

ד ר ש ו ה'
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C A L L U P O N
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**BNEI
AKIVA**
UNITED KINGDOM



Shalom Chaverim,

The title of this publication, "דַּרְשׁוּ ה', בְּהִמְצָאוֹ קְרָאֵהוּ בְּהִיוֹתוֹ קְרוֹב" "Seek Hashem while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near" is a passuk found in Yeshayahu (55:6). Rambam explains (Hilchot Teshuva 2:6) in the name of Chazal (Rosh Hashana 18a) that this specific period when Hashem may be found is the Aseret Yemei Teshuva. This is the time, Rambam adds, when Hashem is most attentive to an individual's pleas.

We understand that this year's Yamim Noraim will be different. Inspiration and hope may not be as forthcoming as in previous years. Whether you use this publication as a service companion or as preparation for Yom Kippur, we hope, that it will inspire you to "seek Hashem" and to "call upon Him."

This publication would not have been possible without the tremendous support of our fantastic Bogrim and Madrichim, who's words will no-doubt offer new ideas and insights into teshuva, Elul, Rosh Hashana, and Yom Kippur.

Rav Soloveitchik zt'l explained that the Haftara read on other public fast days (which contains this passuk) is not read on Yom Kippur. On other days, the obligation falls on man to "seek Hashem" and "call upon Him" so that the result may be – as the next passuk teaches – "Let him return to Hashem." However, on Yom Kippur we read a different perek of Yeshayahu, one which contains the passuk: "Cast up, cast up, prepare the way, lift the stumbling block from the path of My people" (57:14). On Yom Kippur Hashem shows us the way back, leaving the path clear of obstacles for us to return. May we all merit to follow the path back.

G'mar Chatima Tova,
Daniel Ross, Chinuch Worker 5781

Rav Joel Kenigsberg- The eternal possibility of return

R' Meir, one of the greatest of all the Tannaim, had a teacher - Elisha ben Avuyah. Elisha ben Avuyah was a great Sage. But then something happened. He changed. He went back on all that he had known, all that he had taught and all that he had lived by. He drifted so far from the way of Torah that the Talmud even refers to him by a name that indicates his heart and soul were somewhere else - he became known as "Acher" - the "other".

But R' Meir refused to give up on his former mentor. He compared him to a pomegranate, whose seeds can be eaten whilst the hard, outer skin is discarded - so too R' Meir felt that deep within him, Elisha ben Avuyah still had what to offer.

The Gemara relates how once R' Meir was following after Acher, who was riding a horse on Shabbat in violation of the Sages' decree. R' Meir turned to his former teacher with a plea "maybe the time has come to do Teshuva"? Acher answered that he had heard a Heavenly voice that declared - "שובו בווננים שובבים, חוץ מאחר" - all can do Teshuva, except for Acher.

But could it really be? Is it really possible that the gates of repentance had been closed? That there was no opportunity for Acher to do Teshuva?

The answer is that Acher could not do Teshuva. But Elisha ben Avuyah could. His problem was that he thought he was somebody else. He thought he was outside the fold. He saw himself as Acher. He saw himself as so far removed and disconnected from Torah and the Jewish people that for him there was no more chance. But had he seen himself for who he really was, for who he really could be - not as Acher, but as Elisha ben Avuyah, he would have realized that the path back, however difficult, was still within his reach.

There could be no more important message to remember for Rosh Hashana. The new year begins with a day of judgement, but it is also a day on which Avinu shebashamayim is waiting with outstretched arms for us to return home. Let's not make the mistake of Acher - let's remember who we really are, and that it's never too late to come back.

Ketiva veChatima Tova, Shana Tova uMetuka to you all!

Rina Shaya (Shevet Morasha) - Physical and Spiritual Preparation

Approaching Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur may appear a daunting task. How should we best focus our attention and efforts for preparation in the lead up to the Yamim Noraim?

Many of the early sources place a heavy emphasis on being in a state of full spiritual and physical readiness before daring to approach G-d in prayer. For example, Rabbi Simlai in Masechet Brachot (32a) says "Let a man ever first prepare his prayer and afterwards he may worship". This is especially true of the Chazzan, who the Mateh Moshe says must also prepare by teaching his family the order of the services entirely so that he need not interrupt his prayer to show them the place. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai also placed importance on preparation and was said to have never been in the audience of a Chazzan who he had not tested in advance to be sure of both his state of spiritual purity and his knowledge of the prayer and order of the service.

However, the Ba'al Shem Tov founder of Chassidut and the champion of the "simple Jew", takes a somewhat different approach. He is quoted by the Or Yesharim saying "if a man does not know the meaning of the prayers, but worships G-d, be blessed, because... though he does not know even the meaning of the words, his prayer ascends and pierces the firmament". Regardless of the worshipper's state of readiness to meet G-d in prayer, the words themselves are able to "bring about great amendments in the superior worlds".

A story is told of a student in the Bet Midrash who asks to be excused early from his studies on one of the days leading up to Rosh HaShana. His Rav questioned why he wanted to leave and the student replies that he needs to practice the prayers before he is the Chazzan on Rosh HaShana. The Rav replies "the machzor is in the same order as it was last year, but it would be better for you to look into your own deeds, and put yourself in order".

Making the necessary physical preparations for Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur is important, but it is crucial that this does not detract from assuring a state of spiritual readiness as well.

Ilan Wreschner (Shevet Tzion) - Becoming a pillar of Am Yisrael

The Gemara in Menachot makes an observation about the Arba Minim. The lulav and etrog “produce fruits” whilst the hadassim and aravot don’t. Halachically, unless all four are bound together into a single unit, the mitzvah of shaking the Arba Minim hasn’t been fulfilled. The Gemara continues to reach us that the same applies to our tefillah. Unless the righteous, the ones that produce fruits, and the wicked, the ones that don’t, come together and daven as one unified congregation, Hashem won’t answer our prayers.

Rav Wolbe asks in Alei Shur, we can understand why the wicked need to daven with the righteous, since they don't have enough individual merit, but why is it necessary for the righteous to pray with the wicked? The answer is because Hashem isn't interested in individuals, even if they're righteous, He wants Am Yisrael. No one is righteous enough to be equivalent to Am Yisrael as a whole. Perhaps a proof for this can be seen from the fact Hashem didn't give the Torah to Avraham, the first person to properly recognise Hashem, rather we had to wait until we had become a people, when we stood at Har Sinai as a nation “like one person with one heart”.

The most important thing to realise when approaching the Yomim Noraim is that we are approaching from the perspective of Klal Yisrael, not as individuals. Are any of us brave enough to stand before Hashem in judgement alone?

Rav Yisrael Salanter explains there is an even higher level still. Greater than the one who is part of the community is the one who the community relies upon. During the Aseret Yemei Teshuva we make additions to davening. The first is ‘זכרינו לחיים... למענך אלוקים חיים’ - ‘remember us for life, for Your sake O’ Living G-d’. Who is the one that can daven to Hashem saying they’re worth keeping alive for Hashem’s sake? The person who Hashem’s chosen people depends upon.

Before we get disheartened and feel like we can never reach this level, it doesn't take being the gabbay of a shul or on a governors committee to be someone the community relies upon. Without people who make up minyanim, without people engaging in Jewish enterprise, and most importantly, without Madrichim to educate the next generation, no community can survive. These people fall under the category of ‘the one who the community relies upon’.



Our goal for this month is to show Hashem that we understand that we need Klal Yisrael, and even better, show Hashem why Klal Yisrael needs us.

Zac Abrahams (Shevet Tzion) - Keeping an eye on the clock

The Gemara in Kiddushin on daf 49b speaks about how a *'rasha'* can fix all the wrongdoings they've done in just one moment. It uses the example of a *rasha* who has one thought of teshuva and becomes a *'Tzadik gammur'* a fully righteous person. We also see similar ideas to this one brought up in various places, including Kiddushin 40b, Masechet Avoda Zara, and discussed by the Rambam in Hilchot Teshuva.

This has always bothered me. How can it be that a person can fix all their wrongdoings in just one moment? How can that be true? Is that really the approach we're supposed to take as we get closer to Rosh Hashanah?

I heard the following answer from Rav Gershon Turetsky.

There's a story of the Ashinover Rebbe who's sitting in his house with all his Chassidim one Erev Yom Kippur and they're eating their *Seuda Hamafseket* whilst it's getting later, later and later and the Chassidim are getting very worried as they look at their watches and they see, "it's almost time for Yom Kippur, it's almost right here". They don't know what to do. They don't want to be chutzpadik and say anything to their Rebbe but at the same time, time was really running out. They finally got one of the older Chassidim to say something to the Rebbe. "Rebbe! Rebbe!" He points to his watch and says, "time is really running out!"

The Rebbe stops, smiles at the Chassid and says, "a Jew always has to have two watches. One watch which says we're running out of time, but another which says there's always a little more time."

I think this illustrates the healthy balance we all have to have. We all have to feel to an extent that we're running out of time, every moment is precious, we have to take advantage of every opportunity, but at the same time we have to keep in mind that there's always a little more time, there's always an opportunity to fix.

I think this is a healthy message to take with us as we approach Rosh Hashanah, the end of our year. It's never too late to start fixing, and at the same time we have to take advantage of every moment and opportunity that comes our way and with that approach BE"H we'll all have a Gmar Chatima Tova.

Jodie Franks (Shevet Avichai) - Focusing on the Microscopic

Rabbi Yisroel Salanter was once asked why, despite all our efforts, we seem to make such limited progress in our avodat Hashem. He replied that there are two ways of magnification - microscopic and telescopic. The most powerful telescope still shows a star as a distant dot, whilst a microscope makes an object appear larger than life. A telescope looks at objects which are so far away from us, and no matter how large the magnification they still seem small.

Rabbi Salanter explains that this is the problem with the way we see our avodat Hashem - the importance of a mitzvah and the effect of an aveira are sometimes so remote from our daily life that they seem small and inaccessible to us, even when we try to focus in on them. His solution is to look through a microscope rather than a telescope and try to appreciate the enormous significance of just one mitzvah, even if we are unable to see the effect of our actions.

Elul is the time to be looking back on our actions and making active changes in order to strengthen our relationship with Hashem and with other people. Rabbi Salanter's analogy reminds us that committing to even one thing, although it may seem small, has an enormous effect and so we should try to do every mitzvah with this idea in mind.

Sarah Murgraff (Shevet Avichai) - The Instant Power of Teshuva

When discussing the Halachot of Yom Kippur, the pasuk in Vayikra 16:30 says: *כי־בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִכַּפֵּר עֲלֵיכֶם לְטַהֵר אֶתְכֶם מִכָּל חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' תְּטַהֲרוּ: - "For on this day, atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be clean before Hashem."* I want to focus on the words "on that day."

At first, the idea that on a single day sins that have been committed continuously for years can suddenly be forgiven, may seem counterintuitive. The prophet Yonah definitely struggled with this idea. How could the decree of destruction of the city of Ninveh suddenly be overturned? How could its inhabitants have such a huge change of heart and do teshuvah for their evil ways after years of sinning. Can such a dramatic reversal really happen?

Yonah troubled by this question. He delved deeper and deeper, trying to get to the bottom of it. The verb "went down" appears multiple times in the book of Yonah. However, his attempts to get to the bottom of things led him nowhere. He only discovered the idea of sudden reversal when he was thrown onto dry land after being swallowed by the big fish, and was ready to die. Suddenly Hashem created a tree which provided him with shelter. Immediately afterwards, however, he was deprived of this joy when a worm ate away at the tree.

Hashem was punishing him for not believing in sudden reversals. Yonah did not believe the people were capable of doing teshuva. But, through the symbolism of the tree and the worm, he is shown how change can happen in an instant. Just as he deprived Nineveh of repentance, the plant too is taken away from him.

When Yonah recites Hashem's 13 attributes of mercy he makes a slight change to the wording. Whilst in Shemot, it originally says, 'A G-d compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and truth', Yonah substitutes 'truth' with 'renouncing punishment'.

Yonah has come to understand that the Divine Truth is the ability to forgive. Hashem can suddenly renounce punishment, because human beings can suddenly do Teshuvah in an instant.

Joel Herman (Shevet Hineini) - The Symbolism of the Shofar

The shofar is blown from the month of Elul until Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. The roots and significance of the shofar link back to Vayikra in perek כג whereby it says, "you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion commemorated with loud blasts."

These loud blasts are what we know now as teruah and so we hear the shofar on Rosh Hashana. The explicit details and importance of the shofar itself, rather than another sound, is because it makes the same sound that was heard on top of Har Sinai when Hashem addressed the people. Moreover, it is also an emblem of the beginning of the Jewish year, which is Rosh Hashana, and also the beginning of the Jubilee year, which in Hebrew is Yovel which translates as ram's horn, and also blown at the beginning of battles.

The Talmud further suggests that we blow specifically a ram's horn as the shofar so that we are reminded of the binding of Yitzchak on the akeida. When Yitzchak is put on the akeida about to be sacrificed by Hashem's request, Avraham is told it is just a test and instead a ram is used as a korban and is sacrificed instead. This shofar sound coming from a ram's horn then reminds us of the sacrifice Avraham was willing to make for Hashem and how we should also be willing to emulate these sacrifices for Hashem in our own lives.

Lastly, the shofar is used as oppose to other instruments as the intention of the shofar is not to create a melody but rather when the shofar is played one can be focused on the sound and connect with Hashem. The shofar is a battle or mournful cry rather than a melodic tune and when we hear this sound, we should focus on ourselves and our davening and daven for a healthy new year.

Daniella Wieder (Shevet Ne'eman) - Strategic Resolutions

It's that time of year again where we make new year's resolutions, but how many of yours have actually lasted the entire year? Hopefully many, but if not, then there's a method that can help.

Let's say you want to work on a Middah (character trait), such as anger. Write that down. Then underneath, split that into three subcategories, which could be people who make you angry: friends, family and yourself. Split each of those into three further subcategories. For example, you could split family into instances when they annoy you: a sibling has an annoying habit, getting annoyed with your family at Friday night dinner, or a relative has an annoying habit. Choose one of these to work on, and work on that for the entire year. Now, if you manage to master this by Chanukkah, you can take on the next one, and if you manage to master that one by Pesach, you can take on the last one. This way you will have either mastered one sub-subcategory, or an entire subcategory in one year! And this is a lasting change.

This can really work with anything. Let's say you want to read more Jewish books. You can split that down into categories of books, and split each of those down into the amount of time you want to spend reading per day or week.

By doing this, your resolution can really last. Yes, it might be something small, but we're showing Hashem that we're working on ourselves, and we want to become better people and come closer to Him.

Ben Rothstein (Shevet Avichai)- Teshuva: seizing the opportunity

Many of us may be wondering at this time, approaching Rosh Hashana, whether our teshuva is really effective. Can it honestly be that it is within our power to return to G-d and simply wipe away all the aveirot we may have done? Parashat Nitzavim-Vayeilech reassures us that it is. The pesukim (Devarim 30:11-14, translation based on JPS 1917) read:

כִּי הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם לֵאמֹר לֹא־נִפְלְאת הוּא מִמֶּנּוּ וְלֹא רַחֲקָה הוּא: לֹא בַשָּׁמַיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי וְלֹא־מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבֹר־לָנוּ אֶל־עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְעָלֵה־לָנוּ הַשְּׁמַיִמָּה וְיִקְחָה לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעֲנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה וְיִקְחָה לָנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעֲנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה: כִּי־קְרוֹב אֵלַיִךְ הַדְּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְבְּךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ

"For this commandment which I command you this day, it is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say: 'Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, and make us hear it, that we may do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say: 'Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, and make us hear it, that we may do it?' But the word is very close to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you can do it.

"This commandment" is understood by many as a reference to teshuva. The Torah is telling us that it is not beyond our ability to repent; rather it is incredibly close to us and within our power.

The Gemara (Avodah Zara 17a) relates the story of Elazar ben Durdaya, who leads a life filled with sin, until he experiences a spiritual awakening and runs to repent. At first though, he begs the mountains to ask G-d for forgiveness on his behalf, but they refuse. He then asks the heavens and the earth, the sun, the moon and the stars but none of them can atone for him. He slowly comes to the realisation of *אין הדבר תלוי אלא בי*, "the matter is dependent on nothing other than myself", and cries bitterly until his soul leaves him, whereupon a heavenly voice emerges and declares, "Rabbi Elazar ben Durdaya, a place is prepared for you in the world to come".

This sends us a frightening, yet empowering message: no one, no intermediary or scapegoat will be able to effect teshuva on my behalf. Concurrently and consequently, this is something that I have total control over, and is entirely dependent on my action. Teshuva is readily available, but we have to decide to take advantage of it.



Abi Laderman (Shevet Morasha) - Focusing on the Future

A therapist was once asked; what is the biggest problem you face with your patients? She answered: "They stay stuck. They get to a certain point of self-awareness but then cannot move forward."

At first glance it is very strange that at the beginning of the Aseret Yemei Teshuva, the Ten Days of Repentance we celebrate Rosh Hashana. The Aseret Yemei Teshuva are a time for reflection on the past year, a time where we confess, apologise and ask for forgiveness.

And yet we do almost none of this on Rosh Hashana, there is no confession, no reference to the past year. On Rosh Hashana we focus on the coming year and on the future, not on looking backwards. Should we not start our 10 days of teshuva with teshuva?

Rabbi Sacks answers: to mend the past you first have to secure the future.

There are two places in the Torah where we see the opposite mentality was taken, first with Noah and then with Lot's wife. After the flood it is as if Noah looked back, overwhelmed by his grief he turned to wine, before the flood he was called righteous but after it, he ended his days drunk and dishevelled. So too, Lot's wife turned back to look at the destruction of Sodom and was turned into a pillar of salt. They looked back and never managed to see the future.

As a people we have survived tragedy after tragedy by looking forward. When Sarah died, we might have expected Avraham to be paralysed with grief, and to give up. But instead, we are told: "Avraham came to mourn for Sarah and weep for her, then Avraham rose from beside his dead wife." We are then told how Avraham bought the first plot of land in Israel and arranged a wife for Yitzchak, he was purely focused on working towards what he had been promised to him by Hashem. First, he built the future, then there was time to look back.

This is what we do on Rosh Hashana, we read about the miraculous birth of Yitzchak, because we are looking ahead, and then having secured our future we turn to fixing the past. The problem that the therapist had with her clients was that they weren't working towards anything, they focused only on the past and therefore got stuck and couldn't look forward. First, we must focus on building a better future, only then can we fix the past.

Lawrence Shenkin (Shevet Hineini)- Constant Repentance

In Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Elazar said: "repent one day before your death." His students found a slight problem with this. "Rabbi," they said, "how do you know when you're going to die?" To which he responded, "Ah, so you need to be repenting every single day of your life." He notes this right before advising that one should keep their friends close, to honour and respect them and "heat themselves from the fires of the wise."

It's noted in Bamidbar Rabbah that every single person in Am Yisrael has great things about them but so to every single person has shortcomings. However, all of our shortcomings can be identified and found by the people around us.

Repent one day before your death. Repent every day of your life. And do it whilst heating yourself from the fires of the wise. Do it whilst around friends that can identify your shortcomings and help you do teshuva and you may help them too, and together amongst Am Yisrael, we can be better, as you personally, amongst your friends and as an entire nation.

Rabbanit Sarah Kenigsberg - Writing the Blueprint

When I was pregnant with my daughter I was working as an organic chemist at a pharmaceutical company. If you couldn't find me in my lab doing work you would generally find me reading the MSDS – the material safety data sheet looking up the properties of the reactants and solvents I was working with. I would be checking if the materials were safe for me to work with despite the fact that many of them I had worked with several times before – now, during pregnancy, the stakes were that much higher. Chemicals that are safe when handled properly for adults can have serious effects on a foetus due to its rate of development. The sensitivity of a foetus means that small changes can have far reaching consequences. This was constantly in my thoughts and reflected by my actions.

So too, Rosh Hashanah can be described as the conception of the year, and the 10 days following as its gestation period. We are building up the DNA, the spiritual make-up of the year to come and extra thought needs to go into the way we act and what we expose ourselves to. Changes in this time period are much easier to achieve than later on in the year. Now we have this great opportunity to rewrite the spiritual blueprint which can enable us to improve and progress in ways that may have seemed unattainable until now.

So as we are coming up to Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the day man was created, let's remember that every year we have the potential to be recreated. Let's tap in to this power and put extra effort and energy into ensuring that we act in the best way possible so that this year will be one of unprecedented growth and spiritual development.

Rachel Cooklin (Shevet Avichai) - The Significance of Silence

Rabbi Sacks tells a story of a religious woman who was interviewed about her faith. She was asked what she said to G-d when she prayed and replied that she just listened. The interviewer then asked, "when you listen what does G-d say?" The woman simply replied "He just listens, and if you don't understand that I can't explain it to you."

So much of the reflection that we are encouraged to do during Elul, in the run up to the Yomim Noraim, is centered around silence and our interactions with it. Elul is a time to reflect on our actions from the year before in order to become better people and grow in the year ahead.

To do this, people take inspiration from Rav Yisrael Salanter who compiled a Cheshbon HaNefesh (an accounting of the soul) that focuses on different characteristics to enable each of us to ensure that we are constantly improving and working on ourselves. One of the middot (character traits) on which he focuses is silence. To ensure that before we open our mouths we are silent. To consider the impact that our words can have on those around us.

The last paragraph of the silent amida for Ashkenazim begins with the phrase: "תִּדְמוּ נַפְשֵׁי וְלִמְקַלְלֵי מְרֻמָּה מְדַבֵּר וּשְׁפָתַי מִרַע לְשׁוֹנֵי נֹצֵר" - "guard from evil and my lips from deceitful speech, to those who curse me let my soul be silent."

As we move through this reflective and spiritual time may we all consider the impact that our words and silence can have on those around us, and ultimately Klal Yisrael.

Yona Taub (Shevet Hineini) - The Importance of Intention

There is a famous quote by Mahatma Gandhi which says that 'action expresses priorities', meaning that our actions reveal our intentions.

It is a fascinating idea – and actually a very Jewish one! Surely our intentions instigate our actions? But no, there are many ideas that pass through our minds but only the ones that result in actions should be regarded as our intentions.

It is difficult to control our thoughts and desires and Judaism does not judge us for this. However, we do have control over whether we choose to act on our desires. It is not the thoughts that are held accountable for, but the whether we chose to act upon them.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we are judged for our actions – but Judaism is quite clear – we are not judged for what we intended to do but only what we actually did.

There is a story in the Gemara which describes a man who sells his property with the intention of making aliya. However, at the time that he sold the property he did not say anything with regards to his intentions. Ultimately, he did not move to Israel and he wished to go back on the sale. Rava said: Since he did not explicitly state his intention that he was selling his property on condition that he make Aliya, it is an unspoken matter that remained in the heart, and unspoken matters are not significant matters. Intentions only become important when they are turned into actions.

However, there is one occasion in which we should judge people by their intentions and it has become increasingly common.

Today on campus and in politics we are increasingly facing a 'cancel culture' in which people are criticised for things that they say. Minor mistakes or slips of the tongue are sufficient to bring down the rage of social media upon the so-called offender. Take for example the Dean of Claremont McKenna College, near Los Angeles.

In October 2015, a student wrote an essay for the college magazine about her feelings on exclusion. Olivia, a child of Mexican immigrants, wrote that she felt as if she has been admitted to fill a racial quota and that she felt alone on this

supposedly progressive campus. In response to her essay, Mary Spellman, the dean of students, sent her a private email which said:

Olivia —

Would you be willing to talk with me sometime about these issues? They are important to me and the DOS staff and we are working on how we can better serve students, especially those who don't fit our CMC mould. I would love to talk with you more.

Best, Dean Spellman

Two weeks after receiving this email, Olivia posted it on her Facebook page with the comment, "I just don't fit that wonderful CMC mould! Feel free to share." The email was shared, and the campus erupted—marches, protests, demands for diversity training, and demands for Spellman's job. You can even find a clip on YouTube of a group of students circled around Spellman and other administrators berating them through bullhorns. Spellman apologized for her poorly worded email, but after escalating outrage and increased news coverage, she eventually resigned. Instead of looking at the intent of Dean Spellman, which was genuinely concerned, the students looked only to their feelings of injury and offence. This incident is far from isolated and far from limited to the US.

On Rosh Hashanah we are judged for our deeds and not our intentions – thank G-d! But in our own lives, when we feel offended or angry at what someone says to us, it is essential that we look behind the words and ask what were the intentions – and if there was no intent to hurt or harm then we should try our very best not to take offence and not to call out the individual.

Dania Mann-Weinberg (Shevet Avichai)- The Importance of Now

Sometimes, during the month of Elul, we may experience a small identity crisis regarding what sort of person we think we are. This can be particularly poignant if we feel we have fluctuated considerably over the past year. We also may struggle to feel intellectually honest about taking on extra things during this time.

The Gemara in Masechet Rosh Hashana (ז:ז), says that a person is only judged according to their deeds at the time of judgement. Rashi explains that this means that Hashem evaluates us based on who we are now rather than based on any future deeds. This makes evident the fact that it's worthwhile to try to take extra care in our Avodat Hashem during this time, even if we're concerned about maintenance in the future.

Additionally, we can also interpret this Gemara to say that to an extent we are judged according to who we are currently, rather than on who we were in the past.

This idea of not seeing people as a product of their past mistakes is one that we can apply to the way we judge others, and even sometimes when evaluating ourselves.

Sam Prais (Shevet Avichai) - The Need for Acceptance

Many of us try to justify aveirot when we do them. What do I mean by this? Let's take an example of someone whose light is on in their bedroom on Friday night, and they decide to turn it off. What could their logic be?

"If I don't turn my light off I won't be able to sleep, so I'll be tired tomorrow. Therefore, I'm turning the light off for *Oneg Shabbat* – enjoyment of Shabbat. I'll also turn it off with my elbow, so I'm turning it off with a *shinuy* – not in the usual way. That means it doesn't really count as breaking Shabbat. In fact, since I did it with my elbow and it was for *Oneg Shabbat*, maybe it was even a mitzvah to turn off my light?"

Of course, this is quite an extreme example, but this kind of thought process is one that many of us go through when we do aveirot. We are trying to justify our actions and convince ourselves that what we did was right. Whilst this skewed logic may work in our heads, it is important to remember that it does not work with Hashem.

The first step to doing Teshuva properly is to accept that what we did was wrong. At this time of year – Elul, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur – we really need to start accepting and admitting where we have gone wrong throughout the year, and that it was wrong. Only by doing this first will we be able to do Teshuva fully, enabling us to have a meaningful and successful Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

Joel Leighton (Shevet Zion)- Teshuva as growth

Every year, Parashat Nitzavim is read the week before Rosh Hashana. But why? What is in this parasha that links it to Rosh Hashana?

An answer can be learned out from a very interesting pasuk at the end of shlishi which says "הַנְּסֻתָּוֹת לַה' אֱלֹקֵינוּ וְהַנְּגִלוֹת לָנוּ וּלְבָנֵינוּ עַד־עוֹלָם לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה" - "Concealed acts concern Hashem, our G-d; but with overt acts, it is for us and our children ever to apply all the provisions of this Torah". The Ibn Ezra explains that הַנְּסֻתָּוֹת refers to the sins that people do in secret. Those are for Hashem to judge, not us. Our whole tefillah on Rosh Hashana is dedicated to placing Hashem as King and this helps us to recognise our role, that it is not to investigate and judge other people's private lives, but we have to have faith in Hashem's system of justice that ultimately people will receive the reward and punishment they deserve.

So what is our role? The pasuk tells us - 'הַנְּגִלוֹת' is for us and our children. We have a responsibility to keep the things that happen in public holy. We can't have people openly sinning in public, we have to protect the sanctity of our Torah.

Parashat Nitzavim is telling us that there's more to teshuva than just repenting for the sins we have done, we also have to want to actively become a better member of the Jewish people, and be a positive influence on our communities, in order to protect the sanctity of the Torah, Hashem is commanding us to observe and fulfil the words of this pasuk.

Chana Be'eri (Shevet Na'aleh) – Our Relationship with G-d

The Haftara that we read on second day Rosh Hashana is Yirmiyahu's appeal to the Northern tribes of the kingdom of Israel to return to the fold of Judaism and reunite with the southern kingdom of Yehuda. Yirmiyahu speaks of G-d's love for His people and recalls happy times of the past, reassuring Israel that they can again experience the delights of a relationship with G-d.

Erica Brown describes Jewish time as a spiral, cycling through festivals that demand different emotions of us, and periods of greater intimacy with or distance from G-d. Israel is stuck in a period of distance, so by recalling a period of closeness Yirmiyahu reminds them that a time will come when they will spiral back towards this state of closeness.

Humans are creatures who live in the moment. In times of joy, we struggle to remember the bad times, while in times of despair, we can hardly imagine the feeling of hope and happiness. This haftarah reminds us not to give up when we feel distant from G-d: no matter how far we have strayed, we will again reach a state of closeness with Hashem.

Shira Neville (Shevet Orot) – The Deeper Meanings of Elul

Elul has three Roshei Teivot that each correspond to teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah.

The first is the one most of us are familiar with; "Ani Ledodi Veledodi Li" - "I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me". This reflects Hashem's relationship with Bnei Yisrael, one of endearment.

"At Levavcha Ve-et Laevav (Zarecha)" - "your heart and the heart of your descendants".

"Ish Ierayayhu Umatanot Le-eyyonim" - "each man to his friend and gifts to the needy."

We are told that teshuvah, tefillah and tzedakah remove the evil of the decree. This period is our time to turn our focus on these three principles. What teshuvah do I need to do? How can I improve my tefillah? Can I give more of myself to others?

Ani Ledodi Veledodi Li represents Tefillah, We are turning to G-d and he is turning to us, we are having a conversation with him

At Levavcha Ve-et Laevav (Zarecha) represents Teshuvah. We are accepting that our hearts will be changed

Ish Ierayayhu Umatanot Le-eyyonim Tzedakah. We are committing to give of ourselves to others.

Daniel Ross (Shevet Morasha) - Active 'asking'

As we enter into the month of Elul we begin reciting Tehilim Perek כז everyday after Maariv. I want to focus on the fourth passuk of this perek: אַחַת שְׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת- ה' אוֹתָהּ אֲבַקֵּשׁ שְׁבֵתִי בְּבֵית-ה' כָּל-יְמֵי חַיֵּי לַחַזוֹת בְּנוֹעַם-ה' וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהִיכְלוֹ: The most simple translation of this passuk is: "One thing I ask of ה', that I will ask: to dwell in the house of ה' all the days of my life, to look upon the pleasantness of ה' and to frequent His Sanctuary." Why do we have the double expression of שאלתי and אבקש - both mean to ask?

Rav Techtel zt"l, in his sefer *Eim Habanim Semeicha*, provides the fascinating answer of an unnamed גדול מן הגדולים (a great Rabbi among greats), based on a Gemara in Niddah (70b) which teaches "What should a person do to become wise? Increase [his time] sitting [in the Beit Midrash] and reduce [his time] buying and selling. They said, 'Many have done this and it did not help them.' Rather they should plead for compassion from the One to Whom wisdom belongs." The Gemara continues to ask how a person can increase their wealth and how to have male children and each time the answer is the same: he should perform an action and ask G-d for a favourable result. The conclusion in each of these cases is מאי קמ"ל - What is being taught? We already know that prayer is the way to these results! דהא בלא הא לא סגי - That one without the other - prayer without action - is not sufficient.

The Gadol that Rav Techtel quotes explains that prayer alone, without action is insufficient, and this is the difference between שאלתי and אבקש. The word שאלתי means to ask, to pray; whereas the word אבקש means to seek out, it is concrete action. Therefore, when David haMelech says "אַחַת שְׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת-ה' אוֹתָהּ" אֲבַקֵּשׁ" he means: 'One thing I've prayed for, and that which I will seek out with genuine, substantial action.'

Perhaps this explains the famous phrase that we recite on Rosh Hashana and on Yom Kippur: ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רע הגזרה - "Teshuva, Tefilah and Tzedakah avert the evil decree". We must want to return to G-d and pray for forgiveness, but we must also actualise this through our behaviour and actions.

Gidon Schwartz (Shevet Ne'eman) - The Order of Teshuva

The culmination of Elul and this whole period is Yom Kippur, and in the Beit Hamikdash times the focal point of the drama that would unfold in front of Am Yisrael were these two goats; the 'שעיר לה' and the 'שעיר לעזאזל', the goat for Hashem and the goat for 'Azazel'.

Rav Yehuda Amital זצ"ל points out an interesting lesson from the order these two goats were dealt with. The first goat that was dealt with was the 'שעיר לה' offered up as a Korban Chatot, the purpose of that was to atone for sins that were committed for mistreating and sins regarding things inside the Beit Hamikdash itself. Only after these more internal sins were atoned for and forgiven could the 'שעיר לעזאזל' – the scapegoat, be led off through the desert and be thrown off the cliff to atone for all other more general sins.

This is what must be happening within each of us in the run up to, and even more so on, Yom Kippur. Before we do our vidui and do teshuva for all the individual sins we must be introspective and only once we have addressed the inner issues and roots of the sins can we move on to achieving the tahara, the purity, that is the focus on Yom Kippur. Without this tahara our kapara (atonement) is just papering over the cracks.

We need to look at the lessons from the two goats at how we view ourselves as our own Beit Hamikdash so that Hashem can purify us and then Yom Kippur can achieve its true purpose of Hashem purifying us so we can become complete Ovdei Hashem (servants of Hashem) as He desires. "Just as a mikvah purifies the impure so to Hashem purifies Israel."

Shira Collins (Shevet Ne'eman) - Bridging the Gap

As Elul comes to a close we start to really focus on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, but the truth is there is a time in the middle that is equally as important and possibly more confusing. So, we should probably spend some time thinking about that. This, of course is the Aseret Yemei Teshuva the time in between the two most important dates in the Jewish calendar. This time is really peculiar, we go back to work and get on with our lives. Yes, it's possible we may think about doing a couple of more mitzvot here or there, but in general we don't really focus too much on it.

This confuses me personally, so while doing a little learning on the matter, I came across a great analogy from Rabbi Hain on this topic. He explains "After hearing the wake-up call of the shofar on Rosh Hashana, we essentially press the snooze button for an additional week of sleep before begging for forgiveness on Yom Kippur." This perfectly depicts my confusion of this time, why do we have this break between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur? What can we do about it?

The Rambam writes: "Even though repentance and calling out [to G-d] are desirable at all times, during the days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, they are even more desirable and will be accepted immediately as it states [Yishaya 55:6] "Seek Hashem when He is to be found." (Hilchot Teshuva 2:6)

From this we can see, that for the Rambam teshuva during the Aseret Yemei Teshuva is like no other time in the year. Instead of viewing this as a valley a place to spiritually fall down we should really view it as an opportunity to build a spiritual bridge from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur. A time to focus on our repentance, that we started on Rosh Hashana to the point where we are cleansed by Yom Kippur. We need to use that bridge from point A (Rosh Hashana) and point B (Yom Kippur) to complete that process, which without the Aseret Yemei Teshuva we wouldn't be able to do.

Avishai Marcus (Shevet Tzion)- Rav Kook's Models of Teshuva

In one of his biggest works, Orot HaTeshuva, Rav Kook enlightens us about two ways in which Teshuva happens to most people. Teshuva Hadragit (gradual) is the process of incremental improvements to our character. Overtime we notice that there are flaws in the way that we act and we make changes in our lives to develop ourselves. In contrast to a slow development, we also experience Teshuva Pitomit (sudden). This is when we experience a flash of lighting. An abrupt moment of clarification that we are doing wrong and we must improve.

The question is – how can we make Teshuva long-lasting? Especially Teshuva Pitomit which can seem so arbitrary.

The Piazeschnza Rebbi shares a simple piece of advice. Write.

In the Sefer Tzav V'Zeruz he expands on this. When we write our thoughts down they switch from being an abstract concept to a tangible reality. It becomes something that we are aware of because it doesn't just float around in our head, we can see it in front of our eyes. This concept is otherwise known as Cheshbon HaNefesh, the 'weighing up of the soul'.

May we all merit to retain the level of Teshuva that we reach in Elul.

Shana Tova Ve'Gamar Chatima Tova!

Avital Cohen (Shevet Seenai)– Sowing the Seeds

The month of Elul is upon us, a time for preparing ourselves for the upcoming holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. A time for repentance introspection and reflection. A time that we cannot let slip away for our life depends on it.

One story that I think really illustrates this is the tale of a farmer. Every year, in winter, he would go to an agricultural convention to learn of new farming technology that he could use to improve his crop output. One year, at the convention, he felt terribly ill and had to be hospitalised.

After he was discharged he came home to a site that truly shocked him. The majority of his fields were bare. Apparently the instruction to plant seeds had not been followed and so he had lost everything. All of his work had been for nothing.

Elul is the planting season. Elul is the time when we must plant the seeds of growth and devotion to Torah and to G-d and then we can hope to have an improved year. If we do not plant those seeds then there is nothing left.

During this time we must make sure that we are putting in that extra bit of effort so that we can plant the seeds and be worthy of having a bountiful harvest in the year to come.

Joel Ucko (Shevet Tzion/Morasha) - A Change in Perspective

There was a time when the Bal Shem Tov encountered a Water-Carrier in his village. The Bal Shem Tov greeted him and asked, "How are you?"

"Absolutely terrible. I am an old weak man. This work is much too strenuous. I am majorly lacking in rest and I have nobody to support me. I make so much effort to climb so many stairs with heavy buckets of water only to be bombarded with complaints when there is the occasional spillage. These heavy buckets are too much for me everyday. I don't feel valued at all. My life is miserable"

The Bal Shem Tov comforted him and left him with his blessing that his situation would improve. A few weeks later the Bal Shem Tov then encountered the Water-Carrier again and asked "How are you? How have things improved for you?"

"Thank G-d," the Water-Carrier beamed. "I am so fortunate. I may be old, but I am healthy and strong. I can afford the basic necessities in life and I can provide for my children. Not only am I independent, I can help others in my job. Suddenly I've started to realise that when I bring people water they are grateful. So much so on a cold wet day, after a long heavy shift I will be offered a cup of tea and refreshments."

Its clear to see that the Water-Carrier's mindset changed quite drastically between the first and second encounter with the Bal Shem Tov. How is this the case?

In long careers in life, where we wake up to the same surroundings, same tasks, doing the same activities with the same people, with the same resources its pretty normal to get fed up and become quite negative. However, the Water-Carrier decided to change his approach to the day. He decided to install this true sense of simcha and joy in to his heart that Hashem has provided him in order to alter his existence.

The Vilna Gaon explains that a person who is able to master being in a joyous state will be able to cure himself of any disease just from being able to keep themselves positive and away from stress. It says in Tehillim "If I had the wings of a dove I would fly away and find rest". Everyone has periods of everyday



where they really want to escape. However, the real rest is when you are resilient to those tough moments, fight through harder times and that sense of achievement and pride from staying positive is where the real rest is.

This Elul and over the course of the Yamim Noraim, let's all take a moment to consider how we can implement a wider sense of Simcha in to our day. As we self-reflect, let's all establish one area of our lives where we can improve our ability to be joyful this through that extra bit of Simcha, we will feel happier, calmer, more relaxed and most all we will see us gain that much more success.

Shana Tova

Madeleine Ferris (Shevet Morasha) - The Constant Struggle

The Rambam says in Hilchot Teshuva that each and every person has their merits and sins. A person whose merits exceed his sins is determined righteous, whilst a person whose sins exceed their merits is determined wicked. However, if their sins and merits are equal, they are determined 'beinoni'.

Beinoni is a broad category within which most people fit, with even some of the greatest Gedolim declaring themselves beinoni. This seems somewhat disheartening, as if even our greatest teachers cannot attain the level of being a tzadik, how are we to escape this permanent state of neutrality?

On the contrary, the Alter Rebbe goes so far as to claim that the state of being Beinoni is one of spirituality, owing to the fact that it is a constant state of reflection, repentance, repair and renewal.

Every person, he says, has a Yetzer Hara and Tov. The beinoni is wise enough to know that the Yetzer Hara will never go away, and so is in a constant struggle of attempting to keep the Yetzer Tov dominant. This struggle is the struggle of the righteous.

Rosh Hashana and the Aseret Yemei Teshuva are often depicted as being the beginning of a process of judgement, but for the beinoni every day is judgement day. Teshuva is a habitual state, and so whilst this period in particular allows for specific focus, we must keep in mind that Teshuva is an ongoing process. Our personal reflection time need not be confined to one short period per year; it should permeate all areas of our lives constantly in order to further elevate our spiritual status as beinoni.

Josh Daniel (Shevet Avichai) - Lost in Translation

"Teshuva is not repentance, Tefilla is not prayer, and Tzedakah is not charity"

The Lubavitcher Rebbe exclaims and explains with ear piercing clarity,

He questions are habitual Rosh Hashana Routine of just not understanding what words mean,

So whatever your shul, machzor, your preference, The Lubavitcher Rebbe is asking us to change our frame of reference:

Teshuva is not repentance because that implies starting anew, erasing our old self and all the evil it could do.

But Teshuva comes from "shuv" which means return to move,

back to our old selves work out what's wrong and improve, not remove,

"Tefilla is not prayer" cos to pray means to petition,

To make requests from G-d to beg him, that's not our mission,

"Tafel" means to require additional work,

A work of the heart – we try to arrange,

our values with G-d's and hope for self change,

Its not an exchange,

"Tzedakah is not charity" because charity implies the giver has no obligation to give, that's not how we live,

Tzedakah means righteousness and its just the right thing to do,

giving to others as Hashem gives to you,

So bear in mind this Elul as we're reading through the siddur, fulfilling our obligation,

that some of our words might be getting lost in translation.

Gemma Denby (Shevet Tzion) – The Timing of Elul

The month of Elul immediately precedes the Yamim Noraim. Chazal teach us that this is the month in which we are given an opportunity to work on our relationship with Hakadosh Baruch. The word "Elul" is spelt Aleph-Lamed-Vav-Lamed, which forms an acronym for the words of the verse "Ani Ledodi Vedodi Li" – "I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me" (Shir HaShirim 6:3). "My Beloved" is referring to G-d. Shir HaShirim ("The Song of Songs") is an analogy describing the love relationship between G-d and the Jewish people. Elul is the month whereby G-d reaches out to Am Yisrael more than any other time in the year. The heavenly gates of love are opened, imploring us all to enter and reconnect with Hashem as never before.

The first time that Elul appears in the Tanach as "chodesh hashishi" is in the nevuah of Chagai HaNavi who was a prophet living at the beginning of the second Beit Hamikdash. Chagai turns to Bnei Yisrael and says 'this is the month we are in, where you should take stock of where you are right now, you're all sitting in your homes and Hashem's home is destroyed.' He says, 'did you ever think you have planted a lot but you haven't reaped all the benefits of your investment?' Chagai turned to Bnei Yisrael in this month specifically because in Eretz Yisrael this is the month of harvesting. Chagai beseeches us to use this opportunity to take stock of everything in the past, undergo a process of true self analysis, with the ultimate intention of seeking mechila (forgiveness). This is a time for us to carry out some self-introspection and utilise the opportunity that G-d has given us and continues to give Am Yisrael year in year out to write ourselves in the Book for Life for the coming year.

In Masechet Rosh Hashanah - Rashi says be willing, don't be so caught up with all the measurements here and there, if you are willing to forgive and forgo some of those details, you are in fact willing, during this month of Elul to be able to say "Ani Ledodi Vedodi Li"- that only comes when we feel the distance and truly yearn for the closeness, then we can be zocher to appreciate this time.