

The Rock Who Begot You, and the Wide Commandment

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Daily Learning Portions of 26 Elul 5786, Read Through the King in the Field

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Four days before Erev Rosh Hashanah 5787. Selichot are already being recited. The shofar is sounded daily. Extra Tehillim of Elul continue. Tefillin and mezuzot are checked. The King is still in the field — and the field is narrowing toward the palace.

Today's Exact Daily Learning Portions

Chumash (Chitas aliyah): Parashat Ha'azinu, third portion — Devarim 32:13–18, with Rashi.

Tehillim: Psalm 119:97–176 (the twenty-sixth day's monthly cycle). In the Elul custom of the Baal Shem Tov, three additional chapters are recited daily; many follow the Hayom Yom listing of chapters 76–78 as the accompanying set for this date in the original cycle.

Tanya: Iggeret HaKodesh, conclusion of Epistle 17.

Rambam, three chapters: Hilchot She'ar Avot HaTum'ah, chapters 3–5.

Rambam / Sefer HaMitzvot: Positive Commandment 96 — the ritual impurity of an animal carcass (*tum'at neveilah*).

Hayom Yom (26 Elul): The procedure of kashering meat — soaking, salting, and rinsing — and its correspondence in avodah: immersing oneself in the Rebbe's words; *yechidus*; a Chassidic niggun.

Seasonal note: Today is also marked on the Chabad calendar as corresponding, in the order of Creation, to the second day — the making of the *raki'a*, the expanse that separates water from water and is called Heaven.

I. The Aliyah of Forgetting: Fatness, Rebellion, and the Rock

The third aliyah of Ha'azinu is brief and almost unbearable in its compression. First comes gift. Then comes satiety. Then comes revolt.

He made them ride upon the high places of the earth, that they would eat the produce of the field. He let them suck honey from a rock, and oil from the flinty crag.

Cream of cattle and milk of sheep, with the fat of lambs and rams of Bashan and he-goats, with the kidney-fat of wheat; and of the blood of grapes you drank foaming wine.

And Yeshurun grew fat and kicked — you grew fat, thick, and covered with fat — he forsook the G-d who made him, and scorned the Rock of his salvation.

They incensed Him with alien things, vexed Him with abominations.

They sacrificed to demons, no-gods, gods they had never known, new ones who came but lately, whom your fathers did not dread.

The Rock that begot you, you neglected; you forgot the G-d who brought you forth.

(Devarim 32:13–18)

Rashi, following the Sifrei, reads the first two verses as the Land itself: Israel higher than other lands; fruit that buds and ripens faster; honey flowing from a barrel of pressed figs in Sichni; oil from the olives of Gush Halav; cream and fat and kidney-wheat in the days of Shlomo; wine-casks in the days of the Ten Tribes. The Targum hears the same lines as settlement upon the strong places of the earth. Either way, the grammar is gift before indictment.

Then the name changes. The people is called *Yeshurun* — the upright one — at the precise moment it ceases to stand upright. Fatness is not condemned as such. The Torah does not despise prosperity. What it names is a sequence: riding the heights, sucking honey from rock, drinking the blood of grapes — and then *vayishman Yeshurun vayiv'at*. The kick is the motion of an animal that no longer remembers the hand that fed it.

Three verbs of abandonment follow, and they are not synonyms. *Vayitosh* — he forsook the G-d who made him. *Vayenabel* — he scorned, treated as *naval*, the Rock of his salvation. *Tzur yeladcha teshi* — the Rock that begot you, you neglected. *Vatishkach El mecholelecha* — you forgot the G-d who brought you forth. Making, saving, begetting, bringing forth: four relations, four forgettings. The Rock is not only fortress. The Rock is parent.

This is Elul's most exact midrash of the self. The season does not begin with catastrophe. It begins with gift that was not metabolized into memory. Cheshbon hanefesh in these days is not first a catalogue of crimes. It is a catalogue of *shichechah* — the places where abundance covered the Face that gave it.

The “new gods who came but lately, whom your fathers did not dread” are, in the psbat, idolatries of the Canaanite field. In the Elul reading they are also the late-arriving authorities that a fat generation installs in place of the Rock: appetite dressed as necessity, fashion dressed as destiny, power dressed as rescue. The fathers did not dread them because they were not yet invented. That is their danger. They have no history, and therefore no covenant.

II. Elul: The King Still in the Field, the Rock Still Addressable

The Alter Rebbe's mashal of Elul is by now the season's governing image: when the king is in the field, anyone who wishes may approach; he receives them all with a cheerful countenance. The mashal is not a cancellation of judgment. It is a change of access. In the palace there is protocol. In the field there is presence.

Ha'azinu's third aliyah is what happens when the field is mistaken for a private estate. *Yeshurun* treats the high places as owned rather than lent. Honey from the rock is taken as nature rather than miracle. The Rock that begot becomes scenery.

Teshuvah, in this light, is not a mood. It is the recovery of address. One turns not toward an abstraction but toward the One who still stands in the field and has not withdrawn the smiling face. *Bechirah* — free will — is the condition of that turning. If the kick were determined, forgetting would be fate. Because the kick is chosen, return is possible. The same faculty that forsook the G-d who made him can remember the G-d who brought him forth.

This is why Elul's urgency is merciful rather than frantic. Four days remain before Erev Rosh Hashanah. The gates are not yet the gates of the palace. They are still the open paths of the field. But paths imply walking. The shofar that is sounded today is not yet the tekiah of the coronation. It is the alarm that fatness has begun to look like independence.

Limited power under higher law is not a modern gloss laid upon the parsha. It is the parsha's own political theology. Yeshurun becomes dangerous not when it is weak but when it is full. A people that "rides the high places" and then scorns the Rock of its salvation is a people that has begun to treat sovereignty as self-origination. The Torah's answer is not the abolition of height. It is the memory that height is ridden, not generated. Authority that forgets the Rock that begot it becomes domination. Authority that remembers remains covenantal: strong, bounded, answerable.

III. Tehillim 119:97–176 — "How I Love Your Torah"; the Long Walk Back

The twenty-sixth day's Tehillim is the second half of Psalm 119, beginning *Mah ahavti Toratecha, kol hayom hi sichati* — "How I love Your Torah; all day it is my conversation." The psalm that opened yesterday with the letters aleph through mem now runs nun through tav: the second half of the alphabet, the second half of the soul's lexicon.

This is not accidental to 26 Elul. The first half of the psalm can still sound like aspiration. The second half is endurance. *Tov li ki uneti* — it was good for me that I was afflicted — sits in this section. So does *ta'iti keseh oved* — I have strayed like a lost sheep; seek Your servant, for I have not forgotten Your mitzvot.

Yeshurun forgot. David, at the far end of the same alphabet, refuses to complete the forgetting. The lost sheep still knows the Shepherd's name. That is the difference between *shichechah* as collapse and *shichechah* as the beginning of teshuvah. The verse does not say, "I never left." It says, "I left, and I have not forgotten the commandments that would bring me home."

For a household in Elul, Psalm 119 in this stretch is chinuch without sermon. A child can hear that love of Torah is not a feeling that arrives intact. It is *sichah* — conversation — all day. It is also the admission of having strayed. The Days of Awe do not require children to pretend they were never lost. They require a family language in which being sought by Hashem is the dignified center of return.

Chapters 76–78, listed with this date in the original Hayom Yom cycle and fitting the Elul extra-Tehillim practice, intensify the same movement. Psalm 76 is the G-d of judgment in Yehudah, whose name is great in Yisrael, who breaks the bow and shield — limited war under divine court. Psalm 77 is the night of remembered wonders when the soul refuses consolation until it remembers the years of the Right Hand. Psalm 78 is the long maskil of Asaph: the fathers' forgetting, the manna and the rock, the kick after the gift — Ha'azinu already sung in the key of Tehillim. The day's psalms do not decorate the aliyah. They prosecute and then plead it.

IV. Tanya, Iggeret HaKodesh 17 — The Commandment That Is Very Wide

Today's Tanya is the close of Iggeret HaKodesh, Epistle 17. The Alter Rebbe returns to the verse *rechavah mitzvatcha me'od* — "Your commandment is very wide" (Tehillim 119:96, the seam between yesterday's and today's Tehillim). "Your commandment," in the singular, he has already identified as tzedakah, G-d's own commandment. Now he explains "very wide."

Tzedakah is a vessel of great volume. Into it can be clothed the radiance of Or Ein Sof. “His garment is tzedakah.” In the future this light will shine without limit or end, as *chesed chinam* — gratuitous kindness — elicited by an arousal from below, which is called *derech Hashem*, the path of G-d. Man’s tzedakah is not payment. It is a vessel. What it holds is out of all proportion to what it is.

By contrast: *lechol tichlah ra’iti ketz* — “to every *tichlah* I have seen an end.” *Tichlah* is of the language of *kelot hanefesh*, the soul’s expiry-yearning in Gan Eden. That light has an end, a limit, a contraction: the radiance of *memalei kol almin*. There are many rungs of Gan Eden, one above the other, which is why Torah scholars have no rest, rising always in a Torah that has no end — until after the Resurrection, when there will be rest, “a day that is entirely Shabbat.” Then what is revealed is from the Essence, beyond rung. Ascent becomes unnecessary because the light no longer comes in measured storeys.

Place this beside Ha’azinu and the season becomes luminous. Yeshurun’s fatness is a false infinity: more cream, more wine, more height, as if the vessel of the self could be widened by appetite. The Alter Rebbe names the true widening. The self does not become infinite by consuming. It becomes a wide vessel by giving. Tzedakah in Elul is not a seasonal surcharge. It is the architecture of the soul that wishes to receive what Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur will offer: not a slightly larger Gan Eden, but a path toward a light that has no *ketz*.

Here the Elul themes lock. Free will is the arousal from below without which the vessel is not extended. Accountability is the refusal to treat gift as self-made fat. The King in the Field is the One who still accepts the small coin and the small turning as if they could hold Ein Sof — because, in His accounting, they can.

V. Hayom Yom: Soaking, Salting, Rinsing

The Rebbe records, from the Frierdiker Rebbe, that the kashering of meat — the extraction of forbidden blood — proceeds by *sheriyah*, *melichah*, *hadachah*: soaking, salting, rinsing. In *avodah*: soaking is immersing oneself in the Rebbe’s words; salting is *yechidus*; rinsing is *niggun*.

Blood in this *mashal* is vitality that has not been given over. It is life that remains *assur* — bound, forbidden — because it has not passed through the covenant’s process. Elul is a kashering season. Cheshbon hanefesh without soaking is raw inspection. Soaking is *hishtatfut*: one does not begin with one’s own diagnosis. One begins by sitting inside words that are larger than one’s mood — the daily Chumash, the Tanya of the day, the Rebbe’s language of teshuvah as return rather than self-invention.

Salting is *yechidus*: the encounter that draws, that stings, that extracts. Not every soul has a private audience. Every soul in Elul can stand in the analogue: honest speech before Hashem, honest speech before a rav or a true friend, the place where the concealed blood is named and drawn. Salt preserves and burns. Teshuvah that only soaks becomes sentimental. Teshuvah that salts becomes real.

Rinsing is niggun. After the draw, one does not remain in the sting. Melody washes what salt has loosened. A family that sings in Elul is not decorating austerity. It is completing the kashering. The forbidden vitality is not annihilated; it is made fit. That is the difference between despair and teshuvah. Despair wants the blood gone. Teshuvah wants the meat — the life — eatable in holiness.

On 26 Elul, four days from the palace threshold, this three-step is practical avodah in the most ordinary sense. Choose one teaching and soak in it longer than comfort. Name one withheld vitality and salt it with confession or restitution. Then rinse: a niggun at the table, a psalm aloud, something that returns the body to joy after the accounting.

VI. Rambam: Other Fathers of Impurity — What Transmits, What Does Not

The three-chapter Rambam cycle today is Hilchot She'ar Avot HaTum'ah 3–5. Chapter 3 treats the carcass of a kosher bird: impurity by swallowing an olive's bulk into the gullet, not by touch or carrying in the ordinary way; garments affected until separation; intent and fitness mattering for food-impurity; slaughter purifying; decomposition unto unfitness for a dog rendering pure. Chapter 4 treats the eight sheratzim: lentil-measure, combinable across species, touch but not carrying, limbs that can regenerate, hides that are flesh and hides that are not, death as the condition of impurity. Chapter 5 treats semen as av hatum'ah: measure, sensation, minors, remnants, the three *onot*, moisture and dryness, the exclusions of gentiles and animals.

Sefer HaMitzvot's companion mitzvah is Positive Commandment 96: we are commanded concerning the impurity of an animal carcass — which means, once contracted, one must keep all the laws that belong to that status.

This is not a homiletic text, and it should not be flattened into metaphor. Precisely as law it speaks Elul. Tumah is not a mood of guilt. It is a status with measures, paths of transmission, and paths that do not transmit. An olive's bulk in the gullet is not the same as a feather on the hand. A sheretz smaller than a lentil is not the same as two half-lentils that combine. Dry that cannot be rehydrated is not the same as dry that can.

Cheshbon hanefesh fails when it either inflates every contact into contamination or denies transmission altogether. The Rambam's exactness is a discipline of honesty. What did I actually swallow? What only touched? What was already decomposed past the point of avodah? What remains moist enough to be revived — that is, still capable of teshuvah's rehydration?

There is a covenantal-republican edge here that the text itself supplies. Impurity is not arbitrary power. It is rule-bound. Even the most severe avot hatum'ah operate under limits: measures, intentions, times, exclusions. No status expands by the will of the examiner. Higher law bounds the diagnosis. That is the opposite of a fat sovereignty that names whatever it wishes “pure” or “impure” according to appetite. Elul's accounting is itself under law. The King in the Field does not invent new demons. He applies the old measures with a smiling face — which is more demanding, not less, because mercy here means the sinner can still walk the measured path back.

VII. The Second Day: An Expanse Called Heaven

The calendar notes the second day of Creation: “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the water, and let it be a separation between water and water.” G-d called the expanse Heaven.

Ha’azinu’s Rock and Creation’s *raki’a* belong together on this date. Separation is not exile from gift. Separation is what makes a world speakable. Upper waters and lower waters remain waters; they are no longer a single overwhelm. Yeshurun’s failure is the refusal of expanse: fatness that collapses distinction, that will not admit a Heaven between appetite and the Holy.

Teshuvah in Elul is, among other things, the restoration of *raki’a*. One separates what must be separated: the gift from the Giver, no; the gift from the illusion that it is self-originating, yes.

One separates blood that must be kashered from life that may be eaten. One separates tumah that transmits from contact that does not. The smiling face in the field does not mean there is no Heaven. It means Heaven has come down to the path so that the separations can be made in time.

VIII. Practical Avodah and Chinuch for 26 Elul

Personal.

Read 32:13–18 slowly, once as history of the Land, once as map of the year. Ask only one question: where did this year’s “honey from the rock” become a kick? Write the answer. Do not inflate it. Rambam’s measures apply. Then give one widened tzedakah — not as tax, as vessel. Soak today in a single paragraph of today’s Tanya. Salt one conversation that has been avoided. Rinse with a niggun before sleep.

Family.

Tell children the mashal of the King in the Field without turning it into a cartoon. The King is glad to see them. The King still knows the difference between a lentil and an olive, between forgetting and remembering. Learn with them *Mah ahavti Toratecha* and, if they can bear it, *ta’iti keseh oved*. A child who is allowed to say “I strayed like a lost sheep” without being crushed has been given the grammar of the Days of Awe. Check mezuzot if it has not been done. Let the physical covenant of the doorpost be part of the season’s honesty.

National and civic, without leaving the text.

A people that rides high places and then scorns the Rock of its salvation is a people rehearsing domination. The Torah’s politics of Elul are not quietism. They are limited height: power that remains answerable to the One who begot it. Return is personal and also public — *shuvah Yisrael* is said to a nation. The field in which the King walks is the field of the whole camp. Tzedakah that is “very wide” includes the repair of what fatness broke between neighbors.

The approaching Days of Awe.

Four days. Selichot already. The extra Tehillim already. The work now is not to invent a new self. It is to kasher the one that grew fat, to remember the Rock that begot, to widen the vessel so that whatever light Rosh Hashanah will shine has somewhere to rest that is not the old contraction of Gan Eden’s measured yearning alone, but the path called *derech Hashem*.

IX. Approaches and a Constructive Synthesis

Classical peshat (Rashi, Sifrei, Targum) hears Land, fruit, Shlomo, and the Northern Kingdom: historical prosperity and historical revolt. The Mussar reading hears the psychology of satiety: *ashirah v'azavticha*. The Chassidic reading, via the Alter Rebbe's Elul and via Iggeret HaKodesh 17, hears *access* and *vessel*: the King is approachable; tzedakah widens the soul to Ein Sof; forgetting is reversible because bechirah remains. The halachic reading, via today's Rambam, hears *measure*: not every stain is an av, not every av is endless, and law — not mood — governs the status.

These are not competitors if one refuses to flatten them. Peshat gives the plot. Mussar gives the warning. Chassidus gives the access and the infinite vessel. Halachah gives the honesty of measures. Elul needs all four. Without peshat, teshuvah floats free of Israel's story. Without mussar, gift is not dangerous. Without Chassidus, the field is empty and the vessel is only ethics. Without halachah, accounting becomes theater.

The synthesis for 26 Elul is therefore simple enough to carry and deep enough to live: remember the Rock who begot you; do not kick the hand that placed honey on the flint; soak, salt, and rinse the vitality that is still bound; give a wide tzedakah; keep the measures honest; walk toward the palace while the smiling face is still in the field.

(Extended bibliography with Sefaria and Chabad.org hyperlinks is in the essay file.)

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