

Elul: A Time for Reflection, Retrospection, and Preparation

As we enter the month of August, we know we're on the path to the High Holy Days, for the month of Elul has just begun. Our sensibilities are heightened because we know that very soon the rituals of autumn will be upon us: Back-to-School sales, fall fashions at the department stores and advertisements in the newspaper, returning home from summer vacations, ripe garden vegetables and flowers at 'farm fresh' stands, and, of course, the most important fall ritual of all, the High Holy Days.

From the time I was a little kid, in my parents' home there was just as much excitement around the approaching High Holy Days as there was excitement about going back to school. 'Back to school' was something truly to be excited about for sure: anticipating seeing old friends, wondering who your teachers would be for the coming year, getting new school clothes, and, of course, a brand new pencil box, one of the back-to-school necessities one simply could not do without.

For me, though, the excitement regarding the High Holy Days did not have anything to do with the actual services themselves. It was about finally getting to wear those very 'special' clothes I shopped for with my mother specifically for the High Holy Days. I actually still remember some of those outfits from decades long gone and they were special indeed. They were fancy, and fancy clothes meant something important was happening when I dressed in them. And I wore them specifically for the purpose of going to the synagogue. So there was always a connection from my earliest memories between the preparation for the high holidays and the holidays themselves.

Now, as an adult, this period that anticipates the High Holy Days, the month of Elul, is for me one of heightened mindfulness related to interiority, a spiritual kind of preparation. We approach the High Holy Days with an entire month of certain Jewish rituals that allow us to open our minds and hearts to the meaning of these days of awe. For starters, we recite Psalm 27 on a twice daily basis and it is traditional to blow the *shofar* during *Shacharit* every weekday during the month of Elul. I interpret this as the great 'wake up call'. We all need to be reminded on a daily basis that the most holy and sacred time of the year is approaching and to begin to ready ourselves. The very name of the month preceding the Jewish New

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Year – *Elul* – is, in fact, an acronym for '*Ani L'Dodi V'dodi Li*'. This phrase, taken from the Song of Songs and translated as 'I am to my Beloved as my Beloved is to me' is a metaphor for our loving relationship of mutuality with God. This is the Covenant that bonds the Jewish people with Adonai and we are reminded of this on a daily basis during the month of Elul.

This year I encourage all of you to spend time each day, whether attending our daily minyan, or our Shabbat services, or even in the privacy of your own home, to re-engage your mind and heart with your lifelong memories of the *Yamim Noraim*, these special Days of Awe. Reflect upon how the meaning of these holy days have impacted you in your life and what you hope to 'make right' in the days ahead and beyond. This is the time to make peace with yourself, your loved ones, both family and friends, and even co-workers, whom you may have offended or unwittingly hurt. For only when *Teshuvah* is complete and the words of forgiveness have been spoken by those whose forgiveness you are seeking, can you begin to request such exoneration from the Holy One. May the month of Elul bring us closer to ourselves, each other and Adonai and may we find the peace and healing within as we prepare for the High Holy days ahead.

In anticipation of the High Holy Days, we have two special evenings during Elul coming up at B'nai Jacob that I encourage you all to attend. The first is our Friday evening monthly musical service called, "Friday Night Live!". Please join with the B'nai Jacob community for this innovative and lively traditional Friday night service with a contemporary spin. Save the date: **August 24th** at 8 PM. Then on Saturday evening, **September 8th**, we will have our traditional *Selichot* Service. This hour-long service, following a program to be announced, is the first time we hear the familiar melodies of the High Holy Days to come. It's sort of a special preview of what's ahead for us musically for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Mark your calendars now for these two special events. I look forward to seeing all of you in shul before the High Holy Days this year.

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