

Shall We Arise at Dawn?

Rabbi Eliyahu Peretz



Once again, the first of the Jewish month of Elul has come and some of us have started reciting *Selichot* prayers (according to the Sephardi custom) and starting the countdown from the first of this month to Rosh *Chodesh Tishrei* (the first of the month of Tishrei) and the Jewish High Holy Days - those joyous days which can only be called "the Days of Awe(some Joy)." Until then, time still lies before us: weeks of introspection, soul-searching and repentance, which also provide us with an opportunity for deeper introspection regarding the essence and meaning of this period.

Each year, toward the beginning of Elul, I ask myself a recurring question: will I arise early, participate in *Selichot* and sing "I arose at dawn" with the congregation? Or is it possible that my priorities or the tools at my disposal have changed over time, and I will consider other options? It is reasonable to assume that once more (as in past years) I will not know what I intend to do until the last minute, i.e. a few hours beforehand.

The question of why this doubt recurs each year is more intriguing than the uncertainty of whether or not I will do it. Is it a new plan of priorities for investing my energy as I prepare for these High Holy Days, the upcoming days that bring us blessing, renewal and joy? The greatest question is whether the change of customs will serve the objectives of the month. There are three well known verses that are said to characterize the themes of the month of Elul:

- 1) "the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your]descendants"
- 2) "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine"
- 3) "Giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor."

As indicated by these three verses, our essential goals for this period are repentance, prayer and charity. These verses and goals are engraved in our hearts in letters of iron and honey. However, in the final analysis, the temptation arises to question what is the proper hierarchy: are these three traditional components that characterize Elul essential or can one save effort and get by without one of them? In an attempt to answer these questions, we must examine the content and the meaning of the tasks we have addressed and that we must perform.

Let us commence with the issue of charity. The giving of charity is a great mitzvah, as the verse in Deuteronomy says: "do not be hardhearted or tightfisted", and adds "You shall open wide your hand". Since there is no doubt that the greatness of the human heart and the fulfillment of this mitzvah bring the redemption closer and produce a more egalitarian and just world, the need and frequency of the mitzvah of charity should not be questioned. It is important to note that we are not giving the poor charity from our own resources but rather returning to them what is theirs by right, therefore this is not considered a voluntary act but rather a moral duty, and all the sages agree on this point.

On the subject of repentance, we must distinguish and differentiate between the inner work and the external work that we must carry out. Soul searching takes place as part of inner contemplation; however, this is not sufficient in itself: a spiritual act of rectification is also required. As to external work, we should include both repentance for acts that were performed and also reconciliation with those who were harmed. Since those with whom we wish to reconcile are human beings, they will react, enter a dialogue with us and will then decide of their own volition when and how the forgiveness will take place. Many important scholars have written about the subject of repentance, and he who seeks information shall find it, therefore we will not elaborate on this, but we do add that these efforts should not be reduced, since they bring justice closer and encourage us to be conscious and prepared all year long in order to prevent harm towards others and toward ourselves.

It is no wonder that the subject of prayer is sensitive, complex and controversial. This is the case due to the fact that each and every one of us develops different prayer customs. This happens despite similar frameworks, because each of us connects with the spiritual and ritual process in his or her own way. These issues are particularly prominent in the modern age because of the great complexity of the different identities that exist in our houses of worship and also as a result of a diverse variety of individual practices. If so, we return to the question which I raised in the beginning: should I rise at dawn and recite many *Selichot* prayers during this month? I do not have a uniform answer but I tend to think that *Selichot* are precious tools that help us create a change and awaken the senses, heart and mind. Perhaps others may find that their answer to the question is that they do not feel it necessary to allot time every morning and will make do with only minor participation in the *Selichot*, or they may have found their own expression that they have found useful in achieving their goals. They are right, since to date this is the manner in which the tradition of our people has developed, and we do not wish for a permanently fixed identity but rather a living and existing people, existing in the present but facing the future.

It seems that perhaps I have found an answer that will serve me this year, namely that I must pay attention to [all] three actions. It is possible that on another year I will choose to focus on but one of the actions of the month of Elul that we have mentioned.

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