

History, Laws and Customs of the Month of Elul

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The Torah portion of *Re'eh* is always read on the Shabbat that precedes the month of *Elul* or on *Rosh Chodesh Elul* itself. The month of *Elul* is the month during which we must take stock of our spiritual accomplishments of the previous year and plan to improve our spiritual condition in the coming year.

Elul acts as a bridge between the holidays of the spring and summer, *Pesach* and *Shavuot*, and the autumn holidays, the Days of Awe and *Sukkot*. The holidays of *Pesach* and *Shavuot* are days in which we experience G-d's kind beneficence (almost) regardless of our spiritual readiness. In order to properly experience the latter days, on the other hand, one must prepare themselves with intense soul-searching and spiritual devotion. *Elul* similarly contains both the aspects of our search for G-dliness and G-d's commensurate revelation to us.¹

It is therefore fitting that this week's Torah portion contains a brief review of the major holidays; *Pesach*, *Shavuot* and *Sukkot*.²

It's Never Too Early for Teshuvah

G-d in His kindness granted us this month which is propitious for *Teshuva* – repentance—to enable us to enter the new year in a state of purity.

The forty days from *Rosh Chodesh Elul* until *Yom Kippur* were the days that Moshe was on Mt. Sinai for the third time in order to receive the second set of *Luchot* (tablets). This was considered an *et raxon*, a propitious time, during which G-d was favorably inclined towards the Jewish people.

It therefore remains an *et ratzon* for all times. This means both that G-d is favorably inclined towards us and that we are more naturally inclined to sincerely serving Him at this time.³

960 Hours

The number of hours from the first day of *Rosh Chodesh Elul* until *Yom Kippur* is 960. This is the minimum amount of *Lugin* (liquid measurement that equals approximately one liter of water) that is necessary when making a kosher *Mikvah*. This is also the number that is needed, according to the

¹ As is known, one of the acronyms of the month of *Elul* is *Ani LeDodi VeDodi Li* – I am to my Beloved and my beloved is to me (Song of Songs 6, 3, see Shelah, beginning of his Masechta Rosh HaSahana). This symbolizes the way we must serve G-d in this month - by first approaching Him. Only afterwards does He inspire us with the High Holiday's sense of reverence.

In terms of the holidays, *Pesach* and *Shavuot* are comparable to the "*Vedodi Li*" aspect of *Elul*, while *Sukkot* and *Shemini Atzeret* are similar to the aspect of "*Ani LeDodi*".

² Sefer HaSichot 5751, pg. 179 See Deut. 15. 1 - 17

³ Elef Lamateh on Mateh Efraim 581, 2

Jerusalem Talmud, in order to nullify a complete creature (*beryah*).⁴ Just as a ritually impure person emerges cleansed by immersing in a Mikvah, so too when a person “immerses himself” in the service of G-d unique to this propitious time, he will emerge as new being that is nullified to G-d.⁵

Thus we see that one should not postpone doing *Teshuvah* until late into this month. Every hour of this month is special and should be utilized fully.

When to Begin?

It is important to begin preparations for the new year early. Here are some dates which are considered appropriate to begin.

- **Rosh Chodesh Elul.** This is 40 days before Yom Kippur which is also considered to be a judgment day.⁶
- **Erev Rosh Chodesh Elul,** a day that one can do the first level of Teshuvah and begin the higher level Teshuvah in Elul itself.
- **Shabbat Mevorchim Elul.** The Previous Rebbe remarked that on this day in the town of Lubavitch the “*teshuvah* wind” would already blow.⁷
- **The 20th of Av.** This day is 40 days before *Rosh HaShana*. Just as much of the future of a child is determined forty days before it is formed,⁸ so too much of how we will be spiritually ready for *Rosh HaShana* is determined on the Twentieth of Av.⁹
- **The 15th of Av.** This is 40 days before the 25th of Elul which was the first day of creation.¹⁰ Some begin wishing others a good year from this time.¹¹
- **The Seventeenth of Tammuz.** On this day Moses broke the *Luchot* (tablets). Thus began the repentance process which culminated in Moshe ascending the mountain on *Rosh Chodesh Elul* to receive the second set of *Luchot*.¹²

Calculating the 40 Days

There are various ways to explain which were the 40 days that Moses spent on the mountain for the last time. There are several opinions:¹³

⁴ Yerushalmy Terumot, 10, 5. See Tur Y.D. end of Siman 100 and Bach there

⁵ Benei Yissachar, Mamarie Chodesh Elul, Mamar 1, 15

⁶ Likutei Sichot vol. 4, pg. 1103 note 1

⁷ Likutei Diburim, 1, 115b See also Likutei Sichot 19, 158 - 161

⁸ Sotah 2a, Sanhedrin 22a

⁹ For this reason, it is customary in the Kabbalistic Yeshivah of Bet El, which is in the old city of Jerusalem, to do the *Hatarat Nedarim* (annulment of the vows) on the Twentieth of Av (Divrei Shalom). Although this custom is not widespread (nor is it Chabad custom), it indicates the significance this day (Hitva'aduyot 5745, pgs. 2758 – 2764).

¹⁰ See Shelah, *ibid*, that some begin fasting in preparation for *Rosh HaShana* on this day. This day is also significant in that trees planted on or before this day are considered to have entered their second year of *Orlah* on the following *Rosh HaShana* (Y.D. 294, 4).

¹¹ Hitva'aduyot 5751 vol. 4 pg. 179

¹² Shelah *ibid*. In addition, I have heard that some Chassidim begin their preparations on the 12th of Tammuz.

¹³ The difficulty that has led to the differing opinions in this matter is that it seems that Moshe ascended the mountain in the morning (Ex. 34, 2). In fact, Rashi (Ex. 19, 3) writes that Moshe would always ascend the mountain in the morning. In addition, the plain reading of the text is that Moshe was on the mountain for 40 days and 40

- **Moshe went up on the 29th of Av in the morning and came down on the morning of Yom Kippur.** The forty days begins with the first day of Rosh Chodesh Elul (the 30th of Av) and does not include Yom Kippur itself.¹⁴
- **Moshe went up in the morning of the first day of Rosh Chodesh Elul and came down on the morning of Yom Kippur.** That year Elul had 30 days. The forty days includes neither the first day of Rosh Chodesh nor Yom Kippur.¹⁵
- **Moshe ascended in the evening of the first day of Rosh Chodesh Elul and came down towards the evening of Yom Kippur.** On that year, Elul had 29 days. The 40 days includes both the first day of Rosh Chodesh and Yom Kippur.¹⁶
- **Moshe ascended on the second day of Rosh Chodesh Elul and came down on (the end of) Yom Kippur.** Elul that year had 30 days. According to this opinion, Moshe was on the mountain for 40 days and 39 nights.¹⁷

The Very First Elul

According to Rabbi Eliezer, G-d began creating the world on the 25th of Elul.¹⁸ His decision to do so was based on his knowledge of the pleasure he would get from the actions of His (future) creations.¹⁹ In other words, G-d “advanced” us our lives based on our future “returns” to Him. Similarly, in every Elul, G-d is willing to grant us blessings of goodness and salvation even if we have not behaved in a manner that is fully deserving of these. We are, however, committed to serve him in the future. Based on His knowledge that when we receive these blessings we will fulfill our commitments, G-d grants us the blessings in advance.²⁰

During the month of Elul, it is customary to:

- **Blow the Shofar**
 - This commemorates Moshe’s ascent to the mountain which was accompanied by a Shofar blast.²¹
 - Some have the custom to begin blowing on the first day of *Rosh Chodesh* while some begin on the second day of *Rosh Chodesh*.²² This is due to the differing opinions as to when Moshe ascended the mountain (see above). The Chabad custom is that the shofar blower (*Ba’al Toke’ah*) begins practicing to blow on the first day whereas the public blowing does not begin until the second day.²³

nights. If Moshe went up on the first of Elul and came down during the day of Yom Kippur, he would have only been on the mountain for 38 days and 38 nights since Elul usually has only 29 days.

¹⁴ Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi, on Rashi Ex. 33, 11

¹⁵ Bach, O.C. 581

¹⁶ Ibid See there as to how to understand the verse “and you shall go up in the morning” (Ex. 34, 2).

¹⁷ Midrash Tanchuma Parshat Ki Tisa, Siman 31, quoted in Tos. D.H. Kedei, Bava Kamma 82a, Magen Avraham 581, 1. See Tosfot as to how to understand the various verses that mention 40 days and 40 nights.

¹⁸ Rosh HaShana, 10b

¹⁹ See Bereshit Rabba 1, 4, Vayikra Rabba 36, 4

²⁰ Benie Yissachar, Elul, Mamar 1, 4

²¹ Tur ibid quoting Pirkie DeRabbi Elazar, 46

²² Mateh Efrayim, 581, 7

²³ Thus, both opinions are fulfilled. Hayom Yom, Menachem Av 30. See Likutei Sichot vol. 34, page 95 and on

- In addition, the purpose of the Shofar blowing is to inspire the people to do *Teshuva* as the Days of Awe approach.²⁴
- Sefardic custom is to blow the Shofar during Selichot which they begin on the second day of *Elul*.²⁵
- Some have the custom of blowing just four notes; *Tekiah, shevarim, teruah* and *tekiah*. This is generally the Ashkenazi custom.²⁶ The Chabad and Sefardic custom is to blow ten notes: the above-mentioned, plus *tekiah, shvarim, tekiah, tekiah, teruah, and tekia*.²⁷
- Some have a custom that, if for some reason, they did not blow the shofar after Shacharit they do so after Mincha.²⁸
- **Recite Psalm 27 during the morning and afternoon prayers.** This inspiring Psalm contains allusions to the days of *Elul, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur* and *Sukot*.²⁹
 - It is recited in *Shacharit* after the song of the day.³⁰
 - It is also recited at the end of the day. Some recite it after *mincha* (Chabad custom), while some recite it after *ma'ariv*.³¹
 - One who usually recites this chapter before *Aleinu* (as is the Chabad minhag) and is davening in a minyan in which it is recited after *Aleinu* should say it together with the minyan.³²
 - (If you daven with a minyan that does it differently, you should follow the minyan. Igros Kodesh vol 19. P 430)
- **Say additional Psalms**³³
 - Some say 10 extra psalms a day.³⁴
 - Chabad custom (based on a tradition of the Ba'al Shem Tov) is to add three Psalms a day. Additional Psalms are recited on *Yom Kippur* in order to complete the Book of Psalms.³⁵

²⁴ Tur, ibid based on Amos 3, 6. "If the Shofar is blown in the city, will the people not tremble?"

²⁵ Yalkut Yosef, Hilchot Slichot, 14

²⁶ Kitzur Shuchan Aruch 128:2

²⁷ Sefer HaMinhagim Chabad

²⁸ Torat Menachem 5751 vol. 4 pg. 314 note 81

²⁹ See Midrash Shochar Tov (Midrash Tehillim) on Chapter 27

³⁰ In some communities, *Kaddish Yatom* (mourner's Kaddish), is recited after the Song of the Day and after Psalm 27 respectively. This is in order that it should not be thought that Psalm 27 is part of the Song of the Day. The Chabad custom is to recite one *kaddish* after both. The reason for this is to not add an unnecessary kaddish (Torat Menachem vol 25. Pg. 231). The recital of "*Hoshi'enu*" after the song of the day before Psalm 27 is sufficient to clarify that this is not part of the song of the day.

³¹ Mateh Efrayim, 581, 6, Elef HaMagen 10

³² Igrot Kodesh vol 19 pg. 430

³³ See Elef Lamateh, 581, 16 that one who says *Tehillim* consistently is protecting himself, his family and all of Israel from negative decrees. He brings upon them blessing of success, kindness and mercy. There is nothing that protects from negative forces like the holy recital of *Tehillim*. It should be recited slowly and with concentration.

³⁴ Mishna Berurah, 581, 3

³⁵ See HaYom Yom, *Rosh Chodesh Elul*: "When the Tzemach Tzedek was nine years old, the Alter Rebbe said to him: "I received from my Rebbe (the Maggid) who received from his Rebbe (the Baal Shem Tov) ... that from the second day of Rosh Chodesh Elul until Yom Kippur we are to say three chapters of Tehillim every day. Then, on Yom Kippur, thirty six (chapters): Nine before *Kol Nidrei*, nine before sleeping, nine after *Musaf*, and nine after *Ne'ila*. Whoever did not start on the second day of *Rosh Chodesh* is to start with the *Tehillim* of the particular day on which he realizes his omission, and complete the missing *Tehillim* later."

- **Say Selichot**

- Sefardim say *Selichot* during the entire month of *Elul* (with the exception of *Rosh Chodesh* and *Shabbat*).³⁶
- Ashkenazim say *Selichot* for the week preceding *Rosh HaShana*. If *Rosh HaShana* falls on Wednesday or later in the week. If *Rosh HaShana* falls earlier in the week, *Selichot* are recited from the previous *Motzai Shabbat*.³⁷

In Addition, Elul Is a Good Time for:

- **Checking One's Mezuzot and Tefillin**

- Although by the letter of the law,³⁸ *tefillin* (purchased from a G-d-fearing expert scribe) that are worn on a regular basis need not be checked at all, and *mezuzot* need only be checked every three and a half years, it is a pious custom for one to check their *tefillin* and *mezuzot* in this month.³⁹
- According to the Midrash, the battle of *Sichon* and *Og* took place in the month of *Elul*. They were the protectors of the Canaanites who were then native to Israel. Thus, they were like an evil *Mezuzah* protecting the entrance to the land Of Israel. Moshe and the Jewish people conquered them in the month of *Elul* and replaced them with two and a half tribes who represented a kosher *Mezuzah to the land of Israel*.⁴⁰
- The month of *Elul* is like the doorway towards teshuvah and the gateway to the New Year. Thus, it is a propitious time to check one's (*Tefillin* and) *Mezuzot*.

- **Introspection of one's deeds of the past year and resolution to strengthen the positive and correct the negative.**⁴¹

- **Inspiring people to do Teshuva.**

- In some communities the Rabbi shares thoughts that inspire to *teshuva* between *Mincha* and *Ma'ariv* of this month.⁴²
- In some communities⁴³ the Gabbai (sexton of the shul) would call out (at the beginning of the month of Elul), "Return, wayward sons."⁴⁴
- Care should be taken by the speakers not to speak negatively about the Jewish people. Only positive and uplifting messages should be shared.⁴⁵

- **Additional Torah study, especially in the inspiring aspects of the Torah such as *Midrash*, *Kabbalah*,⁴⁶ *Chasidut*, and *Musar*.⁴⁷ In particular, it is recommended to learn Igeret**

³⁶ O.C. 581, 1

³⁷ Rama ibid

³⁸ See Yoma 11a, Y.D. 291 and Shulchan Aruch HaRav, 39

³⁹ Mateh Efraim 581:10. Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 128:3. Torat Menachem 5748. vol 4 pg. 209.

⁴⁰ Each tribe is associated with a certain spelling of G-d's name, the numerical value of which is 26. 26 times two and a half equals 65 which is the *Gematriah* of מוֹדוּם

⁴¹ Sefer Maamarim Yiddish p 75. See the Chabad Tehilim pg. 204 and Hayom Yom for 27 Menachem Av

⁴² Elef Lamateh, ibid, 15

⁴³ Book of Our Heritage

⁴⁴ Yirmiyahu 3:14

⁴⁵ Likutei Sichot vol. 24 pg. 38

⁴⁶ Some have a custom to recite Tikunei Zohar daily from Rosh Chodesh Elul until Yom Kippur (Elef HaMagen, 581, 17). See Torat Menachem vol 34 pg. 303

⁴⁷ Likutei Sichot vol 2 pg. 632

HaTeshuvah (the third section of Tanya) and Derech Chayim by the second Lubavitcher Rebbe.⁴⁸

- Have a positive influence on friends.⁴⁹
- One should publicize that it is a time for everyone to leave their bad habits and flee to the City of Refuge – the Torah. In this way he can rectify everything. One must first do teshuva out of fear and then out of love. This will bring a blessing for a good year.⁵⁰
- Performing mitzvot in the best possible way (*behidur*).⁵¹
- Praying with extra devotion.
- Adding in charitable acts (tzedakah).⁵²
- Many of these positive actions are alluded to in various verses on the Tanach that allude to the month of *Elul*.⁵³

Good Year Wishes

When writing letters during the month of *Elul*, it is customary to finish the letter by wishing one's fellow that he be inscribed and sealed for a good year.⁵⁴ Some add this greeting from the Fifteenth of Av.⁵⁵

May You All Be Inscribed and Sealed for a Good Year

⁴⁸ Sefer Maamorim Yiddish, pg. 75. See See Likutei Sichot vol 9 pgs. 303 – 305

⁴⁹ Ibid pg. 306

⁵⁰ Likutei Sichot vol 2 pg. 626.

⁵¹ Sefer Maamorim Yiddish, ibid

⁵² Ibid vol 4 pg. 1348

⁵³ See Sefer HaSichot 5749, pg. 198, Elef Lamateh, 581, 1, and in many places

⁵⁴ Maharil, Hilchot Yamim Nora'im, quoted in Mateh Efrayim, 581, 9

⁵⁵ Sha'ar Yissachar, Mamar Yom Tvar Magal, 2