

KEHILLAT B'NEI ABRAHAM
ELUL 5786
Overview of the Month of Elul — אלול

Elul (אלול) is the sixth month of the biblical calendar when counting from Nisan and the twelfth month when viewed in relation to the civil year beginning with Tishrei. It normally falls during **August–September**. Elul contains **29 days** and serves as the spiritual bridge between the ordinary months of the year and the **Yamim Nora'im (ימי נוראים), the Days of Awe**—Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur.

In Jewish tradition, Elul is especially associated with **teshuvah (תשובה, repentance/return)**, **tefillah (תפילה, prayer)**, **tzedakah (צדקה, righteousness/charity)**, **cheshbon hanefesh (חשבון הנפש, examination of the soul)**, **forgiveness**, and **preparation to stand before God**.

For a Messianic Jewish community, Elul also provides a powerful framework for considering Yeshua's call to repentance, reconciliation, watchfulness, and readiness for the Kingdom of Heaven.

1. The name Elul

The name **Elul** is of Babylonian origin and entered Jewish usage during or after the Babylonian exile. The month is explicitly named in Scripture:

“So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.”
— **Nehemiah 6:15**

The rabbis later found spiritual meaning in the Hebrew letters:

א – ל – ו – ל

They associated them with **Song of Songs 6:3**:

אני לדודי ודודי לי
Ani l'dodi v'dodi li
“I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine.”

The initial letters form אלול — **Elul**.

This transforms Elul from merely a season of fear before judgment into a season of **relationship**. We return to God because we belong to Him.

2. Elul and Moses on Mount Sinai

One of the most important traditional explanations for Elul's character comes from the chronology surrounding the **Golden Calf**.

According to rabbinic tradition, Moses ascended Sinai for a final period of forty days beginning on **1 Elul** and descended on **10 Tishrei—Yom Kippur** with the second tablets.

The sequence is traditionally understood as:

First forty days: Moses receives the Torah.

Second forty days: Moses intercedes following the sin of the Golden Calf.

Third forty days: reconciliation and restoration, culminating on Yom Kippur.

Thus, Elul became associated with the possibility that **sin does not have to be the end of the story.**

Israel sinned grievously, but Moses interceded:

“If now I have found favor in Your sight, O Lord, let the Lord, I pray, go among us... and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your inheritance.”

— **Exodus 34:9**

The second tablets represent something profound: **what was broken can, through repentance and divine mercy, be restored.**

This is the spiritual heartbeat of Elul.

3. The thirteen attributes of mercy

The Sinai story also connects Elul with God's revelation of His character in Exodus 34:6–7:

יְהוָה יְהוָה אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנוּן

Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v'chanun...

“The LORD, the LORD, God merciful and gracious...”

Jewish liturgy identifies this passage with the **Shelosh-Esreh Middot HaRachamim** — שלש-עשרה מידות הרחמים, the **Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy**.

They become particularly prominent in the **Selichot** prayers leading toward the High Holy Days.

The emphasis is significant. Before Israel approaches the Day of Atonement, Israel remembers **who God is**.

Repentance therefore begins not simply with the greatness of our sin but with the greatness of **God's mercy**.

4. Elul as the month of Teshuvah

The central concept of Elul is:

תשובה — **Teshuvah**

The word comes from the Hebrew root שׁוּב — **shuv**, “to return.”

Biblically, repentance is therefore more than feeling sorry. It means **turning around and returning to God**.

This is beautifully expressed in Hosea:

שׁוּבָה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
Shuvah Yisrael ad Adonai Elohecha.
“Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God.”
— **Hosea 14:2 [14:1 in many English Bibles]**

Elul asks us to examine not merely:

“What have I done wrong?”

but:

“Where have I wandered from God, and how do I return?”

That distinction is crucial.

5. Cheshbon HaNefesh — an accounting of the soul

Another important Elul practice is:

חֶשְׁבוֹן הַנֶּפֶשׁ — **Cheshbon HaNefesh**
“An accounting of the soul.”

Just as a business periodically examines its books, Elul invites a person to examine the spiritual accounts of life.

Questions appropriate for Elul include:

- How is my relationship with God?
- Have I neglected prayer or Scripture?
- Whom have I injured through my words?
- From whom do I need to seek forgiveness?
- Whom do I need to forgive?
- Have pride, anger, jealousy, greed, or bitterness taken root?
- Have I fulfilled commitments I made to God?
- What habits are drawing me toward holiness?
- What habits are drawing me away from Him?

Psalm 139 provides an excellent Elul prayer:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any grievous way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.”
— **Psalm 139:23–24**

6. The sounding of the shofar

In many Ashkenazi communities, the **shofar** (שׁוֹפָר) is sounded each weekday morning during Elul, generally beginning on the second day of Elul and continuing until the day before Rosh Hashanah.

The shofar functions as a spiritual alarm.

Maimonides famously interprets the message of the shofar at Rosh Hashanah as essentially:

Awake, sleepers, from your sleep.

The physical sound represents a spiritual summons:

Wake up. Examine your life. Return to your Creator.

This resonates strongly with the Apostolic Scriptures:

“Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Messiah will shine on you.”

— **Ephesians 5:14**

Elul therefore becomes a season of **spiritual awakening**.

7. Psalm 27

A widespread Jewish custom is to recite **Psalm 27** during Elul and through the festival season.

It begins:

יְהוָה אֹרִי וְיִשְׁעִי מִמִּי אֶיֶרָא

Adonai ori v'yish'i, mimi ira?

“The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?”

— **Psalm 27:1**

The psalm beautifully combines the major themes of the season: fear and confidence, seeking God, divine protection, prayer, repentance, and hope.

Its great Elul aspiration is:

“One thing have I asked of the LORD... that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD.”

— **Psalm 27:4**

Elul ultimately asks us to simplify our spiritual lives until we discover our “**one thing**.”

8. Selichot — סליחות

As Rosh Hashanah approaches, Jewish communities begin special penitential prayers called:

סליחות — **Selichot**, “forgivenesses” or “petitions for forgiveness.”

Sephardic communities traditionally recite Selichot throughout Elul, beginning around **1 Elul**. Ashkenazi communities generally begin near the end of Elul, on the Saturday night before Rosh Hashanah, subject to calendar rules that ensure an appropriate number of days.

Selichot repeatedly emphasize confession, mercy, covenant, and the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.

The worshiper comes before God saying, in effect:

**We have sinned—but You are merciful.
We have wandered—but You invite us home.**

9. Repairing relationships before Yom Kippur

A particularly important Jewish teaching is that Yom Kippur addresses sins **between humanity and God**, but offenses committed against another person require reconciliation with that person.

The Mishnah teaches:

“For transgressions between a person and his fellow, Yom Kippur does not effect atonement until he has appeased his fellow.”
— **Mishnah Yoma 8:9**

This has a remarkable parallel in Yeshua's teaching:

“If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there... First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” — **Matthew 5:23–24**

This makes Elul extremely practical.

Repentance is not only something done in the synagogue.

Sometimes teshuvah requires a telephone call.

Sometimes it requires returning something.

Sometimes it requires paying a debt.

Sometimes it requires saying:

“I was wrong. Please forgive me.”

10. Elul and Yeshua's proclamation

Yeshua begins his public proclamation with a message entirely appropriate to Elul:

Μετανοεῖτε — Metanoeite

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”
— **Matthew 4:17**

In a Jewish context, this resonates with the biblical concept of **teshuvah—returning to God**.

Yeshua's message is therefore not merely, “Feel guilty.”

It is:

Return, because God's Kingdom is approaching.

That is also the urgency of Elul.

11. “The King is in the field”

A famous Hasidic image associated particularly with Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi describes Elul with the expression:

המלך בשדה — HaMelech ba-sadeh
“The King is in the field.”

During most of the year, approaching a king in his palace requires protocol and preparation. But when the king travels through the countryside, ordinary people can approach him.

The metaphor teaches that during Elul, **the King makes Himself especially approachable.**

This fits beautifully with:

אני לדודי ודודי לי
Ani l'dodi v'dodi li.
“I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine.”

Elul is preparation for judgment, but the Judge whom Israel approaches is also the **Beloved.**

12. Elul and the Seven Haftarot of Consolation

Elul also occurs during the latter portion of the **Shiv'a D'Nechemta** — שבועה דנחמתיא, the **Seven Haftarot of Consolation** following Tisha B'Av.

This creates a beautiful liturgical progression.

After mourning Jerusalem's destruction during the Three Weeks and Tisha B'Av, Israel hears Isaiah's repeated message:

Comfort.

Restoration.

Return.

Jerusalem will rise.

God has not abandoned Zion.

Then Elul arrives and asks Israel to respond to God's consolation through **teshuvah.**

God calls His people home—and His people turn toward Him.

13. The journey of Elul

The spiritual movement can be summarized as:

Tisha B'Av → Consolation → Elul → Teshuvah → Rosh Hashanah → Ten Days of Repentance → Yom Kippur → Sukkot

This progression is theologically profound.

Brokenness → Comfort → Return → Judgment → Atonement → Joy

And that final destination matters.

The Jewish calendar does not end the season with fasting on Yom Kippur.

It moves toward **Sukkot**—זמן שמחתנו, **Z'man Simchateinu**, “the season of our rejoicing.”

Repentance ultimately leads toward restored fellowship and joy.

Elul for Messianic Jewish believers

For followers of Yeshua, Elul provides an especially meaningful opportunity to recover the biblical discipline of repentance without treating repentance as merely a one-time event associated with initial faith.

Yeshua teaches his disciples continually to forgive, reconcile, remain watchful, bear fruit, pray, and prepare for the coming Kingdom.

Elul asks the Messianic believer:

Am I merely confessing Messiah, or am I actually walking in his ways?

Paul similarly writes:

“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.”
— **2 Corinthians 13:5**

Elul therefore should not become a season of hopeless introspection. Its purpose is **return**.

The shofar says:

Wake up.

The prophets say:

Return.

The Psalms say:

Seek His face.

The Selichot say:

Forgive us.

The Messiah says:

Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

And the Song of Songs reminds us why:

אֲנִי לְדוּדִי וְדוּדִי לִי

Ani l'dodi v'dodi li —

“I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine.”

That may be the best summary of Elul: **we return to the One to whom we already belong.**

With Love in Messiah,

Rabbi Jaco
KBA.