



Matir Asurim / מתיר אסורים / "The One Who Frees Captives"

This phrase from Jewish liturgy refers to God's power to act for freedom and/or humanity's ability to manifest godliness through working for freedom. "Freer of Captives" is one of Judaism's names for the Eternal.

Matir Asurim, the organization, connects Jewish spiritual, cultural, and communal resources and people experiencing incarceration or re-entry.

Divrei Matir Asurim Elul '84

Matir Asurim Words/Matters -- September 2024 / Elul 5784

Divrei Matir Asurim is available in three formats: straight text for copying into emails; formatted text for copying/printing for postal mail; and on-line (with some internet links for those who can access them).

This month's edition includes two sections:

MEETINGS AND OPERATIONS

TORAH EXPLORATIONS and NEW YEAR THOUGHTS



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Divrei Matir Asurim is a publication to promote religious education and solidarity.

If not otherwise noted, content is provided by V. Spatz, an outside member of Matir Asurim.

Who We Are

We are a collection of Chaplains, Rabbis, Cantors, Kohanot/Hebrew Priestesses, advocates, activists, volunteers, loved ones of incarcerated people, and people with direct experience of incarceration. We are an all volunteer group who began meeting in 2021. We live and work across Turtle Island, in territories, cities, and rural settings of the US and Canada.

Vision

We are striving toward a world free from oppression, where aspects of social identity like race, class, and gender no longer limit our safety, opportunities, and agency to live into the fullness of our sacred potential.

We are striving toward a world where individuals are mutually accountable to one another and where wrongdoing is addressed through reparative and transformative justice, guaranteeing the human dignity of all parties.

We are striving toward a world where all people are provided with the conditions for healing trauma and for *teshuvah* (repentance/restoration), surrounded by resources, guidance, and social support networks.

We are striving toward a world where nobody is isolated and everyone has opportunities to connect to something larger than ourselves—whether to community, culture, or spirituality. Within that world, we envision a Judaism that is radically welcoming and accessible to all seekers.

MEETINGS AND OPERATIONS

Core Organizers and Working Groups

The August 18 meeting focused event planning and preparations for making best use of grant funding.

Information Session. The first event is an on-line information session for outside folks interested in learning more about Matir Asurim and how to get involved. That is scheduled for September 9.

Author Discussion. The second event is an on-line discussion with Dr. Robin Bernstein, author of *Freeman's Challenge*. This new book focuses on the system of prison labor for profit developed in New York state in pre-Civil War years. This "Auburn model" of incarceration still influences how prisons operate in the U.S. and other places.

Professor Bernstein is a cultural historian specializing in race in the U.S., from the nineteenth century to the present. She teaches at Harvard University, holding these titles: Dillon Professor of American History, Professor of African and African American Studies, Professor of Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality; Chair of doctoral program in American Studies.

Professor Bernstein joins Matir Asurim to discuss themes from her new book and its relationship to Jewish work in- and around prisons.

The event is scheduled for September 25, and we plan a transcript to share with inside readers.



Grant Funding. Matir Asurim is grateful to individual donors and to the Rise Up: Nurturing the Soul of Jewish Justice Initiative, which are providing funding for projects in the new year.

Next General Meeting: October 20, 2024

Memorial and Special Concerns

Recent Losses to Execution:

August 7 (Texas): **Arthur Lee Burton**
August 8 (Utah): **Taberon Dave Honie**

Scheduled Executions:

August 29 FL **Loran Kentsley Cole**
September 24 TX **Travis James Mullis** MO **Marcellus "Khaliifah" Williams**
September 26 AL **Alan Eugene Miller** OK **Emmanuel Antonio Littlejohn**

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Divrei Matir Asurim Elul 5784

TORAH EXPLORATIONS and NEW YEAR THOUGHTS:

New offerings for 2024 and sections from 2022 and 2023 materials

Note adapted from the 2023 High Holiday mailing: It is often taught that the month Elul is a month to spiritually prepare us for the Days of Awe (the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur). A verse from Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs, is often associated with these spiritual preparations: *Ani l'dodi, v'dodi li* -- I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine. (More on this to come). This phrase invites us to consider what it means to think about and be responsible for one another's wellness. It pushes us to remember that all of our struggles are bound up with one another's and to remember that community and family is a verb - something that we are always in process with. With that quote in mind, it feels particularly important for us to reach towards you and to make sure you know that we are with you, dear community. You deserve love, you are worthy of care and healing and we know that you hold so much wisdom about the complexity and depth of what it means to repair in the face of rupture.

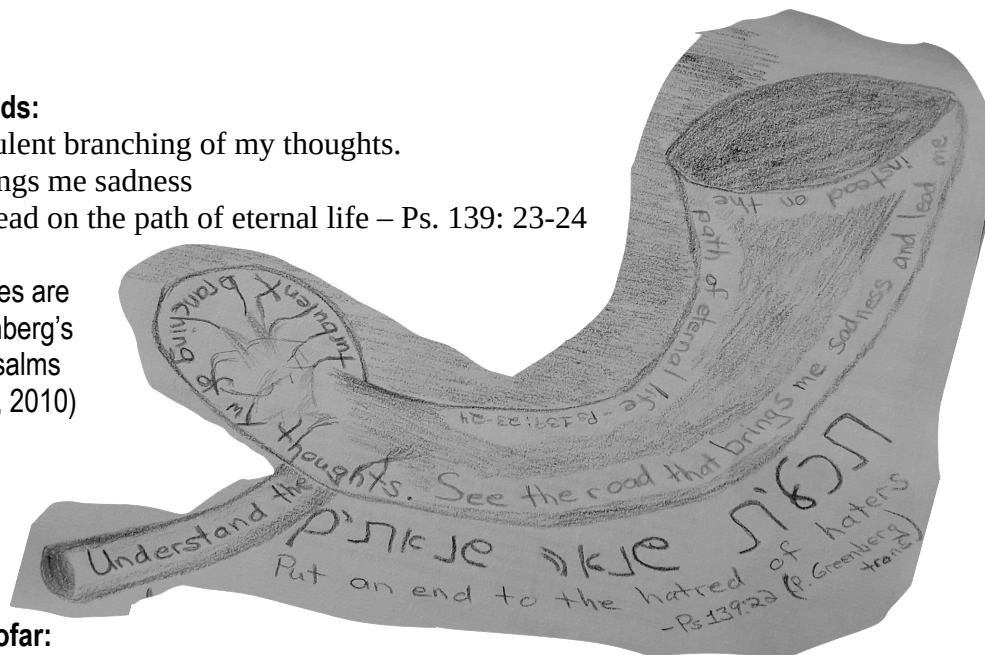
With blessings for *tzedek, rachamim, v'shalom* -- justice, compassion and peace

New for 2024: Psalm 139 is sometimes used at times of trouble or concern, including the start of a new month. This shofar note was created for the start of Elul some years back and is shared here for Rosh Chodesh Elul 5784 with the same intention: **Renew our lives at the new moon and for year ahead.**

Text added to shofar reads:

Understand the turbulent branching of my thoughts.
See the road that brings me sadness
and lead me instead on the path of eternal life – Ps. 139: 23-24

These English verses are from Pamela Greenberg's translation of the Psalms (Bloomsbury Press, 2010)



Text added below shofar:

תכלית שנאה שנאתים: [Takhlit sinah s'neitim]

“Put an end to the hatred of haters” – Ps. 139:22

Torah/Haftarah Readings for Deuteronomy/Devarim

<i>Hebrew title</i> [English]. Chapters: verse	Haftarah	Civic date. Hebrew date
Devarim [Words/Matters]. Deut 1:1 - 3:22	Isaiah 1:1-27	Aug 10. 6 Av
Va-etchanan ["I pleaded"]. Deut. 3:23-7:11	Isaiah 40:1- 26	Aug 17. 13 Av
Eikev [As a result]. Deut. 7:12-11:25	Isaiah 49:14 - 51:3	Aug 24. 20 Av
Re'eh ["see"]. Deut 11:26- 16:17	Isaiah 54:11 - 55:5	Aug 31. 27 Av
Shoftim [judges]. Deut 16:18 - 21:9	Isaiah 51:12- 52:12	Sep 7. 4 Elul
Ki Teitzei ["When You Go Out"]. Deut 21:10-25:19	Isaiah 54:1-10	Sep 14. 11 Elul
Ki Tavo ["When You Come"]. Deut 26:1-29:8	Isaiah 60:1-22	Sep 21. 18 Elul
Nitzavim [Standing]. Deut 29:9-30:20	Isaiah 61:10 - 63:9	Sep 28. 25 Elul
Vayeilech [He went]. Deut 31:1-30	Isaiah 55:6-56:8	Sep 28. 25 Elul
Ha'azinu [Listen]. Deut. 32:1-52	2 Sam 22:1- 52	Oct 5. 3 Tishrei 5785
V'zot HaBerakhah [This is the blessing]. Deut 33:1 - 34:12	Joshua 1:1-9 (or 1:1-18)	Oct 25. 23 Tishrei

Elul -- אֶלּוּל -- ending and preparing

The lowest day of the calendar, Tisha B'Av, is behind us in the month of Av. The high points of the fall holidays are ahead, in the first month of the new year, Tishrei. So, Elul, the final month of the Jewish calendar, is also a time in-between.

Many Jews treat this in-between time as a special gift, a time to focus on letting go of the previous year and working to prepare for the new year. One related teaching links the name "Elul" to a verse from the Song of Songs. The letters of the name -- *alef-lamed-vav-lamed* -- match the first letters here:

"Ani l'dodi v'l'dodi li -- I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine."

-- Song of Songs (*Shir HaShirim*) 6:3

א	אָנִי	I am
ל	לְדוֹדִי	my beloved's
ו	וְלְדוֹדִי	and my beloved
ל	לִי	is mine

In addition, the final letters of these words add up to 40 = *yud + yud + yud + yud* = 10 + 10 + 10 + 10. This is understood as a hint that the verse is talking about the 40 days of Teshuvah / Return, from Rosh Chodesh Elul to Yom Kippur.

Linking Elul to this verse highlights the month as a time for a loving connection with the Divine and with the divine in ourselves and others. More on this in *For Times Such as These* excerpts, below.

"Because"

by Rabbi Yael Levy, from A Way In: Directing the Heart Through Jewish Mindfulness

*Yes, I will offer blessings with my life,
To all that is I lift my hands. -- Psalm 63:5*

As the season continues to gently turn us, the Torah calls:

*Because.** (Deut. 7:12)

Because everything comes on the heel of everything else,
Because every action has consequences,
Because all is connected,

Because we are not the source
Because we are not all powerful,
Because we are not the center,

Because we are here together with all life,
Participants in the Infinite Unfolding,

This is what is asked of us:

To live with awe,
To walk in paths of truths,
To love,
And to be of service with full hearts and souls,
For the well-being of all life. (Deut. 10:12)

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Rabbi Yael Levy kindly offers her teachings for re-sharing though Divrei Matir Asurim.

* This teaching is based on passages from the Torah portion Eikev. The word "eikev," starting the portion (Deut 7:12), can be translated as "because" or "as a consequence." It is also related to the word "heel," and the name, Ya'akov or Jacob.

May the calls of the season guide us with gentle care.

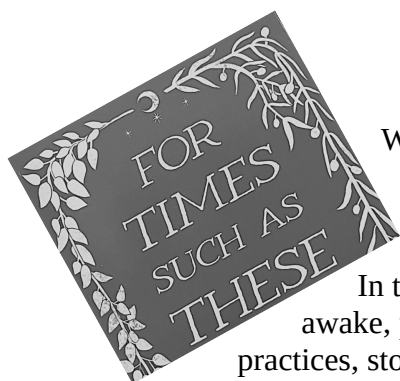
Note adapted from the 2022 High Holiday mailing: We hope that the ancient words, contemporary creative interpretations, and artwork brings the intentions of each prayer close to your hearts. While we grieve that we cannot pray together, our hope is that these prayers are one small way of moving beyond the limitations of prisons.

We know that nobody is free until we are all free. As we bring in 5783, we are reaching towards each one of you, our beloved Jewish community across and beyond bars, with love, with care, with a commitment to justice and healing.

Whether or not the prayers are familiar to you, whether or not you feel prepared for the holidays or for the new year itself, we hope that this offering meets all of us with softness for our broken hearts. We hope that whatever meaning you find in these pages or make of their words, that we remember together that we all have the master key, that we can let our hearts ring out to God as loud as any shofar, and that our broken hearts are held by one another!

With blessings for *tzedek, rachamim, v'shalom* -- justice, compassion and peace,

Val, Sarit, Cece, Laynie, Chava, Meli, Callie
and all of us at Matir Asurim: Jewish Care Network for Incarcerated People



For Times Such as These: Elul

What has grown in the last year of your life?

What have you cultivated in the past year?

What has fallen away? What have you thrown away?



In the past year, when have you felt most alert, oriented, grounded, awake, powerful? What was happening in those times? What people, practices, stories, and understandings can you bring forward from those times?

What do you want to bring your energy to in the new year?

What do you want to pay attention to everyday? -- Katz & Rosenberg, p. 277

Elul is a time of divine love, abounding forgiveness, and generosity for ourselves and others, where and whenever possible. The name of the month, Elul, it is taught,* corresponds to verse 6:3 in Shir HaShirim:

אָנִי לְדוֹדִי וְדוֹדִי לִי

I am my beloved[']s and my beloved is mine.

Elul is a time of experiencing God as Beloved and Lover. Centuries of Jewish tradition have built up infinite understandings of, metaphors for, and expressions of the Divine. It is notable that in the month when instructed to do the most self-reflection, to sit with harm we've committed and ways we've missed the mark, all of the significant God-talk is about love and care. And for those who don't experience God as King, Sovereign, or Beloved, it is still possible to distill and apply the wisdom that there can be no transformation, individual or communal, without love and care. It is necessary to envision the forces of love and care as present, active, and acting in the world and our lives. -- Katz & Rosenberg, p.278

In Elul, daily practices and liturgy change. The shofar is blown every day to prepare for the new year, to announce its arrival and its process of becoming....The blasts of the shofar open our hearts and act as an alarm clock to wake us up....a beautiful example that nothing is sudden. making a full repair requires time to reflect, recommit, repair, and make a different choice the next time. The process of teshuvah is not flipping a switch....Hearing the shofar daily helps peel back layers that have built up over the past twelve months, and gently eases one into the month ahead. -- Katz & Rosenberg, p. 280

Why is there all of this praying and singing and horn tooting? It all is for the sake of cheshbon ha'nefesh and teshuvah: the accounting of one's soul and making repair.** This is the heart of Elul and the High Holiday season: to excavate our lives, to examine how we treating each other, to reflect on how we are living our values, to try to know and understand the harm we have caused and experienced in the past year, and to make amends. (cont.)

* See above in Divrei Matir Asurim to see how the first and last letters of "ani l'dodi v'l'dodi li" hint at Elul and the season of return. (More p.5)

** Teshuvah = repair, return, repentance.
Cheshbon = accounting. Ha-nefesh = "the soul."
(More p.5)

Excerpt from *For Times Such As These*

(cont.)

Cheshbon ha'nefesh, soul searching, can happen through the traditional practices of Elul, through a musar practice of looking at particular aspects and values, through journaling, meditation, somatic practices, in therapy...in therapy, and through discussion with friends. Anything you do to take a serious and heartfelt account of how you're doing is cheshbon ha'nefesh. The question then is what to do with what we have found?

First and foremost we are called to "make teshuvah." Teshuvah comes from the root of the word "to return." But to what do we return? We return to events of the past year and years, with the gift of time and perspective, to better understand what happened and why, our behaviors and roles in the event. We return, through the practice of making amends, to ourselves. One of rabbinic Judaism's core theological foundations is an understanding that people are made b'tzelem Elohim, in the image of the Divine. When we commit harm, we are moving away from our core selves. When we make teshuvah, we return to our essential goodness. -- Katz & Rosenberg, p.284

NOTES:

* **Elul, it is taught.**

Endnote cites *Mishnah Berurah* 581:1 for the teaching about Elul and Song of Songs 6:3.

Mishnah Berurah ["Clarified Teaching"] includes explanations of Jewish laws. The author is Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (1839-1933 CE). Kagan is also called "*Chafetz Chaim*," after his most famous book. (See also below.)

** **Cheshbon ha'nefesh.**

Both Cheshbon hanefesh and tThe first word, "accounting," is pronounced: *chesh-bone* with *ch* as a strong, back-of-the-throat h-sound, like the start of "Chanukah." The second word, "the soul," is pronounced: *ha-nef-esh*,

The related section in *For Times Such As These* notes that there are many teachings, from over the centuries, about how cheshbon hanefesh and teshuvah can work. They conclude:

We will spend our whole lives learning and practicing how to be in better relationships with ourselves and each other and the world. Jewish tradition offers us seasons of wisdom and practices, and community in which to do with work. -- Katz & Rosenberg, p.286

For Times Such As These: A Radical's Guide to the Jewish Year

Rabbi Ariana Katz and Rabbi Jessica Rosenberg. Wayne State University Press, 2024

Excerpts, with small adaptations, used with permission.

ADDITIONAL NOTE: Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan's writings titled *Chafetz Chaim* focus on the careful use of words. The words "*chafetz chaim*" are found in Psalm 34:12-14 --

Who is the person who delights in life [*chafetz chaim*], who desires to see good days?

Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from deceitful speech.

Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.

Jewish tradition is very concerned with the power of words, how they can be used to harm people. The high holiday prayers are full of sins we commit by using words in hurtful ways. And Kagan's detailed teachings about using words are often studied at this time of year.

SHOFAR: A COLLECTIVE CALL (from 2022 and 2023 High Holiday Mailings)

To everyone everywhere
No one, no one is excluded, from my heart.
To everyone everywhere
No one, no one is excluded, from my heart.
I wish you well, my beloved.
I wish you well, dear sweet soul.
I wish you well, my beloved. May you live with ease.
– Pablo Das

∞

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?

The horn blows to usher in Elul...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 – Re'eh, Shoftim, Netzavim, Ki Tetze – 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. – Passage from *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*, by Rabbi Alan Lew

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we blow the shofar. The piercing call of the ram's horn is meant to shatter us, startle us, spiritually awaken us to the work of repentance, accountability and the collective need for transformation. The shofar's call breaks open our hearts and it is from this place that we can heal.

In a prison, there is much that shatters and reminds us of the immensity of healing that is needed. But for most, there is no shofar. May the collective sound of our shofars across Turtle Island reverberate, move through the air to find each one of you. May the shofar blasts mingle with my prayers to meet your prayers. May the air that you breathe feel thick with care and may you feel the yearning in the shofar vibrations that call us towards a world where healing, transformation and abounding love for all is possible. May our shattered hearts meet your shattered hearts in the wind and in the breeze that knows no limits, no walls, no borders, no bars. May we feel the many ways that we are connected despite impossible circumstances. May the shofar remind us that we are not alone in this work.

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And G'd says: Hear the sounds of the shofar! And if you cannot hear the shofar, if you cannot step foot in the synagogue for whatever reason, then hear what is meant to wake you.

Hear: I Can't Breathe, Hear: Black Lives Matter, Hear the cries of the refugees, Hear the names of the restless dead. Wake. Stay woke. It is all a shofar. – Dane Kuttler

More Matir Asurim High Holiday resources available. Ask an outside contact to download and share.
Or reach out to us using the contacts on front and back page of this edition of Divrei Matir Asurim.

TALMUD STUDY AND ART-MAKING FOR ROSH HASHANA

The Lace Midrash -- (from 2022 High Holiday Mailing -- study/art session held Summer 2022)

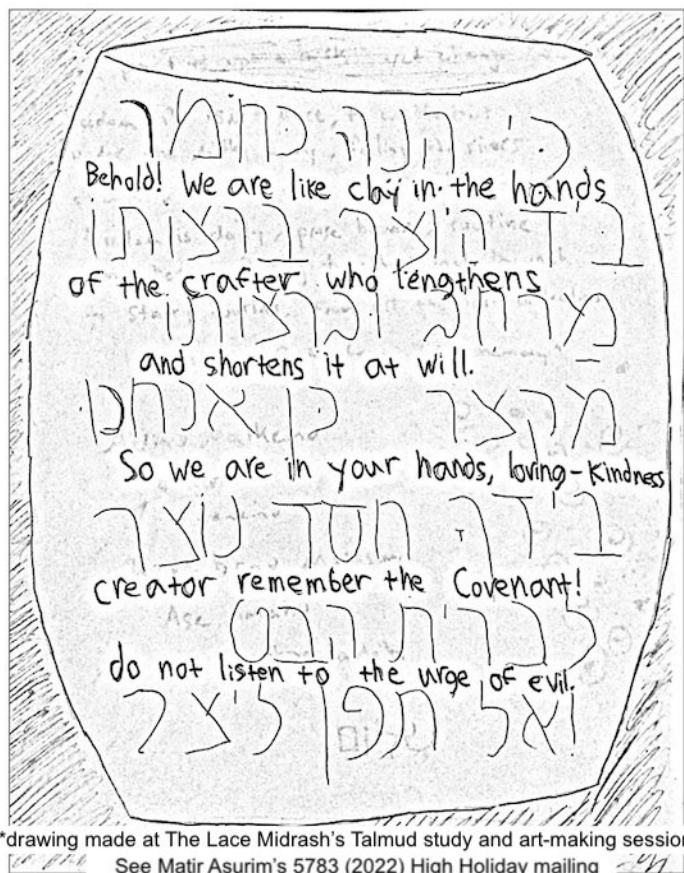
[A group of 12 or so gathered in Chicago, IL] to think about Rosh Hashanah and what we could send you to make the holiday meaningful. We read this selection from the Mishna (Rosh Hashana 1:2) and had an interesting discussion about how God sees us; our hearts, our deeds, and how God relates to us; as troops, sheep, special individuals, or as all basically the same. Then we had some quiet time to express our thoughts and feelings through making art. It was a special opportunity to gather... and feel that we were also gathering with you, the readers of this offering.

This is the text that we read together:

At four times of the year the world is judged: On Passover judgment is passed concerning grain; on Shavuot concerning fruits that grow on a tree; on Rosh HaShana, all creatures pass before Him like sheep [benei maron*], as it is stated: "He Who fashions** their hearts alike, Who considers all their deeds" (Psalms 33:15); and on the festival of Sukkot they are judged concerning water, i.e., the rainfall of the coming year.

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[Art made in the 2022 study group is featured throughout the 5783 high holiday mailing. Here's one piece: clay jar with text in Hebrew and English.]



*drawing made at The Lace Midrash's Talmud study and art-making session See Matir Asurim's 5783 (2022) High Holiday mailing

* Babylonian Talmud (RH 16a) suggests several meanings for "benei maron": flock of sheep; soldiers of King David's house; steps of Beit Maron [a steep climb]

** "fashions = ha-yotzer" (Ps. 33:15) is a strong feature in "Ki Hinei Kachomer," a liturgical poem recited or sung in many high holiday services

כִּי הִנֵּה כַחֲמֵר בְּיַד הַיּוֹצֵר
בְּרִצּוֹתָיו מְרַחֵב וּבְרִצּוֹתָיו מְקַצֵּר
כִּן אֲנַחְנוּ בְּיַדְךָ חֶסֶד נוֹצֵר
לִבְרִית הַבֵּט וְאֵל תִּפְן לַיֵּצֵר

*Ki hinei kachomer beyad hayotzer.
Birtzoto marchiv uvirtzoto mekatzer.
Ken anachnu veyadcha chesed notzer.
La'brit habet ve'al tefen la'yotzer.*

Behold, we are like clay
in the hand of the crafter,
who lengthens and shortens it at will.
Thus we are in Your hands, merciful Creator.
Remember the Covenant
and do not listen to the Evil Inclination.

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Psalm 27: for Elul and the Season of Return

Psalm 27 is linked with the season of return, from the start of Elul through Yom Kippur (or the end of Sukkot). Here are two interpretations to compare and use in this season:

Psalm twenty-seven (David's.)

God is my light, my salvation.
Who am I scared of.
My life's fortress.
Who frightens me.

2) Villains approach
to devour my flesh.
Foes. Enemies.
They collapse, fall!

3) If you assemble a camp against me
my heart will not fear.
If you mount a war
against me, I'll be sure of this—

4) I'll ask one thing of God
(request)
To be settled in God's house
all my days
To view God's pleasant side
To visit God's palace

5) Yes they'll hide me from catastrophe
in their sukkah.
In their tent, conceal me. Lift me in strength.

6) Right now. Lifting my head
above surrounding foes
I'll sacrifice pealing offerings
I'll sing to God. I'll chant.

7) Listen, God. I'm calling.
Feel sorry for me, respond

8) My heart says we are requesting you God
I am requesting you God

9) Don't hide from me.
Don't be angry at me,
my support.
Don't abandon or
leave me, my solution.

(psalm continues)

From the beginning of Elul we include Ps. 27

Yah, you are my Light, my Savior,
Whom need I dread?
Yah, With You as my strong Protector
Who can make me panic?

2) When hateful bullies gang up on me,
Wanting to harass me,
To oppress and terrorize me,
They are the ones who stumble and fall.

3) Even if a gang surrounds me
My heart is not weakened.
If a battle is joined around me
My trust in You is firm.

4) Only one thing do I ask of You, Yah,
Just this alone do I seek:
I want to be at home with You, Yah,
All the days of my life.
I want to delight in seeing You,
When I come to visit You in Your Temple.

5) You hide me in Your Sukkah on a foul day.
You conceal me unseen in Your tent
And also raise me beyond anyone's reach.

6) And now, as You have held my head high,
Despite the presence of my powerful foes,
I prepare to celebrate and thrill,
Singing and making music to You, Yah!

7) Listen, Yah, to the sound of my cry
And, being kind, answer me.

8) My heart has said: I turn to seek You,
Your Presence is what I beg for.

9) Don't hide Your Face from me.
Don't just put me down,
You, who have been my helper
Don't abandon me, don't forsake me,
God, my support.

(psalm continues)

PSALM 27, Continued

10) Parents leave me and God — take me in.

10) Though father and mother have left me
You, Yah, will hold me securely.

11) Show me your route.

Guide me to the straight path
because of those exploiting me.

11) Please teach me Your way
And guide me on the straight path.

12) Don't give me up

to the bodies of those who hate.
False witnesses have stood up against me
Panting violence

12) Discourage those who defame me.
False witnesses stood up against me,
Belching out violence.
Don't let me become the victim of my foes.

13) If only I could believe
that I'll see Divine good in life's land

[I would not have survived]

13) If I had not hoped that I would yet see
Yah's goodness fully alive on Earth.

14) Aim your hope Godward.
Strengthen the nerves of your heart. Once again
aim your hope

14) So friend, you too, hope to Yah.
Be sturdy! And make strong your heart!
And most of all —keep hoping to Yah.

-- Zackary Sholem Berger

-- Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, z"l

This interpretive version by Zackary Sholem Berger, originally appeared on medium (Sep 5, 2019). It is shared through the Open Siddur Project with a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International copyleft license.

This translation by R' Zalman Schachter-Shalomi was first published in his [Siddur Tehillat Hashem Yidaber Pi](#) (2009). Versification by Aharon Varady. It is shared through the Open Siddur Project with a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International copyleft license.

Lulei, Elul, Doubts



^ ^ Lulei – Elul v v



The Hebrew of Ps. 27:13 begins with the word *lulei*: "if not" or "unless" or "except." Printed editions of the psalms have long added extra dots around this word. These dots link Psalm 27 with Elul in at least two ways:

1) they point to shared, but reversed, letters: *lulei* [*lamed-vav-lamed-alef*] is the reverse of *Elul* [*alef-lamed-vav-lamed*];

2) they highlight shared themes of judgment and doubt.

Jews have many, varied ways of understanding what divine judgment means, for the Days of Awe and year-round. Doubts are common, though, regardless of belief system and season. And Psalm 27 expresses both faith and doubt. At any time of year, Ps. 27:13 can prompt us to wonder:

Do we see "Yah's goodness fully alive on Earth"? Will we ever?
Can we believe we'll "see Divine good in life's land"?

The new year can spotlight ways the Divine seems to be failing us, even as we try to focus on our own mistakes. So, it's worth exploring how the Babylonian Talmud links those dots around "*lulei*" to doubt. (**cont.**)

Lulei, Elul, Doubts (cont.)

The Talmud treats the biblical King David as author of the psalms and imagines that he has deep worries. In the bible, King David makes serious mistakes; in Talmud and later Jewish commentary, he is referenced as a pious man but no saint. In this particular passage, the dots around *lulei* in Ps. 27:13 are suggested as evidence of the biblical character's human doubts:

Why are there dots upon the word 'lulei'?
David spoke before the Holy One, blessed be He: "Master of the world, I am sure that you will pay a good reward to the righteous in the world to come, but I do not know whether I shall have a share in it"? Some sin might cause.
(Ber 4a)

In this passage, King David never directly questions the idea of "a good reward to the righteous in the world to come." But the Talmud text itself offers that incomplete expression: "Some sin might cause." English translations and footnotes try to fill in a complete idea: David was worried about a future sin, maybe, or he was just not sure of his own piety. But the incomplete thought could include doubt about the whole idea of divine reward and punishment.

The incomplete thought in the Talmud is similar to the text of Ps. 27:13, which is a little odd. Translators struggle to make sense of it:

"If only I could believe..." [Berger, above]

"If I had not hoped..." [Schachter-Shalomi, above]

That might happen if I weren't sure..." [*Siddur Eit Ratzon*]

As a whole, Psalm 27 includes a range of emotions and belief states: fear, confidence, faith, worry, anger, gratitude, hope. The Talmud story of King David adds more layers of emotion and concern.

...All of which points back to those weird dots and how they're interpreted. Those dots have been a part of biblical text for centuries. Which means centuries of confused and doubting Jews. We might think we're supposed to be entering the season of return with all the answers or with perfect faith. But those dots suggest that we can, maybe should, show up with all our own confusions and doubt.

The doubts expressed in Ps. 27:13 also remind us to use Elul for considering our own behavior and relationships.

Back to "Because"

Return to the verse Rabbi Yael highlighted in the meditation, "Because" (above, p.3):

And now, O Israel, what does the ETERNAL your God demand of you? Only this:
to revere the ETERNAL your God,
to walk only in divine paths,
to love and to serve the ETERNAL your God with all your heart and soul
-- Deut 10:12, Jewish Publication Society (JPS) 2023 trans.; above is Rabbi Yael's own trans.

Elul calls us to focus on the demands of Deut 10:12 and to ask about our individual and collective responsibilities.

What is our responsibility with regard to "Divine good in life's land"?

Are we doing our part to make Divine goodness more "fully alive on Earth"?

As Rabbi Yael wrote:

Because everything comes
on the heel of everything else,
Because every action has consequences,
Because all is connected...



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