

While the Gates Are *Open*

פֶּתַח לָנוּ שַׁעַר

*Chassidic Tales & Teachings
From Elul Through Yom Kippur*

Chaim Davies

Tishrei 5787

שנת ומתו"ק האז"ר וטו"ב לפ"ק

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*Dedicated with love to my wonderful children,
whose delight in a delicious mayseh keeps me ever
searching for the light of our tzaddikim.*

Foreword

The Days of Awe beckon each of us to stand before Hashem as we truly are. The tefillos speak of judgment, remembrance, forgiveness, and return. Yet the deepest heartbeat of these days is not always expressed in words. It is usually found in a sigh, a tear, an ache of yearning, or a cry from a heart that can't find the words.

The Chassidic masters taught through stories. A *mayseh* could open the heart where even a profound discourse could not. They lived with an abiding awareness of the Shechinah, and that presence filled the ordinary moments of their living with meaning.

In their stories, the Yamim Noraim are never distant ideas. They unfold in crowded batei midrash, along difficult roads, beside sickbeds, and within the heart of a simple child. Wherever life led them, they sought and found Hashem's presence.

The stories and teachings gathered here follow the journey from the first stirrings of Elul to the final moments of Ne'ilah. Some speak of trembling before the King; others of joy, compassion, heartfelt prayer, and the courage to begin again. They carry and preserve the wonder and spiritual intensity of earlier generations while continuing to speak directly to today's reader.

Together, these stories return again and again to one hope: that no Yid is too distant, no prayer too simple, and no hour too late. The gates may appear to be closing, but while they remain open, even one honest cry can rise before the Throne of Mercy and make all the difference in the world.

Elul

אלול

Elul

The King is in the Field

1. When the King Is in the Field

Reb Shneur Zalman of Liadi explained the month of Elul with a parable.

Before a king enters the royal city, the people of the surrounding country go out to receive him in the field. There, no guards prevent them from approaching. Everyone who wishes may come before him.

The king receives them all with a gracious countenance. He smiles upon each person and listens to every request.

Then the king proceeds toward the city, and the people follow him. Once he enters the palace, however, no one may enter without permission. Only those who have been granted a place in the royal court can approach him there.

So it is during Elul. Throughout the year, and especially during the Days of Awe, Hashem is like a king within his palace. The awe of the royal chamber is revealed, and entrance requires preparation.

But in Elul, the King is in the field.

Hashem comes near to every Jew in the place where that Jew presently stands. A person need not first make himself worthy of the palace. He may approach from his field, from his work, from the ordinary and unfinished circumstances of his life. The King receives him with compassion and shows him a smiling face.

Source: Likkutei Torah, Re'eh 32a–b.

2. Do You Have Anything That Needs Repair?

On Rosh Chodesh Elul, Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev was standing beside the window of his home.

A gentile cobbler passed below. He looked up and called to him:

“Tell me, Rebbe, do you have anything that needs repair?”

Reb Levi Yitzchak sat down upon the floor and began to weep bitterly.

“Alas for me and for my soul! The Day of Judgment is drawing near, and I still have not repaired myself.”

Source: Zikhron LaRishonim.

3. Even the Fish Are Trembling

Reb Moshe of Kobrin used to relate something that happened when he was approximately six years old.

It was Shabbos Mevarchim Elul. Little Moshe was outdoors, playing with the other children.

His sister came to him and cried:

“Moshe! They have already bentched the month of Elul. The fish in the water are quivering and trembling from fear of the judgment—and you are playing with the children?”

Reb Moshe would say of her:

“She was a righteous woman, and her words entered my heart. From that time onward, I devoted myself to the service of the Creator.”

His sister looked at a six-year-old child playing outside and spoke to him as though his soul was already capable of hearing what the month demanded. Her words entered—and remained.

Source: Maamar Mordechai, vol. II, p. 260, introduced as an account Reb Moshe of Kobrin related about himself.

4. When Elul Entered the Room

Rav Yitzchak Shlomo Ungar remembered spending Shabbos Mevarchim Elul with Reb Aharon of Belz.

At one point he looked through the window of the Rebbe's private room. Reb Aharon was inside, davening and supplicating alone.

Then came Birchas HaChodesh.

As the Rebbe reached the announcement of the coming month with the words "Chodesh Elul", he suddenly stretched out his hands and seized the gartel of his *meshamesh*, Reb Shalom Fogel, with tremendous force. He began trembling terribly, his entire body shaking.

Elul had entered the room.

Source: Rav Yitzchak Shlomo Ungar, *Rishumim B'Shimcha*, p. 269; first-person eyewitness account naming the attendant as Reb Shalom Fogel.

5. The Healing of the Soul

Shabbos Mevarchim Elul in the court of the Minchas Elazar, Reb Chaim Elazar Shapira of Munkács, was remembered as an experience in itself.

When the Rebbe raised his voice to announce, "ראש חודש — אלו יִהְיֶה בְּיוֹם — Rosh Chodesh Elul will be on," his disciple wrote that "חיל בְּיִלְדָּה אָחוּ לְכָל הַשּׁוֹמְעִים" — trembling like that of a woman in labor seized all who heard."

During the prayer of Yechadsheihu, after the words "וְלִרְפוּאָה שְׁלֵמָה" — and for a complete healing," the Minchas Elazar would add in a weeping voice:

"וְלִתְשׁוּבָה שְׁלֵמָה, וְלִגְאֻלָּה קְרוּבָה, וְנֹאמַר אָמֵן" — For complete Teshuvah, and for the imminent Redemption; and let us say, Amen."

The voice itself brought those present to examine their deeds. His disciple wrote that even a heart of stone would melt.

The Minchas Elazar sometimes spent part of Av at distant health resorts. Yet as Elul approached, he became

anxious to return home before Shabbos Mevarchim. He wanted to complete the “healing of the body,” he said, so that he could begin attending to the “healing of the soul.”

Source: Darkei Chaim VeShalom, Minhagei Chodesh Elul §686, compiled by the Minchas Elazar’s disciple Reb Yechiel Michel Gold.

6. Erev Yom Kippur Began in Elul

Reb David Tzvi Shlomo of Lelov used to describe what happened in the home of his grandfather, Reb Moshe of Lelov, when Shabbos Mevarchim Elul arrived.

The change was not confined to the Rebbe. The fear and awe of the approaching Days of Judgment entered the entire household—“כָּל בְּנֵי הַבַּיִת וְהַמְשָׁרְתִּים” — all the members of the household and the servants.”

They began asking forgiveness from one another.

“הָיוּ מְפַיְסִים וּמְרַצִּים הֶאֱחָד לְהַבְרֹו כְּמוֹ בְּעֶרֶב יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים” — They would appease and make peace with one another, as on Erev Yom Kippur.”

In Reb Moshe’s house, Erev Yom Kippur did not begin only on the ninth of Tishrei. As soon as Elul was bentched, the people who lived and worked together began repairing what stood between them.

The awe of judgment first became visible in one person asking another for mechilah.

Source: Malchus Beis David.

7. Bring Me Close to Your Torah

Reb Shaul Leib Ganz spent 13 Shabbosos with the Maharid of Belz, Reb Yissachar Dov Rokeach, during the period when the Rebbe was staying in Ratzfert.

One of them was Shabbos Mevarchim Elul.

Before Mussaf, the Maharid entered the beis midrash and went directly to the Aron Kodesh. He opened it and began pleading before Hashem with intense emotion.

“Ribbono Shel Olam, please help me to be close to Your holy Torah. I feel so terribly far away!”

Those who saw the Maharid saw a gaon and tzaddik to whom thousands of Jews looked for guidance. The Maharid entered Elul by opening the Aron and asking Hashem to draw him near—as though he himself still stood at a great distance from Torah.

Source: Si'ach Zekeinim, transmitted by the eyewitness Reb Shaul Leib Ganz to his son-in-law Reb Chaim Leib Stein.

8. Meir Still Has Not Done Teshuvah

Reb Ber'tzi of Nadvorna once came to spend Shabbos Mevarchim Elul with his uncle, Reb Meir of Premishlan.

Jews were arriving to spend Shabbos in the presence of the tzaddik. Yet from Reb Meir's room came the sound of deep sighing.

“Elul has arrived,” he lamented, “ומאיר עדיין לא עשה תשובה” — and Meir still has not done Teshuvah.”

With what face, he asked, could he receive the Jews who had come to him? With what face could he sit at the head of his own Shabbos table?

The people were traveling to Premishlan because they believed Reb Meir could awaken them. Reb Meir experienced their arrival as a demand upon himself. The month had been bentched, Jews were coming to his table, and he felt unprepared to face either one.

Reb Mordechai of Nadvorna once stayed with Reb Meir during Elul and heard him reciting L'Dovid Hashem Ori in his room. He later said it was a wonder that the room had not burned from the fire with which Reb Meir said the kapitel.

Source: Divrei Meir HaShalem; Aspaklaria HaMeirah.

9. The Yismach Moshe Ate

On Erev Rosh Chodesh Elul, several visitors came to the home of the Yismach Moshe, Reb Moshe Teitelbaum of Ujhel.

They found him eating.

Many Jews observed Erev Rosh Chodesh—especially Erev Rosh Chodesh Elul—with fasting and Yom Kippur Katan. The visitors were therefore surprised to see the Yismach Moshe sitting at his table.

He noticed their reaction.

“You do not need to eat, because you have not sinned. I need to eat, because I have sinned.”

They did not understand.

After the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash, he explained, a person’s table serves in place of the mizbe’ach and brings atonement. One who has sinned requires a korban.

“If you have not sinned,” the Yismach Moshe told them, “you can fast. You have no need of a korban. But I have sinned, and therefore I need my table to serve as my mizbe’ach.”

Source: Chemda Genuzah, vol. II, “פעם בער"ח אלול באו אנשים לאא"ז.”

10. You Do Not Always Have to Feel

Reb Yitzchak—Reb Itzikel—of Pshevorsk related that the first time he traveled to the Tcheshinover Rebbe was for Shabbos Mevarchim Elul, while the Rebbe was staying in Krynica.

During Birchah HaChodesh, Reb Itzikel stood close to him.

When the Tcheshinover pronounced the words “ראש חודש אלול יהיה — Rosh Chodesh Elul will be,” Reb Itzikel felt something pass through him from his head to his feet. The words themselves awakened him completely.

He thought: Next year I must return and experience this again.

The following year he came back for Shabbos Mevarchim Elul and once again stood beside the Tcheshinover during Birchash HaChodesh.

The Rebbe proclaimed, “רֹאשׁ חֹדֶשׁ אֶלּוּל יְהִיָּה” – yet this time Reb Itzikel felt nothing.

He was deeply distressed. He had returned expecting the fire of the previous year, but no awakening came.

Later, during Kiddush, the Tcheshinover looked at him and asked whether he had felt it that day.

Reb Itzikel admitted that he had not.

“לֹא תָמִיד צָרִיךְ לְהִרְגִישׁ” — You do not always have to feel,” the Rebbe answered.

Reb Itzikel commented, “With that, I consoled myself.”

Source: Siach Yitzchak—Pshevorsk, p. 79.

11. Listen to What He Is Saying

Reb Moshe of Kobrin related that Reb Mordechai of Lechovitch was once traveling during Elul.

The horses needed to rest, and the travelers stopped at a roadside inn. Several non-Jews were sitting inside, speaking among themselves.

Reb Mordechai heard one of them say to another:

“Whoever does not labor as he ought during this month will have nothing to eat throughout the year.”

The man was speaking of the season’s work. If the harvest was neglected now, there would be nothing from which to live later.

Reb Mordechai immediately called his companions.

“Listen to what this man is saying!”

He heard the ordinary conversation as a summons from Heaven. Elul was the season of the soul’s labor. What a

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person gathered now would sustain him in the year to come; what he neglected now could not easily be recovered after the season had passed.

Source: Toras Avos, Elul.

12. These Are Days of Labor—How Can You Sleep?

Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk and his brother Reb Zusya were traveling together during Elul.

Along the way, they heard a peasant woman trying to awaken her drunken husband.

“These are days of labor,” she cried. “How can you sleep?”

The brothers stopped.

They did not hear only a woman rebuking a sleeping laborer. They heard a summons directed to themselves.

“These are the days of Elul,” they said. “They are days of the service of Hashem. How can a person sleep through them?”

The field had to be gathered before the season passed. The work of the soul also had its appointed time.

Source: Derekh HaMelekh, Parashas Beha'aloscha.

13. Elul Had Arrived

Reb Yechiel Danziger, the first Alexander Rebbe, had become weak. His physicians insisted that he travel to a health resort.

Preparing the journey was difficult. An entire household and entourage had to be arranged in a way that could accommodate the Rebbe's needs and his exacting way of life. Considerable time and money were spent before they were finally ready.

They reached the resort two days before Elul.

On the morning of Rosh Chodesh, Reb Yechiel told his household: “We are going home.”

Everyone was stunned. After all the preparations, the expense, and the labor of the journey, they had remained at the resort for only two days.

Reb Yechiel explained that this was precisely why he wanted to leave.

People would hear what had happened. They would ask how anyone could spend so much money and effort on a journey and then simply abandon it. Then they would hear the reason:

Elul had arrived.

If Jews learned that when Elul comes a person must sometimes be prepared to cast everything else aside and return home to Hashem, the entire wasted journey would have been worthwhile.

He was returning, he said, “to awaken a thought of Teshuvah in the world.”

Source: Orchos Raboseinu MeAlexander, p. 98, transmitted by Reb Betzalel Yair Danziger concerning his father, Reb Yechiel of Alexander.

14. How Beautiful to Be Buried Here

In Elul 5562, Rebbe Nachman of Breslov left Zlatipolia to settle in Breslov. The journey took him through Uman.

As the wagon entered the city, it passed near the cemetery. Rebbe Nachman looked toward it and remarked:

“כַּמֶּה נָאֶה וַיִּפֶּה לְהִקָּבֵר בְּבֵית הַחַיִּים הַזֶּה — How lovely and beautiful it would be to be buried in this cemetery.”

Nothing more came of the remark at the time.

Eight years later, when his illness had advanced, Rebbe Nachman deliberately moved to Uman. He spoke of the holiness of the cemetery, where the Jewish martyrs of the 1768 massacre had been buried, and of his desire to rest among them.

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He passed away in Uman and was buried in the very cemetery he had seen upon first entering the city.

Reb Noson later heard the earlier remark from a man who had traveled with Rebbi Nachman on that Elul journey.

“When I heard this, I stood trembling,” he wrote.

Only afterward had the words revealed what they contained.

Source: Chayei Moharan §217.

15. Next Year You Will Be Holding a Son

Reb Baruch and Rebbetzin Rivka had been married for years without children. At last they came to the Baal Shem Tov and asked for a blessing.

It was Chai Elul 5504, the Baal Shem Tov’s birthday.

During the special seudah he held that day, he turned to Reb Baruch and promised:

“לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה מִמָּוֶשׁ אַתֶּם חוֹבְקִים בֶּן — At this very time next year, you will be holding a son.”

On that Chai Elul the Baal Shem Tov spoke mysteriously of a new soul that was about to descend into the world.

Exactly one year later, on Wednesday, Chai Elul 5505, Reb Shneur Zalman was born.

After returning from the mikveh that day, the Baal Shem Tov was filled with unusual joy. Wednesday was the day of Creation on which the great luminaries had been set in the heavens. A new soul had now descended, he told his disciples, that would illuminate the world with the revealed Torah and with Chassidus.

Source: Sefer HaSichos 5703, p. 154; Chai Elul 5713 farbrengen.

16. A Secret Upsherin

On Chai Elul 5508, the future Alter Rebbe, Reb Shneur Zalman of Liadi, turned three.

His mother, Rebbetzin Rivka, and his aunt Devorah Leah took the child to Mezhibuzh. The visit was kept secret. The Baal Shem Tov had instructed them to bring the boy after davening on Chai Elul, to let no one know who he was, and to leave immediately afterward.

The Baal Shem Tov personally cut the child's hair, leaving his peyos. Then he placed his hands upon the boy's head and blessed him.

When the upsherin was finished, he again warned the women not to reveal where they had been and told them to depart without delay.

On the journey home, the little boy repeatedly asked his mother who the Jew had been—the one who cut his hair, left his peyos, placed his hands upon his head, and blessed him.

His mother gave him one answer:

“זיידע — Grandfather.”

His mother and aunt understood that the Baal Shem Tov did not want the child consciously raised as his disciple. Reb Shneur Zalman would later have to seek the path of Chassidus for himself and find his way to the Maggid of Mezritch.

Source: Sefer HaSichos 5705, pp. 129–131.

17. Eliyahu Came Instead

Reb Yisrael Avraham of Chern-Ostroh, the son of Reb Zusha of Anipoli and nephew of Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk, related the following story.

A wealthy Jew had an only son whose mind had become severely impaired. Hearing of Reb Elimelech's power to bring salvation, the father set out with his son for Lizhensk.

It was Elul. Reb Elimelech withdrew during that month from ordinary public reception so that he could immerse himself in his avodah. Even urgent petitioners were received only briefly. The father nevertheless hoped to reach him.

At an inn along the road, a poor traveler approached them for assistance. Suddenly the sick son, who had long been unable to function normally, spoke with complete clarity. He urged his father to give the pauper generously.

Astonished, the father gave the man half a gold coin.

The poor traveler asked where they were going. When the father explained that they were traveling to Reb Elimelech so that the tzaddik might heal his son, the pauper answered that the boy was already well. Why should they continue and disturb Reb Elimelech's Elul avodah?

The father did not turn back.

When he finally entered Reb Elimelech's room, he placed a pidyon of twelve gold coins before him.

Reb Elimelech looked at him.

"To Eliyahu HaNavi you gave half a gold coin, and to Meilech twelve?"

Only then did the father understand who had met them on the road.

Reb Yisrael Avraham concluded that Reb Elimelech's Elul avodah was so precious Above that Eliyahu HaNavi had been sent to bring the salvation before the petitioner reached Lizhensk.

Source: Kedushas Noam Elimelech, p. 504.

18. The Four Faces of the Saraf

An elderly chassid named Reb Yitzchak lived near Strelisk. His principal Rebbe was the Chozeh of Lublin, to whom he traveled each Rosh Hashanah. After the fame of Reb Uri of Strelisk began to spread, Reb Yitzchak adopted another practice: on Rosh Chodesh Elul he would first visit Strelisk, then continue to Lublin for Rosh Hashanah.

One Rosh Chodesh Elul, Reb Yitzchak watched Reb Uri walking back and forth through his beis midrash at night, looking upon the people gathered there.

He could not take his eyes from the Rebbe.

When Reb Uri passed him and walked away, Reb Yitzchak saw something he could not explain. It seemed that he could still see Reb Uri's face even while the Rebbe's back was turned.

He was afraid to ask the Saraf what he had seen. He decided that when he reached Lublin, he would tell the Chozeh.

But on Rosh Hashanah, he forgot.

After Yom Tov, as Reb Yitzchak prepared to leave, the Chozeh suddenly said to him:

“When you pass Strelish on your return, give Reb Uri my regards. Tell him that I know he has two faces.”

Reb Yitzchak was startled.

“Rebbe, that is precisely what I saw!”

The Chozeh silenced him and told him only to deliver the message.

When Reb Yitzchak returned to Strelish and repeated the Chozeh's words, Reb Uri answered:

“It is not so. I have four faces.”

He cited Yechezkel's vision of the four heavenly creatures, the chayos, each of which had four faces: “וְאֵרְבָּעָה פָּנִים לְאֶחָת — *and each one had four faces.*” The reply matched the name by which Reb Uri was known: the Saraf of Strelish.

Source: Reb Yisrael Berger, Eser Tzachtzachos (Piotrków, 5670/1910), p. 79.

19. The Loan before Prayer

The Tzemach Tzedek had long merited visions of his grandfather, the Alter Rebbe. After returning to Lubavitch from Dobromisl, he prepared questions in Nigleh and Chassidus and hoped that the Alter Rebbe would appear and answer them.

No revelation came.