

Ki Teitzei, Deuteronomy 21:10-25:19

I was honored to officiate at a wedding this past Sunday. The couple have each been married before, so the wedding was small and intimate, tremendously joyous and loving. During the ceremony, they shared this verse from the Song of Songs: *yl ydvdl ydvdl yna*, which means "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine." These are beautiful words, obviously, for a day celebrating the love and commitment of one to another. But perhaps surprisingly, they also connect with this season of the Jewish year.

We are in the month of Elul, and during this month we are called to get ready for the upcoming soul-reckoning of Yom Kippur. During our Shabbat Shelanu and Friday night services we are using Mishkan HaLev (Sanctuary of the Heart), the prayer book for Selichot and Elul. We will blow the shofar during these services to awaken our hearts, minds and souls for the work of teshuva, returning. During these days of Elul, we are invited/instructed to do an accounting of our lives in the past year, to look deep into ourselves to see where we have erred. Doing that kind of work with sincerity is not simple, or quick, or painless. For those who truly want to change, to return to a wholehearted path, assessing with honesty the faults in our characters can be a devastating experience. If the introspection is done harshly and self-critically, it can feel like a shredding of our very being. The reality is that if it is approached in this way, it is unlikely to create real transformation in our lives. Because, honestly, who wants to feel like the lowest of the low? However, our tradition suggests, in connection with the verse from Song of Songs, a different mindset or heart-set for the work we're supposed to be doing.

The ancient rabbis noticed that if we make an acronym of the verse above, we get *lvla* - Elul which is the name of this month. And taking the numerical value of the *y* at the end of each word, we get 40, because each *y* is 10.

"This alludes to the 40 days from the beginning of Elul until Yom Kippur for during these forty days repentance is [lovingly] accepted, so a person should bring their heart near to their Beloved [God] with repentance, and then the Beloved will be close to them to accept the repentance in love." (Mishnah Berurah 581:1)

The rabbis understood that real change, real teshuva, is more possible and more likely when we approach it from the direction of love, commitment and compassion. "I love you. I know this is hard. I am sticking with you and therefore want you to be the best version of yourself," is a very different approach than "You're awful. Change."

In the Mishnah Berurah, God is ready to accept in love all who do the hard work during these 40 days. But that's not the whole story. "A person should bring their heart near to their Beloved." We need to be attentive to our own hearts, hold them with love, compassion and kindness while we do the hard work.

I hope that your self-reflection in the coming weeks is as honest as it can be but also as loving as it can be. I wish you strength and love for the journey.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Sachs-Kohen

For more Torah learning, please join us for Torah Talk, Saturdays, 9 AM at BHC.

