

The King Who Walked the Field Now Dwells Between the Shoulders

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 28 September 2026

*Monday, 17 Tishrei 5787 · 28 September 2026 Chol HaMoed Sukkot · Ushpizin of Yaakov Avinu
Daily Learning Portions elevated through the living work of Elul*

Today's Exact Portions

Secular date: Monday, 28 September 2026

Hebrew date: 17 Tishrei 5787

Seasonal station: Third day of Sukkot; Chol HaMoed in Eretz Yisrael (second intermediate day). Elul 5786 closed on 29 Elul / 11 September. Rosh Hashanah, Tzom Gedaliah, Shabbat Shuvah, and Yom Kippur have already passed. The work of Elul is no longer rehearsal. It is being tested in joy.

Chumash (Chitas cycle): Parashat Vezot Haberakhah, second portion — Devarim 33:8–12

Festival kria (Eretz Yisrael, third day of Sukkot): Bamidbar 29:20–22 — “On the third day, eleven young bulls...”

Tehillim: Chapters 83–87

Tanya: Iggeret HaKodesh, middle of Epistle 22

Rambam (three chapters): Hilkhhot Kelim 27–28; Hilkhhot Mikvaot 1

Sefer HaMitzvot (aligned cycle): Positive Commandment 109 — the mitzvah of immersion

Hayom Yom (17 Tishrei): The *yechidah* is revealed through the avodah of *nisyonot*; from “she clings and cleaves to You” to “she bears Your yoke” to “yechidah to unify You.”

Customs of the day: Eat and dwell in the sukkah; take the Four Kinds; Hallel, Hoshaanot, Musaf with *Yaaleh VeYavo*; Chabad custom not to lay tefillin on Chol HaMoed; Simchat Beit HaShoevah in the evenings. The third day's Hoshaanot and the ushpiz of Yaakov Avinu stand behind the day's learning.

I. What Elul Demanded, and What 17 Tishrei Now Asks

Elul is the month in which the King is in the field. Authority becomes approachable. *Bechirah* is no longer theoretical. *Cheshbon hanefesh* is possible because the Sovereign has come near enough to be addressed without the full terror of the throne room. The Days of Awe then concentrate that nearness into judgment and atonement.

By 17 Tishrei the field has changed character. The same King is still near, but the mode is no longer inspection of the crop. It is dwelling. The blessing of Binyamin in today's Chitas — “the beloved of Hashem shall dwell securely beside Him; He hovers over him all day, and between his shoulders He dwells” — is the Elul doctrine spoken in the grammar of the sukkah. What Elul made accessible, Sukkot makes habitable.

This is the learned claim of the day, and it must not be sentimental. Elul without Tishrei is unfinished accounting. Tishrei without Elul is festival without memory. The portions assigned for this Monday refuse that split. Levi is blessed for having been *tested*. Binyamin is blessed for

dwelling. Tanya teaches how to receive affliction as a father's washing of his only son. Hayom Yom teaches that *yechidah* appears only through *nisayon*. Tehillim moves from a conspiracy of nations (83) to the loveliness of the Divine dwellings (84) to the restoration that lets righteousness and peace kiss (85). The day is one argument: the King who walked the field now asks whether the soul that returned in Elul can *live* under His shade without demanding walls of its own making.

II. Vezot Haberakhah: Levi Tested, Binyamin Sheltered

Levi — Urim, Massah, and the Price of Covenant

And of Levi he said: Your Thummim and Your Urim belong to Your pious man, whom You tested at Massah, with whom You contended at the waters of Meribah; who said of his father and of his mother, "I have not seen him," and did not recognize his brothers, and did not know his children — for they observed Your word and kept Your covenant. They shall teach Your judgments to Yaakov and Your Torah to Yisrael; they shall place incense before You, and whole-offerings upon Your altar. Bless, Hashem, his force, and favor the work of his hands; smash the loins of those who rise against him, and those who hate him, that they rise no more. (Devarim 33:8–11)

Rashi reads "whom You tested at Massah" as praise: the Levites did not murmur with the other tribes. On Meribah he brings, from the Sifrei, the note that Aharon too was caught in that test. The more severe clause — "I have not seen father or mother" — is classically bound to the Golden Calf, when the sons of Levi answered Moshe's call and executed judgment even against kin (Shemot 32:26–29). Read as a whole, the verse also speaks of the priestly vocation as such: the Levi's availability for the Mishkan and for teaching requires a reordered love. Family is not abolished. It is placed under covenant.

For Elul this is not an invitation to hardness. It is a definition of *bechirah*. Free will becomes real at the point where two loves collide and one of them must be ranked. The Levi does not stop being a son. He refuses to let blood decide Torah. That is the opposite of domination. It is limited loyalty under higher law. A priesthood that blessed its own house first would not be a priesthood. A nation that cannot tell the difference between kin and covenant cannot do *teshuvah*, because *teshuvah* is precisely the ranking of the self under the word.

The pedagogical clause follows at once: "They shall teach Your judgments to Yaakov and Your Torah to Yisrael." The test is not an end. It produces teachers. Chinuch is what remains after the *nisayon* has cut. In Elul one examines deeds. On 17 Tishrei one asks who will *teach* what the examination discovered. A home that did cheshbon hanefesh in Elul and then keeps back Torah from its children on Chol HaMoed has reversed Levi's sequence.

The closing petition — "smash the loins of those who rise against him" — is not a romance of violence. It is the prayer that the teaching office not be permanently vetoed by those who hate the covenant. Limited power still requires a back. The Levi has no territorial inheritance. His "force" (*cheilo*) is the work of his hands at the altar and in the school. When that work is attacked, Moshe does not preach serenity. He asks that the attack fail.

Binyamin — The Sukkah Written into the Tribe

And of Binyamin he said: The beloved of Hashem shall dwell securely beside Him; He hovers over him all day, and between his shoulders He dwells. (Devarim 33:12)

Rashi: the Beit HaMikdash was built in Binyamin's territory, and from the day Jerusalem was chosen the Divine Glory has dwelt nowhere else. *Yedid Hashem* is an intimacy of presence, not merely of real estate; *yishkon lavetach* is security that comes from being beside the Divine dwelling, not from walls.

On Chol HaMoed Sukkot the verse is almost too exact to ornament. The sukkah is the temporary house whose roof is unfinished vegetable matter, whose legal definition is exposure under Heaven. "He hovers over him all day" is the *ananei hakavod* that the sukkah commemorates (Sukkah 11b, the dispute of R. Eliezer and R. Akiva: clouds of glory or actual booths — and the halakhah embraces both truths in the mitzvah). "Between his shoulders He dwells" is the posture of a child carried, and of a sanctuary set on the ridge. Elul's King-in-the-Field is the same Presence now located not in the open market of approachability but on the back of the beloved.

Yaakov is today's ushpiz. Binyamin is Yaakov's last son, the only one born in the Land, the son named by the dying mother "son of my sorrow" and renamed by the father "son of the right hand." The home that sits in the sukkah on 17 Tishrei sits inside that renaming. Elul is the season of Rachel's weeping and of honest naming of failure. Sukkot is Yaakov's refusal to let sorrow be the last name.

Two tribes, one political theology

Levi and Binyamin together sketch a covenantal republic in miniature. Levi has no land and therefore cannot become a landed tyrant; his authority is teaching and service, and it is purchased by test. Binyamin has the Sanctuary in his lot and therefore cannot treat territory as raw possession; the land is a shoulder on which Another dwells. Neither tribe is licensed to dominate. Both are licensed to serve a law they did not write. That is the Elul doctrine of limited power spoken through the last blessings of Moshe.

III. The Festival Reading: Eleven Bulls and the Arithmetic of Return

In Eretz Yisrael the third day of Sukkot reads Bamidbar 29:20–22: eleven young bulls, two rams, fourteen lambs, and the corresponding meal- and wine-offerings, "besides the daily burnt-offering." The seventy bulls of the week, decreasing by one each day, are classically read as the seventy nations (Sukkah 55b). The decrease is not contempt. It is education. The nations are included, and they are weaned from excess toward sufficiency.

Elul's national *teshuvah* is personal and also public. The korbanot of Sukkot refuse a spirituality that saves only the self. If the King was in the field so that every Jew could approach, the altar of Sukkot is the same King receiving offerings that diminish day by day toward the one bull of Shemini Atzeret — "the day when I keep you back with Me," a private audience after the public banquet. Elul's accessibility becomes Tishrei's hospitality, then Tishrei's intimacy.

For chinuch: children can count the bulls. Let them. The decreasing number is a visible *cheshbon*. What we needed in panic on the first day, we need less of as joy teaches measure.

IV. Tehillim 83–87: From Conspiracy to Dwelling

The five chapters assigned today are not a random slice. They are a journey that Elul would recognize and Sukkot completes.

83 is a psalm of coalition: Edom, Yishmael, Moav, Hagarites, Tyre, Assyria — “they have said, Come, let us cut them off from being a nation.” The Elul soul knows this voice. It is the voice that says there will be no remnant and therefore no point in return. The psalm’s answer is not denial. It is *yeda’u* — “that they may know that You, whose name is Hashem, are alone Most High over all the earth.” Knowledge, not annihilation for its own sake, is the end. Limited power again: even judgment is pedagogical.

84 turns the body toward the House. “How lovely are Your dwellings, Hashem of hosts.” “Better a day in Your courts than a thousand.” “A day in Your courts” on 17 Tishrei is not metaphor. It is the sukkah. The sparrow finding a house and the swallow a nest for her young is the chinuch image of the day: the child must have a nest *in the courts*, not only the adult a theology of courts. Elul’s *teshuvah* that never becomes a place the young can sit in is still exile.

85 is the Elul psalm that arrives late and therefore arrives on time. “You have favored Your land; You have returned the captivity of Yaakov.” “Restore us, O G-d of our salvation.” Then the line that every mussar and every Chassidic discourse on the season eventually finds: “Kindness and truth have met; righteousness and peace have kissed.” The meeting is not automatic. It is what happens when *teshuvah* (truth about the self) is received by *chesed* (the King’s field-presence) and produces a peace that is not amnesia. On Chol HaMoed the kiss is enacted: we do not stop saying *Yaaleh VeYavo*; we also eat festive meals under schach.

86 is David’s poor prayer: “Incline Your ear, Hashem, for I am poor and needy.” After the cosmic politics of 83 and the architecture of 84–85, the book returns to the single petitioner. Elul is useless if it only produces national rhetoric. The King in the field came for this mouth.

87 crowns the sequence with Zion as mother: “Hashem loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Yaakov,” and “this one was born there” of Egypt and Babylon and Philistia. The sukkah in any courtyard participates in that birth-register. A temporary hut becomes a gate. That is why the Four Kinds are waved in every direction. The map is being rewritten around Zion without erasing the persons who stand in the hut.

V. Tanya, Iggeret HaKodesh 22: The King Washes His Only Son

Today’s Tanya is the middle of Epistle 22. The Alter Rebbe has already rebuked — out of hidden love — the practice of bringing him questions that belong to prophets rather than to Torah scholars: what to do in purely mundane affairs. Then he turns to the one who suffers in the body and does not know how to receive it.

The counsel is the Gemara’s (Berakhot 5a): *lefashfesh bema’asav* — examine one’s deeds. Not as self-punishment first, but as decoding. If there are sins that require the scouring of suffering, the sufferer is positioned to see a love that “upsets the natural order.” The mashal is almost unbearable in its tenderness and its Elul accuracy:

A great and awesome king who, out of his immense love for his only son, personally washes the filth from him.

This is the King in the Field without the pastoral softening that popular Elul talk sometimes adds. The King has come near. Nearness includes washing. Washing includes contact with what the son would hide. Yeshayahu 4:4 is cited: “When Hashem shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion... by a spirit of judgment.” Judgment is the soap. It is still love.

Then the Alter Rebbe cites Mishlei 27:19: “As in water, face to face.” The son who perceives the preciousness of that love answers with love. Chesed is “better than life” (Tehillim 63:4; 36:8). Chesed is “the life of life in all the worlds,” as the Amidah says: *mekhalkel chaim b’chesed*. When that recognition is real, “Hashem too will grant the good,” and will make His face shine in a *revealed* love that had been clothed in *revealed rebuke*. The gevurot are sweetened in their root. The dinim are nullified.

Place this on 17 Tishrei. Elul and the Days of Awe were, for many, the week of revealed rebuke — *selichot*, *vidui*, the fast, the white clothes, the confession that does not decorate. Sukkot is not the cancellation of that week. It is the moment Tanya describes as the turning of the same love from the mode of washing to the mode of shining. The sukkah is a face. Schach is a shade that is also a smile. If a person tries to inhabit the sukkah while refusing the examination of deeds, he is asking for the mashal’s second half without its first. If he remains in examination and will not sit in the hut with guests and children and the poor, he has accepted the washing and refused the shining.

The letter’s earlier rebuke also belongs to the day. The Alter Rebbe limits his own office. He will not be used as an oracle of livelihoods. That is a doctrine of limited spiritual power under higher law. Even a Rebbe does not swallow the whole of a chasid’s *bechirah*. Elul’s accountability runs both directions: the people must return, and the leaders must not claim a jurisdiction Heaven did not grant.

VI. Hayom Yom: Yechidah Through Trial

The Hayom Yom for 17 Tishrei, compiled by the Rebbe from the Frierdiker Rebbe, is built on the Hoshaanot of the day:

Chavukah u’devukah bakh — she clings and cleaves to You: the soul’s *hitkashrut* in Elokut.

To’enet ulakh — she bears Your yoke: Torah and mitzvot with *mesirat nefesh*.

Yechidah leyachedakh — the one people, the *yechidah*, affirms Your oneness: the *yechidah* of the soul is revealed.

Only then is the *yechidah* of the animal soul itself transformed into Elokut. The sign is not ecstasy for its own sake. It is *tokef* in fulfillment — inner vitality, great delight, abundant pleasure in avodat Hashem — and, equally, true equanimity toward worldly yes and no, because the appetite that used to live in the worldly has been relocated.

The footnote is essential and often skipped: the animal soul is not committed to evil. It is committed to pleasure. Pleasure can be re-taught.

This is Elul’s *bechirah* in Chassidic physiology. Free will is not a thin veto. It is the capacity to educate desire. The tests of the year — and Levi was tested at Massah — are the curriculum. *Yechidah* does not appear in the study hall only. It appears when the thing a person wanted is placed on one side of the scale and the yoke on the other, and the yoke wins, and then, later, the yoke becomes delight.

On Chol HaMoed the test is specific and easy to miss: will we treat the “intermediate days” as leftover time, or as the days when the water-drawing joy is actually permitted to be loud? The Mishnah’s line stands (Sukkah 5:1): one who did not see Simchat Beit HaShoevah never saw joy. The Rebbe urged that Simchat Beit HaShoevah be celebrated publicly, in the streets. The destruction of the Temple does not cancel the duty of joy; it relocates it into every street that will host a niggun. That is *yechidah* as public policy.

VII. Rambam: Vessels, Immersion, and the Possibility of Return

Hilkhhot Kelim 27–28 continue the laws of receptacles — what counts as a vessel, how damage and repair affect susceptibility to tumah, how function and form determine legal identity. Hilkhhot Mikvaot 1 opens the architecture of purification: gathering waters, the difference between a mikveh and a spring, volumes, and the first principles of a system whose entire point is that impurity is real and not final.

Sefer HaMitzvot’s positive commandment of immersion belongs here. A Jew can become tamei. A Jew can immerse. The water does not argue with the biography. It receives the body that chooses to descend.

Elul is mikveh-talk even when the calendar has moved. *Teshuvah* in the Rambam (Hilkhhot Teshuvah) is confession, abandonment, regret, and resolution. The mikveh is the body learning the same four motions: admit contact with the dead and the lost, leave it, feel the loss, go down. The sukkah is a vessel of another kind — a *keli* that contains persons rather than liquids, whose *tumah*-logic is replaced by a *kedushah*-logic of shade. To sit in the sukkah after Yom Kippur is to treat the self as a vessel that has been immersed and may now host guests.

Covenantal-republican resonance, kept within the text: a vessel is defined by use and opening, not by the vanity of its owner. Authority over objects in these chapters is legal, not arbitrary. Purification is available according to law, not according to patronage. Limited power under higher law is already the grammar of Kodashim and Taharat. Elul only asked the heart to learn what the halakhah already knew.

VIII. Approaches and Synthesis

Traditional readers of this day’s material do not speak with one mouth, and they should not be flattened.

One line, midrashic and halakhic, stresses Levi’s severity and Binyamin’s Temple geography. The lesson is institutional: priesthood, sanctuary, offerings, decreasing bulls. Avodah is structure.

A second line, mussar, hears Massah and Merivah as the inner tests of speech and complaint, and hears *lefashfesh bema’asav* as the unending audit. Avodah is confession.

A third line, Chassidic, hears *yedid Hashem*, the King washing his son, and the Hoshaanot’s *yechidah*. Avodah is transformation of pleasure.

A fourth line, national and liturgical, hears Tehillim 83 and the seventy bulls and Zion as mother. Avodah is the people’s standing among the nations without disappearing into them.

The synthesis appropriate to 17 Tishrei is not a compromise. It is a sequence, which is what Elul always was. First the audit (Tanya, mussar, Levi at Massah). Then the ranking of loves (Levi's covenant over kin, *bechirah*). Then the dwelling (Binyamin, Psalm 84, the sukkah). Then the joy that has been educated (Hayom Yom, Simchat Beit HaShoevah). Then the public horizon (Psalm 83 and 87, the bulls). Skip the audit and the joy is noise. Skip the joy and the audit becomes a new exile.

IX. Practical Avodah and Chinuch

1. **Do not treat Chol HaMoed as a hole in the year.** Eat in the sukkah with the same seriousness with which Elul's *cheshebon* was kept. Chabad custom of drinking even water only in the sukkah is a pedagogy of totality: the King who was available in the field is now the climate of the house.
 2. **Take the Four Kinds inside the sukkah when possible.** The sukkah gathers one people; the Four Kinds keep their differences. Shared soul without difference is a slogan. Difference without a shared house is a quarrel. Children should hear both sentences.
 3. **Speak one concrete *nisayon* of the past year at the table,** not as humiliation, as Levi's Massah. Then name one pleasure that has already been re-taught, as the Hayom Yom footnote requires. This is how *yechidah* becomes home language rather than a sefer-word.
 4. **Invite someone who was not at your Rosh Hashanah table.** Elul's return that never becomes *hachnasat orchim* in the sukkah has not yet learned Binyamin.
 5. **Count the bulls with the children.** Eleven today. Measure as a holy skill. Limited offering under a full Heaven.
 6. **If the body is in pain or the year was a washing,** learn today's Tanya aloud. Do not skip the mashal. The King does the washing Himself. That sentence is the difference between despair and *teshuvah*.
 7. **Hoshaanot:** when the circuit is walked, hear Hayom Yom's three verbs — cling, bear, unify. They are the whole path from Elul to Simchat Torah in three beats.
 8. **Civic honesty without a forced frame:** Levi's teaching office and Binyamin's hosted Presence are a picture of a people that can have force without owning the law, and land without owning G-d. That picture judges every politics that forgets it. It does not need a newspaper to be true.
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X. Closing

Moshe's hand is on Levi and then on Binyamin. One tribe is told that tests are how a teacher is made. The other is told that G-d dwells between his shoulders. Between them the Alter Rebbe places a father-king who will not send a servant to clean the child. The Friediker Rebbe, through the Rebbe's Hayom Yom, adds that the highest soul-point is not a mood. It is what happens when a test has been borne and pleasure has changed address.

Elul taught approach. The Days of Awe taught standing. 17 Tishrei teaches remaining. The field was never the destination. The destination was a hut whose roof still lets in stars, on a shoulder that belongs to the beloved, in a joy that has been examined and may therefore be trusted.

May the *yechidah* revealed in trial become delight in the mitzvah. May the washing become a face of light. May the children of the house find a nest in the courts. And may the King who walked the field this Elul dwell between the shoulders of His people in a rebuilt Sukkah of David.

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