

Can you prepare for a spiritual experience? (Edited Transcript)

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Be prepared

It's so interesting that preparation deepens an experience. But this applies particularly to deep and meaningful experiences. The truth is, that an experience that is superficial is not enhanced by preparation; it can sometimes even be ruined by preparation. The more profound the experience, the more it is enhanced by preparation. And what could be a bigger experience than that of Rosh Hashana, the day of judgement for us and the entire world?

This Shabbos coincides with the beginning of the month of Elul, which is such an important month in the Jewish calendar. Elul is the month before Rosh Hashana ? thus it is the month of preparation for Rosh Hashana, two days that are of the utmost significance and impact. These are the days of judgment and introspection, of reflection on the purpose of creation and the purpose of our lives. We cannot simply walk coldly into such an experience. We need to prepare. And that's what the month of Elul is about. It is a month of preparation before entering into Rosh Hashana, followed 10 days later by Yom Kippur. Elul is a time of preparation not just for Rosh Hashana, but for Yom Kippur as well, and for the 10 days in between.

Preparation is crucial to how our sages guide us to live a life of meaning. Living a life of goodness, in harmony with the will of Hashem, requires preparation. To live such a life means to live in a constant state of preparation ? to live with mindfulness. We don't just rush through life oblivious to what is taking place; we carefully consider our purpose, and the general direction of our lives. We consider our actions and give genuine, deep thought to who we want to be and where we want to go.

In the Mesillat Yesharim, one of the classic works of spiritual development and growth, written by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, known as the Ramchal, he describes a ladder of ascending levels of spiritual achievement to help us to grow and become truly great people. The starting point of the ladder is what the Ramchal calls zehirut, which means living with self-awareness and mindfulness. The Ramchal quotes an image from Jeremiah the prophet, who talks about people living life ?like a horse charging headlong into battle?. The image is a powerful one. Think of horses in a cavalry charge, with no awareness of what is going on around them, but still rushing headlong because they are caught up in the frenzy of the moment. Rather, we should live with mindfulness, and Elul arrives as a reminder for us to return to this state of mindfulness ? therefore, it is crucial in preparation for Rosh Hashana.

Mindfulness is about living with careful introspection and self-awareness of what we are doing, which enhances the spiritual experience of living like a Jew. An example is saying the Shema, and praying. These are two important mitzvahs. In the Shema, we accept G-d as our King, and we can experience a moment of incredible closeness to G-d as we accept His authority in our lives. Prayer is a time when we pour out our hearts to G-d in a state of vulnerability and deep emotional connection to Him. These two mitzvahs are fulfilled when we say the Shema and the Amidah. But the siddur is structured in such a way that we don't just rush headlong into the Shema and Amidah. There is a process of preparation. First, we say the morning blessings, and then the special passages from the Book of Psalms and other places in the Tanach, which are filled with words of praise and reflection about G-d and His greatness. These pesukei dezimrah ? the ?verses of song? ? prepare us for the climax of what is contained in the siddur in the form of the Shema and the Amidah.

We also prepare for Shabbos each week, not just practically, ie, food and home preparation, but rather, we go through a process of mentally, emotionally and physically preparing ourselves to accept the holiness of the Shabbos experience, which is enhanced through our preparation. This is why the prayers that begin the Shabbos service, taken from the Book of Psalms, are called Kabbalat Shabbat, the receiving of the Shabbos. We don't just walk into Shabbos, we prepare to receive Shabbos.

One of the greatest mitzvahs of mindfulness is the mitzvah of learning Torah. Firstly, this mitzvah is preceded by blessings, where

we acknowledge that G-d is the giver of the Torah ? so we prepare ourselves for the experience of learning Torah. It is not merely a dry intellectual activity, but rather an experience of receiving the wisdom of Hashem in this world and appreciating the privilege of what that is and what that means. To divorce Torah from its Divine origins and just to experience it as one would experience any intellectual pursuit is to drain it of its holiness and its significance, and to severely limit its capacity to impact our lives. In fact, the Gemara says one of the reasons for the destruction of the Temple is that the Jews of the time did not say their blessings before learning Torah. They approached Torah with a lack of awe for its greatness.

As we approach Elul with awe, mindful and aware of the opportunity it gives us to prepare for Rosh Hashana, what should we be focusing on? Our sages teach us that the month of Elul corresponds to the verse from the Song of Songs: ?I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me.? In Hebrew, the first letters of words of the verse: Ani ledodi v?dodi li make up the letters of Elul. So Elul is about our love for G-d and His love for us, and about our closeness to G-d. And an important part of the preparation of Elul is to feel that closeness to G-d.

Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv ? the Alter of Kelm ? links this to the famous prayer we say over Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur: Avinu Malkeinu ? ?Our Father, our King?. First, G-d is our Father, and that represents the relationship of love, connection and bonding. And then He is our King who judges us. So before He is our King, He is our Father. The Alter of Kelm explains that before we can embrace the experience of being judged by G-d, we need to embrace the experience of being loved by G-d.

Whatever He does is ultimately because He loves us and because He wants the best for us. In the same way that a parent loves a child and only wants the best for a child, so too G-d loves us and wants what?s best for us. We need to enter Rosh Hashana deeply connected to G-d?s love for us and our love for G-d. Then the process of judgment, introspection and repentance can be so much more powerful.

We also prepare for Rosh Hashana during the month of Elul by blowing the shofar. The shofar blowing, says the Rambam, is to ?awaken those who sleep?. We need to awaken ourselves spiritually, and this connects deeply with the idea of mindfulness and living with intent and heightened awareness. Habit is one of the most powerful forces in human life. This can be used for the good, because if we adopt good habits then they can be effortlessly implemented without us having to think about them. On the other hand, habit can lead us to living without intent. In preparation for Rosh Hashana, we need to step out of our habits and reconsider, look at everything afresh, renew ourselves and reawaken ourselves spiritually. The message of the shofar sounded throughout the month of Elul is a reminder to prepare for Rosh Hashana. It is actually preparing us for the mindfulness with which we need to engage Rosh Hashana, and it?s reminding us to live our lives with mindfulness, so it touches on both aspects.

Elul was the time, historically, when we were forgiven for the sin of the golden calf, which culminated in Moshe bringing down the second set of tablets from the mountain on Yom Kippur. It was a time of acceptance by G-d, a time of closeness to G-d, a time of opportunity and a time of preparation.

Our sages describe these days as yemei ratzon ? ?the days of acceptance?. It is during this time that we are especially close to G-d and that our prayers, repentance and introspection are more easily accepted by G-d. In fact, the entire period, beginning with Rosh Chodesh Elul leading up to Yom Kippur, is a time of acceptance. So, as we take the time to carefully prepare for Rosh Hashana this year, let us be mindful of the fact that this is a time in which the gates of heaven are wide open for us, and let us use this opportunity to truly connect with and be embraced by Our Father, our King ? Avinu Malkeinu.