Welcome to OrH’s Boot Camp for the High Holidays 5781/2020.

This module is divided into chapters corresponding to Rabbi Alan Lew’s book. Writings include direct quotes from the book, paraphrased material, and journaling prompts for spiritual enquiry prepared by Joyce Schachter. Directions for self-study and study-buddy streams are found below. Divide the module over the weeks between Tisha B’Av (July 30) and Rosh Hashanah (Sept 19). A similar package for the remaining chapters of the book will be released prior to Rosh Hashanah.

SELF-STUDY:

Read the enclosed material and engage with the enquiries. Journal if you like. After the High Holiday period, set your journal aside and reread it in six months.

STUDY-BUDDY:

Find someone with whom you might partner [hevruta]. Your study-buddy doesn’t have to be a close friend. Sometimes it’s a nice way to get to know someone or even open a door to a new way of relating. Determine what kind of meeting would work best for you: phone, Zoom or in-person with social distancing. Set a time limit for the meeting and agree on a set time for each person’s sharing such as 3 or 5 minutes for each enquiry. Practice focused listening for at least part of the session: while one person speaks, the other listens without interrupting, responding verbally or through facial expression. Take time to debrief after the session. Formally/ritually start and end your sessions.

Zoom Sessions:

Everyone is welcome to join the two Zoom sessions August 9, and Sept 13. We will read excerpts together and discuss aspects in the group. Please RSVP your attendance to mindfulness@orh.ca.
Chapter One:  
The Soul Stretches Out to Contain Itself - A Map of the Journey

Between Tisha B’Av and Sukkot, we awaken to the reality of our lives, take stock of ourselves, bare our hearts and souls, atone, pray, fast, and start over.

Rabbi Alan Lew (AL):
You are walking through the world half asleep. It isn’t just that you don’t know who you are and that you don’t know how or why you got here. It’s worse than that; these questions never even arise. It is as if you are in a dream.

AL:
On this journey our soul will awaken to itself. This is a journey from denial to awareness, from self-deception to judgment. We will learn our Divine Name. We will move from self-hatred to self-forgiveness, from anger to healing, from hard-heartedness to brokenheartedness. This is the journey the soul takes to transform itself and to evolve, the journey from boredom and staleness – from deadness to renewal. The journey is one of self-discovery, spiritual discipline, self-forgiveness, and spiritual evolution.

Joyce Schachter:
At this very time in our spiritual year, we Jews stumble about in unexamined habits. Perhaps in 2020, this COVID-19 pandemic year is different. Perhaps the veneer covering the impact of the invisible on our lives has peeled away to expose more than we ever wanted to know: about biology, about our bodies, about the value of our relationships, the value of community, about the role of faith, the yetzer hara (evil inclination) in racism, and perhaps about how much we took for granted.

AL:
Four things will cause God to tear up [ma’akirin] the decree of judgment which has been issued against a person: acts of righteousness, fervent prayer, changing one’s name, and changing one’s behaviour.

Self/buddy enquiry:

1. What acts of righteousness have brought you joy this past year?
2. What role does prayer play in your life at this time?
3. How might you consider changing your behaviour following this HH season?
Chapter Two:
Everywhere He Went He was Heading for Home

TESHUVAH

We are all on a hero’s journey. Like Abraham, like Moses, we all have to leave “home” to find home, to leave again, and keep finding…

AL:
What makes this Jewish? Judaism believes in the particularity of time, that certain times have special spiritual properties i.e. that Shabbat has an extra degree of holiness because we make it that way; that Pesach (Passover) is the time of our liberation; that Shavuot is a time unusually conducive to revelation. When we invest our awareness, Yom Kippur, the day itself, has the power to heal, to atone.

The great journey of transformation begins with the acknowledgement that we need to make it. It is a spiritual necessity. Every time we come home, home is different, and so are we.

Self/buddy enquiry:

1. What activities give you a sense of home?
2. What is blocking or stopping you from feeling at home now?
3. In what ways have you “left home” only to “return home” as you reflect on the various ‘chapters’ of your life?
Chapter Three:
I Turned, the Walls Came Down, and There I Was.

Tisha B’Av (9 Av, 30 July 2020)

Our spiritual journey starts on Tisha B’Av, with the holiday that marks the destruction of the Temple and other bad outcomes for the Jewish people throughout time.

Page 41: Tisha B’Av is the moment of turning, the moment we turn away from denial and begin to face exile and alienation as they manifest themselves in our own lives – in our alienation and estrangement from God, in our alienation from ourselves, and from others. Teshuvah – turning, repentance – is the essential gesture of the HH season. It is the gesture by which we seek to connect with God, reconcile with others, anchor ourselves in the ground of our actual circumstances, so that this reality shapes our actions and not just the habitual, unconscious momentum of our lives.

Page 45:
When things go bad, there is an enormous temptation to blame it on externals, on the evil of others, or on an unlucky turn of events. But, spiritually, we are called to resist this temptation, no matter how strong it may be and no matter how strongly rooted in fact or reason or history it may seem. Ask:
What is my responsibility for a current conflict?
How am I complicit in it?
How can I prevent it from happening again?

Self/buddy enquiry:

The walls come crumbling down and we stand without our usual personas – our roles, our identities, our professional hats. Our vulnerabilities are totally exposed. How can we guide ourselves through the swampland of our less developed traits (our “weaknesses”) toward Teshuva?
Chapter Four:
The Horn Blew and I Began to Wake Up

ELUL

Page 62-3:
The process of returning to ourselves and to God acknowledges the unresolved in our lives. Decline and destruction necessarily precede renewal; tearing down is necessary before rebuilding is possible. Fullness, decline, destruction, renewal, rebuilding, are actually part of the same process, points on a single continuum, consecutive segments of a never-ending circle. We are urged to allow the walls to come down. To face the suffering. Face the loss, turn toward it, embrace it.

Our suffering, the unresolved element of our lives, is also from God. It is the instrument by which we are carried back to God, and back to ourselves, not something to be defended against, but rather to be embraced. We can enter the present moment of our lives and consciously alter that moment. We can end our exile from our integrity and from God.

P66:
“… I call Heaven and Earth to witness you this day that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore, choose life, so that you may live.” Moses repeats in Deuteronomy.

There is a certain gravity in facing ourselves, and a certain grace in sharing ourselves in community and witnessed by the mystery. The ineffable. This is why we are advised to spend the month of Elul in regular practice of introspection, self-examination, and silence… to come to see our life clearly enough so that we can discern the will of God in it – in that sliver of eternity on which we stand and that we call the present moment.

Self/budy enquiry:

What is the prayer that is pressing on your heart at this very moment?
Chapter Five:
This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared

Selichot (23 Elul, Sept 12/20)

P105:
This is real whether you believe in God or not. Perhaps God made it real and perhaps God did not. Perhaps God created this pageant of judgment and choice, of transformation, of life and of death. Perhaps God created the Book of Life and the Book of Death, Teshuvah, and the blowing of the shofar. Or perhaps these are all just inventions of human culture. It makes no difference. It is equally real in any case. The weeks and months and years are also inventions of human culture. Time and biology are inventions of human culture. Language and stories, loves and tragedy, are inventions of human culture. But they are all matters of life and death, all real and all inescapable. Even though we invented the idea of weeks, we die when our allotted number of weeks has gone by. So if this event is merely the product of human culture, it is the product of an exceedingly rich culture, one that has been accumulating focus and force for three thousand years.

P110:
When we become painfully aware that there is nothing we can do at all, we do three things:

1. **We come together as a community to stand together before God as a single spiritual unit.** We heal one another by being together. We give each other hope.

2. **We make confession. We open our hearts.** We find the courage to do this because we are gathered in one single spiritual unit belonging to something much larger and deeper and thicker than one person.

3. **We perform this ancient ritual of judgment, of transformation, of forgiveness, of life and death, as a service.** We got this service from God.

Self/buddy enquiry:

How might you take one more baby step towards that which you fear? What blocks must you overcome?