

Chai Elul – 18th of Elul

Birth of the Baal Shem Tov and the Alter Rebbe

BRIEF HISTORY

The 18th of Elul is a luminous day of truly immense proportion; the Hebrew number eighteen spells Chai, “life,” and on this day two lofty souls entered this world to introduce unprecedented G-dly light and life:

Reb Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chassidism, was born on the 18th of Elul 5458 (1698); on the 18th of Elul 5484 (1724), the prophet Achiyah Hashiloni began teaching the Baal Shem Tov – and on the same auspicious date in the year 5494 (1734), the Baal Shem Tov revealed himself and his teachings to the world.

The Alter Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, founder of Chabad Chassidus, was born on the 18th of Elul 5505 (1745), whereupon the Baal Shem Tov proclaimed: A new soul has descended into this world, and it will illuminate the world with the light of the revealed parts of Torah and the light of Chassidus; it is a soul that will offer itself for the good of Chassidus and whose accomplishments will usher in the era of Moshiach.

Two Sayings that Capture the theme of Chai Elul

THE PREVIOUS REBBE – TWO QUOTES

The Previous Rebbe highlighted two adages that explain the unique virtue of Chai Elul as it relates to our Divine service of the month of Elul:⁶⁸

68. Parshas Ki Savo 5750; Hisvaaduyos p.250.

The power of Chai Elul: eighteenth of Elul or two luminous births?

“The unique virtue of Chai Elul is also due to the birth of two great luminaries: the Baal Shem Tov, who was born in the year 5458 (1698), [that spells the word Nachas,

1) “Chai Elul is the day that brought – and brings – vitality into the month of Elul.”

He then added by way of explanation: Chai Elul gives a vitality to the service of Ani leDodi veDodi Li, “I [the Jewish people] am to my Beloved [Hashem], and my Beloved is to me.”

2) “Chai Elul is the first of the final twelve days of the month of Elul – each of which corresponds to another of the twelve months of the year; a day for a month.

In these twelve days, one should take stock of the Divine service he performed over the twelve months of the outgoing year.

Thus, on the actual day of Chai Elul, one takes stock of last year’s month of Tishrei; and so on regarding each of these twelve days that culminate with Rosh Hashanah.”

THE REBBE – TODAY IS THE ELUL OF ELUL

It is clear from the above sayings, that it is not merely the individual details of our Divine service that receive a boost on Chai Elul – but rather, our entire service of Elul is advanced.

Chai Elul adds Chayus, “vitality,” to Elul – to the extent that it is on this day that we begin our truthful self-accounting regarding all twelve months of the past year. Now, the month of Elul is *itself* a month of stock-taking, so Chai Elul constitutes the ‘Elul’ within Elul.⁶⁹

“pleasure”], and the Alter Rebbe, who was born in the year 5505 (1745) (or ‘Kehos’).

In fact, these two aspects [1) the quality of the day due to the birth of these two luminaries, and 2) the fact that today is the Chai, the “life-force,” of Elul,] are interdependent.

It is because of the great importance of Chai Elul that the entire service of the month of Elul is elevated and renewed.” (ibid, footnote 1)

69. Ibid, Parshas Ki Tzeitzei 5750.

GIVE YOUR DIVINE SERVICE A FACE-LIFT

- From the 18th of Elul onward, we should increase all aspects of our Divine service of Elul – to the extent that it is as if a brand new nature of service has begun.

ESSENCE OF ELUL – UNITING WITH HASHEM

- We can achieve this through introducing the “life-force” of Elul into every area of Divine service, in a manner that makes discernable and emphasizes the essential *soul* of all service. In other words, we reveal and highlight the core connection that unites the Jewish people with Hashem in every aspect of our service.⁷⁰

70. Parshas Ki Savo 5750; Hisvaaduyos p.259.

In this Sichah, the Rebbe defines two aspects of our Divine service:

1) The *essence* which is equally present in each area of Divine service; this is the vivifying force behind all service and uniformly includes all the myriads of detail that emerge on the practical level.

2) The *details* and compartmentalized realms of practical service, e.g., the mode of prayer, study or charity etc.

While the details must necessarily differ from each other, yet they share the same essence and *soul* that, by definition, must constantly fill their every particular.

What is this “essence”? The Rebbe defines it as *the connection between the Jewish people and Hashem* that is generated by any mode of Divine service:

Our existence is our connection with Hashem

“The entire month of Elul represents the Jewish people’s “general” Divine service [since each moment within Elul has an effect and can rectify the entire service of the previous year, as well as prepare for the entire coming year]. On Chai Elul, however, there is added an emphasis on the very *life-force*, the inner-self and essence of this general service, namely, *the bond between the Jewish people and Hashem*. In fact, this bond is also the life-force and essential existence of the *Jewish people*, (i.e. the Jew who performs the Divine service,) for “the Jews are one with the Holy One.”

Post-Chai Elul service simply cannot be the same

With the above in mind, our truthful stock-taking during these final twelve days of Elul that stretch from Chai Elul until Rosh Hashanah (and which correspond to the twelve months of the past year), is transformed into a completely new service!

Cheshbon Nefesh – before and after Chai Elul

For the self-accounting that we perform during the first part of Elul, *prior* to Chai Elul, focuses mainly on the *generalized* entirety of our Divine service; an inclusiveness that by default includes the many details of the service we performed during the entire past year. [In other words] we contemplate the state of our *total*

BOND THROUGH PRAYER

- Since Chai Elul represents the bond of Jewry with Hashem, we should specifically increase our service of prayer from Chai Elul onward – for prayer, by definition, is the bonding of the Jew with his Creator.⁷¹

service of Torah, prayer, charitable deeds, and our conduct as expressed in thought, speech and action.

Conversely, the self-accounting that we make on Chai Elul and the final days of Elul primarily addresses our *essential bond with Hashem* and the amount and manner of its revelation within our actual service. In *this* self-accounting, the detailed aspects of the service – whether Torah study, charitable deeds or the like – are not felt to such a great extent. Rather, our main focus is on the essential connection of the Jew to Hashem which is the Chayus, “life-force,” of all service.” (ibid, p.253-254)

Spread the good news: each moment of Elul is priceless

“Elul is the month of reckoning concerning the outgoing year and the month of preparation for the coming year. Within Elul itself, we are currently within the last twelve days, which, one day per month, correspond to the twelve months of the past year.

This does not merely relate to each individual day alone – it is true of each *moment* within each of these twelve days! With this knowledge we can appreciate the value and significance of each moment of these days – to the extent that it is of great importance to inform every Jew that we meet [of the necessity to cherish and utilize each moment of Elul]. It was for that reason, that we devoted the central theme of this farbrengen to the value of time within Elul.” (Roshei Devarim, Parshas Ki Savo 5751)

71. Ibid, Parshas Ki Tzeitzei.

Shemonah Esrei corresponds to the spine

“Note that it is explained in Likutei Torah how the spine is a parable for prayer. [As our Sages state, “These eighteen blessings of the Amidah, correspond to the eighteen vertebrae that form the spine.”]

Chai Elul: the spine of Elul

The reason for this relationship is because [the spine] supports and establishes all the other limbs of the body, and it is through the spine that life-force is drawn from the brain to all the limbs. [The parallel to the function of the “spine,” i.e., the Amidah, within the month of Elul, is Chai Elul. It is then that the bond between the Jews and Hashem, the bond that constitutes the very life-force of our Divine service and likewise of our souls, is emphasized – Ed].” (ibid, footnote 56)

Eighteen: vertebrae, blessings and Chayus

“This is alluded to in the number of vertebrae within the spine, and the corresponding number of blessings in the Amidah, which total *eighteen* (Chai)!” (ibid, in the subnote to footnote 56)

FOCUS ON THE CONNECTION OF PRAYER

- In addition to our general enhancement of our prayers throughout the month of Elul, we should now lay fundamental emphasis on (not merely using prayer to appeal for Heavenly pardon, but rather on) our attachment with Hashem.⁷²

WHEN RECITING TEHILLIM

- Each of us should reflect this particular mode of prayer in our daily recital of Tehillim – when reciting both the three chapters that we add during Elul as well as the regular daily portions; we should do likewise regarding the additional prayers of Elul – for Chai Elul contains particular significance for *all* forms of prayer, as mentioned earlier.⁷³

LEARN ABOUT THE FESTIVALS

- From Chai Elul onward, we should add in the general study of Torah, and particularly in topics pertaining to Elul, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkos.

NIGLEH AND CHASSIDUS

- This addition should be in both “Nigleh” and Chassidus, the revealed and the inner part of Torah.

FOCUS ON UNION WITH HASHEM IN STUDY

- Moreover, our study should reflect the aspect of prayer⁷² that is achieved through the study of Torah, namely, the union of the Jew with Hashem.⁷⁴

72. Parshas Ki Savo 5750; Hisvaaduyos p.255. See *a Call to Action*, “The Month of Elul”.

73. Roshei Devarim, Chai Elul 5751. See also below, for the full text of the Roshei Devarim.

74. Parshas Ki Savo 5750; Hisvaaduyos p.260.

PROVIDE FESTIVE NEEDS

- From Chai Elul onward, we should add in the performance of charitable deeds in general, and particularly in the drive to provide the needy with their festival requirements – in generous and ample proportions.

FOR ALL COMING FESTIVAL

- The provisions we provide should include necessities for Rosh Hashanah, Erev Yom Kippur, Motzei Yom Kippur – and all the more so, for “the time of our rejoicing,” Sukkos and Shmini Atzeres.

YOM TOV HOSPITALITY

- Our preparations should include the Mitzvah that is basic to Yom Tov:⁷⁵ general hospitality (Hachnasas Archim), and specifically the form of hospitality universally known as Eishel⁷⁶ (אֶשֶׁל, the Hebrew acronym for the provision of “eating, drinking and sleeping” requirements).⁷⁴

75. “See Torah Or, beg. of Parshas Chayei Sarah, and in many other locations.” (ibid, footnote 113)

76. **We all contain Eishel seeds**

[On the verse (Breishis 21:33), “[Avraham] planted an Eishel in Be’er Sheva,” the commentaries explain that Eishel refers to a guest house that Avraham established; Eishel is the acronym of Achilah, Shetiyah and Linah, “food, drink and a place to sleep” – the requirements that Avraham provided to his many guests – Ed.]

“This alludes to the fact that our forefather Avraham “planted” within the nature of all Jewish people the trait of hospitality (as indicated by the verse (Breishis 18:19), “[Avraham] will command his sons and household after him (to follow in these righteous paths),” by providing Eishel – food, drink, and sleeping requirements.” (ibid, footnote 112)

Practical applications of Chai Elul

We present a free-translation of Roshei Devarim from the Sichah of Chai Elul 5751 (following Maariv), with added subtitles.

Most Sichas on Chai Elul underscore its central theme of “vitality” – the need to permeate each aspect of our Divine service with vitality, by focusing on the essential bond that any particular service creates between the one who performs the service with He who commanded it.

However, the Rebbe devoted this entire Sichah to accentuate the need for guidance in the practical application of Chai Elul; since “the main thing is the deed,” the Rebbe highlights a number of straightforward directives for Chai Elul.

WHAT IS THE THEME OF ELUL?

It has been mentioned many times by the Rebbes of Chabad and has further been published, that among the many insights into Chai Elul, there is but one primary message: Chai Elul’s main theme amongst many is to cause vitality to permeate every aspect of Elul.

TORAH, AVODAH AND GEMILAS CHASSADIM

It is therefore clear, that because Elul is the month for self-reckoning concerning the outgoing year, and the month of preparation for the coming year, Elul should therefore contain both a reckoning and a preparation regarding 1) Torah, 2) prayer and charitable deeds. After all, [these comprise the “three pillars] upon which the world stands” (Pirkei Avos 1:2).

ADD VITALITY

Now, this is certainly true of each Jew’s personal “world,” all the more so since the entire universe was only created for the sake of each Jew[’s Divine service]. Therefore, there needs to be an additional vitality in the above [three areas], on Chai Elul.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH ABSTRACT?

Having said that, it is patently obvious when informing someone of a purely spiritual concept, although on some occasions he will comprehend the practical directive on his own, there are times when he will simply not understand what is being asked of him.

SAVE TIME – SPEAK PRACTICALLY

[In order to crystallize the abstract concept into an applicable message,] he will launch into a debate on the topic, thus squandering his time in utterly unnecessary fashion.

Here is a remedy to avert such a situation – and it is a solid piece of advice regarding countless spiritual matters: connect the spiritual theme with something physical which everyone, or at least the great majority of people, are equally able to perform.

THEORY DIVIDES – ACTION UNITES

[Leaving someone with] a purely spiritual matter, on the other hand, is to a far greater degree relying on the feelings of his heart and the comprehension of his mind [to find a tangible expression of the abstract teaching]. And it is specifically in the heart and mind that the key differences between people exist.

That [concern] is not the case regarding *actions*, and particularly among the actions of Jews, who were *all* commanded [by Hashem] concerning these deeds – which are [directly] included within the Torah's 248 positive commands, and, in a converse manner, within its 365 prohibitions.

THE MAIN THING IS WHAT – NOT HOW

Now, although within the actual observance of the Torah's commandments differences may exist – differences that vary from one extreme to another – the commandments nevertheless share a common denominator: they could all be “touched with a hand” and could be “pointed to with a finger” [i.e., they all concern something physical that is within reach of every Jew].

It is true that even after being given a physical directive, a Jew must still contemplate exactly what to do and the like, but he is at least able to immediately formulate and picture the matter in his mind.

HOW DO WE APPLY CHAI ELUL IN PRACTICE?

This [that it is far easier to implement a message containing a practical directive] is certainly true now, during the month of Elul; we could easily connect this [above] information [regarding the theme of Chai Elul] to the concerns of Elul.

1) CHAI ELUL IN PRAYER

For a theme that is emphasized by all Jewry at this time, is the addition in prayer; why, even Torah scholars subtract time from their study schedules in order to augment their prayers during Elul.

ALL TEHILLIM IS PRAYER

[It is therefore certain, that] regarding the service of prayer (which is generally called “The Service”), every Jew is able to join the abovementioned theme [of Chai Elul] with *the chapters of Tehillim* that are connected to the entire month of Elul, and especially the chapters that relate to Chai Elul.

They can do so with the three additional chapters which are recited specifically during the month of Elul, with the daily portion for the 17th of the month and the 18th of the month etc., as well as with the special prayers that are said during Elul.

This all contains particular relevance to Chai Elul, [whose theme – the “vitality” of Elul – is the essential bond between the Jews and Hashem; a theme that is shared with prayer. See above, footnote 70, for further explanation].

PONDER-FREE PROPOSALS

In light of the above, even if it appears to an individual that deep contemplation is indeed necessary in order to discover something to which he can “add vitality” (i.e., in connecting with his

additional activities), nevertheless, we hereby present him with an already prepared directive [i.e., the abovementioned proposal regarding Tehillim] which is “tangible” to all Jews alike.

2) CHAI ELUL IN TORAH

[Having translated the theme of Chai Elul into an easy-to-fulfill, practical directive for the service of prayer,] we can apply the same to our Torah study:

LAWS OF THE FESTIVALS

There are Torah subjects that are time-related – for example, the laws of Elul, Rosh Hashanah and the subsequent days [of Tishrei]. Moreover, these laws are particularly relevant now, for we are within thirty days of Sukkos, when one should begin studying and contemplating its laws. In fact this period [that carries the obligation to study the laws of Sukkos,] already began on the 15th of Elul – it is certainly relevant now, on the 18th of Elul!

3) CHAI ELUL IN CHARITABLE ACTS

Further, [we could find a tangible way to express the theme of Chai Elul] with regard to charitable deeds too. ([Charitable deeds] fall under the general category of Tzedakah.)

So, in order to prevent the debate over what to do or what not to do [I will again spell out the directive in full]:

PROVIDE NEEDY WITH FESTIVAL SUPPLIES

For a start, there is [now] the [requirement of] Tzedakah to aid our fellow Jews in their necessities for the festival of Sukkos, and likewise regarding their Rosh Hashanah needs – concerning which it is written (Nechemya 8:10), “Go, eat rich foods, drink sweet beverages and send portions to those who have nothing prepared – for today is sacred to Hashem!”

INCREASE TZEDAKAH – IT’S GOOD FOR YOU TOO

Further, Tzedakah contains a unique association with Chai Elul – and “all who add, are added to [by Heaven]” (which is a concept that starts on the 15th of Av and continues after it – for that same Mishnah [which contains the above quote] also links the 15th of Av with Yom Kippur, as we have mentioned on numerous occasions).

In conclusion: we have mentioned clear and tangible directives in the categories of Torah study, prayer and charitable deeds.

IMMEDIATE APPLICATION – “DOLLARS”

On the topic of charitable deeds: we will now conclude by following our regular practice of [distributing dollar bills, thus] making each person an emissary to give charity.

In addition to a single coin, which is the minimum for charity, a second coin will be added (and regarding bills – a second bill) in honor of Chai Elul.

The key points are:

- 1) That “all who add, are added to [from Heaven]” in all their affairs,
- 2) That this is especially true regarding being inscribed and sealed for a sweet new year – Kesivah veChasimah Tovah leShanah Tovah u’Mesukah, and
- 3) That the main concern is to immediately bring vitality into every aspect of Elul.

Tzedakah brings Geulah – learn Inyanei Guelah too

Furthermore – and most importantly in light of the fact that one of the acronyms of the word Elul represents the Redemption⁷⁷ –

77. The Acronym of Elul that corresponds to Geulah, is found in the verse (Shemos 15:1) **וַיֹּאמְרוּ לְאִמֵּר אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה**, “[Then Moshe and the Children of Israel sang this song to Hashem] and they declared saying: I will sing to Hashem.”

charity in general hastens the Redemption; and it certainly does so when we connect it with the study of the laws of the Redemption that are stated in Rambam – who dwells [on this topic] at length in the Laws of Moshiach and the Wars (of Kings) – as well as in Shulchan Aruch’s treatment of the blessing for Redemption that we recite in the Amidah prayer, and the like.

CONCLUDE WITH A BLESSING:

Through our adding in Torah study, prayer and charitable deeds, we also produce a tangible addition in the “inscribing and sealing” of each and every Jew and the entire nation as one –leShanah Tovah Tichaseiv veSikaseim, “may you be written and sealed for a sweet new year!”

[At this point, the Rebbe distributed two dollar bills to each person, to be given to Tzedakah.

This rendition of the Sichah is based on unedited notes that were taken by those present.]

a CALL to ACTION

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