



## TOWARDS MEANINGFUL PARENTING

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# Elul: Our Sanctuary in Time

Many of us are familiar with the well-known teaching that the word *Elul* is an acronym for *Ani L'dodi V'dodi Li*—"I am to my beloved, and my beloved is to me." But in fact, Chazal and the mefarshim point out at least **seven** other acronyms for the word *Elul*! This seems very perplexing! Why is there such an emphasis on finding acronyms for *Elul*? We don't do this for the other months of the year. And after all, *Elul* is not even a Hebrew word—it's Babylonian. So why invest so much energy in uncovering hidden layers of meaning within it?

Perhaps the answer can be understood through the following story:

A little boy once asked his father, "How big is Hashem?" The father replied, "As big as an airplane." The next day, the boy looked up at the sky and saw an airplane flying far above. It looked tiny. Months later, while waiting in the airport to board a flight, he stood right next to an airplane and was amazed at its size—it looked enormous! He turned to his father and asked, "So which is it? Is Hashem small, like the plane in the sky, or huge, like the one I see up close?" His father answered: "It depends how close you are to Him."

The closer we draw to Hashem, the greater He becomes in our eyes, and the more real

and present He feels in our lives. That is what *Elul* is all about. During this month, *HaMelech ba'sadeh*—"the King is in the field." Hashem is near, accessible, waiting for us to notice Him.

But how do we truly see Him? By training ourselves to look for Him everywhere. When my brother-in-law, a<sup>h</sup>, was ill with cancer, his Rebbe, Rav Judah Mischel, gave him powerful guidance: "Always bring Hashem into the picture. Search for Him in the small things—even in the number of a hospital room." My brother-in-law and sister-in-law would pause in every room they entered, reflect on the gematria of the number, and search for its message. In doing so, they felt Hashem's presence with them—even in the hardest moments.

That is the essence of *Elul*. It is a time to strengthen our closeness with Hashem, to seek Him in every detail, and even in the very letters of a Babylonian name. The more we search for Him, the more we discover that He is right beside us—and the closer we become.

I want to focus today on a lesser-known acronym of the Arizal that ties into a theme from this week's parsha,—the *arei miklat* (cities of refuge). The Arizal notes a pasuk in *Shemot* whose words contain the letters of *Elul*:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ לֹא צָדָה, וְהָאֱלֹקִים אֵנָּה לִידּוֹ, וְשִׁמְתִּי לָהּ מְקוֹם  
אֲשֶׁר יָנוּס שָׁמָּה

"But one who did not lie in wait, and God brought it into his hand—I will designate for you a place to which he may flee" (Shemot 21:13).

At first glance, this seems puzzling. What could a pasuk about accidental killers possibly have to do with *Elul*? To answer this, we need

to look deeper into the concept of the *Ir Miklat*.

When Bnei Yisrael entered the Land, one of the very first systems they were commanded to establish was safe cities for those who killed unintentionally. Roads were widened, signs posted, and bridges built so the *shogeg* could reach refuge quickly. Why so much attention to this group? Because the *rotzeach b'shogeg* represents the *beinoni*—not a rasha, not a tzaddik, but someone in between. Not someone seeking to do wrong, but someone who lost focus. As Chazal explain, accidents happen when a person is careless, when priorities slip.

That's why the *arei miklat* were placed among the Leviim. The Leviim lived lives of singular focus on avodat Hashem—unencumbered by land, wealth, or career. Immersed in that environment, the *shogeg* could begin to rebuild his focus and elevate himself spiritually.

And now the connection becomes clear. The *Ir Miklat* is a sanctuary in space. *Elul* is a sanctuary in time. Most of us are not reshaim—we don't sin intentionally. Rather, we get distracted: we forget a bracha, we speak without thinking, we lose patience. Small lapses, but if repeated, they begin to shape our identity. *Elul* is our chance to break that cycle, to find refuge, to refocus.

From the very beginning, Hashem “prepared the road” for us, giving us Teshuva as the path back. As the *Shaarei Teshuva* explains, one of Hashem's greatest kindnesses was to create this escape route. During *Elul*, we can surround ourselves with our own “Leviim”—shiurim, cheshbon hanefesh, opportunities to re-anchor ourselves in what truly matters.

This month is our *Ir Miklat*. It is our safe space in time—a chance to step aside from distraction, realign with our goals, and come closer to Hashem. ■




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