

Chai Elul Meditations

by Rabbi Debra Orenstein

These meditations are dedicated to Rebbetzin Geula Newman, who introduced me to Chai Elul. They have been updated for Rosh Hashanah 5781/2020.

“*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, I recommend taking some quiet time to simply be still. 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 or online calendar 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 ask a spouse, friend, or synagogue member to be your *chevruta* (partner in study and reflection).

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 6 and Day of September 7, 2020

Review Tishrei (September 30 - October 28, 2019)

- 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 7 and Day of September 8, 2020

Review Cheshvan (October 29 - November 27, 2019)

- 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 8 and Day of September 9, 2020

Review Kislev (November 28- December 28, 2019)

- 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 considered "family times," including Thanksgiving weekend, Hanukah, and school vacations.

- 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 9 and Day of September 10, 2020

Review Tevet (December 29, 2019 - January 26, 2020)

- 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 as you ended Hanukah, the secular year, and possibly a semester or quarter at work or school?
- 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 10 and Day of September 11, 2020

Review Shevat (January 27 - February 25, 2020)

- 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, the New Year for Trees, or otherwise?
- What beauty did you notice this month?
- What beauty did you create this month?

23 Elul Evening

Evening of September 11 and Day of September 12, 2020

Review Adar (February 26 - March 25, 2020)

- 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 personal celebrations or problems?
- What was the last large gathering you attended before the Coronavirus shut-downs?
- How and when did you first realize the seriousness of the pandemic? What were your first expectations and emotions about it? Have those changed?
- 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, amidst all the disruptions, losses, and tragedies?
- Looking back, what could have done (or refrained from) to experience even 5% more joy? What could have done to spread 5% more joy?
- What do you choose to do today, to serve God with joy?

24 Elul

Evening of September 12 and Day of September 13, 2020

Review Nissan (March 26 - April 23, 2020)

- 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 personal celebrations or problems?
- What did you learn at the time - and looking back?
- How was this Passover different than all other Passovers?
- 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 13 and Day of September 14, 2020

Review Iyar (April 25 - May 23, 2020)

- 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 personal celebrations or problems?
- What did you learn at the time - and looking back?
- (How) did you feel connected to community during Iyar?
- How did you reach out to friends, neighbors, colleagues, and synagogue members, or how did others reach out to you?
- Did you celebrate Israel Independence Day, follow Israeli politics, and/or track Israel’s experiences with Coronavirus?
- What was your experience of Jewish peoplehood this month?

26 Elul

Evening of September 14 and Day of September 15, 2020

Review Sivan (May 24 - June 22, 2020)

- 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 personal celebrations or problems?
- What did you learn at the time - and looking back?
- (How) did you celebrate Shavuot?
- What Torah (including any form of holy Wisdom or Instruction) did you receive during Sivan?
- Who was your greatest teacher this month? (Take this question very broadly: it could be someone living or dead; a close friend or relative, or a public figure; an adult or a child.)
- What experiences of personal revelation and hearing from God, if any, did you have during this month?

27 Elul

Evening of September 15 and Day of September 16, 2020

Review Tammuz (June 23 - July 21, 2020)

- 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 personal 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 16 and Day of September 17, 2020

Review Av (July 22 - August 20, 2020)

- 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 personal 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 17 and Day of September 18, 2020

Review Elul (August 21 - September 18, 2020)

- 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?