

# "MEMAAYAN HACHAIM"

Mussar talks from the Magiach Rabbi Chaim Walkin shlit"a

## Thoughts About Ellul: A Period of a Spiritual "Break" and Recharge

In thinking about the days of Ellul, we are wont to cite the words of the Gaon R' Yisrael Salanter zt"l. (Ohr Yisrael, Letter 14): "From days of old, I always knew how each member of the community would be taken with trembling as the sound of the sexton in the Synagogue would cry out the holy announcement, "the Month of Ellul has arrived!" This trepidation would bring forth its fruit in an enhanced closeness to the service of the Almighty, Blessed be He.

Simply understood, we learn from Rabbi Salanter that the fundamental meaning and effect of the sexton's cry of "Ellul!" was to engender in each and every Jew a sense of trembling, lending the days of this month a feeling of fear and awe of the coming Day of Judgement. This was the main purpose of these inspirational days.

However, we find in the writings of our teachers, first and foremost the Alter of Slabodka, an expression which seems entirely different from this view of the month of Ellul. We find the Alter's insight in "B'Ikvos Ha-Yirah" by Rabbi Avraham Kaplan zt"l., pg. 155: "We come now from the physical break to the spiritual one, from the summer months of Tammuz and Av which find us in the forests and fields, to the fall months of Ellul and Tishrei where we are in the walls of the Yeshiva. What is the difference between these two periods of vacation, so to speak? Everyone would agree just as the former (the physical break of Tammuz and Av) is vital to a rejuvenation of the body, so too is the other

break (Ellul and Tishre) necessary for the reinvigoration of the neshama, the soul. And even more necessary is the recharging of Ellul-Tishrei to the soul, for we all recognize: everyone is in need of a healing for our spiritual malaise in Ellul".

Even the Alter of Kelm, was known to say that "Ellul is the "refreshing break for the soul" (Heb. "m'ononos ha-kayitz shel hanefesh"). From these words, we must appreciate an entirely different view of the essence of the month of Ellul. It is a month whose essence is respite, days of relaxation and for healing.

Yet, how can this insight coexist alongside the one we cited above in the name of R' Yisrael Salanter, zt"l., who presented us with a view of Ellul as a month of "trembling"?! How can we see Ellul as days of fear and awe before the impending days of Judgement and yet, simultaneously a period of recharging, rest, and comfort of the soul?! How are we to understand these two seemingly contradictory ideas functioning together in our understanding of Ellul?

We learn here a profound principle in this new understanding of our approach to our Divine service in Ellul. In truth, the essence of these days is "return". The month of Ellul, indeed functions as a time for refreshing our spiritual batteries, so to speak, days of renewal and relaxation for the soul. This service centers on one's return to himself, to reconnect, once again,

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to his soul, where his inner essence and spiritual forces reside, and this can only be accomplished in an environment of peace and serenity. As the Alter of Slabodka explained: “... just as the former (the physical break of Tammuz and Av) is vital to a rejuvenation of the body, so too is the other break (Ellul and Tishre) necessary for the reinvigoration of the neshama, the soul”—as the body needs to return to itself and its inner forces it needs a period of rest and peace-- a “break” so to speak, in the exact same way does the soul need such a “break”, days of serenity and peace in order to ourselves and our inner strengths. In order to properly do teshuva and make a deep self-review (cheshbon ha-nefesh), we require no less presence and serenity to attain the necessary state of inner quiet (Yishuv ha-daas). Our teshuva and inspiration must be done in this environment of inner repose so that all the insights which we accept during these days can remain with us not just for a moment but for the entire year to come.

But, even moreso, we must remember that when the days of Ellul approach, our key focus must be “I am to my Beloved and He is to me” (Shir HaShirim 6:4—the letters of the word “Ellul). This month is a month of love and connection between the two “beloved ones”, the Almighty and the Jewish people, and as such, we must abandon all other interests to make peace with the Almighty and build anew our lofty spiritual connection with Him, may He be Blessed. In this sense, Ellul is a renewal of the relationship that was in day of old, when there occurred the first rapprochement between Hashem and His people following the sin of the Golden Calf. Those were days of good will, when G-d decided to give once again the Torah to Klal Yisrael. And thus, these days were established as a period of repentance and acquiescence for all future generations.

Yet, we still must understand—on the one hand, the essence of this month is “respite”, break, relax and recharge. If so, how can this attitude coexist with R’ Yisrael Salanter’s thought cited

above-- “each member of the community would be taken with trembling as the sound of the sexton in the Synagogue would cry out the holy announcement, “the Month of Ellul has arrived!” What is the connection between “trembling” and “awe” with days of respite and spiritual relaxation. Put another way, what role does “trembling” play in a month of rejuvenation?

The gemora in Megilla (14a) teaches: The verse states: **“And the king removed his ring from his hand” (Esther 3:10). Rabbi Abba bar Kahana said: The removal of Ahasuerus’s ring for the sealing of Haman’s decree was more effective than the forty-eight prophets and the seven prophetesses who prophesied on behalf of the Jewish people. As, they were all unable to return the Jewish people to the right way, but the removal of Ahasuerus’s ring returned them to the right way, since it brought them to repentance.**

We see from this passage an amazing insight. The Jewish people merited to have forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses who sent a message of repentance, and yet, nothing was successful in bringing about the desired change in their behavior to the way of righteousness. While at the same time, a small, insignificant act such as the decision of King Ahasuerus to seal his evil vizier’s decree of destruction with his personal signet ring engendered such fear and trepidation that the nation was inspired to change their sinful actions! We need to reflect on the power, the hidden inner nature of this event which brought such a fundamental reversal and returned the Jews’ to the path of righteousness!

The key to this insight is found in the oft-cited words of the liturgical poem recited on Purim, “Shoshanas Yaakov”: its verses of thanksgiving praise Hashem for punishing “the accursed Zeresh, the wife of (Haman), he who terrified me” (Heb. “arura Zeresh, eshes mafchidi). It is wondrous, is it not, that Zeresh’s wickedness is

described as nothing more than being the consort of the man who brought fear to the Jewish nation! Certainly, Haman was a evil genius, an enemy of Klal Yisrael. How does the author of this poem simply describe him as “the one who made us scared”? He was so much more!

But, the secret is found in the passage in Megilla we cited above. With all his machinations and treacherous plans, Haman really was nothing more than a powerless frightener! Against Hashem, he had no actual force to damage us, and in the hands of the Almighty, his entire mandate for action was nothing more than to terrify, to wake up the Jewish people. Therefore, Zeresh is depicted in Shoshanas Yaakov as nothing more than the wife of the “one who made me frightened”. This was the hidden power of “the removal of King Ahasuerus’ ring”, to influence Klal Yisrael and bring them to repentance, the ability of the fear of the consequences of sin to awaken them from their sinful slumber and return them to correct behavior.

This, then is the deeper meaning of the words of the founder of the Mussar Movement, the Gaon R’ Yisrael Salanter in his “Iggeres HaMussar”: “Man is unlimited in his imagination, and paradoxically, bound by his intellect . . . the imagination rushes like a torrent of a flooding river, and unless we cast it a life-boat, the intellect is likely to drown in the emotions of the soul and storming of the spirit.”

In other words, R’ Salanter teaches us here that man is taken by his unbound imagination and he pays scant attention to the fact that he is not acting according to the laws of the Torah and the will of the Almighty. As a “flooding river”, the imagination is poised to drown one’s intellect, rendering it oblivious to his error. To prevent this, the Holy One, Blessed is He with His kindness provides man with “a frightener” to save him from drowning the torrent of his imagination. Fear and trembling’s purpose is to shake a person up from his daily life habits, all

based on an out-of-control imagination of false uprightness. Thus, even without an actual punishment, he will be able to do teshuva and repent from his imaginary fantasies.

This, then, is the power of “the removal of the King’s signet ring” to inspire a people to repentance, and this is the purpose of the trembling and fear during these days of Ellul, through the sexton’s heart-piercing cry, “Holy Ellul!”—to awaken a person from habits developed over the course of the entire year. Immersed in one’s accustomed imagination and wanton physicality, that call can arouse a person to be anxious over the state of his spiritual condition and remind him that he is now faced with the period of soulful renewal.

My mother, of blessed memory, was born in the town of Radin and merited to be raised in the home of the Chofetz Chaim. She used to tell me that in the small towns of Europe like Radin of those days, people frequently used to say during Ellul, “G-d scares—but He doesn’t punish.” This conforms to our explanation above, that is, the purpose of the fear of this month was not a punishment per se; rather, it was to inspire a person to do a deep soul-searching (chesbon hanefesh) which would bring to true repentance. In turn, with such behavior, a person would not reach a level where he would require any Divine punishment.

The Mirrer Rosh HaYeshiva, R’ Chaim Shmulevitz zt”l., used to articulate this perspective regarding the period of the Yeshiva in exile in Shanghai during the war years, “I was often occupied, but never pre-occupied” (Heb. hayisi tarud, aval lo murtad). That is to say, R’ Chaim meant that with all the worries and concerns which confronted him in Shanghai, they were no more than i.e. issues to be dealt with. Yet, they never overwhelmed him; he was never pre-occupied with them to interrupt his Divine service. I thought to use this same type of phraseology—in Ellul, we must be frightened, but never afraid (Heb. tzarich

l'facheid, v'lo l'hiyos m'fuchad). We must use the trembling and fear of these holy days of Ellul to awaken ourselves from the transient habits of the previous year to remind ourselves of the necessity of cheshbon hanefesh. In this way we will be prepared to benefit from the respite, the break of this spiritual vacation we mentioned above to strengthen our souls in serenity and peace. But, we must not become afraid. The awe of the coming Judgement Day must never penetrate our psyche to the point that we lose our spiritual sensitivity and peace of mind required for proper soul searching. True repentance which will effect long-lasting character change can only happen within an environment of Yishuv haDaas and inner peace.

The Chofetz Chaim, zt"l., used to say, "How is it possible to be a Jew, if he doesn't introspect at least 2 hours each day!?" A frightening thought! A person cannot identify himself as a Jew, let alone a tzaddik or a chassid, but simply a Jew—without 2 hours of personal analysis daily. This is the Chofetz Chaim's viewpoint regarding the importance of learning Mussar; he saw such study as the most required, foundational activity necessary for Jewish life. Even the simplest Jew is obligated to think about his spiritual status, to review where he stands in life and how this will affect his plans for the future. One must, in the Chofetz Chaim's view, reign in the rushing flow

of life and stand, for a moment at least, present, quiet amidst the vicissitudes of his soul.

**The focal point of this point-of-view must be hammered home into our hearts, that the days of Ellul are no less than days of spiritual regeneration designed to offer us the centeredness and serenity to quiet a soul bound up throughout the rest of the year in the flood of frenzied imagination. Our purpose as Jews during this period of the year is to take a break to facilitate a profound soul-searching. Further, we must use the trembling and awe of the upcoming days of Judgement to awaken ourselves from the year-round life of habit, a creation of our falsely self-righteous imagination. Finally, we must remember, in the approach of R' Chaim Shmulevitz, zt"l., to use our fear, but never become frightened.**



[Written and translated according to understanding of writers]

**The next issue will appear towards the Yamim Noraim**



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