

Dear Friends,

It may be hard to believe, but in just about six weeks from now, Rosh HaShanah will be upon us! Of course all final decisions will be made based entirely by medical data closer to the 25th of September, but things are looking very promising as of now that finally, after three long years, we will once again gather in our sanctuary as an in-person (and virtually also for those who still prefer to keep their distance) community to pray the High Holiday! The anticipation is, indeed, very high! Before we get there, though, before Rosh HaShanah arrives, comes the allimportant preparatory month of Elul, which begins this year on the evening of August 26.

As I imagine you are aware already, it is during the ten days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur that we engage in the intensive process of Cheshbon haNefesh (a thorough “self-accounting” of our deeds) in order to be able to seek forgiveness from those whom we have wronged. While this process is indeed both laudable and critical, we would be foolish to assume that 10 days could possibly be a long enough period of time to conduct the process in even a remotely thorough fashion. Fortunately, tradition accounts for this challenge, which is where the month of Elul comes in.

It is during Elul that we first dip our toes into the water, easing and preparing our way into the process of reflection and atonement. Or, to put it another way, in the words of the Maharal of Prague: “For the entire month of Elul, before eating and sleeping, a person should look into their soul and search their deeds, that they may confess.”

To aid in this process, tradition offers a number of traditions to inspire and guide us along the way. For example:

- Though it is common knowledge that we sound the shofar on Rosh HaShanah to wake us up to the necessities that await, it is actually during the month of Elul that we begin every day (other than Shabbat) with a blast of the horn to awaken our desire for self-improvement.
- Elul is a particularly popular time for Jews to visit family cemeteries, so as to be inspired by the merits of their deceased loved ones.
- It is customary to increase our level of tzedaka offerings. Tradition teaches that by doing so, we bring added protection not only to ourselves, but to the entire Jewish people, too. Also on the topic of continued protection, similar to the way many of us might check the batteries of our home smoke-detectors when we adjust our clocks for Daylight Savings, so too is it customary during Elul for Jews to check the parchment inside their mezuzot to make sure no damage has come to them that would render them no longer kosher.
- While it tradition teaches that God is never truly cut off from the true seeker, all the same, during the month of Elul, God is considered to be particularly accessible and eager to see us make amends with our fellow human beings.
- It is customary to say additional prayers of repentance in preparation for the atonement process of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. These prayers are called selichot (which means “apologies” in Hebrew). Sepharadi communities include these additional prayers for the entire month of Elul, while Ashkenazi communities wait until the Saturday night immediately preceding Rosh HaShanah to begin.

- And finally (even though this is hardly an exhaustive list), it is on the first day of Elul that we typically begin signing our letters and emails with words of encouragement for a good new year. Common phrases are:

“Shanah tovah” (טובה שנה) (Have a] good [new] year.”

“Shanah tovah u’metukah” (וּמְתוּקָה טוֹבָה שָׁנָה) (Have a] good and sweet New Year.”

“Ketivah v’chatima tovah” (וְכַתִּיבָה וְחַתִּימָה כְּטִיבָה) (May you receive] a good inscription and sealing [in the Book of Life].”

“Leshana tovah tikatev v’tichatem” (וְלִשְׁנָה טוֹבָה תִּכְתֵּב וְתִּחַתֵּם) (May you be written and sealed for a good new year.”

So, as we look forward to gathering for Rosh Hashanah on the evening of Saturday, September 25, let us all make good use of the preparatory month of Elul, which begins on the evening of Friday, August 26.

And finally, though it may be a bit premature for me to sign off this way . . .

“Shanah tovah” (טובה שנה) (to All!

Rabbi Dubin