

The Month of Elul

Holidays and Time

To begin to comprehend the deeper mechanisms of the month of elul we first need to try to understand what the concept of time represents in Judaism. The common misconception is that in Judaism just like any other religion or culture, we commemorate past events. For example we celebrate Pesach to remember what happened when we left Egypt. However, while remembering how we became free is a part of the Pesach holiday, it is not primary. In Judaism, the timeline is circular. What does this mean? It means that every year at different times of the year we go through the same things. Imagine all the months of the Jewish calendar in a circle now imagine going around the circle every year over and over again. Every year we experience the special energies that are associated with that month or time of year. For example the ninth of Av is a time where Din (judgment) is very severe therefore, it is no wonder that both the first and second Beit Hamikdash were destroyed on that day and the Spanish inquisition started on that day as well (not to be outdone by the beginning of WWII which took place on that day and brought about unspeakable destruction to world Jewry and the world at large).

Every month and time of year has a special energy to it. It is for this reason that we are given Mitzvot that are time-related (only to be done at certain times of year; ie. Fast, eat matzah, lulav, etrog etc.). The Mitzvot help us ride the wave and go with the energy of that month. There are times to be cautious (three weeks from 17 Tamuz to 9th of Av), times to be happy (Purim, Adar) and times to reflect and do Teshuva (Elul). Therefore, when we celebrate a holiday we are not just commemorating a past event, in fact in a way we are reliving it and going through its special energy once again.

Incidentally the reason why women are exempt from time related mitzvot is that they naturally perceive these energies and can naturally ride the energies. This is represented by their physical bodies which are also based on a monthly cycle. (It should be noted that scientists have no explanation as to why the woman's body is based on a monthly cycle; all animals are either based on seasons or climates.) The special ability to sense the energies of the different times of the year is why it's always been women who have saved us in times of danger. On Purim it was Ester on Chanukah it was Yehudit and on Pesach it was the Jewish women who made the husbands bring forth kids even though they were in a terrible situation. This was the Jewish women in Mitzraim as it says "the more they afflicted them the more they multiply" (Shemot 1:12). In fact it was Miriam who told her father that separating from her mother after the decree that Jewish boys will be killed was not right because a) he could have a daughter and b) we have to do our part and Hashem will do his. Hence we see that it was because of Miriam that Moshe was even conceived. Also by the Golden Calf the women did not present their Jewelry for the idol, (contrary to the Ten Commandments movie), while they were the first to present their Jewelry for the Mishkan. It also says that the women played their tambourines after crossing the sea because they had such emuna in Egypt that they will be saved by Hashem and that they will have to celebrate later that they brought forth with them the

tambourines while the men did not. Furthermore the women did not participate in believing the spies bad report about the land of Israel.

So what special energy does the month of Elul have? This month is significant in many ways i.e. the world was created on the twenty fifth of Elul. In fact some of the deeper commentaries find in the Torah references to Elul in many ways. The simple and well know connotation of the word Elul is Ani Ledodi Vedodi Li, I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me. The first letters of each word of this phrase spells elul. As is referred to in shir hashirim and many other places the Jewish people are viewed as the bride of Hashem. However, we are the kind of wife who goes astray and Hashem is the husband who in his loving kindness takes us back. This is what shir hashirim talks about. Therefore, Elul "I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me" is a time when we renew our so-called vows with Hashem and it is when we renew our special relationship with him and ask him to take us back and forgive us for going astray.

Another connotation of the word Elul is in (Deuteronomy 30-6) which states "et lvavecha veet levav". The full verse translates as Hashem your god will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring. This relates to Elul in the sense that circumcision was and is a covenant between us and Hashem and at this time Hashem is renewing that covenant not physically but spiritually in our hearts. Hashem circumcises our hearts by taking away the barrier between our hearts and him so that we can come closer to him even though we don't deserve it. It is a time when as mentioned before our ketubah with Hashem is renewed (ani vedodi ledodi li) and as we just discussed our covenant with Hashem is renewed as well.

Another connotation of Elul which comes from the deeper sources pertains to the pasuk that speaks about the cities of refuge where people who accidentally committed a crime can go for refuge from the family who will want to take revenge. Now in these cities no one is allowed to hurt them and they can live their lives with a certain peace of mind. The pasuk says "Ina Leyodo VeSamti Lecha" "[G-d] caused it to happen, and I will provide [a place] for you [to which he can flee](Exodus 21:13) look up the pasuk and you will see that the letters at the beginning of the words spell Elul. Now the question is what does Elul have to do with a city of refuge? Also we know that Hashem repays us measure for measure so how is the punishment of being exiled measure for measure in accordance with murder?

Let's tackle the second question first. There is a principle in Torah that says when you want to understand something about anything you always have to see where it appeared first in the Torah. Now the first time that a city of refuge was mentioned in the Torah is by Cain after he kills avel. He is exiled as a punishment and is given a guarantee by Hashem that the creatures wouldn't harm him. Now how is this measure for measure? The deep understanding is that when a person kills another person he has taken him out of his place in this world. He has in a sense exiled him. Therefore, he himself gets exiled and in this sense it is measure for measure. The idea of exile and teshuva is in fact prevalent in many places in Jewish history. Adam and Eve were exiled for their sin, the Jewish people were exiled from Israel after the destruction of beit hamikdash, yoosefs brothers were exiled to Egypt for selling yosef etc. In fact it is well known that exiling oneself from the place of habitat is good for teshuva because a new environment tends to make a person submissive. In fact the Rambam mentions this as one of the ways one can do teshuva and Rashi and the Vilna Gaon are known to have practiced this.

Now let's tackle the second question what does this have to do with Elul? Elul in a time dimension is our city of refuge. The entire year we have "committed murder" by not reaching our full potential. We have in a sense killed both ourselves and others each time we went astray. However on Elul we are given a place of refuge in time where we are safe from the consequences of our actions as long as we do teshuva. We have the chance to do good, repent and return. Incidentally this is why Elul is right prior to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We are put in the city of refuge to test us and then we go to court (Rosh Hashanah) so that Hashem can evaluate our actions in that time.

Therefore, we have to try to take this time very seriously and just as a person who is signing his ketubah (Ani Ledodi Vedodi Li) or signing his contract (Et Lvavecha Veet Levav) or is on probation (in a city of refuge "Ina Leyodo VeSamti Lecha") does not even think about doing wrong we too should clear our heads of even the thought of doing wrong and try to reflect on the whole year with the mind set of atoning for all that we have done wrong during the year.

The Number 40 and Teshuva

The period of time between the first day of Elul until Yom Kippur is 40 days. The number 40 in Judaism is expressed in the Torah many times. If we look closely we will see that every time the number 40 is used it is in connection with a transformation of one sort or another. Let's look at some examples:

The flood lasted 40 days and 40 nights. The Midrash along with many other sources state that the world became radically different after the flood. From the nature of the people to the land everything changed. In a sense the world was reborn and given a second chance for their misdeeds.

The Jewish people were in the desert for 40 years. The time the Jewish people spent in the desert was a punishment for the spies who searched the land for 40 days and for the people believed their bad report. Therefore, here the 40 years were 40 years to compensate for the mistake they made and get them spiritually clean of that sin so that they can enter the land. Here again we see the number 40 transforming the Jewish people from guilty for the sin of spies to being forgiven for it and along with that being given a second chance.

The number of Makot (lashes) that a person received in the times of the beit hamikdash for certain sins is 40 (40-1 according to chachamim). The lashes transformed a person from being guilty to innocent and thereby purified him of sin.

The number 40 also represents the 40 days and nights that Moshe Rabbeinu spent on the mountain before coming down with the Torah. The second time he went up he went on the first of Elul and came down 40 days later on the tenth of Tishrei which is Yom Kippur. Incidentally this is why Yom Kippur is on the tenth of Tishrei; because there is a special energy of forgiveness in the world at that time originating from when Moshe rabbeinu came down with the tablets the second time; symbolizing the fact that Hashem had forgiven them for the making of the golden calf.

There are many other examples of this as well. The amount of water in a kosher mikveh (a well of water which *transforms* a person from impure to pure) has to be 40 seah. The number of days until a baby is formed according to the Gemara is 40 days (this

was scientifically proven as until 40 days the electrical charge of the body is not present), and there are many many more examples.

Moreover, the first letter of the words that are associated with the ideas mentioned previously is the letter “mem,” i.e. Mikveh, Matan Torah (giving of Torah), Makot (lashes), Midbar (desert), Mabul (flood), Moshe. The letter “Mem” in Hebrew has a numerical value of forty. An intelligent person would not attribute this to chance.

As we can see the number 40 has associated with it the power to transform. Therefore, these 40 day we must transform ourselves into righteous people by becoming stricter in following the mitzvot. It has been a tradition to do something extra on Elul that you don't do the whole year. This could be praying with more kavana (concentration) or doing acts of kindness for others, fixing some character flaws which one might have or anything else a person feels like he/she must do to elevate themselves. It is interesting to note that the word Elul is also found in megilat ester. In the verse (9:22) where it talks about giving gifts to the poor *Ish lereihu omatanot laevyonim*, that verse spells Elul. Therefore giving more tzedakah in this month is also very important.

In this month one should do teshuvah. The Rambam says that the mitzvah of teshuvah has three steps: confession, regret and saying that one would not do it again. It is important to note that all three steps have to be said out loud. There are many reasons for this and one is that just like the sin was done with a physical act so too the teshuvah for it has to be done with a physical act in this case being speaking.

What shall a person take out of this practically? In the month of Elul one must feel like he/she has no place. Just like the person who is in a city of refuge has no place one must feel that in the month of Elul. One must feel like he/she is on a shaky bridge and any false move would tip it over. Therefore we must take every precaution not to treat this month lightly and on the contrary to utilize the transforming power of this month and these 40 days to hopefully transform ourselves into the kinds of people we know we can become.

By: Chaviv Danesh

Comments are appreciated and can be sent to ndanesh100@yahoo. Please email this to anyone who you think can benefit from it.

Recommended sources for elul and teshuva: Rambam Hilchot teshuvah

Shaare Teshuva by Rabeinu Yonah

Simpletoremember.com (Rabbi Tatz audio on teshuva and month of elul also Rabbi

Gottliebs audio series on teshuva)