



Parashat Shoftim



English version

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THE ART OF COMMUNAL RESPONSIBILITY

In this week's parasha, the law of the Eglah Arufah is mentioned. This law applies when a murdered person is found in a field, and the killer is unknown. The elders and judges of the nearest city must measure the distance to determine which city is closest to the crime scene. The elders of that city then bring an unworked, unyoked calf (the eglah) to a barren valley and perform a ceremony, which includes breaking the calf's neck. This process symbolizes atonement for the innocent bloodshed, and the elders declare they are not responsible for the crime, **וְיָדְינוּ לֹא שִׁפְכָה שְׂפַכְוֹ אֶת-הַדָּם הַזֶּה** our hands did not spill this blood, asking God for forgiveness on behalf of the community.

The Eglah Arufah emphasizes communal responsibility. The community could be considered responsible for the murder, not in the sense of direct guilt but in terms of neglect. The law of eglah arufah highlights the collective responsibility to ensure safety, justice, and care for others, especially strangers and travelers. If a person was killed near a city, it suggests that the community may have failed in its duty to provide protection, hospitality, or sufficient law enforcement. The ritual serves as a form of communal introspection, where the elders symbolically declare they did not neglect the victim and did everything within their power to prevent such violence. It stresses that communities should be proactive in safeguarding the well-being of all people within their influence.

They say it takes a village to raise a child. In 2024 we have Whatsapp groups for every communal responsibility, and if you are not on at least 5 such

chats, you may not be frum. Being ultra orthodox, I have experienced all different types of Gmachs over the years. Chair gmachs, chair cover gmachs, shiva chair gmachs, sefer torah and aron kodesh gmachs for shiva houses, table gmachs, poncho gmachs, clothing gmachs, bridal gmachs, book gmachs, simcha de'cor gmachs, table cloths gmachs, medicine gmachs, crockpot gmachs, Eliyahu Hanavi chair and Sandak chair gmachs, baby gear gmachs, Shabbos goy gmachs. I will even let you in on a dark secret. In our building, in the dark bicycle room, there is a diaper gmach, and baby wipe gmach. Before school year there are school book gmachs, and backpack gmachs, and before yom tov, we have another wave of gmachs that pop up. Paper good gmachs, fresh Norwegian salmon gmachs, lulav and etrog gmachs, very long aravos for hashana rabba gmachs, and matzah gmachs. We have Hatzalah, Yedidim, Zaka, and the unsung heroes of the community: the eruv checkers. These guys are out there at 5 a.m. Friday mornings with binoculars and ladders making sure a single piece of string can save you from carrying on Shabbat. Superheroes without the capes.

I remember making a ketchup gmach while I was in yeshiva high school. I had to close it down, because some jealous bachur put out rumors that I was eating cereal with ketchup instead of milk, wasting precious ketchup gmach money. This did not stop me from opening my next gmach. A plastic cup gmach, so that we would not have to drink out of the water fountain. I then made a bezeq telephone card for the yeshiva payphone.

Those were shut down by the Rosh Yeshiva, saying that he wanted those taken care of by yeshiva office, so that the yeshiva boys can focus only on learning in yeshiva, not on making gmachs.

Oh! I forgot! There are kallh challah gmachs, where kallahs are brought dough to separate challah on their wedding day, and there are neighborhood watch gmachs. There are walking kids across the street gmachs, and stop sign gmachs for when kids are crossing the streets. There are gmachs of purim costumes, and there are leftover gmachs, where the leftover food from weddings are brought to yeshiva boys that the yeshiva food is not good enough (Sheerit Haplate). There is a Shiluach Haken Gmach, where you can get the mitzvah of sending away the mother bird which is a segulah for longevity, getting married, and having kids. Sefer Torah writing gmachs, where you join a large group of people and have a sefer torah written in your merit. There are money lending gmachs. Handy tool gmach. Wine gmachs, where you can buy great quality wine for wholesale price.

Interconnectedness and shared responsibility is very ultra orthodox. It creates a sense of belonging, trust and accountability. No one is an island. We are all bound to each other and through acts of support and kindness we can make life more manageable and meaningful for everyone. We are stronger together. We teach this to our youth, the importance of give back, and of being a part of something bigger than themselves.

It is so interesting, when you think about it. After the man died between the two cities, and the killer is unknown, the Torah does not allow us to look away, to shrug our shoulders, and move on. Instead, the elders say, in front of the people, that they did not spill his blood. Not merely to mourn, but to ask, How did we fail? How could this life slip through our hands unnoticed, unprotected? It is not about blame, it is about responsibility! They are turning that sad reality into something so powerful. People learn from the whole commotion that we are commanded to make, that we are to learn from our losses, and become empowered to help each other and protect each other.

THE ART OF GETTING INTO THE ELUL VIBE

Elul is the month of many acronyms, and the most known acronym is, **אני לדודי ודודי לי**, *I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me*. Elul is relationship time. There are three types of relationships, only three. Between Man and G-d, Man and others and Man and himself. And Elul has got them all, hidden into that all-powerful word, because Elul is the time to improve relationships. The relationship with G-d is the first acronym mentioned above. The relationship between Man and his friend is the acronym hinted in the words **איש לרעהו ומתנות לאביונים**. And the acronym that refers to Man's relationship with himself, is, **יקוק אלוקיך את לבבך ואת לבב זרעך**.

The reason for these three acronyms is that the three relationships are interdependent. in order to have a good relationship with G-d, you need to improve the relationship with yourself: you need to

be calm, happy, positive, and content. And you need to improve your relationship with others, to forgive, to give and to care.

But let us hyper-focus on the first acronym, the one that hints to our relationship with G-d. The first step to become, **אני לדודי ודודי לי**, *I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me.*, is, that I need to know, who **אני**, is, even before I work on the relationship with G-d. This is a very hard question, if not the hardest question to answer:

Who am I? Am I identified by my strengths and weaknesses, like the workforce will tell me? Am I what I have to offer my family, my community, my social circles? Am I my past, like my psychologist tells me, or am I my future, like my coach tells me? Or – maybe - I am my present, like my yoga teacher teaches me to be mindful and meditate?



The real me is hidden in the word אני. We know, that the word, לאן means, “to where?” Because the word אנה means, “Which direction?” The ה at the end of the word drops, as any dikduk- basics person will tell you the יונה rule, that the יונה letters drop from roots. The word אני, then, means the direction in which I am going. My direction. The י at the end, is like the י at the end of the word שלי, which means the אנה, the direction, that belongs to me. You are not judged according to who you were or who you will be, but by the direction in which you are facing. Even you if you are not yet a Tzaddik or a Chassid, but if you pray כתבנו בספר צדיקים והסידים, Write us in the book of Tzaddikim and Chassidim, that is where you belong, because that is where you want to be!

I remember, after I was engaged and before I was married, I was nervous of the differences between myself and my wife. But the wise sage I consulted with in Yerushalayim asked me if we both want the same things in life, if we are faced in the same direction. Because true love is not about looking in each other’s eyes, it is looking out in the same direction. To have a relationship with G-d, we need to want the same things as He wants. We know that G-d keeps His own Mitzvoth, as we bless, אשר קדשנו במצוותיו, that He commanded us in His Mitzvoth, that He keeps them, Himself. One of the Mitzvoth is to fear G-d. If so, who does G-d fear? What does G-d fear? The answer is He fears that we transgress His Torah and Mitzvoth! If we want to be אני לדודי ודודי לי, we need to be looking in the same direction, hoping and praying that we keep His Torah and Mitzvoth, just like He hopes that we keep His Torah and Mitzvoth. That needs to be our direction, if we want to be in a relationship with G-d.

If you want a relationship with G-d, the Messilat Yesharim begins to tell you that you need to make sure you know what your goal in life is, your passion. That is the first step to אני לדודי ודודי לי.

We don’t think, the way we think, we don’t decide, the way we decide. We think S4, according to our Social, Structure, State of mind, and the version of

our life Story. We need to take responsibility over these, if we want to take responsibility over our lives. Every habit-changing book will tell you that what helps you change your habits is not motivation, alone; it is not self-control, alone. It begins with taking responsibility for your own life, for your own environment, for you own social circles, not waiting for things or circumstances to change on their own, or by other people. Hillel taught us, אם אין אני לי מי לי. If I am not to myself, who is to me? But the first part of responsibility is to identify with the new you, אם אין אני לי מי לי, the direction you are going in. It is not enough to say, “I don’t want to smoke anymore”. You need to say, “I am not a smoker”. It is not enough to say you are going to run, every day, for an hour. You need to say to yourself, “I am a runner who runs an hour a day. This is me. The new me”. Because the first step to taking ownership of your life is taking ownership over yourself, over your identity, your אני.

The problem is that most of us have never just internally silenced all the voices of the people in our life, family, friends, media, etc... We have never stopped to ask ourselves, what is my direction, what is it that I believe in, what is the most valuable thing in my life? How high am I going to aim? We have this herd mentality, never taking out time to find our personal inner truth.

The first step to experience Elul, to experience change, starts with Parashat Re’eh, which is the acronym, ראש חודש אלול הגיע. The first passuk of Re’eh is so strange, for those who understand Lashon Hakodesh ראה אנכי נתן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה See, I am giving before you, today, blessing and curse. Now, the word See, is written in singular command form, for plural command to see would have been ראו. But the word לפניכם, in front of you, is in front of you plural, because if it would have been in front of you, singular, it would have said, לפניך! Wait a second. Is G-d speaking to the whole nation, or is G-d speaking to one person, telling him to see!?!?



For those who claim that Lashon Hakodesh rules are not that important, we can remind them that this question is asked by the Vilna Gaon. If it bothered him, it must be important. And this is what he says: People have a tendency to see things from the eyes of the herd, the community, the family, friends, the news, but, NO! The Torah is commanding *you*, to have your own perspective! What is your Hashkafa? A perspective that you will take ownership over, responsibility over! To be YOU! Once and for all, figure out why you are here in this world, learn the Messilat Yesharim, and discover your life's purpose! To enjoy your own personal relationship with G-d, but on one condition. Not only on your terms. On His terms, as well. There is no such thing as a one-way relationship.

The other day, I asked my Rabbi if I should get a new car. My car is a Toyota Prius, the first, awesome hybrid, and it works fine and is extremely inexpensive. B"H, I have more money than I need, and I can buy any car I want. For me, the truth is, I don't even need a car. I work from home, and my apartment in Jerusalem is less than 5 minutes' walk to all my kids' schools, and endless minyanim. One of my life's blessings is that I don't need, ever, to be stuck in traffic. But when I was seeing how everyone got new cars, I wondered if I am doing something wrong. I asked my Rabbi, "So many friends have gotten themselves nice cars, like Volvos, Teslas, Audis, etc. Should I upgrade to a brand-name car, or just stay the way things are?" My Rabbi answered me, "The reason why they got the Volvos, Teslas and Audis is because, they are seeing others getting Porsches and Lamborghinis, and they feel that they need to upgrade, so they got

the cars they got. You have to ask yourself what serves your needs, and not look around at what other people are choosing."

So, instead of my putting money into the most expensive, fancy black Audi, I will put my money into the most expensive pair of black Tefillin for my son's upcoming Bar Mitzvah. That is my Lamborghini. Instead of investing time in the stock market, to gain from a bear market, something I have no control over, I am investing in my health and running in the forest, every day, in the backyard of my neighborhood Bayit Vegan (there are no bears there). Instead of my trying to figure out a way to beat inflation, I am investing in relationships, by giving free services to as many people now who are in need and can't afford the new life expenses. I try to beat the herd mentality, instead of falling for it. I try to stop seeing the world from the point of view of the news media.

Which brings us to Parashat Shoftim. In order to change and improve, one of the things we need, is to stop lying to ourselves. **שֹׁפְטִים וְשָׁרִים תִּתְּנֶנּוּ לָךְ** Our Rabbis take a twist to that Passuk. You have to put a guard on all of your gates, even your personal gates, or your senses. You need to be your own policeman and see yourself from outside yourself. The other day, while jogging in the forest, I realized how I lie to myself. For years, I have not been doing the Daf Yomi, claiming I just don't have the time. But then, I realized, that I have enough time to read the news, even a few times a day! And if I claim to the world that I am an Effective Learning Specialist, it should be a cinch for me to finish the Daf! So, I made a new habit. The first thing after my jog, before opening the news, I need to first finish the Daf!

Which brings me to the following announcement...Important announcement! I am starting a virtual course on changing habits. It is free during Elul. Please WhatsApp me if you are interested in details. +972585272023.

THE ART OF INTERGRITY



People lie much more than they think. “I’ll be there in 5 minutes”, even though you did not even leave the house yet, and you know it will take you at least 8.5 minutes to get there. “I am careful with what I eat”, but that does not include what I eat in the dark, what I eat out of my home, holidays, or vacations, and what I eat when I am starving, or when no one is looking. “My health and family are my highest proprieties.” Even though I don’t live that way. You can fool some of the people all the time, and all the people some of the time... But once you are fooling yourself, you are really a fool.

I can never forget the time I heard a recording from 1980 from Rabbi Tzvi Aryeh Rosenfeld, zt”l. “If you want Parnassa, you need to tap into the Shefa of the country you live in. Every country has its own Shefa, its own areas where G-d sends blessings of Parnassa. For example, the area of blessing in America, is in High Tech. (He said this in 1980!!! Just look at how big FAMGA has become - Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft, Google and Apple.) In Europe, it used to be that if you wanted to make a parnassa, the Shefa was to become a Rebbe. How does one become a Rebbe? How does one build a following? Here is the secret recipe. Teach people who are easy to convince. It is too difficult to build a following among learned men. You need to teach either women or unlearned men, and then you build trust. Once women or unlearned men say that you are intelligent and wise, the word begins to spread, and then even the learned men start to believe that you are a Rebbe. This is dangerous, but as long as you know, deep down, that you are not a Rebbe, the situation can be controlled. The problem is out of control once you start to believe that you are actually as wise, intelligent, and saintly as your followers think you are.

The passuk says, תָּמִים תִּהְיֶה עִם יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ, you should be complete in your fear of G-d. (Onkelos) In the Sifri, it adds, when you live with integrity, you are in G-d’s hands, you are safe. When G-d asked Avraham to sacrifice his son Yitzhak on the altar, he asked him, “Please”. קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךָ and the Talmud tells us that G-d asked Avraham, Please,

Avraham, don’t fail this test, so that the gentiles and the prosecuting angels won’t say that the first nine tests that you passed were not real wins!

What?! How could you say that the first tests were not real wins?! The answer is that when it comes to serving G-d, G-d wants us to be *real* with our integrity in serving Him, that we are willing to give up everything for Him, our past, our future, our following, our fame, even our “religion”, for Him. He wants us to be תָּמִים, completely honest with ourselves and faithful with Him. G-d asks us to blow the Shofar of a ram, and when we do, He considers it as if we performed an Akeida on ourselves! (Rosh Hashana 16a) G-d wants, more than anything on the high holidays, that we bind ourselves up as Akedat Yitzhak. Why? Because G-d wants us to be honest with ourselves, that we are willing to live and die for Him. למענך אלקים חיים

The place where we are most dishonest, where we fool ourselves the most, is in our prayers. When we say Modeh Ani, and we admit our total dependence to G-d and thank Him for putting a soul in my body, and specifically, my soul, are we for real? When we say, the word אַתָּה, YOU, G-d, I am talking to You, do we really mean it? Who are we fooling? G-d?!? When we say, כִּי בְךָ בִטְחָנוּ וְעַל חַסְדְּךָ, הגדול באמת נשעננו. *Because in You we trust, and on Your great kindness we really rely.* You can lie to everyone in your life, you can even lie to yourself, but you can never lie to G-d. The very introduction to Selichot and a central part of the High Holidays’ pinnacle prayer is actually this: הלא הנסתר והגלוי אתה יודע אתה יודע רזי עולם ותעלומות סתרי כל חי אתה חופש כל הדרי בטן רואה כליות ולב אין דבר נעלם ממך ואין .נסתר מנגד עיניך . There is no fooling G-d. This is a fundamental principle for Elul and a prerequisite to change.

The Talmud tells the episode when the Rabbis of the time came to King David, saying that the Jewish people need sustenance. He said to them, “Go and support each other.” They said, the handful (of the upper class) is not enough to satiate the lion (the lower class). He said, “Go out to war,



and take sustenance from the enemy.” (Berachot 3b)

This is such a strange response from King David, almost as bad as the “If there is no bread, eat cake”, attributed to Marie-Antionette, the queen of France who was oblivious to the problems the poor were facing before the French Revolution. Why would King David say to turn to the rich to support the poor, if the rich said they are not able to! And who is to say that it would be a good idea to endanger the lives of the people by going to out to war, so that maybe they will win some booty?

The answer is that King David had entirely different intentions. As we see in Parashat Shoftim, before going out to war, the Kohen announces to all the people that those who have a new vineyard, a new house, a new wife should go home and not go to war. All of a sudden, you see streams of people disappearing from the ranks! Until now, people said that they do not have money to support the poor, the lower class; but now, you see who has vineyards, who has a new house, and who has a new wife. David wanted to show the wealthy class that they were lying to themselves about how much they had!

Even the greatest people lie to themselves, if they are not learning Mussar constantly. When the prophet Natan came to David to rebuke him for his actions with Bat Sheva, he started by telling the great King David a bedtime story, a long story of a rich man who went and slaughtered the sheep of the poor neighbor, for his own needs. King David ruled, immediately, that the rich man deserved to die! To which the prophet responded, **YOU ARE THE RICH MAN!** You took Bat Sheva, and you manipulated Uriah’s death! Why didn’t the prophet Nathan just deliver a straightforward rebuke to King David? Why did he start with a bedtime story?!

The answer is that if the prophet had told King David that he had done wrong, King David would have “self-justified”. “Uriah, like all my soldiers, gave a divorce contract before war, in case he

would not return.” “Bat Sheva was destined for King David from the beginning of time,...” Nathan the prophet circumvented all self-justifications. Instead, he brought a Mashal in which King David ruled *his own* ruling, without even thinking to self-justify!

So many times, we self-justify not to give tzeddaka, not to keep the custom of maaser. This week, I suddenly had this thought that I should donate to my sons’ school \$1000. I said to myself, It’s Elul, and if I thought of this today, let me go and take care of it immediately. After dropping my son off at school, I walked into the headmaster’s office, and told him about my pledge and handed him the money... but first, I wanted to know what he would use my donation for. Immediately, he said, that he has a reward program for the eighth graders to get them ready for high school: 90 boys are going to be tested on Gemara Massechet Succah, cover to cover. This money would go for that. I said, great! Before I left the room, he said, “Yosef, you are an angel. Every year, for the last ten years, someone has sponsored this. This year, just yesterday, my regular sponsor told me on the phone that corona destroyed his business, and he can’t fill the thousand-dollar pledge this year. And just today, you come in, and offer that exact amount of money.”

How many times G-d gives us money to be someone’s angel, and we say, “Oh, but I need the money to live on the standard to impress the people that I don’t even care about?” You do have money, but you want to spend it on your house, your vineyard, your wife, just not tzeddaka!

The greatest rebuke we will get on judgement day will be that we lied to ourselves. (Breshit Rabah 93, 10) A person says he does not have energy to wake up early to learn and pray, but he has energy to go on business and pleasure trips? Who are we fooling? G-d?!? Eliyahu Hanavi met this fisherman, who was making fun of Eliyahu, who revealed himself as a Rabbi. Eliyahu asked the fisherman - you are making fun of me, but what are you going to answer G-d when you reach Heaven



on judgement day? He answered, I will tell G-d, that when Heaven was giving out brains, they had none left for me. Rabbi, I can't learn a Jewish Word. I can't follow one word the Rabbi says in the class. I have ADD, ADHD, DVD, and USB." Eliyahu asked the fisherman how he catches fish. The fisherman said, I make nets, and I throw them into the water, and I have a whole system to locate where the fish are, and when to lift the nets...

Eliyahu said, Listen to what you are saying! You have brains to make money, but no brains to learn Torah!?!

לְדָרוֹן יִתְנַקֵּן אֹרֵי וְיִשְׁעֵי מִמֵּי אֵיגָא Rosh Hashana is referred to as אֹרֵי, my light, because through the mussar we learn in these days, we discover the lies and dishonesties we live by. If you are not learning mussar, there is no way you can realize how much self-deception has taken over your life.

A CALM ELUL

It has been said that one who says Psalm 27 every day in Elul is promised that he will live his full amount of allotted years and days in a good way, and he will overpower all the prosecuting angels against him, and will merit in judgement.(Siddur Arizal)

What is the meaning of this Psalm?

Psalm 27 is a psalm that says that G-d is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? G-d is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When the evil approach me to devour my flesh... it is they who stumble and fall. Even if an army would besiege me, my heart will not fear. Even if war would arise against me, I would still remain confident. Trust in G-d, strengthen yourself and He will give you courage, and place your trust and confidence in HaShem. Be strong and he will make your heart strong, so that you can continue to trust in G-d. The Midrash explains the words: אֹרֵי My light, this is Rosh Hashana. יִשְׁעֵי My salvation, this is Yom Kippur. (Midrash Shochar Tov)

A few questions. Why is Rosh Hashana referred to as my light? If anything, the darkest night of the month of Tishrei is Rosh Hashana, for there is no moon on that night! And why is it wrong to fret about the judgment on sin? Didn't Amos write אִם-יִתְקַע שׁוֹפָר בְּעִיר וְעַם לֹא יִהְרָדוּ If a Shofar will blow in the city and the people will not fear?(Amos 3 6) אֲרִיָּה שָׁאָג מִי לֹא יִירָא A lion roared, who will not fear (Amos 3 8) א' - אלוה ר' - ראש השנה י' - יום כיפור ה' - הוושענא רבא! Why should the sinner not fear that he may receive the punishment he deserves? Why is it

important for a person not to fear his enemies, and to know that G-d will be there for him, no matter the strength of the enemy? Isn't fear a good thing, when you are outnumbered? When you deserve punishment?

Kind David is singing throughout all the Eluls that will ever be, for every Jew, that nothing will ever scare us, not even our greatest enemies; not even a judgment summons for a repentant on Rosh Hashana. Because I have a G-d I can always trust. בזאת אני בוטח. G-d is on my side, so Rosh Hashana judgement is my light, despite the fact that I have no moon to shine in my darkness.

Why is this calm mindset crucial for Elul? Without being calm, a person's soul cannot soar. As the Sephardic custom is to say in Selichot דלפה מתוגה נפשי הענוגה וחליץ מדאגה נפש עבדך My delicate soul drips from grief, Release the soul of your servant from worry. Because more important than serving G-d out of fear, is the calmness and security that comes from knowing you are in G-d's Hands. You cannot serve G-d, you cannot connect to Him, when you are not calm. You can really serve G-d, only when you are really happy. (Devarim 28;47)

We need to learn how to become calmer. The National Institute of Mental Health estimates that one in five adults in the US will experience a mental health issue over the course of a year. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America claims anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the country.



Calmness does not mean being complacent, indifferent, apathetic, unconcerned. Calmness does not mean lying on a hammock between two palm trees, sipping a Pina colada. That calmness is artificial. Calmness means to be totally in control of all your senses, even when you are working towards your goals, maximizing your capabilities and strengths. Contrary to popular belief, Teshuva and calmness are not opposites: they are one and the same. The only way to real Teshuva, begins from a point of calm. That is the only Teshuva that lasts. Fear of G-d is not anxiety. It is recognition of what is real. It is awareness of the reality of the world.

Lack of calmness is the underlying reason why so many people have a hard time to fight their Yetzer Hara, to take out time to learn, to pray, to connect in Elul, to forgive in Elul. Tension, anxiety, and lack of calmness are the Yetzer Hara's three most failproof ammunition. Just think about it. The whole year, you are so busy running from fear to fear, you don't even have a second to hear your soul! Financial fear, Social status fear, F.o.m.o. (fear of missing out), Fear of the unknown, fear of what people might say, fear of being vulnerable, fear of change, fear of sickness or loss, fear of death, fear of retirement, fear of loneliness, fear of being rejected, or fear that I might miss another deal...The list does not end. And when you are not calm, you can't hear your soul. Soul can only be heard when subconscious is silent.

In Parashat Shoftim, the Kohen takes out the fearful from the army before battle. Even though the lives of all the soldiers are at risk, and everyone had fear, any added fear, fear of loss of a new vineyard, loss of new house, loss of a new wife... could cause the soldier a drop more stress than needed. Calmness is the only way you can fight, pray, learn, do Teshuva, and most importantly, be a healthy person to be around. Fear is actually something you can catch from your colleagues. It is called "secondhand stress". Extra tension or anxiety has no place at the front lines of battle. Neither does it have any place in Elul.

Fear is an emotion that is almost always inaccurate. The statistics of the danger, the percentages quoted by the one who is afraid, are mostly off. Most anxieties are just misinformed emotions. Are you scared of sharks when you swim in the ocean? If you said yes, are you afraid of bathtubs? I don't mean to scare you, but did you know that more people die from drowning in bathtubs than from sharks? Deer collision are more common to cause death than airplane crashes, and still people are more afraid of flying than of driving. Why? Because people fear the unknown. People fear not being in control.

The fear that David was talking about was real, imminent danger. In David's every blind spot lay war, enemy, ambush. From his youth, David's brothers would send him to shepherd the family flock out in dangerous areas of the wilderness, so that he would be eaten alive by the bears and lions. They suspected that he was mamzer, and they wanted him dead, not to bring shame or suspicion to the prestigious Ben Yishai family. Kind David was chased to near death by his own father-in-law, who David respected so much. Later, he entrusted the Moabite king to watch his family. He thought he could trust the Moabites, for his grandmother Ruth was a Moabite princess. But King of Moab killed all of David's family, instead! (Imagine the trauma, the guilt that David could have felt, for mistakenly trusting Moab! Nonetheless, he did not let his mistakes take over his life. He was never afraid!) David was chased to near death by his beloved son, Avshalom. David's rabbi, Achitofel, advised David's rebellious son Avshalom how to kill David. David was cursed a horrible curse from the Gadol Hador, Shimi Ben Gera. Still, David stuck steadfast to his mantra, בַּזֹּאת אֲנִי בֹטֵחַ. In this G-d I will trust.

Although King David is speaking about fear of imminent danger, David's trust in G-d turns fear to light. For King David, fear was like oxygen. Because that is what made him close to G-d. G-d brought the fear, and G-d can bring His salvation. This is Bitachon, this power of זֶכֶת, the power of calm, Midat Hamalchut, is what Moshe Rabbenu



prophesized will be the superpowers of David. וְזֹאת לַיהוּדָה וַיֹּאמֶר שְׁמַע יְקִינֹק קוֹל יְהוּדָה וְאַל־עֲמוּ תְבִיאֲנֻוּ יְדִילוּ רַב (Devarim 33: See Rabenu Bachye)

Rosh Hashana, also, is imminent, the “statistics of danger” are accurate. There is so much at stake. As Mishna Berura writes, “Even though we trust that we will come out of judgement with merit, still, we need to be afraid from the fear of judgement, and this will bring us to be remembered for merit.” (584;1)

Calmness is not something out there, dependent on something external or artificial. Calmness results from a decision that you make, from a commitment. It needs to be one of the highest goals you set for yourself. It is something that you need to practice. Because calmness is the only way you can connect to G-d.

THE ART OF FIGHTING THE YETZER HARA

The four parashiot of Elul have in them endless tools for change and Teshuva. Reeh – See that you have choice, more choices than you think. Shoftim-observe how much self-control you have and how honest and true to yourself you have been. Ki Tetze – Now, go out to war against your Yetzer Hara, your evil inclination; recognize its ways. And then, Ki Tavo- let the past fall behind, שְׁנֵה וְקַלְלוּתֶיהָ, and start a new year, with new blessing.

The difference between a Tzaddik and a Rasha, says the Alter from Kelm, is what you imagine and how you imagine. The way to fight the Yetzer Hara is to use its own weapons against him. The strongest weapon of the Yetzer Hara is false imaginations and fears. Temptations of pleasure and pride are only able to capture us, once we use imagination to magnify the temptation, making it more attractive and powerful than it actually is. Fear of missing out, fear of change, fear of failure, fear of poverty, fear of retirement ... it is not that these things aren't real issues, it is that the Yetzer Hara magnifies and blows them out of proportion.

Here are the selfie steps, the self-help steps to becoming calmer.

1. Identify and Control. Identify the stressor, and find a way to control it. If you cannot control it, trust in G-d that only He can control it.
2. Slow Down. Especially in Elul. Your life is going too fast. A red traffic light means G-d is telling you to slow down.
3. Be Kind to yourself, first. גְּמַל גְּפֹשׁוֹ אִישׁ הֶסֶד (Mishlei 11; 17) Make sure that you eat well (quality over quantity), sleep well (even if you are saying Selihot), and listen to your body, so that you know what it can handle.
4. PRAY! Talk to G-d. If you are afraid, if you want to cry, speak to Him. He brought you the danger, that is just the way He opens up a conversation sometimes.

So, we fight the Yetzer Hara with imagining, but imagining the truth. How powerful a Rosh Hashana can be, how great the reward and punishment of the next world can be, how great I can be, if I just imagine, do my due diligence and trust in G-d. The first step of being a Torah Jew, the first law in Shulchan Aruch, is to imagine, wherever you are, whoever you are with or not with, שׁוֹרֵיתִי לֹהֵ' נִגְדִי, I place and imagine G-d in front of me, present with me, “alive” with me. No matter where I am in the world, I am לפניך מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם.

But the Yetzer Hara counter attacks with imagination: *You can't do this repentance thing! How many times have you tried to improve yourself, and you failed! You're broken down and tired of this self-improvement merry-go-round! How many times have you tried to rise up, like the waves, and you just came crashing down! You may be a failure, but you are not foolish enough to try improving again, for the thousandth time! You know you can't change!* He makes you ignore and forget your strengths. And when that doesn't work, when you actually get into the repentance zone, he



makes you forget your weakness and imagine that you can do more than you actually can: *You can change, if you really want to. It won't be hard. You can change at the last minute.* He makes you bite off too much, more than you can swallow, so that you have spiritual indigestion. He makes you overestimate what you can do in one year and underestimate what you can do in seven years.

Another tool of the Yetzer Hara is to start with something so small and seemingly insignificant, that before you realize it, it becomes something you can't stop. This is the lesson of the Ben Sorer U'moreh, which begins with a young boy going after worldly pleasures and continues with a person who will turn into an unstoppable beast. Parashat Ki Tetze introduces to us the war tactics of the Evil Inclination, how one thing leads to the next : marrying an Eshet Yefat Toar will lead to having a rebellious child.

To counter that, G-d doesn't ask us to change, but to change direction. No matter how far you have gone off the beaten path, the point when you realized that you are in the wrong direction is closer to the destination than the point that you started to go off in the wrong direction. All G-d asks from us is, פתחו לי פתח כחודו של מחט ואני אפתח, Open up even a tiny opening for Me, an opening so small like the sharp point of a needle, and I will open up for you an entrance like a hall. This is the lesson of the shape of the Shofar, that on one side, it is narrow, and on the other side, it is wide. Because all G-d wants from us, is to take the first step. Elul is called אלול because it stands for אני לדודי ודודי לי, I am to My beloved, and My beloved is to me. The month is not called Dalul, after the other passuk of Shir Hashirim, דודי לי ואני לו, My beloved is to me, and I am to Him, because G-d waits for us, to make the small change, to take the first step towards the relationship. וְשׁוּבוּ אֵלַי וְאֶשׁוּבוּ אֵלֵיכֶם

The best way to get ready for Rosh Hashana is to imagine how many things were decided upon, last Rosh Hashana. It's been a crazy year. Last Rosh Hashana was "heavy stakes", on a personal and a

global level. A year of collapse in so many ways. Meron. Givat Zeev. Surfside. Everything we relied on: doctors, hospitals, justice, our votes in America and Israel, police enforcement – everything just seems to be collapsing. The trust in leaders, the trust in the economy, the trust in "the system", whatever the system might have been. People are anxiety-ridden about how to be ready for the next "collapse", as we shift from second vaccine, to the third vaccine, to the unknown...

The Rambam tells us that no matter how saintly we are, every Rosh Hashana we need to blow shofar, to wake up and realize that we are spiritually sleeping. We forgot G-d, even if we trusted in Him. We forgot the truth, as we busied ourselves with unimportant things. Chasing after money we don't need, running after respect and honor that is, anyway, short lived, eating tempting food that is not even good for us, and wasting endless time which is life itself, justifying it by calling it "entertainment". (see Rambam Teshuva 3) This is the message of the Shofar, to simpletons and Chief Rabbis alike. The Shofar blowing is the trumpet blow as we crown G-d as King, at the beginning of the new year. By waking up from spiritual slumber, by searching for the truth, focused on self-improvement, as we crown G-d as the world begins anew each Rosh Hashana, just as G-d was King on the first day of creation.

Elul is time for war. Elul stands for למעלה ושבעה אחת למטה One above, and seven below, the strange way the Kohen Gadol would count and track the sprinkling of blood on Yom Kippur. The Yetzer Hara comes from seven places, with its seven names. (See Succah 52b) He uses any possible way to trick you, to go against you ... but there is always the One Above. *Every day the Yetzer Hara tries to kill you, spiritually, and if G-d won't help you, you won't be able to withstand him* (Kiddushin 30b). But it also means that if we just stick to the truth, if we learn Torah, all the lies of the Yetzer Hara will fall by the wayside. The only way to Teshuva is through Torah learning. Onkelos וְנָקָה לֹא יִנְקָה says, if you learn My Torah, I will forgive your sins. If you do not, I will not



forgive your sins. The Torah is the only vaccine against the Yetzer Hara, בראתי יצר הרע בראתי לו תורה, תבלין. If you learn Torah, you will not be given

over into the hands of the Yetzer Hara. (Kiddushin 30b)

OH MY G-D!

One of the most powerful parts of Selichot is, שומר ישראל שמור ישראל שמוור שארית ישראל ואל יאבד ישראל האומרים בכל יום שמע ישראל. Oh! Watcher of Israel, Watch over the remainder of Israel, and do not allow Israel to be lost, those who say each day, Shema Yisrael. The power we have, the merit we have not to be lost is our saying Shema Yisrael.

R Shlomo Levenstien writes in his sefer “Umatok Haor” that the Pesti Herlap, Hungarian newspaper, in the times of WW1, posted a letter from a Hungarian soldier to his wife. Here it is – word for word. “I ask you a favor. Please ask our Jewish neighbor, Chaim, to translate and explain the words “Shema Yisrael.” Because when the deadly bullets fly over our heads, and the soldiers are falling like the grain at harvest, then the Jewish soldiers cry out Shema Yisrael, and they are saved from death, while their friend soldiers that are gentiles, are killed. And right away, when Chaim explains this power of Shema to you, please let me know! This way, when I will be in danger, it will save my life!”

In Parashat Shoftim, we learn that *not every Jewish soldier* was allowed out to war. The Kohen would tell a person who had a new vineyard, house, or wife that he could not fight. And if he had fear, he could not go out to war. What type of fear are we talking about? Fear of sin. The Talmud tells us that what is being referred to is fear from even a sin of speaking between putting on Tefillin of the hand and Tefillin of the head. (Sotah, 44b)

And then, the Kohen said the most powerful thing that we need to remind ourselves each and every day. וְאָמַר אֲלֵהֶם שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתֶּם קִרְבָּיִם הַיּוֹם לְמַלְחָמָה עַל־אֲבִיבֵיכֶם אֶל־יְהוָה לְבַבְכֶם אֶל־תִּירָאוּ וְאֶל־תִּחַפְּזוּ וְאֶל־תִּעְרָצוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם: The Kohen tells them, *Listen Oh Yisrael! You are approaching war today on your enemies; do not fear, do not become tense, and do not be impressed by them!* Rashi reflects on the words of

the Kohen, where he uses the words Shema Yisrael to begin his speech, שמע ישראל – אפילו אין בכם זכות, אלא קריאת שמע בלבד, כדאי אתם שיושיע אתכם: The Kohen encouraged them before war – *Even if all you have in your favor is the Mitzvah of Kriat Shema alone, you are worthy of His salvation.*

This is somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, one is to fear even slight sins, like speaking between putting on tefillin of the hand and tefillin of the head. This seems to imply that only great tsaddikim were allowed to fight. On the other hand, just for the merit of Kriat Shema, alone, despite all other transgressions, one is worthy of being saved!!!?? How can we understand this? What merit does Shema have, that can outweigh not only minor sins like speaking between donning Tefillin, but even greater sins that a person may have that render him deserving of harm, and save the person when going out to war?

The answer seems to be that of course, if the Mitzvah of Kriat Shema is just a matter of reciting it, then it does not possess that great merit. But Rabbenu Bachye gives us a hint to solve this paradox, בזכות שמע ישראל שהוא פרשת היחוד אתם, בוצחים. *The merit of Shema that is the Parasha of Yichud, and in its merit you will win the war.* What is the mitzvah of Yichud? Of saying that G-d is One? Of believing that G-d is One? (See Rashi Devarim 6;4. Re'em. Gur Aryeh)

The Kli Yakar (Vaetchanan 6;4) quotes the Talmud in Pesachim. (50a) The Talmud asks, why does the passuk tell us א' אחד ושמו א', that G-d will be One and His Name One only at the end of time, when G-d is King of all the Land? Why is G-d now, before Mashiach, not considered One? And the Talmud answers, *This world is not like the next world. In this world, on good news one recites the blessing Baruch Hatov Vehemetiv, and on bad*



news, one recites the blessing Baruch Dayan Haemet, Blessed is the Judge of Truth. But in the next world, everything is Hatov Vehemetiv. In the Next World, when all the pain and sorrow are over and everyone is praising G-d, they will not see bad things happening. Then, in the times of Mashiach, it will only be ה' אחד, One YKVK. This is because the Name of YKVK is the Attribute of Mercy. And the Name of Elokim is the Attribute of Judgement. So in this world, before Mashiach, it is ה' אלוֹקֵינוּ, a mix of Good/ Mercy and seeming Bad/Judgement. But we, His people, know that it is really the same YKVK of Mercy that will be One in the Times of Mashiach, and *everything* is good. But for the rest of the nations, only then, when Mashiach comes, will everyone use the Name of Mercy, of YKVK. And realize how everything is good.

With this, the Kli Yakar explains that there are many times in life when we feel confused by G-d and Judaism. Like when good things happen to bad people, or when bad things happen to good people. These puzzling occurrences make it seem as if, Chas Veshalom, G-d is inconsistent. Sometimes, He uses His Attribute of Mercy, YKVK, and times are great. But sometimes, He uses His Attribute of Judgement, Elokim, and times look bleak. Other nations of the world would simply explain these seeming contradictions by saying that there are different powers in the universe, different gods. But we believe that both mercy and judgement, the things that look good, and the things that look bad, all emanate from One power, from One G-d. ה' אלוֹקֵינוּ ה' אחד

I believe that the hardest Halacha in all Shulchan Aruch to keep is to bless Hashem for bad news

TO REACH MY SOUL

When we think about Elul, the first thing that comes to mind is Teshuva. When we think about Teshuva, the first thing that comes to mind is, *I have no idea how to do this*. Every year, when we try to interpret Teshuva to ourselves, we get the same response. *Blank!*

with the same joy that you bless G-d for good news. (OH 222;3 230;5) To be able to say and believe that whatever G-d does is for the best. That it is all ultimately His Mercy.

The Mishna in Berachot (Berachot 60b) learns this from the Passuk we say so often, without realizing what we are saying. וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְךָ. ובְּכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ. You have to love Hashem your G-d with all your hearts, with all your soul, and with all of your מאוד. What does that mean, to love G-d with all of your מאוד, with all your all? בכל מדה ומדה שמוּדָד לָךְ הוּא מוֹדָה לּוֹ מְאֹד מְאֹד With whatever measure G-d measures to you, thank Him very, very much!! The Tiferet Yisrael (on the Mishna) says that if one wants to overcome his Mazal, if he can thank G-d for the bad, he can change his luck! (Try it! It works!)

The Talmud teaches that once Hillel was coming home, and as he came close to his town, he heard screams and cries from one of the houses. Hillel said, I am sure that the cries are not from my house. How did Hillel know that his family was not the one under duress? The answer is amazing. He didn't know. But he knew that he had trained his family to accept the bad, to bless G-d for the bad, and if something bad was happening at home, Hillel knew that they would not be screaming about it. They would take it calmly.

The secret power of Shema is, as the Tur writes, that when someone accepts painful news with love, that is "the" sign that he is G-d's servant. And G-d will save His servants, allowing them to flip over their mazal completely, from Judgement to Mercy.

Why is it like that? It's something like what happened to me last week, when I spoke to an operator. I asked her what numbers I need to dial to reach her directly next time, without going through the whole operating system and process. She said to me, "I don't know. I never tried to call myself."



We all have thoughts how to get to other people; we think a lot of how we would like to change other people, but we rarely think thoughts of how to change ourselves, or how to get through to ourselves. What buttons do we need to press?

The answer is tricky, because Teshuva is tricky. Real Teshuva doesn't just happen because you know the Shaarei Teshuva manual. You can't change who you are by trying to change who you are. That is not how people change. Why not? Why can't I just regret the past and take on some New Year's Resolutions? Change like that does not work, because to behave differently, you need to think differently. Resolutions don't work, if you don't think differently. And only by challenging your belief system, do you really think differently, do you take a new path. That is the only way to get into the Teshuva game. In our Davening, חנוך הדעת, the blessing of knowledge comes before the blessing of תשובה, the blessing that G-d wants our repentance. Because the way to really repent, the only way, is by challenging "the obvious", or the way you think. (Netivot Shalom) Being *challenged* by something or someone. By asking yourself the right questions, or by someone else asking you the right questions, or by being in the environment that asks you the right questions. Once you are blessed by G-d with a new understanding of the truth of your world, G-d is interested in your repentance. And then, we change by default, after realizing a deeper level of truth.

Teshuva comes from the word והשבות אל לבבך, letting something settle within your heart; it is an inward process. It is not as much about repentance as it is about discovering a deeper truth in life. And there is always a deeper truth in life. You need to go inward and find it. The Rebbe from Slonim writes that teshuva is a whole life's journey of asking right questions, and it is horribly misrepresented when translated by the word "repentance". Repentance is about being better. Teshuva is about becoming different. Being different is much more than being better. Most of Rabbenu Yonah's Shaarei Teshuva is the outline, the elements, the process, the Mitzvah; but all that

is just the manual of Teshuva. The theory of it. You did not get into the game yet, you did not get behind the wheel, until you do Cheshbon Hanefesh. Until you call yourself. You have to know the right buttons to press; you need to know how to dial yourself. In Chovot Halevovot, the subject of Teshuva is first, and then, there is the subject of Cheshbon Hanefesh, challenging you with the questions that will make you think differently. Cheshbon Hanefesh is the only way to play the game, because it is the only way to change your path, and that is what G-d is expecting of you. יעזוב איש דרכו ואיש און מחשבותיו *Let a man leave his path, and a person, leave his false thinking.* G-d does not ask of you only a change in behavior. He asks that you change your *path*, the way you think and believe, your worldview.

This is a great challenge. Because we can be doing something wrong, even though we think we are doing something right. You can be living a whole life, thinking you were doing the right thing, but being so off. כדלים וכרשים דפקנו דלתין *Like paupers, we knock on Your Door!* In Selichot, we mention how we are so poor in our performance of mitzvot and in our level of observing them. Because even if we are as full of Mitzvot as a pomegranate, it could be that we are lacking in some fundamentals. Our belief system could be way off. Our intentions could be way off. The way we look at the world could be way off. Unless we are studying the Cheshbon HaNefesh of the Chovot Helvovot. This is why Teshuva is something that can be done, and should be done, every day of our lives (Shabbat 153a, Iggeret HaRamban). Even if you are a Tzaddik.

The Chidushei Harim gives us an example of how the "righteous" could be way off, without Cheshbon Hanefesh. R Yochanan taught, *Without the Torah, we would have learnt modest behavior from the cat, not to steal from the ant, ...* (Eiruvim 100b) King Solomon taught, *Lazy one! Go to the ant and learn her ways, and become wise. That she has no police officer or ruler (to fear).* (Mishlei 6, 6)... The Midrash explains this: *There was once an ant that dropped a piece of wheat. All of its friends*



came and smelled it, and not one took it, until the one who dropped it came back to get it. (Devraim Rabbah 5b) *The ant brings everything it gathers into a nest to store for the winter. And not one ant will take from another's nest.* (Aruch Erech צנעו)

The Chidushei Harim asks, But isn't everything that the ant gathers stolen goods?!? He does not plant, or work the field!? How can the ant be considered the role model for not stealing, if it never made anything of its own, its whole life?

This is what happens when we learn how to think from the ant, and not from the Torah. Without the Torah, it would be a faulty system, because we would learn from the ant how not to steal, while the ant is the biggest thief there is!

The first Cheshbon of Cheshbon Hanefesh is that you are nothing, without G-d. You are just an ant, who is taking from G-d everything that you have, and everything that you are. You have no merit to exist, because you were born without any merits. You are one big Chessed from G-d. That is all you are. What a humbling thought!

TWO WAYS TO TESHUVA

I was looking for the switch that could take me – overnight – from summer break mode directly into Elul self-perfection mode. I found it. Yishai Ribo's song, called Seder HaAvodah, brought me to Elul mode. The music, enchanting. The words, tear jerking.

ואם אדם היה יכול לזכור את הפגמים את החסרונות את כל הפשעים את כל העוונות בטח כך היה מונה: אחת אחת ואחת אחת ושתיים. אחת ושלוש. אחת וארבע. אחת וחמש. ישר היה מתייאש כי לא יכול היה לשאת את טעם מרירות החטא את הבושה את הפספוס את ההפסד.

And if a person would remember all of his blemishes, his weaknesses, all the different types of sins, he would for sure start to count, like the Kohen Gadol on Yom Kippur, One, one and one, one and two, one and three, one and four, one and five, ... Right away, he would despair, ... because he would not be able to bear the bitterness of the

This humbling thought is a great prerequisite to Teshuva. Because every sin has some self-justification behind it. As if we are "even" with G-d. G-d does a lot for me, *but I also do a lot for Him.* WRONG! לננו ואתה צדיק על כל הבא עלינו ואנחנו הרשענו , ושל ומשפטיך ולא שוה , Each time we say Ashamnu, we do Teshuva on trying to present this self-justification. Because all sin starts from the way we think. And if you change your behavior, your habit will bring you back in a month, a year, or some time in the near future, to your old habit. Even if we refrain from sin in the present, for a little while, we are prone to being activated by a trigger when it comes around. But if you change the way you think, you have made a change for a lifetime. Because when there is no self-justification, YOU have changed.

How ironic that there are precisely 30 instructions in the Cheshbon HaNefesh of the Chovot HaLevovot. One for each day of the month of Elul!

These 30 thoughts are the way that you contact yourself. This is the phone number of your soul.

sin, the embarrassment, what he missed out on, who he could have been, and the loss.

And then Yishai Ribo sings:

ואם אדם היה יכול לזכור את החסדים את הטובות את כל הרחמים את כל הישועות בטח כך היה מונה: אחת אחת ואחת אחת ושתיים אחת מאלף אלפי אלפים ורוב ריבי רבבות ניסים ונפלאות שעשית עמנו ימים ולילות

And if a person could remember the kindness, the goodness, all the mercy, all the salvations, for sure he would start to count, One, One and one, One and two, One of thousands of thousands, and myriads of miracles and wonders that You did for us, day and night.

So, there are two ways to count, to make an accounting of the soul. Two ways to judge ourselves, how we have been over the past year. How many things we have done wrong... which



equals to how bad we have been. Or, how much we owe. How much we are not deserving.

There are two ways to do Teshuva. Fear and love. When you do Teshuva out of fear, you may erase your sins, but when you repent out of love, all of your sins turn into merits. (Yoma 86:) Why is it that teshuva from fear can't accomplish what teshuva out of love can accomplish? Fear and love are important factors to balance in all of our relationships. When there is too much closeness in a relationship, we feel too heimish, and we can say or do things that don't respect the boundaries of the other person. When the relationship is built only on fear, one cannot enjoy the company of the other. So, both fear and love are important. Why, then, is repentance from love going to turn the sins into mitzvot, while repentance of fear does not achieve this? Why does the repentant get more than one who did not sin to begin with?

In the Idiot's Guide to Peoples Skills, it says the following. *When you apologize, tell the person how much you value him/her. Often people want an apology because they feel that what you did devalued them. People who feel disrespected or slighted are angrier and less prone to receiving your apology. Take care of their feelings and their egos first, so they can hear what you say.*

When you sin, you did not just sin. You showed G-d how, in your mind, you devalued Him. The devaluation needs to be rectified first, before you ask Him forgiveness for the sin. So, first you need Love, you need first to count and recognize all the good that G-d has done for you, before you count your wrongdoings. Otherwise, just asking to wipe away the sin brings with it a reminder of the lack of respect that was involved. When you start to mention all of the good things that another person, or G-d, has done for you, before you say how sorry you are, you have a better chance of getting real forgiveness. And sometimes, this process of love works so effectively, it makes the relationship stronger than what it was before the sin.

When we start to learn how G-d is running our bodies and our minds so perfectly, we begin to realize that we have no idea how "high-maintenance" our lives actually are! The average amount of blood, in adults, is 10 pints. In under a minute, your heart pumps blood to every cell in your body. Sneezes can travel at more than 100 miles an hour. Wrinkles form on fingers and toes when they soak, in order to improve traction. All the computers in the world have about the same computing power as one human brain. G-d knows us, inside and out, in all the spiritual and physical details of our being. He knows us far better than we know ourselves. So how could we ever wrong Him? How could we ever dare to think that He is not aware of our innermost thoughts, or how we behave, when no one is looking? How foolish! How devaluating! It almost does not even make sense, how we forgot Him!!!

This is not hard to understand when we begin to grasp how our Yetzer Hara works. He has a special spray, that he sprays on us to make us forget how much we are dependent on G-d and how involved G-d is in our lives. Here is an interesting fun-fact I learnt. *Mosquito repellent doesn't repel mosquitoes; it blocks their sensors, so that they do not know you are there!* The Yetzer Hara has this spray that blocks our sensors, so that we do not know that G-d is there!

Here is another fun-fact. Until he died, Christopher Columbus believed that he had landed in Asia, instead of in the "new world". One can live an entire life as a smart person, an achiever, someone who changed the world for the better... and at the same time, live till his last day, not even knowing where he is. Not knowing that he is surrounded by G-d, he is enveloped by G-d. G-d is there, at his side, running his whole life.

So, the first step to Teshuva is to count all the things that we know that G-d did for us, is doing for us and will do for us, realizing that at best, we can know only a microscopic part of it all. Only then can we undo our lack of respect and correct



the thoughts and actions that blocked our sensors to know that He is so close.

A SPECIAL MONTH

The well known acronym of the month אלול is אני לי לדודי ודודי לי – *I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me*. The sign of the zodiac for this month is a virgin. This month is a month of immense love between G-d and His People.

The custom to say Selichot for forty days is not a preparation for Rosh Hashana. It is that each and every one of the forty days of Elul is precious in its own right. הישאג אריה ביער : the word ארי"ה stands for א' לול , ר' "ה , י' ו'הכ , ה' ושענא רבה . These days were the very days of the Jewish Calendar when so many years ago G-d looked past the Sin of the Golden Calf while Moshe spent forty days with Him. These are days of grace and mercy. We do not want to lose even one of them: they are especially auspicious for getting close to G-d, and therefore we take full advantage of the time saying Selichot. G-d told us that the way to get close to Him is by reciting the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy in the Selichot. When we do, He simply cannot withhold His Mercy.

In his book Tzror Hamor, the father-in-law of the Beit Yosef points to the particular wording used by G-d as mentioned in the Talmud (R" H 17a) כל זמן שישראל עושים לפני כסדר הזה *Whenever perform this service before Me* (the Thirteen Attributes)... Why does it not say, more appropriately, אומרים לפני כסדר הזה *say or recite before Me* instead of perform before Me?

The answer is that the main way to connect to G-d and attain his Mercy is *by living according to His Attributes and practicing them*. Some people pass through the whole of Elul saying the Selichot, but forget about putting the teachings of the Selichot into practice. R' Yehuda Ades, shlit"a, once relayed how a couple approached him seeking aid in resolving their dispute. In Israel, it is common for the Selichot to be said after midnight, and they are

well attended by women as well as men. This young couple, after having had their first few children, reached a dilemma: it just could not work out for both husband and wife to attend Selichot. No babysitter would be available at such hours. One of them, father or mother, would have to stay home, and they could not come to an agreement as to exactly who that would be.

R' Yehuda answered them that they should both go, and *he* will come babysit. It is important to go to shul to say Selichot, but it is more important to perform the attributes of mercy that we recite. If our children need us, then there is no greater kindness and mercy that we can do than being there for them. This is the greatest connection we have to G-d. Of course, R' Yehuda did not babysit, as the couple came to a truer understanding of what exactly the Selichot are about.

The word Elul is not a Jewish word. It is Babylonian. It means to search a path. (See Onkelos on the words in Bamidbar ויתרו את ארץ מצרים) This time of the year is a time of searching, where we set the path for a whole year. The word Elul also stands for the first letters of ומל אלקיד לבבך ואת לבב זרעך *And G-d will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your children...* And a third acronym for the word Elul – איש לרעהו , ומתנות לאביונים , the very words of the Megillah that talk about the mitzvah of giving Mishloach Manot.

These are parallel to the three ways that we can uproot the evil decree- תשובה תפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזירה *repentance* (circumcised hearts), *prayer* (hinted to in the acronym of *I am to my beloved..*) and *charity* (as hinted to in the Mishloach Manot), *will overrule the evil decree*.

The word Teshuva does not mean only repent. It also means to return. To return to G-d's ways, ultimately returning to our true self.



SELF-IMPROVEMENT THROUGH SELF-JUDGMENT

שופטים ושוטרים תתן לך בכל שעריך *Appoint judges and enforcement officers for yourself in all your gates...*(Devarim 16:18)

R' Chaim Vital writes that these words refer not only to society as a whole, but also to the individual on a personal level. This is based on the surprising grammatical form of the term לך, *for yourself* – singular rather than plural – as well as the fact that the term itself is seemingly superfluous. It emerges that the Torah is commanding a person to judge himself and his actions. In order to do this, he must have self-awareness. Indeed, the Chafetz Chaim commented: “The greatest חשבון (reckoning) that we will ultimately have to make on the Day of Judgment is why we lived our life without a proper חשבון .”

Now, how are we to relate to the fact that many therapists discourage self-judgment? They fear that questions like “How could I have been so foolish?” could lead to depression.

The answer is this: Self-judgment does not necessarily mean judging our self-worth, potential, or intellect. Self-judgment that leads us to think that we are not worth anything is definitely counterproductive. There is, however, great value in assessing whether or not we are behaving according to our real worth, potential, or intellect. In contrast to judgment of self-worth, judgment of behavior is not limited to the past; it includes the present and future as well. Focusing on ourselves as people with tremendous power and potential despite our failures can give us greater clarity of judgment and better results. Even after accepting ourselves as worthy, there is still plenty of room for judgment – not only after our actions, but during and before them as well. Allow me to elaborate.

The Shlah Hakadosh writes that a person has seven openings – or gates – in the body: two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, and a mouth. Through these gates, we relate to the world around us. And that is why it is so important to post שופטים and שוטרים

(judges and “police”) there. The brain receive information, and respond to the information received through these gates both emotionally and intellectually. We must keep in mind, though, that our emotions and intellect respond to the impulses generated by the information in fixed – almost “programmed” – ways. The place where this programming goes on is in the mind and heart. These two organs, the mind and heart, must be the שופטים and שוטרים over the “gates of the body”. The responsibility of the intellect and the emotions is to constantly improve and clarify perception, which ultimately improves our behavior and actions.

Let us take, for example, the Torah prohibition of lashon hara (speaking ill of others), a subject to which the Chafetz Chaim devoted an entire book, Sefer Chafetz Chaim. In addition, he also authored a fantastic work, unfortunately less known, called Shaar Hatvunah on the same subject. In that sefer, he addresses how to deal with the problem of lashon hara from a Mussar (introspective) point of view. The Chafetz Chaim writes that by working on behavioral patterns, perception, and self-control, one can stop lashon hara cold turkey.

Let us picture, for a moment, someone who speaks lashon hara, but later does some introspection (“self-judgment”) and regrets his words. One utilizing positive self-judgment does not conclude that he is wicked *because he did not care about the prohibition of the Torah*. Rather, he realizes that the reason he spoke negatively of others was *because he did not change his behavioral patterns or perceptions*. The person realizes that his behavior does not befit his values and beliefs. The words spoken might have flowed from impulse or lack of awareness, and not from a desire to harm another’s self-image. In contrast, *negative self-judgment would be to judge oneself as evil for speaking lashon hara*.

In short, proper self-judgment can be the best way to make us happier people over the long term, and



the best way to use these days of Elul properly as well. If it is misused, however, it can be our

greatest enemy at a time of year when we cannot afford the depression it causes.

YOSSELE THE THIEF

There is an amazing story I told my young daughters at bedtime last week.

The Baal Shem Tov, the Father of Chassidut, was a man of miracles. He saw into the future, and through walls. A very holy man. He had a student, Yossele. Yossele, would learn and pray with the Baal Shem, daily. He was a dedicated student, and revered his Rebbe greatly. But, Yossele also liked money.

The richest Jew in town, a pious Jew, had an only child. A daughter. Yossele visited this man in his house/office numerous times, for a loan and for some business advice. He walked in through the fancy gates, waved to the guards and walked past the big dogs, and he knew how to get from the front door to the office, which was adjacent to the master bedroom. And, he even noticed, as he sat in the office with the rich man, where the rich man kept his money. He knew where the safe was. One day, that man died. He left all of his money, his fancy house, with the guards and the dogs, to his only daughter. A few years passed...

Yossele had been out of cash for some time now. He could not get a loan from anyone. He lay in bed, and could not sleep. He looked at his pocket watch. 2:30 AM. He had just dreamt of having all the money of that rich man who died, and his dream felt so real. He got up and left his simple apartment to go for a midnight walk. Everything was quiet. He walked to the edge of town, to the gates of the rich man's house. The big gates were open a crack. He stepped inside. He looked around and scanned the estate. The guards were snoozing. The dogs, wagging their tails. He walked right passed them, up to the front door. He checked the doorknob, and the door opened as if it had been waiting for him.... Everything was suspended in the peaceful sleep of night...except for Yossele. He

tiptoed passed the main bedroom, and heard the rich daughter snoring softly as he quickly walked up to the office and over to the safe. The safe was open!

Yossele looked wide-eyed at the bars of gold. He looked at the cash, at the bank notes. And then, suddenly, he heard someone talking to him. "Yossele, what are you doing here? You are the student of the great Baal Shem Tov, and it is beneath your dignity to steal." He stood there, shaking, as he realized that it was his own voice talking. "Yossele, get out of here, before it will be too late, and you will do something that you will regret!" Yossele ran out of the house, faster than he had ever run in his life.

White as a ghost, Yossele sat on his bed. He could not sleep. He waited for Shacharit, and was the first one in Shul. As he prayed, wide eyed, he felt something vibrating (before the invention of the cellphone); his heart was beating at a frightening pace. He sat down to learn after prayers, without eating breakfast. He learnt half way through the morning hours, and then, a fellow student of the Baal Shem notified him that the Rebbe was waiting for him in his office.

Oh, no! Oh, no! He walked into the office, whiter than he had been the night before. He sat down and looked at the floor. The Baal Shem asked him, in a gentle, silken voice, "Yossele, did you ever get to know the rich man who used to live in the house at the edge of town, the one with the big gates, guards and dogs?" Yossele nodded, as he continued to look at the floor. He could hear his heart pounding. "Yossele, are you aware of the fact that he had an only daughter, who inherited all of his wealth, including the big house?" Just as he was about to faint, Yossele hear his own voice asking himself, "the one who snores softly?".



“Yossel’e, this morning the rich daughter visited my office.” Yossel’e wanted the wood floor to swallow him, just to save him from continuing the conversation. “She would like to marry one of my students and support him, so that he can learn and grow to become a great Rabbi. She is a pious young woman, and she would like to marry a student that is honest and would never steal. Even under a test. Yossele, I thought about you. Would you like to marry this woman, so that you can stay as a faithful student and learn for many more years without financial worries? Yossele, can I rely on you, that you won’t steal, even if you need the money?”

Yossele, met the woman, married her, and lived happily ever after, becoming a great Rabbi. Moral of the story: if G-d wants you to be rich, you will be rich. So, why steal money that G-d will make yours anyway?

ELUL – TIME FOR A CHANGE

I apologize, but I can’t make my point without first troubling you. Fold your arms. Now, open them. Now, fold them again. Now, notice which arm you “naturally” put on top of the other. Is it right on top of left or left on top of right? Now, switch. Fold your arms the opposite way from the way that you are used to. Feels strange? Welcome to change. Welcome to Elul.

The parasha in which G-d gives us choice coincides with the Shabbat before Rosh Hodesh Elul. Why? Because Elul is a time for change, and change begins with choice. Once, a long time ago, without too much thought, you decided which arm to put on top of the other, whenever you fold your arms. Ever since, you have continued to fold your arms like that, and now, it is “strange to change”. It’s awkward.

Sefardim say Selihot for forty days, because that’s how long Moshe spent up in Heaven to get the second set of tablets, after the sin of the Golden Calf. We were granted the second set of tablets on Yom Kippur, as we received atonement. During

My daughters could not believe the story. *But Abba, Yossele is a thief!! How did the Rebbe suggest that the daughter of the rich man marry a thief?!?* I answered my daughters, that a thief is someone who steals money. Not someone who slipped to temptation and walked around the rich man’s house, *like* a thief. Yossele did not steal, and despite the fact that he acted as a thief, he wasn’t one.

To repent, we need to stop giving ourselves labels. Here are some of them. I am not *that* religious. Or, I am not an early riser. I don’t keep Shabbat. Etc. Removing these labels is the first step we need to take in order to change. We need to view our sins not as an identity, but as mistakes that can be corrected.

those forty days, what did the Jewish Nation do in the desert, without a Torah to study? They probably did Teshuva. Repentance.

The hardest part of repentance is changing self-perception. In order to repent, to change, there are steps that you can’t skip. First, you need awareness of the present situation. Second, you need to choose and define what you want different in your life. You need to choose how you want your behavior and identity to “look”. Then, you need motivation. Motivation depends on three factors: knowing what to do differently, believing in change, and believing that you can do it. For forty days, the Nation in the desert needed to believe that after falling from such lofty angelic levels to idol worship, they could still change. It takes forty days to totally convince yourself that things can be done differently. Even though change may feel awkward at first, it can be achieved in forty days. If you fold your arms the new way forty times, in a week from now, you will probably, naturally, go back to your old way of folding your arms. But, if you changed



the order for forty days, you have probably changed it for life. Elul is 40 days. Only after 40 days from conception can an embryo, in the womb, be considered a living entity. If life in the womb ends before forty days, we do not relate to it as “death”. It takes 40 days to create a human. And, it takes 40 days to recreate a human. Choice, alone, is not realistically going to make the change, until you follow up on the choice for 40 days.

The reason why most people do not change is because they don't understand that it takes forty days. And, when they fail to change, they think that they do not have choice. So, G-d reminds us, just in time, in Parashat Re'eh, that choice is ours, but it takes forty days. Purim is a time for happiness, Hanukah is a time to thank G-d for miracles, Tisha B'Av is a time to mourn. But Elul is a time to choose. Elul stands for opportunity.

NACHUM'S PRAYER

Nachum Kligman, the Frum Entrepreneur, put out an amazing book. One of my favorite parts of his book was something he mentioned, by chance, in a story. That before Nachum gets on a plane, he is accustomed to make a prayer. He prays to Hashem that his seat will be one that does not expose him to tests that sometimes confront people when flying. How beautiful. A person praying for a seat where he can stay close to G-d. I said to myself, I've got to try that prayer!

So, on the way to JFK from TLV two weeks ago, in middle of summer Bein Hazmanim, I made my prayer, and a miracle happened. There were only two yeshiva boys on my flight. One was from Brisk, and the other was a Bobover Chassid. I ended up sitting next to the only two yeshiva boys on the plane.

But on the way back, Nachum's prayer really pulled through. I got to Newark airport 2 hours before the 1:30 pm El-Al flight to TLV. I saw something that I had never seen before in an airport. There was a line of about 300 people waiting to check in. Probably because the flight was overbooked with students and young couples coming in for Elul and the new school year, and the people who were accompanying them, as they waited in line. But time was ticking, and I still did not have my boarding pass. I saw one of my students in the middle of the extended line as I walked to the very end, and I withstood the test of joining him, cutting the line and saying that he was reserving me a spot next to him. Instead, I prayed to G-d that I would get the best seat possible for me. When I got to 'check in', forty minutes before departure, they printed my boarding pass, and it

said that my seat number was STBY, although my travel agent booked me a seat when I bought my ticket a month and a half before. I asked them what that was supposed to mean: I had already booked my seat! They rushed me along and said, “Just run to the gate; they will assign you your seat there.” I ran to the gate as fast as Security would let me, all the while praying Nachum's prayer. There, they told me to wait patiently, until everyone on the plane is seated, *and then* they will print me a ticket with my seat on it. I waited, and prayed, knowing that Nachum's prayer works. Finally, at 1:30 the flight attendant printed my ticket. 50D. “Ma'am, can you find a better seat for me on the plane? Something closer up front?” “Sorry. There are no more seats available!” I ran onto the plane. My back was hurting from the overweight knapsack I used to stick in whatever was too heavy for my carry-on, that knocked the protruding legs of the impatient people sitting in aisle seats. I was totally exhausted. The plane was packed. I walked passed the crying babies, the jumping kids... Finally, I got to my seat. Someone, a yeshiva bachur, was sitting in 50D. “Excuse me; my ticket says 50D.” He got up and said, “That's odd. So does mine!” Again, I prayed Nachum's prayer.

I walked up to the stewards and stewardesses. “It seems that El-Al booked someone else my seat. 50 D. I am weak and thirsty. This is not the El-Al I know. I am very upset.” They sat me down in one of the stewards' seats with a bottle of water, while they tried to figure out a solution. I did not want to be bumped to another flight, even if they would give me another round trip ticket for free. I needed to head back to give shiur and be with my family. I

kept praying, although I was starting to doubt that Nachum's prayer was working. Not only don't you have a good seat, you have no seat! But patience would reveal that G-d didn't answer my prayers for a good seat. He answered me with a BED!"

"Sir. It's your lucky day. My manager said we should compensate you for your trouble; you will be flying business class today." And so it happened that I sat next to two big Talmidei Chachamim, and we became close friends on the flight. I ate like a king, learnt like a talmid chacham, and slept like a baby. I came home rested and ready to teach.

There is a reason why Shoftim is the first parasha in Elul. Shoftim teaches us about the judges we need to put at our gates, on a communal level, as much as on a personal one. Note the word שופטים, Put Judges and officers at your (singular form) gates. This week's parasha is teaching us about watching our eyes, watching our gates. R Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev said, that the way you become a Tzaddik is צ פ ע ס. The letter ס is closed on all sides. The letter ע, also means eye. The letter פ also means mouth. And the letter צ also means Tzaddik. You need to learn how to close your eyes. You need to learn how to close your mouth. Only then you can become a tzaddik.

This week's Parasha talks about appointing kings. Rabbi D. Pinto writes that a Jewish king is different than a Jewish Judge, for the king's job is to be a living example to the people, of studying Torah and following in its ways. His logo is his miniature Sefer Torah that he carries with him, to be constantly learning the Torah and living by it.

Our Rabbis teach, *Who are the kings? The Rabbis!* (Gittin 62a) Why are the Rabbis called kings? Because the Rabbi is the man who lives by the Torah and is constantly in a state of self-discipline. The letters מלך are really the ראשי תיבות, the first letters, of the words מלך, לב, מלך. In the מלך, our mind, we have our Neshama, our G-dliness. In our לב, our heart, rests our Ruach, our spirit; and in our מלך, liver, our Nefesh. The Ruach is the source of pride, anger, jealousy, and honor. The Nefesh is the source of physical temptations and materialistic drives. If we allow our Neshama to reign, and the letters are in the right order, allowing the Neshama to rule the other two, then we are the מלך, the genuine king. But if we switch around our priorities, allowing our מלך (Nefesh), or our לב (Ruach) to rule the מלך (spiritual/intellect), then the letters are switched around, making the letters מל(ר), nothing. When you feel emptiness in life, or you feel that your self esteem is very low, like a "nothing", it is because you are "out of order". You have allowed your feelings and desires to rule over your "hard drive", your intellect and spirituality.

Brian Tracy writes what his self-help master taught him. There are 999 success principles. But without self-discipline, not one of them works. With self-discipline, they all work. Brian defines self-discipline as the ability to do what you should do, when you should do it, whether you feel like it or not.

The first step to Elul transformation, is self-discipline. That is why the first parasha of Elul is Shoftim.

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Bebe and Victor Hanein, and Betty and Seymour Lane

