

Zebulun and Issachar: Partnership After the Seal

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 23 September 2026

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Seasonal placement. Elul 5786 closed on 29 Elul / 11 September 2026. Rosh Hashanah 5787 was 12–13 September. Yom Kippur was 21 September / 10 Tishrei. Today is the second weekday after the sealing, with Erev Sukkot two days hence (25 September / 14 Tishrei). Tachanun is omitted. It is the yahrtzeit of Rabbi Avraham “the Angel,” son of the Maggid of Mezritch and study-partner of the Alter Rebbe. The custom of beginning the sukkah immediately after Yom Kippur is already in force. This essay does not pretend that Elul is still on the calendar. It takes the permanent daily portions of this date and reads them as the harvest of Elul: the King who came into the field has been crowned and has sealed; what remains is whether the return becomes ma’aseh — deed, partnership, and a dwelling that can hold Him.

The pesukim (Devarim 33:18–21):

And of Zebulun he said: Rejoice, Zebulun, in your going out, and Issachar in your tents. They shall call peoples to the mountain; there they shall slaughter offerings of righteousness; for they shall suck the abundance of the seas, and the hidden treasures of the sand. And of Gad he said: Blessed is He who enlarges Gad; he dwells as a lioness, and tears arm and also crown of the head. He saw a first portion for himself, for there the portion of the lawgiver is hidden; and he came at the heads of the people; he executed the righteousness of the Lord, and His judgments with Israel.

I. The Season After Sealing

Elul taught accessibility: the King in the field, ani le-dodi ve-dodi li, the gates of teshuvah held open by mercy that precedes judgment. Rosh Hashanah taught coronation. Yom Kippur taught that a people can stand as one and be sealed. The four days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot, the Midrash says, are days in which Israel is “busy with mitzvot” — this one with his sukkah, that one with his lulav. The field is behind us. The work of the field must now become a hut.

Chassidus names the day after Yom Kippur “G-d’s Name” — not a particular name bound to a particular world, but the simple designation that follows a day on which essence touched essence. Today, 12 Tishrei, is the second of those days. The portions given to us are not a meditation on regret. They are a meditation on how a sealed people goes back into labor: partnership between those who go out and those who sit in tents; the hidden treasures in sand; a tribe that takes the first portion because the lawgiver will be buried there; a covenant that toil done with counsel and friendship does not return empty; and the Tanya’s last word of Epistle 20 — that one hour of teshuvah and good deeds in this world is more beautiful than all the life of the World to Come.

That is Elul’s harvest. The King was in the field so that the field could learn to become a mitzvah.

II. Zebulun and Issachar: Going Out and Sitting Still

Moshe blesses Zebulun before Issachar, though Issachar is the elder. Rashi, following Bereishit Rabbah, explains the inversion by the partnership: Zebulun dwells at the shore, goes out in ships, trades, and feeds Issachar, who sits in the tents of Torah, proclaims the months, and intercalates the years. “From the sons of Issachar, those who had understanding of the times... their heads were two hundred” (I Divrei HaYamim 12:33). The calendar of a people — the very structure of sacred time — depends on a tribe that does not go to sea, and that tribe depends on a brother who does.

The Elul ear hears this immediately. Teshuvah is not only the inner work of the tent. It is also the going out. Bechirah is exercised at the stall and on the dock as much as in the beit midrash. The King in the field did not wait for Israel to finish its commerce before He approached; He came into the place of going out. Zebulun’s tzeiticha is therefore not a concession to the world. It is a form of avodah. Issachar’s ohalecha is not a flight from the world. It is the condition that makes Zebulun’s going out more than profit.

Rashi offers a second reading of “they shall call peoples to the mountain.” Through Zebulun’s trade, merchants of the nations arrive at the border. Having come so far, they say: let us go up to Jerusalem and see what this nation’s G-d is, and what they do. They find one G-d and one table of permitted food, and they offer zivchei tzedek — offerings of righteousness — and some convert. The hidden treasures of the sand (the chilazon, white glass, the tarit) are not only economic. They are the occasion by which the nations are summoned toward the mountain.

Here the Elul theme of national return meets the post-Yom Kippur theme of zikui ha-rabbim. A sealed people does not retire into private purity. It keeps a shore. It keeps a tent. And it keeps the road between them open, so that what was hidden in the sand can become a calling.

For chinuch: a family after Yom Kippur should not speak as if the only holy work is more hours in the book. Name the Zebulun in the house. Name the Issachar. Teach that neither is a higher caste. Teach that the partnership is itself the berachah, and that Moshe named the trader first because without him the calendar-keepers starve.

III. Gad: The Lion at the Edge, and the Hidden Portion of the Lawgiver

“Blessed is He who enlarges Gad.” Rashi: Gad’s territory stretched far east; those who dwell on the border must be lions. He tears arm and head in one blow — a complete act, not a half-measure. “He saw a first portion for himself, for there the portion of the lawgiver is hidden.” Gad chose the land of Sichon and Og, the reishit of the conquest, because he knew that Moshe’s grave would lie in his portion — a grave no man knows (Devarim 34:6). And he came at the heads of the people, fulfilling the oath to cross the Jordan armed before his brothers and not to rest until the land was taken and divided. “He executed the righteousness of the Lord, and His judgments with Israel.”

Three Elul–Tishrei threads are wound here.

First, limited expansion under higher law. Gad is enlarged, but the enlargement is blessed by the One who enlarges. The lion on the border is not a sovereign unto himself. He takes the first portion because the mechokek — the lawgiver — will be buried there. Power that stations itself next to the hidden grave of the lawgiver is power that has already confessed it does not own the last word.

Second, accountability that keeps a promise. The righteousness Gad “does” is not a mood. It is the keeping of the condition on which Transjordan was granted: you will not sit in your wide land while your brothers fight. Elul’s cheshbon ha-nefesh is precisely this: not whether one feels returned, but whether one has crossed the Jordan one said one would cross.

Third, the hiddenness of the lawgiver. Moshe’s burial place is safun — covered, stored, concealed. Gad’s greatness is not that he possesses Moshe, but that he consents to live next to a grave he cannot locate and cannot display. After Yom Kippur, when essence has touched essence and then withdrawn, this is the posture of a people that has been sealed: we live beside a law we did not invent, whose source is hidden, and we still go first into the water.

The yahrtzeit of R. Avraham HaMalach deepens the same line. He was called “the Angel” for a holiness so withdrawn it seemed barely of this world; he was the Maggid’s son and the Alter Rebbe’s companion. The day that remembers a soul almost too refined for earth is the day whose Chumash portion insists that the lion still has to live on the border, and that the lawgiver’s portion is in the ground. Withdrawal and engagement are not two religions. They are two sides of one covenant.

IV. Tanya: Or Chozer, and the Hour that Outweighs a World

Iggeret HaKodesh, Epistle 20, closes today. The Alter Rebbe has been explaining the paradox of or chozer — reflected light. Precisely in the lowest rungs of Asiyah the encompassing light of sovev kol almin and the light of the kav rebound with unique intensity. Therefore the order of created levels — inanimate, vegetative, animal, speaker — is not a simple ladder of dignity. The animal is nourished by the plant; the speaker lives from both; a child cannot say “father” and “mother” until he has tasted grain; R. Nachman’s mind was clearer after meat. Even the faces of the Merkavah, ox and eagle, are nourished from the spirit of the beast and the bird that rise from the altar. “They take pleasure from their own element and essence,” says the Zohar.

From this the Alter Rebbe draws the purpose of a soul’s descent: the mitzvot ma’asiyot, commandments done with physical things in a physical world. “Today to do them.” And the Mishnah: “More beautiful is one hour of teshuvah and good deeds in this world than all the life of the World to Come.”

The first printers added: Until here we found of his holy writing.

The Elul ear, standing two days after Yom Kippur, must not miss what this ending does. Teshuvah is not an escape from Asiyah. Teshuvah is the act that belongs only to Asiyah. The World to Come has no teshuvah in it, because it has no bechirah of this density and no physical object in which the Essence hid Itself in order to be released by a hand. The King came into the field because the field is where the rebound of light is strongest. The sukkah about to be built is the same teaching in wood and schach: the Infinite is willing to be housed in what is temporary, low, and exposed to rain.

Practical avodah: do not treat the days between Yom Kippur and Sukkot as leftover time. They are the first test of whether the hour of teshuvah will become an hour of ma'asim tovim. A nail in a sukkah board is, on the Alter Rebbe's terms, a higher disclosure than an unembodied meditation on forgiveness.

V. Tehillim 66–68: Testing, Nations, and G-d Arising

The day's Tehillim move from personal proving to public procession.

Psalm 66 — “For You have tested us, O G-d; You have refined us as silver is refined... We came through fire and water, and You brought us out to abundance.” The psalm that begins in communal praise turns to a vow and a public telling: “Come, hear, and I will recount what He has done for my soul.” Elul's cheshbon is here given its after-form: the account is not only taken; it is told, so that testing becomes testimony.

Psalm 67 — the seven verses of blessing over the harvest, the face of G-d shining, the nations glad because He judges peoples with equity. After a sealing, the request is not only “forgive us” but “let Your way be known in the earth.” Zebulun's calling of peoples to the mountain is already in this psalm.

Psalm 68 — “Let G-d arise, and His enemies be scattered.” Sinai, the rain of bounty, the procession of tribes, the mountain G-d desired for His dwelling. Gad-the-lion and the hidden grave of the lawgiver stand inside this psalm's military and liturgical motion: G-d does not remain in the field or on the mountain as a mood. He arises, and a people moves.

Read together with the Chumash, the Tehillim refuse a purely private Elul. The soul that was examined is the same soul that must now rejoice in going out, sit in the tent, enlarge a border under law, and tell what He did.

VI. Hayom Yom: A Covenant That Toil Will Not Return Empty

Berit kerutah le-ta'amulah ve-avodah be-mo'atzot chokhmah u-ve-kiruv ha-da'at she-einah chozeret reikam.

We are assured by covenant that any wide-ranging effort and labor pursued wisely and with friendship is never fruitless.

The Rebbe's later comment on this line is unsparing. Counsel that does not give birth to deed is scant. A meeting whose only fruit is another meeting does not impress Heaven. “What matters is the actual deed.”

On 12 Tishrei this is not a slogan for activists. It is the exact measure of whether Elul happened. The King in the field was an approach from Above. The sealing of Yom Kippur was an approach from Above meeting a people that stood. Hayom Yom now places a berit on the human side: if the labor is wide, if it is done with wise consultation rather than isolated heat, if it is done with kiruv ha-da'at — drawing minds near, not humiliating them — it is under covenant. It will not return empty.

Zebulun and Issachar are the picture of that covenant. Gad keeping his word is the picture of that covenant. The Tanya's hour of deed is the metaphysics of that covenant. The sukkah going up in the yard is the first object of that covenant.

Chinuch: after the fast, children should see adults do something that costs wood, time, and a little awkwardness — a wall that stands, a meal invited, a phone call that repairs a friendship, a coin that reaches a place of Torah. Tell them the Hayom Yom in one sentence: Heaven has signed that this kind of work is not wasted.

VII. Rambam: The Get, the Vessel, and Consent Under Law

Today's one-chapter cycle is Hilchot Gerushin 2. The chapter sits inside the laws of how a man divorces a wife by a document — a get — written for her sake, delivered with intent, through agents if needed. The surrounding chapters contain one of the Rambam's most important statements about bechirah: when the law requires a man to give a get and he refuses, the court may compel him until he says "I want to." The Rambam's reason is not cynicism about the will. It is a theology of the will: every soul, at its root, wishes to be of Israel and to do the mitzvot; the resisting surface is the yetzer. Compulsion that uncovers the deeper will is not the destruction of freedom. It is freedom assisted by law.

On a day two days after Yom Kippur, this is not an invitation to coerce souls. It is a reminder that Elul's free will was never the modern myth of an unencumbered self. Bechirah in Torah is the capacity to return — and return is possible because the deeper will already leans toward the covenant. The King in the field does not create that will. He approaches a will that was always His.

The three-chapter cycle, Hilchot Kelim 12–14, treats the measures and statuses of vessels — how a container becomes susceptible to impurity, how size and structure and use determine law. After Tanya's teaching that physical objects are the very purpose of a soul's descent, Kelim is not a dry tract. A vessel is the question of whether the material world can hold holiness or transmit defilement. The sukkah is about to become the year's most public vessel: a house that is not a house, a roof that must leak stars, a space in which eating and sleeping are mitzvot. Elul examined the inner vessel. Tishrei builds an outer one.

VIII. Covenantal-Republican Resonances (Only Where the Text Gives Them)

Nothing in today's portions requires a geopolitical frame. What they do require is an account of authority.

Zebulun and Issachar are a division of labor under a blessing, not a domination of the scholar by the merchant or the merchant by the scholar. Non-domination here is practical: each tribe's good is a condition of the other's.

Gad is enlarged by G-d, stationed on a border, bound by an oath to his brothers, and oriented toward a hidden grave of the lawgiver. That is limited power under higher law.

The Rambam's get is a legal act that must be willed, specified, and delivered. Consent is real, and law may educate consent without erasing it.

Hayom Yom's berit on labor done with counsel and friendship is a civic as well as a hasidic claim: isolated zeal is not the same as covenantal work.

These are not imported theories. They are the grammar of the day's text. A people that has just stood in judgment and been sealed is a people that must now practice limited authority, kept promises, and partnership — or the sealing remains a day and does not become a year.

IX. Approaches and a Constructive Synthesis

Peshat / Rashi. The blessings are tribal economies and military facts: trade routes, calendars, border lions, a first inheritance chosen for Moshe's unknown grave, an oath kept across the Jordan.

Midrash / Sifrei. Zebulun's commerce becomes a summons of the nations to the mountain. Hidden treasure is not only glass and dye; it is the occasion of zivchei tzedek.

Chassidus / Tanya. The lowest world is where light rebounds. Physical mitzvot and teshuvah in Asiyah outweigh the life of the World to Come. The soul came down for a board, a coin, a word, a meal.

Hayom Yom / the Rebbe. Effort that is wide, wise, and friendly is under covenant. Deed, not the meeting about the deed.

Rambam. Will is real and can be educated by law. Vessels have statuses because matter is not neutral.

Synthesis for 12 Tishrei. Elul opened the field so that a person could meet the King without palace protocol. Yom Kippur sealed the meeting. Today's portions describe the only honest sequel: go out and sit still in partnership; take no enlargement that is not blessed and oath-bound; live next to a law whose source you cannot display; put the rebound of light into an object; trust that labor of that kind does not return empty. The sukkah is the first public sentence of that sequel.

X. Avodah and Chinuch for These Hours

Build or finish something that will hold a mitzvah. A sukkah wall, a kosher schach plan, a guest list. Do not leave the sealing in the realm of feeling.

Name the partnership in the house. Who is Zebulun this month? Who is Issachar? What does each actually need from the other before Sukkot?

Keep one promise that costs. Gad's righteousness was not an insight. It was remaining under arms until the land was divided.

Tell one story of testing that became abundance (Tehillim 66). Children should hear that fire and water were not the last word.

Study one physical law. A line of Kelim, a line of sukkah, a line of the get. Let the body of law remind the soul that Asiyah is the point.

Practice kiruv ha-da'at. Hayom Yom's condition is friendship of mind. A rebuke that isolates is not this day's avodah.

Remember R. Avraham HaMalach without imitating only his withdrawal. The Angel's yahrtzeit falls on the day of the border-lion. Holiness that cannot stand on a border cannot protect a people.

Extended Bibliography

Daily portions and calendar

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Elul, Yamim Nora'im, days to Sukkot

Alter Rebbe, teaching of the King in the Field (Elul)

Vayikra Rabbah 30:7 (Israel busy with sukkah and lulav)

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