

A Calendar for Ellul

The sixth month of the Hebrew calendar is *Ellul*, the month preceding Tishri in which the festivals of *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur*, *Sukkot* and *Shemini-Atzeret/Simchat Torah* are celebrated.

As the summer draws to a close, *Ellul* marks the beginning of the Autumn harvest season. The month is mentioned in the biblical book of Nehemiah and in a famous *Mishnah* (*Rosh Hashanah* 1:1) delineating four new years. The first of *Ellul* is the beginning of the tax year for one's livestock.

At what point did this month become a period of self-reflection and repentance? Ancient traditions spoke of Moses ascending Mount Sinai for the second time on the 1st *Ellul*, remaining there for forty days and receiving the second tablets of stone on *Yom Kippur* – the maths is correct! The same *midrash* speaks of the Israelites sounding the *Shofar* throughout the camp to mark Moses' ascent. 'Therefore,' it adds, 'the Sages instituted that the *Shofar* should be sounded on the new moon of *Ellul* every year' (*Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*, 46:2).

Rabbi Eliezer states that in Tishri the world was created – an extraordinary statement that comes into its own today as we ask ourselves, how are we conserving and celebrating the gift of the created world?

With this and many other themes in mind, we would like to offer you this Calendar for *Ellul*, a series of short readings, reflections and meditations – one for each day – that, we hope, will take us on a journey and so help to prepare us practically and spiritually for the Days of Awe. In this way, we pray that we can enter the New Year and *Yom Kippur* with a ready heart and emerge with a sense of renewed energy, determination and hope that our world is not irreparably broken.

1st Ellul, Sunday 1st September

'You shall return to the Eternal One your God and listen to God's voice according to all that I command you this day...' (Deuteronomy 30:2).

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'In the Garden', Rachel (transl. Maurice Samuel)

Calm is the garden with blue and grey  
In the peace of dawn,  
I will rise from the dust of yesterday  
To faith in the morn,  
Accept with humble heart and free  
The judgement that was given me.

A girl walks through the garden beds  
And scatters rain;  
The withered leaves lift up their heads  
And live again.  
The bitter things that God must do  
I will forgive and start anew.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Ellul, Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> September**

'And I will give them the understanding to acknowledge Me, for I am the Eternal One. And they shall be My people and I will be their God, when they turn back to Me with all their heart' (Jeremiah 24:7).

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'It is clear from the Torah that God assists the penitent when they are limited by their nature, and implants in them a spirit of purity whereby they may attain to the level of loving God, as it is said, 'And you shall return to the Eternal One your God and listen to God's voice according to all that I command you this day...' (Deut. 30:2) (*The Gates of Repentance*, by Rabbeinu Jonah of Gerona, First Gate).

Ellul Calendar, week one part 1

3rd Ellul, Tuesday 3rd September

Seek the Eternal One while He can be found,
Call to Him while He is near...' (Isaiah 55:6)

'The beginning of repentance is regret, infusing sorrow in our heart over having sinned, and experiencing affliction...' (*The Gates of Repentance*, by Rabbeinu Jonah of Gerona, First Gate).

We begin with ourselves in this journey towards repentance, but do not end with ourselves? Are there things we regret in our lives? Did we say words we didn't mean, when we should have remained silent? Or remained silent, when we should have spoken up?

4th Ellul, Wednesday 4th September

'Yet on this one I will look:
To the poor and broken hearted,
Who is concerned about My word...' (Isaiah 66:2)

Rabbi Alexander said: If a human being uses broken vessels, it is a disgrace, but with God it is otherwise, for all God's servants are broken vessels, as it is said, 'The Eternal One is near to the broken-hearted and will save the contrite in spirit' (Psalm 34:18 *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana*, 158b).

5th Ellul, Thursday 5th September

Rabbi Helbo said to Rabbi Samuel ben Nahmani: 'I've heard that you are good at interpreting the Torah. Can you tell me the meaning of this verse: 'You have covered yourself with a cloud that our prayers should not pass through' (Lamentations 3:44)? R. Samuel replied: 'Prayer is likened to a bath, repentance to the sea. As the bath house is sometimes open and sometimes shut, so the gates of prayer are sometimes shut and sometimes open, but as the sea is always open, so the gates of repentance are always open. When a person wishes to bathe in the sea, they can bathe in it at any hour they like. So with repentance, whenever a person wishes to repent, God will receive them.' But R. Anan said: 'The gates of prayer, too, are never shut (*Lamentations Rabbah* 3:60 on 3:43).

What does it mean to repent? To pray in today's world? Who is prayer for? For God? For ourselves? For others? When we speak to ourselves – when we listen to that inner dialogue that takes place in our hearts – is there not a reality to the words that are said, even in the silence. Such resolve is not in vain, surely.

6th Ellul, Friday 6th September

'God says, 'All depends on you. As the lily blooms and looks upward, so when you repent before me, let your heart be directed upward...'

Repentance requires resolve, a little effort of will on our part. And if we do move forward, even just a small pace and look up and ahead, then God will help us. Like the sun's rays, we are graced by God's presence with us.

As Shabbat approaches at the end of this first week of Ellul, let us try to let go of the anxieties and worries that beset us. Perhaps first, before we set out to repair and renew, to heal and restore, we can look gently into ourselves and allow something of God's infinite compassion and loving kindness to transform our own hearts.

7th Ellul, Saturday 7th September

'Six days work shall be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy *Shabbat* of complete rest, dedicated to God' (Exodus 35:2).

On Shabbat we rest. Shabbat is a time to stop the mad rush of our daily existence. On its most basic level, Shabbat is a time for physical recuperation from the week of work. Shabbat is a time for evaluating our relationship with the world around us, a time for spiritual renewal and perspective. On Shabbat we have an opportunity to stop running, to breathe deeply, to look inside ourselves, and to think about ourselves as people and as Jews before once again dashing back into the world of work' (Rabbi Andrew Goldstein in *Siddur Lev Chadash*, page 243).

Ellul Calendar, week one part 2