

Elul

Meaning

- Month of repentance in preparation for the High Holy Days
 - Why? Moses went up Mount Sinai to prepare the second set of tablets (after he smashed the first) for the 40 days from Rosh Chodesh Elul (1 Elul) to Yom Kippur (10 Tishri). He obtained God's forgiveness for the Israelites following the incident of the Golden Calf.
 - In Aramaic, means "search"
 - Search one's heart in preparation for Rosh Hashanah (the Day of Judgment) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement)
 - Tefillah, teshuva, tzedakah
 - In Hebrew, acronym for "Ani l'dodi v'dodi li - I belong to my beloved and my beloved belongs to me" (Song of Songs: 6:3)
 - "I" is the Jewish people and "my Beloved" is God
 - In Arabic and Turkish, word for "September"

Customs

- Blow the shofar every morning after shacharit (except on Shabbat)
 - From the first day until the day before Rosh Hashanah
 - Rambam: To awaken us for the soul-searching that will prepare us for the High Holy Days
- Read Psalm 27 every day from Rosh Hodesh Elul through Hoshanah Rabbah on Sukkot (in Tishrei)
 - "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?"
- Recite selichot (special penitential prayers) every morning before sunrise
 - Ashkenazim: during week before last Wednesday before Rosh Hashanah + special service
 - Sephardim: for entire month (adds 45 minutes to shacharit)
- Some visit the graves of loved ones throughout the month

- Some begin or end all letters in Elul with wishes for a good year, e.g., "*Leshanah tovah tikatevu vetechatemu*", "May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year"
 - On Rosh Hashanah, each person is "inscribed" for a good or a bad year, based on their actions in the last year. On Yom Kippur, that fate is "sealed."
- Some check mezuzot and tefillin for defects
- Grant and ask forgiveness to individuals on a one-on-one basis

Gematria

- Elul = 67
 - 67 = Binah (understanding)
 - 67 = Nagid (prince)
 - 6+7 = 13
 - 13 = Love (ahavah)
 - 13 = Oneness (echad)
 - 13 = Number of God's attributes → *Discussion below*

Discussion: Forgiveness

*God is God of Justice (Elohim) and God of Mercy (YHVH).
On the High Holy Days, we emphasize Mercy*

1. Divine forgiveness. The 13 attributes of God

*Adonai! Adonai! El rahum v'hannun, erech appayim v'rav hesed ve-emet.
Notzer hesed la-alafim, nose avon vafesha v'hata-a v'nakke
(lo yentakkeh poked, avon avot al banim ve'al b'nai vanim al-sheloshim ve'al rebeim.)*

- 1 The Lord, (The Lord is merciful before a person sins)
- 2 The Lord (The Lord is merciful after a person has sinned and repented)
- 3 God, (He is all-powerful)
- 4 merciful and (He is compassionate)
- 5 gracious,
- 6 slow to anger,
- 7 abundant in kindness
- 8 and truth, (even after His scrutiny of our conduct)
- 9 Keeping mercy for thousands, (of future generations)
- 10 forgiving iniquity, (He forgives sins committed willfully)
- 11 transgression and (He forgives sins committed in defiance of His will)

12 sin, (He forgives sins committed unwittingly)
13 and cleansing

(Rest of quote: yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, to the third and to the fourth generation. **[This part is NOT included in the liturgy!]**)

[Interpretations by Rabbenu Tam, France 1000-1071 (Tosephot Rosh HaShanah 17b)]

→ Summary of 13 attributes: God is merciful

→ passage repeated many times in Yom Kippur liturgy

- Tanach: Not enough to pray for forgiveness: you must humble himself, acknowledge your error, and resolve not to do it again (e.g., David, II Sam. 12:13ff.; Ahab, I Kings 21:27–29).
- Talmud: Doctrine of *teshuvah* (“repentance”): Man has power of “turning.” from evil to good. He who repents is **always** forgiven.
 - “He who sins and regrets his act is at once forgiven” (Hag. 5a; Ber. 12b)
 - God prays to Himself that His mercy should prevail over His anger and that He should forgive, even when strict justice demands punishment (Ber. 7a)
- Midrash : “Says the Holy One, even if [your sins] reach to Heaven, if you repent I will forgive” (Pes. Rab. 44:185a; see Yal. Ps. 835.)
- Tosafot : God's quality of forgiveness is 500-fold that of His wrath (Tosef., Sot 4:1, based on Exodus 34:6–7)
- Rambam: “Even if a man has sinned his whole life and repents on the day of his death, all his sins are forgiven him” (Yad, Teshuvah 2:1).
- Rav Nahman of Breslov, Hasidic leader: “There is no sin that will not be forgiven by sincere repentance. Every saying to the contrary in the Talmud and the Zohar is not to be understood literally.” (Likkutei Ezot ha-Shalem (1913), 119).

2. Human forgiveness

- God forgives directly only sins committed against Him, “ben adam la-Makom”. God will not forgive sins that harm another person, “ben adam le-havero” until the victim has forgiven the perpetrator
- After payments have been made for physical harm, the perpetrator must seek the victim’s forgiveness for suffering he caused (BK 92a; Yad, Hovel u-Mazzik 5:9; Sh. Ar., HM, 422).
- The perpetrator must seek forgiveness from the victim, but also the victim **MUST** forgive
 - “Man should be pliant as a reed, not hard like the cedar” in granting forgiveness (Ta’an. 20a). “All who act mercifully (i.e., forgivingly) toward their

fellow creatures will be treated mercifully by Heaven, and all who do not act mercifully toward their fellow creatures will not be treated mercifully by Heaven” (Shab. 151b; see also RH, 17a; Meg. 28a).

- If the victim refuses to forgive even when the perpetrator has asked him for forgiveness three times, in the presence of others, then the victim is deemed to have sinned (Tanh. Hukkat 19)
 - Victim should also pray that God forgive the perpetrator, even before perpetrator asks for forgiveness (Yad, loc. cit.; Tosef., BK 9:29; Sefer Hasidim ed. by R. Margalioth 1957, 267 no. 360). (Based on Abraham praying to God to forgive Abimelech (Gen. 20:17).)
 - Concept of “Imitation of God” (imitation dei): Emulate the 13 Attributes
 - “[God]...showed Moses the order of prayer. He said to him: Whenever Israel sin, let them carry out this service before Me and I will forgive them.” (Rosh HaShanah 17b). Commentators: God does not say “SAY” these words and I will forgive you, (i.e., NOT Yomru kaseder hazeh); but “FULFILL”) these words (Ya’asu kaseder hazeh and I will forgive you, i.e.,
- **If you want God’s forgiveness, become more forgiving yourself**
- R. Nahman: “Imitate God by being compassionate and forgiving. He will in turn have compassion on you, and pardon your offenses.”

Story

On Yom Kippur eve, Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev asked an illiterate tailor, "Since you couldn't read the prayers today, what did you say to God?" The tailor said, "I said: Dear God, you want me to repent of my sins, but my sins have been so small! I confess - there have been times when I have failed to return to the customers the pieces of leftover cloth. When I couldn't help it, I even ate non-kosher food. But really, is that so terrible? Now take yourself, God! Examine your own sins: You have robbed mothers of their babes and have left helpless babes orphans. Your sins are much more serious than mine. I'll tell you what, God. Let's make a deal! You forgive me, and I'll forgive You."

"Ah you foolish man," cried Levi Yitzhak. "You had God on the ropes and let him off too easily! Just think! You could have asked God to redeem the entire Jewish people, not just yourself!"

Joke

Two clans were bitter enemies. Before Kol Nidrei, the rabbi brought two two clan heads to the bimah and said he would perform services only if they made up right then in front of the whole congregation. One clan head said to the other, "I wish you for the new year all the things that you are wishing me." Whereupon the other clan head turns to the rabbi and says, "See? See? He is doing it again!"
