

— *Elul* —

The Path *of* Laughter *and* Teshuvah Me'Ahavah

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The Month of Return

B'eZRas Hashem, as we prepare for *Rosh Chodesh Elul*, we enter the month of *teshuvah*, the month of *ratzon*, and the revelation of the *Yud-Gimmel Middos HaRachamim*. Elul is a time of desire, love, connection, and great compassion. The *tzaddikim* describe it as a time when the *ohr* draws closer to the *ma'or*, when the light returns toward the source from which it emerged.

Whenever an outgrowth moves away from its root, it begins to forget its source. Eventually, it takes on a shape and identity as though it exists independently. This is the root of *galus*: the experience of something that comes from a source but imagines itself to be separate from that source. *Teshuvah*, and specifically the month of Elul, is the beginning of a return from that illusion. It is a reattachment and reorientation toward the closeness that, in truth, has been present all along.

Throughout the year, beginning with *Rosh Hashanah*, we carry hopes for who we want to become. We want to be close to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. We want to be attached, engaged, and present. We make plans for ourselves spiritually, psychologically, and physically. Yet as the year unfolds, many of those dreams and expectations remain unrealized.

Elul arrives as the final month of the year, and in a certain sense it can feel like the graveyard of the year. We encounter the remains of the hopes we held so earnestly the previous *Rosh Hashanah*. We look at ourselves and wonder: What became of me? What happened to everything I hoped to accomplish?

The Danger of a Teshuvah Rooted in Shame

When a person begins contemplating what they have failed to accomplish, it is natural to fall into judgment and negativity toward the self. Because of this, Elul and *teshuvah* can become clothed in darkness. They can feel like a heavy burden of responsibility: I have to fix myself; I have failed to use the strengths I was given; if I do not change, perhaps something bad will happen; perhaps I will be judged unfavorably; perhaps *Hashem* is angry with me.

But when a person experiences Divine anger, distance, and alienation, the possibility of genuine connection becomes weakened. Connection is the prerequisite for spiritual growth. We need to feel safe and held. We need to recognize that *Hashem* is the *Makom* who holds all things and that all of existence rests within the all-encompassing embrace of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*.

Healthy change can only emerge from within a background of safety and connection. If Elul confronts me with my fallen dreams and I respond by drowning in shame, sadness, despondency, and hopelessness, then *teshuvah* itself becomes almost impossible. Perhaps fear can frighten a person into changing. At best, however, that produces *teshuvah me'yirah*, a return driven by the desire to avoid punishment or negativity. That is not the ultimate purpose of *teshuvah*.

Every year, therefore, we must reorient ourselves toward Elul. Every year brings with it the losses and disappointments of the year that preceded it, and recognition of those losses easily awakens waves of self-judgment, fear, and concern. These are weakened positions from which to approach our relationship with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*.

The goal is not *teshuvah me'yirah*. The goal is *teshuvah me'ahavah*: a return born from love, a joyous return to the only place where we will ever truly find comfort.

Running Back to the Source

Teshuvah me'ahavah is a swift movement back toward our root. When we realize that there is nowhere else to turn, we run into the loving embrace of safety, calmness, and a deep sense of abiding all-rightness. This is the secret of *teshuvah*: "All I need is You, *Ribbono Shel Olam*. The only way I can

survive in this world is with You. All I want is to be close to You.”

This *teshuvah* is motivated by a kind of love-sickness. We recognize how much time we have spent throughout the year caught in folly and lowliness. We find ourselves having fallen, but the fall does not express what we truly wanted. We do not deliberately desire to spend our lives playing in the mud. Our deepest *ratzon* is to sit near the throne of the King, to live as both a child and an *eved* of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*.

Elul opens a new space for that desire. Through the *Yud-Gimmel Middos HaRachamim*, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* reveals new pathways through which we can reorient ourselves toward His light and loving embrace.

Our instinct is therefore to run upward—all the way toward the *Kisei HaKavod*. When a person suddenly recognizes how low they have fallen and simultaneously discovers how desperately they want closeness, an extraordinary intensity is awakened. The person can rise from the lowest place toward the loftiest heights imaginable, to the place where the *ba'al teshuvah* stands and where even the *tzaddikim gemurim* cannot stand.

The *tzaddik* ordinarily climbs the ladder of spiritual development rung by rung. There are orders, systems, pathways, boundaries, and stages that must be traversed. But

teshuvah me'ahavah possesses another force entirely. When there is nothing but an unbridled love-sickness for *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, the barriers are shattered by the intensity of the soul running upward. There is a *chayil yeseirah*, an additional force that propels the soul through thickness and concealment and breaks through to the other side.

This is the movement of *teshuvah*: the throwing of oneself upward, like the *zerikah* of the *shofar*, from the lowest place toward the highest.

Teaching the Tzaddikim to Return

The *tzaddikim* themselves must learn this art. *Teshuvah me'ahavah* teaches a person to move beyond the ordinary order, beyond the ladder itself, and to run toward places that, according to the normal structure of spiritual development, they do not have permission to reach.

This is the secret of the teaching of the *Zohar HaKadosh* that *Mashiach* comes *l'asva tzaddikaya b'tiyuvta*, to bring the righteous into *teshuvah*. The truly righteous may seemingly have nothing on which to repent other than the fundamental imperfection inherent in existence itself. Nevertheless, every Jew must constantly be engaged in *teshuvah*. This can only be fully understood from the perspective of *teshuvah me'ahavah*.

Ahavah is reattachment. It is a reconnection that ultimately reveals, retroactively, that there was never anything but connection. *Ahavah* has the *gematria* of thirteen, corresponding to the *Yud-Gimmel Middos HaRachamim* awakened during Elul. These thirteen attributes reveal that there is always connection, always compassion, always another pathway toward unity.

Some of those pathways may be hidden. Some may appear severe. A person may find themselves feeling unimaginably low. Yet when the *Yud-Gimmel Middos HaRachamim* are awakened, they reveal the ancient bonds of love, the *ahavah mesuteres* that reaches beneath all darkness. They reveal that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* loves *Nishmas Yisrael*, every aspect of every soul, even within its thickness and concealment.

He waits, so to speak, for the slightest gesture upward. Whatever degree a person manages to detach themselves from the thickness of worldliness creates, as Rebbe Nachman teaches, a tremendous *sha'ashua*, an expression of delight and love from Above. This is the purpose of creation: to be engaged in *teshuvah*, to remember the ancient love, and to return.

The World Is Too Serious to Take Seriously

How, then, do we enter *teshuvah me'ahavah*? The first thing we must do is learn not to be so serious.

The world is profoundly serious. It is what *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* desires. His ultimate intention is to reveal Himself specifically within the *dirah b'tachtonim*, in the lowest imaginable place. This world is *sof ma'aseh b'machshavah techilah*: last in action but first in thought. It is ultimately the place in which the *tachlis* of all *tachlisim*, the purpose of all purposes, will be revealed.

Precisely because this world contains such potent light, its concealment is also serious. Life contains darkness, struggle, pain, and confusion, each person according to their own measure. These realities deserve to be taken seriously.

Yet there comes a point when the world becomes too serious to take seriously. When we tighten ourselves around reality, we become incapable of functioning within it. Everything begins to be seen through fear, limitation, deficiency, scarcity, and not-enoughness. Our vision contracts. We begin looking suspiciously at others, and from this contraction emerge jealousy, desire, anger, and the many forces that distance us from *Hashem*.

At that point, we have to learn how to laugh.

We have to allow the world to soften. Trying to take this overwhelmingly serious world with absolute seriousness becomes a recipe for disaster. Paradoxically, the harder I try to control reality and force it into the shape I believe it must have, the more resistance I create. I have to let go and let God. I have to learn how to laugh at myself and at the world around me.

Laughing Through the Concealment

Ultimately, *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* laughs with the world, and in the future He will laugh with us as well. We must learn to tune ourselves toward that distant laughter of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* and the *tzaddikim* so that we can begin to laugh as well.

There may be nothing particularly funny about the world. But laughter can become the very movement that enables us to rise from the bottom to the top. If I take every level of my existence with absolute seriousness, then I become trapped inside my present definition of myself. I am what I am. My struggles are what they are. My behaviors define me. My darkest thoughts about myself become, *chas v'shalom*, the final truth.

A person can drown inside that consciousness.

We therefore have to laugh ourselves out of stuckness. We laugh until the walls of concealment begin to crack and we recognize that things are not necessarily what they appear to be. Reality can be seen differently. I can be seen differently.

This is the light of *Yitzchak Avinu*: to discover light within severity and life within death itself.

Laughter awakens an openness to being, a gentleness toward existence, and a willingness to inhabit the world rather than control it. This does not mean abandoning *yiras Shamayim*. On the contrary, it allows us to serve *Hashem* healthfully. When a *mitzvah* appears before me, I can enter it with *simcha* and presence. I can believe that the entirety of existence rests upon what stands before me right now, not threateningly, but joyously.

Laughter, ease, calmness, breath, openness, compassion, expansiveness, patience, joy, and hope are all connected. They emerge when we lean back into the recognition that we remain within the circle of unity. We have never fallen outside of it. The love has never been broken. There is an ancient love that cannot be broken.

That is the secret of *teshuvah*. If that love were not already present, *teshuvah* itself would be impossible. We therefore reenter the work of becoming better not through fear and judgment, but through laughter and love.

The Shofar of Laughter

Rebbe Nachman tells of a dream during the days of Elul. He wanted to enter a house in order to hear the *shofar*. As they passed from house to house, they came upon one in which people were singing, clapping, dancing, jumping, and rejoicing with tremendous intensity. There were extraordinary dances, the kind associated with people overflowing with joy and laughter.

Rebbe Nachman said that this must certainly be a good house in which to hear the *shofar*.

Someone present connected this dream with Rebbe Nachman's teaching in *Likutey Moharan*, where the secret of the *teruah* and the *shofar* is associated with breath, with an expansive breath that passes through existence and removes concealment and denial. When the heaviness that has settled over the mind is lifted, we become capable of dancing and clapping. Through the movements of dancing and clapping, that air and breath are awakened.

The student therefore suggested that the *teruah*, the sound of the *shofar*, corresponds to clapping and dancing. Rebbe Nachman agreed.

Rebbe Nosson then discovered another allusion. The verse describing the future redemption says, *Az yimalei sechok pinu*

uleshoneinu rinah, then our mouths will be filled with laughter and our tongues with song. The initial letters of *s'echok p'inu u'leshoneinu r'inah* spell *shofa*"r.

The *shofar* is therefore bound to laughter, song, confidence, and joy in our relationship with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*.

Changing the Garments of the Mind

Elsewhere, at the conclusion of *Torah Chaf-Aleph*, Rebbe Nachman offers a practical approach to sweetening consciousness through this quality of laughter.

Throughout the year we develop serious operating systems through which we interpret ourselves and the world. These integrated forms of consciousness become the lenses through which reality is experienced. Eventually we begin to imagine that we have reached the boundaries of what can be known: this is who I am, this is what other people are, and this is simply how reality works.

But for everything we know, there are endless levels of what we do not know. Beyond every assumption lie possibilities that exceed our present comprehension. These are the *makifim*, the surrounding levels of consciousness that have not yet entered the integrated mind. They contain the possibility of hope and change that has not yet become available within our present way of thinking.

At the end of the year, I may sincerely believe that I cannot change a particular aspect of myself. From the vantage point of my present consciousness, that conclusion may even seem undeniable. But a new *makif* can enter. New information can become available. A new perspective can reveal that what appeared impossible yesterday is possible today.

The garments of thought we have accumulated throughout the year can imprison us inside an identity. Rebbe Nachman offers the metaphor of a person being chased by a friend who wishes to harm him. To escape, the person changes his clothing. He puts on a disguise, and the pursuer runs directly past him.

This changing of garments is part of the work of Elul.

Our old patterns of thought have become too serious. The slightest failure can imprison us in shame and convince us that change is impossible. Elul asks us to change the garments of the mind. We cultivate courage, love, and an awareness of God's undying attachment to the soul. We remember how close we truly are to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, how close we are to the *Beis HaMikdash*, and how precious every good thought, word, deed, intention, *mitzvah*, and act of *chesed* truly is.

We put on garments of grandeur, *malchus*, and *ratzon*. We remember that we are children of the King. Certainly we

serve as servants of the King, because that is what *Hashem* desires from us, but beneath everything we know that we are His children.

When the garments change, new *makifim* can descend. Something that was inaccessible a moment ago becomes available now. I suddenly discover another way to understand myself and another way to understand the world. There is no redemption greater than realizing that what I thought I knew was not the final truth. There is more. There is always more light. There is always more *Ohr Ein Sof* waiting to enter.

Oz Vehadar Levushah

Oz vehadar levushah, we clothe ourselves in garments of strength, grandeur, confidence, and connection to *Hashem*. And when are these garments changed?

Oz vehadar l'evushah v'atizchak l'eyom a'charon, she is clothed in strength and dignity, and she laughs toward the final day.

At the end of the year, when we encounter what feels like the death of the year and everything that remained unrealized within it, we awaken the possibility of change by changing the mind itself. Rebbe Nachman points out that *l'evushah v'atizchak l'eyom a'charon* contains the initial letters of *Elul*. The changing of the garments that produces laughter on the final day is itself the secret of *Elul*.

Thus *shofar* is hinted within *sechok pinu uleshoneinu rinah*, and Elul within *levushah vatizchak leyom acharon*. This is the *middah* of *rachamim*, the loving compassion that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* reveals every year as Elul arrives.

Laughter and Ohr Ein Sof

The *Tzemach Tzedek* teaches that *sechok*, laughter, shares the *gematria* of *Ohr Ein Sof*. Laughter expresses the realization that there is always more Infinite Light available and that this light can transform everything in an instant.

The Rebbe, Rav Yitzchak Meir Morgenstern *Shlita*, develops this idea in *Deah Chochmah L'Nafshecha* in his teachings on Elul, *Ani L'Dodi V'Dodi Li*, in connection with Rebbe Nachman's discussion in *Sichos HaRan* of the *milsa d'bedichusa*, the acts of comedy performed at a wedding in order to awaken great joy.

Laughter, the Rebbe explains, is an extraordinarily lofty quality in *avodas Hashem*. It is bound to the secret of Purim, the time of complete unification.

The spiritual work that begins in Elul continues through *Rosh Hashanah*, the *Yamim Noraim*, *Sukkos*, *Shemini Atzeres*, and *Chanukah*, but its ultimate movement is toward Purim. There is *simcha* and dancing on *Sukkos*, but the

ultimate goal is the *sechok* of Purim, the laughter of complete unity and redemption.

When we enter Elul, therefore, our eyes are already directed toward Purim.

A Deeper Path Than Shame

When Elul arrives, each person begins engaging in *teshuvah*. Frequently this awakens pain, shame, embarrassment, and a constricted consciousness. We continue toward *Rosh Hashanah*, where much of that sadness and humiliation begins to be rectified.

Certainly a person must recognize how far they remain from properly grasping *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. There are times when *bizyonos* and a weakening of our ordinary self-confidence can bring us toward contrition and *teshuvah*. This is one familiar path of return.

But the Rebbe teaches that there is another path, a more inward and far deeper path than shame and embarrassment: *derech ha-sechok*, the path of laughter.

Through laughter, the lower level becomes attached to the higher.

Imagine a small child dressing himself in a way that makes him appear much older and more serious than he actually is. The sight produces laughter precisely because everyone knows that the child cannot possibly be what he is pretending to be, and yet here he stands dressed that way.

Similarly, imagine a simple person with no wisdom standing before the king and pretending to be the king himself. The absurdity produces tremendous laughter, to the point that even the king laughs.

When the king laughs, the lower level becomes attached to the higher.

There Is No True Yeridah

This is the inner work of Elul. A Jew must break open the heart and desire to return to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. We must be serious about *teshuvah* and serious about this world. Yet within that seriousness we must remember the innermost quality of laughter.

In truth, no Jew ever undergoes a *yeridah* in the ultimate sense. What we experience as descent and failure can itself become part of the pathways through which *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* brings us upward. We experience distance and the pain of falling so that we can rise again with greater intensity and strength.

Through *teshuvah*, a person can ascend to a level unimaginably higher than what could have been reached without the fall. A Jew therefore does not have to remain imprisoned in pain because *avodas Hashem* has not unfolded according to plan. We may desperately want to return. We may want forgiveness, pure *teshuvah*, and *tefillah* that feels the way we believe it should feel. Yet we cannot accomplish all of this through our own strength. It is not our task to do it alone.

We strengthen ourselves with the recognition that our *yeridos* and struggles can themselves become part of the path of laughter. We refuse to allow the fall to become our final definition. We stand again.

The Father Hiding from His Child

This is the secret of the teaching of the *Maggid of Mezritch* concerning the nature of laughter.

A father plays with his child. At first the father reveals himself and plays openly. Then he hides. The concealment causes the child to search and yearn for his father with greater intensity. Eventually the father reveals himself again, and the renewed encounter produces an even deeper laughter and delight.

So it is with every Jew.

A person must know that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* remains beside them throughout every fall. The experience of distance itself can become the pathway toward an even deeper bond. *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* has tremendous *nachas ruach* when a Jew recognizes that He remains present regardless of the circumstances and regardless of where that person presently finds themselves.

Hearing the Laughter

Our work in Elul is therefore to enter *teshuvah me'ahavah*: to become a little less serious, or more precisely, to remain serious while discovering laughter within the seriousness itself.

We enter the *Yud-Gimmel Middos HaRachamim*, the thirteen attributes of compassion. These correspond as well to the *Yud-Gimmel Middos shebaTorah nidreshet bahen*, the thirteen principles through which Torah is interpreted. Sometimes we must reinterpret and reinterpret again until we discover another way of seeing ourselves, another way of understanding what has happened, and another pathway toward laughter and love with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*.

We await the *seudah* of the *Livyasan*, when we will laugh together with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. But even now we can begin listening for that laughter. We can listen for the

laughter of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, the laughter of *Mashiach*, and the laughter of the *tzaddikim*.

And we can become that presence for others. A smile, a laugh, or a kind word can puncture the suffocating seriousness of another person's reality. It creates a small opening through which the pressure can escape and breath can enter again. Through that opening we can laugh, dance, and throw ourselves upward, beyond the concealment and toward the place of *teshuvah gemurah*.

May we be *zocheh* to return to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* through love, to recognize the ancient bond that was never severed, and to hear the laughter hidden within the seriousness of the world, *b'ezras Hashem*.