

Returning to *Light*

אורי וישעי

*A Collection of Essays for
Elul and the Yamim Noraim*

Pre-Publication Edition

Chaim Davies

Tishrei 5787

שנת ומתו"ק האז"ר וטו"ב לפ"ק

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ISBN: 9798170109197

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*For questions or comments,
contact: chaimdavies@gmail.com*

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Elul

עֵלּוּל

Developing a Feeling Heart

The Avodah of Elul

The chevra asked that this should be a Mussar shmues, something which would emotionally open us to the avodah of Elul. But the *emes* is, the Eibishter knows that I certainly need Mussar more than anybody else. To whatever extent anything I share here comes across as Mussar, it is only with the intention of giving Mussar to myself. As they say, דְּבָרִים הַלֵּב הַיּוֹצֵאִים מִן הַלֵּב נִכְנָסִים אֶל הַלֵּב – *words that come from the heart enter the heart*, especially during this deeply personal season of Teshuvah and Elul. Indeed, one of the famous *roshei teivos* of Elul is “וַיִּמַּל ה' אֶלֶּקֶיךָ אֶת לִבְּךָ וְאֶת לֵב בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל” – *Hashem your God will open your heart and the heart of your offspring* (Devarim 30:6). Opening the heart is what Elul is all about. What I share here is addressed first and foremost to myself – and I mean that sincerely; hopefully, these words will reach your heart as well.

The Atmosphere of Elul

At this time of year, we must speak about Chodesh Elul. The avodah of this season is awesome. Everyone who has spent time in yeshivah is familiar, to one degree or another, with the way the atmosphere changes when Elul arrives.

We have all heard the stories. In Europe, they would bang on the bimah and call out, “Elul!” Women would faint in the ezras nashim; people would tremble in their boots;

tzaddikim would keep a *ta'anis dibbur* throughout the month. We have heard stories conveying the magnitude of Elul.

Yet there is another side to the month. Elul is also a time of great *chavivus* and *yedidus*—affection and intimacy: as we know, Elul is also an acronym אָנִי לְדוּדִי וְדוּדִי לִי, *I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine* (Shir HaShirim 6:3). I would like to bring out one element that I believe is *shaveh l'chol nefesh*, accessible to everyone, in the avodah of Elul.

The original Elul was the period when Moshe Rabbeinu ascended Har Sinai again after the sin of the Eigel and the shattering of the first Luchos. He went up to plead for mercy on behalf of the Jewish people. The Midrash describes how a shofar was sounded in the camp on that day. The Midrash (Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 46; cited by Tur, Orach Chaim 581) explains that this is why we sound the shofar each year from Rosh Chodesh Elul: it recalls the moment when Moshe returned to Har Sinai to receive the second Luchos and, above all, to seek mercy for Klal Yisrael.

”בְּרֹאשׁ חֹדֶשׁ אֵלּוּל אָמַר לוֹ הַקֹּבֶה (שְׁמוֹת כד, יב): ‘עֲלֵה אֵלַי הָהָרָה’
וְהַעֲבִירוּ שׁוֹפָר בְּמַחֲנֶה, שֶׁהָרִי מָשָׁה עָלָה לָהָר שֶׁלֹּא יִטְעוּ עוֹד אַחֵר
עֲבוּדַת בּוֹכְבִּים וּמִזִּלּוֹת וְהַקֹּבֶה נִתְעַלָּה אוֹתוֹ הַיּוֹם בְּאוֹתוֹ שׁוֹפָר, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר
(תְּהִלִּים מז, ו): ‘עֲלֵה אֱלֹהִים בְּתִרְוַעָה’, וְעַל כֵּן הִתְקִינוּ חֲכָמִים שִׁיְהִי
תּוֹקְעִים בְּשׁוֹפָר בְּרֹאשׁ חֹדֶשׁ אֵלּוּל בְּכָל שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה.”

*On Rosh Chodesh Elul, HaKadosh Baruch Hu said to him,
“Ascend the mountain to Me.” They caused a shofar to sound
throughout the camp, for Moshe had ascended the mountain, so
that the people would not again be led astray after idolatry.
HaKadosh Baruch Hu was exalted that day through that shofar,
as it says, “God ascends with the teruah.” Therefore, the Sages
instituted that the shofar should be sounded on Rosh Chodesh
Elul every year.*

The entire season of Elul is therefore historically a time of *bikush rachamim*—of yearning and searching for mercy.

A Month of Weeping

A fascinating passage in the Zohar Chadash on Parshas Ki Seitzei develops this idea through the Torah's passage about the *eishes yefas toar* (Devarim 21:10-11):

”כִּי־תֵצֵא לְמִלְחָמָה עַל־אֹיְבֶיךָ... וְרָאִיתָ בְּשׁוֹבֶיהָ אִשָּׁת יִפְת־תֹּאֵר וְחִשְׁקָתָּ
בָּהּ וּלְקַחְתָּ לָּךְ לְאִשָּׁה.”

When you go out to war against your enemies... and you see among the captives a woman of beautiful appearance, and you yearn for her and take her as a wife.

The Torah describes a Jewish soldier at war who encounters a beautiful non-Jewish woman among the captives. It then sets out a process through which she may ultimately enter the Jewish people and marry him.

One element of that process is: “וּבְכַתָּהָ אֶת אָבִיהָ וְאֶת אִמָּהּ” – *She shall weep for her father and mother for a month of days.*

On the simple level, she is given thirty days to mourn her father and mother. Chazal also understand it as giving her time to gain closure from the idolatrous world in which she was raised. She must wean herself away from that world before she can properly embrace the faith of Klal Yisrael.

However, the Zohar Chadash (Ki Seitzei 58b/96b) flips the script for us. Asks the Zohar: What is this “month of days”? Astoundingly, it answers: this is the month of Elul.

”וּבְכַתָּהָ אֶת אָבִיהָ וְאֶת אִמָּהּ יָרַח יָמִים”, דָּא הֵיא יִרְחָא דְאֵלּוּל, דְּבִיָּה סָלִיק מִשָּׁה לְטוֹרָא, לְמַבְעֵי רַחֲמִין קָמִי קוּדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא, בְּגִין דִּישְׁתַּבִּיק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַל חוּבָא דְעַגְלָא. וּבְגִין דָּא וּבְכַתָּהָ אֶת אָבִיהָ וְאֶת אִמָּהּ יָרַח יָמִים, בְּגִין דְּגָלִי עֲרִייתָא דְקוּדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא וְעֲרִייתָא דְאֹרִייתָא. כְּמָה דְאֵת אָמֵר, (וּיקרא י"ח:ז) עֲרוֹת אָבִיךָ וְעֲרוֹת אִמְךָ לֹא תַגְלֶה.”

“She shall weep for her father and mother for a month of days”—this is the month of Elul, during which Moshe ascended the mountain to seek mercy before HaKadosh Baruch Hu, so that Israel would be forgiven for the sin of the Calf. Therefore, “she shall weep for her father and mother for a month of days,” because the nakedness of HaKadosh Baruch Hu and the nakedness of the Torah had been exposed, as it says, “You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father or the nakedness of your mother.”

According to the Zohar, this text simultaneously describes how Moshe Rabbeinu ascended Har Sinai to plead for mercy for the Jewish people during this month.

If the “month of days” is Elul, what are the “father” and “mother” over whom we are meant to cry? We understand that Elul is a time of Teshuvah and tears—but what exactly are we crying over?

The Yesod v'Shores HaAvodah (Sha'ar HaMayim) cites the Arizal:

”וּבְבִקְתָּהּ אֶת אָבִיהָ וְאֶת אִמָּהּ יָרַח יָמִים”, אֶת אָבִיהָ – זֶה הַקַּב”ה, וְאֶת אִמָּהּ – זוֹ כְּנֶסֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל, יְבִכָּהּ הָאָדָם וַיִּתְחַנֵּן לִפְנֵי ה', יָרַח יָמִים – הוּא חֹדֶשׁ אֱלּוּל שֶׁהָמָּה יָמֵי רַחֲמִים וְרַצּוֹן.”

“She shall weep for her father and mother for a month of days.” “Her father” is HaKadosh Baruch Hu, and “her mother” is Knesses Yisrael. A person should weep and plead before Hashem. The “month of days” is the month of Elul, for these are days of mercy and favor.

Knesses Yisrael is often a name for the Shechinah—the loving Divine Presence that Hashem manifests in our world (see Ramak, Pardes Rimmonim 23:11; cf. Zohar Balak 197a). On the simplest level, however, it also simply means Klal Yisrael. The Arizal is teaching us that Elul is a time to cry

over our relationship with HaKadosh Baruch Hu and with Knesses Yisrael.

This interpretation is fascinating, but whenever we encounter a deeply *drush*-oriented or kabbalistic explanation of a *pasuk*, we must connect it back to the simple meaning of the text. The Zohar is, in a very real sense, a commentary on Chumash. It reveals depth and profundity within Chumash, not something separate from it. Sure, there are multiple levels of interpretation, we have a notion of *Parde*'s (*Pshat*, *Remez*, *Drash*, and *Sod*); but it is all one paradise, one garden.

How, then, does this teaching belong to the subject of the *eishes yefas toar*? It can't be simply taking the *pasuk* out of context and imposing a set of hints upon it—the father, the mother, and Elul—with no real connection to the woman taken captive?

Why the Eishes Yefas Toar Needs a Month

Let's consider: Why does the *eishes yefas toar* receive a full month to cry? Because human beings become tethered to their vices. We become attached to the habits through which we soothe, calm, and comfort ourselves. This woman grew up in a world of Avodah Zarah. We do not expect her to flip a switch—to discard all her *getchkes* in one day—and become a faithful servant of the God of Israel the very next. There must be a transition. She has to mourn the world she is leaving before she can accept her new reality and embrace the faith of Yiddishkeit.

In the same way, the avodah of Elul is a gradual movement into a renewed relationship with HaKadosh Baruch Hu. It is not meant to be: "I am sorry; I have done Teshuvah; now I will flip the switch. Yesterday I behaved one way, but today I will whip myself into shape, arrive at Rosh Hashanah, and blast myself onto an entirely new

madreigah.” Elul teaches that we need time to readjust and acclimate ourselves. We need to reevaluate our relationships with HaKadosh Baruch Hu and with the Jewish people. What is going well? What has been broken? What is not working as it should? We must cry over that, mourn over that, and develop a *hargashah*, a feeling for it.

It is not enough to say, “These behaviors are bad; I will drop them.” No. We must *get in touch* with the pain of the people we have let down; with the ways we have fallen short in our relationship with HaKadosh Baruch Hu; with the ways we have failed to show up as we should for our parents, siblings, and others. We must find a way to develop the feeling.

It is not enough to simply abandon the Avodah Zarah. First comes “וּבְכֹתָהּ אֶת אֲבִיהָ וְאֶת אִמָּהּ יָרַח יָמֶיהָ”. First we learn to cry; first we learn to feel. Only then can we reach the transformation, change, and reorientation that must follow.

Gathering the Lost Sparks

We can also understand the *eishes yefas toar* on another, deeper level. Why would we bring some random woman from the battlefield into the Jewish people, simply to indulge a soldier’s desires? The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains: There are lost sparks in the world—souls and sparks of holiness that have been taken captive by the *Sitra Achra*, the yetzer hara. The Gemara says that Klal Yisrael was scattered into exile “כִּי יִשְׁתַּחֲסְפוּ עֲלֵיהֶם גִּרִּים” – *so that converts would be added to them* (Pesachim 87b).

The kabbalists explain that, as Hashem’s desire for creation moved from Hashem’s infinite unity and absolute oneness into a world of multiplicity and finitude, sparks of a once-unified light shattered and scattered throughout the world. Our work in this life is to gather those sparks and bring them back to Oneness.

The Ohr HaChaim's discussion is remarkable (and we've barely scratched the surface). In his reading, the *eishes yefas toar* represents the work of *birur*, of separating and elevating holiness from among the *kelipos*, the coarse husks of physical existence. This soldier looks across the brokenness and concealment of the battlefield and sees a beautiful spark: someone who, at her essence, is out of place among the captives. She *belongs* with the Jewish people yet has somehow become lost in the world, whether through intermarriage on a simple level or, more broadly, through the universal shattering and scattering we described.

The Mitzvah of the *eishes yefas toar* is, for our purposes, also a *mashal* for our own journey. Klal Yisrael is the “הַיָּפָה בְּנָשִׁים” – *the most beautiful of women* in the eyes of HaKadosh Baruch Hu (Shir HaShirim 1:8). Yet we have been taken captive. We find ourselves on the battlefield, lost amidst a world not our own; and as Klal Yisrael comes home, she looks at us and asks: What happened to this *eishes yefas toar*? What happened to this beautiful woman?

Our avodah is to reunite with the One. But the process of coming home begins with “וּבְכֹתָהּ אֶת אֲבִיהָ וְאֶת אִמָּהּ יָרַח” —with that month of tears. As we say in Selichos, “כְּדֹלִים וּכְרָשִׁים דִּפְקִנוּ דְלִתֶּיךָ” – *Like the poor and destitute, we knock upon Your doors*. We come before HaKadosh Baruch Hu as broken people. We are broken; we are disoriented. But we are *here*, and we want to have a heart. We want to feel what it means to be close to You.

Tears That Open the Heart

The Pri Etz Chaim (Sha'ar HaShofar 5) records the Arizal's practice of specifically crying on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The Be'er Heitev (Orach Chaim 584:3) even approvingly cites this practice in a halachic context. The Arizal taught:

”גם הָיָה מְנוּהַג מוֹרֵי י”ל לְבָבוֹת בִּר”ה וּבִיה”כ, וְאָמַר כִּי מִי שֶׁאֵינוּ בּוֹכֶה בְּיָמִים אֵלֶּה, אֵין נִשְׁמָתוֹ טוֹבָה וְשְׁלִימָה. גַּם אָמַר, כִּי מִי שֶׁבּוֹכֶה אֶז מַעֲצָמוֹ, וּמַעוֹרָר אֶז בְּבִכְיָה גְדוֹלָה מֵאֲלִיו, כִּי אוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה דִּנְיָן אוֹתוֹ בִּב”ד שֶׁל מַעֲלָה, וְנִפְשׁוֹ מְרַגֵּשׁת, וְלָזָה בָּא לוֹ בְּכִיָּה.”

It was also the practice of my master, of blessed memory, to cry on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. He said that one who does not cry on these days does not possess a soul that is good and whole. He also said that when a person begins to cry on his own at that time and is spontaneously stirred to great weeping, it is because at that moment he is being judged by the Heavenly Court. His soul senses it, and therefore tears come to him.

We are not entering the halachic discussion here. It is known that the Vilna Gaon recommended *not* to cry on Rosh Hashanah (Ma’aseh Rav 207), and the early account in Sefer Ezra also appears to indicate that crying on Rosh Hashanah is not warranted (cf. Nechemia 8:9-10; Ohr HaTzafun, Avodaseinu B’Rosh Hashanah. See our essay: *Joy or Trembling?*). But for our purposes, the preparation of Elul belongs to this work as well. If a person cannot cry during these days, the Arizal says that something within the *neshamah* is not as it should be.

Note: the point here is not necessarily to cry tears of sadness. Tears can also come from joy; many different emotions can produce them. The avodah is to *feel*.

We are trying to come home like the *eishes yefas toar*, to bring that beautiful captive back into the fold of Knesses Yisrael. Before she can return, however, she must fulfill “וּבִכְתָּהָ אֶת אֲבִיהָ וְאֶת אִמָּהּ יָרַח יָמִים”. She must consider how far she has fallen, how she came to be found amidst another nation. We, too, may have become so distant that it seems as though Klal Yisrael must recover us from another nation’s spoils.

Returning to Oneself

Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook zt"l writes (Oros HaTeshuvah 15:10) that the essence of Teshuvah is returning home and reuniting with our source. His words are exceptionally powerful:

”בְּשִׁשּׁוֹכְחִים אֶת מֵהוּת הַנִּשְׁמָה הָעֲצָמִית, בְּשִׁמְסִיחִים דָּעָה מִלְּהִסְתַּכֵּל
בְּתוֹכִיּוֹת הַחַיִּים הַפְּנִימִיִּים שֶׁל עֲצָמוֹ, הַכֹּל נַעֲשֶׂה מְעַרְבָב וּמְסַפֵּק.
וְהַתְּשׁוּבָה הָרָאשִׁית, שֶׁהִיא מְאִירָה אֶת הַמַּחֲשָׁבִים מִיָּד, הִיא שִׁיבוֹב
הָאָדָם אֶל עֲצָמוֹ, אֶל שָׂרֵשׁ נִשְׁמָתוֹ, וּמִיָּד יָשׁוּב אֶל הָאֱלֹקִים, אֶל נִשְׁמַת
כָּל הַנִּשְׁמוֹת, וְיִלְךְ וְיִצְעַד הַלָּאָה מַעֲלָה מַעֲלָה בְּקִדְשָׁהּ וּבְטָהֳרָהּ. וְדָבָר זֶה
נוֹהֵג בֵּין בָּאִישׁ יְחִידִי, בֵּין בָּעַם שָׁלֵם, בֵּין בְּכָל הָאֲנוּשִׁיּוֹת, בֵּין בְּתִקּוֹן כָּל
הַהוּיָה בָּלָה, שֶׁקִּלְקוּלָהּ בָּא תָמִיד מִמֶּה שֶׁהִיא שׁוֹכַחַת אֶת עֲצָמָהּ.”

When we forget the essence of our essential self; when we lose focus of gazing into the depths of our inner life, everything becomes confused and doubtful. The first act of Teshuvah, which illuminates the darkness immediately, is for one to return to his self, to the root of his soul – and from there he immediately returns to God, the Soul of all souls, and progresses step by step further upward in holiness and purity. This applies equally to an individual person, to an entire nation, to all of humanity, and to the rectification of all existence as a whole—its corruption always comes from its forgetting itself.

The search to rejoin HaKadosh Baruch Hu is what the avodah of Elul and Teshuvah are all about.

Avodah Zarah and the Final Step of Teshuvah

This also explains Elul’s connection to the *eishes yefas toar*’s abandon of her Avodah Zarah. Remember: the original Elul was the aftermath of the Eigel HaZahav. Moshe Rabbeinu descended from Har Sinai to find that at least a small group of Jews were actively worshipping the Eigel. He breaks the *luchos*, then ascends the mountain again to seek mercy for the Jewish people: for those who

worshipped it, and for those who failed to protest it. The original spiritual crisis of Elul was Avodah Zarah, and Moshe's response is to ascend and plead for mercy.

The Zohar is telling us that this remains the avodah of every Elul: we must abandon our own forms of Avodah Zarah – the false ideals we have fashioned, and the lull of security that any worldly success beckons us towards.

When the Rambam presents the fundamental elements of Teshuvah, he describes one of the steps of Teshuvah as follows (Hilchos Teshuvah 2:2):

”וַיַּעֲד עָלָיו יוֹדֵעַ תַּעֲלוּמוֹת שְׁלֹא יָשׁוּב לְזֶה הַחֲטָא לְעוֹלָם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ‘וְלֹא נֹאמַר עוֹד אֱלֹהֵינוּ לְמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵינוּ, אֲשֶׁר בָּךְ יִרְחַם יְתוֹם’ (הושע יד,ד).”

One must take the Knower of Depths as his witness that he will never return to this sin again, as it says: “And we will no longer say to the work of our hands, ‘You are our gods,’ for in You the orphan finds mercy” (Hoshea 14:4).

The Rambam's prooftext is astonishing. If we searched all of Tanach for a verse to express a person's firm decision never to repeat a sin, we might never have chosen this one. What does that have to do with “וַיַּעֲד עָלָיו יוֹדֵעַ תַּעֲלוּמוֹת”—that the *Knower of the Depths* of all hidden things must be taken as our witness that we will not return to this sin?

The answer lies in the relationship to Avodah Zarah once again. We invest the power of Avodah Zarah into the things we make and control: our livelihood, our *hishtadlus*, our success, or whatever else it may be. These things become our new Eibishter, *l'havdil*. They become what we imagine is truly in control. We fall prey to the trap of thinking exactly what the Torah warns us about: “וְאָמַרְתָּ: “בְּלִבִּי בָּחִי וְעֵצָם יְדִי עָשָׂה לִי אֶת־הַחֵיל הַזֶּה” —*You will say in your heart, “It is my strength and the might of my hand that have made this wealth for me”* (Devarim 8:17).

The Rambam is teaching us Teshuvah targets this erroneous way of thinking. In standing before Hashem and committing to repair our ways, we heal any unhealthy connections through which we have ascribed divinity to our own handiwork.

The final step of Teshuvah is recognizing that everything is truly from HaKadosh Baruch Hu. It is not merely a declaration: “I commit myself to never do such-and-such again.” Such a statement can still be centered on *me*. “Look at me: I am so powerful that I can guarantee my own perfection!”

Instead, we must center the process on HaKadosh Baruch Hu, taking Him as our witness – as the Rambam put it: “וְיָעִיד עָלָיו יוֹדֵעַ הַתְּעִלְמוֹת”. HaKadosh Baruch Hu – the only One Who truly knows the depths of the human mind and heart, the *Tamim Dei’os* – He is the only One Who can testify that I will not return to this sin. Not me.

Why We Lost Nevuah When We Lost Avodah Zarah

This opens us to a larger principle about Avodah Zarah. The Gemara tells us (Yoma 69b) that HaKadosh Baruch Hu nullified the intense drive we used to have for Avodah Zarah. The Vilna Gaon (in his commentary to Seder Olam Rabbah Ch. 30) teaches that, *zeh l’umas zeh*, the corresponding spiritual power that disappeared was prophecy.

The loss of prophecy was not gradual. There were the final prophets – Chaggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (Sotah 48b) – and then, abruptly, prophecy was no longer present in the world as it had been before.

A common explanation is that if the world loses an overwhelming temptation toward an exceptionally severe sin, it must lose an equivalent power on the side of holiness:

“זֶה לְעֵמֶת זֶה עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹהִים” – *God made one corresponding to the other* (Koheles 7:14). Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin develops that approach. Rav Kook (Eder HaYakar, 3), however, offers a fascinating explanation of the specific relationship between the two which we will draw upon.

What is the power of Avodah Zarah? It is the desire of the *imagination*. Think of more ancient eras of history. The drive toward Avodah Zarah was a yearning for the supernatural: a desire to believe that there is more to the world than its physical surface. An idol may appear to be only a brick, a stone, or a carved bone, yet its worshippers believe it can produce the miraculous and magical. It represents powers they cannot comprehend. It promises that the world contains more than meets the eye. Avodah Zarah is an expression of the world's imaginative capacity.

The Rambam explains at length in the Moreh Nevuchim (II:36) that one of the principal faculties involved in prophecy is the *koach hadimyon*, the imaginative faculty. A person develops the capacity to apprehend realities beyond the limits of the visible and physical world. That is an essential preparation for prophecy.

Spiritual yearning draws on this same power as well. It is a desire to transcend the merely physical, to see beyond that which the eyes can see, to understand more deeply than the mind can ordinarily comprehend, and to move beyond the usual limits of human perception. That is the power of prophecy. Avodah Zarah stands opposite it as the distorted desire to experience the supernatural within this world.

This is why the Torah so closely contrasts occult practitioners with the Navi. It warns us not to turn to diviners and sorcerers, because Hashem will place a prophet among us: “נָבִיא מִקִּרְבְּךָ מֵאַחֶיךָ” – *a prophet from among*

you, from your brothers (Devarim 18:15). The authentic prophetic relationship fulfills the underlying yearning that people otherwise seek to satisfy through forbidden means.

Our Own Avodah Zarahs

Although the sweeping drive toward Avodah Zarah is no longer present in the same form, we certainly fashion our own idolatries. Whenever a person invests some created thing with a transcendent “something more” that it does not truly possess, this draws upon the same spiritual distortion. I am *not* saying that such a person has necessarily violated the Torah prohibition of Avodah Zarah. What I *am* saying is that the impulse comes from the same root: assigning a supernatural quality to something that does not have it.

During Elul, we therefore try to develop a deeper emotional awareness of any harm or friction we have introduced in our relationship with HaKadosh Baruch Hu. We remove the idols and intermediaries that we’ve positioned between us and Him, and set our sights directly on our Maker. At the same time, we lean into *feeling* the damage we have caused in our relationship with Knesses Yisrael and any distance we may feel from other *Yidden*.

A Heart of Flesh

At the outset, I mentioned the famous acronyms of Elul: “אָנִי לְדוּדֵי וְדוּדֵי לִי”, as well as that of the Ba’al HaTurim: “אֶת לְבָבְךָ וְאֶת לֵבְךָ” – in both instances, the initial letters spell *Elul*.

The avodah of Elul is to open our hearts and learn to *feel* more. The prophet Yechezkel speaks of a Messianic era, a future in which Hashem will remove the heart of stone from within us: “וְהָסַרְתִּי אֶת לֵב הָאֲבָן מִבְּשָׁרְכֶם וְנָתַתִּי לָכֶם לֵב בָּשָׂר” – *I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh* (Yechezkel 36:26). So too, the avodah of

Elul is to develop a fiery, emotive heart: *hisragshus* and *hislahavus* in Avodas Hashem. It is not enough merely to *know* what must be repaired: to know that we must daven Shacharis properly, attend seder, be kind, or fulfill the same obligations as always. We must develop an *emotional bond* with the avodah.

The Opposite of “If Only”

Throughout Elul we recite Tehillim 27, “לְדֹרֵהוּ אֹרִי” (לְדֹרֵהוּ אֹרִי). Near its end (27:13), Dovid HaMelech says:

“לֹאֵלֶּא הָאֲמַנְתִּי לִרְאוֹת בְּטוֹב ה' בְּאֶרֶץ חַיִּים...”

If only I had believed that I would see the goodness of Hashem in the land of the living...

Dovid HaMelech's expression is somewhat cryptic. *Eretz hachaim*, the land of the living, is often understood as an allusion to Olam HaBa. The Rambam uses the term that way (Hilchos Teshuvah 3:5), and the Ramchal uses similar language in describing how a *ba'al kedusha* experiences life: “בְּאֵלֵינוּ הוּא מֵתְהַלֵּךְ לִפְנֵי ה' בְּאֶרְצוֹת הַחַיִּים עוֹדְנֵנוּ פֹה בְּעוֹלָם הָהָא” – *it is as though he walks in 'the land of the living' while he is still here in this world* (Mesillas Yesharim, Ch. 26). Dovid HaMelech seems to be reflecting painfully over whether he had enough *emunah* to merit seeing Hashem's goodness in Olam HaBa (see Berachos 4a). What does this have to do with Elul?

Amazingly, the Ba'al HaTurim (Devarim 30:6) finds another allusion to Elul in these words.

“וְכֵן” לֹאֵלֶּא הָאֲמַנְתִּי לִרְאוֹת בְּטוֹב ה'” לֹאֵלֶּא, אוֹתִיּוֹת אֵלֶּל, שְׁמֵאֵלֶּל
וְאֵילֶּל חֲרָדְתִּי נֶגֶד ה'.”

Likewise, “If only I had believed that I would see the goodness of Hashem”: the letters of לֹאֵלֶּא are the [inverted] letters of אֵלֶּל;

From Elul onward, I tremble before Hashem.

There are many acrostics and hints to Elul throughout Tanach. I've actually run an analysis to find all the sequences of acrostics – *roshei teivos*, *sofei teivos*, forwards and backwards – and I've identified 167 places in Tanach where you can see a trace of Elul.

Some are fascinating. Just to give you a taste:

“אָהַד לְחַטָּאת וְאָהַד לְעֹלָה” – *one as a sin offering and one as an olah* (Bamidbar 6:11).

“וְאָקְחָה פֶּת לֶחֶם וְסַעַדְו לִבְכֶּם אַחֵר תַּעֲבֹדוּ” – *I will get bread and you will sustain your heart; then you will pass on* (Bereishis 18:5).

“אִישׁ לְנַחֲלָתוֹ וְאִישׁ לְאֶרְצוֹ” – *each man to his inheritance and each man to his land* (Yirmiyahu 12:15). That one is beautiful: each of us must come home to our *yerushah*. Teshuvah is all about reconnecting to our source.

Yet in our case, לולא is not a set of initial letters; it is the word Elul in reverse. Why must Elul be hinted here in this way? Couldn't HaKadosh Baruch Hu have arranged some way for the word to appear in the forward direction and still get his message across? What's the idea of a backwards *remex*? And what does this allusion actually *mean*?

The words *Lulei he'emanti* mean “Had I not believed,” or, in the sense of *halevai*, “If only.” An “if only” mentality means that I missed the opportunity. If only I had seized the chance while it was available. If only I had developed a relationship with that Rebbe or paid more attention in that class while I was still in high school. If only I had taken that internship during that summer. If only I had seized that opportunity. “If only” means: the opportunity has passed.

Lulei is the inverse of Elul. Because what Elul means is that the opportunity is *here*, directly in front of us.

Therefore, in Elul we read these words and remind ourselves: Don't say: "לֹא הֶאֱמַנְתִּי לִרְאוֹת בְּטוֹב ה'"—*if only* I had opened my eyes to see the greatness of HaKadosh Baruch Hu, to see the eternal light of Olam HaBa hidden within Olam HaZeh. It's all around us; we just need to open our eyes to see it.

Chazal teach that HaKadosh Baruch Hu concealed the primordial light of the Six Days of Creation (Bereishis Rabbah 11:2). Where did He hide it? In the Torah (Degel Machaneh Ephraim, Bereishis 7), available for tzaddikim in every generation to access (Noam Elimelech, Re'eh). The treasure for which we are searching is directly in front of our eyes.

To say *lulei he'emanti* is to say, "I know that this opportunity does not belong to me; I can no longer experience it." Whereas Elul declares the opposite. Elul is about "וּבְכַתְּהָ אֶת אָבִיָּהּ וְאֶת אִמָּהּ יִרְחַח יָמִים" – you *can* experience that opportunity for transformation now. You *can* open your heart: "וּמַל ה' אֶלְקֶיךָ אֶת לִבְךָ וְאֶת לִבְבּוֹ וְרַעַךְ". You *can* experience genuine transformation in your *avodah shebalev*, both in how you feel about HaKadosh Baruch Hu and how you connect with Klal Yisrael. That opportunity is present *now*.

Efshar L'Hiskayem: You Can Stand Before Him

Rabbi Dov Ber Cohen shared another remarkable acrostic for Elul with me. We recite the following words in the Asher Yatzar bracha each time after using the bathroom:

"גָּלוּי וְיָדוּעַ לִפְנֵי כְּסֵא כְּבוֹדָךָ שָׂאם יִפְתָּח אֶחָד מֵהֶם אוֹ יִסְתָּם אֶחָד מֵהֶם
אֵי אֶפְשָׁר לְהִתְקַיֵּם וְלַעֲמֹד לִפְנֶיךָ."

It is revealed and known before Your Throne of Glory that if even one of them were to open or one of them were to close, it would be impossible to survive and stand before You.

Rav Dov Ber focused on those final words “אִי אֶפְשָׁר לְהִתְקַיֵּם וּלְעֹמַד לְפָנֶיךָ” – *it would be impossible to survive and stand before You*, which express the fragility of our physicality. He noted that these words contain an acrostic for Elul, and explained that Elul boldly proclaims: “אֶפְשָׁר לְהִתְקַיֵּם וּלְעֹמַד לְפָנֶיךָ” – unlike our physical existence, when it comes to our spiritual nourishment it is possible to survive and stand before you, Hashem. We *do* possess that power. We *can* undergo this transformation. And Elul is the embodiment of both that mindset and that opportunity.

The Song of Torah at Night

I would like to conclude with something practical: one particular avodah through which we can access this Emunah and move from an “if only I believed” mentality to one of genuine belief.

The Rambam teaches (Hilchos Talmud Torah 3:13) that although a person is obligated to learn Torah by day and by night, the principal time for acquiring wisdom is at night.

“אֵף עַל פִּי שֶׁמִּצְוָה לְלַמֵּד בַּיּוֹם וּבַלַּיְלָה אֵין אָדָם לָמַד רַב חֻכְמָתוֹ אֶלָּא בַּלַּיְלָה. לְפִיכָךְ מִי שֶׁרָצָה לְזַכּוֹת בְּכֶתֶר הַתּוֹרָה יִזְהַר בְּכָל לַיְלָתוֹ וְלֹא יֵאבֵד אֶפְלוֹ אֶחָד מֵהֶן בְּשֹׁנָה וְאִכְלָה וְשִׁתָּה וְשִׁיחָה וְכִיּוּצָא בָּהֶן אֶלָּא בְּתַלְמוּד תּוֹרָה וְדִבְרֵי חֻכְמָה. אָמְרוּ חֻכְמִים אֵין רְנָה שֶׁל תּוֹרָה אֶלָּא בַּלַּיְלָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (איכה ב יט) ‘קוֹמִי רִנִּי בַּלַּיְלָה.’”

Although it is a Mitzvah to learn by day and by night, a person acquires most of his wisdom only at night. Therefore, one who wishes to merit the crown of Torah must be careful with all his nights and not waste even one of them in sleep, eating, drinking, conversation, or the like, but devote them to Talmud Torah and

words of wisdom. The Sages said: The song of Torah is heard only at night, as it says, “Arise; sing out at night” (Eichah 2:19).

According to the Rambam, the “song of Torah” can only truly be heard or sung at night. Night is the ideal time to receive wisdom and experience the music of Torah.

(As an aside, the Rambam’s version of this idea differs slightly from the reading found earlier in the Midrash; see Shir HaShirim Rabbah 5:11.)

But take a look at the continuation of the verse cited by the Rambam (Eichah 2:19):

”קוּמִי רִנִּי בַלַּיְלָה לְרֹאשׁ אֲשֶׁמְרוֹת שְׁפָכִי כַּמִּים לִבְךָ נִכַּח פְּנֵי ה'...”

Arise; sing out at night, at the beginning of the watches. Pour out your heart like water before the Presence of Hashem...

Rising at night to learn is a form of “שְׁפָכִי כַּמִּים לִבְךָ”, of pouring one’s heart out like water before Hashem.

In another context, Chazal apply this idea of waking at night to Dovid HaMelech, who rose at midnight to sing songs of praise to the Eibishter. The Gemara (Berachos 3b) describes how his harp would strum to awaken him at midnight, at which point he would rise to sing songs to Hashem. The Torah learned at night has the quality of song.

A third statement from Chazal (Tamid 32b) explicitly connects this pasuk with the indwelling of the Shechinah:

”תָּנָא רַבִּי חִיָּיא: כָּל הָעוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה בַּלַּיְלָה – שְׂכִינָה כְּנֻגָּדוֹ, שְׁנֹאמַר: ‘קוּמִי רוּנִי בַּלַּיְלָה לְרֹאשׁ אֲשֶׁמְרוֹת שְׁפָכִי כַּמִּים לִבְךָ נִכַּח פְּנֵי ה'.”

Rabbi Chiya taught: Whoever occupies himself with Torah at night, the Divine Presence is before him, as it is stated: “Arise, sing out at night, at the beginning of the watches. Pour out your heart like water before the Presence of Hashem.”

Rebbe Nosson of Breslov expands on this idea in *Likutei Halachos* (Hilchos Tefillah 1:1:4) by explaining that Torah learned at night not only produces a different level of wisdom, but it also brings a person into particular closeness with the Shechinah.

”הַלְמוֹד שְׁלוֹמֵי דִין בְּלֵילָה הוּא קָרוֹב יוֹתֵר לַעֲלוֹת אֶל הַשְּׂכִינָה הֵן מֵצֵד הָאָדָם, הֵן מֵצֵד הַשְּׂכִינָה, בְּכִיכּוֹל, כִּי הָאָדָם יָכוֹל לְבַטֵּל עֲצָמוֹ וּלְדַבֵּק עֲצָמוֹ בּוֹ יִתְבָּרֵךְ יוֹתֵר בְּלֵילָה מִבְּיוֹם מַחֲמַת שָׁאֵז נָחִים הָעוֹלָם מִרְדִּיפַת הָעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, כְּמוֹ שְׁאָמַר רַבֵּנוּ (סִימָן נב). וְגַם הַשְּׂכִינָה הִיא סְמוּכָה לְהָאָדָם הַלּוֹמֵד בְּלֵילָה וּמִקְשָׁבַת לְקוּלוֹ, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכְּתוּב (אֵיכָה ב) קוֹמִי רִנֵּי בְּלֵילָה לְרֹאשׁ אֲשֻׁמּוֹרוֹת שְׁפָכִי כַּמִּים לִבֶּךָ נוֹכַח פָּנֶי ה'. 'נוֹכַח פָּנֶי ה' דִּיקָא, כִּי הַשְּׂכִינָה קְרוֹבָה אֵלָיו וְהוּא נוֹכַח פָּנֵי ה' מִמָּשׁ, כִּי בְּלֵילָה הַשְּׂכִינָה הִיא בְּעוֹלָמוֹת הַתַּחְתּוֹנִים.”

Learning at night is more capable of ascending to the Shechinah, both from the person's side and, as it were, from the side of the Shechinah. A person can nullify himself and attach himself to Hashem more deeply at night than by day, because the world then rests from its pursuit of this world, as our teacher said in Lesson 52. The Shechinah is also close to a person who learns at night and listens attentively to his voice, as it is written: "Arise; sing out at night, at the beginning of the watches. Pour out your heart like water before the Presence of Hashem." Specifically "before the Presence of Hashem," because the Shechinah is close to him and he is literally before the Presence of Hashem; at night, the Shechinah is present in the lower worlds.

The Shechinah is close to a person who learns at night and listens carefully to every word he says. “נוֹכַח פָּנֵי ה'” means that he is directly before the countenance of HaKadosh Baruch Hu.

Closing

This brings us back to *Lulei he'emanti* and to the avodah of developing the feeling of Elul: we seek to open our hearts

to our connection with HaKadosh Baruch Hu, and to feel the deficiencies that have accumulated in our Avodas Hashem, whether *bein adam laMakom* or *bein adam lachaveiro*. What we're now seeing is that one of the great methods of repairing those deficiencies is through learning Torah at night.

When the *oilam* comes together for night seder, and we are *shteiging* together with *deveikus*, clarity, and yearning to connect to HaKadosh Baruch Hu, we begin to hear the song of קוּמִי רְנִי בַלַּיְלָהּ. That song then flows directly into activating our emotive connection and ultimately the increased Presence of Hashem in our lives, of שְׁפָרְכִי כְמִיּוֹם לְבָרְךָ נִבְחָח פְּנֵי ה'.

We want the *yiddishe hartz* of Elul. We want to feel the yearning that Dovid HaMelech felt when he sang (Tehillim 27:4):

"אַחַת שְׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת ה' אוֹתָהּ אֶבְקֶשׁ – שְׁבֹתִי בְּבֵית ה' כָּל יְמֵי חַיִּי..."

One thing I have asked of Hashem; this is what I seek: that I dwell in the house of Hashem all the days of my life...

Talmud Torah at night is an opportunity where a person can acquire the greatest wisdom, hear the song of Torah, and merit an extraordinary revelation of the Shechinah in his life.

Nu, im yirtzeh Hashem, may we each merit to connect to the Shechinah during Chodesh Elul; to experience the remarkable closeness; to feel our *neshamos* coming alive in the *hislahavvus* of Elul; and to merit a *kesivah v'chasimah tovah* together, Amen.