

Elul 5763

The month of Elul occupies a special place in our religious imagination. Beginning with the first - startling - blast of the shofar on ראש חודש, to the haunting melody of סליחות as we begin חודש, it is a month that evokes a special atmosphere of חרדת הקודש, of awesome majesty.

I think people usually assume that what makes אלול special, what gives it its special nature, is that it is the month that precedes the ימים נוראים, and therefore a month of preparation for the יום הדין.

R' Yisroel Salanter showed a palpable and noticeable trepidation the entire אלול. And he was asked: צי איז אלול דען א בער, is Elul then a bear? To which he replied that דוד המלך was fearless enough to have said גם את הארי ואת הדוב הכה עבדיך, even did I smite the lion and the bear without fear, yet that same דוד המלך said: סמך בשרי וממשפטיך יראתי מפחדך בשרי וממשפטיך יראתי, my flesh crawls with fear of you, and of your judgement am I afeared.

Certainly, then, the awesomeness of אלול is related to the approach of ראש השנה and the days of דין which it brings into prospect.

But this is only half the story. The significance of אלול lies not only in the fact that it leads up to the beginning of the new year, but also - and even more fundamentally - in the fact that it is the last and concluding month of the past year.

Let me explain this:

You know, one of the saddest facts of life is that eventually everything most things go stale. The freshest, tastiest food eventually goes bad. Ideas go stale; ideas that were once new and exciting and revolutionary become, with the passage of time, boring and passe. Movements, institutions, political parties, that were once important and vital, become useless and worse. And human relationships can grow stale; it requires constant work to prevent a friendship or a marriage from becoming routine.

Even our relationship with the רבונו של עולם can grow stale.

The Torah says in פרשת דברים: ועשיתם בארץ ונושנתם ועשיתם: כי תוליד בנים ובני בנים ונושנתם בארץ; when you will have given birth to children and grandchildren, and you will have grown old in the land. *To grow old in the land*; what a sad image. A nation can also grow old, and tired, and forgetful of its mission. And that weariness breeds cynicism and hedonism and perverseness, and all the vices that finally destroyed the spiritual

health of our people, and lost us ארץ ישראל and the מקדש.

The גמרא in גיטין points out that the value of ונושנתם is 852. The Jewish people lived in ארץ ישראל for 850 years, until the בית המקדש was first destroyed. Says the גמרא: צדקה עשה הקב"ה עם ישראל שהקדים שתי שנים לנושנתם: גמרא. Had they stayed in ארץ ישראל two years longer, had that process of enervation and decline and fall gone on for two more years, then the spark that was kindled at הר סיני would have ח"ו gone out completely, and there would have been nor hope left for our people. And so two years before it would have been too late הקב"ה sent us away into גלות, and thus to stop the slow insidious decay of ונושנתם.

And this dynamic repeated itself many times throughout our history. The משך חכמה, in a very profound passage, writes that the history of גלות in miniature is this: Jews arrive on some new shore and face the challenges of rebuilding Torah and Jewish life. And we would rise to the occasion. Faced with a great challenge, we would summon up courage and invention, and rebuild Yeshivos and communal institutions, reconstitute scholarship, and establish vibrant Jewish life on this new shore. And then, when all that could be done - given the limitations of גלות - had been done, a new generation would grow up without that challenge. For them Yiddishkeit would be easy, could be taken for granted; and, since it is the nature of human perverseness to turn on that which is too easy, they would turn on Yiddishkeit. Again the sad cycle of ונושנתם. And so the השגחה would have to arrange that the Jews be driven to some new shore, where the cycle could begin again.

What is true over the broad sweep of time, hold true also within the narrow confines of a single year. Every ראש השנה is a beginning; it is ראשית שנה. And each ראש השנה we experience a certain sense of renewal. We imagine that the world is being created anew, היום הרת עולם. We are swept up in the majesty and grandeur of the day, and its evocation of קדושה ומלכות, holiness and grandeur. We are moved to our depths by the קול שופר. We try to do תשובה, and make resolutions to better ourselves during the coming year.

How much of that remains by the end of the year? How much of that resolution, of that enthusiasm, of that elevation? How little escapes the steady erosion of time, the insidious decay of ונושנתם!

The Torah describes the sweep of the year, from beginning to end, from ראש השנה to אלול, with the words: מראשית השנה עד אחרית שנה. There is a slight anomaly in the פסוק: When talking about the beginning of the year it says: מראשית השנה, the beginning of *the* year; but when talking of the end of the year it says: עד אחרית שנה, until the end of a year. The Satmar rebbe explained, very tellingly: At the beginning of the year with think that this is *the* year, *השנה*; this year is going to be special, this is the year that I am going to turn the corner, that I am going to really change. But by the end of the year its just שנה, another year, no different than every other.

ראשית שנה is אלול. It is the very end of the year, the furthest point from the ראשית שנה with which the year began. That is its significance and its challenge. Because the challenge of our history is to finally overcome the decline of ונושנתם. We look forward, ultimately, to that time when הקב"ה will say to us - as those who davened, I have redeemed you, bringing the אחרית back to the ראשית, reversing, finally, the terrible sentence of ונושנתם.

And that is our challenge each אלול. ראשית השנה is ראש השנה. אלול is אחרית שנה. The challenge of אלול is to bring the אחרית back to the ראשית, to reconnect them, so that the year can close on the same high note with which it began.

And that is why we blow שופר each day this month - not to anticipate the שופר blowing on the ראש השנה to come, but, rather, to remember the how we blew שופר one year ago. You know how sound has the power to evoke memory. The sound of the שופר this month is meant to evoke memories in us - memories of how we stood here in shul one year ago, with the shul all bedecked in white. To remember how uplifted we were, how moved, how exalted. To remember how we listened in hushed silence to תקיעה, תרועה, שברים, תקיעה. To remember how we cried as we read, together with our friends and neighbors, מי יחיה ומי ימות, who will live this year and who will die; and, looking back, we now know. To remember the resolutions that we made. To remember how we said כל נדרי, hushed at first, and then in gathering crescendo. To remember the sadness of וידוי and of זיכור. To remember the joy when we stood around the חזן at the end of מוסף and sang with him: היום היום היום. To remember the feeling of promise as we wished each other גוט יאר.

That was ראשית השנה. A whole year has gone by since then, a lot of water under the bridge. But if now, at אחרית שנה, at the end of the year, we can re-engage with what we felt then, at ראשית השנה, then we can salvage the year. If we can let the sound of the שופר each morning this month remind us of what we thought and felt and resolved last ראש השנה, and infuse those feelings and memories and resolutions, that sense of קדושה, that fervor, now, at this last opportunity, into our davening and into our lives, then we can - in a small but real way - defy the seemingly inevitable decline of ונושנתם, and we will have redeemed the year, as the הקב"ה will ultimately redeem the world, saying אתכם אחרית כראשית.