

Experiencing Elul

Elul, the month of introspection and preparation for the coming year, is the month during which we need to take stock and reevaluate where we are in our lives. Chazal have found allusions to this month in various acronyms of *pesukim* in *Tanach* that guide and direct us to focus on this monumental task.

The most famous acronym for the month of Elul is “*Ani ledodi vedodi li*” (*Shir Hashirim* 6;3), I am to my beloved, and my beloved is to me. Every person must identify their ‘*ani*’, their unique, distinct quality and direct it toward the service of Hashem. Equally crucial is the task of making the relationship with Hashem one of ‘love’, one of closeness. *Tefilla* is a daily gift that helps us achieve this goal of closeness. One who

works on this aspect of their relationship will find that Hashem’s presence becomes much more tangible throughout the day.

A time for spiritual refuge from the turmoil and distractions of life

Another acronym we find for Elul is in the *passuk* “*Ish l’rei’eihu umatanot Pevyonim*” (*Esther* 22;9). This reminds us to concentrate on doing acts of charity and kindness, to focus on mitzvot that connect us to others. Elul is a time to give more *tzedakah* and look for opportunities to develop ourselves as givers. Additionally, this *passuk* highlights the importance of ‘*ish l’rei’eihu*’, relating to others with a feeling of friendship and responsibility for their well-being.

The task of *teshuvah* is linked to this month in the *passuk* “*umal Hashem Elokecha et levavcha, v’et levav zarecha*” (*Devarim* 30;6). The circumcision of one’s heart entails removing negativity within us so that we can live a life full of goodness and righteousness.

There is, however, another acronym which zeroes in on the core theme of this month. The Torah teaches us, “*VehaElokim ena lyado, vsanti lecha makom lanus*

Tamah 38

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shama” (Shemot 21;13). Just as there are cities of refuge where one flees if he kills accidentally, so Elul is a month of reflection and introspection, a time for spiritual refuge from the turmoil and distractions of life. Rav Wolbe encourages people to spend time in Elul alone, meditating, assessing, and reconnecting with one’s self. The Chasidic masters take the symbol of the city of refuge one step deeper. Indeed, they say, we are all guilty of killing by accident, and we need to run to this city to rehabilitate ourselves. Whom have we killed accidentally? None other than ourselves. We have murdered the great potential that Hashem infused within us to develop ourselves in myriads of ways, to be exalted and elevated, and we have fallen short.

Elul is therefore a time to focus on three principal aspects. Firstly, to work on mitzvot that connect us to Hashem, especially putting more emphasis on our davening. Secondly, to expand our relationship with others, focusing on the mitzvot of tzedakah and chesed. Finally, to develop a deeper relationship with ourselves through the mitzvah of *teshuva*, returning to our potential. ■

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