



58

ELUL: MONTH OF LOVE AND AWE

THIS SHABBAT WE BLESS THE FORTHCOMING MONTH, because on Tuesday and Wednesday in the coming week it will be “Rosh Chodesh”, the New Moon of the month of Elul. The letters of the Hebrew word Elul form the initial letters of the verse “I am to my beloved, and my beloved is to me”¹. This is a line from the Song of Songs (6:3), which is explained as describing the love between G-d and the Jewish people. This month is a time when we come close to G-d, and G-d comes close to us, in love, in preparation for the meaningful festivals in the following month: **Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Succot, Simchat Torah.**

Chassidic teachings describe the special closeness to G-d in this month using the image of a King who has left his Palace and is travelling in the countryside, close to his subjects².

This idea expresses love. But another aspect of our relationship with G-d, all the year round and especially in the month of Elul, is the feeling of Awe.

Thus there is a custom that we hear the Shofar (ram's horn) blown every weekday in Elul except the last day of the month, just before Rosh Hashana. On the two days of Rosh Hashana, the blowing of the Shofar is the central aspect of our experience of the Festival (although if Rosh Hashana falls on Shabbat, the Shofar is not blown).

The idea of blowing the Shofar is explained by Rabbi Moses Maimonides as being a kind of alarm, rousing us, saying “Awaken you slumberers from your sleep and remember your Creator!”³. He quotes a verse from the prophets: “Can a Shofar blow in the city and people not tremble?” (Amos 3:6)

This explanation of the Shofar emphasises its stirring quality, bringing a touch of awe to one’s heart. One sighs... Perhaps one regrets something one did, or did not do. Perhaps one wonders how to make amends...

Another reason given for the Shofar blowing is as an act of recognition of G-d, our King. When a king is ceremoniously crowned the trumpets triumphantly proclaim a salute. So too we proclaim G-d as king using the Shofar. This explanation, given a thousand years ago by Rabbi Saadia Gaon, expresses quite a different mood, one of exultant dedication to G-d our king.

A third aspect of the Shofar is associated with the coming of the Messiah. In the weekday Amidah prayer said three times daily we declare “Blow the great Shofar for our freedom...”.

In a sense this combines all the above levels of meaning: a spiritual arousal, in which we and the entire Jewish people, indeed the whole world, turn back to G-d, with genuine love and awe; and also a triumphant call of spiritual victory, as we declaim at the end of each Prayer service: “On that day, G-d will be One, and His Name will be One” (Zacharia 14:9).

On Rosh Hashanah we reaffirm our bond with G-d and our dedication to Him. Yom Kippur, Succot and Simchat Torah are further aspects of this intimacy with G-d. The month of Elul is a month of preparation for this incredible experience. A key way to prepare is by giving charity, which is emphasised in our Sedra⁴. We are coming to a beautiful month, expressing both love and awe...

1. אָנִי לְדוּדֵי וְדוּדֵי לִי . See *Kitzur Shulhan Aruch* 128:1 for other ways of explaining the word ‘Elul’, treated as an acronym. 2. See Rabbi Shneur Zalman’s *Likkutei Torah*, Re’eh, p.32. 3. Laws of Repentance, 3:4. 4. Deut.11:26-16:17. See 15:7-8, and the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Likkutei Sichot* vol.34 p.89.

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SEDRA RE'EH

GIVING WITH A SMILE

Debbi lay sprawled on her bed, enjoying her book. The doorbell rang. She tried to ignore it. It rang again. Her brother and sister were both out, she realized, and her mother was buried in her work on the computer, writing an article, probably. Sighing, she got up and climbed down the two flights of stairs to the door.

Standing in the porch when she opened it was a man, with a ragged brown raincoat, ancient checked cap, and tired eyes. She recognized him - he was a Jewish beggar who often came to their house.

Oh no! she thought as she stomped into her mother's office. Her mother looked up from her computer.

"It's that old man again at the door, Mummy. Do you have any money for him?"

Her mother's face lit up. "Mr Jacobs! How lovely! Here, take this to him, and offer him a drink - it's such a hot day."

Debbi looked at her mother, and shrugged her shoulders, but went to do as she was told.

Mr Jacobs was so grateful, she even felt a little less grumpy at being disturbed. She went back to her mother and asked curiously:

“Mummy, why are you always so happy when people like Mr Jacobs come to us? They’re such a pain - aren’t they..?”

“Well,” said her mother “It’s funny that you should ask this now, because it actually discusses this idea in this week’s Sedra, Re’eh. You know, I also used to think like you about this, but then I was reading the Sedra one week, and it says how important it is to give to the poor with a happy face.

“And, not only that, the poor are actually doing us a favour by letting us give to them! Think of that - because of Mr Jacobs, we both have a big Mitzva - the Mitzva of giving Charity, Tzedaka”.

“I suppose that’s specially a good thing to do now we are heading towards Rosh Hashana,” said Debbie. “That must be why so many letters come from different Jewish organisations, asking for support.”

Her mother nodded. Then a thought struck Debbie.

“But what if we ourselves were very poor and didn’t have much money - would G-d want us to give away the little we have?” she asked.

“Even if we only have a little, we should give what we can, and G-d will reward us. Even a person like Mr Jacobs should give charity, at least a few pennies!”

“With a happy face!” added Debbie.

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