

Days Are Coming  
A Journey through the Jewish Year





Sivan Rahav-Meir

# **DAYS ARE COMING**

**A Journey through  
the Jewish Year**

TRANSLATED BY

**Yehoshua Siskin**

Maggid Books

*Days Are Coming*  
*A Journey through the Jewish Year*

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*In honor of*  
**Andrew Lewis**

חנוך ראובן

*for his Diamond Jubilee Birthday!*

וַיִּתְהַלֵּךְ חֲנוּךְ אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים...

“Hanoch walked faithfully with God...”

*May our Hanoch always walk with Hashem and live a long life.*



*For an aliyah of the neshamot of*

אברהם בן בן־ציון הלוי ז"ל

שושנה בת פאול ז"ל

רחמה בת חנוך ראובן ז"ל

דניאל דוד בן נפתלי הרץ ז"ל



*And for a merit that all Jewish singles meet their zivugim.*



"האירה את העולם בתורה ובמעשים טובים"

*In loving memory of*

**Katie Fishel**

*Whose sense of humor kept those around her smiling,  
whose passion for shidduchim kept those around her hoping,  
and whose generosity of heart let everyone in her presence know  
she was there for them.*

*In her short life Katie brought joy to so many through her thoughtfulness.  
Her love and kindness for family and friends knew no bounds.  
She will always be cherished.*

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## *Introduction*

THE CYCLE OF the Jewish year is a journey, taking us through a process of growth. Each holiday highlights something special, and adds depth to different aspects of our characters. In order to truly appreciate the gifts these holidays bring, we need to know as much as possible about them. We need to prepare for them, study and learn about them. The book before you is a guide to the holidays that we encounter on our journey through the year: How are we liberated on Passover? How do we experience the true joy of Sukkot? What can we learn from Hanukka, Purim, Tu BiShvat, and the various fasts? Why do we even celebrate all the holidays and festivals, and how are they relevant to our lives in the modern world?

I have written this guide at a time of particular anxiety, both worldwide and national. In the midst of a pandemic, between one round of elections and another, it seems to me that our daily routine has been hijacked – that the cycle of the Jewish-Israeli year has been erased and forgotten among the headlines, conflicts, and stormy debates. I remember hosting a broadcast in the news studio when one of the commentators said, “The elections will be held between Purim and Passover so that the government will be formed by Shavuot.” It is of course important to form a

government, but the holidays are not only dates on the calendar. They are our common denominator – the past, the present, and the future.

The response to the short articles I have published on social networks about the holidays has shown me that I am not alone in feeling this way. There is a great thirst for texts that connect us to the holidays. And so this book was born. I have included a selection of my posts and columns, with added insights and articles.

The ideas are not mine. Most of them come from sages and commentators of past generations, but also from authors and thinkers of our own time. Last but not least, I have also included thoughts and observations sent to me by readers from throughout the Jewish world.

Following the journey from Tishrei to Elul, there is an additional chapter: “Days of Corona.” It is a collection of thoughts and words of counsel expressed during the pandemic. I include it with the hope that we will soon be able to read it looking back, solely in the past tense, simply as a matter of historical interest.



There were many partners in this project whom I want to acknowledge. First and foremost, thank you to my husband Yedidya, the engine behind it all, including this book. Thank you to our children, Aharon (for his wise comments), Tamar, Netanel, Hillel, and Yehudit.

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Thank you to the dedicated volunteers who translate and spread the “Daily Portion” that I write into seventeen languages throughout the world. (To subscribe: [www.sivanrahavmeir.com/the-daily-whatsapp/](http://www.sivanrahavmeir.com/the-daily-whatsapp/))

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Finally, thank you to God, who sanctifies the Jewish people and the holidays.

Sivan Rahav-Meir  
Jerusalem





# Elul

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## **FIRST OF ELUL**

### **A new beginning**

The path we are taking begins here. It is the first of Elul, exactly one month before Rosh HaShana, and the summer is over. Yet this date does not signify the end of a year or season, but rather a new beginning. The month of Elul has always represented preparation and self-improvement, refining ourselves as we welcome the prospect of a good new year. Above all, Elul challenges us with a profound question: Are we capable of change? Do we truly believe that we, or indeed our reality, can be different and better? Or do we believe that everything is predetermined, that we are bound by the laws of nature and therefore powerless to change ourselves or our destiny? Do we believe in *teshuva*? *Teshuva*, after all, is not only about the level of observance of Judaism. Every act of self-improvement – however small – and every correct choice, is an act of *teshuva* as well.

In a wonderful text, often quoted during Elul, Maimonides explains the concept of free choice while highlighting the meaning of *teshuva* as it pertains to the freedom of every human being. “Free will is granted to every person. If one desires to turn to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to

turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is his.... A person should not heed the view held by fools ... and the unenlightened... that at the time of a person's creation, the Holy One, blessed be He, decrees whether he will be righteous or wicked. This is untrue.... The Creator does not decree that a person will be either good or evil.... This principle is a fundamental concept and a foundational pillar of the entire Torah and the mitzvot" (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuva*, chapter 5).

A campaign is needed to remind us that we are indeed autonomous beings and have free choice. We need to take the current trend that we see and reset it in the opposite direction. The algorithms of today's social networks attempt to penetrate our minds with addictive messages. Advertisements claim that "it's natural for you to have no self-control," as if we are weak and easily pulled along, and promotions for reality shows broadcast the message that we simply "must watch." Of course, sometimes it is easiest to feign misery and make excuses for our actions: "It's not my fault. Because of my parents/my teachers/my mother-in-law... I had no choice...."

The powerful gift described by Maimonides, the freedom to make choices and to change, is of course always open to us, but it is especially accessible during Elul, the prime time for this process of introspection and self-improvement. The road we are about to take starts here. Seize this extraordinary opportunity for self-development and begin your journey right now! Have a good month. Have a good year. *Shana tova*.

### **The first night of *Selihot* (prayers for divine forgiveness)**

Throughout the world, Sephardic Jews begin to say *Selihot* at the beginning of Elul, special prayers that will continue until Yom Kippur. Rabbi Chaim Sabato described the magical *Selihot* he heard as a child while living in an absorption camp for new immigrants in Israel:

“Grandfather sweetly sings the *Seliḥot* prayers. There is pain in the *Seliḥot* tunes: pain of the *Shekhina* (Divine Presence), pain of the *galut* (exile), and pain that comes from sin, but there is no despair. The melodies descend to the depths of the heart and ascend to the heights of *teshuva* until they glitter with sparks of hope. And everyone cries. Some cry over the body and its ills, some cry over the soul that is tormented by sin, and some, upon hearing others cry, cry together with them.

“From the women’s section, the sounds of sobbing are heard. One woman stands in a corner and sighs. Another stands in the opposite corner and weeps. Old women are sighing over their sins, pleading for an end that is favorable. Mothers are crying over their unmarried daughters.

“And then all are suddenly stirred as they read together, as if with a single heart: ‘Benevolent God, compassionate and gracious One.’ And then, after the *Seliḥot*, words of reconciliation are sung melodiously for the pardon that has been promised: ‘For on this day you will be forgiven and cleansed from all your sins.’ Whose heart would not melt on such a day?”

The world is changing. In recent years, there has been a tremendous influx of people at *Seliḥot* prayers. Participation in *Seliḥot* tours – visiting synagogues to hear different liturgical and melodic versions of *Seliḥot* – has also grown. These developments are perhaps signs of a deep yearning to reconnect with this beautiful and meaningful tradition.

### **When Rabbi Lau heard the shofar**

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau once described the emotional moment he first heard the shofar blown during *Seliḥot*:

“We immigrated to Israel at the beginning of the month of Av 5705 (1945), shortly after the end of World War II. We were a group of children and youths who were orphans of the Holocaust. At the age of eight I did not know how to read or write and did

## *Elul*

not understand a single word of Hebrew. Needless to say, I did not know anything about Rosh HaShana or the shofar. After a short stay in Atlit and some time spent in a children's institution in Kfar Saba, I arrived at the home of my uncle, Rabbi Mordechai Fogelman, of blessed memory, who was the rabbi of Kiryat Motzkin, near Haifa. I lived there until I reached bar mitzva age. The main synagogue was located in the center of the town. It was an impressive size with a high dome and was filled to capacity on Shabbat but sparsely attended during the week.

“I will never forget the morning when, at age eight, I accompanied my uncle to the synagogue for the Rosh Hodesh Elul service, which includes Hallel, the reading of the Torah, and the Musaf prayer. All I could do was stare at the pages of the prayer book since I still did not know how to read. Suddenly I jumped, gripped with panic, at the sound of an unfamiliar siren that reverberated throughout the giant synagogue and echoes in my ears to this day. In Polish, I asked my uncle to explain the meaning of this jarring siren, and thus I received my first lesson on the meaning of the shofar in Jewish law and tradition: that from the first of the month of Elul, we blow the shofar each morning in order to awaken the hearts of the people to do *teshuva*, and that the shofar does not only make the heart tremble, reminding us of the binding of Isaac and our standing at Mount Sinai, but also that its letters spell ‘*shipur*’ (improvement), as in ‘improve your deeds.’ I heard all of this for the first time in my life that morning.”

This story shows us that it is possible to bridge the gaps we feel may be hindering us and to make great progress in our lives. A child who, at the age of eight, did not know what a shofar was and did not understand a word of Hebrew eventually became the Chief Rabbi of Israel and one of the most prominent Jewish speakers in the world.

### **To go above and within**

Throughout the year, much of our energy is directed externally, toward the world at large. We are preoccupied with politics, the media, social networks – everything outside of ourselves. Elul, however, calls upon us to channel our efforts in two other directions: to look above and to look within.

Above – through prayer, hope, and heartfelt request. We direct our speech not only toward people here in this world, but toward the Master of the universe.

Within – toward self-improvement. We assess ourselves to determine what attributes and behaviors we can work on. How do we spend our days? Do we invest time and effort in refining our character and nurturing our soul? Are we happy with our children's education, with how much we invest in our family life? How can we bring about real change in our daily lives? Is it possible to bring our center of gravity into our souls and turn our thoughts toward the purpose of life? It is not by chance that the main text of Yom Kippur is "We are guilty; we have betrayed." We are not concerned with what others did wrong, but with what we have done wrong.

### **A month for checking our accounts**

The daily calendar of the Chabad movement presents a concise, thought-provoking article a day, intended to awaken us spiritually. The following thought is given for the month of Elul:

"The month of Elul is a month for checking our accounts. In order for a business to thrive and make a significant profit, its owner must check the accounts from time to time, especially to see where there have been losses due to work improperly done. The situation is similar when it comes to our spiritual work. Throughout the year, all of Israel is preoccupied with Torah, mitzvot, and building good character traits. Then the month of Elul arrives and all Jews, according to their spiritual level, must search their souls

and make a true account of everything that has transpired during the year, and to understand their virtues and strengthen them, and to recognize their shortcomings so they can work to correct them. With thorough preparation in this way, one may attain a good and sweet year both physically and spiritually.”

What is this soul-searching that must be done? It is not just a matter of profound self-criticism. In fact, you should begin with recognizing your positive qualities and reinforcing them, and only when you have done this should you examine your shortcomings and correct them.

### **To shorten the distance**

Rabbi Jacob Katz offered the following insightful thought in a talk at Yeshivat Netiv Aryeh in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City in Jerusalem:

“This issue is really about the distance between the mind and the heart. We know things on an intellectual level and we can explain what needs to be done and why, but we fail to put it into practice. We do not succeed in drawing it into our hearts. We do not succeed in really feeling it. The Kotzker Rebbe said that the distance between the mind and the heart is greater than the distance between heaven and earth. During this month, the month of Elul, we feel the closeness a little more; the connection between the mind and the heart is a little stronger. At this time of year, there is a greater opportunity to progress. This is the challenge each of us faces in every area of life – to shorten the distance between the mind and the heart, to truly feel what we know is true.”

### **SEPTEMBER 1: BACK TO SCHOOL**

#### **We are the teachers**

The first of September has arrived, but the optimum period for learning does not start now. In fact, it has just ended. Summer vacation is a transformative time when the most influential and

meaningful learning takes place: it is the time when our children receive a real-world education. They watch closely as their parents talk, work, and drive. They see how their parents behave in a park, on a beach, or in a hotel. In short, they absorb the way in which the world outside of school operates.

Before we deposit our children once again into the hands of their teachers (with many thanks to you!), we need to remember that the most significant connection in life is the connection between a parent and child. We hear many lovely stories at this time of year about “the best teacher I had,” which are all wonderful and of course, very important, but ultimately it is the parents who are the most influential educators in a child’s life. Indeed, it could be said that the manner in which we purchase our children’s books, wrap them carefully in a protective book cover, and prepare them for school is just as important as the content of the books themselves.

Almost any kind of connection can be severed. Friendships can be broken, marriage can end in divorce, a contract can be breached – but the bond of parenthood can never be terminated. Even if, throughout life, parents and children are in conflict with one another or don’t have the best relationship, what connects them is eternal.

The parental bond is so fundamental and powerful that the Torah uses it as a model for the connection between God and ourselves: “You are children of the Lord, your God.” In our relationship with God, even if there is a disconnect, even if we have grown apart, become confused, and lost our way, we will forever remain His children.

### *“Shalom, Kita Alef”*

At a glance, Naomi Shemer’s “*Shalom, Kita Alef*” is simply a sweet children’s song celebrating the first day of school. However, there is a much deeper message within. “Donna sleeps, Donna wakes up,

Donna folds her pajamas,” the song begins. But when it comes to describing the mother’s separation from her child, Naomi Shemer turns to the eternal Bible: “And Mother is already standing there, like Yocheved or Miriam in the reeds. The breeze is singing, ‘A great journey begins today; *shalom*, first grade.’”

What a powerful image: Moses’s mother and sister, two women who built the nation, watch over baby Moses with trepidation, hope, and prayers for the future. So too, with trepidation, hope, and prayers, we accompany our children to the school gate.

This is not only about a pencil case and a backpack, and even the usual threat of a teachers’ strike cannot diminish this tradition. We connect ourselves today with all the mothers and fathers of generations before us who supported and looked on with love as the next generation ventured forth and blossomed.

A similar hidden gem is found in the song “You Will Not Defeat Me,” in which Naomi Shemer envisions how we will flourish here and never again be vanquished from our land.

She describes looking out the window and seeing “schoolchildren with a satchel on their backs and flowering myrtle branches in their hands.”

Our Sages stated: “Jerusalem was destroyed only because schoolchildren stopped learning” (Shabbat 119b). A nation is measured not only by its physical strength; it requires young children learning in school. The nation exists because of them and their learning, and if they are also holding myrtle branches (symbolizing nature and Shabbat), then our enemies will never defeat us.

A great journey begins today. To the more than one million school children who are returning to their studies with their bags on their backs – may you be successful!

### **Guard the deposit**

Copious messages of congratulations, status updates, and heartfelt blessings abound wishing students well at the beginning of a new



### *Third of Elul: Anniversary of the Death of Rav Kook*

school year. I have a feeling a great storm would erupt should any minister today choose to share the following letter that was sent to students in 5709 (1949), the first school year after the establishment of the State of Israel. The letter was written by Zalman Shazar, then Minister of Education who would later become the third president of Israel. His letter reads as follows:

“Grow up well, young brothers and sisters. Open your hearts wide to receive the Torah of Israel. Learn of the heavy price that has been paid by generations of your ancestors for their loyalty to our faith, how bitter was the taste of slavery, and of the expectations arising from the vision of the rebirth of Israel. Remember: You have a calling as the successors. The entire historical value of our revival depends on this. Love the legacy of your people. Learn to revive within yourselves the glory of holy aspirations and an eternal mission. Cherish our great creators and teachers, both from ancient times and those living among us today. Connect your hearts and souls with our eternal heritage, ever renewed. May the vision of Israel’s prophets be the vision of your future lives. The hope of our nation is the State of Israel; the hope of the State of Israel is our youth. Gather strength, learn well, deepen your knowledge, know the Torah of Israel, cherish the creative human spirit, love freedom. And guard very well the heritage and hope that have been deposited with you.”

Amen.

#### **THIRD OF ELUL: ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF RAV KOOK**

##### **In need of consolation**

What do we need above all else? Consolation. On the third of Elul, we mark the passing of Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, the great consoler, who passed away in 5695 (1935). After two thousand years of exile, after being trampled, humiliated, and expelled from many countries, Rav Kook insisted that our generation needs