



Readings for the Month of Elul

Compiled by

SHANI COHEN

CCAR Press HUC-JIR Intern



CENTRAL CONFERENCE OF AMERICAN RABBIS · NEW YORK

Copyright © 2020. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

THE SAGES drew a connection between the month of Elul and Shir HaShirim (Song of Songs) 6:3, Ani l'dodi v'dodi li, "I am beloved's and my beloved is mine." The theme of love carries us through all three sections of this guide: drawing closer to ourselves, closer to each other, and closer to God. We draw closer to ourselves, each other, and God by taking time for a daily practice, by taking time to reflect on our own journey. Once we are aware of where we are, we can turn to our community. What brings us together? How do Judaism and Torah connect us to others and help strengthen our relationships? Finally, we may consider our relationship with God. How do we connect to God? When do we feel doubt?

The month of Elul leads up to Rosh HaShanah, the start of a new year. In preparation for the High Holy Days, this guide helps us take the time to think more deeply about our place in the world, our connections to our loved ones, to Torah, and to God.



TURNING TO YOURSELF

We start our spiritual practice by looking inward at our own personal journeys, setting goals for the coming month, and deepening personal connections with Torah and rabbinic texts. Ani l'dodiv dodi li, "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine," Shir HaShirim teaches. Yet before we can truly love another, we must learn to love ourselves. We can do this by confronting our own self-perceptions, acknowledging our doubts and fears, and finding freedom in self-acceptance. The following section is meant as a guide in this journey of self-discovery, beginning on our path towards the new year.



אלול א Elul I

Psalm 27/*Adonai Ori*

God is my light אֱלֹהֵי אֲנִי. Traditionally, this psalm is read every day of Elul. Its verses reflect a range of human emotion and a wavering sense of faith appropriate to these days of spiritual struggle. The speaker's confident serenity is disrupted by an anxious awareness of surrounding threats. Not certainty but quest is the dominant mood: the search for light, peace, and strength in tumultuous times. The last verse —“wait for Adonai”— suggests the value of repeated recitation of the psalm. Courage and inner peace come with patience, discipline, and development of a spiritual practice.

—Rabbi Janet Marder and Rabbi Sheldon Marder, *Mishkan HaLev: Prayers for S'lichot and the Month of Elul* (CCAR Press, 2017), p. 8.

Have you ever developed a spiritual practice? If so, what elements of that practice do you want to carry with you through this Elul? If not, what do you hope to gain from this spiritual practice for the month of Elul?

אלול ב Elul 2

Courage

And I said:

O if only I had wings like the dove

I would fly away and find a restful abode.

I would wander afar while hastening

to find a haven from the stormy tempest. (Psalm 55:7-9)

And so I pray

that my spirit have the strength to soar,

that my heart have the courage to seek,

and my mind the wisdom to discover,

a life of meaning and purpose.

Grant me, O God,

strength,

courage,

and wisdom.

—Rabbi Karyn Kedar, *Amen: Seeking Presence with Prayer, Poetry, and Mindfulness Practice* (CCAR Press, 2020), p. 59.

What is your prayer for the coming month of Elul? How would you define “a life of meaning and purpose”?

אלול 3 Elul 3

Practice for the Practice

Psalm 27:13—Turn the Letters Around / *Lulei* לולא

It's a puzzle on the page each morning.
Dots dance around the Hebrew letters,
their energy attracts my attention.

Lamed-vav-lamed-alef.

Lulei, “Had I not . . .”

The Hebrew letters spell out the internal,
spiritual, and emotional work I have to do.

Reluctant. Resistant.

Not yet remorseful.

I rearrange the Hebrew letters.

Alef-lamed-vav-lamed.

Elul, this month when my life is full of doubt, questions, regret.

Twenty-nine days

to work the puzzle,

to turn the letters around, read them in a mirror.

A whole month to look at myself, to turn myself around,

to put my relationships, choices, actions in a different order,

to see myself in the mirror.

. . . The puzzle is visible on the page,
the dots draw it back to my attention.

Lulei.

If I don't solve it,

darkness will conceal the possibility and promise of this New Year.

Elul.

When I turn the letters around,

I will see goodness, blessing, broken pieces become One.

—Rabbi Debra J. Robbins, *Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27: A Spiritual Practice for the Jewish New Year* (CCAR Press, 2019), pp. 8–9.

What do the letters of Elul mean to you? What are the interconnected puzzle pieces in your life?

אלול 4 Elul 4

Notice the River

Notice the river
at break of dawn —
a braid of streams, creeks, and brooks, a dance of insects near the shore.
Notice how brackish,
where the river meets the sea,
how with grace the river
hugs the shore —
fierce in its rising,
fiercer when it falls.
Notice it all —
how it bends,
how it tells
the time of year,
and how smooth the boulders are that guide its course

Notice the Holy One
in blessing and in beauty,
in acts of repair,
in the unearthing of truth,
in eyes that meet,
in the tumult of change,
in words of forgiveness,
in the bridges we build to those we hurt,
in the flow of a year,
in the course of a journey,
in rising and falling,
in the bend of a river,
in the hand we hold out to those who hurt us, in the life we are living
in blessing and in beauty.

—Rabbi Janet Marder and Rabbi Sheldon Marder, *Mishkan HaLev: Prayers for S'lichot and the Month of Elul* (CCAR Press, 2017), p. 119.

When do you connect with your own spirituality? How can you multiply those moments in your life to deepen your relationship with God?

אלול ה Elul 5

Ki Teitzei

Deuteronomy 6:18 says, *V'asita hayashar v'hatov b'einei Adonai*, “Do what is right and good in the sight of Adonai,” inspiring Nachmanides to comment, “It is impossible to mention in the Torah all human conduct with neighbors and friends, all business transactions, all the institutions of community and all of the nations. Rather, after having mentioned a number of them, such as ‘Do not go about as a talebearer’ (Lev. 19:16), ‘Do not take vengeance or bear a grudge’ (Lev. 19:18), ‘Do not stand idly by your neighbor’s blood’ (Lev. 19:16), ‘Do not curse the deaf’ (Lev. 19:14), ‘Stand before the aged’ (Lev. 19:32), and others like them, [Torah] goes back to say in a general way that one should do the good and the straight in all matters.” Torah’s goal is not merely to inculcate a law-abiding citizen, but to train a God-inspired soul.

—Rabbi Amy Scheinerman, “Ki Teitzei,” in *Voices of Torah*, Vol. 1, ed. Rabbi Hara Person (CCAR Press, 2011), p. 508.

What does it mean to train a God-inspired soul? How does Torah inform your behavior?

אלול 6 Elul 6

For Autumn

The rains have come,
Windy days and crisp nights.
Days are shorter now
As the land prepares to sleep.
Bless this day, God of seasons.
Bless the autumn with the hope of comfort and rest.
Be present with us as we gather with family and friends
So that we enliven our moments with love and joy.

God of time and space,
May this season be a blessing and a teacher.
Make me like the coming rain, nourishing all that I touch.
Make me like a gentle wind, quietly clearing old habits
And the debris of my mistakes.
Make me like the crisp air,
Present, refreshing, and free.
Bless my days with service and my nights with prayer.
Make me like the land, seeking solace and rest.

—Alden Solovy. *This Grateful Heart: Psalms and Prayers for a New Day*
(CCAR Press, 2017), p. 21.

How does the changing of summer into autumn affect you as we approach the High Holy Days? How do memories affect you at this time of the year?

אלול 7 Elul 7

Psalm 27:1

Hold the Pose—*Mimi Ira* מִמִּי אֵירָא

In yoga, holding a pose often leads to trembling,
breathing and continuing to hold the pose builds strength.

I am reminded—

Feel no shame,

shaking is an indication of growth, not a sign of weakness.

Over time, the shaking lessens and the stillness lengthens.

And then it's time to move on to a different pose—

a different encounter—

and begin the cycle over again.

Shaking, I am like Job who feels *pachad*, fear, in his bones.

It's a quaking, churning feeling

sometimes noticeable to others, sometimes only to myself.

I say, "I'm shaking, I'm afraid."

Or maybe, "I've been shaken—

physically, emotionally, spiritually by an intense encounter."

I breathe, I wait, the shaking stops, the calm returns,

I move again, but I am changed.

... This season is about holding the pose.

Each day I learn again to maintain the focus,

to not turn away when I tremble or am immobilized with fright or terror.

Like yoga, this too takes practice.

When I encounter the Strength of Life, will I tremble in fear?

When I am in the Presence of Light,

will I be able to hold the pose of awe?

—Rabbi Debra J. Robbins, *Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27: A Spiritual Practice for the Jewish New Year* (CCAR Press, 2019), pp. 16–17.

When in your life have you felt fear? What helped you work through it?

אלול ח Elul 8

Scripture teaches, “The Tablets were the work of God and the writing was the work of God, *charut*, “engraved,” upon the Tablets” (Exodus 32:16). Do not read *charut*, but rather *cheirut*, “freedom,” for there is no one who is truly free who does not engage in the study of Torah. —*Pirkei Avot* 6:2

The rabbis who wrote this teaching wanted us to see a paradox. The Torah and its commandments bind us to laws that have been imposed upon us, yet our greatest freedom comes from the acceptance of Torah. As human beings, we learn that our bodies and souls are filled with all kinds of needs and desires but that not everything we want is good for us. The freedom to pursue all our appetites is actually a form of slavery. Real freedom comes from choosing to engage in a discipline and an order that helps us find mastery over ourselves and fulfillment of our highest aspirations. Judaism teaches us to become the champions of our own lives.

Viewed this way, autonomy is not a new idea introduced into Judaism by the modern age. Judaism depends on our ability to choose and accept Torah. God has no need for automatons. The covenant is a relationship with God in which we willingly espouse a path that leads us toward the joy of service to others, community, purposeful living, and spiritual fulfillment.

Our relationship with God is one of love. In a relationship between human lovers, relationship means freely choosing to be constrained by the needs of the one we love. In the same way, Torah and mitzvot emerge from our loving relationship with God. However, also as in a loving relationship with a person, our relationship with God cannot be one-sided. We respond to God by accepting the right and the obligation to help shape the terms of the relationship in a way that serves our needs, too.

Our part of the *b'rit*, “covenant,” is to engage with the mitzvot lovingly. We have the right to question the ways of the tradition that we find harmful to our being. Just as Rabbinic Judaism has done since ancient times, we have an obligation to alter the tradition to meet the needs of our times. We accept, we choose, we shape, we lovingly find ways to turn our will toward God’s will and, in so doing, we discover freedom.

—Rabbi Jeffrey W. Goldwasser, in *Lights in the Forest: Rabbis Respond to Twelve Essential Jewish Questions* (CCAR Press, 2014), pp. 174–175.

Do you find freedom in the study of Torah? How might Torah help you find mastery over yourself?

אלול ט Elul 9

Doubt

Take your well-held beliefs and put them aside.
Despite what we are taught, there are many ways,
many paths,
many options.
You are only limited by your imagination.
Do not doubt your heart.

—Rabbi Karyn Kedar, *Amen: Seeking Presence with Prayer, Poetry, and Mindfulness Practice* (CCAR Press, 2020), p. 58.

How do you find yourself limited in your relationship with God? Were these limitations taught to you growing up?

אלול Elul 10

For Grace

All I am,
All I have,
All I'll become,
Are present in this moment:
Warmth and breath,
Love and compassion,
Silence and celebration.
Everything, here.
All gifts, present.
What then, God of all being,
What then of my choices?
What will I make of the space
Between this breath and the next?
Will I bring laughter and light,
Hope and faith,
Wonder and strength?
Will I stand in humble service
For all of my brothers and sisters?
Maker of heaven and earth,
Grant us the wisdom to choose lives of grace,
Of vision and understanding,
Seeing each moment as a choice
To bless our companions
With strength and wisdom,
With honor and respect.
Blessed are the gentle moments of grace.

— Alden Solovy, *This Joyous Soul: A New Voice for Ancient Yearnings*
(CCAR Press, 2019), p. 85.

How have you grown or changed in recent months? How are you still becoming?

TURNING TO EACH OTHER

We now move from self-reflection to interpersonal connection. This section explores our connections with loved ones, the commandment to love the stranger, and our mission of tikkun olam, “fixing the world.” Often it is the love of others, whether a spouse, community member, or a stranger, that can empower us to forgive ourselves for past wrongs and move forward with compassion. When we look beyond ourselves to the outside world, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the brokenness, corruption, and hate that surround us. We may feel powerless to make a difference. Yet our tradition teaches us that we are enough, that by saving even one life, it is as if we save the whole world. By approaching the world with love, we can enter the new year ready to uplift ourselves and our communities.



אלול II Elul II

Psalm 27:7

A Gracious Answer

As Rosh HaShanah Approaches

V'choneini Vaaneini וְחַנּוּנִי וַאֲנֵינוּ

At the heart of the psalm,
in the shortest of the verses,
appears a pair of Hebrew words that differ only by a single consonant:
V'CHoneini, be gracious to me
VaAneini, answer me.

. . . A shift occurs at Rosh HaShanah.
I hear my voice among others, a community at prayer.
The anthem of the season
as the ark opens wide,
and so, too, our hearts:

*“Avinu Malkeinu, choneinu vaaneinu,
Our Father our King, be gracious to us and answer us.”*

The pair of Hebrew words that differs only by a sound
appears now with a plural ending:
Be gracious to us and answer us.

With the Psalmist, I petition my God.
With the congregation, I petition our God.
With these words,
I include others in my plea
and accept responsibility for those beyond myself.

. . . I give way to You. Me gives way to us.
Different sounds become a single community.

—Rabbi Debra J. Robbins, *Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27: A Spiritual Practice for the Jewish New Year* (CCAR Press, 2019), pp. 71–72.

In what ways do you accept responsibility for those beyond yourself? Are there moments when you feel the power of the community, when “me gives way to us”?

אלול יב Elul 12

Redeeming My Life

A part of me
Refuses to forgive
Myself
For my errors, my mistakes,
My oversights and misdeeds.
How can I redeem my life from within
This place of judgment,
Of harsh words and
Somber requirement?

God of Old,
God of justice and truth,
Teach me to restore my life
Through acts of love and kindness,
Thoughtfulness and care,
In support of my
Family and community.
Teach me to surrender my days
To the joy of service to others,
The joy of concern for this world
And generations to come.

Heavenly Guide,
Revive me with Your light,
Restore me with Your truth,
Refresh me with deeds
Of righteousness and charity.

— Alden Solovy, *This Joyous Soul: A New Voice for Ancient Yearnings*
(CCAR Press, 2019), p. 74.

Are there mistakes that you struggle to forgive yourself for? How might acts of love and kindness help you find forgiveness?

אלול יג Elul 13

Jonah Remained in the Fish's Belly

On Solitary Confinement and Compassion

How does the Book of Jonah help us understand imprisonment and isolation from community? Deep within the great fish, Jonah is separated from community, light, and the warmth of the sun . . .

T'shuvah (“repentance”) is best achieved through positive relationships, not isolation. In a biblical “city of refuge” (*ir miklat*; Numbers 35), the residents (prisoners who unintentionally killed someone) lived with the Levites (who tended to hold leadership roles in their generation). Rehabilitation and growth happen not in isolation, but rather around role models of compassion, spirituality, and good values.

—Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz, *The Book of Jonah: A Social Justice Commentary* (CCAR Press, 2020), pp. 51–52.

Have you experienced moments of isolation from your community? What were moments of connection that have brought you closer to others?

אלול יד Elul 14

Presence

And all that we really have,
and all that we can really give,
is presence.

Just to be present.

—Rabbi Karyn Kedar, *Amen: Seeking Presence with Prayer, Poetry, and Mindfulness Practice* (CCAR Press, 2020), p. 73.

How can you be more present with your loved ones? With yourself? With God?

אלול טז Elul 15

Jonah's Hatred for the Stranger

On Tribalism, Ethnocentrism, and Fundamentalism
in a Pluralistic World

We are commanded to love our neighbor only once in the Torah, yet we are commanded by the Torah thirty-six times to love and protect a stranger—something utterly more difficult. In the challenge of building such distant relationships, we can find opportunities for change and growth. The familiar determines who we are, the foreign who we might become. The tribal evokes nostalgic memory, while the universal inspires the visionary dream. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches that neither tribalism nor universalism by themselves can sustain the world. While we should love and cherish our unique communities, we also should value and engage with foreign communities and individuals. We should insist that our own communities “borrow” from others. Tribalism, at its best, solidifies community, language, identity, and kindness to “one’s own.” Universalism, at its best, solidifies interconnection, diversity amid unity, and justice.

—Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz, *The Book of Jonah: A Social Justice Commentary* (CCAR Press, 2020), pp. 51–52.

How can you enact the mitzvah to love and protect the stranger? Does your community welcome outsiders? In what ways does your community still have room to grow?

אלול טז Elul 16

Liberal Jews in our era treasure our autonomy and are ambivalent about the authority of God and Torah. No one is going to tell us what to say, what to do, or what to believe. Though we want the benefits of community, we are wary of the demands it may place on us. Furthermore, those of us in America live in a society in which freedom is defined in direct contrast to obligation, instead of in partnership with it.

But let's face it: we have not yet learned how to be free. It is one thing to throw off authority. It is another to realize freedom. Freedom requires conscious choice, and choice is its own burden. How do we choose well? Using which values? Having chosen, do we commit and follow through? How and when do we reevaluate our choices? The number and scope of choices in a day is overwhelming. Without a framework, we flail. So we look to a mix of external norms and institutions from the surrounding culture—the Protestant work ethic, the American dream, parenting trends, to name a few examples—to make choices for us. Shouldn't the wisdom of our own people have at least as strong a voice? Once we realize that we've traded one system of external authority for others, we find that the treasure we are seeking is under our own hearth. We are yearning for guidance. We are yearning for coherence. If chosen, covenant, mitzvah, and Torah are as relevant and sacred to us now as they ever have been.

Covenant is the choice to commit to a Jewish way of life in relationship with Jewish community: to study it, question it, and reinterpret it, but to choose Jewish text and tradition—the three-thousand-year-old conversation of our people with God—as a framework for our lives. Within this framework, a mitzvah is a call for action that requires a carefully considered response... Through it all, Torah is our sacred guide. Those who study it know that it endlessly reveals insights about the meaning of life. Gershom Scholem teaches, “The Torah turns a special face to every single Jew, meant only for him [*sic*] and apprehensible only by him, and a Jew therefore fulfills his true purpose only when he comes to see this face and is able to incorporate it into the tradition” (Scholem, “Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism,” 295). Autonomy is a lonely fiction. Covenant, mitzvah, and Torah are the modern liberal Jew's way to journey toward freedom.

—Rabbi Rachel Timoner, in *Lights in the Forest: Rabbis Respond to Twelve Essential Jewish Questions* (CCAR Press, 2014), pp. 212–213.

What are some external norms and cultural frameworks that have governed your life? In what ways do Jewish wisdom and mitzvot help guide your life and bring you closer to your community?

אלול יז Elul 17

For Courage and Comfort

Be strong and let your heart have courage. (Psalm 31:25)

God, hear our prayer.

With horror we bear witness to
the evil within our midst.

We pray that our broken hearts
do not become embittered.

Let us not give in to cynicism and despair.

May we find comfort in our faith and in our community,
and may we strengthen our resolve
to be messengers of peace and healing,
bringing comfort to the broken-hearted.

We pray for the soul of our country.

May violence be no more.

May the way of our land be for good and not for evil.

May the words we speak, inspire.

May our outstretched arms, embrace.

May our minds learn tolerance and understanding.

Strike the inclination to do evil from
the hearts of the wicked.

Empower us for good, for life, for love.

God, we pray for the children.

...Our children, pure in their beauty,
proof of goodness and miracle.

Our children, the children, dear God.

May we be strong and may our hearts have courage.

—Rabbi Karyn Kedar, *Amen: Seeking Presence with Prayer, Poetry, and
Mindfulness Practice* (CCAR Press, 2020), pp. 111–112.

How do you find hope and strength when the world seems broken?

אלול יח Elul 18

Against Hatred

For those who hate,
Let there be no hope,
And may all derision and disdain perish in an instant.
May intolerance be swiftly cut down.
May You quickly uproot, crush, cast down, and humble the arrogant,
Speedily in our days.
Blessed are You, Adonai,
Who destroys enemies and humbles the arrogant.

— Alden Solovy, *This Joyous Soul: A New Voice for Ancient Yearnings*
(CCAR Press, 2019), p. 80.

What do you do when you encounter hatred in your community? What can you do to create a more peaceful, just world?

אלול יט Elul 19

Our Calling

Surely, this mitzvah is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach.
It is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart:

You shall not threaten the rights of the stranger or orphan.

You shall not take a widow's garment in pawn.

Remember that you were a slave in Egypt.

Justice, justice shall you pursue,
that you may live to inherit the land that Adonai your God gives you —
you must not remain indifferent.

Keep and heed all that I instruct you;
thus it will go well with you — and your children after you — for all time. . . .

This mitzvah is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart:

When you reap the harvest in your field and overlook a sheaf,
it shall go to the stranger, the orphan, and the widow —
you must not remain indifferent.

Life and death I have set before you, blessing and curse.

Choose life —

so that you and your children may live. . . .

Blessed shall you be in your comings
and blessed shall you be in your goings —
you must not remain indifferent.

Our Calling. As a counterpart to the plea “Hear Our Call” (*Sh'ma Koleinu*, pages 134–135), we remind ourselves of the Jewish people's sacred calling: to live by mitzvot that lead us to a life of holiness . . . In his final address to the Israelites, Moses utters a compelling call to righteousness, exhorting the people to follow God's teachings . . . Moses reminds the nation of Israel that its very survival depends on creating a just and equitable society.

—Rabbi Janet Marder and Rabbi Sheldon Marder, *Mishkan HaLev: Prayers for S'lichot and the Month of Elul* (CCAR Press, 2017), p. 133.

How can Jewish tradition help us build a just and equitable society? Are there certain mitzvot that you could observe towards this end?

TURNING TO GOD

In this final section, we encourage you to explore your connection with the Divine. Modern interpretations of traditional liturgy, rabbinic teachings, and contemporary poems will guide you towards a deeper understanding of God. The Sages view the Song of Songs as a series of love poems between the people of Israel and God. As we near the end of Elul and the start of the High Holy Days, this spiritual culmination of our journey prepares us to face the new year grounded in the present and hopeful for the future.



אלול כ Elul 20

We Are Your People

Our God and God of our ancestors —

We are Your people; and You are our God.

We are Your children; and You are our father, our mother.

We are the people who serve You; and You call us to serve.

We are Your community; and You are our portion.

We are Your legacy; and You are our purpose.

We are Your flock; and You are our shepherd.

We are Your vineyard; and You watch over us.

We are Your work; and You are our maker.

We are Your beloved; and You are our lover.

We are Your treasure; and You are the One we cherish.

We are Your people; and You reign over us.

We offer You our words; and You offer us Yours.

So forgive us, pardon us, lead us to atonement.

—Rabbi Janet Marder and Rabbi Sheldon Marder, *Mishkan HaLev: Prayers for S'lichot and the Month of Elul* (CCAR Press, 2017), p. 117.

This modern interpretation of Ki Anu Amecha comes from the S'lichot liturgy, in which we implore God to forgive our sins. In light of this traditional idea, how do you understand your relationship with God?

אלול כ"א Elul 21

A congregant of mine who is struggling with lung cancer recently approached me for some spiritual counsel. She asked, “Can you help me figure out what to pray for? It is more than I can bear to pray for my cancer to clear. I just can’t stand having too much false hope and ending up so disappointed.” I told her that I understand her hesitancy to pray for a miraculous healing. She would have to think about what would be left of her emotionally and spiritually if her prayer should appear to go unanswered. However, that certainly doesn’t mean that I told her to refrain from praying. I believe that the exercise of prayer itself possesses the power to produce some significant measure of the strength she most needs to face an uncertain future. Her prayers can also intensify her focus on making a blessing of each day, of each minute of her life, reminding her that none of what she had previously assumed to be “normal” about living is, in fact, to be taken for granted, nor is it permanent.

This is how I look at God’s place in the experience of suffering. I do not believe in a God who selects certain children to be inflicted with leukemia, so neither can I believe in a God who selects certain children to be cured of leukemia. It is no accident that the overwhelming majority of traditional Jewish prayers are expressions of gratitude, not requests for intercession in our lives or world. The religious discipline of Judaism inspires a person to sense blessing in things that humans too often consider ordinary or expected—our breath, our freedom, our abundance, the many wonders of the universe. The goal is to engender the question “Why me?” in moments of good fortune, not just at times of suffering. If God’s worth is to be evaluated solely on the basis of whether our wishes are granted when we pray, there is no humility in prayer. We are not seeking God; we are seeking to *be* God.

We will, of course, always yearn for a world without evil or suffering. However, it is the very existence of curse that enables us to recognize and hunger for blessing—and it is the existence of curse that will forever fuel our efforts to unleash more and more of God’s light through our own actions.

—Rabbi Kenneth Chasen, in *Lights in the Forest: Rabbis Respond to Twelve Essential Jewish Questions* (CCAR Press, 2014), pp. 4–5.

What is your concept of God? How do you understand God’s relationship to suffering and evil? Has your view changed throughout your life?

אלול כב Elul 22

Psalm 27:4

I'm Asking God One Question

Achat Shaalti אַחַת שְׂאַלְתִּי

If I could ask only one thing of God, what would it be?
It's nearly impossible to decide.

My prayer bends toward gratitude, not supplication.

“Thank You, Strength, for the steps I take as I walk the dog.”

“Thank You, Wisdom, for the opportunity to study Torah.”

“Thank You, Generosity, for abundance in my life.”

“Thank You, Protection, for keeping us alive
and allowing us to reach this moment.”

Endless gratitude,
every new day of every New Year.

If I could ask God for only one thing, what would it be?

I have no requests, only questions . . .

Maybe . . .

Who can . . . ?

When will . . . ?

What if . . . ?

Where was . . . ?

Why did . . . ?

No. Now I know my question.

If I could ask God something,
not for something,

The one thing I would ask is:

“How can I help?”

—Rabbi Debra J. Robbins, *Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27: A Spiritual Practice for the Jewish New Year* (CCAR Press, 2019), pp. 26–27.

What is the one thing you would ask God?

אלול כג Elul 23

Noach

After the destruction, Noach sought to correct the sin of Adam Ha-Rishon, who ate not the fruit of prophecy, which unites us to God, but the fruit of mere experience, which separates us from God. In the *Noach* narrative, one stream of thought in the *Zohar* now identifies the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as grapes from the vine (1:73a–b). The esoteric meaning of the story holds that the vine was exiled from Eden along with Adam. Noach had the vine and replanted it after the Flood. He planted the vine and drank of the wine (of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil). According to the *Zohar*, “When Noach came to examine the sin of Adam HaRishon, he came not to cleave to it, but to understand/know it [*i'minda*] and to fix the world, but could not.” And because of this, the *Zohar* continues, *vayishkar vayitgal*, he became intoxicated with these supernal matters and uncovered secrets of the world, creating breaches that had been closed (see the *Y'did Nefesh* commentary to the *Zohar*). This wine, by the way, was the same wine that the sons of Aharon drank in Torah portion *Sh'mini*.

—Rabbi Mordecai Finley, “Noach,” in *Voices of Torah*, Vol. 1, ed. Rabbi Hara Person (CCAR Press, 2011), p. 17.

In this interpretation, Noach becomes drunk on the “fruit of mere experience,” discovering hidden knowledge that distanced him from God and his goal of fixing the world. Do you also have secret knowledge that keeps you at a distance from others? From God?

אלול כד Elul 24

Kavanah from the Elul Psalms

Based on Psalm 102:25–29

I say: “Not now, my God—
not in the middle of the journey. Do not carry me off.
Your years outlast all generations:
in some distant past You laid the earth’s foundation;
heaven itself is the work of Your hands.
They will vanish, but You endure. . . .
Your years never end.
The children of those who serve You—may they live in peace.
And their children, who live in Your presence—may they endure.”

—Rabbi Janet Marder and Rabbi Sheldon Marder, *Mishkan HaLev: Prayers for S’lichot and the Month of Elul* (CCAR Press, 2017), p. 71.

In Judaism, we are taught that we must balance the two truths: “The whole world was created for me” (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 37b), and “I am nothing but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27). In what ways do you feel grateful for your life? In what ways do you take aspects of your life for granted?

אלול כה Elul 25

God as Creator, Parent, Shepherd, Judge, Love. We all have metaphors that speak to us. Metaphor is very personal, and potentially redemptive. As I've grown, my concept of God as "Author of All Metaphor" has deepened. I now believe that God is a Fiction Writer.

Some theologians assert that God is truth and everything else is falsehood. I disagree. I believe God is truth and everything else is fiction. Fiction differs greatly from falsehood. The world is a story spoken into being by, about, and for God. At the center of this exquisite poetic and tragic adventure is covenant.

Fiction is a key that opens the locked chambers of the heart. Linguistic purists claim that metaphor is a parasite, that what "my love is a red, red rose" really says is there are no words to express what I mean, so I will take words out of context and abuse them to express myself. What they call untrue, I call revelation. Metaphor says, "I have no other means of language to express my feelings and fears, my creativity and my intellect, my sense of spiritual connectedness . . . I have a million thoughts and ideas and questions that I could unload over hours and hours, or I can simply admit the shortcomings of language and in my *desperation* to communicate, simply say everything in one easy breath: "Man is a passing breeze." In nonfiction, there is little need for relationship; but with metaphor, we must assume an intricate understanding based on trust. Metaphor relies on the ability for any two people to immediately begin a relationship.

The definition of metaphor is the conditional relationship of two concepts, a relationship between two nouns that is reciprocal. Both influence and redefine each other. Covenant is also a conditional, reciprocal relationship between two parties.

Stories reach deeply into hearts and minds because unlike non-fiction, demanding fractional attention, fiction invites our presence wholly: mind, body, spirit. It sweeps us away and returns us renewed with keener vision. We do not live objectively. We live in metaphor. Poetry does not just "make pretty." It reveals and it redeems. God is the Author of All Metaphor. Before the universe came into being, God had no means to know that God existed. There was nothing against which to compare Godself. No mirror, just blank infinity. Then came the brilliant moment God realized "I am." Creation exploded into being with God's next thought. "I am what?" The Hebrew word for "what" and "matter" is the same: *mah* (מה). We matter. We are God's story, the reflection through which God understands Godself.

God is a Fiction Writer, and fiction, ironically, is Ultimate Truth's master key.

—Rabbi Zoe Klein, in *Lights in the Forest: Rabbis Respond to Twelve Essential Jewish Questions* (CCAR Press, 2014), pp. 19–20.

What metaphor for God speaks to you? What metaphor takes you out of your comfort zone?

אלול כו Elul 26

To the God of Doubt

Dear God, why?

Help us understand why
this eerie darkness falls upon daylight.
Smoke and ash. An unnatural silence,
then moaning, then sirens, then screams.
And shock. Disbelief. Anger. Sadness.

We cannot look away. We must not turn away.

Help us to have faith and courage
when there is confusion and doubt.

Give us the strength to look into the eyes of the wicked,
to be defiant and determined.

May we prevail.

May we have the resolve and wisdom to
bring safety to our broken and fractured world.

Dear God, bring healing to those in pain
and comfort to those bereaved.

You created this world from light and goodness.
You make peace in the high heavens.

Help us find the way to make peace here on earth.
God of doubt, hear our prayer.

—Rabbi Karyn Kedar, *Amen: Seeking Presence with Prayer, Poetry, and Mindfulness Practice* (CCAR Press, 2020), p. 113.

How do you respond to disbelief, anger, or sadness in yourself or in your community?

אלול כז Elul 27

Nitzavim/Vayeilech: While Our Students Live

At the end of *Parashat Vayeilech*, Moses warns that he will call heaven and earth to witness against the Israelites . . . for he knows that after his death, the people will forsake the teachings of God. Yet we remain loyal to God as long as Moses's disciple Joshua lives, according to the Book of Judges; we serve God all the days of Joshua's life. In reconciling these apparently contradictory passages, Rashi beautifully demonstrates how teachers live on through their beloved students.

Rashi "After my death you shall surely act corruptly" (Deut. 31:29). But for all the days of Joshua, the Israelites did not act corruptly, as Scripture says, "And the people served Adonai all of Joshua's days" (Judges 2:7). From this we learn that a teacher cherishes a student as he cherishes his own life and that all the time Joshua would live, it would appear to Moses that he himself lived.

—Rabbi Elaine Rose Glickman, "*Nitzavim/Vayeilech: While Our Students Live*," in *Voices of Torah*, Vol. 1, ed. Rabbi Hara Person (CCAR Press, 2011), p. 525.

As you contemplate your deeds this year and acknowledge your own mortality, what inspiration can you find in Rashi's interpretation? What can you do to appreciate both the teachers and students in your life?

אלול כח Elul 28

God's Plan: An Introspection

If God's plan

Followed my plan,

I would have no scars on my skin

Or in my heart.

If God's plan

Followed my plan,

I would not have felt the fire or the ice,

Heard the beauty or the terror,

Seen the new bud or the dying leaf.

If God's plan

Followed my plan,

I would not have learned to grieve or cherish,

To hope or surrender,

To be broken and still be whole.

What, then, keeps me locked in fear,

In dread of yielding to

Your great works,

Your awesome love,

Your radiant power?

What small desire,

Petty hope—

What yearning of self—

Blocks my service in God's holy name?

God on high,

Release me from my judgments and designs.

Open my heart to You fully,

Without reservation.

Cast out my doubts and shames,

So I may receive

Your divine wisdom and strength . . .

—Alden Solovy. *This Grateful Heart: Psalms and Prayers for a New Day*
(CCAR Press, 2017), pp. 48–49.

How has God's plan for you contrasted with your own plans in life? How have you grown from these experiences?

אלול כ"ט Elul 29

Psalm 27:14

Hold On and Immerse

Kaveih . . . V'kaveih קַוֶּיִה . . . וְקַוֶּיִה

The Hebrew words “hope” and “cord” share letters.

I grab hold of both.

I use them to tie myself securely to a base or pull myself to safety.

...The Hebrew words “hope” and “cord”

also share letters with the Hebrew word *mikveh*.

Immerse in God, like a person immerses in the water,
in the ritual bath.

I immerse in the fresh possibilities for holiness and new life.

Hold on and immerse in God.

This takes strength, courage, and daring.

Will I dare to grab hold of hope and pull it tight?

Can I let Holiness wash over me?

Am I brave enough to . . .

Pray?

See the divine image in every human encounter?

Use my voice for those who have no voice?

Hear with heart?

Learn and grow in soul?

Do I have the courage

to live, really live, in the world of the living,

here and now, in a new year?

Yes.

I will.

Hold on. Immerse. Live.

—Rabbi Debra J. Robbins, *Opening Your Heart with Psalm 27: A Spiritual Practice for the Jewish New Year* (CCAR Press, 2019), pp. 100–101.

What can you do today to live in the moment with courage and compassion?

What guiding principle will guide you through this year?