

Elul and Confronting Spiritual Anxiety

Reading L'David Hashem Ori

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This week, we experience that annual mixture of incredulity and fright that comes every Rosh Chodesh Elul, as the sounds of the shofar's initial salvo seem to obliterate whatever little bit of summer remains. As the shofar subsides, we rush to recite the passage that Chazal have selected for the month of Elul, Psalm 27, *L'David Hashem Ori*.

The dominant themes of this psalm, including the threat posed to David by his enemies, his need to find refuge in the Almighty, and his longing for intimacy with Hashem, are hardly unique. Why, then, did Chazal choose this psalm as the official psalm of the month of Elul, our month of introspection and preparation for the Days of Awe?

I believe that the answer to this question lies in the last two verses of the Psalm, which also happen to be the most confusing. David declares, 'had I not believed that I would see the goodness of God in the land of the living. Yearn unto Hashem, be strong and He will embolden your heart, and yearn unto Hashem.' At first glance, the penultimate verse appears to have been cut off in the middle. A question is posed, but there is simply no answer. 'Had I not believed that I would see the goodness of Hashem in the land of the living....' *then what?*

Mysteriously, the opening word of this verse, *lulei*, is written with encoded dots above it, a biblical device used to inject ambiguity into the text. Commenting on this special form of biblical code, the Midrash tells us something remarkable: 'a teaching in the name of R. Yosi: why are there dots above the word *lulei*? David said to God, 'Master of the Universe, I know that in the future you will reward the righteous handsomely in the World to Come, but I do not know whether I will be counted amongst the righteous¹.'

Chazal are teaching us that whilst David appeared to have been spiritually confident, he was actually profoundly anxious. David, in a moment of confidence, begins to write that what gives him strength is a belief that he will be counted amongst the righteous, such that he will 'see the goodness of God in the land of the living.' Right then, he wonders, am I truly a righteous person? His doubt stops him mid-sentence.

Yet, that is not where the Psalm ends. Despite all of the misgivings that David has regarding his own religious integrity, David refuses to give up on himself. He cries out, 'yearn unto Hashem, be strong and He will embolden your heart, and yearn unto Hashem.' The final passage of the Psalm is a testament to David's conviction that whatever his failings may be, that if he yearns for Hashem, that he will find Him. And if, for whatever reason, that first yearning falls short, David knows what his response will be, as the psalm concludes, he will yearn unto Hashem once more.

To my mind, these last two verses encapsulate the very essence of our experience of the month of Elul. Who amongst us cannot identify with David's sense of self-doubt, of questioning our own righteousness? Like David, even as we try to think confidently about our prospects for spiritual restoration and rehabilitation, we stop dead in our tracks, unable to complete the proverbial sentence.

¹ Midrash Tehillim, Buber edition, Psalm 27. See also, Talmud Bavli, Brachot 4a.

It is, perhaps, to address this anxiety that Chazal prescribed *L'David Hashem Ori* every morning and evening of the month of Elul, as nothing short of a mantra, a credo. If we do not believe in the possibility of our own spiritual worth, we will have lost the battle of Elul before even the first salvo is fired.

As Hillel said, *אם אין אני לי, מי לי*, 'If I am not, spiritually speaking, for myself, who will be?' If I do not give myself enough credit to believe in the very possibility of elevating and refining my character, of drawing nearer to my Creator, then I have already been defeated.

In Elul, we must all find the strength to conclude as David himself did, by believing enough in our own moral and spiritual potential to 'yearn unto Hashem,' whatever lingering doubts about ourselves we may harbor. We do so confident that He to whom we strive will meet us halfway, hand extended, and 'embolden our hearts,' *חזק ויאמץ לבך*, so that we may embark on a path of meaningful *teshuvah*.