

ELLUL REFLECTION & RETURN

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

As we greet the month of Ellul this coming Thursday and Friday, it is important to appreciate the historical and contemporary significance of this month of preparation.

The Jews received the 10 Commandments on the 6th of Sivan, 2448. Moshe ascended Sinai to learn the Torah and remained for 40 days and nights. In his absence, due to a mistaken calculation, the Jews assumed that Moshe was not returning and made the Golden Calf. Descending from Sinai on the 17th of Tamuz, Moshe broke the 1st Luchos, destroyed the Golden Calf, punished the sinners, and began a second 40 day period of prayer and supplication begging for Hashem's forgiveness. On the 1st day of Ellul, (this coming Thursday) Hashem commanded Moshe to reascend Sinai to receive the 2nd Luchos.

During the 2nd stay of 40 days and nights the people immersed themselves in prayer and Teshuvah hoping for Hashem's reacceptance of them as the Chosen People. In order to avoid making the same miscalculation as before, the people sounded the Shofar at the end of each day that Moshe was on the mountain. Moshe returned after 40 days on Yom Kippur, 2449, bearing the 2nd Luchos and Hashem's full acceptance of their Teshuvah. From then on, the 40 days, starting with Rosh Chodesh Ellul and culminating with Yom Kippur, have been designated as the period for soul searching, and Teshuvah.

Starting with Mariv on Thursday, we add Psalm 27 at the end of Shachris and Mariv. Friday morning after Shachris, we will begin sounding the Shofar every day. The saying of David continues through Succoth. We do this because of the references to Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Succoth made in that Psalm.

This period and the Yomim Noraim are resplendent with symbols and customs. Beginning with the month of Ellul, we introduce into our daily activities the focus of this special period: Tefilah, Teshuvah, and Tzedaka. The sounding of the Shofar reminds us of the origins of this period, culminating with Yom Kippur. However, the intent is far more than a historical commemoration.

As explained, the Jews in the desert sounded the Shofar at the end of the day to indicate the end of each of the 40 days Moshe was on the mountain and avoid a repeat miscalculation. Why then do we sound the Shofar every morning after Shachris?

This period is intended to focus us on our ability to rebuild and do Teshuvah. Therefore, we sound the Shofar in the morning to capture the imagery of Moshe ascending the mountain on the morning

of the 1st day of those last 40 days to accept the 2nd Luchos and Hashem's forgiveness. Knowing that we have sinned is important; knowing that Hashem forgives, is far more important. How often have we been motivated to seek forgiveness from a friend only to be rebuffed by their lack of desire to forgive? How quickly that desire to apologize dissipates! Knowing that Hashem will forgive generates the desire to seek forgiveness.

The custom of adding Psalm 27 to the daily davening is another technique for focusing us on the nature of this special month. Starting with the 1st day of Ellul we enter into a period highlighted by the severity of being judged on Rosh Hashanah, the certainty of being forgiven on Yom Kippur, and the celebration of renewed intimacy with Hashem, manifested during Succoth. It is an amazing sequence of introspection, change, and renewal that is captured within the verses of the 27th Psalm.

The first verse refers to Hashem as our light and salvation. Light refers to the harsh, but honest, perspective of judgment that forces us to confront the truth of our actions and rationalizations.

Salvation refers to the benevolence of Hashem's forgiveness on Yom Kippur that embraces us in renewed intimacy and trust.

The later mention of being sheltered by Hashem's Succah, is the comfort and security generated by our intimacy with G-d and the trust we have in Him. We are so confident in our renewed relationship that we celebrate with seven days of joy, culminating in Simchas Torah.

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