

Chai Elul Meditations

by Rabbi Debra Orenstein

These meditations are dedicated to Rebbetzin Geula Newman, who introduced me to Chai Elul.

“*Chai Elul*,” the 18th day of the Hebrew month, is said to be the birthdate of both Israel Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, and Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of its Chabad branch. *Chai*, of course, means “life,” and is an auspicious day for conducting a “life review.” The custom is to use each day from Chai Elul until Rosh Hashanah to review and meditate on one month from the last year. On the day of Erev Rosh Hashanah, you review Elul, the month just gone by. Below is a schedule for this year, and some questions to prompt your contemplation.

Before launching into any questions, however, I recommend taking some quiet time to simply dwell in God’s presence. You may wish to watch your breath or chant a word, such as Shalom, as part of your meditation. Ask for wisdom and guidance. Then, turn to your date book and consult it to remind you of where you were and what occupied you during a given month. You can write your reflections in a journal, or find a *chevruta* (study buddy) with whom to share ideas.

It is good to set a specific time of day for these meditations, for consistency’s sake. The ideal time, from my perspective, is at the end of the morning Amidah prayer. Those who recite the daily prayers already may slow down and (re)discover the Amidah as the meditation it truly is. Those who don’t already recite the daily Amidah will find that its blessings - asking for wisdom, forgiveness, healing, justice, a good year, and peace, among other aspirations - create a beautiful vision against which to measure the past year.

18 Elul

Evening of September 16 and Day of September 17, 2011

Review Tishrei (September 9 - October 8, 2010)

- Where were you - physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually?
- What was your major focus this month? How did you use your time and energy?
- Were there any special celebrations or problems?
- What did you learn at the time - and looking back?
- What was your experience during the last High Holidays?
- What were your fears, hopes, dreams, and intentions?
- Did your year match your prayers?
- What did you do over the course of the High Holidays and Sukkot to help pave the way for a good year?

19 Elul

Evening of September 17 and Day of September 18, 2011

Review Cheshvan (October 9 - November 8, 2010)

- Where were you - physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually?
- What was your major focus this month? How did you use your time and energy?
- Were there any special celebrations or problems?
- What did you learn at the time - and looking back?
- How did you integrate the lessons of last year's High Holiday season into the year?
- How were you taking care of your physical body at this time?

20 Elul

Evening of September 18 and Day of September 19, 2011

Review Kislev (November 9 - December 7, 2010)

- Where were you - physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually?
- What was your major focus this month? How did you use your time and energy?
- Were there any special celebrations or problems?
- What did you learn at the time - and looking back?

This time period includes what are often "family times:" Thanksgiving weekend and the early days of Hanukah.

- How did you relate to your family this month?
- How did you relate to your family this past year?
- What are your aspirations with regard to family this coming year?
- What, if anything, do you wish to do differently with and for your family?

21 Elul

Evening of September 19 and Day of September 20, 2011

Review Tevet (December 8, 2010 - January 5, 2011)

- Where were you - physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually?
- What was your major focus this month? How did you use your time and energy?
- Were there any special celebrations or problems?
- What did you learn at the time - and looking back?
- How did you nourish your body and spirit during the "down time" of late December?
- How did you celebrate the secular New Year?
- Were there any fears that came to the fore this month?
- What did you pray about?
- What acts of kindness did you do this month?

22 Elul

Evening of September 20 and Day of September 21, 2011

Review Shevat (January 6 - February 4, 2011)

- Where were you - physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually?
- What was your major focus this month? How did you use your time and energy?
- Were there any special celebrations or problems?
- What did you learn at the time - and looking back?
- Did you experience connections with nature this month, in light of Tu Bishvat or otherwise?
- What beauty did you notice this month?
- What beauty did you create this month?

23 Elul Evening

Evening of September 21 and Day of September 22, 2011

Review Adar I and II (February 5 - April 4)

- Where were you - physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually?
- What was your major focus this month? How did you use your time and energy?
- Were there any special celebrations or problems?
- What did you learn at the time - and looking back?
- It is said, “as soon as Adar comes, great joy comes.” How did you experience joy this month?
- Is there anything you could have done to experience even greater joy?
- Is there anything you could have done to spread even more joy?
- What do you choose to do today, to serve God with joy?

24 Elul

Evening of September 22 and Day of September 23, 2011

Review Nissan (April 5 - May 4, 2011)

- Where were you - physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually?
- What was your major focus this month? How did you use your time and energy?
- Were there any special celebrations or problems?
- What did you learn at the time - and looking back?
- In what ways are you more free today on 24 Elul, than you were during Passover? In what ways are you less free?
- Review how you experienced renewal in Nissan, whether through springtime, Passover, relationships, Torah, music, or any other means. What does this teach you about creating a truly *new year*?

25 Elul

Evening of September 23 and Day of September 24, 2011

Review Iyar (May 4 - June 2, 2011)

- Where were you - physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually?
- What was your major focus this month? How did you use your time and energy?
- Were there any special celebrations or problems?
- What did you learn at the time - and looking back?
- (How) did you feel connected to community during Iyar?
- What was your experience of Jewish peoplehood this month?

26 Elul

Evening of September 24 and Day of September 25, 2011

Review Sivan (June 2- July 2, 2011)

- Where were you - physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually?
- What was your major focus this month? How did you use your time and energy?
- Were there any special celebrations or problems?
- What did you learn at the time - and looking back?
- (How) did you celebrate Shavuot?
- What Torah (in the broadest sense of the term) did you receive during Sivan?
- What experiences of personal revelation and hearing from God, if any, did you have during this month?

27 Elul

Evening of September 26 and Day of September 27, 2011

Review Tammuz (July 3- 31, 2011)

- Where were you - physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually?
- What was your major focus this month? How did you use your time and energy?
- Were there any special celebrations or problems?
- What did you learn at the time - and looking back?
- What did you do that was new this month?
- What did you do that was holy this month?
- Can you remember what dominated your thoughts during Tammuz?
- What habits of mind would you now like to cultivate?

28 Elul

Evening of September 27 and Day of September 28, 2011

Review Av (the month of August)

- Where were you - physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually?
- What was your major focus this month? How did you use your time and energy?
- Were there any special celebrations or problems?
- What did you learn at the time - and looking back?
- This month includes both the national Jewish day of mourning, Tisha B'av, and one of the happiest days on the calendar, Tu B'av. What were your personal highs and lows during Av?
- (How) can you find inspiration from both the high and the low experiences of this month?
- When difficulties or tragedies strike, what has been your most effective way of responding? How would you like to respond?
- What is your typical way of responding to life's blessings? How would you like to respond?

29 Elul

Evening of September 28 and Day of September 29, 2011

Review Elul (the month of September)

- Where were you - physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually?
- What was your major focus this month? How did you use your time and energy?
- Were there any special celebrations or problems?
- What was your perspective about your growth in the past year when you started this inquiry on Chai Elul, and what it is today?
- Whom do you need to forgive?
- Of what do you need to repent?
- Of whom do you need to ask forgiveness?
- What are your hopes and intentions for the High Holidays and the coming year?