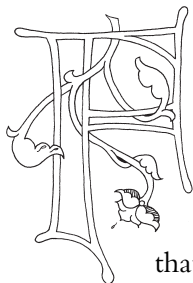


Elul

- MONTH: *August-September*
- ENERGY: *Returning to the Inner Stillness Within Change*
- AREA OF HEALING: *Action*
- ASTROLOGICAL SIGN: *Virgo*
- HEBREW LETTER: *Yud*
- HEBREW TRIBE: *Gad*
- DIVINE NAME PERMUTATION: *HHVY*
- HOLIDAY: *Selichot*



orgiveness is a major theme of the energy of this month. It is not always easy to forgive when we have been hurt, but it is easier when we realize that an attack against us is not personal. If we can see God's hand in what has occurred, and appreciate how the challenges we are facing are taking us forward, it is easier to forgive the person who hurt us because we see that they played a significant role in our growth. This month is dedicated to this kind of review.

In Elul, Michelle's daughter was invited to a few bar mitzvah celebrations at the synagogue where Michelle used to belong, and Michelle dreaded returning, even to drop off her daughter. Months earlier, Michelle had terminated her membership at this synagogue after several unpleasant experiences with the rabbi, the cantor, and a few women friends. She was afraid to return and face them. She felt they had betrayed her trust and her friendship and she felt like a victim.

Through therapy, Michelle realized that the greater truth was that she had spiritually outgrown her former synagogue. She was not a victim; rather, she exercised her powerful freedom of free choice and had chosen another place to worship. She felt betrayed by the rabbi and cantor, but she saw that what they did was not exactly betrayal. She realized, with the true seeing eyes of Tammuz, that what they did to her was not personal. Actually, in Tammuz she was given an opportunity to see clearly their all too human self-serving side and she no longer could hold them in the esteem that she had previously. As a true spiritual seeker, she realized that she could no longer in good conscience confine herself to the back-stabbing politics and spiritual narrow-mindedness characteristic of this synagogue. She needed to be true to herself.

In many ways this realization was a gift, because it enabled her to go to another synagogue where her spiritual needs would be better met. She was welcomed and appreciated in this new synagogue. Once out of her former synagogue, she could breathe more deeply. She felt liberated. She was asked to teach in the upcoming year and even read from the Torah, as she so much loved to do. She felt that it was a gift and a pleasure to be there.

When she realized the deeper truth about what had really happened in her former synagogue during this month of Elul, it was easy to let go of the feeling of being a victim. She understood that the circumstances with the rabbi and the cantor that had hurt her were the forces that propelled her to change synagogues. She was grateful on many levels that she had left. She saw God's hand in what happened. She could forgive the rabbi and the cantor for their human frailty, and yet still choose to move on. Having forgiven the rabbi and the cantor, she could enter into her former synagogue briefly as needed. She felt whole and good about herself.

Energy: Returning to the Inner Stillness Within Change

Elul is known in Judaism as the headquarters for *teshuvah*, which literally means “to return.” *Teshuvah* has many facets to it. In its most common usage, it often connotes a return to or an acceptance of a greater level of Jewish observance. It also refers to the acknowledgment of an error, the resultant feelings of regret, and the commitment to correct a situation and behave differently in the future. On the deepest and most mystical level, *teshuvah* is the return to inner wholeness, beauty, and potential, a return to the soul and its innate connection with the Divine. *Teshuvah* is the healing and letting

go of what keeps us separate from others and God and from being who we really are. Beginning with the second day of Elul, the shofar is sounded four times daily after morning services to highlight and intensify this inner turning and powerful awakening of the soul present in this month.

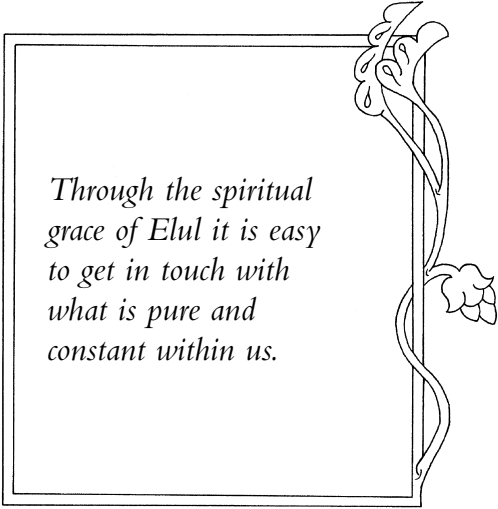
Elul begins somewhere toward the middle to end of August and continues to the middle of September. Even though the heat may still be strong, there is a subtle change in the quality of light upon the arrival of Elul, and we sense that fall will soon be upon us. In many places in the world, the days will become shorter, the air cooler, and the leaves will once again turn into beautiful colors before they fall to the ground. We will see before our very eyes the cyclical dance of nature. Some of us will greet these changes with joy and some with regret; nevertheless, the natural changes will occur. Nature will turn inward once again.

As we both witness and experience the inevitable cycles of life, we are drawn inward to the consciousness within us that does not change. Through the spiritual grace of this month it is easy to get in touch with what is pure and constant within us. It is interesting to note that the astrological sign of this month is Virgo, which is symbolized by a virgin. This is the only astrological sign that is feminine. According to Kabbalah, the feminine refers to the capacity to receive. There is a unique goodness that an inward-turning person can receive during this month. Kabbalah says that this is hinted to in Proverbs 18:22: "Who finds a wife [virgin] finds great good." Elul sweetens the judgment energy of the two previous months, Tammuz and Av, and brings a hidden goodness.

As our consciousness turns inward this month, we are able to access a certain detachment that enables us to become aware of the ways in which we strayed from actualizing our potential. We see the good and not so good within us. As the last month of the year, we naturally find ourselves reviewing, assessing, and evaluating the

accomplishments, challenges, and shortcomings of the entire year. It is the time to get in touch with the essence of what is important in life. We find ourselves reflecting on the dominant themes of the last year, what soul qualities we were encouraged to develop and express during the year, what lessons we needed to learn. Many of us will be brought to new levels of appreciation for the personal relationships that have nourished us in this last year and the accomplishments we were able to achieve. Others of us will be more aware of unfinished business and the work needed to heal relationships so we can truly open to newness in the coming year.

Elul is a time of spiritual accounting. For those who have had a relatively easy year, it may be easier to come to terms. Those who have had difficult year may become discouraged, feel burdened by sins, and question the capacity for real change. Know that this despair is natural at this time and temporary and it can be a launching pad for the *teshuvah* experience. We are not really stuck. As we feel our regrets for the mistakes we have made in our lives this last year and we allow ourselves to feel our own brokenness, it becomes clear that we want something so pure and so deep and that we cannot do this on our own. If we call out to God from this place of brokenness, there is a heavenly grace that we can draw upon in this month that is unique. The gates of heaven are open during this month.



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The first letters of the Hebrew verse “*Ani ledodi vidodi li*,” “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine” (Song of Songs 6:3), spell out Elul. This signifies that there is an intimate and loving closeness between God and people this month. It is said that in Elul God wanders in the fields, while on Rosh Hashanah, God sits on His throne like a king. The metaphor of God sitting on His throne as King expresses the awe inspired by our awareness of God as the creator and ruler of everything. The perceived distance between us and God is reduced in Elul, God is very close to us, and the experience of God’s unconditional love is more accessible. Nevertheless, we must want it, and we must work for it.

Elul directly precedes Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. Elul is the time of spiritual preparation for the high holiday. The *teshuvah*, the inner work of returning to one’s true essence, done during this month will affect our capacity to stand before God on Rosh Hashanah and draw down the blessings for the coming new year.

Kabbalah talks about two kinds of awakenings: from above to below and from below to above. In Nissan, which hosts Passover, there is an awakening from above, a flow of heavenly grace from the spiritual world to this physical world. In Elul, there is also a flow from above, but we must initiate it by our actions and spiritual yearning. Because we have to work for this heavenly grace, we earn the blessings, and this enables us to integrate them into our lives in a way we would not do if they were just given to us.

Take note of the kinds of conversations you have during this month. The quality of *teshuvah* is in the air, whether people are consciously undertaking the process of self-evaluation or not. I have noticed that *teshuvah* is the theme of many plays and television programs, even situation comedies.

During this month, you may also find that you are brought into contact with people you have not seen for a while and are now given an opportunity to heal and com-

plete the relationship in a way that was not possible before. For example, Gladys ran into her ex-husband unexpectedly and had a chance to talk to him in a more sympathetic and communicative manner than had been possible during their separation and divorce. You too may have unexpected meetings or calls out of the blue. On the other hand, if you feel a desire to connect with someone you haven't had contact with in a while, listen to your inner voice and follow your heart. It generally is a good time to reach out to people you want to be close to and wish them a happy and healthy new year.

During this month, you may find yourself revisiting places and situations that on a conscious level you would choose not to, but nevertheless, opportunities are being provided for you to let go of the residual negativity imprinted on your soul, so you can truly go forward in your life. For example, we saw how Michelle had to return to the synagogue she left due to unpleasant experiences with a variety of people. Another person I know, Jennifer had to visit family members whom she had not seen in a long time and for whom she harbored negative feelings. In both these cases, an important exchange occurred that helped heal and liberate each woman from continuing limiting patterns of behavior. In all your encounters this month, look to bring forth the healing and the forgiveness needed in relationships.

Historically, Elul is the time period during which Moses returned to Mount Sinai to plead for forgiveness for the sin of the Golden Calf. Consequently, Elul is the month for us to work on forgiveness of ourselves and of others, allowing us to open to the higher worlds and receive new revelation. As we forgive others, so we open up to divine forgiveness. Much has been written about the benefits and importance of forgiveness. As difficult and stubborn as we can be, letting go of our hurts and anger is often the best thing we can do for ourselves. Though forgiveness is a spiritual practice for the whole year, it is a major theme for this month. As we approach the upcoming

new year, forgiveness provides an opportunity to let go of the past and its limitations in order to enable us to open to the new year as fully as possible.

The spiritual awakening of Elul was augmented during the year of the writing of this book on September 11, 2001, the twenty-third of Elul, when the World Trade Center was destroyed by terrorism. In this unique event, over three thousand people from all nations, all ages, all religions, died together. This horrific event was a shofar blast, a divine wake-up call, in line with the energy of this month of Elul. We woke up as a nation. People turned to God in a more immediate, authentic, and direct way. There were prayer services throughout New York City and national prayer vigils. This event facilitated a dramatic and authentic *teshuvah* experience for many people, which is characteristic of this month.

Out of such horrific events, people transform themselves in ways that they might not do when life is taken for granted. In light of this tragedy, there has been greater spiritual clarity about what is really important in life ever since. It is not the money one has, but the love. Our priorities shifted. We cared about people, not about business. We realized how precious and holy a human life is and how connected we really are to each other. We truly felt each other's pain. We cried together and felt a new degree of intimacy with people. America grieved and unified in a way it hadn't done in a long time. Particularly in New York City, people have become instantly connected to each other. Strangers even make eye contact on the street. There is a generosity of spirit and caring and opening of the heart that is extraordinary. There is a commitment and dedication to make this world a better place, and be the people God wants us to be. All of this is characteristic of the transformational energy of Elul. September 11 was a powerful *teshuvah* experience. One hopes we will maintain the awareness of the spiritual opening we received on September 11. Some people want to return to a September 10 world, but it is impossible to go back.

If something horrific like this was going to happen, this was the month for it. It was even predicted in the *Zohar*, the principal ancient book of Jewish mysticism. In the chapter of Balak it is said that three buildings in a major country would be destroyed on the twenty-third of Elul and that this event would begin the prophesied process of redemption. Many people in the Jewish community feel that we have now truly entered into this period.

General Guidelines and Goals

These guidelines and goals enable us to direct our energies in the ways that are optimal for our growth and transformation in accordance with the energy of this month. It is recommended that you read and meditate upon them often in the course of the month. Reflect on their applicability to you, and allow them to direct and inspire you often this month.

I. COMPLETE UNFINISHED BUSINESS AND PLAN FOR THE FUTURE.

Take time to review the last year. What were the major themes? What do you still need to complete before the year is over? What was last year about? Take time to record any insights from these reflections.

Personal transformation and growth can begin only from where we are. Take time to review where you are. Be as honest and objective as you can be in the following reflections. Write a brief description and evaluation of your current status for each one.

Reflect on your physical well-being—your health, diet, living situation, and livelihood. Are you satisfied, or would you like some improvement?

Reflect on your emotional well-being—your relationships with family, friends, colleagues, and community. How would you define your general disposition? Are you satisfied or are you open to expansion?

Reflect on your spiritual well-being—your inner prayer life and your connection to God and Judaism. Are you satisfied or open to enhancement?

Accepting ourselves and acknowledging the areas in our life that need rectification, improvement, and expansion is the foundation for growth. In preparing for the new year, reflect on what you would like to let go of and what you would like to continue, expand and bring into the upcoming new year. Remember, if nothing changes, nothing changes. If we do what we have done in the past, most likely we will get what we always got. Most of us want more than what we have, yet we do not know how to really change. Begin to formulate a plan to rectify the areas in your life that are not in accordance with what you really want.

2. DO THE WORK OF *TESHUVAH*.

When we do *teshuvah*, we acknowledge the mistakes we have made and the actions we have taken that are not in accordance with how we want to be in the world. This is not an easy process, but it is necessary if we are to grow and become the people we truly want to be. The *teshuvah* process asks us to assume responsibility for our actions, to feel regret for the mistakes we have made, and pledge to do differently in the future. And, finally, we make penance for any suffering we have caused. Here are some guidelines to assist you in this reevaluation process.

Identify the particular actions, behavior patterns, personality tendencies that you would like to change. Without making a vow, state how you plan to change your behavior in one or two ways. What compensation are you willing to offer for the pain and suffering you caused yourself, others, and God?

3. **FORGIVE GOD, YOURSELF, YOUR FAMILY, FRIENDS, EMPLOYER, EMPLOYEES, AND SO ON FOR THE PROBLEMS AND DIFFICULTIES YOU HAVE FACED IN THIS LAST YEAR.**

Forgiveness is an ongoing process. It is not always easy, because the ego likes to be right, especially if we feel we have been wronged. Though forgiveness is a great gift we can give to another, it is primarily an act of compassion toward ourselves. Anger and resentment keep us bound to limiting ideas of who we are—we feel like a victim, we feel stuck, and so on. Forgiveness and compassion purify, heal, and liberate us—we feel free and whole.

Make an effort in this month to practice forgiveness and compassion. Forgiveness does not mean that we condone negative behavior, nor do we deny our angry or hurt feelings. However, forgiveness asks us to see beyond the limits of our personality or that of the person who hurt us and open our heart to love. Though it is an act of grace, forgiveness is a process and may take some time. It is easier to forgive others and even ourselves when we are willing to take responsibility for the negativity we experienced. We are not victims. In the act of forgiveness, we substitute compassion for blame, and we trust ourselves and God that we have grown and will continue to grow from the pain or challenge we have experienced. Forgiveness is complete when we gain insight into how the challenges and difficulties we have faced in this last year support our growth.

During this month, reflect on the relationships in which you may harbor continuing resentment or anger. Reflect on relationships with people whom you may have caused pain and who may harbor anger toward you. Reflect on the ways you have been judgmental or unforgiving with yourself. Use the meditation provided in this chapter to work on forgiveness in preparation for approaching people directly.

4. **REPLACE THE INNER CRITIC WITH THE INNER CARETAKER.**

As a therapist and teacher of Jewish meditation, I am very aware that many people

suffer from feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and unworthiness. It is very hard, if not impossible, to change if we feel negative about ourselves. When we think about changing ourselves, we encounter our own resistance and often doubt that we can ever change.

Many people may have heard negative messages about themselves as children, messages that have become a part of how they experience themselves today as adults. Though people may know intellectually that these ideas have no basis in truth, they do not know it emotionally. As a result, they continue to feel deep inside that they are not good enough, not smart enough, not entitled to have the feelings that they do—all the things they were told as children—even though they may be externally very successful in their lives. Though not psychotic, they have ongoing internal conversations in which they criticize themselves and others. They continue to judge themselves harshly as adults and feel a lot of shame about things that have happened in their life. When we think about making changes in our lives, these negative voices may actually become stronger.

Take note of the inner critic, that negative voice within you that judges and criticizes you and others. Don't get into an extended battle with that part of yourself. Simply make an effort to substitute a loving, caring, nurturing voice in its place. Tell yourself how beautiful, wonderful, and lovable you really are. Accentuate the loving voice within you until it becomes integrated and prominent. Affirm yourself and others. Look to see the light rather than the darkness. Remember, the glass is half full rather than half empty.

5. MEDITATE, AND IDENTIFY WITH THE WITNESS, THE OBSERVING PART OF YOURSELF.

Completing one year and preparing for the next year is a time of major transformation. In times of change, it is helpful if we anchor our awareness in the part of us

that is constant and does not change. As we meditate, we access the witness part of ourselves. This witness consciousness is greater than our minds. From this place within us, we have objectivity and detachment. We realize that we are not our bodies, we are not our emotions, and we are not our thoughts. We are this pure divine soul. We are this listening awareness, this observing consciousness.

Many meditation techniques assist us in accessing this part of ourselves, and all meditation techniques do this to varying degrees. Meditate on a daily basis. Meditations can be brief; even five to fifteen minutes will make an important difference.

6. DEEPEN YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

Elul is the optimal time to develop intimacy with the Divine. Give yourself time to develop a personal relationship with God. In addition to formalized prayer and meditation, take time to talk directly to God in your own words. Share your hopes, dreams, fears, and pain. Ask for God's help, strength, and guidance. Ask God to help you change in the ways you want.

If it is hard for you to talk to God in this way, ask for God's help. Plead and beg if necessary. A relationship with God is the most important relationship in your life. Even if you are not sure whether you believe in a personal God who hears the needs of individuals or even if such a Being as God exists, pretend that you do and speak to God about your resistance or doubt. Take time to speak and time to listen to any changes that occur within you as you speak.

Astrological Sign: Virgo

The qualities of the sign of Virgo reveal much about the energy of this month. First, the sign is represented by the virgin. The virgin symbolizes purity and modesty. The

virgin represents the part of us that has remained pure, untainted, and unchanged by the vicissitudes of life. It is this deep part within us, the pure holy soul, that calls for our attention this month.

The virgin indicates that feminine energy is dominant in this month. Feminine energy according to kabbalah is grounded, detail-oriented, and more practical than masculine energy. Virgo is an earth sign, which further suggests that the focus this month is practical. Indeed, this is the month of the healing of action.

Like Gemini (Sivan), Virgo is ruled by the planet Mercury. Mercury, the mythological messenger of the gods, represents communication as well as reasoning and the analytical powers of the mind. People born under this sign are known for these qualities, as is the energy of this month.

Quite different from the exuberance and emotional intensity of Av's Leo, the energy of Virgo is introspective and disciplined. While people born in the previous month might be flamboyant and passionate and desire to be the center of attention, people born in Virgo tend to be conservative by nature, analytical, emotionally restrained, and detail-oriented.

With a gift for systematic organization, Virgos love a sense of order. I was married briefly to a Virgo. Not only was his desk totally neat and organized, he knew what and where every piece of paper in his desk was. Virgos tend to be observers rather than leaders; they like to work behind the scenes. They are great problem solvers. They are more emotionally detached than people of other signs. They stand back in life, observing, scrutinizing, and analyzing in order to better understand the underlying dynamics of the life situations they are in. When they do finally act, they do so purposefully.

In their search for purity and order, on the negative side, Virgos tend to be judgmental, self-critical, and critical of others. They more easily see what is not in place

rather than what is. Skeptical that others can ever meet their high standards, they tend to be aloof. Afraid that they might not be able to meet their own high standards, they tend to avoid taking chances for fear that they will make a mistake and be judged by others the way they tend to judge themselves.

According to astrology, the Virgo energy of the month at its best supports introspection, analysis, and objectivity and, at its worst, judgmentalism and aloofness.

Hebrew Letter: Yud

” The Hebrew letter for Elul is the yud. The smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet, the yud is simply a point. The yud is part of all letters and represents the essential life energy in the letter.

According to kabbalah, creation began with a yud, which represents the original point of entry of the infinite into the finite. As the smallest letter in the alphabet, the yud represents the self-nullification of the ego necessary for coming close to God. The yud is the essential point. The yud represents the soul, in its most pristine state, at the level of its union with the Divine.

The yud is the first letter of the Divine name, YHVH, and in this place the yud represents the *sephira*, the quality of Divine Thought (*chochma*). The yud is the first letter in the name Israel (Yisrael) and is also the first letter in the word “Jew” (Yehudit). It is the first letter in the names of many of the biblical prophets, such as Joshua (Yehousha), Jeremiah (Yirmiyahu), Isaiah (Yeshayah), and Joel (Yoel). Many holy words, names, and things begin with this letter.

The numerical value of the yud is ten. Ten is accepted as the basis for the universal number system. Ten represents plurality, but it contains within itself the initial and

essential unity. It is no coincidence that we have ten fingers, ten toes, ten *sephirot*, ten commandments, and ten people as a requirement for a prayer *minyan* (quorum).

Meditating on the yud this month supports the inner turning to the most essential inner point within us. Place the yud on your inner screen, meditate upon it, merge with it, and let it teach you the secrets of the power of becoming small.

Hebrew Tribe: Gad

When Leah saw that her sister, Rachel, had given her maidservant to Jacob to bear a child with and she herself had not conceived a child in a while, she gave her maidservant Zilpah to Jacob. Leah named the first son of this union Gad. Gad means “good fortune” (Gen. 30:11). This name is a sign of the good energy of this month.

When the Jewish people were entering the land of Israel, the tribe of Gad requested the land not in Israel, but east of the Jordan. They expressed their willingness to join in the fight with the other tribes for the land of Israel and only afterward would they then return to the land they preferred. Moses complied with their request and blessed them with extraordinary strength and good fortune. During the conquest of the land of Israel, they even marched in front of the other tribes. Because of their generosity and courage, their territory was larger than the territory of any of the other tribes. Living on the border, they remained continually protective of Israel.

Commentators on the Torah such as Rashi have also said that Gad chose the land on the east side of the Jordan because they wanted to remain close to Moses, who would not be entering the land. They guarded the burial site of Moses and they guarded the land of Israel.

Gad is the perfect tribe to represent the energy of this month in many ways. Gad, the tribe that served and protected the borders of the land, represents the month that is on the border of one year and the next. We need to tap into the strength of Gad to review the last year and prepare for the coming year. Gad is the energy that defines boundaries, and boundaries are important. Many problems in life occur because people have diffused personal boundaries. They do not know where they end and where others begin. They do not distinguish the past from the present or future. During this month of Elul, we are better able to make these distinctions.

When boundaries are clear, we can assume responsibility for ourselves and make choices about extending ourselves to others. As Gad did with the other tribes of Israel, Gad is the energy that both defines boundaries and is willing to extend beyond them when necessary. This Gad kind of knowing so essential this month enables us to know our own boundaries between self and others, as well as make distinctions between the past and the future.

The prophet Elijah came from the tribe of Gad. Interestingly, the oral tradition says that Pinchas, who slew Zimri, the prince of the tribe of Shimon, along with Cosbi, reincarnates as the prophet Elijah. It is predicted that Elijah will blow the shofar and bring the people back to the land of Israel. It is this returning to the land, to the essence of oneself that the shofar awakens within us.

Divine Name Permutation: HHVY

The permutation of the Divine Name for this month is HHVY. From the placement of the hays (H's) in the first and second positions, we see expansiveness in the higher

worlds of Atzilut and Beriyah. These worlds are spiritual, not physical, and the letters in these worlds shape the flow of Light above creation. The hay is a feminine letter, so we see once again the prominence of the feminine in this month. With the two hays in the first and second positions, we need to turn inside and upward.

The position of the last letter in this permutation, which corresponds to our physical world, known as Assiyah, is occupied by the yud (Y). As we learned earlier, the yud is the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet, just a dot. Even to sound the letter yud, the mouth has to close almost entirely so only a minuscule amount of air is released. The yud in this position indicates that at this time spiritual light is dim and hidden in the physical world. We have to nullify ourselves, reach deep inside ourselves and beyond ourselves to draw down the tremendous spiritual light that is so available in the higher dimensions. The vav (V) in the position of the world of Yetzerah is the only letter that is in its optimal and usual placement. This placement corresponds to the heart and informs us that the heart is the direct channel through which we draw down the light.

The permutation demonstrates that the energy of this month is reflective, rather than active. Taking time to go inside yourself so as to contact the higher levels of your being will be most productive at this time.

Torah Portions

The first Torah portion of this month (Deut. 18:1–20:20) begins with the *shoftim*, which means “judges.” Moses is instructing people to appoint judges who will judge righteously and objectively. So begins the process of judging oneself of Elul. We need to access the part of ourselves that can be objective and can review, reflect, and judge ourselves in this past year.

The next Torah portion, Ki Setzei (Deut. 21–26), begins with “When you will go out to war against your enemies, God will deliver them into your hand and you see among the captives a woman who is beautiful in form and you desire her, you may take her for a wife” (Deut. 21:10–11). Though these are instructions for war, they are interpreted by Jewish mysticism as instruction for the inner battle that occurs in this month. The enemies are internal, and with God’s help you will access the soul, which is the beautiful woman. There is a battle that we each must wage at this time and the Torah gives us guidance in how to be victorious. We are told that we can take this woman, but “shave her head, remove the garment of captivity from her” (Deut. 21:12–13). Basically, strip yourself of all the external garments of self, so you see the true intrinsic goodness of the divine soul.

The next Torah portion, Ki Tavo, begins, “When you enter the land, you shall take the first fruits . . . and go to a place where God will choose to make His name dwell” (Deut. 26:1–2). The declaration mandated in the verses that follow these helps one purify the soul and connect with one’s past. The willingness to offer one’s first fruits strengthens one’s devotion and connection to God. The chapter lists the blessings we will receive for aligning with Divine Will and the curses for not doing so. This reiterates a basic concept within Judaism, that of free will. We choose our actions and must reap the consequences of them.

Holiday

Selichot

HISTORY Selichot literally means “forgiveness” and refers to special prayers said during Elul. The daily recitation of these prayers along with the sounding of the shofar

during this month is rooted in the Torah. The Torah informs us that it was on the new moon of Elul that Moses returned to Sinai to ask for forgiveness for the sin of the Golden Calf. Moses remained on Mount Sinai for forty days and returned with new tablets on Yom Kippur. This forty-day period between the beginning of Elul and Yom Kippur has been historically designated for repentance and forgiveness.

During ancient times, the shofar was sounded each day to remind the people that Moses was pleading for God's forgiveness for their sins as well as to facilitate the process of *teshuvah* within the people themselves. The sounding of the shofar reminded them of their sin of idolatry and awakened them to the possibility that they could find God within themselves.

OBSERVANCE Today, in synagogues throughout the world, special prayers of repentance and forgiveness along with the sounding of the shofar occur daily to commemorate this biblical forty-day period. The shofar blowing is the wake-up call for the soul. Many people recall the shofar blasts as they are blown on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. But if you go to synagogue in the morning in Elul you will hear these sounds every weekday.

There are four different sounds by the shofar blasts. Some sounds are long and steady and pierce the depths of the heart and soul. Other sounds are short and broken and open us to the brokenness of our hearts and souls. Hearing the shofar blasts we are automatically turned inward, and we hear the crying of our own souls. If we go deep inside and truly open our hearts, we may even weep. This is a wonderful sign of the *teshuvah* and purification process possible this month.

On the Saturday night approximately a week before Rosh Hashanah is a special midnight service entitled Selichot, when prayers of penitence are recited along with the Thirteen Attributes of Divine Compassion. An invocation, this powerful verse of the

Thirteen Attributes may be translated in English: “Adonai, Adonai, God who is merciful, and gracious, long-suffering, abundant in loving-kindness and truth, guarding loving-kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving transgression, iniquity, and misdeeds, and cleansing, not holding guilt” (Exod. 34:6). This verse is repeated many times on the holiday of Yom Kippur.

Many of these prayers were composed before the seventh century. Although, historically these prayers were said during the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, in the eleventh century this practice was extended to the entire month of Elul. According to kabbalah, the gates of compassion open at midnight. We are told that the recitation of the attributes as received by Moses will solicit God’s forgiveness.

Meditation

Since forgiveness is a major theme for this month, here is a meditation to support you in this process. It is important to know that forgiveness is a process of letting go. It takes time, patience, and compassion.

Take a few breaths, relaxing the body and mind, and call to your inner screen and to your heart the image of someone who has hurt you, someone toward whom you continue to hold feelings of anger and resentment. Do this with each person toward whom you harbor negative feelings. This meditation may prepare you to better respond to a possible request for forgiveness from someone who has hurt you.

Silently say in your heart, “I forgive you. I forgive you for whatever pain you caused me either intentionally or unintentionally. I forgive you.” Tell this person how you were hurt, and how you now want to forgive him or her.

Ask God to help you have love and compassion for the person. Tell God you do not want to be stuck in your anger and hurt. Reflect on the pain this person must have felt inside when mistreating you. Consider how you may have contributed to the pain you experienced. Repeat several times: “I forgive you.” Allow yourself to be with any feelings that occur within you.

Begin to let go of the pain and resentment. Breathe it out, and let your heart open. Ask God to open your heart and fill it with God’s love. Imagine that God is pleased with you. Open to feel God’s love and compassion between you and this person. Open to the possibility that this person was a messenger from God bringing a teaching you needed.

Practical Recommendations

1. DO A SPIRITUAL ACCOUNTING FOR THE PAST YEAR.

As if you were watching a movie of your life, allow yourself to review, reflect, and reexperience the highlights of the year. Outline the major events, accomplishments, and challenges of the past year on a piece of paper or in your journal under the headings Fall (Tishrei, Cheshwan, Kislev), Winter (Tevet, Shevat, Adar), Spring (Nissan, Iyar, Sivan), and Summer (Tammuz, Av, Elul). Record the feeling tone and the themes for each portion of the year. Consider what remains unfinished in your relationships or projects. Reflect upon the way you shared in the joys and sorrows of members of your family and community. What relationships strengthened in this last year? What relationships were diminished or challenged?

2. MAKE FORGIVENESS A PART OF YOUR DAILY SPIRITUAL PRACTICE.

Identify the people toward whom you hold continuing resentment and negativity. Begin the process of forgiving. It may be important for you to tell the individuals that

you continue to have angry feelings about something they have done. This gives them the opportunity to apologize and make amends. It is much easier to let go of your anger and resentment and forgive someone who wants to be forgiven.

With certain persons you may have already done this many times, and it was not helpful. They do not feel regret for what they have done and do not want to be forgiven. They may claim that you are overly sensitive. It is not necessary to continue to make yourself vulnerable to these people, but it is important that you let go of the hold that your anger has in your life.

In your effort to forgive people, the spiritual practice of imagining yourself on your deathbed may be helpful. From this perspective, your anger and resentment toward people seem petty and you can let them go. You feel greater appreciation and compassion for people. You know that you want to be free to make this transition.

Another variation is to imagine people you resent on their deathbed. What would you say to them? We never know when death will occur, our own or someone else's, so we want to say what is really important and essential to each other when we can. Imagine what you would say to your mother, your father, your husband, your siblings, your friends at this time. Take time to express your deep feeling to people in your life, even those for whom you harbor no ill feelings.

3. SAY A DAILY PRAYER OF FORGIVENESS.

Forgiving others is so important that there is a prayer to be said every night before sleep. It often takes a lot of prayer to be able to forgive another who has hurt you deeply. You might find it helpful to recite this prayer every day during this month. "Master of the universe, I hereby forgive anyone who angered or antagonized me or who sinned against me, whether against my body, my property, my honor or against anything of mine, whether he did so accidentally, willfully, carelessly, or purposefully,

whether through speech, deed, thought, or notion, whether in this transmigration or another transmigration, I forgive. May no man be punished because of me. May it be your will my God, God of my forefathers, that I may sin no more.” In this prayer, we declare our willingness to forgive everyone. We forgive anyone who has antagonized or done harm to us or our property either intentionally or accidentally. Reciting this prayer before sleep may help you to forgive the people who have hurt you.

4. SEND NEW YEAR GREETING CARDS TO PEOPLE WITH A LITTLE PERSONAL NOTE AND BLESSING.

This simple gesture becomes an opportunity to heal and strengthen your relationships with others. Take time to call people you are connected to and have not been in touch with. Express your appreciation for what they have meant to you in your life.

5. BLESS PEOPLE WITH A HAPPY AND HEALTHY NEW YEAR.

It is customary to bless everyone you encounter with a happy and healthy new year. Blessing others allows you to become a channel of divine blessing. As we bless, so are we blessed. Bless people you love and people you do not yet know you love. You can easily give a quick blessing in almost any conversation or you can do an extended blessing meditation.

Visualize someone on your inner screen or see this person standing before you. Consider what this person wants and needs and open to bless him or her in ways beyond what the individual would request. Utter a blessing in your mind, then speak the words. You may want to begin with “May you be blessed . . .” or “May God bless you . . .” or “You are blessed with . . .” and allow the outpouring of your heart to be expressed. If the person you are blessing is not in front of you, visualize that he or she accepts the blessing and say “Amen” for the blessing you have just given. The saying of “Amen” seals the blessing.

6. SAY PSALMS.

The recitation of Psalms (Tehillim) is said to have the power to cleanse and purify the soul. There are several different kinds of books of Psalms that are universally numbered. For thousands of years, Jews and Christians have turned to the psalms for comfort and strength. It is particularly beneficial practice during this month of Elul.

As you say the psalm, seek to find yourself in the psalm and feel its relevance and application to your life. If possible, say the psalm in Hebrew, even if your Hebrew is not very good, but it is fine also to say the psalms in English. If you are feeling sad, say Psalms 3, 6, 10, 13, 22, 31, and 51. Psalm 23 is a basic and popular one and always relevant. It is actually said every Shabbat.

It is a traditional practice to repeat Psalm 27 daily during this month. Some verses from this wonderful psalm follow. Repeat these verses many times, as a mantra, and see how your consciousness is lifted upward.

“God is my light and salvation; whom shall I fear. God is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”

“One thing I ask of God, one thing I seek, that I may dwell in the house of God all the days of my life.”

“God, hear my voice when I call, be gracious to me.”

A Tale to Live By

We blow the shofar each day in Elul to open the gates of our hearts and souls. The following story about shofar blowing carries an important message for this month, a month about getting to the essence of what is really important.

The Maggid of Mezerith, the successor of the Baal Shem Tov, needed someone to blow the shofar for Rosh Hashanah. Many people wanted the honor of this *mitzvah*,

so a time was set aside for auditioning. In preparation for the audition, the men went to the *mikvah*, studied kabbalah, fasted, gave charity.

The Maggid was present for the auditions and would select the person. Each man had an opportunity to blow the shofar and share with the Maggid what he was thinking about when he blew. Each blowing was more beautiful than the next. And when each man shared the complex and intricate kabbalistic intentions that were in his mind at the time, it was very impressive.

Then Moshe, the water carrier, blew the shofar. When asked what he was thinking about when he blew, he confessed, “I do not know kabbalah, so I do not have any lofty intention. I am ashamed to tell you, but when I blew the shofar, I was crying to God. I have four daughters who need to be married. I need a *shidduch* (marriage partner) for each of them, and money to pay for the dowry and wedding. I am a simple water carrier. Please, God, help me. I can’t do this without You.”

The Maggid selected Moshe, the water carrier, to blow the shofar in his congregation, declaring that the prayers of a sincere and broken heart open the gates of heaven. So remember, it is your cries, your sincere prayers, your tears that are precious to God. These tears purify you as well as the world.