

Elul: The Month of Spiritual Refuge (*Shoftim*)

Chodesh Tov!

In many sefarim that discuss the month of Elul, reference is often made to the *remez* (hint) found in the verse: *Ani ledodi vedodi li* – ‘I am my Beloved's and my Beloved is mine’ (*Shir HaShirim* 6:3), where the first letters of this four-word phrase spell ‘ELUL’.

Additionally, two further verses are also often cited when speaking about Elul: *Et levavecho ve'et levav* – ‘your heart and the heart of [your children]’ (*Devarim* 30:6), and *Isb lerei'eihu umatanot la'evyonim* - ‘one to another and gifts to the poor’ (*Esther* 9:22).

As Rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried explains (see *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 128:1), each of these three verses expresses a different value for us to work on during the month of Elul: *Tefillah* (prayer), *Teshuva* (repentance) and *Tzedakah* (charity).

However, even before making reference to these three verses, Rabbi Ganzfried quotes a different verse which, according to the Ari ז"ל, encapsulates the essence of the month of Elul.

In *Parshat Mishpatim* we are first taught about the ‘Cities of Refuge’ (*Arei Miklat*), where someone who has unintentionally killed can find physical refuge as well as a setting for personal and spiritual reflection and rehabilitation.

Interestingly, this verse (*Shemot* 21:13), which speaks of the *Arei Miklat*, states: ‘If he did not lie in wait to harm him, but it came about by an act of God, then I am setting apart a place (*ina le'yado vesamti lecha*) where he may find refuge’. These four Hebrew words also spell out ELUL, and according to the Ari ז"ל, this is a *remez* that the month of Elul is a favorable time for repentance, reflection and rehabilitation for sins that we have committed during the entire year.

As it happens, the law of the *Arei Miklat* is mentioned in a number of additional places in the Torah: in *Parshat Massei* (*Bemidbar* 35:9-15), in *Parshat VaEtchanan* (*Devarim* 4:41-43) and in this week's portion, *Parshat Shoftim* (*Devarim* 19:1-10). Yet beyond the *remez* of the first four letters of the phrase ‘*ina le'yado vesamti lecha*’ spelling out the word ELUL, is there any further connection between *Arei Miklat* and Elul?

The answer is that there most certainly is! The Lubavitcher Rebbe (*Torat Menachem*, 5714:3, p. 182) explains that someone who has sinned is considered to have unintentionally ‘killed’ a part/potential of their soul, and just as someone who has accidentally killed another person then flees to a physical city of refuge so they can escape from the ‘redeemer of blood’ (*go'el ha'dam*) and so they can have an opportunity for some personal and spiritual reflection and rehabilitation, so too, Elul is a spiritual refuge in time, where those who have sinned can escape from the *yetzer hara* and seize the opportunities available in the month of Elul for personal and spiritual reflection and rehabilitation.

From here we learn that just like the *Arei Miklat* are physical places of refuge, so too, the month of Elul is a spiritual period of refuge, and just as *Arei Miklat* affirm and protect life, so too does the month of Elul.

And so, as we begin the month of Elul, and as we read about the law of the *Arei Miklat* this Shabbat, we are tasked with seizing the unique opportunities of this special month - to repent, reflect and rehabilitate our physical and spiritual selves.

Shabbat Shalom!

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