The Jewish Month of Elul

A Month of Mercy and Forgiveness
Hodesh haRahamin vehaSelihot

The month of Elul is the last month of the Jewish civil year. However, according to the biblical Calendar, it is also the sixth month, counting from Nisan which is called the "first of the months" in the Torah (Ex. 12:2). This document explores the spirituality of Elul for Jews and Judaism.

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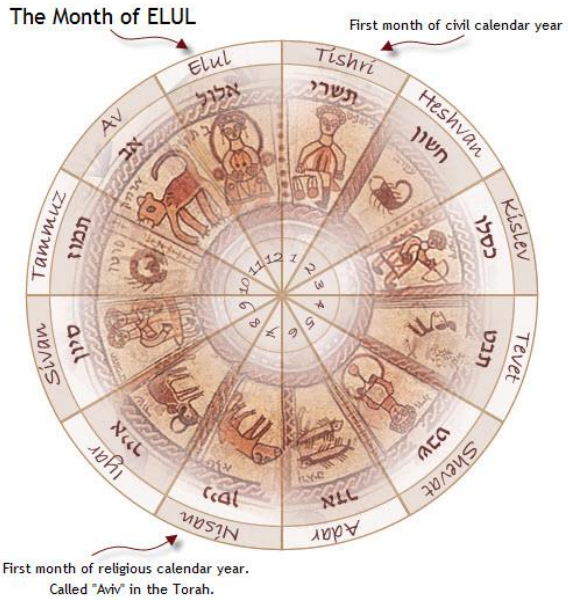
"It is a Tree of Life to all who hold fast to It" (Prov. 3:18)

The Month of Elul

The month of Elul[1] is the last month of the Jewish civil year. However, according to the biblical Calendar, it is also the sixth month, counting from Nisan which is called the "first of the months" in the Torah (Ex. 12:2). Elul precedes the month of Tishrei (called the seventh month, Numbers 29:1).

Placed as the last of the months and followed by the New Year, Elul invites an introspective reflection on the year that has been. Elul begins the important liturgical season of Return and Repentance which culminates with Rosh HaShanah,[2] the Days of Awe[3] and Yom Kippur[4] (1-10 Tishrei). Elul takes its place as an important preparation time for repentance.



Elul follows the months of Tammuz and Av, both catastrophic months for Israel according to tradition. Tammuz is remembered as the month in which the people of Israel built the Golden Calf (Ex. 32) and Av, the month of the sin of the spies (Num. 13). The proximity of Tammuz and Av to Elul underscores the penitential mode of this, the last of the months, before the new beginning and spiritual re-creation that is precipitated with the New Year beginning the following month of Tishrei. The Jewish calendar carries the message that in the cycle of life estrangement can and should be followed by reconciliation.

"Elul" Spirituality

Tradition teaches that Elul was the month when Moses ascended the mountain for the second time and remained there for forty days after the incident of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32; 34:27-28). Jewish tradition recounts that Moses spent the period between the new moon of Elul (*Rosh Chodesh Elul*) and Yom Kippur (10th day of the month of *Tishrei*), i.e., 40 days, praying for God's forgiveness for the people of Israel, only descending when the period of repentance was complete. That Moses did descend from his period of seclusion with God of the mountain and he did so with the second set of tablets is seen as testimony to God's great mercy towards the people (*Bava Bathra* 121a).

Elul. An invitation… Wisdom through Understanding

During the month of Elul each person and, indeed, the Community of Israel as one, reflect upon the past year, entering, on the first day of Elul, into a forty day period of introspection.

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[1] Elul is an ancient Akkadian word meaning "harvest" and is related to an Aramaic word meaning "search."
[2] Rosh HaSahnah, "Head of the Year," is the first day of Tishrei, the New Year in the civil Calendar. It is the first day of the *Yamin Noraim* (The Days of Awe) and falls ten days before Yom Kippur.
[3] The Days of Awe (*Yamin Noraim*) are ten days from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur: 1st to 10th Tishrei. Also called the High Holy Days and *Aseret Yemai Teshuvah* (Ten Days of Repentance) these days are a time for intense focus upon repentance and forgiveness in preparation for Yom Kippur.
[4] Yom Kippur, also called The Day of Atonement falls on the 10th Tishrei. It is the holiest day of the Jewish year, observed with a 25 hour total fast, intense prayer and attendance at synagogue services. Yom Kippur is the pinnacle of the 40 penitential days which begin with Rosh Hodesh Elul and continue through to Yom Kippur.

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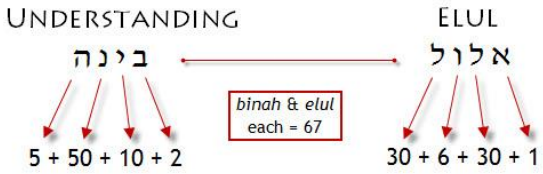
Kabbalists interpret the Gematria[5] associated with Elul (Elul = 67) with *binah* / understanding (**בינה** | *binah* is also numerically equivalent to 67).



Elul is a time to grow in wisdom, to reflect with understanding upon one's standing within the framework of God's mercy and justice. Spiritual reflection associated with the preceding month, Av, pictures God as having retreated within a concealed inner sanctum—a reflection, in fact, of human distancing and withdrawal from God. Elul becomes a time to make good, to reflect, to advance in wisdom (through *understanding* [*binah*]), and to begin setting things to rights—the beginning of the "*teshuvah*" process.

The King is in the Field

Jewish mystical thinking encourages the idea that reflection upon one's inner motivations and thoughts one is able to engage the "power" of the soul within the body, reshaping the way in which we live and respond—re-orientating our "will" to God and to good.

> "...And his heart shall understand and he shall return and be healed" (Isa. 6:10).

An Hasidic parable

During the season of repentance, and particularly on Yom Kippur, God is envisaged as Father and King. Hasidic reflection sees God as, "the king in the field" during Elul, drawn out of "concealment" and approachable. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi[6] in his *Likkutei Torah* explains the Hasidic teaching of the approachful-ness of God during Elul. The teaching takes the form of a parable.

> A king normally lives in a palace, separated from and unapproachable by ordinary people—this is how our relationship with God seems as we become bound up in the world with its distractions, frailties and concerns. During Elul, however, the king (God) might be experienced as having left the hiddenness of the palace and having entered into the field (i.e., that place where ordinary people are) and so becoming available to his subjects. In this month of Elul, while people continue with their normal activities they are at the same time aware of the presence of God and are drawn to prayer, reflection and response.

This parable, like much of Hasidic philosophy, invites us to enter a period of personal reflection where our ultimate goal is to uncover the Divine point which is within. This is the holy point (*Yehidah*) within every person's heart—the "living soul," which is partnered with the Divine Eternal and which, in the course of everyday life, becomes covered and hidden. During Elul we are the ones

[5] *Gematria* is a system where-in a numerical value is attributed to a word or phrase. The most commonly used methods are adding the numerical value of each letter of a word or phrase and finding a correlation with the result in another word. Conclusions drawn using Gematria depend upon the idea that words or phrases with identical numerical values bear some relation to each other, or some relation to the number itself.

[6] Shneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812) is also called the Baal HaTanya, The Alter Rebbe, RaZaSH and several other names. He was the founder of Chabad, a branch of Hasidic Judaism. His works include: *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*, *Likkutei Amarim* (*Tanya*), a Siddur now published as *Siddur Tehillat HaShem*, *Likkutei Amarim*, *Sefer HaMa'amorim*, *Responsa* and Hasidic Discourses on the study of the weekly Torah portions, *Torah Or* and *Likutei Torah*.

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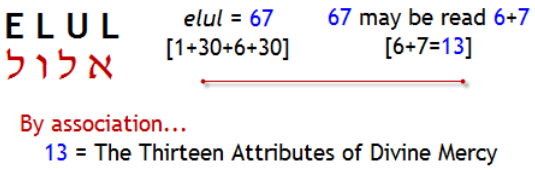
who "come into the field" seeking the King, and it is during Elul that we turn to prayer and seek to draw close to God remembering the Divine attributes of Mercy and Forgiveness. According to *The Sefat Emet*[7] it is in our Divine point that God has implanted eternal life in us and it is this Divine point which we must seek to uncover in order that we might be renewed; released from our sinful and imperfect selves, and "inscribed for life"—that God will inscribe "Life" on our hearts—with the coming of Rosh HaShanah.

Elul — A Month of Mercy and Forgiveness

Elul is called the "Month of Mercy" and "Month of Forgiveness" (*Hodesh haRahamin vehaSelihot*). It is a time for *teshuvah* (return) to God, to renew one's efforts in prayer, Torah study and charity, and to seek forgiveness for transgression, especially against one's fellows. It is the belief in Jewish tradition that God does not forgive sins committed against another person unless one first endeavors to be reconciled with those wronged. During Elul, the last month before the Days of Awe, Jews, mindful of the great sin of the Golden Calf, enter into a spiritual and practical cleansing which will culminate with Yom Kippur.

According to a complex form of Gematria, Elul = 13: א+ל+ו+ל = 1+30+6+30 = 67 ≈ 6+7.



Accordingly, the number thirteen suggests a connection with *The Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy* and the month of Elul which is developed through the month of Elul.

> "The LORD! The LORD! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgressions and sin" (Ex. 34:6-7).

Selihot

Liturgical customs during Elul include the recitation of *Selihot*.[8] *Selihot* prayers, mentioned in the *Mishnah* (*Ta'anit* 2:1-4), originated as prayers for fast days. *Selihot* are recited by Sephardim[9] from the first day of Elul; by Ashkenzim[10] as the month draws to a close

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[7] *The Sefat Emet*, R. Yehudah Lieb Alter of Ger (1847–1905), is named after his famous work, *Sefat Emet* (*The Language of Truth*).

[8] *Selihot*. From the Hebrew root *Samech*|*Lamed*|*Chet* meaning "to forgive or pardon. [The Modern Hebrew word for "sorry" *Slihah* is from the same root, i.e., "Forgive me."] *Selihot* are penitential prayers and include liturgical poems (*piyyutim*), biblical verses, confessional prayers and the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.

[9] The Sephardim are Jews who follow Jewish liturgical styles, traditions and customs which derive from the practices of the Jews of the Iberian peninsula before the expulsion of 1492. Sephardic practices spread throughout the areas to which these Jews emigrated.

[10] The Ashkenazim are Jews are those whose traditions and customs are derived from mediaval Jews of the Rhine lands in central Europe, and northern and north-eastern Europe. Ashkenazic Jews begin to recite Selihot at least four days before Rosh Hashanah usually beginning with the preceding Saturday night. If Rosh Hashanah falls on Monday or Tuesday the recitation of Selihot begins on the Saturday night of the preceding week.

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The chief theme of the *Selichot* of Elul and the Days of Awe is the *Thirteen attributes of Divine Mercy* (*Shelosh Esreh Middot haRahamim,* Ex. 34:6-7).

The custom and association of *The Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy* with the forty day period of Elul and the Days of Awe, culminating on Yom Kippur, is drawn from ancient tradition. The *Tur*[11] in *Orah Hayyim* records a midrash (found in *Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer*[12]) which recounts that after the incident of the Golden Calf, when Moses re-ascended the Mountain, there began for Israel a forty day period of reconciliation culminating in the revelation of *The Thirteen attributes of Mercy* to Moses (on Yom Kippur.)

In the Ashkenazic tradition the recitation of *Selihot* through Elul reaches a climax on the eve of Rosh HaShanah with the inclusion of a collection of *Selihot* called *Zechor Berit*, which invoke the merits of the Patriarchs and recall Divine promises. "Remember the covenant with Abraham and the binding of Isaac…"

> The Holy City and its regions are turned to shame and to spoils and all its desirable things are buried and hidden and nothing is left except this Torah.
>
> (from *Zechor Berit Avraham, Selihot 42,* composed by Gershom Ben Judah).

Elul and the Shofar

The shofar is sounded every morning after the Shaharit services from the second morning of Elul to the twenty eighth day. This practice, related to the sounding of the horn at Sinai, calls attention to the significance of Elul as a period for reconciliation and introspection. Maimonides[13] described the sound of the shofar in Elul as a "wake up call," a reminder to those who are "asleep" that it is time to rise up from complacency and travel the pathways of repentance (*Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4).

Psalm 27

During the month of Elul the custom is to recite Psalm 27 communally from *Rosh Chodesh Elul* until the middle of the Sukkot, 45 days later. Midrash suggests the first verse: "God is my light and my helper, whom shall I fear?" alludes to the High Holydays. God is "my light" on Rosh HaShanah, and "my salvation" on Yom Kippur; further, "for he will hide me in his Sukkah" (v. 5) hints at Succot (*Kitzur Shulhan Aruch* 128:2[14]).

The Baal Shem Tov[15] instituted the custom of reciting three additional chapters of Psalms each day, from the 1st of Elul until Yom Kippur (on Yom Kippur the remaining 36 chapters are recited, thereby completing the entire book of Psalms)

There is a further allusion to Elul found in Psalm 27…

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[11] The *Arba'ah* Turim often called simply *The Tur*, is an halakhic code written by Jacob ben Asher (1270-c. 1340). He is often referred to as *Ba'al Turim*. The code is divided into four (*arba'ah*) sections (*turim*/rows)—the name refers to the four rows of the High Priest's breast plate: *Orah Hayyim, Yoreh De'ah, Even Ha'ezer, Hoshen Mishpat*. The *Shulhan Aruch* of Joseph Karo follows the same four part structure.

[12] The *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* is an aggadic and midrashic work which is is sometimes ascribed to R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (c. 80-118 CE) although some parts are dated as late as the 8th Century.

[13] Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, also called The Rambam, (1135-1204) was a philosopher, Torah scholar and physician whose works have become influential in Jewish scholarship. His *Mishneh Torah*, a codification of Talmudic law, has eminent authority.

[14] *Kitzur Shulhan Aruch* is a 19th Century compendium of halakhah compiled by R. Shlomo Ganzfried.

[15] Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (1698-1760), often called *The Baal Shem Tov* (*Master of the Good Name*) or *Besht*. He is considered the founder of Hasidic Judaism.

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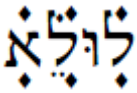
Lulei – "Had I not trusted!..."

"Had I not trusted that I would see the goodness of God in the land of life…" (v. 13).

"Had I not trusted!..."



The Jewish scribal tradition has accentuated the word *lulei* (*Had I not*) by placing dots over the word in the text. The word *lulei* in Hebrew, לוּלֵא, when read backwards (i.e., left to right) spells Elul.

The Talmud relates King David's uncertainty regarding his "reward in the land of the living." According to the Tanna, Rabbi Jose,

> David spoke before the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Master of the world, I am sure that you will pay a good reward to the righteous in the world to come, but I do not know whether I shall have a share in it'? This was because David was afraid that a sin of his might cause his exclusion or cause God's promise to be unfulfilled. (*Berachot* 4a).

The psalm teaches us that the possibilities that David envisaged, "Had I not the confidence that I would enjoy the goodness of the LORD", are so terrible the psalmist does not complete the thought.

According to The Pri Tzadik[16] the word *lulei* (*had I not*) is significant because it is a hint that this is a time for a person to fix his or her actions so that their sins do not cause them to lose out on the reward in the world to come. The Baal Turim[17] writes that *lulei* (**ל.ו.ל.א**) are the letters of word Elul "because from Elul onwards I tremble before God." (Devarim 30:6)

ELUL — A month of Introspection and Spiritual preparation

A number of spiritual teachings are derived from acronyms formed from the Hebrew letters of Elul. *Aleph* / *Lamed* / *Vav* / *Lamed* | **א.ל.ו.ל**

A famous dictum which comes to the fore during the High Holy Days is:

"*Teshuvah, Tefillah and Tzedakah can change the evil decree*."

Usually translated as Repentance, Prayer and Charity, this dictum is reflected in spiritual associations made during Elul and further developed during the Days of Awe where the possibility that one's name will be inscribed for Life of Death in the *Book of Life* adds an incentive to "improve oneself" through, repentance, prayer, service to God and acts of charity.

Penitential themes in Acronyms of ELUL.

Penitential themes are especially evident in the teachings derived through associations with the letters of the word Elul – **א.ל.ו.ל** – and biblical verses.

- ***Teshuvah***[18] (usually translated, Repentance).
  And the LORD your God will circumcise ***your heart, and the heart of your*** *offspring* (Deut. 30:6).

[16] *The Pri Tzadik* is the name given to Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen Rabinowitz (1823-1900); also known as Tzadok HaKohen. He was a Hasidic Rebbe and left writings on Halakhah, Hasidut, Kabbalah and Ethics as well as astronomy, algebra and geometry.
[17] Jacob ben Asher (1270-c. 1340) author of the *Arba'ah Turim* (often called *The Tur*).
[18] *Teshuvah*, usually translated as "Repentance" comes from the Hebrew root, *Sh.U.V.*, (**ש. ו. ב**) meaning "to Return."

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- ***Tefillah***[19] (usually translated, Prayer).
  I am my Beloved's and my Beloved is Mine (Song of Songs 6:3).
- ***Tzedakah***[20] (usually translated, Charity).
  Each man [shall give gifts] to his fellow, and presents to the poor (Esther 9:22).
- ***Torah Study***. ("A place of Refuge for us" ~*Makkot* 10a)
  If [God] allows it [the unintentional death], into his hand I will designate for you [a place he may flee] usually translated, *"I will assign you a place to which to flee"* (Ex. 21:13).
- ***Kulo La-HaShem*** (Total Devotion to God).
  One for a burnt offering and one for a sin offering (Lev. 12:8).
- ***Guelah*** (Redemption).
  To the LORD, and they said, saying, "I will sing…" (Ex. 15:1).

1. TESHUVAH — REPENTANCE — Returning to the Lord

אֶת-לְבָבְךָ וְאֶת-לְבַב | ***Et L'vavcha V'et L'vav***
Your heart and the heart [of your descendants]…

And the LORD your God will circumcise ***your heart, and the heart of your*** *offspring, to love the LORD thy God with all your heart, and with all your soul, that you may live* (Deut. 30:6).

Circumcision is a sign of the covenant between God and Israel; "circumcision of the heart" speaks of a total binding of the soul to God. The verse in our quotation, significantly, comes from the Torah portion always read on the last Sabbath before Rosh Hashanah.

During the month of Elul this verse has particular pertinence. It is an invitation and a reminder that *teshuvah* (returning) to the ways of God is the way to LIFE.

In context, the verse (Deut. 30:6) speaks of the experience of both the negative and the positive events that will occur in life and the divine promise that if you "*shavta ad Adonai Elohekha*" (turn toward the LORD your God) God will help you by extending the divine capacity for love and empathy (v.3) and the LORD will gather you, indeed, fetch you from wherever you are scattered (v.5). The verb "*shuv*" (to return) occurs seven times in Deuteronomy 30:1-10 and appropriately these verses are read at the beginning of the High Holy Days.

The passage speaks in the context of "end times" inviting *teshuvah* (return and repentance). In the penitential time of Elul it contains the promise of renewal in the new year beginning with Rosh HaShanah.

2. TEFILLAH — PRAYER — Service of the Heart

אֲנִי לְדוֹדִי וְדוֹדִי לִי | ***Ani l'dodi v'dodi li***
I am my Beloved's and my Beloved is Mine (*Song of Songs* 6:3).

It has been customary to interpret "Beloved" in this verse from the Song of Songs as referring to God and the close and loving relationship that exists between Israel and her "Beloved." During Elul

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[19] *Tefillah*, usually translated "Prayer" derives from the root *P.L.L.* (**פ ל ל**) which means "to judge, clarify, plead, entreat, intercede." In the *hitpalel* form the meaning is "to judge oneself" or "to appeal to God as a judge," a form frequently appearing in the Bible (e.g., 1 Kgs. 8:42).

[20] *Tzedakah* from the root Tz.D.K (**צ ד ק**) means righteousness, fairness or justice. Giving to the poor (commonly called "Charity") is more than a magnanimous act. It is an act of justice, an act of righteousness, an act of fairness; it is responding to the commandment "Justice, justice, you shall pursue" (Deut. 16:20).

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the connection formed between this verse and the penitential mode of the season becomes an invitation to reflect upon that relationship. The Aruch HaShulhan[21] suggests, "Now is the time that all my thoughts should be directed towards my Beloved (God) then, my Beloved is also to me; my Beloved helps, assists, and cares for me." Elul becomes one way of creating Sacred Time.

Also found in this verse is an illusion to the forty days after which the repentance of Israel was accepted by God. [The last Hebrew letter of each of the four words is *yud*. *Yud* = 10 x 4 = 40].

Mishna Berura states,

> This alludes to the forty days from the beginning of Elul until Yom Kippur for during these forty days repentance is [more readily] accepted so a person should bring their heart near to their Beloved [God] with repentance, and then the Beloved will be close to them to accept the repentance with love (*Berura* 581:1).

Ani l'dodi v'dodi li is an invitation to prayer—Service of the Heart—ha'*avodah she'ba'lev*.

> "What is service of the heart?" ask the rabbis. "It means prayer" (*Ta'anit* 2a).

3. TZEDAKAH — CHARITY — Justice, justice, you shall pursue…

אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ וּמַתָּנוֹת לָאֶבְיוֹנִים | *Ish L'Rei'eihu U'Matanot L'Evyonim*
Each man [shall give gifts] to his fellow, and presents to the poor. (Esther 9:22)

While these acts [giving gifts] constitute acts of loving kindness they also constitute a response to the Divine mercy and forgiveness which is anticipated and sought throughout the month of Elul. In the story of Esther the verse is the foundation for the halakhic requirement to celebrate, at Purim, the transformation from grief to joy. The book of Nehemiah (8:10–12), likewise, links the sending of *manot* (gifts) to those who have no prepared food, along with eating and drinking well, to constitute the celebration of the holy day, Rosh Hashanah.

4. TORAH STUDY — "The Words of Torah are a Refuge"

By means of another verse suggested by the acronym: אלול [Elul] becomes a "Refuge in Time," creating space for a spiritual preparation for Rosh HaShanah and the Days of Awe leading to Yom Kippur.

אֲנָה לָיָדוֹ וְשַׂמְתִּי לְךָ | *Ina L'yado V'Samti Lecha*
if [God] allows it [the unintentional death], into his hand
I will designate for you [a place he may flee]
Usually translated, "*I will assign you a place to which to flee*" (Ex. 21:13).

This verse comes from the passage in Exodus which speaks of the cities of refuge. Elul, now associated with this passage, becomes a place of refuge [a Refuge in Time] for sinners. In Elul we are invited to take advantage of created refuges in "Time" and "Space."

How? The Torah becomes a refuge in Time because according to the rabbis,

> "*the words of Torah are a refuge*" (*Makkot* 10a).

[21] The *Aruch HaShulhan* is a work compiled by Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein (1829-1908). He is given the name, The Aruch HaShulhan, after his work. The *Aruch HaShulhan* is a chapter by chapter restatement of the *Shulhan Aruch* (a codification of halakhah by Joseph Karo).

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The *Sefer Ha-Ḥinuch*[22] discusses six commandments associated with the six cities of refuge which focus upon God's presence and the importance and centrality of them in our relationship with God. These commandments are pictured as "six walls" which surround us daily and constantly creating a refuge in Space.

1. The ceiling. A constant reminder that "I am God your God."
2. The floor. Remain focused on God. Do not worship falsely.
3. The front wall. Remember God is One to be worshiped with heart, soul and might.
4. The right wall. Love and fear of God. God's right hand eternally embraces us in love.
5. The left wall. God's left hand supports and lifts our head. We see the exalted and distant God.
6. The back door. A reminder not to be led astray by our hearts or our eyes. We should guard our "back door" against temptations that might disconnect our consciousness of God.

The Arizal[23] teaches that we learn from this verse "He did not lie in wait, but God placed it in his hand – I will give you places to flee…" (Ex. 21:13) that in the month of Elul, in the place of refuge, there will become for us a desire to repent of the sins of the entire year, including accidental sins.

The rabbis interpreted "places of refuge" in terms of Torah: "Exile yourself to a place of Torah" (*Avot* 4:14). The whole of the month of Elul becomes a spiritual refuge until the time of "trial" (Rosh HaShanah)—a time to prepare the spirit and heart for *teshuvah* (return) to God.

5. KULO LA-HASHEM — ALL for GOD

אֶחָד לְעֹלָה וְאֶחָד לְחַטָּאת | *Echad L'olah V'echad L'chatat*

One for a burnt offering and one for a sin offering (Lev. 12:8).

The verse "One for a burnt offering (*olah*) and one for a sin (*chatat*) offering" occurs three times in the Torah but with variations in the order of the offerings. The order "a sin offering (*chatat*) and a burnt offering (*olah*)" occurs twice (Lev. 5:7 and Num. 6:10); the order "one for an *olah* and one for a *chatat*" occurs only in Leviticus 12:8 in connection with the purification rites for a woman after giving birth.

While the *olah* takes first place in this recitation from the Torah the sages have noted that in the temple order of sacrifice the *chatat* sacrifice was offered before the *olah*. The Talmud relates a rabbinic discussion (*Zevachim* 90a) as to why the *chatat* in practice always preceded the *olah*. The *chatat*, they suggest, is "like an intercessor [to appease a king]; When the intercessor has appeased [the king], the gift [*the olah*, the votive offering] follows.

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[22] The "*Ḥinnuk*" [*Sefer HaḤinuch*] is an enumeration of the six hundred and thirteen affirmative and negative precepts of the Mosaic Law, arranged in the order of the weekly Torah portions. The work provides ethical and halakhic teachings based upon Talmudic and later traditions and draws upon Alfasi, Maimonides and Nachmanides as authorities.
An anonymous work, it has been attributed by some to Aharon ha-Levi of Barcelona. This attribution is disputed, however, because of discrepancies in opinions found expressed in the work when compared with opinions in Ha-Levi's other works. Thus, some scholars suggest the author of *Sefer ha-Hinnuk* was possibly another Aharon Ha-levi who was a student of RaSHBa (R. Solomon Aderet), but not a colleague of RaSHBa, as was Aharon ha-Levi of Barcelona. It is also suggested that the author may have been the brother of Aharon ha-Levi, Pinchas ben Joseph ha-Levi.

[23] Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572) was a renowned kabbalist. His name Arizal is an acronym derived from the title Elohi Rabbi Yitzchak (The Godly Rabbi Isaac).

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Naturally the question arises as to why the ordering: *olah*, *chatat* which appears in Leviticus 12:8 is chosen to be the one inferred in Elul. The answer, perhaps, lies in the unique character and role of the month of Elul in the religious and spiritual psyche.

The Hebrew word *olah* means "elevation"—the *olah* is an offering from below to above; the *chatat* on the other hand has a "drawing down" function—the offerer receives atonement from God. The *olah* reflects the desire to "set God before me always" (Ps. 16:8) while the *chatat* recalls the words of the psalmist "my sin is before me always" (Ps. 51:5).

The *olah korban*, the burnt offering, as described in the Torah, is a free offering, no "strings attached". It is a pure gift to God (*Leviticus Rabbah* 2:7) which "goes up" both physically (as smoke) and spiritually, elevating the soul of the person making the offering. The root meaning of the word "*korban*" is to "bring close."

The verse "one for an *olah* and one for a *chatat*" (Lev. 12:8) accentuates the *olah* over the *chatat* in a way that connects to and emphasizes the focus on the *teshuvah* of Yom Kippur—the totality of commitment of the person with God. The *chatat* is concerned with individual sin (which *is* important at Yom Kippur) but the *olah* prioritizes the commitment of total devotion to God (*kulo la-Hashem*), a priority that is maintained in the order of the *vidui* (confessions) of the Yom Kippur liturgy where *olah* related confessions precede the *chatat* type aggressions in the list.

The shofar speaks…

The *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*[24] teaches that on *Rosh Hodesh Elul* [the new moon of Elul] God said to Moses, "Ascend the mountain to me" (Ex. 24:12) and instructed the people in the camp to sound the shofar as a reminder to stay faithful and not to worship idols. In this way "God was elevated through the shofar blast, as the verse states:

God has ascended [olah elohim] with the teruah;
the LORD with the call of the shofar (Ps. 47:6)"
[***Olah Elohim*** *b' teruah; Adonai b'kol shofar*]

Because of this *The Tur*[25] in *Orach Hayyim* teaches that the Sages established the blowing the shofar on Rosh Chodesh Elul in every year, and for the entire month of Elul, in order to warn Israel to repent. Amos reminds us: "Is the shofar ever sounded in a city and the people not tremble?" (Amos 3:6).

The sound of the shofar goes up and God ascends (*olah Elohim*) throughout Elul.

There is everywhere, in all creation, the presence of God and the proximity of the Divine to humankind is never so accentuated as in the spirituality of Elul. God is both "in the field" and approachable, and elevated by human faithfulness. Perhaps Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's profound observation that "the Shofar melts away God's strict, disciplinary judgment and leaves only His overriding love and mercy and sensitivity"[26] helps us to understand the priority of the *olah* over the *chatat* in our verse.

The *Midrash Tehillim* (47) explains that God is elevated through the shofar, "God has ascended with the teruah blast" (Ps. 47:6) because through the shofar's *teruah* the name Elohim, which is the name of

[24] The *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* is ascribed to R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (c. 80-118 CE).
[25] *Orah Hayyim,* is one of the four *arba'ah turim* ("Four Rows") of Jacob ben Asher's *Arba'ah Turim* (also called *The Tur*) (1270-c. 1340). The other "rows" are: Yoreh *De'ah, Even Ha'ezer, Hoshen Mishpat*.
[26] Soloveitchik Joseph B., "Israel's Hidden and Revealed Teshuvah," *Yemay Zicharon*, W.Z.O., Jerusalem, 1986, pp. 215-227

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God meaning Justice, ascends and becomes the name YUD HEH VAV HEH which is the divine attribute of Mercy.

Joseph Karo[27] taught, "From the shofar of the desert we only learn that the shofar sound prevents us from sinning. We still need to learn that the sound of the Shofar awakens a person to repent." (*Beit Yosef*[28], *Orah Hayyim*).

6. GEULAH — REDEMPTION — "*I will sing.*"

לַיהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר אָשִׁירָה | *L'Hashem Vayomru Lemor Ashira*
To the LORD, and they said, saying, "I will sing…" (Ex. 15:1).

[This acronym for Elul is read here in reverse, i.e., left to right]

After the miracle of the crossing of the sea, Moses (and Israel) "sing" praises to the Lord. The introduction to the verse, "Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song" is, when interpreted from the perspective of Rabbinic Hebrew, translated as future tense.

אָז יָשִׁיר-מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת
לַיהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לֵאמֹר אָשִׁירָה… (Ex. 15:1)

[יָשִׁיר (*yashir* | *he will sing*) is future tense; …שָׁר (*shar* | *he sang*) is past tense.]
The sages of the Talmud explain the verse's use of the future tense is an illusion to the future; to resurrection.

> R. Meir said, "Whence do we know resurrection from the Torah? From the verse, 'Then shall Moses and the children of Israel sing this song unto the Lord' not 'sang' but 'shall sing' is written." Thus resurrection is taught in the Torah (*Sanhedrin* 91b).

Elul and Redemption

The linking between the month of Elul and this verse (Ex. 15:1) connects the month of Elul with Redemption—Jewish interpretation of the verse helps form a bridge between Israel's experience of redemption in the past and the hope of redemption in the future.

From the very moment of miraculous redemption from Pharaoh's army by the hand of God, Israel said "*I will sing.*" Indeed the moment is recalled in the daily prayers on Weekdays, Sabbaths and Festivals.[29] Just as God was present for the Israelites of old, God too will answer the prayers of the faithful today.

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[27] Joseph ben Ephraim Karo (1488-1575) is the author of the *Shulhan Aruch* the most authoritive codification of halakhah in Jewish scholarship. He is also author of *Beit Yosef*, a commentary on Jacob ben Asher's *Arba'ah Turim*, a work which he later developed in compiling the *Shulhan Aruch*.
[28] *Beit Yosef* is an early work of Jospeh Karo and a forerunner of his later work, the *Shulhan Aruch*. *Beit Yosef* is a commentary on the *Arba'ah Turim* of Jacob ben Asher.
[29] The *V'ahavta*, the recitation of paragraphs from Deut. 6:4-9; 11:13-21 & Num. 15:37-41, is followed by *Geulah*, the blessing for redemption, the concluding blessing of the Shema. The congregation then recites of sings "*Mi Chamocha*" the first two lines of which are taken from the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15:1-21). The Amidah section of the service follows.

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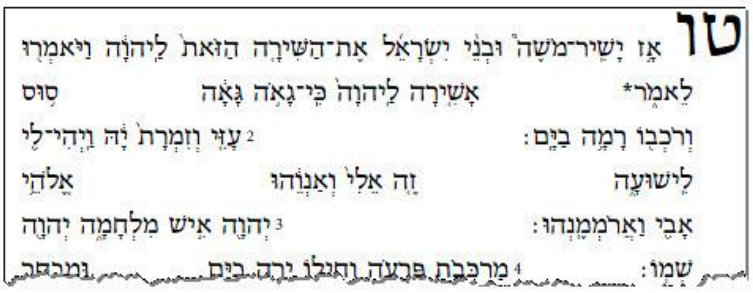
The *Mekilta*[30], too, draws on the possibilities inferred in the words, "Az *yashir*"— "*Then* he will sing…" (Ex. 15:1). As Israel sang in the past, the possibility remains that Israel will sing again in the future.

> *Then Sang Moses.* Sometimes the word "then" (*az*) refers to the past and sometimes to what is to come in the future. … Rabbi says: It is not written here: "Then Moses sang" (*Shar*), but, "Then Moses will sing" (*Yashir*) . Thus we find that we can derive the resurrection of the dead from the Torah (*Mekilta be Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Shirata*, Ch. 1).

Moses' song is traditionally read in the Torah service with a special chant and written according to a special pattern in the form of "half brick over a whole brick, and a whole brick over a half brick" (*Talmud*, *Megilah* 16b).


טו אָז יָשִׁיר־מֹשֶׁה וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לַיהוָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ
לֵאמֹר* אָשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי־גָאֹה גָּאָה סוּס
וְרֹכְבוֹ רָמָה בַיָּם׃ 2 עָזִּי וְזִמְרָת יָהּ וַיְהִי־לִי
לִישׁוּעָה זֶה אֵלִי וְאַנְוֵהוּ אֱלֹהֵי
אָבִי וַאֲרֹמְמֶנְהוּ׃ 3 יְהוָה אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה יְהוָה
שְׁמוֹ׃ 4 מַרְכְּבֹת פַּרְעֹה וְחֵילוֹ יָרָה בַיָּם

"Half brick over a whole brick, and a whole brick over a half brick" (*Talmud*, *Megilah* 16b).

David of Kotzk recounts a tradition that the angels wanted to sing praises to God but God said to them, "Wait, and let Israel sing first. Humans are able to praise only when they are inspired. If we do not give them the opportunity, the desire will pass" (*Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, p. 407).

ELUL and the Days of Awe

As the month of Elul draws to a close the penitential mode which has been developed throughout the month intensifies as people enter the High Holy Days of Tishrei with Rosh Hashanah, *the* Day of Judgment, followed by the days of Awe, and Yom Kippur.

[30] *The Mekilta de Rabbi Yishmael* is a halakhic midrash to the Book of Exodus. The Aramaic word "mekilta" corresponds with the Hebrew word "middah" which means "a measure" or "a rule". The work is devoted to scriptural exegesis. *The Mekilta of Rabbi Ishmael* is of unknown date and not to be confused with *The Mekilta of Rabbi Shimon* (a Halakic midrash on Exodus from the school of R. Akiba). It is not mentioned specifically in the Talmud but passages quoted by rabbis in the Talmud use material from the Mekilta sometimes attributed by the Geonim to *The She'ar Sifre de Rab* or *The Mekilta de Eretz Ysirael.*

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