

Elul Chizuk

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There are many thoughts on people's minds as we proceed further through the month of Elul. We have all heard about how in previous generations, just mention of the word Elul was enough to awaken the hearts of Yidden to teshuvah. It is well known that R' Yisroel Salanter used to say that in Elul, even the fish in the ocean shiver. Yet, even in his day, he writes how times have changed. All the more so in today's generation, when it is so difficult to awaken any sort of feeling in Yiddishkeit, how hard it is to feel anything in regard to Elul.

Many of us start off the month with some sort of expectations of ourselves.

But more often than not, somewhere along the way, despite all our seemingly good intentions, things just don't seem to go according to plan. Very often, new trials and tribulations come up just now which we weren't prepared to deal with. Sometimes, new unexpected obligations arise. Sometimes, it seems just plain harder to get the act together. Little by little, the frustration of being unable to follow up on our goals adds up, until we are forced to leave them to the side. And although we might be embarrassed to admit it, we end up just falling into Rosh Hashanah, perhaps in a sorrier state than we were when we began.

Worst of all are those of us who with the aforementioned in mind are afraid to even start thinking about Elul. Why want something which can't be had, why aim for a goal what can't be reached? Why set oneself up for disappointment?

We all believe that everything in this world is b'hashgocha pratis. If so, there screams out a question which demands an answer: Why does Hashem do this to us? If Elul is such a

special time, why don't we feel it? If this is such an opportune time to improve ourselves, why do many of us end up failing and falling harder in Elul than at any other time?

Maybe we can start to understand this phenomena if we look a little into what exactly Elul is. We have all heard the acronym given for the month of Elul: A'ni L'dodi V'dodi L'i. I am for my beloved as my beloved is for me. On a simple level, we understand the message to be referring to the special relationship which we have with Hashem in Elul, how it is an opportune time to try to do teshuvah and improve oneself in preparation for the upcoming Yomim Noraim.

Rebbe Nachman points out in Likutei Moharan 6, that if we were to analyze the passuk, we would notice that there are two ideas being conveyed: the concept of A'ni L'dodi, I am for my beloved, and that of V'dodi L'I, my beloved is for me. The first thought, that of A'ni L'dodi, referring to one's relationship with Hashem as it manifests from a person towards Hashem. The second thought is the opposite, from Hashem towards us.

All the good intentions which we spoke about before, in certain respects may go under the category of Ani L'dodi. They demonstrate the realization that in order to do proper teshuvah, it is necessary not to be satisfied with one's current level, high as it may be. That one must constantly strive towards higher levels in learning and toil in serving Hashem.

But at the same time, there is another concept in which one has to gain proficiency in before he can properly go on the path of teshuvah. That is the message of V'dodi Li. The knowledge that even if he were to fall, even to the lowest places, that he should never give up, and still always try to find Hashem. That he should still try to do whatever he could in his situation, and to be strong with it.

This realization is based upon the knowledge that V'dodi Li; that Hashem is always with me, and it is possible to serve Him properly in every possible situation. Hashem has nachas and enjoyment from every small step that I take to better myself and to come closer to Him, no matter where I'm coming from and what I look like right now.

How does this knowledge help me? First of all, it serves as a form of a protection to keep up with the Ani L'dodi. I can only strive for the highest if I'm capable of not falling even in the lowest and smallest. If I'm afraid to fail, then I'll never start. But if I know that there really isn't such a thing as failure, then there's nothing to be afraid of.

But why isn't there failure? Didn't I set goals which I didn't keep? Aren't I on an even lower level than before I even started?

That's what V'dodi Li teaches us. It teaches us the proper perspective of the Ani L'dodi. Very often, what is really propelling us to achieve higher levels and realize goals is our feelings of a need for self-respect. A person looks in the mirror, and can't bear the level which he finds himself. He then goes on an often ill-fated quest to change that image which he saw. Naturally, when he sees where he's headed and that his efforts seem futile, the most logical next step would be to give up.

But if Ani L'dodi, if what is driving me higher is a realization that I want to be L'dodi, for my Beloved, and not for myself, then I take delight in whatever my Beloved does. And what is that? V'dodi Li- my beloved wants me.

Thus, there is no such thing as failing. In every situation, there is always something that I can do, even if it might seem very small. When the focus is not L'dodi then that small bit loses its value, because how will that help me to accomplish my real goal, which is to restore my self-respect. However,

when the goal is L'dodi, then I will always try to do whatever I can, given the situation.

My Beloved loves me, and takes great nachas from anything I do for Him. If that's the case, then I'm not afraid to aim for the highest goals, because I know that whatever I achieve, even if it's far from the goal, is still very dear in Hashem's eyes.

Why was I afraid to want? Because why want something which can't be had. But if wanting to improve is to want to please Hashem, then whatever He allows me to accomplish is obviously fulfilling that.

More importantly, though, this understanding, the internalizing of it in itself is a form of teshuvah. Besides the aspect of teshuvah of actually changing one's former habits and achieving new levels, there is aspect of the actual closeness to Hashem. That takes place in our hearts and minds. The more one realizes Hashem's presence and greatness, the closer one is to Him. Seforim explain that the middah of Gedulas Hashem is actually the middah of His everlasting love and kindness. When someone realizes how He is really with him, by him, and next to him in each and every situation, and that He takes nachas from every little point of good, he is coming closer to seeing Gedulas Hashem.

We can now understand why Hashgocha has decreed that Elul be such a hard time to achieve outwardly in Avodas Hashem, especially in our generation. Today, in the Dor Ikvisa D'Meshicha, Hashem wants us to realize more than ever: We are Dodim, and we are for each other. We are not trying to become something or accomplish anything. We are just trying to come close to Hashem, and that is by realizing how close He really is to us. But in our low generation, if He were to allow us to be outwardly successful in our Avodah, we might very well fall into the trap of thinking only of ourselves and forgetting to do true teshuvah, which is to come back to Him. So He sends us

yeridos and nisyonos, and ways of preventing us from living up to our goals, all in order to cajole us into looking towards Him, and to realize how He's here, with me, by me, and next to me.

May Hashem help us to internalize this message, to realize V'dodi Li, and through that may we be zoche to fulfill our Ani L'dodi properly and be zoche to teshuvah shleima in all aspects, and to a shnas geulah v'yeshuah.

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