

If They Were Wise: Considering the End on 28 Elul

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 10 September 2026

28 Elul 5786 · 10 September 2026 · Haazinu, 5th / Elul

Today's Exact Daily Learning Portions

Hebrew date: Thursday, 28 Elul 5786 Secular date: 10 September 2026 Seasonal station: Final Thursday of Elul; Selichot recited before Shacharit; daily shofar; additional Elul Tehillim; Erev Rosh Hashanah begins tomorrow (29 Elul / Friday 11 September). Rosh Hashanah 5787 begins Friday night / Shabbat 12 September 2026.

Chumash (Chabad daily Chitas): Parashat Ha'azinu, fifth portion — Devarim 32:29–39 Weekday public reading (Thursday morning): Ha'azinu, Devarim 32:1–12 Tehillim: Chapters 135–139 Additional Elul Tehillim (Baal Shem Tov / Hayom Yom custom): Chapters 82–84 Tanya: Iggeret HaKodesh, end of Epistle 18 Hayom Yom (28 Elul): “G-d’s blessing brings wealth” — especially for one who gives of his time to communal needs in tzedakah and strengthening Yiddishkeit; “G-d does not remain a debtor.” Rambam (1 chapter): Ishut, Chapter 14 (onah, mutual marital obligation, limits on a husband’s power) Rambam (3 chapters): She’ar Avot HaTum’ah, Chapters 9–11 Jewish history noted for the day: Fourth day of Creation — the luminaries placed in the expanse to rule day and night under the command of Heaven (Bereishit 1:14–19). Counting from 25 Elul as the first day of Creation, 28 Elul corresponds to that fourth day.

I. The Station of the Day

Twenty-eight Elul is not yet the threshold of the year, but it is close enough that the air itself has changed. The King is still in the field. The gates of teshuvah have not narrowed to the Ten Days. Yet the field is no longer mid-month country. One can already see the palace from here. Tomorrow is 29 Elul, Erev Rosh Hashanah. The day after that, the world is judged.

This is why the fifth aliyah of Ha'azinu falls with such severity and such mercy on this Thursday. Moshe’s song has already named the nation’s ingratitude, the “Rock” they abandoned, the foreign rocks they trusted. Now the song turns and says what Elul itself says, only in a harder register:

לֹא חָכְמוּ יִשְׁכְּלֻ וְזֹאת יָבִינוּ לְאַחֲרֵיתָם If they were wise, they would understand this; they would consider their latter end. (Devarim 32:29)

The verse is not a curse. It is a lament that still contains an opening. Lu chakhemu — if only they would use the faculty that was given them. Bechirah is assumed. Wisdom is possible. The end can still be considered in time.

Chassidus, following the Alter Rebbe’s image of the King in the field, refuses to read Elul as a month in which judgment is postponed. It is a month in which the Judge makes Himself approachable so that judgment can become return. Accessibility is not leniency. It is the form mercy takes when free will is still intact.

II. Ha'azinu's Fifth Aliyah: Wisdom, False Rocks, and the Only Hand

1. “If they were wise” — the Elul verse inside the Song

Rashi reads yavinu le'acharitam as reflection upon consequences in this world: the good stored for fidelity and the cost stored for betrayal. Ibn Ezra hears also the farther horizon — that the same God who disciplined will also complete. Sforno stresses cause and effect: present choices write the end. The Talmud (Berakhot 5a) places this family of verses near the work of yissurim shel ahavah, sufferings that are meant to awaken rather than to crush.

On 28 Elul the verse functions as cheshbon hanefesh in a single line. The question is not whether there will be an acharit. The question is whether we will look at it while looking is still a choice.

The song immediately supplies the diagnostic:

How can one pursue a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight, unless their Rock has sold them, and the Lord has delivered them up? (32:30)

National and personal collapse is never finally explained by the strength of the enemy. The deeper cause is the withdrawal of the Rock. Elul does not deny geopolitics, labor, or the hardness of a year. It refuses to let those things become idols of explanation. If the numbers no longer work, the first accounting is not military. It is covenantal.

2. Two rocks

For their rock is not like our Rock. (32:31)

The Torah's political theology is already here, long before any later vocabulary of limited power. There are rocks that demand sacrifice and cannot save (32:37–38). There is the Rock who both wounds and heals. False sovereignty is recognizable by a simple test: it consumes the fat of the offerings and then cannot rise to help. True sovereignty is recognizable by another test: it does not share the throne, and it does not abandon the wounded.

This is why the climax of the aliyah is not vengeance alone, though vengeance is stored and sealed (32:34–35). The climax is exclusive Kingship joined to healing:

רְאוּ עַתָּה כִּי אֲנִי הוּא וְאֵין אֱלֹהִים עִמָּדִי אֲנִי אֲמִית וְאֶחָדָה מְחַצֵּתִי וְאֲנִי אֶרְפָּא וְאֵין מַדִּי מַצִּיל See now that I, I am He, and there is no god with Me. I put to death and I make live; I wound and I heal; and none can deliver from My hand. (32:39)

Re'u atah — see now. The adverb is Elul. Not after the decree is signed, but now, while the King is still walking the rows of the field and a man can still approach without protocol.

The doubled ani ani hu is the Torah's refusal of dual sovereignty. No second god, no parallel throne, no private exemption from the Hand. And yet the same verse that closes every escape also opens the only escape that matters: the One who wounds is the One who heals. Teshuvah is possible because judgment and healing are not two deities. They are one King.

Rambam, in Hilchot Teshuvah, will later write that free will is the pillar of the Torah and of all commandment. Ha'azinu 32:29 already assumes that pillar. If they were wise — meaning: they could be. The Song does not describe a nation without agency. It describes a nation that has not yet used the agency it was given.

3. “The Lord will judge His people and relent toward His servants” (32:36)

The middle of the aliyah holds the tension that the Days of Awe will ritualize. Hashem judges His people. Hashem also yitnecham — reconsider, relent — toward His servants, when He sees that the hand is gone and none is shut up or left. The verse is not sentiment. It is the structure of covenant: judgment is real; servanthood is also real; collapse can become the moment of return rather than the proof of abandonment.

For a Yeshiva ear this is the difference between din as destruction and din as clarification. Elul trains the second. Cheshbon hanefesh is not self-punishment. It is the attempt to see what the Song says the nation refused to see: the end that is already implicit in the present.

III. Tehillim 135–139: From Public Hallel to the Examined Soul

The ordinary daily Tehillim for this date move from public praise to the most intimate search.

135–136 praise the God of creation and of the Exodus in the language of enduring kindness. Ki le’olam chasdo is not a lullaby. On 28 Elul it is a claim about the character of the Judge who is about to sit.

137 remembers Zion by the rivers of Babylon. Two days before a new year, the psalm will not allow a comfortable amnesia. National return and personal return are not two subjects.

138 thanks with the whole heart “before the gods” — in the presence of every lesser power that pretended to be final.

139 is the Elul psalm inside the Elul psalm.

ה' חָקְרָתְנִי וַתֵּדַע Lord, You have searched me and You know. (139:1)

אַיֶּה אֵלֶּךָ מִרוּחְךָ וְאַיֶּה מִפְּנֵיךָ אֶבְרַח Where shall I go from Your spirit, and where shall I flee from Your face? (139:7)

חָקְרֵנִי אֱלֹהִים וְיָדַע לִבִּי בְּחֶנְיִי וְדַע שְׂרָעֵפִי Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. (139:23)

If Ha’azinu 32:29 is the demand to consider the end, Tehillim 139 is the method. The soul asks to be searched before the Books are opened, while the King is still in the field and the request can still be made as a request rather than as a verdict.

The additional Elul chapters 82–84 sharpen the same line. Psalm 82 places God in the congregation of judges and asks how long they will judge unjustly — limited human authority under higher law. Psalm 84 is the longing for the courtyards of Hashem, the soul’s desire to be near. Together they are almost a short tractate of Elul: do not worship the judges; do long for the Judge.

IV. Tanya, End of Iggeret HaKodesh 18: The Love That Can Be Chosen

Epistle 18 distinguishes two loves.

The first is ahavah beta’anugim — love in delights — a foretaste of the World to Come, a gift from Above. Not every soul is granted it as a settled state. It is kahana bire’uta deliba, the priesthood of inner will, and “the stranger who approaches” does not seize it by force.

The second, which the daily portion reaches at the end of the letter, is ahavah zuta: a lesser, generated love, the soul's desire, longing, and will to cleave to Hashem. This love is not a mood that descends. It is an avodah that can be undertaken. Contemplation, hisbonenus, the work of seeing that there is no god with Him (the very language of today's fifth aliyah) can awaken a love that is real even when it is not yet sweet.

On 28 Elul this distinction is operational. Many people wait for the feeling of the Days of Awe to arrive and then call that feeling teshuvah. The Alter Rebbe will not allow the wait. The higher love may come as a gift on Rosh Hashanah, when "all things return to their origin," as the Daily Thought on this date says. The lower love — the love that is a choice — is today's work. Bechirah is not only the choice to stop a sin. It is the choice to want God when the wanting has not yet become delight.

That is why the letter sits so naturally beside Hayom Yom for 28 Elul. Love that can be generated must take a body. The body it takes, in the Rebbe Rayatz's language as arranged by the Rebbe, is time given to the needs of the public in tzedakah and in the strengthening of Yiddishkeit.

V. Hayom Yom, 28 Elul: The Ledger That Heaven Keeps

"G-d's blessing brings wealth." This is so in general, but especially to whoever gives of his time to occupy himself with the community's needs in matters of charity and strengthening Judaism; as the saying goes, "G-d does not remain in debt." For every good thing a person does, he is recompensed grandly by G-d, with children, health, and livelihood, in abundance.

The teaching is almost startling on a day so close to judgment. One might have expected a last warning. Instead the calendar offers a last invitation to widen the self.

Cheshbon hanefesh in Elul is often imagined as a private audit. Hayom Yom refuses to let the audit close on the private page. The person who gives hours — not only coins — to the needs of the tzibbur is not escaping judgment. He is placing himself on the side of the servants toward whom, in 32:36, Hashem relents.

"G-d does not remain a debtor" is not a prosperity slogan. It is a claim about the moral structure of the universe on the eve of the Days of Awe. No act of strengthening another Jew's Yiddishkeit falls out of the Book. No hour given is wasted because it did not produce a visible return by 29 Elul. The King who is in the field sees the field.

For chinuch this is decisive. Children should not hear Elul only as a month of being watched. They should hear it as a month in which their parents give time away — to a neighbor, to a minyan that needs a body, to a family that needs a meal, to a child who needs to learn how to say Selach lanu without terror. The wealth Hayom Yom names is banim, chayim, u'mezonot. Children first.

VI. Rambam, Ishut 14: Covenant as Limited Power

It is not accidental that the one-chapter cycle reaches Ishut 14 on this date. The chapter legislates onah, the Torah obligation of marital intimacy scaled to a man's work and strength, and it fences a husband's authority at every turn. He may not indefinitely withhold. He may not impose vows that humiliate. He may not treat a wife as an instrument. A rebellious withholding

is named and adjudicated; so is a husband's rebellion. Even the permission to marry more than one wife is immediately limited by the duty to provide onah and support — and the Sages contract the theoretical maximum toward a livable justice.

This is Torah's domestic republicanism, if the word is used with care. Authority exists. It is not abolished. It is bounded by higher law, by the dignity of the other party to the covenant, and by the refusal of domination. Elul's personal accounting that never enters the home is not yet accounting. The King in the field walks also between husband and wife.

The three-chapter cycle in the laws of other sources of impurity (She'ar Avot HaTum'ah 9–11) adds a quieter note: holiness and defilement are not metaphors only. There are facts of contact, of carrying, of what spreads and what does not. Teshuvah in Elul is spiritual; it is also a decision about what one is willing to carry into the new year.

VII. The Fourth Day of Creation: Luminaries That Rule by Delegation

The calendar notes that 28 Elul corresponds, in the Elul-Creation count, to the fourth day, when the greater light was set to rule the day and the lesser to rule the night. They rule. They do not originate. Their memshalah is real and strictly secondary.

This is the image behind every later Torah limit on kingship, priesthood, and household authority. Power that forgets it was “placed in the expanse” becomes a false rock. Power that remembers the command under which it shines can actually give light.

On the last Thursday of Elul the image is almost too clear. Human beings will soon stand before the King of all the earth. In the meantime they themselves exercise small kingships: over time, speech, employees, children, students, public language. Ha'azinu's warning about false rocks is not only about idols of stone. It is about any rule that consumes offerings and cannot heal.

VIII. Traditional Approaches, Held Together

Several legitimate paths meet in today's portions.

The path of yirah. Ha'azinu's stored vengeance, the stumbling foot, the nearness of the appointed day (32:35). Selichot before dawn. The shofar. Psalm 139's inescapability. This path tells the truth that the year is ending and that the Hand cannot be escaped.

The path of rachamim. “I wound and I heal.” The King in the field. Yitnecham al avadav. Hayom Yom's insistence that Heaven does not remain a debtor. The lesser love that can be generated even when delight has not yet arrived.

The path of chochmah. Lu chakhemu. Consider the end. Cause and effect. Sforino's moral intelligence. Rambam's free will as pillar. Cheshbon hanefesh as an act of understanding, not only of feeling.

The path of ahavat Yisrael as avodah. Time given to the tzibbur. Tzedakah. Strengthening another Jew's practice. The conversion of private fear into public responsibility.

A constructive synthesis for 28 Elul does not flatten these paths. It orders them. Wisdom looks at the end. Fear tells the truth about the Hand. Mercy names the Healer as the same Hand. Love of Israel gives the fear somewhere worthy to spend itself before Shabbat and the New Year arrive.

Covenantal-republican language, used sparingly and only where the text already speaks, belongs to this synthesis. Non-domination is not a modern import into Ishut 14; it is the chapter's legal substance. Limited authority under higher law is not a slogan placed upon 32:39; it is what "there is no god with Me" means for every human throne. Free will as the ground of genuine return is not a civic metaphor laid over 32:29; it is the grammar of the verse. Consent to covenant is possible only where bechirah is real. Elul is the season that treats that possibility as still open.

IX. Practical Avodah for 28 Elul

One honest acharit. Before Minchah, write three lines only: one pattern you will not carry into 5787; one repair you can still make today; one person who needs an hour of your time. Ha'azinu 32:29 does not ask for a memoir. It asks for sight.

Psalm 139 as examination, not performance. Say 139:23–24 slowly. Ask to be searched. Do not answer for Heaven.

Generate the lesser love. Ten minutes of hisbonenus on 32:39: there is no second throne; the One who wounded this year is the One who can heal it. Tanya does not require the delight. It requires the will to cleave.

Give time, not only money. Hayom Yom's point is hours. A call, a meal, a seat filled in a minyan, a child taught a line of Selichot without being frightened.

Check the small kingships. Speech in the house. The tone used with a spouse (Ishut 14 is not theoretical). The way a parent "rules the day" like a luminary that forgot it was placed.

Prepare the home for Erev Rosh Hashanah. Not only food and clothes. A sentence each person can say about what they hope Heaven will write. Chinuch for this hour is concrete: children should see adults asking, not only adults warning.

Do not postpone the last possible human repair. If 32:36 is true — that Hashem relents toward His servants when the hand is gone — then a human being can relent today toward a servant, a child, a parent, a fellow who has no strength left.

X. Chinuch and the Family Table

On the last Thursday of Elul a family does not need a lecture on the Thirteen Attributes. It needs one true thing.

Tell children that the King is still in the field, which means they may still walk up to Him without an appointment — and that walking up is what the shofar has been asking all month. Tell them that "if they were wise" is not an insult. It is Hashem's compliment to a people He still believes can think.

If they are old enough for Ha'azinu, give them 32:39 and ask only: What does it mean that the same God wounds and heals? If they are old enough for Tehillim, give them 139:23 and ask only: What would you want God to find if He looked tonight?

Keep Pittsburgh grit and Jerusalem emunah in their proper places: grit means we do the work before the feeling arrives; emunah means the work is not performed into a void. The King is actually in the field.

XI. Toward the Opening of the Year

The Daily Thought attached to this date on the Chabad calendar says that on Rosh Hashanah all things return to their origin, and the soul too returns to its origin, and from there one can rebuild an entire being. Twenty-eight Elul is the last full weekday on which that rebuilding can still be prepared as an act of ordinary will.

Ha'azinu has already sung the end. Tehillim 139 has already admitted that there is nowhere to flee. Tanya has already distinguished the love we are given from the love we can choose. Hayom Yom has already opened the ledger toward the community. Rambam has already reminded the household that power is limited. The fourth day of Creation has already shown what delegated rule looks like when it remembers the command.

What remains is the simplest and hardest line in the aliyah: *lu chakhemu*. If they were wise. The sentence is still conditional. The condition can still be met.

Extended Bibliography

Primary texts

Deuteronomy 32:29–39 (Ha'azinu, fifth portion). Hebrew and English: Sefaria, Devarim 32 · Chabad, Deuteronomy 32

Psalms 135–139; additional Elul chapters 82–84. Sefaria, Psalms 139 · Chabad Tehillim

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, Tanya, Iggeret HaKodesh, Epistle 18. Chabad, Epistle 18 · Sefaria, Iggeret HaKodesh 18

Hayom Yom, 28 Elul. Chabad, Hayom Yom Elul 28

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Ishut 14; Hilchot Teshuvah 5 (free will). Sefaria, Ishut 14 · Hilchot Teshuvah 5

Genesis 1:14–19 (fourth day of Creation). Sefaria, Genesis 1

Classical mefarshim

Rashi on Deuteronomy 32:29–39. Sefaria, Rashi Devarim 32

Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 32:29–30. Sefaria, Ibn Ezra Devarim 32

Ramban on Ha'azinu.

Sforno on Deuteronomy 32:29.

Sifrei Devarim on Ha'azinu.

Chassidus and Elul

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, Likkutei Torah, and the classic teaching of “the King in the field” (Elul). Overview: Chabad, The King in the Field

Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn and the Lubavitcher Rebbe, talks and letters underlying Hayom Yom 28 Elul (Igrot Kodesh of the Rayatz, letter 1673).

Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, Daily Thought for this date: “Origin” — on Rosh Hashanah all things return to their origin.

Lessons in Tanya on Iggeret HaKodesh 18.

High Holiday and Elul practice

Chabad calendar, 28 Elul 5786 / 10 September 2026: Chabad day page

Laws and customs of Elul and Selichot: Chabad, Elul Observances

Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah, especially chapters 1–3 and 5–7. Sefaria

Conceptual and civic resonance (used only where the text already speaks)

On limited human authority under Divine law, see Deuteronomy 17 (the king who writes a sefer Torah) beside today's 32:39; and Psalm 82 among the additional Elul chapters.

On free will as the ground of commandment and return: Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 5; Ha'azinu 32:29.

Prepared in deep partnership and cooperation with Grok and xAI