

Elul: A Time of Love

By Yaakov D. Homnick

A sort of culture has emerged, predominant at least in the yeshivah world, which defines the month of Elul as a time for cultivating trepidation. With the Days of Awe looming, our earnest *bachur* (young man) is enjoined to begin quaking in his boots for a full month before Rosh Hashanah. He must be careful not to smile too brightly during that period, lest he be marked as the most frivolous brand of scoffer.

In theory, these gathering clouds of dread should inspire our young friend to walk the long and winding road to sincere *teshuvah* (penitence). As for oldsters like ourselves, whose schedules are imposed upon us by the exigencies of fiscal obligation, we scrounge in our free moments for stimuli that enable us to hearken back to those fearsome precincts, the Eluls of our faded youth.

In recent years, I have persistently promoted a grand heresy, backing it with the audacious claim that it is truer to the sources and long-term traditions of Elul. Namely, that Elul is primarily a time of love, that both in the language of opportunity and in the



Illustration: Caryl Herzfeld

language of obligation, it needs to be presented just that way. It is a chance to achieve a deeper love of God. With that great opportunity comes the concomitant obligation to take steps to build the intellectual and emotional

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foundation of that love. At the end of that road lies the real penitence, the poignant and puissant peregrination we call *teshuvah*.

The Talmud in *Yoma* (86b) differentiates between penitence born of fear and penitence born of love. The distinction is that the fear-based version can only reduce an intentional sin (*mayzid*) to a sin of negligence (*shogeg*), while the love-based form not only eliminates the negative imprint of sin entirely, it converts it into a merit. Yes, amazingly, in the latter version, the person emerges with a net gain, his ledger augmented by the overall experience.

Without entering into this counter-intuitive phenomenon of profiting from the sin/love/penitence axis, we are sharply arrested by the awareness that a *teshuvah* from fear does not extenuate; it merely attenuates. In other words, penitence from fear is a plea bargain, accepting a conviction for a lesser offense; only penitence born of love

restores a perpetrator to innocence! Why would we not focus on the true repentance, the one that buries the sin under stepping-stones of one's dead self (to shamelessly steal a phrase)?

This is not to diminish the significance of fear and awe, *yirat Shamayim*, in a full Jewish service of the Almighty. After all, even a beginner's knowledge of theology includes the idea that Abraham represents love and Isaac represents fear, and that the completeness of Jewish service is achieved by the merger of those two aspects by Jacob who "sits in both tents." Our concern, however, is to correctly identify the particular ideal associated with a full penitence and the trail that Elul blazes toward that goal.

Indeed, the sources for demarking Elul as a month with outstanding spiritual properties all bespeak love as its defining element. *Ani Ledodi Vedodi Li*, which is the acronym most widely quoted in halachic texts, is a quote from Song of Songs (6:3): "I am drawn to my lover, and my lover is drawn to

me." This is hardly a vague point that requires supplementary elaboration. The classic halachic précis, *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, cites another acronym: *Et Levavcha Ve'et Levav*, which is taken from the verse: "And God will correct your heart and the heart of your offspring to love Him..." (Deut. 30:6).

The earliest source for treating Elul differently than the rest of the year is in the RaN's commentary on the Talmud in *Rosh Hashanah*. The fourteenth-century scholar explains that since Moshe went up Mount Sinai for forty days to ask God for forgiveness for the incident with the Golden Calf, the thirty days of Elul plus the first ten days of Tishrei (through Yom Kippur) are a time of great closeness between God and the Jewish People. Once again, closeness and love are the themes.

And how could it be otherwise? If complete penitence must be born of love, then certainly the original *teshuvah* of the nation as a whole must be founded in a spirit of love. It seems only natural, then, that the day of the giving of the second tablets (after that forty-day session) is considered a day of joy, like a wedding, as

elaborated in the last *mishnah* of *Taanit*.

Additionally, the readings from the Prophets that accompany the Torah on the four Shabbatot in Elul are part of the "Seven of Consolation," which are read after the ninth of Av to recreate a forward-looking and optimistic spirit in the Jewish heart after the mourning for the destroyed sanctuaries. Clearly, the appropriate approach to Elul is to build on the succor of the prophets' visions for a bright future and to generate a passionate love—an intimacy with God, which mocks the momentary illusion that is the basis of sin. True *teshuvah* is an inevitable byproduct of that sense of belonging, of owning a place in God's court; a member of the palace guard must check his plebeian antics at the gate.

As we recite daily in Elul, King David, the master of *teshuvah*, shows us the way, laying out the sentiment of love and closeness that opens the heart to Godliness (Psalms 27:4): "One thing I asked from God, that I seek, to dwell in the house of God all the days of my life, to gaze upon the delight of God and to contemplate in His palace." JA

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