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How to Really Grow During the Month of Elul

A pious man encountered a group of triumphant soldiers coming back from a fierce battle, flushed with victory. "You have returned victorious from a minor struggle," he said to them. "Now get ready for the major battle."

"And what is that major battle?" they asked.

"The war within us, against the evil inclination. That is the great war. You just came back from three weeks of intense fighting, and now the enemy has been vanquished. But fighting the insanity of the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination, never ends. Even after 100 defeats, he will never leave you alone. The battle is constant. He will not rest until he kills you. The moment you let your guard down, he will pounce and attempt to utterly destroy you.

"In a typical war there is a front line. Sometimes you are surrounded, but at least

you know where the enemy lies. The *yetzer hara*, however, is a master of disguise. He knows how to mask illusions as reality, how to rationalize evil as good. He is so devious, he knows how to get you to harm yourself and your loved ones without your even realizing it." (*Duties of the Heart, Shaar Yichud Hamaaseh, chapter 5*)

We are beginning the Hebrew month of Elul. It is time to intensify the battle against the *yetzer hara* and restock our supply of weapons.

The enemy's first plan of attack is to knock out your sense of personal responsibility and get you to hand it over to someone else. "Let my teachers inspire me," you think. Or, "Let my rabbi tell me what I have to work on."

Stop waiting for someone to tell you what to change during Elul. You are responsible for yourself.

Stop waiting for someone to tell you what to change during Elul. You are responsible for yourself. You must do the necessary introspection, get in contact with yourself, and determine what you need to work on. As the Mishnah says, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" (*Avos 1:14*). No one can help you grow unless you take responsibility for yourself. Your teachers can give you the greatest tools in the world for self-transformation, but you will leave those tools on the bench if you don't take responsibility for your own life.

You need to get clarity about what life means to you. What do you want to accomplish this coming year? What are you committed to tackling? If you don't make these decisions, you might easily delude yourself into thinking that you are preparing adequately for Rosh Hashanah by listening to some inspiring talks and hoping that somehow these great rabbis will make you great.

No one can make you great. No one can turn you into a Torah scholar. There are no shortcuts; you are solely responsible for your own growth and learning. Toughen up and stop relying on others. No one can do it for you.

Judgment and Love

The month of Elul seem to be paradoxical. On the one hand it is the time for "Ani l'dodi v'dodi li - I am for my Beloved and my Beloved is for me" - an acronym for "Elul." It is a time when we feel God's intense love and closeness. Yet Elul is also the time to prepare for Rosh Hashanah, when the Book of Life and the Book of Death are open and the King of the universe sits in judgment, deciding who will live and who will die, who will have cancer and who will be cured, who will be crushed in an accident and who will survive. There seems to be a contradiction between "I am for my Beloved and my Beloved is for me" and the Day of Judgment. How are the two related?

Every judgment God renders - whether a windfall or a bankruptcy - is exactly what we need to grow closer to Him.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the Ramchal, encapsulates in one paragraph the whole point of our existence, and in doing so gives us an answer. In The Way of God (1:4:6) he writes, "The root purpose of the service of God is for the human being to constantly turn to his Creator, to realize that he was created for the sole purpose of being drawn close to his Creator...." Everything that happens to us in this world is for one reason and one reason alone: to get closer to the Almighty, to feel that I am for my Beloved and my Beloved is for me. The Jew understands that everything God does is for our good; it is an expression of His love. Every judgment He renders - whether a windfall or a bankruptcy - is exactly what we need to grow closer to Him.

I am for my Beloved, if you love the Almighty

and appreciate that He is your father, then *my Beloved is for me*, you will see that the Almighty loves you and that everything He does is for your good. But if you don't appreciate what God has done for you and instead you have complaints, you will mistakenly think He does not love you.

The Ramchal describes the objective of the war against the *yetzer hara*: "Man was placed in this world only to overcome his evil inclination and subjugate himself to His Creator through the power of his intellect. He must overcome his physical desire and tendencies, and direct all of his activities toward attaining this purpose [of coming close to God]" (ibid). It is up to us to choose to cling to God by vanquishing our *yetzer hara* and rising above the vanities and confusion of the world.

Learning Torah

The Ramchal then identifies the primary weapon God gave us to fight the *yetzer hara* and achieve our purpose: "God gave us one means that is greater than anything else in bringing man close to God, and that is Torah study" (1:4:9). There is nothing more powerful than learning Hashem's instructions for living. These are the actual words of our Creator.

But the Ramchal sets conditions: "For the person who reads them in holiness and purity, with the proper intent of fulfilling God's will, these words have the unique property of causing the one who reads them to incorporate in himself excellence and greatest perfection." We need to learn Torah with holiness and purity, which means that our learning has to be *lishmah*, unadulterated, for the sake of Heaven. Our motivation to get close to God cannot be mixed with the desire for approval or the need to conform to societal pressure.

Elul is the time to examine your goals and drives.

Elul is the time to examine your goals and drives. Why are you learning Torah? Make sure it is for the right reasons. Keep it pure.

And lastly, learn Torah with the intent to fulfill God's will, as we say in our daily prayers in the second blessing before reciting the *Shema*: "Instill in our hearts to understand and elucidate, to listen, learn, teach, safeguard, perform and fulfill all the words of your Torah's teaching with love." Torah study is not just for intellectual stimulation. The goal is for you to absorb it in your bones and live it. Torah learning has to change you and bring you closer to the Almighty. If your intent is not to fulfill what you are learning, you may know an incredible amount of Torah, but you are just a donkey carrying books. Your knowledge has not penetrated into the fiber of your being.

The shofar is blowing; you are moving closer to the Day of Judgment. You are at war. The enemy is at the gate. Now is the time to strengthen your resolve to fight the great battle against the *yetzer hara*. It is time to take responsibility for every aspect of your life, to reconnect to God's constant love, and to intensify your determination to learn Torah with purity, in order to fulfill the God's will. No one can do it for you.

Excerpted from [Wisdom for Living: Rabbi Noah Weinberg on the Parashah](#). [Click here to order.](#)



The One Who Is Falling

Recently, a new acquaintance told me her surprising story. Susan decided to enter a raffle. "Why not? The money goes to a good cause," she thought. First prize was a trip to Israel. Susan was certain that she wouldn't win, so she forgot about it. Of course, she won the trip, but the story doesn't end there.

While seated on the plane, awaiting takeoff, the passenger beside her asked if she would switch seats with her. Susan said, "Of course," but immediately wondered to herself, "Why did I just give up my aisle seat to sit in the middle?" Susan did not yet know that this quick decision would bring about a positive change in her life. She didn't realize that she was then sitting between her future husband and future sister-in-law.

How do some occurrences seem to connect? To what extent do Divine providence, free choice, and cause-and-effect intersect? Or do they?

The unusual wording of a verse in this week's Torah portion sheds light on this fascinating topic. "When you build a new house, you must make a *maakeh*, guardrail, for your roof, so that *the one who is falling* will not come to fall from it [emphasis added.]"

What does "the one who is falling" mean? Is the Torah warning us of a future event? The Talmud explains that "the person who will fall was predestined to fall since the six days of Creation." That's why the verse refers to him as "the one who is falling." What roles do providence and free will play in this scenario? Freedom of choice and causality are two systems by which the world operates. The connection between them is explained in the Talmud. "Reward is brought about through those with merit, and punishment through the guilty."

In other words, an individual's act of free will

can bring about a pre-ordained result or goal. In this situation, it is the free will of the homeowner who is negligent in erecting a guardrail that will lead to the punishment of the person who was predestined to fall.

The *Shelah Hakadosh* explains that God knows all that could occur, what actually will occur, and what might have occurred. Every potential outcome is foreseen. Certain occurrences take place because they are simply part of the overall Divine plan. Other times, free will can change an outcome. There are different versions of what the future may be.

Consider this example. Joe lands a dream job. He's got it all planned out. Tomorrow he'll give his current boss the required two weeks' notice, and then he'll take two weeks off before the mandatory start date for the new job. But that night Joe ends up in the ER with a painful kidney stone. The x-ray shows a mass and further testing reveals that he has stage one kidney cancer. That's the bad news. The good news is that, because it was discovered early, it can be removed safely and Joe won't need any further treatment. That painful kidney stone actually saved him. However, due to the six-week recovery period, he'll lose out on the new job. But, on the day Joe was scheduled to have started that new job, his "former" boss calls and offers Joe a promotion at an even higher salary. Thank God!

Although we possess complete freedom of choice and action, this doesn't negate other underlying factors. Here's an example. Someone may establish a high-tech start-up in an underdeveloped country and be unsuccessful. Although the necessary natural resources were plentiful and inexpensive, the lack of skilled labor and political corruption over-rode that. Now, extend this idea to someone embarking on a spiritual self-improvement program in a depraved environment. What are the prospects for success? Preexisting conditions can preclude successful outcomes, yet, despite the odds,

sometimes great things do happen. Look at your own life or those of others. You'll find experiences that were unlikely to turn out well yet did. Perhaps these were part of a broader, far-reaching Divine plan.

Freedom of choice and causality work in tandem with Divine providence to bring God's plans to fruition. They are tools with which the universe operates and is governed. A goal can be achieved in different ways. God's desired ends can be brought about through any of a variety of means. If a goal is not attained by one means, it will come about by another, but these distinctions may not be obvious to us.

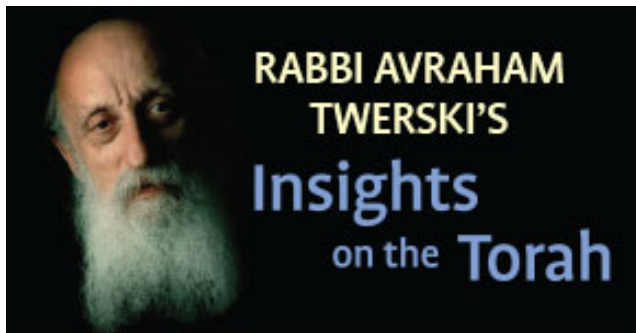
The Talmud's statement that "reward is brought about through those with merit and punishment through the guilty" might help us understand this. A person's act of free will can be the means to trigger a particular, preordained occurrence or goal. It may result in either a reward or a punishment. The free will of the homeowner who neglected to erect a guardrail ultimately brought about the punishment of the person who was predestined to fall. *Rashi* succinctly concludes that if someone falls off a roof, it's because he or she was a "fallen one," deserving to fall. It is your duty and choice, however, to make sure that it's not off your roof.

The Torah neither tells people to forego building houses nor to avoid going to the roof. The commandment is simply to build a guardrail. The performance of a straightforward, common-sense mitzvah can prevent potential harm. Therefore, imagine the potential good that can result from going beyond one's comfort zone to help another. Just ask my friend Susan!

Making It Relevant

1. In retrospect, how have specific occurrences and choices you have made coincided with surprising outcomes?

2. Strive to see God's providence in your life.
3. Establish clear boundaries ("guardrails") for yourself, to ensure your physical and spiritual safety.
4. Don't be afraid to go beyond your comfort zone to help another. You never know what good might result!



Addiction and Free Will

If a man will have a wayward and rebellious son, who does not hearken to the voice of his father and the voice of his mother . . . a glutton and a drunkard (Deut. 21:18-20).

The Talmud says that the capital punishment of the wayward son was never carried out and is a technical impossibility. Why then does the Torah mention it? So that we will be rewarded for studying it (Sanhedrin 71a).

Is it logical to have a Jewish law that is a technical impossibility and is there only to be studied in theory? And what is the specific reward for this?

Rabbi Elyah Lopian addresses this issue. He prefaces with a question. The Talmud says that the wayward son is a youth who steals to satisfy his gluttony and his craving for alcohol. The harsh punishment decreed by the Torah is not for the crime of theft, but because his behavior is certain to progress to the point

where he will kill to satisfy his cravings.

Rabbi Lopian says that the Torah relates that when God provided water for Ishmael to prevent him from dying of thirst in the arid desert, the angels protested, "Why save him? His descendants will kill Jews!" (as we so tragically know). God responded, "I do not judge people by what may transpire in the future."

Why, then, is the wayward son punished for what he will do in the future?

Rabbi Lopian answers that every person has freedom of choice in his moral and ethical behavior. Even a profligate sinner may do teshuvah, repentance. However, a youth who steals for food and drink has lost his freedom of choice. His cravings have overwhelmed his freedom of choice, and he is capable of eliminating anything that stands in the way of his gratifying his desires.

Anyone familiar with addiction recognizes the phenomenon Rabbi Lopian describes. An addict essentially loses his freedom of choice and becomes enslaved by his addiction. I have repeatedly heard recovered addicts say, "When I needed drugs, I did things that I never thought myself capable of doing."

Any addiction can enslave a person, whether it be to alcohol, drugs, cigarettes or food. It is, therefore, extremely important that we take great precaution not to develop habits that can be destructive.

This is especially important for parents to know. It is not uncommon for parents to think that their son's frequent recourse to alcohol is a phase which he will outgrow. It is far more likely that the condition will progress to most serious proportions.

When parents become aware of use of drugs or excessive use of alcohol in a child, it is a mistake to think that asking or ordering him to

stop will be effective. He may have lost his freedom of choice. Parents should consult someone with established competence in addiction, and follow the advice they are given.

Understanding the unrelenting course of addiction is a reward we receive from studying this portion of the Torah.



The Foundation of a Successful Marriage

How important is marriage? A recent survey by Bradford Wilcox reveals a troubling disconnect: 75% of adults ages 18-40 consider making a good living crucial to life fulfillment, while only 32% view marriage as essential. Approximately 40-50% of first marriages end in divorce, with subsequent marriages facing even higher failure rates. With marriage rates plummeting and nearly half of marriages still ending in divorce¹, we've clearly lost sight of something fundamental.

Modern marriage fails because we've forgotten a fundamental truth: successful relationships require ruthless prioritization. We treat marriage like a hobby—something to nurture when work calms down, when finances stabilize, when life becomes convenient.

Judaism offers a radically different approach.

Priority One: Your Marriage

Three thousand five hundred years ago, this week's Torah portion established a revolutionary principle that has strengthened Jewish families for millennia:

"When a man has newly taken a wife, he shall not go out with the army or be assigned to it for any purpose; he shall be exempt for the sake of his household for one year, to give happiness to the woman he has taken" (Devarim 24:5)

Many young couples fail to realize that a relationship in its infancy—delicate and fragile like a newborn baby—requires maximum care, love and attention. They go about their lives, prioritizing their career and their other obligations, failing to nurture the most essential aspect of their lives. This mitzvah of nurturing the first year, *Shana Rishona*, teaches the foundation of successful marriage: your spouse must come first. Not sometimes. Not when convenient. Always.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains: "The husband must forgo not only individual achievement, but even the welfare of the whole." When the Torah exempts newlyweds from military service—the highest civic duty—it establishes an uncompromising hierarchy: marriage success determines national success, not the reverse.

Marriage's Divine Endorsement

How seriously does God take this priority system? Rabbeinu Bachya reveals an extraordinary insight: the final letters of *"ה שנו לביתה יהי נק"* (he shall be exempt for his household for one year) spell out God's four-letter name—the Tetragrammaton. The Creator literally signed His name on this commandment!

Even more remarkably, Rabbeinu Bachya observes that God practiced what He preached. After the "wedding" at Mount Sinai, the Divine Presence remained stationary for one year before traveling with the Jewish people—God's own *Shana Rishona*, first year of marriage with His chosen nation.

This divine endorsement reveals why prioritizing marriage isn't just relationship advice—it's cosmic law.

The First "Not Good" In the Torah

But why should marriage rank above career, military service, and personal ambitions? The first time God declares something "not good" in the Torah concerns solitary man: "It's not good that man be alone" (Genesis 2:18). Rabbi Hirsch explains:

The goal of perfection, which the terrestrial world is to attain through man, cannot be attained in full, as long as man is alone. The completion of the good was not man, but woman; only when woman was created was the good completed - for man and for the entire world. As our Rabbis teach us (Yevamos 63A): Only husband and wife together are called "Adam - אדם" as is stated, 'Male and female He created them...and called their name Adam' (Genesis 5:2).

Marriage doesn't just create families; it creates fully realized human beings. Jewish law demonstrates this profound truth: the Code of Jewish Law² teaches that when a child is born, the parents make a blessing to express gratitude to God.³ But remarkably, the text of the blessing does not mention the creation of a new human being. We reserve that blessing for when husband and wife unite under the chuppah. The first of the seven wedding blessings declares, "*Baruch Ata Adonai, Yotzer Ha'Adam* - Blessed are You, God, who creates man." When man and woman enter the bond

of marriage, they are born anew, unified as their complete self.

Taking this idea a step further, Kabbalah reveals marriage's deepest purpose: training for our relationship with the Divine. When we learn to constantly think about our spouse, desire closeness, and search for ways to show love—we're actually learning how to relate to God Himself.

Getting Your Priorities Straight

This week, examine where marriage actually ranks in your life's priorities. Do your calendar, budget, and attention reflect the Torah's hierarchy? If you're single, consider how you'll rearrange these priorities when you find your spouse. The ancient wisdom of *Shana Rishona* offers a clear guideline: treat your spouse's happiness as your primary mission, and watch both your marriage and your spiritual growth flourish.

Shabbat Shalom!
Avraham

1. 
2. Shulchan Aruch - Orach Chaim 223
3. "Shehechianu" for girls, or "HaTov v'HaMetiv" for boys.