

The Month of Elul

Second Chances

"From Rosh Hodesh Elul onwards until Yom Kippur, it is customary to rise before dawn to recite penitential prayers (selihot) and supplications (tahanunim).

Rama: The Ashkenazic custom is not that way; rather, from Rosh Hodesh, the shofar is sounded daily after the morning prayer, and some do so, even after the evening prayer." (Shulhan Arukh OC #581)

The arrival of the month of Elul ushers in the season of repentance. In certain circles, the mere contemplation of this month would issue a shudder through the soul, or as my Rabbi says: "When the Chazan announces the new month in the Shabbat service and utters the word "Elul," the very walls of the Beit Midrash begin to quake."¹ Elul is imbued with this sense of foreboding as it announces the countdown to Rosh Hashanna – the Judgment day:

"Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanna: one for the utterly wicked, one for the wholly good, and one for the average class of people. The wholly righteous are at once inscribed, and life is decreed for them; the entirely wicked are at once inscribed, and destruction destined for them; the average class are held in the balance from New Year's Day till the Day of Atonement; if they prove themselves worthy they are inscribed for life, if not they are inscribed for destruction." (Talmud. Rosh Hashanna ??)

And thus, Elul, this final month of the Jewish year becomes the final opportunity to ratchet up mitzvot, to ensure that good deeds exceed misdemeanors. The anxiety of Elul is the tense anticipation of the divine courtroom in which our very lives hang in the balance. Much is at stake, and we would do well to prepare, to enter judgment in a flawless state. Upon this backdrop, the shofar of Elul – sounded daily - is timely wake-up call:

¹ I heard another cultural variation on this story just last year. It was Rosh Chodesh Elul and I was driving from Jerusalem late at night and listening to Galgalatz; not exactly a religious radio station. The DJ played the Sephardi piyut, "adon selichot," a radio favorite in honor of the month of repentance, and then she commented that "with the arrival of Elul, there is a tradition that even the fish in the sea start to quiver!"

"Even though the sounding of the Shofar is mandated by the Torah, it contains a hidden message, namely: Wake up! Awake from your slumber! Emerge from your state of drowsiness and examine your life! Do Teshuva! Remember your Creator!" (Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Hilchot Teshuva 3:4).

II. Elul and Love

But in certain sources, a different atmosphere pervades the month of Elul. Not fear, but love! The name "Elul" is seen as an acronym for "*Ani ledodi Vedodi Li* – I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me."² This is a phrase from the Song of Songs 6:3, a poetic work understood in the rabbinic mind as an expression of the love between God and Israel. In this perspective, Elul becomes a time of reciprocal love and closeness between God and Israel. The pinnacle of the month is Rosh Hashanna – a day on which the Shofar sounds a royal fanfare proclaiming God's sovereignty. In this conception, Rosh Hashanna is characterized with a festive atmosphere (Yom Tov) in contrast to the stringent restrictions and denial of Yom Kippur.³

But how can these two temperaments – the tension and the love – coexist? How could the "Days of Awe" be days of love? Where do we get the joy of Rosh Hashanna? How can we express delight and love whilst we plead for our lives?

iii. Renewal of the covenant

One of the earliest sources that records the sounding of a Shofar in Elul is the midrashic work, Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer. The midrash establishes a connection between our observance of Elul, and its historic roots in the wilderness:

² Cited for example in the Mishna Berura OC 581:1. I am unclear as to the source of this tradition.

³ In a lecture by Rav Meir Lichtenstein in Elul 5771, he pointed to a divergence in atmosphere of Rosh Hashanna prayers between religious-Zionist yeshivot and equivalent Haredi yeshivot, Beyond the endemic tension of the Yom Hadin - the judgment day, he claimed that the former are inspired by a joyous atmosphere with upbeat, happy song, whereas in the latter, a pervading and palpable sense of tension, even fear, filled the room. In his view, this pointed to two different conceptions of Rosh Hashanna. Either it is awe-filled or a source of joy. Section vi. Of this essay also relies heavily on Rav Meir's presentation in that lecture.

"In Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer it is taught that on Rosh Hodesh Elul, God instructed Moshe to ascend the mountain to receive the second tablets of stone. **A Shofar was sounded in the camp**, as Moses ascended the mountain so that they not err yet again after idolatry.⁴ God was raised with that Shofar blast, as it states (Psalms 47:6), "God ascended with the Terua." **And this is the reason that the Rabbis instituted that the Shofar be sounded on Rosh Chodesh Elul** each year – so as to warn Israel that they should repent ... and to confuse Satan. In Ashkenaz the minhag is to sound the shofar every morning and evening after prayers." **Tur #581 (Rabbi Jacob son of the Rosh, Baal HaTurim)**

The forty-day period from the start of Elul to Yom Kippur is mapped upon an ancient historical precedent - the traumatic episode of the Golden Calf - a dramatic paradigm of sin and repair. With the sin of the Calf, Israel abrogated its sworn commitment of exclusive allegiance to God; in response, the tablets of stone that bore witness to the God-Israel covenant were smashed. And yet, despite Israel's betrayal, after a series of appeals by Moses and expression of national remorse, the relationship was repaired, God forgave the nation and the covenant was rehabilitated.

God's invitation to Moses to ascend Mt. Sinai and receive the second tablets of stone, identical to the first, symbolized the forgiveness, the end of crisis and the healed relationship:

"...Since the Holy One, blessed be He, became reconciled with them and gave Moses the second Tablets and also made a covenant that God would go in their midst, He thereby returned to His previous relationship with them [before the sin of the Calf], and to the love of their "wedding" [reference to Matan Torah and see Jeremiah 2:2] and it was obvious that His presence would be in their midst just as he had commanded him [Moses] at first." (Nahmanides 35:1)

Moses ascended the mountain to receive the second tablets on the first day of the month of Elul. Moses remained on the mountain for forty days and nights. The second tablets were thus presented by Moses to the people on Yom Kippur. The granting of the second tablets

⁴ The midrash mentions the Shofar being sounded only on Rosh Chodesh. One could argue that the daily shofar is a daily reminder to the nation so that we not "err". But on this basis, we don't understand why the shofar would not continue all the way to Yom Kippur.

frames the period of Elul and the ten days of penitence, a historical matrix of forty days of renewal and forgiveness.

iv. Which Forty-Days?

But in fact, the episode of the Golden Calf consisted of three sets of forty-days. By examining this triple sequence of forty-days we may properly ascertain the nature of this Elul period. Rashi charts the period from the giving of the Torah through the drama of the sin of the Golden Calf to the second tablets:

"... on the seventeenth of Tammuz the tablets were broken, and on the eighteenth he burned the calf and judged the sinners, and on the nineteenth he went up [Mount Sinai]... **He spent forty days there and begged for mercy**, as it is said: "And I cast myself down before the Lord, etc." (Deut. 9:18). On Rosh Chodesh Elul it was said to him, "And in the morning you shall ascend Mount Sinai" (Exod. 34:2) to receive the second tablets, and he spent forty days there, as it is said concerning them, "And I remained upon the mountain just as the first days" (Deut. 10:10). **Just as the first ones [days] were with favour (*et ratzon*) [from the seventh of Sivan to the seventeenth of Tammuz], so were the last ones [days] with favour (*et ratzon*) . [We may] deduce from this that the intermediate ones were with wrath.** On the tenth of Tishri the Holy One, blessed is He, was appeased to Israel joyfully and wholeheartedly, and He said to Moses, 'I have forgiven, as you have spoken'(Bemidbar 14:20⁵). He [God] gave over to him the second tablets, and he [Moses] descended, and He [God] began commanding him concerning the work of the Mishkan... (from Midrash Tanchuma 31, Seder Olam ch. 6)

The timeline works in the following way:

⁵ The usage of this verse, from the Spies episode, seems out of place in the context of the Golden Calf. Moreover, in the Spies story, the people are severely punished despite this "forgiveness." Nonetheless, this phrase is repeatedly quoted by midrash in association with the sin of the Golden Calf, and has entered the Yamim Noraim (High Holiday) liturgy, both in selichot and in kol nidrei.

Period of 40 days and nights	Date	What	Ends with
	6 Sivan	Revelation at Sinai	
1. Et Ratzon	7 Sivan - 17 Tammuz	Moses on mountain to receive First Tablets	17th Tammuz Golden Calf: Moses smashes the tablets
2. God's Wrath. Moses' Prayer	19 Tammuz -29 Av	Moses prays for forgiveness	
3. Et Ratzon	1 Elul – 10 Tishrei (Yom Kippur)	Moses on mountain to receive Second Tablets	10 Tishrei (Yom Kippur) Moses descends with Second Tablets

There are THREE sets of forty days and nights. In the FIRST, Moses ascends the mountain to study and receive the law. He descends with two tablets of testimony, however in the wake of the great sin of the Golden Calf, the tablets, symbol of the covenant, are smashed and the relationship with God is on hold. Now Moses prays for a SECOND period of forty days and nights⁶ (Deut 9:25) imploring God and seeking His forgiveness; pleading that He spare the nation. Moses succeeds in his mission, and God reconciled Himself to Israel. The invitation to ascend the mountain for a THIRD time and the announcement of the second tablets, signals the renewal of the relationship. Moses knows that this is a time of good fortune – "*et ratzon*" – the second set of tablets express the rehabilitation of the covenant.

And here we reach the crux of the matter. Frequently, the month of Elul is perceived as a period in which Israel's life and good fortune is in the balance; a time in which Israel is the subject of a looming threat, a period in which we beseech God for life, as we wait, in a breathtaking, nail-biting vigil for God's merciful pronouncement of "*salachti* – I have forgiven you" in the closing moments of Yom Kippur. But this is not Rashi's chronology! God's anger does not extend into Elul! For Rashi, the middle forty day period is the time of God's wrath. But from Elul, Israel is in a state of grace, God's anger having abated. Forty days prior to Yom Kippur, God has already reconciled Himself to Israel.

⁶ On the basis of Deut 10:10, Rashi assumes that this second period of forty days was spent on the mountain as well. However on the basis of Shemot 33:6-12, we may suggest that he prayed in the confines of the camp, not daring to ascend the mountain to God. I heard this possibility from Rav Yaakov Medan.

And so, this begs the question: what is the texture of Elul? In other words, what are these forty days of Grace? What was happening during the forty days it took to issue that second tablets, and what in fact do the second tablets signify?

Let us focus on this "*et ratzon*" and return to the language of the Tur, quoted above. Why do we sound the Shofar in Elul? When Moshe ascended Mt. Sinai for the third and final time, "a Shofar was sounded in the camp ... so that they not err yet again after idolatry." In other words, God is granting Israel an opportunity to get it right a second time. In Moses' initial forty-days, Israel had sinned. Now, as Moses ascends the mountain. God offers Israel a second chance to replay the forty days, and this time, to act flawlessly. In life we don't always get second chances. Historically, the month of Elul constituted that second chance. The sounding of the shofar is a reminder that we not repeat the mistakes we made the first time.

So Elul represents an amazing kindness of God; a relationship of trust and divine confidence in Man. God allows us to replay the scenario so that we may repair our actions. In essence, the re-writing of the luchot; the tablets of stone, coincides with a divine invitation to re-write our own biography.

V. Human Participation

As many scholars have noted, the re-writing of the second tablets is fundamentally different to the first tablets: the human involvement is greater the second time around.

The first tablets are very much a product of God's "work":

"The **tablets** were **God's** work, **and the writing** was **God's writing engraved on the tablets**" (32:16).

But the second tablets are a partnership between God and Man:

"God said to Moses, 'Hew **for yourself** two stone tablets like the former ones, and **I will write** on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets which you shattered'" (34:1).

Moses hews the tablets; God writes them. The Rabbinic mind saw this joint man-God energy as representative of the mechanism of Torah Shebe'al Peh – the dynamic in which man becomes an active partner in the legislation of divine law:

"And I shall write on the tablets the words': ...The first tablets were inscribed only with the Ten Commandments; Now that you have expressed remorse, I give you *midrash, halachot v'agadot* [halachic explications.] – (Midrash Rabb 34:1)... The meaning behind all this is that the first set of tablets did not include the authority to create new laws, only that which Moshe received... The second tablets, however, authorized every distinguished scholar to create laws ... **And for this reason, the Holy One ordered that the second set be engraved by Moshe**, not because they were not worthy of Divine inscription, but in order to teach that new legislation authorized by these tablets **partner human** endeavor with the help of Heaven, just **as the tablets themselves were the work of Moshe and the script of God the writing was also with Moshe's participation.**" (Netziv. "Haamek Davar", Shemot 34:1)

The Netziv suggests that with the second tablets, God invited man to a higher degree of engagement and participation in the law. The first tablets were Godly, but they created a static, uncreative Torah, at a distance from humanity. The granting of the Law, an overwhelmingly divine act, created a pristine, Godly Torah. But that Torah, devoid of human participation, shattered upon entry into the orbit of man.

With the second tablets, God instigates and welcomes human participation; taking account of the changing realities that are intrinsic to the human and societal experience. It is as if God is acknowledging man's place as the law is given. The invitation to hew out the stone suggests that a divine Torah must be given on a human canvas; one which is constantly mutating and undergoing metamorphosis, a Torah that has the capacity for renewal, because humans change, make mistakes and learn from them.

This Torah is the Torah of Elul. אָנִי לְדוֹדִי וְדוֹדִי לִי. It is a beautiful organic relationship between God and Israel, in which God intrinsically acknowledges man's flawed nature and creates a Torah that will accommodate our errors.

VI. The King in the Field

In a famous and evocative image, Rav Schneur Zalman of Liadi imagines God during Elul as a king before his coronation – the king in the field.

"It is like a king who, before he enters the city, the people of the city go out to greet him in the field. There, everyone who so desires is permitted to meet him; he receives them all with a cheerful countenance and shows a smiling face to them all. And when he goes to the city, they follow him there. Later, however, after he enters his royal palace, none can enter into his presence except by appointment, and only special people and select individuals. So, too, by analogy, the month of Elul is when we meet G-d in the field..." (Likkutei Torah, Re'ei 32b; see also Likkutei Sichot, vol II p. 632 ff.).

Let us penetrate this metaphor a little. On Rosh Hashanna, the king will be crowned. Once he is sovereign, he will recede beyond the high palace walls to a realm in which he is inaccessible and under guard. However, in the period prior to his coronation, the king is "in the field." He is accessible, available, still in touch with the rank and file people. We may illustrate this image with a scene from contemporary elections. Imagine the candidate on the presidential campaign trail. He will speak with everyone and anyone; he is in the supermarket, the diner, the public schools, the university campus. He wants to impress, he wishes to hear, he invites human contact. But once elected, he disappears from sight to administrate the affairs of the nation, guarded by the secret service, and is now approachable by appointment only.

This is a metaphor. What does it mean? How does it express the atmosphere of Elul? It is saying, very simply, that Elul affords us an opportunity to meet God directly. The "king is in the field," in other words, in my every day life, I have an opportunity to meet God. I can meet God by davening correctly, I can meet God, by remembering to make a bracha after food, I can encounter God when I curb my anger, or my gossip, I can engage with God in all walks of life. Now God is in my life – in the field; He is not yet in the courtroom!

And at this point in time, God is open and impressionable. And precisely because the atmosphere is a normal, everyday scene- "in the field " – Elul is the "*et ratzon*," the opportunity to live our lives correctly, as a correct expression of our value system, as we demonstrate by our lifestyles that we accord with God's values and priorities. Now is the time in which God sees us in our ordinary human situation and may be impressed by our sterling conduct. The candidate is here! Take the opportunity to show him who we are.

vii.

And so, where does this leave us? We began with an image which characterized Elul as a time in which we might feel under threat, out of our depth, fighting for our lives; an Elul of fear.

We have constructed an alternative framework for Elul: A time in which God is open to second chances, in which He welcomes human participation, in which God makes Himself accessible in advance of the great Coronation Day that is Rosh Hashanna. God seeks our love, our relationship. Elul is the opportunity to demonstrate that we may indeed lead our lives in a manner of which we are proud. This Elul, let us reciprocate God's love.

Chodesh Tov!