

**Chapter 1 - THE SOUL STRETCHES OUT TO CONTAIN ITSELF:
A MAP OF THE JOURNEY**

You are walking through the world half asleep. It isn't just that you don't know who you are and that you don't know how or why you got here. It's worse than that; these questions never even arise. It is as if you are in a dream.

A great horn sounds, calling you to remembrance, but all you can remember is how much you have forgotten. Every day for a month, you sit and try to remember who you are and where you are going. By the last week of this month, your need to know these things weighs upon you. Your prayer becomes urgent.

“The invisible is more important than the visible.” Sigmund Freud, introducing what some consider to be the single great idea upon which all the significant developments of the twentieth century have rested.

For all of Freud's animus against Judaism, his idea was an extremely Jewish one. In fact, it may not be too much to suggest that it is *the* Jewish idea. Judaism came into the world to bring the news that the invisible is more important than the visible. From the beginning of time, humans had seen the world as a play of competing forces, which they had personified as gods. The sea struggled against the earth, the rain either overwhelmed the forests and fields or famished them, men and beasts hunted each other, hatred and vengeance, love and compassion, struggled for hegemony in the human heart. But Judaism came to say that beneath this appearance of conflict, multiplicity and caprice there was a oneness, a singularity, all-powerful and endlessly compassionate, endlessly just.

In the visible world, we live out our routine and sometimes messy lives. We have jobs, families and houses. Our lives seem quite ordinary and undramatic. It is only beneath the surface of this world that the real and unseen drama of our lives is unfolding. If the purpose of ritual (*referring specifically to those during Elul and the High Holiday season*) is to render the invisible visible, then what is the profound, universal, unseen and unspoken reality that all of this ritual reflects? What journey of the soul, what invisible journey of transformation, does all of this make visible?

On this journey our soul will awaken to itself. We will venture from innocence to sin and back to innocence again. This is a journey from denial to awareness, from self-deception to judgment. We will learn our Divine Name. We will move from self-hatred to self-forgiveness, from anger to healing, from hard-heartedness to broken-heartedness. This is the journey the soul takes to transform itself and to evolve, the journey from boredom and staleness --- from deadness --- to renewal. It is on the course of this journey that we confront our shadow and come to embrace it, that we come to know our deepest desires and catch a glimpse of where they come from, that we express the paradoxical miracle of our own being and the infinite power of simply being present, simply being who we are. It is the journey from little mind to big mind, from confinement in the ego to a sense of ourselves as a part of something larger. It is the journey from isolation to a sense of our intimate connection to all being. This is the journey on which we discover ourselves to be part of an inevitable chain of circumstances, the journey beyond death, the journey home. This is the longest journey we will every make.

Chapter 4 - THE HORN BLEW AND I BEGAN TO WAKE UP: ELUL

Suddenly you are awakened by a strange noise, a noise that fills the full field of your consciousness and then splits into several jagged strands, shattering that field, shaking you awake. The ram's horn, the shofar, the same instrument that will sound one hundred times on Rosh HaShanah, the same sound that filled the world when the Torah was spoken into being on Mount Sinai, is being blown to call you to wakefulness. You awake to confusion. Where are you? Who are you?

Then you remember. In exactly one month, one revolution of the moon, you will stand before God. What will God see on that day? What will you see? This encounter can carry you significantly closer to the truth of your life. Standing in the light of God, you can see a great deal more than you ordinarily might, but only to the degree that you are already awake, only in proportion to the time and energy you have devoted to preparing for this encounter.

So it is that the Mateh Moshe, (a highly cited halachic work by Rabbi Moshe ben Avraham Przemyśl, 1550 -1606, published in Cracow 1591), proclaimed, "Every person must prepare himself for thirty days beforehand with teshuvah, tefilah and tzedakah for the day when he will appear in judgment before God on rosh HaShanah. Therefore, let every person scrutinize their actions with a view to mending them. Let them exclude themselves for one hour every day and examine themselves." And Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai, (commonly known as the HIDA, Jerusalem born rabbinical scholar and pioneer in the publication of Jewish religious writings, 1724 – 1806), declared, "During Elul one should devote less time to study and more time to fixed periods of introspection and self-evaluation." The Kav HaYashar, (popular work of musar literature authored by Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Kaidanover, 1648 – 1712, published in Frankfurt 1705), recorded that many men in his time observed silence between the advent of Elul and Rosh HaShanah to affect the purification of their souls.

The horn blows to usher in Elul, and it is blown every morning of the month of Elul as well, lest we forget and slip back, lest we surrender to the entropic pull of mindlessness. The Torah also stands ready to help keep us awake. As we move through the month of Elul, we also move through the Book of Deuteronomy and each of the weekly Torah readings whispers to us, "Wake up! Wake up!" Each of these readings offers a subtle rhyme to the process of awakening to which the month of Elul has called us.

We must engage in the regular practice of introspection, self-examination and silence. This is the time when it is made clear to us that everything depends upon our own moral and spiritual choices. This is the time to devote serious attention to bringing our lives into focus; a time to clarify the distinction between the will of God and our own willfulness, to identify that in us which yearns for life and that which clings to death, that which seeks good and that which is fatally attracted to the perverse, to find out who we are and where we are going.

All the rabbis who comment on this period make it clear that we must do these things during the month of Elul. We must set aside time each day of Elul to look at ourselves, to engage in self-evaluation and self-judgment, to engage in *cheshbon-ha-nefesh*, literally a spiritual accounting. But we get very little in the way of practical advice as to how we might do this. So, allow me to make some suggestions.

PRAYER - The Hebrew word for prayer is *tefilah*. The infinitive form of this verb is *l'hitpalel* – to pray – a reflexive form denoting action that one performs on oneself. Many scholars believe that the root of this word comes from a verb for judgment, and that the reflexive verb *l'hitpalel* originally must have meant to judge oneself. This is not the usual way we think of prayer. Ordinarily we think we should pray to ask for things, or to bend God's will to our own. But it is no secret to those who pray regularly and with conviction that one of the deepest potentials of prayer is that it can be a way we come to know ourselves. **This is true in at least two ways. First**, when we pray, we stand before God – we invoke God's presence, we see ourselves through God's unblinking gaze. From this point of view, it becomes rather more difficult to engage in the kind of self-deception and highly selective interpretation of data we usually employ to make assessments of ourselves. God isn't as easy to deceive as we are. God has the annoying tendency of taking everything into account and not just the aspects of our experience that make us look good (or bad, if that's what we're up to). I have either meditated or prayed every day for the better part of the last thirty years. There have been a few occasions during this time when I've done something that I knew to be wrong at the time that I did it. These times, for most of us, are rather rare. Most of the time, the negative, destructive things we do are done unconsciously. The remedy for this, of course, is simple to become more conscious, more aware. But what about those rare times when consciousness is not the problem? What about the times when we are perfectly conscious to begin with, when we say to ourselves, I know this is wrong, I know this is going to be hurtful and destructive both to myself and to others, but damn it, I'm going to do it anyway. After performing such a deed, it is possible to go through much one's life in denial or to construct elaborate justifications for why you did it. But it is impossible to employ such strategies while standing before God. Then, the naked truth of what we have done cannot be denied, and all our justifications crumble to the dust. **Standing before God, we see ourselves whether we want to or not.**

Second, it is also the case that there is something about the mechanics of prayer that causes us to know ourselves. Like all spiritual activities, Jewish communal prayer has a point of focus; in this case, the words of the prayer book. We try to concentrate on those words, but inevitably our mind wanders and we lose our focus. When we realize that this has happened, we bring our focus back to the words of the prayer book, and as we do, we catch a glimpse of what it is that has carried us away. This is an important thing to see. The thoughts that carry our attention away are never insignificant thoughts, and they never arise at random. We lose our focus precisely because these thoughts need our attention and we refuse to give it to them. This is why they keep sneaking up on our attention and stealing it away. This is how it is that we come to know ourselves as we settle deeply into the act of prayer. **Sitting there with the prayer book in our lap, we begin to become aware of the things we have been trying to avoid; we begin to see things from which we have been averting our gaze; unconscious material begins to make its way toward the surface of our consciousness.**

So, during the month of Elul, one of the times we can use to examine ourselves, to **engage in self-assessment and self-judgment, is the time spent in communal prayer.** We can either devote more time to this activity, or if we already pray quite regularly, now we can do so **with a more focused intention to have our praying become tefilah in the original sense – an act of self-judgment, an opportunity to see ourselves more clearly.**

MEDITATION – Meditation also presents us with this opportunity. Although much has been written in recent years about the various aspects of Jewish spiritual activity that resemble meditation, nowhere is this similarity more apparent than in the month of Elul, where we are bidden to set aside time each day to look inward, to take account of ourselves spiritually. Sitting each day at a specified time during the month of Elul, we may focus on our breath and our body, holding our body at the balance point between tension and relaxation, watching the breath as it enters and leaves the body just below the naval, letting the belly fill up with breath and then letting the breath go out.

As we saturate these most fundamental aspects of our reality with awareness, we find that we inhabiting ourselves in a deeper way than we usually do. And gradually this sense spreads to our heart and our mind and our soul, and we find that we are also inhabiting our feelings, our thoughts and our spirit more deeply, that we are filling these things with more consciousness than we usually do, that we are feeling them more immediately, more concretely, more viscerally; **in short, that we are coming to inhabit the present-tense reality of who we are, coming to see our real moral and spiritual position and what is required of us next.**

Exactly the same phenomena we described in relation to prayer arise when we meditate – that moment of insight when we bear witness to the thoughts that have carried our awareness away; that moment when we come to know precisely what these thoughts are, precisely what it is that we aren't looking at and so keeps sneaking up on us and grabbing our attention.

In fact, it is just this process that the physiologist Herbert Benson identifies as the fundamental gesture of meditation, the gesture he calls the Relaxation Response. According to Benson, all the brain wave changes and psychospiritual effects we have come to associate with meditation are set off precisely at the moment when we come to realize that our mind has been carried away from the object of our concentration and we resolve to gently bring it back. When we were speaking of prayer, it was the words of the prayer book that we were trying to focus on. Here in meditation, it might be the breath and it might be the body, it might be a mantra and it might be a visualization, but in all these cases, the result is the same: **we come to see ourselves more clearly. We come to see the things we either will not or cannot see.**

And meditation helps us see something else as well: it helps us see that we are something larger than ourselves. This is an essential aspect of Rosh HaShanah --- seeing ourselves as not just a discrete ego, but as part of a great flow of being. The very first thing the Talmud has to say about Rosh HaShanah is this, "On Rosh HaShanah, all the inhabitants of the earth stand before God, as it says in Psalms 33:15, 'God fashions their hearts as one, and discerns all their actions together.'"

When we sit in meditation with other people breathing the same air, hearing the same sounds, thinking thoughts in the same rhythms and patterns, we experience our connection to each other in a very immediate way. **This connection is not merely an idea; it is our heartfelt, visceral reality. This is an important part of the process of seeing ourselves. Meditation helps us inhabit ourselves more deeply, and it constantly throws us up against the very things about ourselves we are trying not to see. But it carries the process of insight one step further; it helps us to see that we are not merely our individual selves, but part of something much more vast as well.**

FOCUS ON ONE THING – It may not be realistic to expect a significant number of people to suddenly begin showing up at prayer minyans or meditation groups during the month of Elul --- some of us are simply not made to engage in these activities; not in Elul, not ever (*especially this year due to the Corona virus pandemic*). Many will never get over finding the daily prayer service tedious and opaque. Many others will always either be frightened to death or bored to tears by the prospect of meditation and the blank wall of self it keeps throwing us up against so relentlessly.

So, I am pleased to inform you that it is perfectly possible to fulfill the ancient imperative to begin becoming more self-aware during this time without doing either of these things. Let me recommend a simpler method and you won't even have to set aside a special time to practice this; you have set aside the time already. Just choose one simple and fundamental aspect of your life and commit yourself to being totally conscious and honest about it for the thirty days of Elul. "A world in a grain of sand," as the poet William Blake reminded us. Everything we do is an expression of the entire truth of our lives. It doesn't really make any difference what it is that we choose to focus on, but it ought to be something pretty basic, something like eating or sex or money, if for no other reason than that these concerns are likely to arise quite frequently in our lives and to give us a lot of grist for the mill.

As an example: I think it's a very rare thing that we eat out of hunger these days and it is even rarer that we stop eating when our hunger is satiated. Clearly eating is an activity with profound emotional and spiritual reverberations, and just as clearly it is an activity that resides at the opposite end of the emotional spectrum from stress. It has become obvious why eating often becomes something other than the simple act of satisfying our physical hunger. Eating is a fast palliative for the stress that overwhelms us, a surrogate for the emotional and spiritual nourishment we need and never receive, a way of feeling our physicality in a world that all too rarely permits us to do so. In short, the act of eating is a gateway to some of our deepest feelings. This is why, if we just make a simple resolve to only eat in truth during the month of Elul --- to eat only when we are truly hungry, "only all that your soul desires" --- I think we'll be amazed how much of the truth of our lives we'll dredge up, what a complex of repressed feeling and dysfunction this simple focus will bring floating up to the forefront of our consciousness.

The truth of our lives is reflected in everything we do, and if we focus on even one small part of our lives, it brings up the entire truth of it.

So, we can pray, we can meditate and we can set aside a moment every day for reflection. Or we can simply choose one thing in our life and live that one small aspect in truth and then watch in amazement as the larger part of our life begins to emerge. The truth is, every moment of our life carries with it the possibility of a great blessing and a great curse, a blessing if we live in truth and a curse if we do not.

This is the time of year we are bidden to know the truth. In fact, we are commanded to do so. *Parshat Re'eh*, which we always read right before *Rosh Chodesh Elul*, commands us to look, to see, to pay attention, for I have put before you a great blessing and a considerable curse right there in the moment before you. All that's required of you is to see what's in front of your face and to choose the blessing in it.

The essential act of the High Holiday season is *Teshuvah*, a turning toward mindfulness, and an important step in this process is a kind of turning in to examine our perceptive mechanisms, the way we see the world. It is a shifting of our gaze from the world itself to the window through which we see it, because that window, the screen of our consciousness is not just a blank, transparent medium. Rather it is a world unto itself, a world teeming with life, and that life affects what we see. And because that life makes us see the world differently, the first step in *Teshuvah* is to look at the window itself. When the shofar blows on the first day of *Elul* and every morning thereafter, it reminds us to turn our gaze inward, and to place judgment at the gates of our consciousness, to shift our focus from the outside world to the considerable activity taking place in the window through which we view it.

GUIDED QUESTIONS TO REFLECT UPON

FROM PAGE 1

- 1 – How do you understand, subjectively in your personal life, the statement, “Judasim came into the world to bring the news that the invisible is more important than the visible?”
- 2 – Do you observe a Jewish ritual that “renders the invisible visible?” What is the ritual? What is the profound universal, unseen and unspoken reality that this ritual reflects?
- 3 – Alan Lew states at the bottom of page 1, “It is the journey from little mind to big mind, from confinement in the ego to a sense of ourselves as a part of something larger. It is the journey from isolation to a sense of our intimate connection to all being. This is the journey on which we discover ourselves to be part of an inevitable chain of circumstances, the journey beyond death, the journey home.” Why do you think he believes that “this is the longest journey we will ever make?”

FROM PAGE 2

- 1 – How do you experience “waking up” as you hear (or visualize hearing) the shofar blowing daily in the month of Elul? What are you waking up to? Is this a positive experience?
- 2 – We read, “This is the time when it is made clear to us that everything depends upon our own moral and spiritual choices.” How does that make you feel? What moral and/or spiritual choices are you making this Elul that support this idea? What is your sense of “everything?”

FROM PAGE 3

- 1 – Have you ever felt that when praying you were standing before God? What did that feel like? How have you seen yourself through God’s “unblinking gaze?”
- 2 – “The thoughts that carry our attention away are never insignificant thoughts, and they never arise at random.” Alan Lew believes that *davkah* by being distracted from focusing on the words in the prayer book, we are able to encounter, if we choose to do so, things in our lives that we have been trying to avoid. Does this change your understanding of the words in the prayer book always being the same, day in and day out? Why or why not?

FROM PAGE 4

- 1 – Why do you think it is important to practice communal prayer rather than in the privacy of one’s home? (of course, this year is an exception).
- 2 – How is meditation different from prayer? What is unique to meditation that is NOT part of prayer?
- 3 – What is the importance of focusing specifically on the breath when meditating?
- 4 – Have you experienced “coming to see yourself more clearly” during prayer or meditation? What was this experience like? How did you feel about this?

FROM PAGE 5

1 – What is the advantage of meditating with other people over meditating alone in private? What is the advantage of meditating alone in private over meditating with other people?

2 – What is “one simple and fundamental aspect of your life” that you feel comfortable choosing to “commit yourself to being totally conscious and honest about” on a daily basis during this current time leading up to Rosh HaShanah?

3 – Did Alan Lew’s understanding of eating find a resonance with you? Please speak to that.

FROM PAGE 6

1 – “The truth is, every moment of our life carries with it the possibility of a great blessing and a great curse, a blessing if we live in truth and a curse if we do not.” Have you experienced moments in your life, where living your truth brought you a blessing and not living your truth brought you a curse? Please try to be as specific as possible.

2 – What do you consider to be the greatest blessing of all and the greatest curse of all?

3 – If the essential act of *Teshuvah* during the High Holiday season is a “turning toward mindfulness,” where, “an important step in this process is a kind of turning in....,” how does this not lead to an obsession with one’s self, to self-absorption, and to being consumed by thinking of one’s self all the time? Conversely, how does this “turning toward mindfulness” help us to “see that we are something larger than ourselves?”