF ELUL is a time of preparation for the High Holidays. We'll look at the themes of Rabbi Alan Lew in the book, *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*, which is about preparing for the High Holy Days. We will discuss developing a journaling- and contemplation-practice based on those themes that we'll try during the month. I will share "prompt" questions based on Lew's book that we'll use to help us journal.

This class will be take place on Zoom. In order to find the Zoom link, please go to:
www.TBDrochester.org/HH

JOURNEYING WITH GOD: ELUL 2

Sunday, September 13 at 11:00am

WE'LL CONTINUE TO EXPLORE the themes of Rabbi Alan Lew in the light of our own journaling practices. Howard will also present a Hasidic story about journaling for the High Holy Days and its role in *Teshuvah*.

This class will be take place on Zoom. In order to find the Zoom link, please go to:
www.TBDrochester.org/HH

INSPIRATIONAL READINGS FOR ELUL

POEM FOR ELUL

Dane Kuttler, *The Social Justice Warrior's Guide to the High Holy Days*

And G!d says: You think these are my office hours? That only in these precious days I can hear you? No! I walk with you through the valleys and the fields, gridlocked streets and riot blocks. It is YOU who hears ME in these coming days. It will be you who stops to listen. These gates are open for YOU.

QUARANTINE FOR THE SOUL

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder*

Prayer clarifies our hopes and intentions. It helps us discover our true aspirations, the pangs we ignore, the longings we forget. It is an act of self-purification, a quarantine for the soul. It gives us the opportunity to be honest, to say what we believe, and to stand for what we say. For the accord of assertion and conviction, thought and conscience is the basis of all prayer.

THE ART OF TESHUVAH

Rabbi Adina Allen in *The Rabbinical School of Hebrew College: High Holy Days Companion*

Teshuvah is the foundational practice of the High Holy Day season. Literally translated as “return,” *teshuvah* is understood as a process of turning away from those ways in which we have missed the mark so we might come back into right relationship with others, with the Divine, and with ourselves. Whether those ways have been through carelessness, egotism, or laziness, *teshuvah* challenges us to admit our transgressions, make amends, and resolve to do better in the coming year. Yet according to the great Hasidic master Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapira, *teshuvah* is also a kind of creativity. More than a simple return to what has been, it is a process of remaking ourselves anew. But how?

Rather than turning away from our missteps, the creative potential of *teshuvah* lies in a turning towards those places in which we faltered and failed. In the words of psychologist David Richo, “Hidden in everything negative is something alive and beautiful that wants to belong to us.” Immense power and potential dwell in the dark, wild places that are unresolved in our soul. For it is only when we allow ourselves to come face to face with these less desirable parts of ourselves that we can understand and unlock the creative vitality contained within them.

In this way, we emulate the creative process of the Divine. A beautiful midrash on the creation of the world conveys an argument between a certain philosopher and Rabban Gamliel, the leading rabbinic authority of his time: Reflecting on the first verses of the Torah, the philosopher remarks, “Your God is indeed a great artist, but surely God found on hand suitable materials which were of help in creating!” Intrigued, Rabban Gamliel asks, “What are those materials?” The philosopher replies, “Chaos, void, darkness, water, wind, and the depths” (Genesis Rabbah 1:9).

When *teshuvah* leads us back into ourselves, we too find chaos, void, and darkness in our depths. Rather than turning away from our human failings, *teshuvah* beckons us towards these complicated, not-yet-integrated places within. The ways in which we miss the mark arise from those dark and unknown corners of ourselves, those places of chaos and void. It is within these very places that our own artist’s palette lies hidden. Like a half-finished painting that yearns to be fully realized, *teshuvah* is the work of re-engaging with all that yet remains unknown and unresolved, so that a fuller, richer, more vibrant self might emerge.

In this season of new beginnings, *teshuvah* calls us to return to and encounter our deepest selves. May we have the courage of spirit, intrepidity of mind, and openness of heart to see all that we find there as pigments on our palette, as the raw materials for us to create ourselves anew.

THE LIGHT OF GOD

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder*

Worship

is a way of seeing the world
in the light of God.

ELUL (1)

Adonai is my light and my life. Whom shall I fear? [Ps. 27:1a]

Olitzky & Sabath, *Preparing Your Heart for the High Holy Days – A Guided Journal*

Forgiveness is difficult whether you are the one who asks for forgiveness or grants it. Even simple words of apology seldom come easily, especially when we are peering into the hidden recesses of our own souls and we know that God is looking in the same place. While it is certainly difficult to say, “I’m sorry,” and mean it, such words of remorse are also hard to accept. Frequently, we regard these familiar words as we would the apology of a young child forced by a parent to offer regret to a younger sibling. But we need to recognize that regret is the first step to real change. Without earnest introspection and forgiveness of ourselves and others, we will not change. Only in the reflection of divine light-uncorrupted by the demands

of our ego-are we are able to see where we went wrong, what we did to hurt another and how we thereby harmed ourselves.

Our tradition calls this process of self-reflection *cheshbon hanefesh*, literally “making an accounting of the soul.” It’s what the month of Elul is all about. This is a period of preparation, as we anticipate standing naked and humble before God during the High Holy Days period. It takes time to ready ourselves to stand before God. And it takes a lot of work, too. Although these tasks are not easy, Elul does offer us an opportunity to begin again, fully restored to life. Each day, we take stock of our lives, as we consider our actions and interactions over the previous twelve months. Today we begin only with ourselves, unafraid to confront our previous exploits. For in the transformational process of *t’shuvah*, we come to learn that these actions are no longer part of who we are now.

ELUL (3)

Adonai is the foundation of my life. Whom shall I dread? [Ps. 27:1b]

Olitzky & Sabath, *Preparing Your Heart for the High Holy Days – A Guided Journal*

It takes a long time for some of us to recognize that God is the foundation of our lives-the foundation of *all* life. Some people never even try to reach that understanding. It might be easier for us if we didn’t have to struggle with personal faith, if it came to us with less effort. But that doesn’t seem to be the Jewish way Our tradition teaches us that faith develops-it ebbs and flows. We constantly grapple with issues of faith. As we move through our lives, we are bombarded daily with challenges to that faith. No one is going to come along and provide us with all the answers. Such religious “spoon-feeding” would rob us of the opportunity to achieve spiritual maturity Remember the story of Jacob’s dream? He wrestled with God throughout the night before he was moved to declare, “God was in this place and I never realized it before.” Like Jacob, I am prepared to declare: God is with us in this place and every place, no matter how distant divine light seems to be and no matter how profound the darkness. Let us join together to find the light.

This season in the Jewish calendar presents us with many opportunities for spiritual struggling. Each day during the month of Elul and the early days of Tishrei, as we wrestle with our understanding of God, we also confront who and what we are as individuals. Through humble petitionary prayers of *selichot*, of forgiveness, we ask for divine guidance so that we might muster the strength to change, so that we again might become the person we once aspired to be. So “Whom should we dread?” Only the self we used to be-if we allow it to prevent our becoming a new self.

MAKING HOLY SPACE

HighHolidays@Home, *Seeker Season – A High Holiday Guidebook for the Curious & Courageous*

Most years, making space to celebrate Rosh Hashanah means writing a seating chart at our local synagogue. Usually, it's about sitting in the front, but not too far forward that the rabbi can tell if we're not paying attention, and not in the direct path of the air conditioning. Your mother gets chilly. But 2020/5781 is not most years. This year, it's about making space in our homes, which have already become our offices, our classrooms, our gyms and our restaurants. Now, our homes must transform into spiritual sanctuaries.

ELUL (4)

The Creator has blown into my nostrils a living soul, wisdom of heart and the gift of reason that I might recognize and fear God . . . After having been created for this purpose and having acted in opposition to it, what is life to me? [Rabbi Jonah of Gerona, *Gates of Repentance*, First Principle]

Olitzky & Sabath, *Preparing Your Heart for the High Holy Days – A Guided Journal*

The more we become aware of God as our Creator, the more we understand what God's purpose for us is. Then we are able to know how we have fulfilled or frustrated God's plan. In Elul, we are encouraged to take a look at how and what we are doing with the precious living soul God has breathed into us. We come to appreciate that God has given us life; this alone should inspire us to act in accordance with God's will. Moreover, God has given us "wisdom of heart and the gift of reason" so that we might recognize how we have acted in opposition to God's purpose.

Using these gifts of wisdom and reason, we are able to discern between what we have become and what we are striving to become. With this holy gift of recognition, we see which of our actions were holy and helped to fulfill God's plan, and which were unholy. We are also able to differentiate the three parties against whom we have sinned this year: God, others, and ourselves. Consulting our heart of wisdom we know, as Maimonides discovered centuries ago, that different kinds of sin require different kinds of confession. For our sins against God, or God's plan, we must seek divine forgiveness. For our sins against others, we must acknowledge our wrongdoings and ask forgiveness from those whom we have wronged. And for our sins against ourselves, we must accept that we have damaged our own lives. Although it is dizzying to try to turn simultaneously in three directions at once, we understand that the more purposefully we turn, the more our lives will have purpose.

ELUL (9)

One thing I ask of Adonai only this do I seek: to live in the house of Adonai all the days of my life, to gaze upon Adonai's beauty, to frequent God's temple. [Ps. 27:4]

Olitzky & Sabath, *Preparing Your Heart for the High Holy Days – A Guided Journal*

How wonderful it would be just to remain in God's presence all day, every day, as the psalmist says, "to live in the house of Adonai all the days of my life." As a matter of fact, we already do. We just don't always realize it. When the Torah was given at Sinai, there was complete silence instead of an anticipated blast of noise. Six hundred thousand people stood at the foot of the mountain in the wilderness of the desert, and no one talked, nothing moved. We didn't even hear the flapping of birds winging their way across the sky. There was total silence unmarred by noise of any kind. Only in this way could everyone hear the divine message. God hasn't stopped speaking to us since that day at Sinai, but there is so much noise in the world that we are prevented from hearing God's voice.

So what can we do? We need to get rid of the many noises that distract us. Our world is too full of them. We need to listen to and then still the inner voice tugging at our gut, reminding us that we have done something we should not have done. Even if what we did months ago seemed inconsequential at the time, the time now has come to ask for forgiveness-what our tradition calls begging *m'chilah*-from those we love. If we don't, that inner voice will get so loud that we may never be able to hear God's voice. Seek out those whom you have wronged and then listen carefully.

What you hear may astonish you.

ELUL (10)

Who has achieved complete *t'shuvah*? A person who confronts the same situation in which he [or she] sinned and abstains, although that person has the potential to commit the sin again. [Moses Maimonides, *Laws of Repentance* 2:1]

Olitzky & Sabath, *Preparing Your Heart for the High Holy Days – A Guided Journal*

Becoming someone else means reimagining who we are. *T'shuvah* means turning from who we were into someone different, someone who behaves differently. It means envisioning ourselves returning to an earlier situation but making another choice this time, doing it differently. The rabbis forbid us to offer prayers that ask to alter what has already occurred in the past. Rather, they teach us that God demands *t'shuvah*. We pray that our future actions and their consequences will be different.

It's difficult to imagine ourselves doing differently everything we regret about the past year. So let's take a single past event and envision ourselves responding differently this time.

Remember the moments just before you acted. Try to remember who you were and what you were thinking. Did you carefully consider what you were doing? Did you weigh the consequences? Did you have any idea then how ashamed you would be now?

Think to yourself and pray, “God, I am trying to remember exactly what I was thinking then. I do not know how I could have behaved that way. Had I the sense of Your presence and of who I want to be in Your eyes and in my own, I might have acted differently” When we imagine ourselves in that same situation in the future, we know that we will respond differently because of our *t’shuvah*. For that act, at least, our *t’shuvah* is complete.

ELUL (16)

There are sins that can be atoned for immediately and other sins which can only be atoned for over the course of time. [Moses Maimonides, Laws of Repentance 1:4]

Olitzky & Sabath, *Preparing Your Heart for the High Holy Days – A Guided Journal*

T’shuvah is not a single act or a single moment of personal transformation. Rather, it is a lengthy process, a daily struggle that our tradition emphasizes during this month and a half of the Jewish calendar. This focus on our own transformation, on repentance and renewal during Elul and Tishrei, however, is framed by the remainder of the Jewish calendar, which demands daily *t’shuvah*. We must recognize that despite the intense pressure on us during this time of year, some of the *t’shuvah* we need to do cannot happen just yet. Some of what we must repent for, ask forgiveness for, and a great deal of what we want to become must be left for the coming year.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, like Maimonides, taught that *t’shuvah* can be sudden or gradual. Sometimes repentance is instantaneous, forgiveness is immediate, and change is felt at the moment. But there is also a slower, more gradual repentance. In this case, the movement toward regret and forgiveness involves tiny steps. Each small attempt to transform ourselves is nearly imperceptible. “Sudden repentance,” according to Rabbi Kook’s categories, “derives from a spiritual flash entering the soul ... immediately the person experiences inwardly a complete change for good.” Gradual repentance, on the other hand, results from a feeling inside that tells us we must go forward and improve our ways. *T’shuvah*, both sudden and gradual, is open to us when we are open to it.

ELUL (24)

The kernel of Torah is “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But in our day we seldom find it so, and few are they who love their fellowmen [and women] with all their heart. On the contrary, if a person can contrive to ruin one’s neighbor, nothing pleases him more. [The Memoirs of Glukel of Hameln, Trans. Marvin Lowenthal]

Olitzky & Sabath, *Preparing Your Heart for the High Holy Days – A Guided Journal*

As we become aware through doing *t’shuvah* of the parts of ourselves we must shed, we can begin to admit how we may have hurt others. We can acknowledge that we sometimes have forgotten the counsel that “you should love your neighbor as yourself.” Reviewing our behavior during of the past year, we realize that we often have released at others the anger we should have directed at ourselves. And yet we also must learn to forgive ourselves. How else can we learn to love our neighbors as ourselves?

We cannot really love others until we love ourselves. Loving ourselves, however, as we take stock of all the wrong we have done and realize all the *t’shuvah* we have yet to do, becomes increasingly difficult. We should be gentle with ourselves as we engage in the process of change. By forgiving ourselves and by embracing who we are becoming through the process of *tshuvah* we gradually come to love ourselves more. Then we are able to love others.

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev taught that our ability to love others is indicative of our ability to love God. “Whether a person really loves God,” the Berditchever said, “can be determined by the love that person shares with others.”

SHARERS OF GENTLE JOY

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder*

Mindfulness of God rises slowly, a thought at a time. Suddenly we are there. Or is He here, at the margin of our soul? When we begin to feel a qualm of diffidence lest we hurt what is holy, lest we break what is whole, then we discover that He is not austere. He answers with love our trembling awe.

Repentant of forgetting Him even for a while, we become sharers of gentle joy; we would like to dedicate ourselves forever to the unfoldment of His final order.



CALENDAR

SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THUR	FRI	SAT
SEPT. 6 Elul *Live Zoom Discussion	7 Elul	8 Elul	9 Elul	10 Elul	11 Elul	12 Elul
13 Elul *Live Zoom Discussion	14 Elul	15 Elul	16 Elul	17 Elul *Rosh HaShanah services online	18 Erev Rosh HaShanah	19 1 st Day Rosh HaShanah
20 2 nd Day Rosh HaShanah *Live Zoom Discussion *Tashlich	21	22	23	24	25 *Yom Kippur services online	26
27 Erev Yom Kippur	28 Yom Kippur	29	30	OCT. 1	2 Erev Sukkot	3 1 st Day Sukkot
4 2 nd Day Sukkot	5 3 rd Day Sukkot	6 4 th Day Sukkot	7 5 th Day Sukkot	8 6 th Day Sukkot	9 7 th Day Sukkot/ Hoshana Rabbah	10 Shmini Atzeret
11 Simchat Torah	12	13	14	15	16	17

CALENDAR NOTES

- **September 6**
@ 1:00pm **“JOURNEYING WITH GOD: ELUL 1”**
A live, interactive Elul discussion with Howard Brill will take place on Zoom.
For more details, see page “Journeying with God: Elul 1” on page 4.
The Zoom-link will be available on September 6, at: www.TBDrochester.org/HH
- **September 13**
@ 11:00am **“JOURNEYING WITH GOD: ELUL 2”**
A live, interactive Elul discussion with Howard Brill will take place on Zoom.
For more details, see page “Journeying with God: Elul 2” on page 4.
The Zoom-link will be available on September 13, at: www.TBDrochester.org/HH
- **September 17** **ROSH HASHANAH SERVICES**
Prerecorded videos of a selection of prayers and sermons for Rosh HaShanah services will be available on YouTube from September 17 and can be viewed anytime thereafter. The YouTube-links for Rosh HaShanah services will be available on September 17 at: www.TBDrochester.org/HH
- **September 20**
@ 11:00am **“BEING WITH GOD: ROSH HASHANAH”**
A live, interactive Rosh HaShanah discussion with Howard Brill will take place on Zoom.
For more details, see page _
The Zoom-link will be available on September 20, at: www.TBDrochester.org/HH
- **September 20**
Afternoon **OUTDOOR TASHLICH SERVICE**
A Tashlich service will be held outdoors in an area that offers parking and enough space for people to spread out six feet apart from others.
Facemasks will be required, covering both mouths and noses.
Attendance is limited to the first 50 who RSVP to Temple Beth David at: (585) 266-3223 (address and time will be announced when you call to confirm)
- **September 25** **YOM KIPPUR SERVICES**
Prerecorded videos of a selection of prayers and sermons for Yom Kippur services will be available on YouTube from September 25 and can be viewed anytime thereafter. The YouTube-links for Yom Kippur services will be available from September 25 at: www.TBDrochester.org/HH