

R' Moshe Schwab z"l (1918-1979) writes: With the arrival of the month of *Elul*, we are faced with the question, "What is *Elul*?" How is this month different from every other month?

R' Yisrael Salanter z"l said, "Every month should be *Elul*, but *Elul* is *Elul*." R' Schwab explains: All year long, a person should act the way we try to act during *Elul*. At least, when *Elul* arrives, one should be aware that his life, both the material and spiritual aspects, hangs in the balance. This is true of oneself, of one's family, and of every member of the Jewish People.

Elul is the time to prepare for *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, the days on which, we believe with perfect faith, we will be judged. We understand that everything that will happen, whether on a personal or communal level, depends on those days. Yet, one cannot "leap" into *Rosh Hashanah*. One must prepare for it. To the degree that one prepares himself, to that extent he will experience *Rosh Hashanah*. Conversely, to the degree that one is lax in preparing for *Rosh Hashanah*, to that extent he will miss out when *Rosh Hashanah* comes.

A person who knows that he has a court date in the distant future does not let his life be overshadowed by that upcoming event. However, as that date looms near, the litigant begins to fixate on it. So should we be when *Elul* approaches. All year long, we know that *Rosh Hashanah* is in the distant future, and we ignore it. When *Elul* comes, it is time to start focusing on our upcoming court date. *Chazal* say that on *Rosh Hashanah*, "Every living creature passes before *Hashem*." This really means, "Every living creature." There are no exceptions. (*Ma'archei Lev* Vol. I, p. 57)

Shabbat

"The Sabbath presence (literally, 'The face of *Shabbat*') let us welcome." (From the Friday night hymn, *Lecha Dodi*)

What does it mean to welcome "the face" of *Shabbat*? R' Ben Zion Bruk z"l (1904-1985; founder of the Bet-Yosef Novardok Yeshiva in Yerushalayim) explains:

We all make sure to complete our preparations before *Shabbat* begins--some people out of habit, and some people out of fear of performing prohibited activities after sunset. But there is more, something deeper than that, to *Kabbalat Shabbat* / Welcoming the Sabbath. As R' Moshe ben Maimon z"l (*Rambam*; 1135-1204; Spain and Egypt) writes: "It is a *Mitzvah* for a person to wash his face, hands and feet in hot water on *Erev Shabbat*, wrap himself in his garment, and sit solemnly waiting to receive the face of *Shabbat*, as if he were going out to greet a king."

Imagine, elaborates R' Bruk, that a king was coming to town and one went out to watch the fanfare from a distance out of curiosity. That is not called "receiving the face of the king." The purpose of welcoming a king is to take advantage of his appearance to strengthen his dominion and confirm the relationship between him and his people. [A more modern analogy, perhaps: If one goes to a wedding reception--known in Hebrew as a "*Kabbalat Panim*" (literally, "receiving the faces")--but stays in the background eating *hors d'oeuvres*, never saying "*Mazal Tov*" to the bride, the groom, or their parents, he has done nothing to enhance the celebration or to strengthen his own relationship with the celebrants.]

So it is, writes R' Bruk, when the *Shabbat* Queen arrives. One can actively prepare himself to greet "the face" of *Shabbat*, or one can be content with letting *Shabbat* slip in quietly. The former is called welcoming "the face" of *Shabbat*. This means, among other things, not reciting the psalms of *Kabbalat Shabbat* out of habit; rather reflecting on their meaning and their connection to the Holy Day. (*Hegyonei Mussar* I p.23)

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Teshuvah

Rambam z"l writes: Do not think that *Teshuvah* / repentance is necessary only for bad deeds. Rather, just as one must repent from bad deeds, so one must seek out his *De'ot ra'ot* (loosely translated: character flaws) and repent from those also. These may include: anger, hatred, jealousy, competitiveness, mockery, lust for money or honor, lust for food, etc. From all of these, one must repent. This, *Rambam* adds, is more difficult than repenting from bad deeds because, when a person is immersed in these, it is very difficult to extricate himself. (*Hil. Teshuvah* 7:3)

R' Gershon Edelstein z"l (1923-2023; *Rosh Yeshiva* of the Ponovezh Yeshiva) comments: This teaches that a person must repent from having bad *Middot* / character traits. Even someone who was born with bad *Middot*, to whom they are natural, must change his nature and correct those *Middot*. Admittedly, changing one's nature is very difficult work!

R' Edelstein continues: There are tactics that can help a person correct his *Middot*. The first is Torah study, which the *Gemara* (*Kiddushin* 30b) describes as the antidote to the *Yetzer Ha'ra*. The more one attaches himself to the Torah, the more it influences him to perfect his character.

Second, R' Edelstein adds, prayer can help a person correct his character flaws. For example, we pray (at the end of *Shemoneh Esrei*), "Guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceit," asking *Hashem* to help us correct bad *Middot* that involve action (speaking). We continue, "To those who curse me, let my soul be silent, and let my soul be like dust to everyone." Here we ask *Hashem* to help us develop humility, which, in turn, will help us not be pained when others offend us. Indeed, humility is the key to correcting many bad *Middot*.

However, R' Edelstein continues, prayer is not enough. One must work on his character using the tools of *Chochmat Ha'nefesh* (loosely translated, knowing oneself) taught by *Sifrei Mussar* / works on character improvement. One cannot repair his *Middot* without studying *Mussar*, R' Edelstein writes. As R' Yisrael Lipkin z"l (1810-1883; "R' Yisrael Salanter"; founder of the *Mussar* movement) said: "Changing oneself without studying *Mussar* is like trying to see or hear without eyes or ears."

R' Edelstein adds: There is a great benefit to studying *Mussar*, for though such works one knows what sins and shortcomings one must correct. In addition, *Mussar* works give advice on how to change one's nature, and what actions are helpful. As is well known, a person is influenced by his actions. Part of fulfilling the obligation to repent, R' Edelstein concludes, is engaging in steps that lead to repairing one's *Middot*. (*Asifat Shemuot: Tishrei* p.182)

"It shall be when he [the king] sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself two copies of this Torah in a book . . . It shall be with him, and he shall read from it all the days of his life, so that he will learn to fear Hashem, his Elokim . . ." (17:18-19)

The Torah states that reading the words of the Written Torah can lead a person to *Yir'at Hashem*/ reverence for G-d, notes R' Moshe Zuriel z"l (1938-2023; former *Mashgiach Ruchani* of Yeshivat Sha'alvim and a prolific author, who passed away last week). This results, explains R' Zuriel, from reflecting upon the fact that the words one is reading are holy, having been uttered by *Hashem* Himself.

R' Zuriel continues: This should teach each of us about the importance of studying the Written Torah every day (in addition to *Gemara* and *Halachah*). Many people read "*Shnayim Mikra V'echad Targum*" / the weekly *Parashah* twice with the commentary of Onkelos. But, do we heed the admonition of the *Maggid* / angel that appeared regularly to R' Yosef Karo z"l (1488-1575; Greece and *Eretz Yisrael*; author of the *Shulchan Aruch* and other works): "You read *Shnayim Mikra V'echad Targum* superficially like someone stoking coals, like someone hurrying to fulfill an obligation"? Basic *Halachic* works, such as the *Mishnah Berurah*, confirm the imperative to be proficient in the Written Torah, R' Zuriel notes.

It is true, R' Zuriel observes, that the *Gemara* (*Bava Metzia* 33a) seems to downplay the importance of studying the Written Torah. However, that is merely because we would not know how to perform any of the *Mitzvot* if not for the details found in the Oral Law (the *Mishnah* and *Gemara*). But that should not cause a person to neglect the Written Torah. Indeed, in terms of holiness and the ability to inspire *Yir'at Hashem*, the Written Torah, which is the direct word of *Hashem* through His Prophets, is superior.

(*Lekket Ahavat Ha'Torah*)



"So that his heart does not become haughty over his brethren and not turn from the commandment right or left, so that he will prolong years over his kingdom, he and his sons amid Yisrael." (17:20)

R' Hillel Lichtenstein z"l (1814-1891; Hungary and Galicia) writes: We learn in *Pirkei Avot*, "If one's fear of Heaven precedes his wisdom, his wisdom will persist." Fear of Heaven is the foundation for remembering one's Torah studies.

This may be alluded to in our verse, R' Lichtenstein writes. Our Sages say that if one is haughty, he will forget his wisdom. And they say, "Who are royalty? Torah scholars!" Thus, our verse could be read: If one is not haughty and one does not deviate right or left from the *Mitzvot*--i.e., if he has fear of Heaven--then he and his descendants will remain royalty, i.e., Torah scholars.

(*Shiyarei Maskil* 1:4)