

ELUL

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The arrival of the month of Elul this week marks the turn of the seasons for us as the summer (though not necessarily the heat) wanes. It also more importantly marks for us the advent of the great holiday season of the succeeding month of Tishrei.

It is a time of assessment of the departing year and hope and commitment and prayer regarding the future year. In Eastern Europe the folk saying was that "even the fish in the rivers trembled with the advent of Elul." In our modern sophisticated society, rare are the human beings let alone the fish in the rivers that tremble at any event or at any time.

Yet we would be completely unfeeling if the arrival of Elul did not stir within us feelings of anticipation tempered with a touch of anxiety. The past year, like almost all other years, was one of mixed emotions and uneven accomplishments. Yet every year brings with it unexpected blessings and accomplishments and presents us with previously unknown challenges.

Elul is the perfect time to assess these events of the past year and see our road ahead. Life today is so complicated, noisy and distracting that we rarely take the necessary time and effort to judge ourselves, our behavior, goals and hopes. Elul provides us, if we take the opportunity to grasp its potential blessing, to accomplish this necessary assessment of the past and rededication to our future.

Without such a necessary time out in our lives we are prone to repeat past errors and to give up on cherished hopes and future accomplishments. Perhaps we no longer tremble at the arrival of Elul but we certainly should at the very least think about trembling and rededication in our lives.

The Ashkenazic custom is to sound the shofar at the conclusion of the morning services during the month of Elul. Sephardim already begin the recitation of early morning selichot - penitential prayers - with the arrival of Elul. These customs are meant to remind us of the importance of preparation in spiritual matters and Jewish life.

Just as one has to prepare one's body for strenuous physical stress and activity - one cannot arise one morning and say to one's self that today I am going to run a marathon race without having previously trained for that ordeal - so too is it in the spiritual world.

Effective and meaningful prayer on the High Holy Days requires training and preparation. It is too great and dangerous a leap from the everyday mundane and often tawdry world to the exalted spiritual realm of the High Holy Day season if there is inadequate training and preparation for the event.

Elul provides us with that month of training and preparation. It, with its special customs and rituals, is meant to help us to get into shape, so to speak, for the challenge of the Days of Judgment and Awe that follow it. Forfeiting Elul's blessings and opportunities diminishes our abilities to truly exploit the opportunities that the succeeding High Holy Days can afford us.

Elul is our personal trainer that helps prepare us adequately for the forthcoming challenges of the season and of life. It should therefore never to be treated lightly.

The turn of the seasons also reminds of us of the fragility of life itself. Israel is blessed with almost all evergreen trees in the country. But there are enough falling leaves around to remind us that "man is merely a tree of the field." The Torah serves us as being a "tree of life." If we are successful in keeping our leaf, so to speak, connected to this tree of eternal life then we are also eternally ever green.

The Jewish view of life is that it is eternal in one form or another and this concept of eternity, of influencing our future generations that are yet unborn, should govern our lives and daily behavior. Elul comes to remind us of this truth. It raises and rouses us and forces us to see life in its long run and true perspective.

The shofar sound and the selichot will long survive us but hearing them and following them in our lives is a guarantee of our soul's eternity and Godliness. In the American West there is a tree called the "quaking Aspen." Its leaves constantly tremble even in the stillest of air. I recently saw these trees and was most moved by them. It reminded me of the month of Elul and its meanings and lessons. As long as nature still trembles before its Creator so should we.

Shabat shalom.

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