

“MEMAAYANHACHAIM”

Mussar talks from the Masgiach Rabbi Chaim Walkin shlit" a

The Essence of Ellul: Pausing the Tumult of Life and Turning Our Attention Inward

It is well-known in the Yeshiva world and in the halls of Mussar that R' Yisrael Salanter zt"l. was wont to say during this time of the year, “Really, the entire year should be infused with the spirit of Ellul. But, at the very least, **Ellul** should be Ellul!” Those generations were so full of fear and trembling over the days of “Holy Ellul” that they lived and breathed throughout the whole year the spiritual growth they experienced during Ellul. All the more so, during the month of Ellul itself, they expressed in their daily life the unique spiritual elevation which is Ellul.

I remember, when years ago I was learning in the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland, Ohio, the Rosh Yeshiva R' Boruch Sorotzkin zt"l returned from a visit to Eretz Yisrael. He shared with us, with great emotion, an event from his visit. While in Israel, he had participated in a Sheva Brachos. At that occasion, a number of bochorim used the Simchas Chossan and Kalla to give themselves the opportunity to act in a somewhat “light-headed” fashion. This was, R' Boruch said, during the summer month of Sivan. And-- this was the point of his story—R' Boruch described how R' Elya Lopian zt"l, who was also present at the Sheva Brachos, stood and rebuked the bochorim: “How is it possible for you young men to be acting with such frivolity?! Are we not in the middle of Sivan, a few days more and it will be Tammuz. And after Tammuz is Av. And Av is the month prior to Ellul!!!”

To such an extent did R' Elya zt"l live and breath with the spiritual essence of Ellul that it's influence penetrated into his soul months prior. I would like to posit that a fundamental aspect of Ellul is first, the

opportunity to pause the tumultuous flow of life's constant activities, and second, to turn our attention inward, to introspect. If, throughout the the year one is overwhelmed with life's daily stresses and traumas. Ellul is the time for each individual to “call a halt” and to repeatedly conduct a spiritual inventory. We know how in our days, and certainly in previous generations, many Gedolei Hador, great Torah Sages, would retreat from their worldly activities for Ellul and return to the Yeshiva. They would live in an environment profoundly more serious than “regular” life, all for the purpose of doing every action with a greater sense of attention to and focus on the details of spirituality.

In the business world, a responsible CEO (Chief Executive Officer) of a large concern is required to do a complete and thorough year-end review of the company's stock-in-trade, to create an accurate profit and loss (P/L) statement. In precisely the same way is each Jew required at the end of the year to make time to stop himself and think, so he can get an accurate picture of who he really is. When one completes the year on such an elevated level, with a sense of elation and self-understanding, then he can begin a new year, building on these spiritual achievements.

When I was a young student in the Telshe Yeshiva, I heard just this explanation of the nature and purpose of Ellul. Every year, a choshuve Rav came to Cleveland and spent the entire month of Ellul in the Yeshiva as one of the bochorim. I approached him and asked: “Why does the Rav trouble himself to travel away from his home and family to spend Ellul

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in the Yeshiva? Can't the Rav make arrangements in a study hall near his home town, making it clear to everyone that he is not to be disturbed during this month? He answered me with a moshal, an analogy. "If one wishes to purchase a kilogram, or any specific amount of a particular merchandise, how is he to know that the scales being used by the seller are accurate? Isn't it possible that we're all being misled, and the weights on which we are relying for our purchases are inaccurate?!!" The Rav continued: "It is for this reason that the government has an Office of Weights and Measures where the official "kilogram" is kept. Thus, if a dispute arises between a buyer and a seller as to the accuracy of the weight used in the seller's store, by checking with the official governmental "kilo", they can know if the seller is being honest or not."

"So it is with me," the Rav explained to me. "All year I work hard to delve deeply into Mussar, and based on this effort, I make decisions on all types of issues which come to my doorstep. But how do I know if the standards by which I live and use to determine the decisions I make in my life are true? Isn't it possible that my "shikul ha-daas" is in error due to the confusion all around me which can affect my judgement?"

Therefore, for a month every year I come back here, to the pure air of the Yeshiva, which is the spiritual "governmental office of weights and measures" which are amazingly accurate, never having been damaged. I then can check and scrutinize myself, and correct every aspect of my character which needs fixing in order that my principles, my "shikul ha-daas" is right and true throughout the rest of the year."

This is the meaning of the days of Ellul for all of us: a time to stop the "rollercoaster of life" and to place our attention upon on the trueness of our character. Within this process, we can clearly recognize that this means we must review the accuracy of our "weights and measures" in comparison with the truly accurate "weights", the spiritual principles of our Torah. Each one of us must find the time and place during these

days of Ellul to stop and introspect into our deeds over the past year, not just in particular for the year which is coming, but for our whole lives before us in general.

The Or HaChayim explains in the parsha of the "Eishes Y'fas Toar", the woman captured in battle (Devarim 21: 10-14), on the verse (13) "She shall. . . sit in your house and she shall weep for her father and her mother for a full month". This is an analogy to the neshama of a person held captive by the yetzer hora. Hashem will choose a dwelling place for her, a place distinctive to the Jewish people, that is, the Beis Hamidrash. And the verse continues: "and she shall sit in your house", that is, she will confess with tears for having sinned against her father and her mother, and her having abandoned them. Her father: this refers to HaKodesh Boruch Hu; her mother: this refers to the Jewish Community. For a full month: this is the amount of time sufficient to repent; or (in another explanation- trans.) it hints to the month which is uniquely designated for repentance, the month of Ellul.

We see from the words of the Or HaChayim Hakodesh that the parsha of the Eishes Y'fas Toar is a hint revealing the foundation of the nature of "the month which is uniquely designated for repentance—the month of Ellul". Further, we see that the Eishes Y'fas Toar (is an allegory for us—trans.) teaching that it is incumbent upon every person during this month to fulfill "she should sit in your house" i.e dwell in the "beis hamidrash) the place which is (as we said above) the spiritual "governmental office—the repository of true weights and measures" which are amazingly accurate, and, as we said, stop and look into our life, to measure over and over again the nature of our deeds and behaviors. Moreover, each one of us should analyze if in truth our actions match the values and right behaviors as taught in the place of "true measures", (trans. i.e. the place of Torah) the Beis HaMidrash.

In the Shulchan Oruch (Orech Chaim chap. 581), the Mechaber writes: It is customary to rise early in the morning to say Selichos—penitential prayers—and

supplications from Rosh Chodesh Ellul until Yom Kippur.” The Mishna Brura explains the reason for this custom (Se’if 1): (During these days) Moshe went up on Mt. Sinai to receive the second set of Tablets of the Law and the shofar was sounded in the Jewish camp. Moshe went up so that they (i.e. the Jewish people- trans.) would not further stray after idol worship. Thus, these days are a time of reconciliation (between G-d and the Jews—trans.)”

The meaning of the Mishna Brura’s explanation is this: the sin of the Golden Calf, simply understood, resulted from a lack of introspection and attention, which brought them to a state of fear and despair. In this emotional morass, the Jewish nation could come to do such a terrible sin and worship the Calf. Hence, the expiation for this had to be specifically during these days of Ellul when we are obligated to be particularly stringent regarding our paying attention—not just as a commemoration of the days when Moshe went up on Mt. Sinai to receive the second Luchos, but more precisely to be aware of the spiritual nature of our deeds in order to bring forgiveness for the Sin of the Calf. This comports exactly with what was explained above, that is, that Ellul is a time of “pausing the tumult of life and turning our attention inward”. In this process, one must analyze deeply the root causes of his sins to see with penetrating clarity the true nature of his life’s deeds with conscious thought. In this way he will merit Repentance, Teshuva.

I saw also that the Mechaber rules (ibid. chap. 603) that even one who in general is not particular throughout the year to refrain from eating kosher bread baked by a non-Jew (Pas Akum), nonetheless during the 10 days of Teshuva one should be strict and refrain from doing so. Further, we find other customs and stringencies accepted by the Jewish people specifically during these days of Teshuva. It requires some thought to understand what is the rationale for these customs? How is it correct that a person who is lenient in his behavior the rest of the year suddenly begins to act differently? Is not such type of behavior merely a valueless show? Do we not

know that immediately after Yom Kippur this person will go back to his original lenient custom; what can be the benefit for changing his custom and acting stringently during the 10 days of Teshuva?

It seems the explanation for this is based on the words of Rav Dessler zt”l. in Michtav M’Eliyahu (vol. 1, p. 111): “Every person has his own specific “nikudas ha-bechira” (lit. “a point of free-willed choice) which moves between the 2 extremes—between the more lofty level to the lower, base one.” In other words, Rav Dessler is revealing to us that every individual has hidden within his personality a “lofty level” i.e. an elevated spiritual potential which enables his growth and spiritual accomplishment, his acceptance of stringencies. One is thus obligated to consistently strive to reach this intrinsic elevated state, and conversely, to distance himself from his negative spiritual potential.

Therefore, specifically during the days of holiness of Ellul, we are more required to strive for this higher spiritual potential within our “nikudas ha-bechira” and conduct ourselves according to the customary greater stringencies mentioned in the Shulchan Oruch. Truth be told, these actions are absolutely not merely an external sham or pose. Rather, they are “an inner expression of the higher spiritual potential within oneself”.

The Mashgiach, R’ Yerucham zt”l. writes in his magnum opus Daas Chochma Umussar concerning the value of repentance: “The idea of teshuva connotes an extremely elevated spiritual level, and this is due to the fact that it expresses a fundamental aspect of one’s character. In other words, with Teshuva (literally, repentance. Here the Mashgiach is noting that the word in Hebrew derives from the verb “to return”—trans.) one returns to oneself, and this self is the greatest and most elevated level in a person’s character.”

We learn from the Mashgiach’s words that the essence of Teshuva is returning to oneself, to again and again return to those strengths, those aspects of his character upon which his entire being is built.

This, too, is the meaning of these days of Ellul, pausing the tumult of life and paying attention to our actions—and we now see from R' Yerucham zt"l., this includes paying attention to our intrinsic self, the strengths and potentials within us.

My Mother, of blessed memory, was born in Rodin and was raised in the home of the Chofetz Chaim zt"l. She used to say to us that in the towns of that time, there was a common saying on everyone's lips during the month of Ellul: "In Ellul, even the fish in the ponds tremble!" I always wondered, did they really imagine that the fish could recognize the nature of these days and actually shiver due to the awe of Ellul?! I derived from my Mother's statement a profound principle in life—"A person sees what he does only through the prism of his own life experience," one takes in the world around him based on his life's perspective. Just like the shoemaker, upon meeting a new acquaintance immediately is drawn

to the fellow's shoes, the quality of their leather and the craftsmanship of their stitches, and the painter immediately pays attention to the paint job on a house he comes upon, so too during Ellul, the Jews of that generation were profoundly aware of the sanctity of the month, it was a part of their nature—it was in their blood!! Hence, when they would see something, they'd express it in terms of Ellul. This is the reason when they saw fish jittering in the water, from their point-of-view they could only describe the behavior of the fish as if they, too, knew it was Ellul—everyone sees the world only from his perspective. They were so immersed into the spiritual grandeur of Ellul, it affected their folk language. So too, we must imbibe the air of Ellul, to live and breathe Ellul as the Jews of old did.

This, then, is our work during the holy days before us, to pause the racing, the tumult of life and to reflect on our actions, to weigh them in the scales of judgement and wisdom, and fulfill ourselves the actions of the Eishes Y'fas Toar, "to sit and cry in your house 30 days", as explained by the Or HaChayim HaKodesh. We can do this by sheltering ourselves in "your house", the Beis Hamidrash, the place of character refinement whose measures are "amazingly accurate, having never been damaged", where even Gedolei Hadoros would secrete themselves during these days.

We know how much these sages trembled before even the mentioning of the name of Ellul, to the point that for them, Ellul created a feeling which lasted all year long. The closer they approached the month, the more they conducted themselves with seriousness and abjured any frivolity, because "Ellul—at least it is Ellul!" We need to recognize our goal in the purpose of this month, in a word—to pay attention!! The stringencies during this time which became part of the customary life of Jews worldwide, did so in order to help us strive for our "lofty potential", to peer into our essence and "return to our true intrinsic self". It is for this reason that we must inculcate within our psyche the awe of these days, so that we too can feel that "even the fish swimming in the ponds are trembling!!"



[Written and translated according to understanding of writers]

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