

Session 149
Re-eh/Elul – It's all in the Prep
13 August 2023
<https://youtu.be/7ac3Ct1EHE8>

Ari

Shalom everybody, shalom, shalom. Please tell me that you can hear me. We are facing some challenges. Ok, thumbs up, that's great. Oh my goodness, what a thing. I really hope this goes smoothly. We've been losing electricity out here a lot and so our internet was disconnected. Jeremy just drove to the nearby village to reconnect us. So if all of a sudden we lose connection, I have set up my phone by the window in the one spot that sort of has a connection with the mobile hotspot, so I'll try to reconnect if that works. Bottom line is, let's just hang tight together. This is important.

And with all of the stress that's going on, I'm already starting to calm down. Why? Because I'm seeing your faces and it's fun for me to see your faces. And to see all of you. And because I didn't even get to see you last week. You know, it was a last second decision last week that I didn't join, but I just felt so dehydrated and my head-ache was so piercing that I decided to medicate myself and lie down as my wife, Shaena recommended. As Abraham was told by HaShem about Sarah... "Listen to your wife, Sarah," so that's what I did. So I missed you all very much.

But I was actually with my wife in Netanya on "vacation," which is both a word and a concept that I continue to struggle with. You know, a very dear friend of mine owns a place there in Netanya, and he offered us to stay there. And after discussing it with Shaena, we felt it was the right thing to do for us and for our family as a whole. We were just too excited at the prospect of Dvash jumping in the kitty pool, Shiloh playing in the sand on the beach for the first time. But I couldn't shake the discomfort that the whole idea of vacation was causing me. I don't know if you will be able to relate to this what I'm sharing with you, but I just wanted to share my heart because it's still sort of alive within me. You know, and I knew leading up to it, it was something I was going to need to work through. And I think that the idea of going on vacation made me feel a little like I was being, perhaps, ungrateful. Because in many ways, I feel like I live a vacation in this Garden of Eden here in Judea. Not only because of the physical and the spiritual beauty of this place, but also because my mission here is sharing the beauty of Judea and the miracles of HaShem. And while it can be exhausting, it's so intrinsically meaningful and fulfilling to me that it's sort of, vacation-like.

And by that I mean that many people work in their jobs as a profession, as a means to an end. They work to make money so that they can support their family and perhaps take a vacation. But for me, I felt like taking a vacation from something as inherently meaningful as what we what we're doing out here, felt strange and uncomfortable and possibly wrong. I've been

talking to Jeremy about this, also, since I came back. But at the same time, I was simply not sure that I was seeing things clearly and correctly. And when I saw that look in Shaena's eyes, how excited she was, I just knew I needed to get over it and that it was the right thing to do, to go out there. Plus, when I looked around and I saw Jeremy was taking a vacation, Yishai Fleisher was taking a vacation, so many of the people who I consider rabbis and heroes were going on vacation, I figured, "Who am I? Not to go on vacation. I must not be seeing it right."

And so we went and it was beautiful. And the experiences that Shaena and I had together with our children, mostly at the beach or at the kiddie pool, it was just totally without distractions. It was priceless. And as you guys know, I don't share pictures of my family or my kids on social media, ever. But Shaena and I both felt like, we feel like the Fellowship, we're a family here. We are a family. And so we share personal things, like pictures and I just cut it out when it's broadcast on the audio form. So I thought I'd take this opportunity to share a few pictures with you. Just to let you know where I was, is that cool...thumbs up?



Ok, so this just a few pictures. Dvash was on a boat, she couldn't imagine it.



Here we have...who is that? We're playing on the beach together.



Shiloh and Dvash. How cute is that?! I mean you can see it was a special experience.

Despite the joy, it was still challenging for me. In a real way! And before launching into the Fellowship, I want to share a little bit of that with you. Because perhaps some of you may identify with the struggles I was having around the whole thing. And also, you may have

thoughts that you want to share with me later about the whole subject. Some sort of perspective that you can give to me. So I'm going to try to keep this short.

So we got there and we got to this fancy building. At least compared to our standards. I mean for us, having uninterrupted electricity, reliable hot water, asphalt on the road, I mean that's pretty fancy. I mean we took the kids to go to the shopping mall, and it had a little Gymboree in it. And this is the last little video picture I'm sharing. This is them playing in the Gymboree.

Tabitha

Ari, you never sent me the video.

Ari

I never sent you the video?! Ok. Well, I guess that's meant to be. It's cute! It's really cute. If any of you want, you can send me a WhatsApp and I'll send you the video. Maybe Tabitha can share it with you. I don't know if anyone's like dying to see my children in Gymboree. But either way, just seeing the experience, the colors, and the stores, and the stimulation of it all through their eyes was so much fun. Cause it turns out that it's pretty rare...Shaena and I were reflecting on it, that we leave the relative rustic, simplicity of Judea with our kids or at all. So there's just so many things that they were seeing for the first time...like a hot-air balloon. Blew Dvash's mind that people were riding in a balloon in the sky! I mean it was just too much for her to handle.

But even so, you know the building had this beautiful pool, and a kiddy pool, and it was overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, the Yam H'gadol, it's called the Great Sea. By the way, it's not by any means the largest of the seas or the greatest in any capacity. So why is it called the Great Sea? Our sages say because its shores are upon the Land of Israel. Anyways, it just felt so extravagant, and it was a six-minute walk to this outdoor mall called the Piano Center, with loads of kosher restaurants and outdoor games for kids. There were numerous minyanim, you know prayer services for me to pray three times a day.

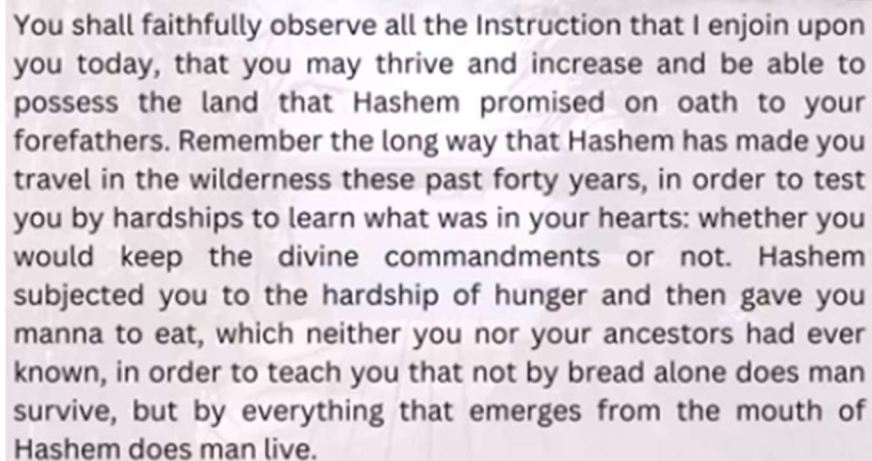
And the reason I'm telling you all this is perhaps to explain the moments where I felt all of a sudden like attacked by these strange thoughts. It was like an ambush in my head. You know, thoughts like, "What more do I need than this? What do I need this war for that we're fighting in Judea? Why all this struggle? Like what do I need it all for?" Because as you know, while I love my home, I love the Farm, I love the mountain, I love my mission, I love my life, if you've been on this Fellowship journey with us long enough, you know that it hasn't been easy and it hasn't been simple. And sometimes it feels like it's unsustainable. Like we're living on miracles. On miracles.

We have just a few things – the Supreme Court that wanted to uproot our vineyards and destroy much of what we're doing out here. There are a number of hostile Arab villages not far from us

that can sometimes cause challenges and threats. There's the EU and the UN, but also like the internal challenges, which sometimes seem more difficult than the external ones. You know challenges with partners, and with money and with my dog eating Jeremy's chickens, and with being stuck with paying child support for five children of our first farm hand who I signed to be a guarantor. Those of you who know what I'm talking about, know what I'm talking about. I'm not going to tell the whole story again.

And so here I was on the beach in the serenity of Netanya. And the thought just flung into my head, "This is the life. It's simple. Everything I need is right here within 6 minutes of this building. It would be so peaceful and serene. What do I need the war for?" And even as I'm saying this, I'm ashamed to say it, but we can be vulnerable with each other, we can be honest. And there were moments where those thoughts were coming into my head. It wasn't an intellectual thing, it was an emotional thing. I think it was a very human thing. I think. Anyways, it was this visceral voice from a simple place within me, and in those moments I felt very disintegrated. You know I felt like there were different parts of me that are usually integrated together that were being sort of teased out and separated out if that makes any sense. It was unsettling.

And then Shabbat comes and I open up the Torah portion from last week and I see that it was speaking directly to me. Chapter 8:



You shall faithfully observe all the Instruction that I enjoin upon you today, that you may thrive and increase and be able to possess the land that Hashem promised on oath to your forefathers. Remember the long way that Hashem has made you travel in the wilderness these past forty years, in order to test you by hardships to learn what was in your hearts: whether you would keep the divine commandments or not. Hashem subjected you to the hardship of hunger and then gave you manna to eat, which neither you nor your ancestors had ever known, in order to teach you that not by bread alone does man survive, but by everything that emerges from the mouth of Hashem does man live.

-Deuteronomy 8:1-3

You know and when I read that, it was one of those moments I felt like the Torah was reintegrating. We are not in this world for leisure and relaxation. We're in this world to serve HaShem and to bring HaShem into the world. And these challenges, these confusions, these wars, they're not a bug. They're a feature. They're

the reason that we're here. There would justify the moments of peace and serenity. The challenges are what life is all about.

But that thought then just ricocheted into another thought in my head. And I thought, "Ok, then if that's true, how am I justifying this vacation? Am I running away from my mission? Is it wrong that I'm here?" I kept on thinking of the words of Baruch Marzal, who's a well-known rabbi in Hebron. Very righteous man. And when I saw him again, about six months ago and I

witnessed again his devotion, his tireless devotion to the Jewish people, I invited him to come stay for a few days at our guest house on the Farm for a little vacation. You know I told him that he would be my guest, no charge. And Shaena, she always laughs at me, that I'm not very good at charging people to stay in our guest house, even though we really need to. But that's a challenge I could discuss at another time. Anyways, I invited him to come and stay. And without blinking an eye, he responded, "Is there a national purpose for me to be there?" I mean, it was just such an automatic response. It was such an integrated response and I've been thinking about it ever since. I mean to Baruch Marzal, his whole life is for HaShem and Israel and for the Jewish people. And if there wasn't a very clear reason for the nation of Israel, for him to come and stay in my guest house, then the answer was definitively no. So I answered him, "Yes, there is! There is a reason. The national mission is for you to come and relax and recharge. You'll be stronger for having done it."

But that wasn't a good enough reason for him and he politely declined. And so that exchange has been echoing in my head. But now that we've returned and the dust has settled, I'm arriving at a certain peace about it. Because I did feel recharged and renewed and rejuvenated, and I've come to terms with the fact that I'm not Baruch Marzal. Jeremy told me that very clearly. That's not where I'm at and that's not where I'm holding. And while it's truly maybe right for him, I don't think it's right for me and my family. You know, an occasional getaway is not necessarily an indulgence that I need to shamefully tolerate. I can lean in, I can embrace it. And I'm starting to think it's a good thing if it's kept in its proper context. You know as long as I remember that my mission here is to serve HaShem from the midst of the very real struggles and challenges of this world. And if the opportunity presents itself to take time off with my family, great. That opportunity is from HaShem also.

You know the words from the Torah portion of Vayeshev came to my mind in Genesis. You know, "Vayeshev Ya'acov," and Ya'acov settled down. And our sages say that Ya'acov was seeking calm and peace and serenity. He was seeking to settle down. And to leave the conflict and the struggles behind him. And it was because of that, perhaps it was because of that that the greatest onslaught of struggles and pain and anguish was thrust upon him with the sale of Joseph, etc., etc.

Anyways, the conclusion I'm coming to is that when HaShem presents us with moments of serenity and rest, it's ok to take them. Gratefully. We should take them gratefully. But our mission in this life is not the pursuit of serenity. Our mission is to fight the good fight. You know it's to struggle against the illusions of this world and to battle the darkness by shining a light. From within it, from deep within that darkness. We need to be within it. And it's that fight which justifies the moments of serenity we're gifted with. Not the other way around. And besides, since I've been back I've realized that if I did own that apartment and I was living there with my family, it would be no time before I started feeling empty and meaningless and I would need to get back out here to the Judean frontier.

Ok. I hope it was ok that I shared that with you. I'm working through in a therapeutic sort of way. But this Fellowship, I really want to talk about that. I want to talk about the confluence actually between two subjects that are really happening at the same time. One is the Torah portion of Re'eh and the other is Rosh Chodesh Elul, beginning of the holy, precious, special month of Elul which we celebrate starting on Wednesday night and we finish Friday night. So I'm eager to share that with you. But before I do, it is my great joy to introduce my beloved friend and teacher, Jeremy Gimpel, who is right here with me, who is going to share some thoughts with you.

Jeremy

Hey everybody! Good to see everyone. Shalom, shalom. I'm sorry, I wasn't online. There was just a power outage on the Farm. I'm sure you heard about it because it happened minutes before the Fellowship was supposed to go live. So that's just the way things roll here. It's wonderful to see you all. I really enjoyed hearing Ari's inner struggles about going on a vacation. You know he's just righteous. Everything is a walk with God. Everything is a pursuit of the truth. He can't just go on vacation and have a good time. No, there's an inner battle of the meaning of it all and the purpose of it all. And that's actually what I want to talk about today. It says in the Torah portion, Re'eh. Behold I have set before you the blessing and the curse.

Behold sort of misses the Hebrew there. Because Re'eh in Hebrew literally means, "look, see with your eyes." Behold can sort of be like a general...Behold Israel. No, it's "Look with your eyes, Israel, you can see it. I've placed before you the blessing and the curse." And you're like, "What's He really saying there?" It's like confusing language. Hear O Israel. I get that. Listen, understand. What is He telling us to see? And so the answer is that the book of Deuteronomy is actually a recap of the last 40 years in the desert. It's Moses's final speech. And he's saying, "Look, in the last 40 years, pay attention. It's something that you don't need to believe in. It's not some sort of theology or something you need to sort of have faith in. Look. Every single time you veered from the path there was a curse. Every time you walked with God there was blessing. You don't need to look far. You can see it with your own eyes. The last 40 years have been that. So listen. You're about to go into the Land of Israel. You're about to continue on this journey. But remember. Hold onto this 40 year journey tightly. Because it is the living testimony for you and your children when you go into the Land of Israel.

And the Torah portion continues and it says: I'm giving you, notein, notein is in the present tense. So, all of the Chasidic masters say, Moses is telling every single generation right now, he is giving us that vision, right now. So the Torah is saying, "Don't just look at the 40 years in the desert. Look at every civilization that has come and gone in the last 3000 years. Look when empires lose the moral foundation. The whole structure comes down. Every society that loses the moral fabric, when it starts to sort of unravel, forget about it. The whole thing comes apart.

And here's what it's saying. "Look, you can see with your own eyes. You don't need to believe in anything that's beyond your own eyes' vision. You can see it yourself. Know that that will be a living testimony throughout all time."

And it's amazing that I see the most secular, godless, cities, everywhere in Western civilization. Western civilization had this amazing foundation of the Ten Commandments, of biblical values. It had the Torah at its foundation whether it liked it or not, whether it knew about it or not. That's what was keeping Western civilization, Western civilization. And every single place that starts to veer from that path, that starts to unravel that foundational structure – San Francisco, Detroit, Seattle. It's like one by one you can sort of point at them and you see them all falling apart. Europe has no more children, being invaded by 3rd world countries. Who knows what's going to be in Europe? And so that's the first part of Re'eh. Look, the blessing is right before you. You don't need to look far.

But then there's another idea. The sages of Israel teach a beautiful thing. Look before you. I'm placing the blessing and the curse. And so the sages of Israel based on this idea. We've shared about this before, but today I'm going to take it a little bit deeper. They say you should walk around with two notes in your pocket wherever you go, all the time. One in your right pocket and one in your left pocket. One note says – I am just dust and ashes. And the other note says – the entire world was only built just for me. And you see those are two totally opposite ideas. One is absolute humility. I am nothing, I am dust, I am ashes. And the other is that spice carts will appear. The whole universe will organize itself in the most unbelievable way by this intelligent reality that is guiding me personally in my life. Everything that's happening is happening only for me and my own faith journey. And it's like you have to hold onto both of those notes at one time.

And so over Shabbat, we had an amazing guest. He was an elite soldier, still serves in reserve duty in kind of the Fouda unit of Israel. If you've ever seen the show Fouda, those are just the heroes of Israel that go deep into enemy territory, have to dress up sometimes as the enemy themselves to kidnap the chief terrorists in the most dangerous scenarios. And he actually gave over the devar Torah in our House of Prayer, Friday night. And he said, "You know, it says to look and there'll be blessing and curse. Look at these two notes. Place them in your pockets. And where is that and how that actually the blessing and the curse of our lives?" And he says, "Well we have these two notes. But most people pick out the wrong note at the wrong time. They don't know which one that they want. Someone says to you, 'You should start your own Torah study. You should start giving over classes in your community.' Whoa, I'm just dust and ashes. I don't know if I can, I don't know if I can take on such a responsibility."

That's the secret. That's where the blessing and the curse actually exist in our lives. When do we pull out one note and when do we pull out the other note? Here's the deal. Anytime you are called to do good, anytime you feel an opportunity to rise up and bring light into the world,

that's the note that you pull out that says, "This whole world was created just for me and this moment in time right now is perfectly designed for me to accomplish my mission in the world. It's time for me to rise up."

But anytime your ego hurts, anytime the bad is like that...it's like...it's ok. I'm just dust and ashes. What am I taking myself so seriously for? And that's the balance and the dance that we have to live through in life.

But then there's a second idea that really relates beautifully with this. And Ari just touched on it right now. And Ari and I didn't coordinate exactly what we're going to say. But he really got to the core of it. Are we here to experience serenity or are we here to experience pleasure? And I was listening to this interview with a recovering addict. And he said his whole life he thought his purpose was to be happy. His whole life he thought his purpose was to have serenity, be happy, feel pleasure. And you know, what was he going to do? And he said something that I thought was absolutely profound. He said he no longer thinks life is about how he can be happy. He said he thinks his life is about how he can be useful.

And I found that to be absolutely touching. That is the path, how can we be useful to our wives, how can we be useful to our husbands, how can we be useful to our community? And here's the trick. We were designed to serve. And that's why you see people slipping into the Tower of Babel. Humanity will actually enslave itself quite freely if they need to. They'll enslave themselves to vaccine mandates and masks that don't make any sense. Because they feel like we are here to serve a higher purpose. And the higher purpose that you serve, actually the more meaning and good feelings of happiness you'll generate. If you believe in your marriage, you're serving that purpose. You believe in your family, you believe in your children, you believe in your community, you believe in your Fellowship, you believe in your country, you believe in God, you believe in building the Kingdom. The bigger you can go, the more useful you are to that purpose, actually that's where the blessing resides.

And so we have before us the blessing and the curse. To pick out those two notes. And to know that when we are called to bring that light into the world, to actually be useful, to think about that...how can we be used for the goodness of the world? How can we be used to bring light into the world? And that actually is the blessing that God laid before us.

And so I want to bless everyone in the Fellowship that you follow that path of how can we be useful? How can we serve the highest good in our life? And when we commit to that and we work toward that, what we'll see is that blessing resides, happiness grows and we begin to flourish. And so, I am so excited about this upcoming week. Because Elul is in the air and that is my favorite time of the year. And so this Fellowship is coming up and we are going to go deep into Elul and just launch ourselves into a beautiful new year. But until then, I will pass it off to Ari, so thank you all so much. We'll see you again next week. Shalom.

Ari

Shalom everybody. Yes, that was beautiful, Jeremy. I hope that you guys can hear us. Tabitha just called me and told me that the internet is unstable and it's going in and out. So just let me know, if we lose connection, start going like this. Give me some sort of sign because I'm looking at all of you while we talk. But yes, that was beautiful, Jeremy. And thank you for sharing that. And another thing that's beautiful, that you may want to see is the Gymboree! Are you guys up for that? It's 12 seconds. Ok. Tabitha, good for it. They want it. The people have spoken.



Ok, I don't know if you could see that, if the internet was good enough, but how cute are they? It's beyond, it was just beyond.

But anyways, I worked through that whole thing with you. But hearing that from Jeremy, hearing him say how to be "useful," that actually makes sense. That's a prism that makes sense to pass through a lot of the decisions about what we're doing with our lives and who we are. Are we of use? Are we being useful? And when we're trying to figure out how to proceed with our life, even professionally in anyway, that's a good prism to think about. Because this is a time of thinking and reflecting because as I said, we're going into the month of Elul.

So that's what I want to talk about and really how to prepare for Elul. Because these days are filled with tremendous beauty and tremendous potential. Potential, which if we're honest, can sometimes lead to a little bit of anxiety as we've spoken about in the past before the High Holidays. I don't know if non-Jews feel this way, if they have the same sort of baggage as someone like me has, growing up in the world and the prism of exile, Judaism which I've gone through. But it can often...the highest opportunities can often be laden with anxiety and stuff like that.

And you know, just having a conversation with a dear friend of mine, as the words came out of my mouth which often does, "Can you believe it? It's Rosh Chodesh Elul this week! Elul! This week, can you believe it? We're already approaching the chagim. We're already approaching the High Holidays." And he responded, "Oh God, why did you need to share that? I don't want to think about it. The three weeks already ruins half of my summer." Remember he's talking about the three weeks between the 17th of Tamuz and the 9th of Av where we're in various levels of mourning about the Temple. He's saying that ruins his summer, because it makes it all a drag. And now he says, "And now I have to think about Elul?" Which sort of shocked me because these are two totally, totally different experiences. One is grief and tragedy and distance from HaShem. And the other is Elul, right? Like what is Elul? It stands for, we've made slides for it in the past. It's aleph, lamed, vav, lamed. That's how you spell Elul. Which stands

for “Ani le’dodi, v’dodi li.” I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me. That’s what King Solomon says in the book of Shir ha’shirim, Song of Songs. It’s a time filled with love and reconnection, so why did he feel that way? What do these two periods have in common?

So I think that the one thing that they have in common is that they’re both periods that need to be...a little bit of reflection. Some self-reflection. Both periods that have a lot of potential that we can harness for growth and light and it’s that very potential which causes the anxiety. Because we don’t want to let the time pass us without harnessing it to some degree. And riding the wave to come closer to HaShem. And if we do, then there’s the guilt, the whole Jewish guilt thing. We’re not actually harnessing the time and tapping into it correctly. And the thought that we may not harness it correctly, that causes angst, you know we don’t want to squander it.

So that’s why I titled this Fellowship – It’s all in the Prep. Because we’re in a place right now before the month even begins. So that it’s an opportunity for us to calmly and serenely take a few moments and think about it ahead of time. Hopefully just get a basic orientation. Maybe a little bit of a heads start. A game plan for the days ahead. Because Rav Kluger, who I’ve shared with you, he points out that these days are called “y’mei ratzon,” the days of favor. And starting at the new moon of the month of Elul, is 40 days which culminate in Yom Kippur, which means 40 days from this coming Wednesday is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Because it was on the new moon of the month of Elul that Moses ascended Sinai for the second time to beg atonement for the nation of Israel for the sin of the golden calf. And it was on Yom Kippur, 40 days later that HaShem granted that forgiveness, right?

So we know, we’ve talked about it many times, the Hebrew grasp on time is that it is an ascending helix. And each year, we’re able to harness the latent energy present at that time of the year, on that sort of strand of that helix. And so at this time of the year, a desire for repentance and reconnection builds up within us. You know a desire to draw closer to HaShem. Because keep in mind, this is a little bit of an abstract, sort of mystical thought, but the month after Elul, is Tishrei, right? The first of Tishrei, the first of that month is Rosh Hashanah.

So what does that mean for Elul? Rosh Hashanah, the whole world was created. But what happened before the creation of the world? Elul was like the month before the world was even created. It means that this was a time where there was really nothing at all other than HaShem’s will. And HaShem’s love. And they were stirred to inspire creation, itself. And so this is a time that was made for us to tap into that deepest will within ourselves.

And so just a quick prayer – HaShem please help us get there. Please awaken within us the desire that’s already burning within us to come close to You, to rekindle our love and our friendship and our relationship that we yearn for so much. Help us guide each other and inspire each other in returning to You from a place of love and truth. Amen.

My friends, it is our belief that this is the time that Isaiah was talking about in chapter 55. It says:

Seek Hashem when He
can be found; call upon
Him when He is near.
-Isaiah 55:6

You know, right now we're in the month of Av where we read through the prophets. HaShem says, "No, I'm putting up walls between us." Even though we always know that the walls aren't really there. He can always hear us. But there's an emotional distance. Right? But this verse refers primarily to the ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Between Rosh

Hashanah and the Day of Atonement. But it does refer by extension to the entire period of time starting with Elul that we're going into. You know the entire month of Elul is that time when HaShem can be found. This is the time to call upon Him when He's near. There's a tremendous opportunity here.

And by the way, perhaps that's part of why we feel that anxiety. Right? Because there's a dissonance between the great potential of this time and how deserving that we may feel. We may feel that we're just not deserving to really come close to HaShem at all. You know if you're like me, perhaps you feel like your deeds have fallen short of who you COULD be. Of who you SHOULD be. Who you committed that you WOULD be around this time last year. And most likely the year before that also. And really, despite my greatest efforts, I often walk around feeling undeserving. And not sort of a humble, good, holy undeserving, but a beating myself up kind of undeserving. Like a falling short type of undeserving.

Which brings me for a moment to this week's Torah portion, which really spoke to me in that way. It addressed that part of me. It addressed that feeling that was starting to come up. So here we are, chapter 14:

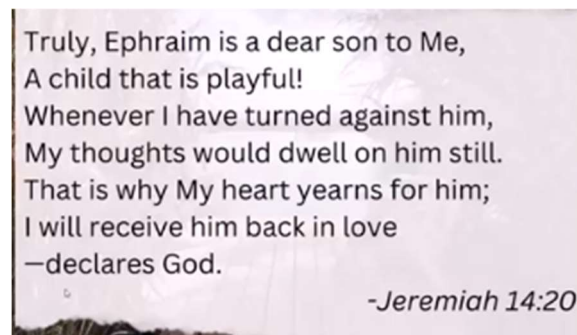
You are children of Hashem, you God. You shall not gash yourselves or shave the front of your heads because of the dead. For you are a people consecrated to Hashem, your God. Hashem chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be a treasured people.
-Deuteronomy 14:1-2

So this is just one of the most critical verses in the Torah because it conveys so many fundamental truths all at once. But for the moment, let's just start with the first part of the first verse. We're HaShem's children. It's such a revolutionary idea. It's so bold and it's so comforting. But sometimes it's difficult to really let ourselves believe it.

Because you know we've talked about this before, but the Torah is just filled with detailed lists, describing the nation of Israel's rebelling against HaShem, again and again and again and again. Rebelling against HaShem on a national level. And by the way, in a very similar way, you know I and some other guilt-feeling Jews feel like we rebel against HaShem on a personal level also. It's hard to throw stones when we look at our own personal lives and see again and again. We've made commitments and we've taken things upon ourselves and we again and again, we fall and

we rebel. But HaShem's ways aren't ours. And we say that although any normal person would walk away from a relationship that has so much ingratitude and betrayal in it. HaShem loves us in a way that we can't even understand. You know the closest description that we can find, that our mind can possibly wrap around, that gets us close to that, is that verse. We're HaShem's children. HaShem loves us as a parent loves a child.

So the Ohr Chaim, one of the great sages of Israel, actually takes this verse and expounds on it further with a verse from the 31st chapter of the book of Jeremiah, Yirmiyahu, a verse that many of us, myself included sing to our children every night when they go to sleep. It goes:



It's such a beautiful song. I actually, with your permission, I want to take a moment to share it with you. There's so many versions of it, but I just wanted to play a little piece of one of the beautiful songs with these words.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9kRrWiQFjgE>

You know I think maybe because I'm a father for the first time, you know, at the age of 39, 40 was it, that I became a father for the first time. I couldn't have imagined the degree of overwhelming, crippling love that my heart had the capacity to feel. And so just to know that HaShem loves us in that way. You know the Ohr Chaim teaches that when a normal person is near someone that has a foul odor coming from them, you keep your distance from that person with this foul odor coming from them. But when it's your child, not only don't you have a problem hugging and kissing them and playing with the diaper totally packed, filled and even spilling out. You know you bring your child close.

You know there are some parents that actually enjoy it. You know there are some parents that love their children so much that they actually come to like the smell emanating from them, however crazy that sounds. I was asking one of my friends in the nearby village of Ibea HaNachal, the wife answered and she said, "Yeah, when your kid hasn't gone to the bathroom...you know, number 2 for like a week. And finally it comes out? You love the smell of it!" I was sort of comforted to know I was not alone. I hope it's not too...this is my life. These smells are my life, so maybe I'm just connected, this is just out of the realm of what I should share. But here I am, I'm in it and I'm coming.

And I know I probably shouldn't, but I really need to share with you a story that just happened, that really illustrates this so beautifully. The more I think about it, it's really not necessary that I share it with you, but I just want to. And I immediately thought of this teaching when this happened.

So Shaena and I decided to take a drive back from Netanya in the middle of the night so the kids would sleep through it. But Shiloh woke up in the middle of the trip, shifting and crying, and I was trying to comfort him. And then, all of a sudden, boom, he just starts projectile vomiting. Like projectile vomiting – shooting out of his mouth, like that movie that I never saw, like Poltergeist? It was actually really scary. I'd never seen him throw up before. So while the car was moving, even though Shaena said not to, I grabbed him out of his car seat and I held him close to me, after which he immediately started vomiting huge amounts in my face, on my beard, all over my clothes. I think even some of it when into my mouth. I was definitely tasting it. It was all over me.

And we pulled over as soon as we could and I just took off my shirt and I threw it away, it was just drenched. And we got home a half hour later and right then in the middle of the night, I took out his car seat and I washed it off thoroughly with a garden hose. And I just left it there in our yard. And now last night, I knew, oh today Shaena was going to need to take them around, so I took it out, after Shabbat. And I put it back into the car. And I picked it up in the air to sort of shake it out and just then, maybe a cup, a cup and a half of the water from when I washed it out. You know that pukey water that had been baking in the sun over Shabbat? Poured out in my face again, all over my face, all over my shirt. Same throw-up as before, just three days later in the heat wave of Judea. And it had definitely aged like fine wine.

But anyways, why do I share this with you, other than I really just thought it was funny and I wanted to? I share this with you because I immediately thought of this verse and the Ohr Chaim. Anyone else's child where I was dealing with that? I would have probably been annoyed, probably angry, horrified, obviously disgusted beyond belief. But being that I knew that I knew that it was my beloved son, Shiloh, who I love beyond words, when he was throwing up, I brought him closer to me. I brought him closer to me. I held him close and I comforted him. That's right. So great is my love for him that as he was vomiting ON me, I brought him closer.

And that is really how I believe it is with HaShem and us. You know to sin after having repented from that sin, think about it. We sin and then we really truly repent from that sin. And then we do that sin again! I think we've all been there. Our sages actually liken that to a dog vomiting and eating its own vomit. Which I thought was just an analogy or something until I had a dog, and then I realized that they actually do that. You know, but even so, the fact that many of us feel that our repeated sins and our failures and all the other stench coming from us, that we think or that we feel make us unlovable, it's just not true. HaShem brings us even closer at those moments. Because we're His children and He loves the fact...I really think that He loves the fact that despite it all, after falling on our face and repeating the same mistakes and rebellious mistakes again and again, here we are, and we're not giving up and we're trying again and again. I think HaShem really loves that.

And that's what the Ohr Chaim says this verse is telling us. But you know that even when we may wreak of sin, HaShem still loves us and engages with us and wants to play with us.

And the second part of that verse leads right into that. We're HaShem's children, right? That's the first part. We should not gash ourselves or rip out our hair. What is that about? Why is that verse connected directly to the verse telling us that we're HaShem's children? Why does it say that we shouldn't injure ourselves? As many other peoples and faiths and religions do when something devastating or distressful happens, like losing a loved one or when a tragedy strikes. And I think HaShem is telling us that we need to remember that we are His children and His love for us far eclipses everything else. His love for us is beyond what we can imagine and therefore, we must remember and believe that everything, everything is from HaShem and everything is therefore for the best.

And you know, there will be times that we will feel heartbroken and we'll be weeping at the funeral of a parent or God forbid, I can't even say. You know there are times that we'll feel such grief and heartbreak. But that grief and heartbreak lives on a foundation of happiness. Even as we're weeping in a very real way, it's built on a foundation of happiness. Every other emotion needs to be built on that foundation of happiness. We need to trust that everything is for the good, even if our mortal human minds cannot understand it. So yes, you know grief is ok. It's human.

But ad kan, you know what I mean? Until here, there's a limit. There's a limit because we're HaShem's children and He loves us and everything He does for us is good. So don't go starting to rip your hair out or gash your arms or express that just unbelievable devastation and grief too much. That's not right. That's not the right balance. And that's what Elul's about. I actually don't think that we necessarily need to do too much conventional, time-consuming sort of preparation. Because the real service on Elul is about a state of mind. It's about uncovering something that's already there. And what's that? It's about uncovering our desire to come close to HaShem again as His children who love Him. That desire to come close to HaShem is already there within us. We just need to find it, to pull it up and to come close to Him. And I really believe that the fact that we've tried before again and again, and we failed again and again. The fact that we keep getting up and trying relentlessly and unreasonably. It is that yearning, that yearning within our hearts that HaShem, Himself is yearning for. Right? HaShem is yearning for our yearning. That's what Elul is about.

And so Rav Kluger shares, he says in Elul we say to HaShem, from Psalm 27:

One thing I ask of Hashem, that I seek, to sit in the house of Hashem all the days of my life, and to behold the sweetness of Hashem and visit his holy Sanctuary.

-Psalm 27:4

That's what we want. Just to be close to HaShem. So what's the preparation? Let's work it through. Let's work it through, but I think to simply turn our hearts to HaShem and to speak with Him. To talk with Him, to open our mouths, real words come out, to speak with Him from the depths of our soul. To tell Him how much we yearn to be close to Him

and to serve Him. That's what HaShem is yearning for during this time more than any other. For our hearts, for our yearning.

The prophet Hosea says in chapter 14:

Take words with you and return to Hashem.

-Hosea 14:3

And we see very clearly that HaShem tells us just three verses later what will happen if indeed we do that. We take our words and we return to Hashem, if we open up our hearts and we talk to Him and tell Him how much we want to be close to Him.

Right? And if we can't do that, how badly we want to want it. Right? Here's the verse in Hosea, chapter 14, verse 5. This is what HaShem says will happen if we turn to Him with our words. He says:

I will remedy their backsliding; I will love them overwhelmingly.

-Hosea 14:5

He just wants us to talk to Him, just to talk to Him. Anything, any words out loud, to talk to Him. And I'm saying this as if I'm the king of...I'm not, I'm not. I struggle with it. But it's definitely foremost in my mind, in my service of HaShem, and in my journey and in my work, my spiritual work.

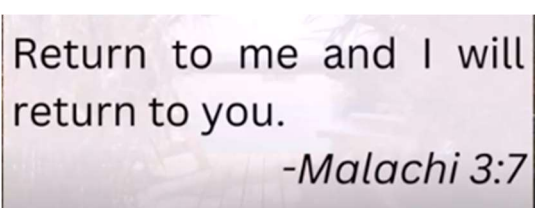
And friends, like I said, if we're in such a place of feeling lost and confused that it's hard to even do that, it's ok. Then let's just tell HaShem how badly we want to want to be close to Him. If He sees how badly we want to remove the calluses around our hearts, and we all have them to one degree or another, He will remove them for us. We don't need to do it ourselves. I'm not even sure that we really can do it ourselves. All we need to do is really want it, or even want to want it. And to tell Him that and to express that to Him in words. To go outside, to a field, to our home, or even just a blanket over our head in bed as we're falling asleep at night. Just open our mouths to HaShem and He'll do the rest.

Ok, my friends, so there's so much more I wanted to talk about in this Fellowship, but I think it's gonna have to wait until next week. But I didn't want to miss this opportunity with our time left together to open up, and I really want to hear from you. We don't have a lot of time for this Fellowship Connection, but I want to because this is a journey that we're on together. We're

here to encourage each other and to strengthen each other. Ardelle just sent out another beautiful prayer packet which I love, and I'm so grateful for, and I hope you all get it. And you can turn to Ardelle or Tabitha for that.

And so you know, in that spirit, I want to take this opportunity to just...you know there's something that just happened this week, and I want to send love and prayer and encouragement and support to our dear friend, Ryan Roberts, who is devastated right now. He lost his wife, Karen. And he shared the eulogy with me that he wrote for her and it was really deeply moving. And I'm sure he'd be more than happy to share it with all of you, and to have you read it too. Perhaps reach out to him or Tabitha if he gives his blessing, then we'll be happy to share it. I shouldn't have even said that, I don't want to put him on the spot, which I obviously just did right now. But it's just so beautiful, and it's really quite a testimony to her. It's definitely worth the read. Particularly during these times when we would do well to consider what our final message would be to the world. You know what we would want said about us. And from what I gathered from Ryan's words, his beloved Karen had a heart filled with love and fear of God, a tender heart. Just a very, very special person. And so, Ryan, I want you to know that I and my family and the whole Fellowship, we're with you and we love you and we're sending vibes and prayers of consolation to you and your family.

So anyways, with that I sort of, I want to end this part of the Fellowship with a blessing to you, to all of us that with HaShem's help, you know, may we embark on these holy days with eagerness and joy and gratitude. Not with anxiety, but with eagerness, with a heart filled with desire to understand what a wonderful opportunity is right here at our fingertips. Is right here, just on the tip of our tongue, it's right there. You know, may we remember, may all of us remember that as the prophet Malachi told us. He says:



HaShem is just waiting for us to return to Him, and yes, Ryan was sharing with us about Karen's words and her message that fearing God was such paramount importance to her. And really it is. Fearing God is the cornerstone, is the foundation.

We talk so much about loving God, but without fearing HaShem, without respecting His heart, and His will, and His desires for us, there's really no respect in the relationship.

And I think that's one of what Jeremy was talking about, some of the downfalls of Western civilization. And I think even those in the West that still claim and profess and really do believe in God, a lot of that fear is gone. And it's just about feeling good and love. And without fearing HaShem, fearing, violating our relationship with Him. You know fearing, violating His desires for us, there's no respect in the relationship. And without respect there can't be true love.

So I bless us that we remember that God is our Judge and our King, and that's what Rosh Hashanah is about, right? Accepting God's sovereignty in our lives. Accepting the yoke of His Kingship. And with that does come a healthy amount of fear. But during these days when we're assessing our actions and seeking how we can come before Him with repentance and truth, I bless us that we don't forget even during this journey and this spiritual work, that we don't forget for one moment that this great King, that this ultimate Judge, that He is our Father and that we're His children and that He loves us like His children as He told us in this week's Torah portion.

And I bless us, my friends that we're able to internalize that truth. And during this sacred time, we can infuse that into our very essence. And the natural results from that is that Elul will be filled with love and happiness. You know 12 times in the book of Deuteronomy, in the book of Devarim do we have the word, simcha. It's once in the book of Genesis, once in Exodus, and all the other books. But it's 12 times in Deuteronomy, seven of it is in this Torah portion. Because I think that's the message to us, that if we have that fear, and we internalize that fear and that love, it will result in happiness. We'll feel HaShem's love for us, we'll feel it to the depths of our souls and we'll feel happy from that knowledge. And I bless us that that love and that happiness bursts forth from our hearts to everybody around us. Really, we can't just focus it on HaShem and the people around us are still at odds with them and angry at them and resentful. No, no, no. Burst forth everybody around us. And just as we love all those in our lives, in our orbits, particularly those who we think may not be worthy of that love? Just as we're able to love them, may we feel the great love that Hashem has for us.

So hang tight my friends, because I want to bless you of course right now with the blessing of the High Priest, which I'm eager to bless you with as I am every week. But hang tight because right afterwards, I want to have a little Fellowship Connection where we can talk a little bit. I want to hear your thoughts about Elul, repentance, about loving HaShem. I want to hear your questions, your thoughts, anything that you want to share. If you don't have anything to share or to ask, it's ok. But if you do, you can raise your hand.

But for this moment, it's my great honor to bless you with the blessing of Aaron the High Priest. That of course, as you know, I'm not a descendant of Aaron. I am of the nation of Israel, I'm of the other tribes of Israel. But we are an "am cohanim," a nation of priests. And so, it's my joy to bless all of you.

Aaronic blessing (Hebrew)

May HaShem bless you and protect you. May He shine His light and His countenance upon you, and may He give you peace. Amen.