



www.actt613.org

ACTT Inspirational Reading for Elul 5784

Table of Contents

How to Really Grow During the Month of Elul	2
Elul: How to Realistically Change the World.....	4
Falling in Love in Elul	6
Elul: The 4 D's of Lasting Change	8
Overcoming Apathy & Discouragement and Preparing for Rosh Hashanah.....	10
Maximizing Your One Shot at Life	12
The Process of Change	14
Apple's Secret Ingredient.....	16

*ACTT thanks Aish HaTorah for their permission to reproduce this material from
www.aish.com*

How to Really Grow During the Month of Elul

by Rabbi Noah Weinberg 7 min read

No one can help you grow unless you take responsibility for yourself.

A pious man encountered a group of triumphant soldiers coming back from a fierce battle, flushed with victory. “You have returned victorious from a minor struggle,” he said to them. “Now get ready for the major battle.”

“And what is that major battle?” they asked.

“The war within us, against the evil inclination. That is the great war. You just came back from three weeks of intense fighting, and now the enemy has been vanquished. But fighting the insanity of the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination, never ends. Even after 100 defeats, he will never leave you alone. The battle is constant. He will not rest until he kills you. The moment you let your guard down, he will pounce and attempt to utterly destroy you.

“In a typical war there is a front line. Sometimes you are surrounded, but at least you know where the enemy lies. The *yetzer hara*, however, is a master of disguise. He knows how to mask illusions as reality, how to rationalize evil as good. He is so devious, he knows how to get you to harm yourself and your loved ones without your even realizing it.” (*Duties of the Heart, Shaar Yichud Hamaaseh, chapter 5*)

We are beginning the Hebrew month of Elul. It is time to intensify the battle against the *yetzer hara* and restock our supply of weapons.

The enemy’s first plan of attack is to knock out your sense of personal responsibility and get you to hand it over to someone else. “Let my teachers inspire me,” you think. Or, “Let my rabbi tell me what I have to work on.”

Stop waiting for someone to tell you what to change during Elul. You are responsible for yourself. You must do the necessary introspection, get in contact with yourself, and determine what you need to work on. As the Mishnah says, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” ([Avos 1:14](#)). No one can help you grow unless you take responsibility for yourself. Your teachers can give you the greatest tools in the world for self-transformation, but you will leave those tools on the bench if you don’t take responsibility for your own life.

You need to get clarity about what life means to you. What do you want to accomplish this coming year? What are you committed to tackling? If you don’t make these decisions, you might easily delude yourself into thinking that you are preparing adequately for Rosh Hashanah by listening to some inspiring talks and hoping that somehow these great rabbis will make you great.

No one can make you great. No one can turn you into a Torah scholar. There are no shortcuts; you are solely responsible for your own growth and learning. Toughen up and stop relying on others. No one can do it for you.

Judgment and Love

The month of Elul seem to be paradoxical. On the one hand it is the time for “*Ani l’dodi v’dodi li* – I am for my Beloved and my Beloved is for me” – an acronym for “Elul.” It is a time when we feel G-d’s intense love and closeness. Yet Elul is also the time to prepare for Rosh Hashanah, when the Book of Life and the Book of Death are open and the King of the universe sits in judgment, deciding who will live and who will die, who will have cancer and who will be cured, who will be crushed in an accident and who will survive. There seems to be a contradiction between “I am for my Beloved and my Beloved is for me” and the Day of Judgment. How are the two related?

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the Ramchal, encapsulates in one paragraph the whole point of our existence, and in doing so gives us an answer. In *The Way of G-d* (1:4:6) he writes, “The root purpose of the service of G-d is for the human being to constantly turn to his Creator, to realize that he was created for the sole purpose of being

drawn close to his Creator...." Everything that happens to us in this world is for one reason and one reason alone: to get closer to the Almighty, to feel that I am for my Beloved and my Beloved is for me. The Jew understands that everything G-d does is for our good; it is an expression of His love. **Every judgment He renders – whether a windfall or a bankruptcy – is exactly what we need to grow closer to Him.**

I am for my Beloved, if you love the Almighty and appreciate that He is your father, then *my Beloved is for me*, you will see that the Almighty loves you and that everything He does is for your good. But if you don't appreciate what G-d has done for you and instead you have complaints, you will mistakenly think He does not love you.

The Ramchal describes the objective of the war against the *yetzer hara*: "Man was placed in this world only to overcome his evil inclination and subjugate himself to His Creator through the power of his intellect. He must overcome his physical desire and tendencies, and direct all of his activities toward attaining this purpose [of coming close to G-d]" (ibid). It is up to us to choose to cling to G-d by vanquishing our *yetzer hara* and rising above the vanities and confusion of the world.

Learning Torah

The Ramchal then identifies the primary weapon G-d gave us to fight the *yetzer hara* and achieve our purpose: "G-d gave us one means that is greater than anything else in bringing man close to G-d, and that is Torah study" (1:4:9). There is nothing more powerful than learning Hashem's instructions for living. These are the actual words of our Creator.

But the Ramchal sets conditions: "For the person who reads them in holiness and purity, with the proper intent of fulfilling G-d's will, these words have the unique property of causing the one who reads them to incorporate in himself excellence and greatest perfection." We need to learn Torah with holiness and purity, which means that our learning has to be *lishmah*, unadulterated, for the sake of Heaven. Our motivation to get close to G-d cannot be mixed with the desire for approval or the need to conform to societal pressure.

Elul is the time to examine your goals and drives. Why are you learning Torah? Make sure it is for the right reasons. Keep it pure.

And lastly, learn Torah with the intent to fulfill G-d's will, as we say in our daily prayers in the second blessing before reciting the *Shema*: "Instill in our hearts to understand and elucidate, to listen, learn, teach, safeguard, perform and fulfill all the words of your Torah's teaching with love." Torah study is not just for intellectual stimulation. The goal is for you to absorb it in your bones and live it. Torah learning has to change you and bring you closer to the Almighty. If your intent is not to fulfill what you are learning, you may know an incredible amount of Torah, but you are just a donkey carrying books. Your knowledge has not penetrated into the fiber of your being.

The shofar is blowing; you are moving closer to the Day of Judgment. You are at war. The enemy is at the gate. Now is the time to strengthen your resolve to fight the great battle against the *yetzer hara*. It is time to take responsibility for every aspect of your life, to reconnect to G-d's constant love, and to intensify your determination to learn Torah with purity, in order to fulfill the G-d's will. No one can do it for you.

Elul: How to Realistically Change the World

by Rabbi Benjamin Blech 6 min read

Start by thinking small - and in that way change ourselves and our own world.

Feeling down about the state of the world? Hard to read the newspapers with all of the tragedies that have become part and parcel of our daily lives?

Well the month of Elul is here – the month, with its daily blowing of the shofar, meant to remind us that Rosh Hashanah is just a short four weeks away and that we have got to give serious thought to our personal responsibility to do our part to make the coming year a better one.

In light of the immensity of our problems how can we possibly do anything that would make a difference? Can anyone of us imagine that we personally could actually play a role in changing the world?

It is precisely in response to this question that Judaism gave a startling answer. Maimonides expressed it by way of a remarkable illustration. Every one of us, he taught in his Laws of Repentance, needs to think that as G-d judges the world in His annual review before the High Holy Days, He finds it perfectly balanced between its sins and good deeds. Divine judgment withholds its final decree until *you* are brought into the equation. And if your deeds also seem to be almost perfectly balanced between the good and the evil, then one, just one additional good deed, no matter how small can be the one to tilt your judgment favorably, which in turn would decide the fate of all of humankind.

It may be far-fetched. Yet the greatest philosopher of the Jewish people did not hesitate to phrase it this way in order to impress upon every one of us the truth that every person makes a difference – and every one of our actions has consequences on the divine scale of judgment.

That's why I think **the most important piece of advice I can give anyone as I think about ways to change the world with the beginning of Elul are two words: *think small.***

Just a few years ago Muhammad Yunus won the Nobel peace prize for turning the concept of thinking small into a major innovation which has already revolutionized the banking system as well as the lives of millions of people. It was in 1974 that Bangladesh was hit by a devastating flood followed by a severe famine. Yunus decided to lend \$27 without any collateral to a group of women of the city of Joba nearby the University where he worked as a teacher. Women there made bamboo baskets but were forced to sell them at such a low price that could barely pay for the raw material. They could never purchase larger amounts for lack of capital. Yunus initiated what is now known as microcredit, allowing poor people anxious to make a go of small businesses to succeed.

With the small sum they received they were able to finance their work and to establish themselves. Micro-finance, or microcredit, was born. Thinking small, something never practiced before, created a new way of life and of opportunity. One small act changed the balance of the scale – and millions today prosper.

And there is yet another way to think small. It is expressed beautifully by way of a story told in the name of the Chofetz Chaim.

At one time, he was asked how he was able to have such a great impact on the Jewish world. This is how he answered: “Originally, I set out to change the world, but I failed. So I decided to scale back my efforts and only influence the Jewish community of Poland, but I failed there, too. So I targeted the community of my hometown of Radin, but I achieved no greater success. Then I gave all my effort to changing my own family and I failed at that as well. Finally, I decided to change myself and that's how I had such an impact on the Jewish world.”

Leo Tolstoy came to the same conclusion. **“Everyone thinks of changing the world,” he wrote, “but no one thinks of changing himself.”** And so the world continues with its myriad flaws, everyone complaining about the common sins of others while paying very little attention to themselves.

Most people want to change the world to improve their lives, but the world they need to change first is the one inside themselves.

There is a movement today that has taken the concept a step further into practice. It concerns itself not with the really large issues, issues which realistically most of us will be unable to influence, but with the smaller daily interactions which in fact define everyday life. It’s called “small acts of kindness” and I love it precisely because its demands are so easy and yet, if universally practiced, would really change our lives.

The suggestions are simple. Choose one or a dozen:

- Give a genuine compliment to somebody at least once a day.
- Write down what you appreciate about another family member and pass it along.
- Check in with someone who’s sick.
- Ask if you can help someone who may be having a difficult time in life right now.
- Lend your vehicle to take someone without one shopping for their necessities.
- Hold the door open for the person behind you.
- Make a card for someone special.
- Deliver flowers anonymously to a hospital patient.
- Ask a senior citizen about their life story and truly listen.
- Give a hug to a loved one or friend.
- Offer to pay another person’s food bill.
- Lend a hand to someone doing hard work.
- Donate to a homeless person, perhaps give them some food.
- Leave a kind server a generous tip.
- Let a person out from a side road who’s waiting to get into the main road.
- Help another parent out with a stroller or carrying things.
- Give someone a book that you no longer need.
- Give your parents or grandparents a call just because.
- Volunteer at a community event.

Grandiose plans are great – but we rarely do them. Impressive ideas for changing the world are, yes, impressive but frequently impractical and unrealizable. So perhaps this year before Rosh Hashanah we could scale down our ambitions and think small – and in that way change ourselves and our own world.

Falling in Love in Elul

by Rabbi Yisroel Gelber 4 min read

What's love got to do with it?

The month of Elul is an acronym of a verse from Song of Songs, "*Ani L'Dodi V'Dodi Li*," "I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me. This concept -- loving G-d and feeling His love for us -- is a central theme of Elul. But this month doesn't have one love-inspiring holiday in it! What is it about this month that represents the relationship of love between us and the Almighty?

We all know about the natural love that a parent has for a child. Even before birth, the mother is giving of herself, literally, and the giving never stops.

But what about a child's love to his parents? When does the child begin to truly love the parent?

I discovered the answer when my oldest son was born. The physical and emotional exhaustion of caring for a newborn -- one that liked to cry, and didn't like to sleep -- was like nothing my wife and I had ever encountered before. Thinking about everything our parents had done for us -- happily, too! -- there was no way we could ever repay them. The sheer enormity of their caring for us was bigger than we were. In these life-changing weeks following the birth of our first child when we transformed from being children into parents ourselves, our appreciation and love for our own parents transformed as well.

When the child becomes a parent himself and experientially feels how much his parents have done for him, that's when the child begins to truly love and appreciate his parents. To the degree that the child recognizes how much his parents have given him, to that degree his love for his parents will grow.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe writes, "Gratitude awakens love in the receiver and naturally inspires it in the giver as well."

This is the key to understanding the experience of love in Elul.

Every year on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur we humbly submit our prayers and supplications to G-d, begging to be inscribed and sealed for a good year. As the season of the High Holidays draws to a close, the rest of the year we watch as our fate unfolds. It is at that last point of the year, the final month of Elul, that we can look back and see the entire past year spread out before us. That's when we can fully appreciate that we were indeed sealed in the Book of Life. We can see the myriad blessings that G-d heaped upon us and our loved ones. And the more we savor the details of the blessings G-d bestowed upon us, the more our appreciation will grow.

In Elul we come full circle, back to where we started from, and see with a new depth of feeling the enormous gift of love that G-d has showered upon us. In that moment of gratitude to Him we can feel a deep love for Him. *I am for my beloved, and my beloved is for me.*

In all of our relationships -- marriage, friendship, business -- we are natural experts at seeing what those around us are doing wrong. We have to make a real effort to focus on what's going right. But it is only when we re-train our eyes to see how much the other is actually doing and giving for us that our feelings of gratitude and love will grow.

Rabbi Wolbe recommends engaging in daily exercises to strengthen our "gratitude muscle," the most potent of which is a verbal recognition of another's kindness. Three times a day practice saying thank you to people who may perform everyday kindness to us. And if you look carefully, you'll see that there are more than enough opportunities. There is the postman who delivers the mail, the cashier who scans our food at the supermarket,

and the salesman who helps us find what we need at the store. We are in fact receiving all the time -- from G-d and others around us, and have so much to be grateful for.

Let's use this Elul as an opportunity to recognize the kindness that others have done for us, and especially to reflect on how much our Father in Heaven has done for us in the past 12 months. As we head into the month of Elul, followed by the High Holidays, may our hearts be so full of appreciation and love for the Almighty, and may we all be inscribed in the Book of Life.

Elul: The 4 D's of Lasting Change

by Rabbi Eli Held 4 min read

How to keep your resolutions and truly grow.

David, a friend of mine, shared with me something that changed my life. He and his wife were frequently fighting and couldn't find a way out of their negative pattern of behavior. He told me that last year, as Rosh Hashanah was approaching, he decided to make a resolution that on every Friday for the next year he would write a little note thanking his wife for some of the things she had done for him over the past week. He would then stick it under her pillow where she would find it on Friday night.

Before he committed to doing this, he mentioned the idea to his wife. She thought it was such a good idea and decided to take on this project as well.

He told me that this little gesture made a great impact on their relationship, not just on Friday and Shabbat, but throughout the week as well.

He also told me that this was the first resolution in his life that he actually kept for the whole year. The secret to his success: it was the first resolution he did not make alone. He partnered with his wife.

David's experience was eye-opening to me and illustrated the first and perhaps most important tool of what I call The Four D's of Lasting Change.

1. Don't Do It Alone

One of the cornerstone principles of the 12-step program, which has helped millions worldwide recover from the darkest addictions, is that as humans we cannot go through life alone. We must draw on the help and support from others in order to succeed.

Involve a friend or a mentor with your resolution. Too many resolutions have fallen by the wayside because we didn't have anyone to encourage us and keep us strong. When the going gets rough and we feel like giving up it is absolutely essential to have a shoulder to lean on.

Better yet, partner with a friend in taking on a growth project together and become accountable to each other. Accountability coupled with a sense of not wanting to let our partner down is a potent force that will give us a much better shot at staying with our resolutions.

2. Don't Take on Too Much

Too often we become inspired to change and resolve to make big improvements in our life. The problem is that even though our souls desire to grow, our bodies resist big change. Our bodies only adapt to small changes, one step at a time. So whatever you resolve to do, cut it in half. Real incremental growth is better than big aspirations that remain unactualized.

3. Daven – Pray

Even the most grand ambitions will fail without G-d's help. Pray to Him and ask for clarity on what you should be working on and that He give you the focus and wisdom to properly devise a successful course of action to go about that change. Turn to Him for success in your endeavors and you will have an infinitely better chance of achieving that success.

4. Don't Fear Failure

We need to stop fearing failure. Failure is an integral and unavoidable part of growth. Just as an infant falls all the time when learning to walk, we too will never grow out of failing and falling when we strive to attain a goal.

We need to utilize our failures to learn new things about ourselves and then we need to get back up and try again.

The only way we can escape failure (and criticism) is by doing nothing and saying nothing.

We need to learn to chew on the fat of failure or we will remain small and unfulfilled.

This year as we enter into the Hebrew month of Elul, the month of preparation before Rosh Hashanah, let's be smart about rekindling our inner will and resolve to change.

Find a growth partner, cut your resolution in half, pray, and be fearless about failure. You will have an Elul that will inspire you and lead you into a year filled with enduring growth.

Overcoming Apathy & Discouragement and Preparing for Rosh Hashanah

by Rabbi Nechemia Coopersmith 6 min read

Preparing for Rosh Hashanah should not be a downer. It's an auspicious, exciting time for clarity and closeness, grounded in positivity and love.

The Hebrew month of Elul, a spiritually super-charged time leading up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, has a surprising theme. The word "Elul" is an acronym for the phrase "*Ani l'dodi v'dodi li* – I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me" that comes from King Solomon's [*Song of Songs \(6:3\)*](#).

To borrow from Tina Turner's famous song, what's love got to do with it? Why does this phrase that articulates the deep longing between two lovers, which is a metaphor for the love between G-d and the Jewish People, serve as the core focus of preparing for Rosh Hashanah?

What's the Essence of Rosh Hashanah?

Rosh Hashanah transports you back to the very beginning of time when G-d, as CEO of the universe, was setting budgets and job descriptions for all of humanity. As a mutli-gazzilionaire, there is no limit to what this CEO can allocate. The only limit is His employees' understanding of the company's vision and the extent of their responsibility to implement the CEO's bottom line.

On [Rosh Hashanah, you stand before G-d, a.k.a. the CEO](#) of the universe, making your case for the upcoming year. The previous year is over; your past performance is not relevant. Every person is starting a new chapter and everything is up for grabs. Now is the time to get clarity, articulate your dreams, and genuinely commit to make them happen.

The month of [Elul](#) is the crucial time period to recalibrate your goals and get ready to make your presentation to the Boss Himself.

Two Obstacles

But embracing this challenge requires overcoming two sizable obstacles that you may find yourself slamming into: apathy and discouragement.

You feel pretty distant from G-d and are perfectly content to stay where you are, putting in your minimal effort to live a decent life and spending the rest of your time on social media and binge-watching, and whatever fix you need to comfortably pass away the time. Apathy stops all growth in its tracks.

And if you *do* want to work on personal growth and take preparing for Rosh Hashanah seriously, there's that voice that whispers in your ear: "Who are you kidding? How many times have you gone down this road, and look where you are? In the exact same spot, with the exact same issues. People don't change. Admit it, you're a failure and there is no reason to think this year will be any different."

Discouragement saps your energy and cynically undermines your ability to change.

The phrase "I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me" that typifies the essence of Elul is the life preserver you need to extract you from your debilitating apathy and discouragement.

How so?

Love is the Pillar

Stephen Covey, the author of *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, popularized the expression, “Love is a verb.” One of Judaism’s commandments is “to love your neighbor” which most commentaries define as expressing love through action. It’s tricky to mandate an emotion; commanding action is far more doable.

Marriage is the commitment to shower your spouse with acts of love, no matter what mood you’re in and whether or not you’re feeling the love. Regardless of your feeling, love her – meaning put your love into action. Show affection, give compliments, go out on a date, be curious and listen, and most importantly care about the things your spouse cares about.

Putting your love into action fosters feelings of love. What starts as a verb becomes an object. And the distance you may have been feeling between you and your spouse dissipates as the intimacy is restored.

Now apply this with G-d. **It’s okay if you’re not feeling the love. Love is a verb; just do it.** Don’t wait for the sudden inspiration. Take a few quiet moments and ask yourself: what are the things that are important to G-d that I can work on making important to me? Give yourself some time to answer; you may be surprised to hear what your inner self says when you access it with honesty and vulnerability.

Then select one or two things that speak most to you and start implementing them, slowly but surely. These first steps loosen the shackles of apathy and help close the spiritual distance you may be feeling with G-d. But you need to make the first move, not G-d. That’s why the phrase begins, “I am for my beloved” – it’s starts with you taking the first step.

The Ultimate Cheerleader

Love flows both ways. Once you take that first step in drawing closer to G-d, your efforts will be met with G-d’s welcoming embrace. G-d’s love is a constant. Even the smallest step forward impacts the tenor of the relationship.

G-d reciprocates, as expressed in the second part of the phrase, “and my Beloved is for me.” This is essential to overcoming discouragement.

While you may have moments where you feel like throwing in the towel and give up on yourself, G-d sees what you’re really made of. As your Creator Who invested in you immeasurable potential for greatness that only you can achieve through your unique mission in life, G-d is rooting for you and wants you to succeed. Feel that love and allow it to empower you to take the next step forward in your journey.

Preparing for Rosh Hashanah should not be a heavy downer. It’s an auspicious, exciting time for clarity and closeness, grounded in positivity and love.

That’s why the essence of Elul is expressed through the phrase “I am for my beloved and my beloved is for me”, underscoring the love that exemplifies this period.

Turns out that love has everything to do with it. Initiating small steps to strengthen your relationship with G-d will shake off your apathy and arouse a greater feeling of love and closeness. And this, in turn, will be reciprocated by G-d’s constant love, giving you the encouragement and confidence to plow forward, step by step, in fulfilling your life’s journey.

Maximizing Your One Shot at Life

by Slovie Jungreis-Wolff 6 min read

How to create the life you want.

[Steven Sotloff](#), the Jewish freelance journalist who was decapitated by ISIS, sent us all a message leading up to Rosh Hashanah. In a letter smuggled out by a former cellmate in May, he penned his thoughts to his family. A cousin read his words to the 1,000 mourners who attended the memorial service in Pinecrest, Florida.

“Live your life to the fullest... Everyone has two lives. The second one begins when you realize you only have one.”

We are approaching the holiest days of the Jewish calendar. It is time to take stock, to recognize that we have only one life and need to make each day count.

Spiritual Check-Up

Elul, the Hebrew month leading up to Rosh Hashanah, is a time set aside for spiritual self-examination. We [scrutinize](#) our values. We think about the way we treat others, speak to both strangers and family, and whether we have lived with a compassionate heart. We ask ourselves if we have set aside real time to forge a relationship with our Creator. The ultimate question of ‘who am I’ and ‘how is this world better because I am present’ is pondered by taking a long, hard look within.

Sometimes we come up deficient. It is painful to confront the image that stands before us in the mirror. We cannot believe how bitter or negative we have become. Scenes from the past year that were buried away now pop up and we are troubled by the tones we used or words that were said.

This past summer, I had the joy of having my daughter and her family spend a few weeks with us in our Long Island home. They live in Israel and everything was new and exciting to the children. As I was taking my 6-year-old granddaughter out to the main avenue in town, I knew that she would be meeting many people for the very first time. I explained to her the importance of saying hello with a smile.

“Bubby, I think that some people are allergic to a smile. Do you think so too?” she asked.

I had to laugh but realized that there was much truth in this child’s observation. Time passes, we become jaded. We forget how to smile and appreciate daily moments of joy. A critical eye strips us of seeing life as a blessing. We complain, we blame, we whine, we point fingers, we judge, and we bring negative energy into our homes. We rush our kids along so that we can finally have some quiet, not realizing that we are missing out on life’s sweetest moments. If we are serious about making this world better, the place to begin is within ourselves.

What is the secret to successful change?

Mindfulness is the first step. Become aware of your daily interactions. Are most of your conversations putting others down, sarcastic responses, or impatient retorts? Have you become more connected to your iPhone than to the people in your life who need you most? When was the last time you shared a word of appreciation or encouragement-especially to your family?

If we are brutally honest with ourselves, we may feel shame with the way we have acted – screaming at the kids, overblown anger at our spouse, being a source of malicious gossip that hurt others and sullied our souls. Some of us made wrong decisions that caused incredible pain. As long as we keep rationalizing our bad behavior we will never confront ourselves.

Step 2 requires a sense of embarrassment that propels us to take action.

Instead of just living with self-humiliation or rationalizing our bad behavior, this is the point where we can make real change happen. We take the discomfort and use the emotion as a positive energy to embark upon a new path. Life is about asking ourselves how can I take this moment and create a better me. What must I do right now so that I won't remain nursing my wounds and bitter regrets? Let's think about our triggers. Making a plan on how to react next time we are faced with a frustrating personality or situation will help us recalibrate.

Transforming oneself can be a most difficult challenge. Sometimes we change because we want to grow, other times we don't really want to change but we recognize that we must. Either way, if we take our passion to create the life we want, we have the ability to rejuvenate ourselves. A spiritual makeover keeps us moving forward. Stagnation leads to depression of the soul.

Keep Climbing

The best way to reach new heights is to make a plan and keep on climbing. And while we climb we will probably fall. Don't be afraid of failure. Of course there will be times that we will still yell, share some juicy gossip, or seem uncaring to our spouse. This doesn't mean that we should give up or that our attempts to be better were for naught. Tomorrow is another day and another opportunity for change. We will not completely alter ourselves overnight. G-d who created us knows this and is most patient with us, His children. He wants to see that we are not callous and indifferent. Every parent desires a connection with his child. When we turn towards G-d and attempt to better ourselves, we are expressing our desire to reconnect with our Father. We are displaying the value we place on the gift of soul that we have been given.

These are days of reconciliation between us and G-d. Take a few moments, right now, and make a decision that will [transform your life](#). Embrace your ability to change. **Choose a kindness a day, one less hurtful response, one more smile when you feel depleted and want to scream**, one more mitzvah that stretches your heart and soul. We have only one life. Start living it now.

The Process of Change

by Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits 6 min read

When it comes to personal growth, we all have good intentions. But how do you translate that into actual improvement.

Elul and the High Holidays is a very special season. It's a time to take advantage of a special opportunity to work on ourselves: to change, be great and fulfill dreams. It's a new beginning to finally do those things you've always sensed you were capable of, but never followed through.

Every Elul starts off with the same high expectations -- that there will be a whole new world and things will never be quite the same again. Unfortunately, the initial enthusiasm all too often gives way to a somber reality; enthusiasm tapers off and you end up not too different from before you started. Of course, you do grow slowly, year after year, but the big breakthrough -- becoming the person you know you can and should be -- never seems to materialize. It remains an elusive dream.

How do you take all the initial goodwill, enthusiasm and excitement -- and parley it into significant and lasting change? In other words, how do you make the High Holiday season really work?

PREPATORY PLOWING

The Sages tell us there is a heavenly voice (*Bat Kol*) that reverberates during the month of Elul, saying "Plow the fields, don't plant for the thorns and weeds." There are of course many layers of Kabbalistic meaning here. But the most straightforward explanation is that if you don't properly plow a field beforehand, no matter what you plant, your garden will eventually be overrun by weeds.

Therefore, the key to a successful Elul is to properly prepare -- i.e. consider what seeds you wish to plant.

How do you "plow" yourself, to ensure that everything you accept upon yourself will develop the way you want it to -- so that a few months down the road you won't regard your resolution as wishful thinking?

Your desire to change is clear -- otherwise you wouldn't be reading this right now. But what causes you to change? The key is to understand yourself ("the ground") -- how you function, how you grow, and what motivates you?

MATURE CHANGES

The story is told of a young man in the yeshiva of Rabbi Meir Chadash. He was a lazy student who never learned, did whatever he pleased and seemed ready to drop out completely. Then one day the student did a 180-degree turnabout. He was the first one in the study hall in the morning, and the last one out.

The next day, Rabbi Chadash approached him and said. "You're so immature, when are you going to grow up already?"

The message was clear -- you don't change overnight from being irresponsible and apathetic, to being the most responsible and consistent person around. And if you try, it's a fake. You may succeed for a few days, thinking you've accomplished it all, but how long can that last? That's not "growth," it's immaturity. True growth is gradual. You have to know what the next step is, understand yourself, and be honest.

Decide what to accept upon yourself that will make a difference -- e.g. keeping a kosher home, or dedicating yourself to become more caring and sensitive. These seeds all have tremendous potential... if you prepare the ground first.

Look deep inside, get good advice, and above all, be realistic about what is possible to achieve.

REALISTIC AND APPROPRIATE

What about the actual teshuva process? The first step is recognizing your mistakes -- understanding what you've done wrong and how you could have done better.

To do this, you have to know your specific capabilities. Otherwise you'll make the mistake of trying to change things that are beyond you. This is insidious, because when you "confess" you don't really mean it -- since deep down you always knew it was unrealistic.

True teshuva and confession means articulating the fact that at your level you could have done better. It's important to do this in a way that you'll hear it and believe it.

Understand what your issues are today; if they're beyond you, they're not "your" issues. Deal with what's realistic and appropriate. If you don't, you'll plant your seeds year after year -- and be left with nothing but weeds. Of course, don't pervert this idea as an excuse to continue making mistakes. Rather, realize that drastic change often backfires.

Don't move into a dream world. The Torah doesn't want us to be "unnaturally pious." Assess what aspect of your character is "off" and start to change it -- gradually.

CHEERING YOU ON

"Preparing the ground" means discovering what motivates you and recognizing what you have to do now. Ultimately, the final major change may be years away. But don't be discouraged. The Sages say that once you've put yourself in a position that will get you somewhere, as far as G-d is concerned -- you've actually arrived. Once you've sincerely resolved to do something, there's an elevation of your soul. In the metaphysical world it is considered as if it was already done. Your "soul" has arrived; it's just that your "body" still has to go through a lot of steps.

One more thing. To be inspired to teshuva, we have to realize that G-d loves us -- even in light of all the mistakes we've made. Realize that G-d understands you, that He's "cheering you on" and wants to help. Don't feel guilty; any mistakes you've made are part of a growth process to get where you are today.

G-d doesn't want you to suffer. On the contrary, if growth is what G-d created us for, then even the hardships involved must be the best thing for us. G-d is not the "big bully in the sky;" He's on your side. If you don't realize this, you'll never do teshuva.

Think big and have long term goals -- but be realistic. Take things one step at a time -- but to keep up the momentum. True teshuva demands maturity, realism and honesty.

Apple's Secret Ingredient

by Rabbi Yogi Robkin 3 min read

A growth-mindset enables us to envision exciting goals for the new year that will challenge us to bring out our full potential.

For Apple's brand new, top-secret project, Scott Forstall, a senior vice president, wanted to recruit a team comprised of solely growth-minded individuals. Forstall was a fan of psychologist Carol Dweck who defined a "fixed mindset" that places artificial limits and avoids failure and "growth mindset" that generally thinks big, exhibits more positive effort and experiences less helplessness.

To isolate the growth-minded employees at Apple, Forstall delivered a curious pitch to superstars across the company. He warned that this top-secret project would provide ample opportunities to "make mistakes and struggle, but eventually we may do something that will remember the rest of our lives." Forstall surmised that those who jumped at the opportunity were growth-minded individuals who, far from growing dismayed or discouraged by the tremendous challenges that lay ahead, they would remain inspired, curious and committed through the arduous process.

It was this team of growth-minded individuals that ended up creating the mildly successful gadget called the iPhone. (From Gary Keller's *The One Thing – The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results*)

The impact our mindset has on what we accomplish in life is remarkable – and also frightening. The good news, as Dweck points out, is that mindsets can and do change. Like any other habit, you can set your mind to it until the right mindset becomes routine.

While a Jew should always be growth-minded, it is during the month of Elul, the Hebrew month before the High holidays, that we are reminded to examine how we've reverted to a life-model of fixed-mindedness and proactively switch gears. Every morning during the month of Elul the resonating sounds of the shofar echo in synagogues, reminding us to wake up from our spiritual slumber and meet the challenges of the moment.

Elul invites us to reconsider the possibilities of our lives – how we might increase the meaning, commitment and purpose in our lives and veer away from the paths that aren't leading us to where we want to go. With a growth-mindset, we can envision exciting goals for the new year that will challenge us to bring out our full potential.

Here are some growth-minded challenges to experiment with during Elul:

- Consider adopting a mitzvah this month that you've been putting off but feel inspired about putting into practice.
- Commit to learning Torah 10-15 minutes a day.
- Pencil in a coffee date with yourself and journal about your spiritual dreams and aspirations – authentically consider whether you are on the path to achieve those ambitions and, if necessary, consider what it might take to get you on that desired path.
- Pursue one quiet act of kindness a day.
- Practice the art of gratitude.
- Tackle one challenge that you keep pushing off.
- Ask those you have hurt for forgiveness and wholeheartedly forgive those who have hurt you.