

# Elul – Beginning to Re-Turn

## Section 1: We're Already There

*Sefer Yetzirah (The Book of Formation) is the earliest extant work of proto-Kabbalah and it is traditionally attributed to Abraham (18<sup>th</sup> Century BCE) and/or R' Akiva (2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE). It connects each month with a Hebrew letter, a constellation, a part of the human body and a human emotion, sense, or faculty. What does it suggest about the spiritual work of our month?*

**Sefer Yetzirah 5:8** (translated by R' Aryeh Kaplan)

He made the letter Yud king over action  
And He bound a crown to it  
And He combined one with another  
And with them He formed Virgo in the Universe  
Elul in the Year  
And the left hand in the Soul  
Male and female

**ספר היצירה ה:ח**

המליך אות י' במעשה  
וקשר לו כתר  
וצרפן זה בזה  
וצר בהם בתולה בעולם  
ואלול בשנה  
ויד שמאל בנפש  
זכר ונקבה

*R' Tzvi Elimelech Spira of Dinov (Poland, 1783 – 1841) was the founder of the Dinov Chasidic dynasty, and a student of R' Elimelech of Lizhensk and the Chozeh of Lublin. He is known by the name of his widely beloved major work, the Bnei Yissascher, which focuses on the spiritual background and work of each month. What does he add here to our understanding of this month's inner work?*

**Bnei Yissascher on Elul 1:1**

Elul is especially suitable for Teshuvah (Return to our best selves)...The Judgements (Severities) of Tammuz and Av are sweetened in Elul.

**בני יששכר על אלול א:א**

הוא מסוגל להתעסק בתשובה  
...  
הדינים של תמוז א"ב נמתקים באלול

**Bnei Yissascher on Elul 1:6**

“He formed in it Virgo [lit. Virgin] in the Universe” (Sefer Yetzirah 5:8). The Jewish People are always like a virgin who has never been ruler over by any man. They are as dear to their Beloved, as it were, every time, just like the first moment.

And the constellation of this month, which is especially suitable for Teshuvah, is Virgo, because through Teshuvah we become like new creations, as if we have never been ruled over by the evil impulse.

**בני יששכר על אלול א:ו**

צר בו בתולה בעולם  
כנסת ישראל דומין תמיד לבתולה  
שלא שלט בה עדיין שום איש  
וכביכול חביבה על דודה  
בכל פעם כשעה ראשונה  
  
והנה החודש הזה המיוחד לתשובה  
מזלו בתולה  
דע"י התשובה נעשים כבריה חדשה  
וכאילו לא שלט עליהם היצר הרע

*R' Avraham Yitzchak Kook (1865 – 1935) was the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of pre-state Israel and a giant of both mysticism and Jewish law, who synthesized Lithuanian and Chasidic perspectives.*

*Orot HaTorah (Lights of the Torah) is a selection of Rav Kook's writings on the value of Torah and how to learn and live its ways. It was compiled by his son, R' Tzvi Yehudah Kook (1891 – 1982) and published in 1940.*

<p><b>Orot HaTorah 11:2</b></p> <p>The righteous person must have creative imaginative faith in their own life. Meaning, that they believe that their very lives and their emotions, that come straight from the foundation of their soul, are good and upright, and will lead them on the correct path. The Torah should be a guiding light, through which we see where we may go astray, for sometimes the soul wonders in directionless chaos. But one should constantly be in a state of spiritual self-confidence.</p>	<p><b>אורות התורה יא:ב</b></p> <p>האדם הישר צריך להאמין בחייו          כלומר שיאמין בחיי עצמו          והרגשותיו ההולכות בדרך ישרה          מיסוד נפשו          שהם טובים וישרים ושהם מוליכים בדרך ישרה          התורה צריכה שתהיה נר לרגלו          שעל ידה יראה את המקום          ששם הטעות עלולה          שלפעמים תתע הנפש בתהו לא דרך          אבל המעמד התמידי צריך להיות הבטחון הנפשי</p>
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*Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772 – 1810) was the great-grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidut. He originally attracted a small but ardent following, but his followers are now a large grass-roots movement with great influence across the Jewish world. Likutei Moharan is the primary collection of his teachings, which are renowned for their creativity and psychological insight. How does this short excerpt from his teachings about Teshuvah relate to the sources above?*

<p><b>Likutei Moharan 6:2</b></p> <p>The essence of Teshuvah is to hear yourself disgraced and remain completely silent.</p>	<p><b>ליקוטי מוהר"ן ו:ב</b></p> <p>וְעַקֵּר הַתְּשׁוּבָה          כְּשִׁישְׁמַע בְּזִיּוֹנוֹ יָדָם וַיִּשְׁתַּק</p>
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**Section 2: Up, Down and All Around**

*The Zohar (Splendor or Radiance) is the foundational work of Kabbalah or Jewish mysticism. The Zohar first appeared in Spain in the 13th century, and was published by R' Moses de Leon (1240 – 1305). De Leon ascribed the work to the tannaitic sage R' Shimon bar Yochai (2<sup>nd</sup> Century, Land of Israel), an attribution which some take literally, others deny, and still others find to be partially true.*

*Despite this controversy existing from its inception, the Zohar became extremely influential, even in matters of Halachah (Jewish law), and profoundly influenced the Chasidic movement. What does this teaching add to our understanding of Teshuvah, and what questions does it provoke?*

<p><b>Zohar 3:122b</b> (translated by Daniel Matt)</p> <p>Teshuvah restores everything – repairing above, repairing below, mending oneself, mending the whole world.</p>	<p><b>זוהר ג קכ"ב</b></p> <p>ותשובה אתקין כלא          אתקין לעילא אתקין לתתא          אתקין לגרמיה אתקין לכל עלמא</p>
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*R' Yisroel ben Eliezer (c. 1700 – 1760), known as the Ba'al Shem Tov, or Besht, was a mystic, healer and teacher who lived in the Ukraine and founded the Chasidic movement (Chasidut). Chasidut is very diverse, but all Chasidim see themselves as followers of the Besht and his teachings.*

*Tzava'at HaRivash, (Testament of the Rabbi Yisroel Ba'al Shem) is an anthology of teachings and instructions attributed to the Ba'al Shem Tov and his successor, R' Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritch (1704 – 1772). How does this teaching help us to understand the zoharic passage above, and what are its implications for our daily lives, during this month and throughout the year?*

**Tzava'at HaRivash 1:100 (p. 19b)**

This is a great principle: everything in the world contains the holy sparks [of the Divine]. Nothing is empty of the sparks, not even trees or stones, nor human behavior, even the wrongdoings that people do have these sparks of the [cosmic] breaking in them.

And what are sparks from the breaking? They are Teshuvah. When a person makes Teshuvah for a wrongdoing, they elevate the sparks that were in that action to the higher world. Hence the verse [which describes Divine forgiveness] says, “bearing sin” (Ex. 34:7), i.e. lifting the sin upwards.

**צוואת הריב"ש א"ק**

זה כלל גדול  
 בכל מה שיש בעולם יש ניצוצים הקדושים  
 אין דבר ריק מהניצוצים אפי' עצים ואבנים  
 אפילו בכל המעשים שאדם עושה  
 אפי' עבירה שאדם עושה  
 יש בה ניצוצות השבירה  
 ומה הוא ניצוצות השבירה היא התשובה  
 ובשעה שעושה תשובה על העבירה  
 מעלה הניצוצות שהיו בה לעולם העליון  
 וזה שאמר נושא עון  
 פירוש נושא עון  
 נושא ומעלה העון למעלה

*R' Nathan Sternhartz of Nemirov (1780 – 1844), also known as Reb Noson of Breslov, was the foremost disciple and scribe of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, and led the Breslover movement after Rebbe Nachman's death in 1810.*

*Reb Noson led the Breslov Chasidim through a particularly difficult period known as the Years of Oppression (1834 – 38) in which the Savraner Rebbe (R' Moshe Tzvi of Savran 1775 – 1837) used his considerable influence to persecute the Breslovers by ethically dubious and often violent means.*

*However, Reb Noson told his family and his followers not to respond in kind to these provocations: “They are our brothers. Eventually they will be rectified. We ourselves will have to seek remedies for them!” (Kramer, Through Fire and Water p.412) How does this example augment our perspective of Teshuvah, and challenge us in the work we do on our own relationships?*

**Section 3: No Kvetching, Please**

*Throughout history, many people representing myriad religions and philosophies have berated humankind for our relentless failure to act wholly righteously. As the first verse below demonstrates, a voice like this also exists in our tradition.*

*However, there is also another voice, found in the subsequent sources, that radically challenges it and which reframes our understanding of the Creation story, Teshuvah and ourselves. How might we integrate the wisdom of these teachings into this month's spiritual work?*

<p><b>Ecclesiastes 7:29</b></p> <p>Behold, only this have I found, that G!d has made man upright; but they have sought out many schemes.</p>	<p><b>קהלת ז:כט</b></p> <p>לְבַד רָאָה זֶה מִצָּאתַי אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה הָאֱלֹקִים אֶת הָאָדָם יָשָׁר וְהִמָּה בִקְשׁוּ חֲשִׁבֹנוֹת רַבִּים</p>
<p><b>Psalms 66:5</b></p> <p>Come and see the deeds of G!d Awesome in His plot toward humanity.</p>	<p><b>תהלים סו:ה</b></p> <p>לְכוּ וּרְאוּ מַפְעָלוֹת אֱלֹקִים נִוְרָא עֲלֵיָהָ עַל־בְּנֵי אָדָם</p>
<p><b>Midrash Tanchuma on Parshat Vayeshev</b></p> <p>R' Yehoshua ben Korcha said on the above verse: Even the awesome events You bring upon us, You bring them through a plot!</p> <p>Come and see: when the Holy One made the world, from the first day He had already made the angel of death...and Adam was created on the sixth day, and a plot was hanged upon him that he would bring death to the world, as it says: “For on the day that you eat thereof, you shall surely die.” (Gen. 2:17)</p> <p>This is like a man who wanted to divorce his wife...he wrote a Get [writ of divorce] and came home with the Get in his hand, looking for an excuse to give it to her. He said to her: “Pour me a drink.” She poured it for him, and as he took the cup from her hand he said to her, “Here's your Get!” She said, “What have I done wrong?” He said to her, “Get out of my house! You poured me a lukewarm drink!” She said to him, “Did you already know that I was going to pour you a lukewarm drink, that you had already written the Get and placed it in my hand?!”</p>	<p><b>מדרש תנחומא על פרשת וישב</b></p> <p>א"ר יהושע בן קרחה אף הנוראות שאתה מביא עלינו בעלילה את מביאן בא וראה כשברא הקב"ה את העולם מיום הראשון ברא מלאך המות ואדם נברא בששי ועלילה נתלה בו שהוא הביא אתה מיתה לעולם שנאמר כי ביום אכלך ממנו מות תמות</p> <p>מלה"ד למי שמבקש לגרש את אשתו כתב גט נכנס לביתו והגט בידו מבקש עלילה ליתנו לה אמר לה מזוג לי את הכוס שאשתה מזגה לו כיון שנטל הכוס מידה אמר לה הרי זה גיטך אמרה לו מה פשעי אמר לה צאי מביתי שמזגת לי כוס פשור אמרה לו כבר היית יודע שאני עתידה למזוג לך כוס פשור שכתבת הגט והביאתו בידך</p>
<p><i>Teshuvah is often associated with weeping and remorse for our failings. This is certainly one important aspect of it, but the early Chasidic Master, the Me'or Einayim (R' Menachem Nachum Twersky of Chernobyl, 1730 – 1797) here reminds us of another side of Teshuvah.</i></p> <p><i>How might we balance remorse and joy in our own, current, Teshuvah practice?</i></p>	

<p><b>Me'or Einayim on Parshat Ha'azinu</b></p> <p>Teshuvah is a positive mitzvah from the Torah, and therefore it should be done with joy.</p>	<p><b>מאור עינים על פרשת האזינו</b></p> <p>תשובה הוא מצות עשה מן התורה ולכן צריך לעשותה בשמחה</p>
<p><i>How does Reb Noson understand the name sometimes given to our period, “Yamei Ratzon”? What is the trajectory he suggests for our journey from now until Yom Kippur?</i></p>	
<p><b>Likutei Halachot</b> <b>Choshen Mishpat, Laws of Guaranteeing 3:35</b></p> <p>From the New Moon of Elul until Yom Kippur...these are the “Days of Desire” most literally. For on them the highest Desire is illuminated every year and in every generation, so we need to strengthen ourselves to draw to ourselves strong desires and great yearnings for the Blessed G!d. And through Desire, Awe is made, therefore these days are called the Days of Awe.</p>	<p><b>ליקוטי הלכות</b> <b>חושן משפט - הלכות ערב גילה</b></p> <p>מראש חֲדָשׁ אֱלוּל עַד יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים אֱלוֹ הַיָּמִים הֵם יְמֵי רָצוֹן יְמֵי רָצוֹן דִּיקָא כִּי בְהֵם מְאִיר הַרְצוֹן הָעֲלִיוֹן בְּכָל שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה בְּכָל דּוֹר וְדוֹר וְאֵז צְרִיכִין לְהִתְגַּבֵּר בְּיוֹתֵר לְהַמְשִׁיךְ עַל עַצְמוֹ רְצוֹנוֹת תְּזַקִּים וְכִסּוּפֵין גְּדוּלִים לֵה' יִתְבָּרַךְ וְעַל יְדֵי הַרְצוֹן נַעֲשֶׂה יִרְאָה בְּנִ"ל וְעַל כֵּן אֱלוֹ הַיָּמִים נִקְרָאִים יָמִים נוֹרָאִים</p>
<p><i>R' Yonah ben Avraham Girondi (Catalonia, 1180 – 1263), known as Rabbeinu Yonah, was a medieval scholar, prominent opponent of Maimonides (1135 – 1204) and the instigator of the public burning of his works in 1233, in Paris. He later atoned for this and wrote Sha'arei Teshuvah (Gates of Teshuvah) as part of his process of private and public Teshuvah. Here he offers some very down-to-earth advice for us on doing Teshuvah. What parts of yourself might benefit from following the advice below?</i></p>	
<p><b>Sha'arei Teshuvah 1:35</b></p> <p>“If you did bundles of transgressions, now do bundles of good deeds” (Leviticus Rabbah 21:4). If one’s legs ran to do transgressions, now run to do mitzvot. If one’s tongue lied, then use one’s tongue to speak truth, wisdom, and teachings of kindness. If one’s hands spilt blood, then open your hands to give to your needy brother. ... If you once caused conflicts, now seek and pursue peace.</p>	<p><b>שערי תשובה א:לה</b></p> <p>אם עשית חבילות של עברות עשה כנגדן חבילות של מצוות רגלים ממהרות לרוץ לרעה יהיו רצות לדבר מצוה לשון שקר - אמת יהגה חכו ופיו יפתח בחכמה ותורת חסד על לשונו ידיים שופכות דם פתוח יפתח את ידו לאחיו לענייו משלח מדנים בין אחים יבקש שלום וירדפהו</p>
<p><i>R' Yaakov Yosef HaKohain of Polnoye (Ukraine, 1710 – 1784) was one of the first and most dedicated of the Besht's disciples. His book, Toldot Yaakov Yosef, published in 1780, was the first Chassidic work ever published is and one of our most important sources of the Besht's ideas.</i></p> <p><i>Do you prefer the gritty realism of this teaching, or those which emphasize how natural and easy Teshuvah could be?</i></p>	

<p><b>Toldot Yaakov Yosef on Parshat Beshalach</b></p> <p>Teshuvah involves progressing gradually in a round-about way. We don't make Teshuvah all at once, coming close to the blessed Creator at once. This is the reason we must humble ourselves in every way, and cultivate great perseverance.</p>	<p><b>תולדות יעקב יוסף על פרשת בשלח</b></p> <p>סדר התשובה שיהיה בהדרגה להסיב דרך ולא בפעם אחד בדרך התשובה להתקרב אליו ית' בפעם אחד כי זה לסבה שיתבטל מכל וכל רק בשקידה רבה</p>
<p><i>R' Tzadok haKohen Rabinowitz of Lublin (1823 – 1900), usually referred to as Rav Tzadok, was a major figure in Polish Chasidut. In Tzidkat HaTzadik (The Righteousness of the Righteous), Rav Tzadok explores the nature of humanity in psychological and spiritual terms. Does the teaching below correspond to your own experience? If so, what is the part of your self he is speaking about?</i></p>	
<p><b>Tzidkat HaTzadik 49</b></p> <p>Everyone knows that their strongest desire can be a vessel for the most sacred and healthy things. And those aspects of life we repeatedly transgress in are exactly the ones which are waiting to be used with a clean and “pure heart” (Ps. 24:4).</p> <p>Therefore our sages said, “With the limb that you sinned with, do mitzvot!” (Lev. Rabbah 21:5). This not only repairs that specific aspect of ourselves measure-for-measure, but repairs our entire spiritual beings.</p> <p>For all of us were created with certain specific healing to do, and no one is alike in this, just as we don't find two people with exactly the same face, as we all have a divinely unique soul... And on this it is said: no one can stand in words of Torah until they have stumbled in them (Gittin 43a) because by stumbling we understand that we were created to repair that very thing we stumbled in.</p>	<p><b>צדקת הצדיק - אות מט</b></p> <p>כל אחד ידע שבמה שיצרו תוקפו ביותר הוא כלי מוכן לאותם דברים ביותר להיות נקיים וזכים אצלו ובדברים שהירבה לפשוע בהם ידע שהוא כלי מוכן להיות דייקא באותו דבר נקי ובר לבב ולכן אמרו שבאבר שבו חטא בו יעשה מצוות ואין זה רק תיקון לעבירה הקודמת מדה כנגד מדה אבל הוא גם תיקון נפשו</p> <p>בפרט כי כל אחד נברא לתיקון איזה דבר פרטי אשר בו נתיחדה נפשו בפרט ואין לה חבר כמו שלא נמצא פרצופים שוים ופרצוף פנים רומז על צלם אלהים דנפש ועל כזה אמרו אין אדם עומד על דברי תורה אלא אם כן נכשל שעל ידי המכשלה הוא מבין שלכך נוצר לתקן אותו דבר</p>
<p><i>A final thought and question from this midrash: Can you remember a time in your own life when the gates of Teshuvah have opened for you? What happened?</i></p>	
<p><b>Lamentations Rabbah 3:15</b></p> <p>Prayer is likened to a mikveh (ritual bath) and Teshuvah is likened to the sea. Just as a mikveh may be sometimes open and sometimes locked, so too the gates of prayer are sometimes open and sometimes locked. But the sea is always open, and so too the gates of Teshuvah are always open.</p>	<p><b>איכה רבה ג:טו</b></p> <p>נִמְשָׁלָה תְּפִלָּה כְּמִקְוֵה וְנִמְשָׁלָה תְּשׁוּבָה כִּיָּם מֵה מְקוֹה זֶה פְּעָמִים פְּתוּחָה פְּעָמִים נְעוּלָה כִּךְ שְׁעָרֵי תְּפִלָּה פְּעָמִים נְעוּלִים פְּעָמִים פְּתוּחִין אֲבָל הַיָּם הַזֶּה לְעוֹלָם פְּתוּחַ כִּךְ שְׁעָרֵי תְּשׁוּבָה לְעוֹלָם פְּתוּחִין</p>