

# *ELUL*

## REDEMPTIVE REALIZATION

Although chronologically it is the final month on the Jewish calendar, Elul is not perceived as the conclusion of the year. Rather than a finale, Elul is an important beginning, as it commences a period of preparation for the High Holidays. On Rosh Hashanah, Hashem judges our actions, and on Yom Kippur, He pardons our sins. Therefore, we ready ourselves during Elul through introspection, analyzing our past behavior and striving to improve, with hopes for a favorable judgment.

According to the Torah, time itself has spiritual significance. Historically, after the Sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe Rabbeinu spent the entire month of Elul on *Har Sinai* appealing to Hashem to forgive the Jewish people. Atonement was granted on Yom Kippur, establishing an eternal day of forgiveness. In the same vein, the month of Elul was permanently imbued with the energy of the Divine compassion that eventually resulted in that atonement. Therefore, every year we strive to maximize the unique spiritual opportunities available during this preparatory season.

The character of Elul is illustrated by a famous chassidic parable, in which the king is in the field, as opposed to in his palace. Usually, to gain audience with a king, residents must navigate the complicated bureaucratic system that governs the royal palace. The imagery of a king in the field emphasizes his special accessibility to the common people, who are free to approach him without prior permission.

At the same time, however, the field also represents a workplace, where we actively engage in the material world. In contrast to the High Holidays, the month of Elul is likened to the field because it does not have any restrictions on creative labor. The nature of this time period, therefore, presents a paradoxical combination: ideal Divine accessibility and mundane human activity. How do these two conditions shape the essence of our spiritual work in Elul?

In general, a name defines the essence of an entity. Therefore, additional questions arise when analyzing the name “Elul”. One of its well-known acronyms is found in the verse in *Shir HaShirim*: **אני לרודי ורודי לי הרועה בשושנים** (I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine, who pastures among the roses.)<sup>1</sup> While on the surface, this *pasuk* sounds sentimental, it actually hints at a fundamental theme of Elul. The purpose of the Torah and *mitzvos* is to nurture the eternal bond between Hashem and the Jewish people. This loving mutual relationship is described by the *pasuk*, both in the affectionate overtones and mirrored phraseology. How does this depiction of a loving relationship guide the spiritual work of Elul? More importantly, how do we foster this ideal connection in a practical way?

Another area of further study is the common practice of blowing the *shofar* in the synagogue during the full month of Elul.

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<sup>1</sup> *Shir HaShirim* 6:3.

As *shofar*-blowing is the central *mitzvah* of Rosh Hashanah, the Day of Judgment, how does the *shofar* fit into the preliminary experience of Elul? In what ways does it relate to the concept of strengthening our mutual relationship with Hashem?

## Free Will and the Will to Be Free

In order to clarify the nature of our personal development during this month, let us re-examine the above-mentioned *pasuk* that forms the acronym Elul – **אני לדודי ודודי לי הרועה בשושנים**. The subject of the sentence, the “I” initiates by expressing devotion to the beloved. The beloved, in turn, reciprocates with his commitment. This is a mutual and loyal relationship. Therefore, the work of Elul mandates us to be proactive in our efforts to connect with Hashem. We need to reach out to Hashem, **אני לדודי**, and He will respond with equanimity **ודודי לי**. But how do we direct our efforts? How is this approach conducive to the necessary repentance process before the High Holidays?

The *Sefas Emes* explains<sup>2</sup> that the spiritual toil of Elul is best described by the chapter in *Tehillim* called *Mizmor L’Sodah* (a psalm of thanksgiving).<sup>3</sup> In Temple times, this psalm accompanied the thanksgiving sacrifice (*korban todah*), which was offered by a person who survived a dangerous situation. With the discontinuation of the Temple offerings, our Sages incorporated this chapter into our daily morning prayers. In reality, we face risks every day. By and large however, we remain unaware of most of these risks. In gratitude to Hashem for constantly protecting us, we recite *Mizmor L’Sodah* on a daily basis. However, since the *korban todah*

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<sup>2</sup> *Sefas Emes Devarim*, p. 134.

<sup>3</sup> *Tehillim* 100.

was not brought in the Temple on Shabbos or holidays, *Mizmor L'Sodah* is only recited on weekdays. This “weekday only” quality highlights one connection between Elul and *Mizmor L'Sodah* in that they both occur within the framework of “mundane” time.

*Mizmor L'Sodah* offers other ideas relevant to Elul. The third *pasuk* reads: דעו כי ה' הוא אלוקים הוא עשנו ולא אנחנו עמו וצאן מרעייתו (Know that Hashem, He is God, it is He who made us and we are His, His nation and the sheep of his pasture.)<sup>4</sup> In this verse, we find a difference between the oral pronunciation and the written spelling. The written version is הוא עשנו ולא אנחנו (it is He who made us, **and not us**). However, the word is pronounced as if it were spelled ולו אנחנו (**and we are His**). On the simplest level, we can understand the meanings of the oral and written renditions to essentially be identical. Since Hashem created us (ולא אנחנו) and we did not create ourselves, therefore we are His (ולו אנחנו) – His possession in the fullest sense.

The *Sefas Emes* however, offers a novel insight on the incongruity between the oral and written versions. He explains the following: when we negate our human ego and we suppress our egocentric selves (ולא אנחנו), then we become more devoted to Him (ולו אנחנו). This logic strengthens the analogy conveyed by אני לדודי ודודי לי. A key element of a healthy interpersonal relationship is the willingness to compromise, to sacrifice one's personal desires and keep our egos at bay when they conflict with those of a loved one. By contrast, arrogance breeds insensitivity and selfishness, both of which impede on one's ability to empathize and connect.

In this way, interpersonal relationships are similar to the relationship with Hashem. Our Sages state that Hashem cannot reside

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

with an arrogant person.<sup>5</sup> Haughtiness blinds a person to God's goodness; even if he performs *mitzvos*, his heart is cold and he remains distant from Hashem.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the prerequisite to strengthening our connection to Hashem is to subdue our personal agendas and to mitigate our self-centeredness.

Subordinating the ego is a perpetual battle, because human-kind is egocentric by nature. As is evident from the historical account of Adam HaRishon, this struggle began at the very inception of humanity. After Hashem created Adam HaRishon, He gave him a single *mitzvah*, to refrain from eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. On the surface, it seems like a simple instruction, a singular point of restraint compared to countless permissible possibilities. In order to shape the relationship between man and the Divine, Hashem offered Adam HaRishon **the opportunity to choose obedience**. By giving him a command, Hashem tested the essential quality of Adam HaRishon – his free will.

So why did he defy Hashem? The power of free choice implants a reflexive, primordial urge to be independent.<sup>7</sup> Adam HaRishon's challenge then is the same as our challenge now. Human beings have an inborn resistance to limitations, especially those imposed externally. Restrictions suppress our natural affinity for self-expression. Therefore, defying authority is typical of toddlers and teenagers. Both age groups represent developmental phases during which a child evolves into a new, increasingly independent identity. During such transitions, the child strives to separate from his parents. Rebellion is simply the strong assertion of self.

Equipped with a sophisticated intellect and power of choice, human beings possess extraordinary potential for development.

<sup>5</sup> *Sotah* 5a.

<sup>6</sup> See *Torah Tapestries Vayikera, parashas Tazria*.

<sup>7</sup> See Rabbi Akiva Tatz, *Worldmask*, pp. 5-12.

Perhaps Adam HaRishon attempted to actualize his potential by exercising his autonomy. His instincts told him that submission to God would be belittling. However, by insisting on his independence and perceived **greatness**, Adam HaRishon most ironically asserted and emphasized his **smallness**.

By contrast, annulling the human ego joins a person to the greater existence, which is Hashem. This premise explains why humility is equivalent to greatness. Moshe Rabbeinu was the greatest prophet who ever lived, and yet the Torah praises him because he was exceedingly humble.<sup>8</sup> This notion explains further why God can't live with arrogance. Haughtiness is a character trait derived from the urge to assert human autonomy, which separates a person from God.

### ***Avodas Hashem: Loyalty to Royalty***

Why then were we created with free will if not to assert it? Is not obedience to Hashem the elimination of free will? The value of genuine humility sheds light on the ultimate purpose of human will. Rabbi Akiva Tatz explains that the ideal utilization of free will is to defer it to the will of Hashem.<sup>9</sup> Subordination of human aspirations to Hashem's directives is not a **sacrifice** of will, but rather the **supreme assertion** of will.

Hashem does not request the mechanical motions of obedient servants. Authentic Divine service is described in the second verse of *Mizmor L'Sodab*: עבדו את ה' בשמחה באו לפניו ברננה (serve Hashem with joy; come before Him with glad song). An ideal servant is full of joy, not devoid of thought, acting robotically. A

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<sup>8</sup> *Bamidbar* 12:3.

<sup>9</sup> *Worldmask*, pp. 5-12.

servant is passionately willful, yet in complete accord with the will of his master.

In this vein, the *Sefas Emes* pinpoints the spiritual work of Elul, which is to reaccept upon ourselves the responsibility of service to Hashem.<sup>10</sup> Our devotion to Hashem, as expressed by **אני לדודי**, mandates the voluntary annulment of the human drive for self-determination. The power of will was created to be channeled and aligned with the will of Hashem. Commandments which are observed with unemotional or reluctant obedience are comparable to the work of a servant who perceives his master's wishes as a burdensome hindrance to his self-expression. By contrast, the joyful acceptance of *mitzvos* as a duty and privilege indicates that we are intrinsically motivated to fulfill the desires of God our Master. The Elul process consists of developing one's inner authentic desire to fulfill Hashem's Will.

During this month, we need to ask ourselves: *where do my priorities clash with Hashem's? In what areas am I stubbornly or inappropriately independent and willful?* The impulse to be autonomous often compels us to impose human judgment on situations of indecisiveness or uncertainty. How many times do we find that we *pasken* (rule on a matter of *halachah*) for ourselves, instead of researching the *halachah* or asking a rabbinical expert? The work of Elul requires honest self-assessment and confession of our arrogance.

The Hebrew word *hoda'ah* means both 'admission' as well as 'thanksgiving'. How does confession relate to gratitude? Rabbi Yitzchok Kirnzer explains that an expression of appreciation is essentially the admission of reliance on another.<sup>11</sup> Arrogance prevents a person from being grateful. Recognizing that we have

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<sup>10</sup> *Sefas Emes*, p. 137.

<sup>11</sup> *The Art of Jewish Prayer*, p. 274, citing a concept from Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner.

benefited from another's beneficence is humbling, because we acknowledge our lack of independence. This notion reveals another connection between the spiritual development of Elul and the prayer *Mizmor L'Sodah*. Gratitude is a permutation of the self-effacement we strive for in Elul. This psalm of thanksgiving is the honest recognition of our dependence on Hashem. Surviving a dangerous situation highlights one's vulnerability and strengthens awareness of Hashem's constant protection.

This same idea is found in the prayer of *Modim*. "We thank You, because You are Hashem ... Rock of our lives and Shield of our salvation." In this prayer, we admit that we rely on God and recognize His goodness. The expressions of confession and appreciation are conveyed by the bowing that accompanies the *Modim* prayer. Bowing is a motion of subjugation to Hashem's Will. When we bow, we break our resistance to authority and accept that Hashem's command is for our ultimate benefit.<sup>12</sup> The posture of arrogance is standing up straight; stubbornness is described as being "stiff-necked". Bowing, by contrast, demonstrates gratitude, humility and submission to a higher authority.

While eliminating arrogance and cultivating humility are certainly year-round tasks, they are especially appropriate for the month of Elul. The essence of Rosh Hashanah is accepting the Kingship of Heaven. Prerequisites to acknowledging Hashem's sovereignty are yielding the ego and directing our power of will toward *avodas Hashem*.

The *middah* of humility is vividly portrayed in the epic account of *Akeidas Yitzchak Avinu*.<sup>13</sup> Avraham Avinu defied his deep paternal instincts to protect his only son. He channeled his willpower

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> *Bereishis* 22.

toward the singular purpose of obeying Hashem's command to bring Yitzchak Avinu as an offering. This was Avraham Avinu's ultimate test of devotion; yet perhaps it was a greater test for Yitzchak Avinu to ascend the altar and suppress his own survival instinct.

*Akeidas Yitzchak* is read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah because the lesson of self-sacrifice is particularly suitable for this season. Furthermore, this message is evoked through the use of a ram's horn for the *shofar*. After witnessing Avraham Avinu's willingness to offer his own son, Hashem instructed him to offer a ram in Yitzchak Avinu's place.

In light of our discussion, we can better understand why the *shofar* is blown throughout the month of Elul. The *shofar* is a symbol of self-sacrifice and humility. Moreover, our Sages state that an ideal *shofar* is bent in shape.<sup>14</sup> The curved form symbolizes the deference of our will to Hashem. The cultivation of humility is mandatory for accepting Hashem as King. As discussed at length above, the urge to assert our independence is instinctual and therefore extremely difficult to control. Subordinating our will does not happen in an instant; the transformation from self-serving to serving the Divine is inevitably gradual. Rabbi Yechezkel Levinstein asserts that cleansing ourselves of arrogance is a process that does not begin in Elul, rather seven months earlier!<sup>15</sup>

Without extensive investment of preparatory time and effort, our ingrained self-centeredness is likely to seep into the month of Elul. Rabbi Gamliel Rabinowitz explains how even those who learn Torah and *mitzvos* often fall into this trap.<sup>16</sup> It might seem

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<sup>14</sup> *Rosh Hashanah* 26b.

<sup>15</sup> *Ohr Yechezkel*, p. 231.

<sup>16</sup> *Tiv HaMoadim*, p. 44.

that we are “doing everything right” externally. We *daven*, we keep kosher, we give *tzedaka*. When our lives are running smoothly, we arrive at the month of Elul and simply assume Hashem will grant us a new year of blessings.

The problem is that this is an immature, simplistic approach to the Day of Judgment. As we mature, we need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of *teshuvah*. We need to be cognizant of the following things: Hashem’s control of the world, His ability to give and take, and our complete reliance on Him for everything. Our prayers during Elul should be like those of a beggar at the door, demonstrating our ultimate humility.<sup>17</sup>

## Humility not Humiliation

Humility is the tool that enables us to connect to Hashem. As Rabbi Shmuel Tal explains, when a person conducts himself only according to his own needs, then he is operating in his own universe.<sup>18</sup> One who does whatever he pleases cannot even approach Hashem, because he has not restrained his ego and made Hashem his master. However, Rabbi Tal underscores that humbling oneself does not imply self-deprecation. The purpose of yielding one’s ego is not to lower oneself, but rather to elevate oneself.

Sometimes, we fall into a destructive cycle of error, remorse, and shame. The conscious recognition of our wrongdoings can potentially generate a sense of hopelessness, with no opportunities for *teshuvah* in sight. This downward spiral is more likely to impinge upon, rather than promote, our spiritual development. How

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<sup>17</sup> *Ohr Yechezkeel*, p. 28.

<sup>18</sup> *Tal Chaim, Yamim Nora'im*, p. 212.

then do we introspect and repent, while managing to avoid the negative impact of self-reproach?

The answer is found in the *shofar* of Elul. On the one hand, explains Rabbi Tal, the bent shape of the *shofar* reminds us to humble ourselves before Hashem and cut our ego down to size. At the same time, however, we must remember that humility draws the *Shechinah* closer to us. Nullifying our self-centeredness doesn't degrade us; instead, it eliminates the barrier between us and Hashem. The awakening sound of the *shofar* should break the vicious cycle of despair and remind us of the greatness of our life purpose. The *shofar's* call should awaken us to cry out to Hashem to reinforce our Divine connection.

Our spiritual toil in Elul has a dual focus: humbling our ego and calling out to Hashem. This dual symbolism is represented by the *shofar's* horn-like shape. The air is blown into the smallest part, the mouthpiece, while the sound is emitted through the widest part at the end.

This imagery is also conveyed in a *pasuk* that is recited before blowing the *shofar*: מן המצר קראתי קה ענני במרחב קה (from the narrow strait I called out to Hashem, and He answered me from expansiveness)<sup>19</sup> When we call out to Hashem from a condition of המצר – spiritual restriction and distance, then Hashem answers with במרחב and opens up worlds for us. We are never truly detached from Him. To cry out to Hashem is to admit one's reliance on Him. This humility removes the obstacle of ego, enabling us to access the genuine longing for Hashem that is buried inside.<sup>20</sup> The symbol of the *shofar* alludes to the deepest level of submission to Hashem.

<sup>19</sup> *Tebillim* 118:5.

<sup>20</sup> *Tal Chaim*, p. 212.

## Habitual Rituals

Thus far, we have analyzed the nullification of the ego, the **לא** aspect of humbling oneself. The complementary component is the positive aspect of humility – devotion as conveyed by **ולו אנהנו**. The smallness and humility of **ולא אנהנו** can indeed be transformed into the greatness of devotion to Hashem **ולו אנהנו**. But this metamorphosis requires more extensive spiritual labor than simply making reparations for past mistakes.

It may be humbling to reflect on our transgressions and resolve to improve. However, in perspective, it is not very difficult to analyze *aveiros*. Whether our misbehavior is proactive (doing something forbidden) or passive (neglecting to perform a *mitzvah*), blatant disobedience to God is easily identified. Moreover, a transgression is an obvious misalignment with Hashem’s will, which typically engenders an intuitive sense of remorse.

While it is not easy to do *teshuvah* for our transgressions, an even greater challenge is **doing teshuvah for our mitzvos**.<sup>21</sup> We must ask ourselves if we truly connect and make ourselves His “possession,” through our *avodas Hashem*. Unfortunately, we often assess our *avodas Hashem* in objective terms, in black or white. We ask ourselves, *have I performed a particular mitzvah, yes or no?* When the answer is ‘yes’, we tend to become complacent. Once we have fulfilled our obligations, we feel ‘released from duty’ so to speak. *Mitzvos* essentially become a daily checklist; when each *mitzvah* is performed, we simply check the box and move on.

The problem with this approach is that our *avodas Hashem* deteriorates into rote repetition of pre-conditioned behavior. Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler explains that in order to merit spiritual reward for

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<sup>21</sup> *Nesivos Shalom*, vol. 2, p. 147.

our *mitzvos*, they must be conscious acts of free will.<sup>22</sup> When a person is conditioned from childhood to fulfill certain *mitzvos*, he is rarely motivated by a strong impulse to change this auto-pilot behavior. Therefore, much of his *avodas Hashem* consists of mindless habits that lack the active, purposeful elevation of free will. *Mitzvos* observance like this mandates sincere modification. Not only must one do *teshuvah* for past rote behavior, he must also strive to convert mechanical *mitzvos* observance into mindful, *avodas Hashem*.

The objective of Jewish education is for parents to provide their children with an advantage – a high point from which they can learn to exercise their will in an optimal manner. Higher levels of *avodas Hashem* can only be achieved when we use our upbringing as a springboard for growth, **as the starting point, and not the endpoint**. A higher level of *teshuvah* involves taking a subjective assessment of our *mitzvah* observance. We might *daven* every day, but are we focused and concentrating on what we are saying? Although we might give *tzedakah*, do we do so with enthusiasm or reluctance?

When we scrutinize our positive behavior, we can attain the ultimate humility: admitting that although we keep the Torah, we still need to improve. Complacency is a shade of arrogance, because it is a sign of contentment with the status quo. Egotism is a trait embodied by Eisav, whose name means “done.” Eisav viewed himself as “completely developed,”<sup>23</sup> a finished product, rather than a work in progress.<sup>24</sup> Analyzing our behavior, especially our *mitzvos*, cultivates an attitude of humility, recognizing that we have areas in need of repair.

<sup>22</sup> *Strive For Truth*, p. 59.

<sup>23</sup> Rashi on *Bereishis* 25:25.

<sup>24</sup> See *Torah Tapestries Bamidbar, parashas Masei*.

However, here too honest self-reflection should not lower our self-esteem. To the contrary, examining our *mitzvos* with a critical eye reaffirms that we understand that we are capable of doing better! Humility and low self-esteem are, in fact, polar opposites. Low self-image is created by the self-deprecating spiral, as described above, and results in doubting one's abilities to accomplish. Humility, however, motivates a person to respond to spiritual underachievement by working even harder.<sup>25</sup>

How do we know when our *mitzvos* need improvement? The litmus test for judging the quality of our *mitzvos* is the degree to which our actions nurture our relationship with Hashem. Rabbi Avraham Schorr highlights that the true core of Judaism is not a list of dos and don'ts, prohibitions and obligations. Rather, authentic Judaism is a life mindset of connecting with Hashem all the time.<sup>26</sup> *Mitzvos* are the tools and mechanisms Hashem gave us to achieve this lifelong mission.

Even when our behavior appears *halachically* precise, if we are not consciously working toward cultivating an intellectual and emotional bond with Hashem, then our actions have not fulfilled their purpose. This idea does not undermine the importance of paying strict attention to *halachic* regulations. Jewish law favors the performance of prescribed actions over the expressions of religious fervor.<sup>27</sup> But when we give our behavior exclusive focus over the intellect and the emotions, even our *mitzvah*-related actions remain shallow and ineffective.

The essential flaw in auto-pilot *mitzvos* performance is underscored in the words of Chaggai HaNavi: הכיתי אתכם בשדפון ובירקון וברד הכיתי את כל מעשה ידיכם ואין אתכם אלי נעם ה' (I had struck you with

<sup>25</sup> See *Torah Tapestries Vayikra, parashas Metzora*.

<sup>26</sup> *HaLekeach VeHaLibuv* 5761, p. 191.

<sup>27</sup> See *Torah Tapestries Bamidbar, parashas Korach*.

blast and blight and hail, upon all the work of your hands, yet you have not returned to Me – the word of Hashem).<sup>28</sup> The Malbim comments that the emphasis on “the work of your hands” in the phrase **כל מעשה ידיכם** is intended to criticize the fact that the people’s deeds were executed **by the hands alone**. Their behavior was external and superficial: actions without intention, body motions without soul engagement, a Temple of stones without the heart.

Chaggai HaNavi lived when the construction of the second *Beis HaMikdash* was stalled for a long eighteen years. The nation had grown complacent, and the building seemed doomed to never resume. His prophecy was geared to motivate the people and shake off their apathy. The message of that era still rings true for us now, particularly in the month of Elul. When *mitzvos* are performed in an apathetic manner, with only the work of our hands and not the work of our hearts, they do not bring us closer to Hashem.

Rabbi Avraham Schorr relates the following story told by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein zt”l. Rav Moshe’s father once made a serious pact with a particular friend. Whichever of the two would die first was obligated to return and reveal the secrets of the upper worlds. After many years, the friend of Rav Moshe’s father passed away and he kept his promise, returning to Rav Moshe’s father in a dream.

He related, “You know, my dear friend, that this is the World of Truth in which all deeds, great and small, are judged. Nothing is hidden or ignored. In avoiding forbidden behavior, I passed the test. I was also judged favorably in proactively fulfilling my obligations. What was the most difficult judgment to pass? For not adhering to the principle of our Sages: *rachmana liba ba’i*

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<sup>28</sup> Chaggai 2:17.

(Hashem wants our hearts)! And this is the most difficult work of all.<sup>29</sup>

This is the secret of Hashem's priorities. We are held most accountable for lacking heart. If we are scrupulous in our observance of *mitzvos*, but lack connection with Hashem, then we are liable. If Hashem is absent from our mindset, then we are missing the goal of *mitzvos*. Hashem desires our emotional investment in our *avodah*, as stated in the second *pasuk* of *Mizmor L'Sodah*: **עבדו את ה' בשמחה** (serve Hashem with joy).<sup>30</sup> Our Divine service needs to be enthusiastic, infused with joy and sincerity. When we put our hearts into our *avodas Hashem*, we truly become His people.

The *pasuk* from *Mizmor L'Sodah* invokes the imagery of Hashem as Shepherd and the Jewish nation as His flock. **ולו אנהנו עמו וצאן מרעייתו** (We are His, His nation and the sheep of his pasture). Perhaps another meaning may be gleaned from the word **רועה** that is related to the word **רעות** (friendship). When we passionately devote ourselves to serving Hashem, we create a loving relationship with Hashem and He becomes our closest friend – **אני לדודי ודודי לי הרועה בשושנים**. The sound of the *shofar*, as well, hints to this notion of camaraderie, as **תרועה** shares the same letters as **רעות**. The *teruah* notes imitate the sound of weeping. Our crying during Elul, though, is not out of sadness or despair; tears of *teruah* are of yearning for *teshuvah*, so that we can ultimately achieve closeness with Hashem.

## Foundation of Faith

Even if we can relate to the notion of longing for a relationship with Hashem, we still face the challenge of commitment.

<sup>29</sup> *HaLekach VeHaLibuv* 5761, p. 191.

<sup>30</sup> *Tehillim* 100:2.

Rabbi Gamliel Rabinowitz notes that our “Elul enthusiasm” to grow spiritually usually translates into *kabbalos* (new religious commitments).<sup>31</sup> In a well-meaning effort to improve our areas of weakness, we adopt certain halachic stringencies or precautions. We are usually able to maintain these guidelines for a short time, and if we are truly successful, all the way until Hoshana Rabbah.

We confront the real obstacle only after all the holidays are over, when we return to daily mundane life. Somehow, despite all the special provisions we have made, we don’t emerge from that process any different than before we began. Why don’t our efforts yield results? Why do we often find ourselves back at square one?

Rabbi Rabinowitz illustrates this challenge with the following analogy. A person discovers a crack in the wall of his new home. He buys plaster at the hardware store and then repairs the crack in the wall. He is confident that he has solved the problem, until the next day he discovers a second crack, only this time in a different place on the wall. Thankful that he still has some extra plaster, he fixes the second crack. The next day, a third crack appears.

This pattern continues for days, until he finally admits he is faced with a chronic problem. He employs a professional contractor to assess the cracks in his wall.

The contractor explains as follows: “I can plaster the cracks if you want, but you will have more cracks tomorrow. The reason is that the problem isn’t the wall. The problem is in the foundation. The foundation is weak and these cracks are the symptoms.”<sup>32</sup>

This metaphor applies to our approach in the month of Elul. We can address our various areas of weakness like individual

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<sup>31</sup> *Tiv HaMoadim*, p. 286.

<sup>32</sup> *Tiv HaMoadim*, p. 287.

cracks in the wall. But after the holidays pass, the cracks will return because the problem lies in the foundation, which is our *emunah*. Unless we strengthen our fundamental *emunah*, all progress toward *teshuvah* and spiritual growth is doomed to be temporary. The Chazon Ish once stated that *emunah* is something that requires continuous reinforcement.<sup>33</sup> If one does not take measures to bolster his *emunah*, it is subject to natural attrition. Even if one's *emunah* is rooted in his childhood education, it does not remain steadfast without conscious, ongoing effort.

How can our *teshuvah* genuinely take hold? Reinforcing *emunah* is not an esoteric or philosophical concept. There are several practical suggestions for bolstering our *emunah*. One approach is to constantly remind ourselves of our complete dependence on Hashem.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, this is one of the purposes of the blessings for food and drink. Unfortunately however, for many individuals, reciting *berachos* has deteriorated into a conditioned behavior that does not meet this objective. For *berachos* to boost *emunah*, we need to concentrate on the meaning of the words.

Consider the general blessing: *שהכל נהיה בדברו* (through Whose word everything came to be). This brief but all-encompassing statement declares the profound premise that Hashem is the Master Creator, and the existence of all creation relies on His beneficence. Just before quenching our thirst or satiating our hunger, we are given this mechanism to reframe our perspective that Hashem provides our sustenance. *I did not provide this for myself, because everything is from Hashem.* Let us stop to contemplate this principle every time we say the *berachah*. If we made our mantra *שהכל נהיה בדברו* then our *emunah* would be strengthened considerably.

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<sup>33</sup> *Yalkut Lekach Tov Devarim*, p. 42.

<sup>34</sup> *Ohr Yechezkel*, p. 239.

A second approach to cultivating *emunah* is to strive to maintain a level of awareness of God throughout the day. This is conveyed by the *pasuk*: שׁוֹיְתִי ה' לִנְגְדִי תָמִיד (I have set Hashem before me always).<sup>35</sup> The month of Elul is not a holiday, when we refrain from creative labor. Yet, even as we engage in the material world, we need to maintain awareness of Hashem's constant presence in our daily lives. We can do this by inserting Hashem's name into our conversations. Every time we make plans, we should deliberately mention בְּעֶזְרַת הַשֵּׁם (with Hashem's help) or אִם יִרְצֶה הַשֵּׁם (if Hashem wills it).

When spoken with sincere conviction, these simple words acknowledge that none of our intentions can be actualized without heavenly assistance. Furthermore, we reaffirm our belief in Divine providence and yield to Hashem's plans with the knowledge that His plans are for our benefit. According to Rabbi Rabinowitz, this idea explains the use of the word לִנְגְדִי (lit. opposing me) in this *pasuk* שׁוֹיְתִי ה' לִנְגְדִי תָמִיד. Even when Hashem's will is contrary to my desires, I accept that Hashem is in control.<sup>36</sup>

In order to cultivate faith that is palpable, and not just theoretical, we should allow our faith to permeate every minute aspect of our lives.<sup>37</sup> Thus, another healthy habit to adopt is to **simply ask Hashem for everything you need**. Every day, we constantly assess our needs, whether physical or emotional, and engage in the constant pursuit of fulfilling those needs. Each of these situations is an opportunity to include Hashem in the equation.

The Chazon Ish provides the following example. a person needs to buy new shoes. He responds in several ways. He calculates the cost into his budget, adjusts his schedule to make time

<sup>35</sup> *Tehillim* 16:8.

<sup>36</sup> *Tiv HaMoadim*, p. 200.

<sup>37</sup> *Yalkut Lekach Tov Devarim*, p. 42.

to buy the shoes, and considers which store would have the best selection in his size. The first response of someone with tangible *emunah* would be asking Hashem: *please, Hashem, I need new shoes. Help me get new shoes.* Presenting Hashem with every request does not preclude the necessity of exerting the appropriate effort. But when we initiate the process by turning to Hashem, we cultivate an ingrained cognizance of Hashem as our constant Provider.

A fourth and final piece of practical advice is also related to reciting *berachos* and suggests another way to maximize their impact. The *Mishnah Berurah* states that when reciting any blessing, **it is forbidden to engage in any other activity.**<sup>38</sup> One who does so disconnects his speech from his actions; the mouth is saying a *berachah* while the rest of the body is involved in something unrelated. The incongruity between speech and action creates the impression that intonation of the *berachah* is irrelevant or inconsequential. Even the performance of a minor act requires some amount of attention, and is therefore prohibited during *tefillah* or when reciting *berachos*. Unfortunately, today's society places great emphasis on productivity and, as a result, values multitasking. This philosophy has invaded even our most basic *mitzvos*.

Consider the following examples. How many times have you been drying your hands while reciting *al netilas yadayim*? How often do you walk away from the restroom, saying *asher yatzar* while busying yourself with other things? When we say the *berachah* of *shehakol*, are we opening the bottle cap? Are we pouring water into the cup? Do we subconsciously clear off the table while still reciting *birkas hamazon*? We operate under the illusion that "praying while doing" is efficient. However, when attention is divided between obligatory *berachos* and mundane endeavors, the power of the *berachos* is deflated and the goal of prayer is unattainable.

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<sup>38</sup> *Mishnah Berurah* 191:5, as cited in *Tiv HaTorah*, p. 454.

If we commit ourselves to cease all other motions and activity while reciting a *berachah*, we access the spiritual influence of that *berachah* and bolster our *emunah*.

The month of Elul is an opportune season to strengthen our *emunah* and make it manifest in our day-to-day reality. Especially since the *mitzvah* of reciting *berachos* is already conditioned behavior, we have the advantage of built-in opportunities to maximize these tools to cultivate our *emunah*. Every time we refrain from outside action while praying, we demonstrate a willingness to yield our free choice to Hashem's authority. Furthermore, we provide tangible proof to Him that our attention is turned solely to *avodas Hashem*. When we approach our *mitzvos* like a devoted servant who passionately fulfills his master's wishes, we truly serve Hashem with joy.

The words are written **ולא אנהנו** but pronounced as **ולו אנהנו**. When we humble ourselves and restrain our inborn will for the sake of a *mitzvah*, we become His. *Emunah* perpetuates humility, which expresses the ultimate loyalty to God. Blowing the *shofar* reminds us to be humble, but also to uplift ourselves. The narrow mouthpiece grows wide at the other end, reminding us to release ourselves from our constraints and bask in the expansiveness of Hashem, since the whole world belongs to Him. All that we can offer is ourselves – our sense of independence. An acronym of Elul is **אני לדודי ודודי לי**. However, if one spells Elul backwards, it spells **לו לא**. These are the code words of our life's purpose – to foster a loving relationship with Hashem.