Ki Tetze

"ANI L'DODI V'DODI LI: I AM MY BELOVED'S, AND MY BELOVED IS MINE."
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Holistic Repentance: Life as a Story
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How great is repentance?! God created repentance prior to creating the world (see Midrash Tehillim 90). It hastens the redemption, brings healing to the world, and lengthens one's days (see Yoma 86a-b). Even immediately preceding one's death, one may repent and acquire the world to come. These descriptions provide a romantic aura to repentance along with the possibility to achieve great feats. Yet one cannot read these statements without thinking them to be hyperbole, exaggerations meant to highlight the importance of repentance. Has anyone ever repented and brought healing to the world? Surely not. However, at least two of Hazal's statements regarding repentance may be understood literally, providing greater power to repentance and humanity. First, Rabbi Avahu proclaims, “In the place where penitents stand, even the full-fledged righteous do not stand” (Berakhot 34b). R. Avahu implies that not only do past transgressions not inhibit the penitent's standing, but repentance raises the penitent to heights beyond the completely righteous. Second, according to Reish Lakish (Yoma 86b), repentance alters the past. Repentance motivated by fear transforms intentional sins into unintentional transgressions, and repentance performed out of love transforms intentional sins into merits. While Reish Lakish and Rabbi Avahu grant repentance incredible power, they fail to explain how repentance achieves these results.

The trouble with understanding these statements stems from a larger problem concerning repentance. Hazal were privy to this problem and expressed it eloquently in Yerushalmi Makkat (2:6):

It was inquired of Wisdom, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" Wisdom said "Evil pursues the wicked." It was asked of Prophecy, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" and He said "Let him repent and he will be forgiven."2

Repentance makes no logical sense. The institution of Wisdom, and even the divinely inspired Prophecy, cannot comprehend repentance. Just as the physicist claims that "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction," so too, the Jew must proclaim, "God rewards those who obey the commands of the Torah and punishes those who violate its prohibitions" (Rambam on Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:3). Only the Holy One—Blessed be He—in His omnipotence may validate repentance.

Human experience further supports these qualms with repentance. As Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explains:

Just as God remembers the beings of ancient times, so does man remember and revisit the past which is preserved in his memory. ... What will happen when he [the sinner attempting to repent] looks back and recalls all those years of violating the Sabbath, of exploitation and thievery?3

A person must face the humbling reality that the rushing current of time flows in only one direction. Any act remains ingrained forever in the past. The soul aches and groans when it casts a backwards glance and beholds the mistakes of the past self. The thin and clear yet impenetrable wall of time separates the soul from its past, quashing any hope for respite.

1 See the story of Rabbi Elazar ben Durdiya in Avodah Zarah 17a.


3 Peli, 249.
R. Soloveitchik reconciles these statements about repentance with logic and religious experience. Instead of downplaying the frustration that plagues the soul reflecting on sin, he views it as the key to repentance:

It is the memory of sin that releases that power within the inner depths of the soul of the penitent to do greater things than ever before . . . In repentance of love, love rises with the flames of repentance and burns brightly in the flames fanned by sin; the bonds of love pull man up to great and exalted heights.4

The penitent may harness the memory of sin to reach greater heights, as sin possesses a power that merit lacks:

Hate is more emotional and more volatile than love. The destructive forces are stronger than the constructive forces. A thoroughly righteous man is not given to feelings of hatred or jealousy; he is distinguished by natural feelings of love and mercy and kindness.5

This insight of R. Soloveitchik explains both statements I cited earlier about repentance. According to R. Avahu, the completely righteous person lacks sin and its reservoir of energy, which the penitent—on the other hand—may channel to reach greater heights. For Reish Lakish, properly utilizing sin changes its meaning. Harnessing the sin’s energy produces positive effects that outweigh any previous negatives. Therefore, the sin creates a net positive outcome and transforms into a merit.

_Hazal_ implicitly express this relationship between sin, repentance, and greatness: “Four people died due to Adam’s sin with the serpent, in the wake of which death was decreed upon all of mankind, although they themselves were free of sin. And they are: Benjamin, son of Jacob; Amram, father of Moses; Yishai, father of David; and Kilab, son of David” (Shabbat 55b). The four characters who never sinned—Benjamin, Amram, Yishai, and Kilab—are minor Biblical characters, while their listed relations—Jacob, Moses, and David—are major characters. Despite being sinless, the minor characters never achieved the greatness that their relations achieved. It is noteworthy that David appears as a relation twice. David sinned gravely by committing adultery with Batsheva and effectively murdering her husband Uriah by sending him to the frontlines of the war (I Samuel 11).6 Yet, upon rebuke, David immediately admits to his sins and repents. In fact, _Hazal_ describe David as the paradigmatic penitent, as the man “who raised and lightened the yoke of repentance” (Avodah Zarah 5a). A strong correlation exists between sin and greatness. Thus, _Hazal_ implicitly affirm R. Soloveitchik’s claim that sin lifts penitents to greater heights than the completely righteous.

Former professional basketball player Antoine Walker exemplifies the phenomenon that failure, loss, or sin often motivate people to create positive change. Throughout his successful career in the National Basketball Association (NBA), Walker made multiple all-star teams, won a championship, and amassed over 108 million dollars in salary. However, Walker went bankrupt less than two years after retirement due to overindulging on luxury goods, providing unaccounted loans to relatives, and bad luck with real estate investments. Walker eventually recovered from his financial woes and decided to harness his experience to create positive change.7 Walker’s case is not unique. According to Sports Illustrated, 60% of NBA athletes go broke within five years of retirement.8 Additionally, over three quarters of professional football players go broke or are under financial stress within two years of retirement. To fight these trends, Walker created a documentary about his story and works with Morgan Stanley to educate professional athletes about financial literacy. Walker’s story illustrates how past woes motivate people to create positive change.

Yet the idea of harnessing sin’s power does not truly explain Reish Lakish’s statement. While repenting creates a net positive outcome, it does not erase the sin, which continues to exist in the past. While the meaning of the past changes, its essence remains unaffected. Truly understanding Reish Lakish’s statement requires an understanding of the self and identity, which appears in the research of Israeli psychologist and Noble Prize winner Daniel Kahneman. Kahneman asserts that the self comprises two modes: experience and memory.9 Experience refers to the pleasure and pain of each independent moment. It only knows the present moment. Memory, on the other hand, assesses the past, downplaying the duration of experiences while overrating important moments and endings. For example, the self experiences a long distance run mainly as painful moments interspersed with short moments of elation and a feeling of accomplishment upon finishing. However, the self remembers the run by overlooking the quantity of painful moments, instead focusing on the important moments of elation and how it ended with a feeling of accomplishment. In other words, the memory of the run is more positive than the experience of the run.

4 Peli, 249. 5 Peli, 262. 6 The gemara (Shabbat 56a) suggests that David did not sin. This opinion is hard to understand at face value. The prophet Natan comes and rebukes David for his actions, to which David himself admits that he sinned. Furthermore, there are multiple statements of _Hazal_ that imply that David did sin. He is called “the man who raised and lightened the yoke of repentance” (Avodah Zarah 5a). People can learn from David about how to repent (Avodah Zarah 4b). It seems like the plain understanding of the text and the opinion of most commentators is that David sinned. One explanation of the gemara in Shabbat 56a is offered by R. Yaakov Meidan. R. Meidan notes that the rationale used to acquit David is technical and halakhic. Technically, Batsheva was single because all soldiers who went to war during the Davidic dynasty gave their wives divorce bills. Also, technically, Uriah fell under the category of rebelling against the king because his language implied that he was loyal to Yoav, David’s commander. R. Meidan suggests that the point of these legalistic acrobatics is to show the danger of being overly focused on Halakah. Despite being technically allowed under Halakah, David’s actions were morally corrupt. See Yaakov Meidan, _David vi-Batsheva: ha-Het, ha-Onesh, vi-Hatikun_, (Hertzog Press, 2010).


Kahneman observes that remembering parallels storytelling. Like memories, stories derive meaning from key moments and endings. To his surprise, Kahneman discovered that the self prioritizes memory over experience when making decisions. Kahneman bemoans this finding, noting that memories skew objective experience. People will choose suboptimal experiences if they create optimal memories. The dominance of memory reveals a deep insight into the human psyche: humans make decisions to create the best life story. People view their life as a coherent story rather than a collection of disjoint experiences.

R. Soloveitchik also discusses the relationship between experience, memory, and the self:

The problem of repentance is intertwined with an apprehension of the concept of time and how it relates to the human experience. Rabbi Jedaiah Ha-Pnini was the one who coined the phrase: “the past is nothing, the future is not yet, and the present [passes] like the blink of an eye.” According to this conception, man’s life is meaningless; he has no hold in time whatsoever. But the truth is that man does exist within two distinct dimensions of time: (1) in memory, and (2) in expectation for the future. . . Memory replies to the question: "Who am I?" I am he who remembers these feelings and those experiences, these moments of happiness and those moments of sorrow.10

In contrast to Kahneman, who explains the drawbacks of the memory, R. Soloveitchik details the downside of possessing experience without memory. Without memories and expectations, a person loses their sense of self. Identity comes from memories and the narrative that ties them together. Psychiatrist Oliver Sacks provides real-life examples of this phenomenon when discussing two patients who possess Korsakoff’s Syndrome, a long-lasting amnesic syndrome.11 Every few moments, Jimmie’s memory would reset to his experiences until 1945. This peculiar condition led Sacks to remark—in the same vein as R. Soloveitchik—that: "He is man without a past (or future), stuck in a constantly changing, meaningless moment."12 Eventually, Sacks discovered that Jimmie occasionally achieved meaning through religious worship. Yet his lack of memory severely diminished his ability to form identity and meaning. Similarly, Mr. Thompson also experienced Korsakoff’s Syndrome. However, unlike Jimmie, Mr. Thompson had recently developed the syndrome upon meeting Sacks. Sacks quickly noticed that Mr. Thompson obsessively created stories, continuously reinventing himself and the world around him. Sacks attributed this tendency to Mr. Thompson’s lack of memory and thus lack of identity. Without memories to create a narrative, Mr. Thompson resorted to storytelling.

Communities and nations also rely on memory to form identity. Yosef Yerushalmi notes that, for most of exile, Jews relied mainly on the Bible to interpret events instead of producing new historiography.13 The Akeidah, for example, served as the framework to interpret and understand The Crusades. Jews viewed Christianity as the modern-day Esau and Islam as the modern-day Ishmael. The Bible sufficed to form the robust, complete identity of the Jewish people. Thus, Yerushalmi notes that non-Biblical Jewish historiography mainly began in the early 19th century concurrent with the rise of new movements such as Zionism and the Enlightenment. These novel movements and ideologies turned to the past to acquire a sense of identity and legitimacy.

As mentioned earlier, Kahneman identifies memories and self-narratives as a distortion of reality. By creating memories, the self imposes meaning on the past. Nevertheless, the self only ever experiences independent moments, and so objectively the past is a chronological chain of these moments. However, Dr. Samuel Lebens offers an alternative theory, suggesting that reality is God’s story.14 This “storied reality” exists in a two-tiered system alongside objective reality.15 This two-tiered system allows for a duality of truths. For example, in the storied reality, humans possess significance and free will while lacking these attributes in objective reality. Lebens argues that this duality does not detract from human purpose or freedom. The lack of human purpose and freedom in objective reality is only relevant in a technical metaphysical sense. Pragmatically, however, humans only care about truth in their reality—a storied reality—and the practically relevant truth of a storied reality is that humans possess significance and free will. Furthermore, a storied reality possesses additional practical implications for human identity and meaning. Unlike Kahneman’s empirical reality, a storied reality behaves according to the characteristics of literature and stories. First, in stories, the value of an action partially depends upon its role in the entire story. In other words, actions possess “relational value.” Second, stories require conflict and resolution. Third, stories increase the importance of their characters’ actions. Fourth, stories immortalize their characters. Relational value is the key to understanding Reish Lakish’s statement about repentance.

In a story, individual actions cannot be evaluated independently in a vacuum, but rather by their role in the story. Rabbi Abraham Kook describes this phenomenon by comparing reality to painting.16 A painting comprises many paint brush strokes. However, during the painting process, one disparate stroke may seem meaningless or confusing. Only the completion of the painting bestows context and meaning to each stroke. Similarly, individual actions or events may produce fear or confusion. However, as life progresses and the person’s “painting” edges closer to completion, the purpose of each event becomes clear. The true meaning of a moment can only be comprehended—with the complete context of an entire life—by how it relates to other moments.

The concept of relational value also appears in modern psychological research. Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert coined the term “psychological immune system” to describe the process by which people adapt and achieve happiness regardless of external circumstances.17 Gilbert describes relational value as the driving force behind the psychological immune system. Events, objects, or

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10 Peli, 249.
12 Sacks, 29.
13 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Zakhar: Jewish History and Jewish Memory (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002).
14 Lebens bases his interpretation of reality on the commentary of Rabbi Mordechai Leiner of Izbica, the Ishbiter, who asserts that the world is God’s lucid dream. See Mei HaShiloah on Parshat Miketz s.v. tishma halom li-pator ato.
16 Middot Ha-Ra’ayah: Pahdanut
situations possess objective value. For example, apples possess an objective chemical makeup and ratio of nutrients. However, buying a specific apple activates the psychological immune system, which searches for subjective reasons to prefer that specific apple. Thus, the apple’s value partially derives from being bought and owned, from its relationship with the buyer.

The concept of relational value explains Reish Lakish’s statement about repentance. During a person’s life, God (as it were) labels actions with a pencil, as the meaning of an action may change. Its value partially depends on a future yet to occur. If a person repents and harnesses the energy of a “sin” to produce greater good, then God relabels that “sin” as a “merit.” In an empirical reality, the past motivates the penitent to create a greater future good. However, in a storied reality, the penitent’s future actions rewrite the meaning of the past. This creates a symbiotic relationship where the past motivates a greater future good, which in turn rewrites the past. The past never holds sway over the living. The gates of repentance offer the eternal possibility to rescue and redeem the past.

Stories revolve around the struggle that besets and plagues their characters. In fact, characters often represent the struggles they endure. As writer Milan Kundera remarks about his character Tereza: “Tereza was therefore born of a situation which brutally reveals the irreconcilable duality of body and soul, that fundamental human experience” and later about literary characters in general: “As I have pointed out before, characters are not born like people, of woman; they are born of a situation, a sentence, a metaphor containing in a nutshell a basic human possibility . . . “18 Completely sinless and harmonious characters ruin the very point of literature. Aiming to avoid sin misconstrues the goal. As Hazal implicitly suggest, the greatest Biblical characters sinned and lived tumultuous lives. Literary critics evaluate characters by their ability to handle and overcome failure and conflict. Thus, characters cannot be evaluated during the story, but only after their journey and struggle ends. In a storied reality as well, God judges humans not by their ability to avoid conflict or sin, but by their ability to handle and overcome their struggles.

The following midrash implies another implication of a storied reality: When one performs a mitzvah he should perform it with joy. For had Reuven known that the Torah would record that he tried to save Yoṣef from the brothers, he would have put him on his shoulders and run home to his father. And if Aharon had known that the Torah would record that when he saw Moshe Rabeinu the first time and he heard that he was chosen to be the Redeemer of Israel (and not Aharon) . . . Had Aharon known, he would have come (to him) with drums and cymbals. And had Boaz known that the Megillah would record his giving Ruth some parched wheat to eat, he would have offered her a huge banquet like those of King Shlomo (Vayikrah Rabbah 34:8).

Stories often transcend people and time, surviving through either oral or written transmission. If the characters of the Bible understood the eternality of their actions, they would have approached life with urgency and vigor. Even though the character may perish, their actions remain forever. Their reputation and legacy stand for the remainder of history. In a storied reality, where God remembers every action, each choice becomes infinitely more important and meaningful.

Stories immortalize their characters, keeping them alive beyond their years. Author Tim O’Brien beautifully captures this idea by discussing his childhood crush Linda.19 When Linda passes away from a brain tumor, young O’Brien continues to visit her in his dreams. Dream Linda insists that she is not dead, or at least, that her death does not matter. Eventually, with persistence, he convinces Linda to describe death:

I guess it’s like being inside a book that nobody’s reading . . . An old one. It’s up on a library shelf, so you’re safe and everything, but the book hasn’t been checked out for a long, long time. All you can do is wait. Just hope somebody’ll pick it up and start reading. (O’Brien, 232)

Linda captures the essence of O’Brien’s message. Like shelved books, the dead idly sit by, waiting to be noticed. By telling stories, O’Brien “picks” them up off the shelf and brings them to life. Stories carry on the lives of the dead. In a storied reality, God—the ultimate Author—grants immortality to God’s characters: “I will give them, in My house and within My walls, a monument and a name better than sons or daughters. I will give them an everlasting name which shall not perish” (Isaiah 56:5).

Two anxieties plague the human psyche: abandonment and meaning. Man fears that he may be irredeemable, that he will reach a point of no return, that he will commit a sin so grave that no one or nothing can redeem him. He fears he will be like the wayward and rebellious son whose glutinous actions verify his future: to commit crimes liable for the death penalty. To prevent this ending, the community substantiates this position. People can always redeem their past and themselves. In fact, through repentance, they can harness their sins to reach greater heights.

Additionally, man fears that his life is meaningless, that his existence is a string of independent, fleeting hedonistic experiences. From this fear arises the tendency of storytelling, of creating a narrative that ties together experiences under a meaningful goal. Thus emerges the importance of a storied reality. God, the ultimate Author, authenticates this human tendency, moving it from a naive human construct to an act of imitatio dei: “just as God tells stories, so, too should you tell stories.”20 The stories that humanity coauthors with God give meaning to struggle, eternal importance to actions, life to the dead, and—most importantly—validity to a repentance that rewrites the past and saves humanity.

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18 Milan Kundera and Richmond Hoxie, The Unbearable Lightness of Being (London: Faber & Faber, 1984). I want to thank Sam Lebens for bringing these quotes to my attention in a lecture he gave at Yeshivat Oraya.


20 See Sotah 14a.
HAGGAI: PROPHET OF ELUL
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Rabbi Adin On what basis is Hodesh Elul seen as ushering in the period of repentance? Conventional wisdom maintains that, after having been granted atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf, Moses ascended Har Sinai on 1 Elul. This launched a second period of 40 days and nights spent in celestial study, after which Moses descended with the second tablets on 10 Tishrei, Yom Kippur.

This position, popularized by Ran (Rosh Hashanah 12b be-’alos s.v. garsinan) and Tur (Orah Hayyim 581), is based on the midrashic account of Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer (chap. 46):

Rabbi Joshua, son of Korah, said: Moses was on the mountain for forty days, reading the Written Law by day and studying the Oral Law by night. After forty days he took the tablets and descended into the camp on the seventeenth of Tamuz, shattered the tablets, and slew the sinners of Israel. He spent forty days in the camp until he had burnt the calf and powdered it like dust of the earth, destroyed idol worship from Israel, and established every tribe in its place. Upon the new moon of Elul the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "Come up to me on the Mount" (Exodus 24:12), and have them sound the shofar throughout the camp, for Moses has ascended the Mount, so that they do not go astray again after the worship of idols. The Holy One, blessed be He, ascended with that shofar, as it states, "God ascended with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet" (Psalms 47:5). Therefore the Sages instituted that the shofar should be sounded on the new moon of Elul every year.

The midrash is intriguing, particularly in its mysterious description of God’s ascent with the shofar, to which we will return. Regardless, following Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer’s chronology, we can well understand the commentaries’ depiction of Elul as ushering in the season of repentance: it was during these forty days leading to Yom Kippur that Moses reestablished the relationship between God and His people.

However, its popularity notwithstanding, this conclusion is not necessarily warranted. Nowhere does the midrash identify the month of Elul with repentance; in fact, it does not even mention the practice of blowing the shofar throughout the remainder of the month. It is only after citing the midrash that Ran (ibid.) adds, “From here Ashkenazim relied to blow throughout the month of Elul, morning and night; and from here we may account for those places where they arise early [for Selihot] beginning with Rosh Hodesh Elul.”

What is more, Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer’s timeline has no explicit basis in the biblical text. Even granting the midrash’s general timetable, a quick calculation indicates that Moses would have been required to ascend the mountain not on 1 Elul (which only contains 29 days, equaling just 39 days with the addition of Tishrei’s first ten days) but on the last day of Av. Indeed, Seder Olam Rabbah (6), followed by Bekhor Shor (Devarim 10:10), adopts precisely this chronology. There is considerable debate, then, whether or not Moses ascended on 1 Elul. Given these concerns, might there be an alternative basis for the significance of Hodesh Elul?

In fact, there is an extremely strong candidate for this distinction: the opening prophecy of Haggai. Let us set the stage by reviewing the biblical background to Haggai’s prophecies, delivered during the years immediately prior to the Second Temple’s construction. Earlier, Cyrus had called upon the Jews to return from exile and rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1:1). The Samaritans, however, furiously opposed the reconstruction efforts, and, during the reign of Artaxerxes, petitioned successfully for a royal command halting the work (Ezra 4:7-23). The Jews became dispirited, and abandoned the project until the reign of Darius (Ezra 7:24).

Enter Haggai. The two chapters of his book, particularly the first, are dedicated to urging the people to overcome their hesitation and proceed with the reconstruction. Haggai delivers his first prophecy on 1 Elul, repeatedly invoking the language of repentance:

In the second year of King Darius, on the first day of the sixth month, this word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, the governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Yehozadak, the high priest:

Thus said the Lord of Hosts: These people say, “The time has not yet come for rebuilding the House of the Lord.”

And the word of the Lord through the prophet Haggai continued:

Is it a time for you to dwell in your paneled houses, while this House is lying in ruins?

Now thus said the Lord of Hosts: Consider how you have been faring (“simu levakhem al darkheikhem”!)

21 Of course, there are numerous associations between the term Elul and repentance. For instance, the classic association between Elul and the phrase “Ani le-dodi ve-dodi li,” as well as the Hasidic bon mot “the king is in the field” suggest a heightened level of divine intimacy during Elul. Meiri (Hibbur ho-Teshuvah, Meishiv Nefesh 2:2) posits that during Elul God uniquely enables us to prepare for the approaching Days of Judgment. In support of this view, Meiri, based on a midrash, extends the Talmud’s application of the verse “Seek the Lord while He can be found, Call to Him while He is near” from the Ten Days of Repentance to Hodesh Elul. These explanations and others, however, do not explain why the entire month of Elul is specifically selected for this period of intimacy or preparation, and are perhaps best characterized as mere allusions, as does Arukh Ha-Shulhan (Orah Hayyim 581:1).

22 Or third, see Tanhuma (Warsaw), Ki Tissa 31.

23 Relatedly, as noted by Bah (Orah Hayyim 581 s.v. tanya), Ran and Tur seem to have a somewhat different text of Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer. In Ran’s version, the midrash concludes by recording that on the basis of the events at Sinai, the Jews began blowing the shofar on Rosh Hodesh Elul to inspire the people in repentance and to confuse Satan. Even according to this text, as Ran makes clear in the continuation, the midrash speaks exclusively about blowing the shofar on Rosh Hodesh proper. Tur’s (ibid.) citation of the midrash does include a reference to blowing the shofar throughout the month, but this appears to be a far later and less reliable citation.

24 See also Rashi to Exodus 33:11, R. Eliyahu Mizrahi ibid., Tosafot Bava Kamma 82a s.v. kedei, and Bah (ibid.) s.v. be-Rosh.
You have sowed much and brought in little; you eat without being satisfied; you drink without getting your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one gets warm; and he who earns anything earns it for a leaky purse.

Thus said the Lord of Hosts: Consider how you have fared ("simu levakham al darkheikhem"): Go up to the hills ("alu ha-har") and get timber, and rebuild the House; then I will look on it with favor and I will be glorified, said the Lord. (Haggai 1:1-8)

Given that the biblical year generally begins in Nissan, it is evident that the sixth month refers to Elul (R. Yosef Karo to Haggai 1:1; Da’at Mikra ad loc.). 25 On Rosh Hodesh Elul, then, Haggai exhorts the people to recognize that their agricultural failure is a direct outgrowth of their misplaced priorities: “Because My House which lies in ruins, while you all hurry to your own houses!” Haggai thus appears to provide an explicit biblical basis for 1 Elul launching a period of repentance. 26 Indeed, Kaf ha-Hayyim (Orah Hayyim 581:15; see also Kaf ha-Hayyim Orah Hayyim 429:6) cites Nezirat Shimson, who goes so far as to recommend that one read the beginning of Sefer Haggai on the first of Elul. Further, the verses go one to state that “They came and set to work on the House of the Lord of Hosts, their God, on the twenty-fourth day of the sixth month” (Haggai 1:14-15), indicating that Elul opens and nearly closes with the theme of repentance.

What are we to make of this biblical precedent? We may begin by noting a subtle textual similarity between Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer and Haggai: the verse describing Moses’ ascent to the mountain reads “aleh eilay ha-harah,” “ascend to Me on the mountain,” paralleling Haggai’s charge of “alu ha-har,” “ascend to the mountain,” to collect materials for the construction of the Temple. In both instances, the charge of climbing a mountain inaugurates the period of repentance.

Yet this correspondence primarily underscores the extent to which these models for Hodesh Elul diverge. The respective ascents differ in regard to the nature of the mountain, who is instructed to go up, and for what purpose. Moses climbs the mountain of God. Haggai’s listeners, however, go up to an anonymous mountain. In Shemot, only Moses ascends, whereas in Haggai the entire nation must alight. Moses, according to the midrashic literature, studies Torah with God for forty days and nights, while the Jews of the Second Temple period engage in the decidedly mundane process of wood collection, albeit to construct the Temple. 27

These glaring differences are presumably born of their respective contexts. In Shemot, the nation had effectively shattered the Sinaitic covenant by sinning with the Golden Calf. What is more, at no point does the nation repent for its misdeeds. To the contrary, while God accepts Moses’ pleas and is persuaded not to decimate the Israelites, that is an outgrowth of Moses’ argument from the desecration of God’s name, as well as his invocation of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, rather than any actions taken by the Jews themselves.

Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer reinforces the motifs of the Shemot narrative. According to the midrash, the shofar blast announces Moses’ ascent to the mountain in order to avoid the very real possibility that, thinking Moses has died, the people will again be ensnared by the sin of avodah zarah. 28 Apparently, while the nation has been granted clemency, there is little reason to conclude that they have repented as a nation. Moreover, the midrash’s esoteric depiction of God’s concurrent ascent with the shofar blast suggests that He, along with Moses, withdraws His presence from the nation, indicating His continued displeasure with their actions. 29

The contrast to Haggai could not be more clear. Here, while the people have erred, they have not sinned egregiously, and the navi addresses himself to the entire Judean community (albeit only some 50,000 strong). Specifically, instead of engaging in an act of rebellion, the people are guilty of hypocrisy and apathy. Their sin is not one of commission but of omission: they have failed to overcome the challenges confronting the rebuilding project.

Seeking to stir the people, Haggai exhorts four times in his sefer, “simu levakhem al darkheikhem” (1:5,7; 2:15,18). As Da’at Mikra notes (1:5 note 12), this locution is unique to Sefer Haggai. Quite literally, the prophet urges the people to “pay attention.” And it is not so much a spiritual message as a practical, albeit religious, one. Haggai is the pragmatic Religious Zionist, calling on all people to stop with the excuses, roll up their sleeves, and engage in the rebuilding efforts.

Indeed, contrasting sharply with Moses, who must separate from the nation, Haggai and his contemporary Zekhariah may have personally joined the people by engaging in manual labor themselves. The verse states, “Thereupon Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Jeshua son of Jozadak began rebuilding the House of God in Jerusalem, with the full support of the prophets of God” (Ezra 5:2). Malbim (5:3) appears to maintain that the prophets were instrumental merely inasmuch as

25 While in Sefer Ezra there are indications that the months are actually counted from Tishrei, Da’at Mikra (ibid.) convincingly argues from internal evidence that Haggai’s book certainly follows the bulk of Tanakh in counting the months from Nissan.


27 This is similar to the call in Nehemia 8:15 for the Jews to climb to the mountain and collect materials with which to construct Sukkot.

28 In this, Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer adopts the view that the Jews sinned upon arriving at the erroneous conclusion that Moses had died on the mountain; see also Tanhuma (Buber) Ki Tissa 13 and Rashi Exodus 32:1. It is also worth noting that Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer’s shofar blast, which indicates God’s ascent from the mountain, provides a bookend of sorts with the initial shofar blast of Sinai, which signaled God’s descent onto the mountain.

29 See also Nedarim 38a, which claims that “the Torah was given initially only to Moses and his descendants, as it is stated: “Write for you” (Exodus 34:27), and it is also stated: “Hew for you” (Exodus 34:1), meaning: Just as their waste is yours, so too their writing is yours. However, Moses treated the Torah with generosity and gave it to the Jewish people. And about him, the verse says: “He that has a bountiful eye shall be blessed, as he gives of his bread to the poor” (Proverbs 22:9).” Note that both proof texts are drawn from the second set of tablets, suggesting that Moses’ final forty days primarily are not centered on the relationship between God and the Jewish people, but between God and Moses.
they called on the populace to build. *Rashi* (ibid., s.v. ve-sarav), on the other hand, seems to take the verse at face value: the prophets practiced what they preached, engaging in heavy lifting as they concomitantly urged the people to follow suit. On Rashi’s reading, Haggai practiced the democratic message that he preached. The contrast to Moses, who was specifically separated from the nation, could not be thrown into sharper relief.

It is no surprise, then, that Haggai’s universal, practical message and personal model resonated with the entire nation:

> Zerubbavel son of Shealtiel and the high priest Joshua son of Jehotzadak and all the rest of the people gave heed to the summons of the Lord their God and to the words of the prophet Haggai, when the Lord their God sent him; the people feared the Lord. (*Haggai 1:12*)

Yet a glaring question remains. With few exceptions, the classical commentaries omit Sefer Haggai in their discussions of Hodesh Elul. Why?

A number of factors may be at play. First, as noted elsewhere, the rabbis sought to link nearly all the biblical holidays to the Jews’ first year as a nation, suggesting that the annual cycle of holidays mirrors that original yearlong series of events. The *midrash* does just this. Second, Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer’s narrative enables us to view Elul as a period of preparation for Yom Kippur, heightening the stature of this holy day and extending its “footprint”; this is lacking in Haggai’s prophecies. Third and perhaps most interesting, Haggai’s prophecy was delivered during a period of Judean resettlement, with lessons that were particularly poignant at that time, but less so in later stages of Jewish history. The events of the Golden Calf and its aftermath, leading to Yom Kippur, were seen by the Rabbis as models for the full sweep of Jewish history.

If this final reason for the historical sidelining of Haggai’s prophecy is correct, today’s period of a renewed return to Zion might be precisely the moment to reintroduce Haggai’s clarion call. As Rav Soloveitchik argued passionately in his classic 1956 plea *Kol Dodi Dofek*, albeit at a very different moment in Israeli history, we can in no way be lackadaisical in our support of *Medinat Yisrael*. Stated in 2018 terms, as American Jews we cannot take for granted the *next generation’s support for Israel*, both materially and attitudinally, nor can we take for granted the relationship between the diaspora and Israeli Jewish communities.

Further, Haggai’s clarion call of “simu levavkhem,” an attack on apathy, is acutely relevant in our time, although ironically perhaps most of all in Jewish communities beyond Israel’s borders. The great challenges confronting our generation, at least on Modern Orthodox American soil, resemble less the outright rebelliousness of the *generation of the desert* and more the dispassion and misplaced priorities of Haggai’s returnees.

This year, I will be following Kaf Ha-hayyim’s recommendation to read Sefer Haggai on Rosh Hodesh Elul. Indeed, perhaps the time has come for a renewed appreciation of Haggai’s inspiring message not only for 1 Elul, but the entire month to come.