

A Dog's Life
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It was an unseasonably hot September day five years ago, a day or two before Rosh Hashanah.

We were living on the Upper West Side at the time and I was walking home one evening to our apartment on the West Side, a walk that took me past a kosher ice cream store on the corner of our block. Seating was available for customers outside, and a man sat there enjoying an ice cream while an absolutely enormous St. Bernard dog was laying on the pavement beside him.

His considerable height was revealed when he got up, and reached my waist. I am fascinated with huge dogs, so I went over to pet the dog and to strike up a conversation with the owner. The dog was clearly struggling to remain cool in the warm weather; his tongue lolled out of his mouth in the custom of his breed, he was panting and drooling heavily and smelled *terrible*. Of course, he was extraordinarily friendly, but I had to ask the owner the question that struck me the moment I saw the poor thing. “Isn’t it extremely expensive to keep a dog like this? How do you make room for him in a small Manhattan apartment?” He then said something I will never forget: “When you love something, you always make room.”

In this week’s *Sedrah*, the Torah tells us about the Mitzvah of *maaser sheni*, the second tithe, in which one tenth of one’s agricultural produce is set aside in the first, second, fourth and fifth

years of the seven year *maaser* cycle and brought to Yerushalaim. The Torah makes a puzzling provision in commanding this Mitzvah:

דברים יז כד

וכי ירבה ממך הדרך כי לא תוכל שאתו כי ירחק ממך המקום אשר יבחר ה' אלקיך לשום שמו כי יברכך ה' אלקיך

If you live too far away, such that it's too difficult for you to go to carry all your produce, you can take money instead, go to Yerushalaim and spend it there on whatever you want. I ask you, what kind of a *mitzvah* is this? No one argues that everyone is obligated to ascend to Jerusalem, but this provision seems to encourage laziness! When the Torah tells us to wear Tefillin, it doesn't stipulate that if the Tefillin are uncomfortable and davening is too early, we are exempt from doing so, and may read some Chumash later instead. When the Torah talks about the requirement of a woman to observe the laws of *Mikvah*, it does not tell us that if the mikvah is too far away or the water is too cold, a woman can take a bath instead. And in this week's Torah reading, when the Torah tells us about the animals we are forbidden to consume, it doesn't tell us that if it's too difficult to adhere to these laws, we can partake of certain other normally prohibited animals, because they taste like chicken. What is the meaning of this "out"?

The great Kabbalist R' Moshe Alshich offers a profound insight based on the language in the verse. The Torah is not giving us a legitimate alternative for the inferior performance of a

mitzvah. Instead, it is issuing a challenge. If we find it too difficult to carry the *maaser sheni* to Yerushalaim, if we find the performance of a mitzvah to be burdensome, it's not the *makom*, or the location, that is far away. Rather, it is *Hamakom*- the term used for God on several occasions throughout the Jewish calendar- from whom we are distant, for if we were closer and more deeply connected, we would never find bringing that produce to be burdensome. Instead, it would be a source of great joy and a mark of boundless spiritual privilege. Like that fellow at the ice cream shop and his dog, we make time for and expend effort on the people, values, organizations and activities we consider important and that infuse our lives with joy, happiness and a sense of purpose.

This morning is the first day of the month of Elul, commencing a period of introspection and soul searching. In the same way that we go for an annual physical with our doctor, Elul is the time for an annual “spiritual,” in which we evaluate the condition of our souls and their connection to God. This certainly includes our performance of *mitzvos*, but more fundamentally, our “spiritual” should include our *attitudes*. An engaged religious and spiritual life comprising our commitments to God and his commandments on one hand, and to relating to his creations on the other, should be a source of joy and bring us a sense of purpose such that the road is never

too distant. But aligning these can it can be a challenge, because not everything that is important may be enjoyable in the classic sense. How do we make enjoyable that which is important?

I'd like to make one or two suggestions that might help. The first is to pick two mitzvot in any realm- one which we really enjoy, and one which we really don't. The month of Elul is a great opportunity to work on these. We are already likely to do the mitzvah we enjoy, and we can only get better at it. For the one we really don't enjoy, we should spend some time learning about it. Perhaps there is something we missed, and maybe it would benefit from a fresh look, and take *that* on for the month of Elul as well.

The second suggestion is that attitude depends a lot on atmosphere. The Alshich's challenge about the inability to bring *maaser sheni* as being indicative of distance from God is especially resonant, because according to many commentaries, the purpose of bringing produce to Jerusalem was to experience the holy atmosphere that is pervasive there, which can have such a salutary effect on the soul. This Elul, beyond Mitzvah observance, perhaps let's work on creating an Elul *feeling*, which can bring Elul action along with it. What would put us in the mood for the High Holidays and get us thinking about how to prepare for them? Everyone has a different answer. Hopefully, our soon to be unveiled Shaare Tefilla Elul Program (acronym STEP) will

provide portals of entry, with opportunities to learn about the prayers of the season and other avenues for growth. But beyond that, there are so many ways to create an Elul atmosphere.

Perhaps there is music that gets you in a reflective spirit or that you associate with this time of year. I know that I prepare for the High Holidays with *yamim noraim* music in the background, and I in the coming days and weeks, I hope to share some of this music with you. For others, it's cooking or making your guest lists. Find something and do it, regularly. Hopefully, we will find that the resultant atmosphere will elevate our observance and our commitment, especially at this time of year.

In Kabbalistic works, Elul is known as the time in which *Hamelech Basadeh*, the king is easily accessible to us as he is in the field. Rosh Hashanah is on the horizon, and the King we will coronate on that day is nearby. Let's make sure we are close to Him.