

Dear Community,

Shmuli was a young man who we all admired as a paragon of originality and innovation. In our third-grade classroom, Shmuli could always be counted upon to push the boundaries of sophistication. His stratagems were a work of genius. At the time, our teachers predicted a bright future for him at a prestigious maximum security prison. Ironically, Shmuli now teaches a group of unfortunate third-grade boys who are baffled by their teacher's uncanny awareness of the machinations of the juvenile male mind.

Shmuli invented a game called 'I'm sorry.' He would walk over to someone, bump into them hard, and immediately apologize. This would repeat itself until the victim inevitably wised up and hit him back. While I have warm memories of Shmuli being chased across the schoolyard (especially after making the perplexing choice of a sixth-grade victim), the game reminds me eerily of our attitude towards the High Holidays.

The High Holidays, an important event in the fiscal calendar of any synagogue, should be a time to present G-d with our sincere desire to move away from our past folly. A time to beg His forgiveness of our sins and His bestowal of a good, sweet year. However, for most of us, Rosh Hashana marks the time for our apple a day, a critique of the Rabbi's sermon, and a robust analysis of the tonal intonations of the cantor. We listen to the shofar but are deaf to its plea. We recite the prayers but are blind to their meaning. We acknowledge an awesome day of judgment, but somehow display greater stress at a football game.

How can we possibly overcome the dissonance between our verbal protestations (and occasional intellectual awareness) of the Days of Awe versus our emotional distance from engaging with soul-searching in any meaningful way? One part of the solution begs our understanding that without preparation and introspection, we cannot possibly expect to enter the High Holidays with anything more than the usual blithe callousness to our own fates.

This Shabbat we mark the start of the month of Elul. Our sages (as brought in the Sh'la, Chayei Adam, and Mishna Berurah) connect a verse in Shir Hashirim, the Song of Songs, to the month of Elul. They note something interesting about the verse "אני לדודי, לדודי לי" "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine." The first letter of each of these words spells out אלול, Elul. Elul is a time of extreme intimacy with G-d. G-d approaches and actively waits for us to reignite our relationship with him. During Elul, even a minor step forward is of immense import. G-d will respond by reaching out to help you continue in your ascent. His closeness is a gift to help us start the difficult work of

change and self-improvement. All we need to do is the first step. We reach out and G-d catches us and lifts us up. My 6-year old, Chaim, is convinced that he can do 20 pull-ups. He can, provided that his Papa is holding him and lifting him up every time he pulls up on the bars. G-d is here to lift us up. We just need to start pulling up on the bar.

The second aspect we need to focus on is our resistance to change. The older we get, the more convinced we are of the defeatist mantra 'I am who I am'. However, this attitude is a devastating emasculation of the human spirit. As long as we are alive, we can change. To declare one's self-immutable is suicide of the spirit. In this week's Torah portion, we are told that G-d places in front of us two paths, one of blessing and one of curse. The Vilna Gaon points out that for the word "נֹתֵן, I place, the present tense is used rather the word "נֹתַתִּי" placed. Present tense is used to teach us that this choice is constant, a selection that we actively make every day. We need to understand that we are able and obligated to change and to make the right choice between blessing and curse every day.

This month, we need to consciously demand of ourselves that we will become better. We will allocate time to change, to grow, to improve. Elul is the re-set we need to help us banish the atrophying effect that the stresses of daily living inflict on our souls. Elul sensitizes us to the power of Rosh Hashana, the power of reconnecting to G-d, and the obligation to strive ever higher in our work of self-perfection.

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein