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GETTING THE MOST OUT OF ELUL

Today is the first day of Rosh Chodesh Elul. A person has to be aware that when Elul comes, he has to get his mind ready. He has to prepare himself for Elul. If you just let Elul come and flow over you, you will not get any benefits from Elul. There are some things that you could experience while you're sleeping and still derive benefits from them. For example, taking an x-ray or having an MRI done. They don't require you to be consciously involved. It doesn't make a difference. Even if you're getting radiation treatment, it works even if you're sleeping. It doesn't say you have to participate.

ELUL IS COMPLETELY A TIME OF MERCY

So, we first have to understand what Elul is. The Vilna Gaon in *Likutei HaGra* at the end of *Sefer Yetzirah* makes a mind-boggling statement, a statement that I would expect from the *olam hachassidus*, not from the *olam haGr"a*. Yet, the Gr"a says the following statement: אלול כולו רחמים, Elul is completely a time of mercy, וימי רצון, and its days are when Hashem looks very favorably upon Klal Yisrael. והוא דרגה דחסד, it's an outstanding *madreigah*, level, of unique *chessed*.

Now, Hashem always shows *rachamim*, but Hashem joins *rachamim* together with *din*. Except for the last month of the year, Elul, is כולו רחמים, and that is a tremendous insight.

The Vilna Gaon had a famous *mehutan*, known as the Chayei Adam (R' Avraham Danzig, 1748-1821). The Chayei Adam (סימן קלח) writes, באהבת ישראל, that because of the love of Hakadosh Baruch Hu for His nation Klal Yisrael, הרבה להטיב אותנו, He increased, He went the extra mile, to be *meitiv* with us, וצונו לשוב לפניו בכל עת שנחטא, and He commanded us to do *teshuvah* whenever we sin. ואף שתשובה טובה בכל עת, and even though *teshuvah* is good at any time, still, in all, he says that Chodesh Elul הוא מובחר ומוכן יותר, is the time when *teshuvah* is much more readily accepted, much more so than during the rest of the year. Why? לפי שימים אלו ימי רצון מעת נבחרנו לעם, because these days are *yemei ratzon* - days of Divine favor - from when we became a nation.

All year long, there is a lot of *rachamim*, but the uniqueness of Elul is that it has *rachamim* that creates a *mehilas avonos*, a forgiveness for sins, which the rest of the year's *rachamim* does not accomplish. *Rachamim* during the rest of the year accomplishes a lot of things. You can get *parnasah*. You can get *brilus*. But not *rachamim* for *mehilas avonos*. The Arizal writes that the 13 *middos harachamim* are what governs these days of Elul. When Hakadosh Baruch Hu revealed the *yud gimmel middos harachamim* to Moshe Rabbeinu,

that was the highest level of *rachamim shayach*. Before Hashem taught Moshe Rabbeinu about the *yud gimmel middos harachamim*, He told him: אני אעביר את כל טובי, I'm going to show you all of My *tov*, the ultimate *tov* before you. The Arizal says that the *yud gimmel middos harachamim* are at work day and night if a person is *shayach* to them, if a person relates to them.

Now, this is a tremendous revelation for us because it changes the whole perspective of Elul from being a scary time into being a time of tremendous *ahavah* and tremendous *yedidus*.

WE GET TO HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH HASHEM

One of the fundamental clarifications that everybody has to know is that Yiddishkeit is predicated upon us creating a relationship with Hashem. When we are very young, and we start off doing *mitzvos*, we have no *shaychus* to a relationship with Hashem. So you're either a *mitzvah* boy or an *aveirah* boy or a *mitzvah* girl or an *aveirah* girl. You listen to the *yetzer tov*. You listen to the *yetzer hara*. But the concept of a relationship with Hashem is something that's beyond most youths. People have to realize that the point of Yiddishkeit is to develop a very special, a very unique, and a very personal relationship with Hashem. No two children in a family have the same relationship with their mother or their father. Each one has their own relationship. Some better, some stronger, some weaker. So even when you have a relationship with somebody, that relationship is not static. They're fluid situations. There are times when relationships get stronger or weaker.

Let's say a person gets married and celebrates an anniversary. If he celebrates it properly with *hakaras hatov*, and has good *middos*, and appreciates the *tovah* that his spouse does and provides for him, then an anniversary will be what's called an *eis dodim*. It will be a time of special closeness. Sometimes, people go away on a vacation together to celebrate their relationship, and it's supposed to be a time of warmth, a time that regenerates, that strengthens the whole relationship physically and emotionally, and so on.

You have to know that it's the same with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. There are times that are not all the same. There's a time with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, where the relationship heats up. It warms up. It gets stronger. And the relationship builds, and that newly-strengthened relationship becomes a stepping stone to continue, and move forward.

ELUL IS THAT TIME. THE TIME OF ELUL IS A TIME OF IMMENSE, INTENSE *KURVAH*, CLOSENESS.

Now you have to know how this *kurvah* works. How does it operate? Let's say, in a relationship between a parent and a son, the parent knows when his son's birthday is coming up. Or, maybe the son is graduating soon, or getting engaged, so they make a *seudah* in the house. Maybe the parents will go away with the child, take a trip to Eretz Yisrael to celebrate the upcoming *simchah*. Maybe they'll spend a couple of days with their child. They'll reminisce. But in these cases, it's the parents who step forward and do for the child. It's not the child doing for the parents.

Sometimes you have parents reaching a milestone in their lives, let's say they're married for 25 years, 50 years, and the children now decide they want

to do something special for the parents. They come up with some ideas of how to be *mechazek* their parents, of how to relate to their parents. This is an *eis dodim*.

TIME TO CELEBRATE YEDIDUS WITH HASHEM

Elul is not a time when Hakadosh Baruch Hu awakens you. Elul is אני לי לודוד יודודי. The way Elul works is: I have to feel and sense that Hashem is my beloved, and I come forward and embrace Hakadosh Baruch Hu. I celebrate that *yedidus*. I come to Hakadosh Baruch Hu and I say: “Hakadosh Baruch Hu, since You’re offering me this time of tremendous *rachamim* and tremendous *chesed*, I will come forward and I will do things to strengthen that *yedidus*, to be *mekabel* that *yedidus*, and be together with Hakadosh Boruch Hu.” In Elul, a person is supposed to be walking around, not taking his mind off that awareness. In Elul when you come to *davening*, it’s not like the rest of the year when you come to *davening*. Hashem wants us to communicate with Him. Hashem wants us to talk to Him. Hashem wants us to acknowledge that He is our sole source of all *brachah* and *hatzlachah*. Hashem wants us to come to Him. Coming to *daven* in Elul means to say: “Hashem, I’m coming. I’m speaking to my *dodi, ani ledodi*.” And Hashem responds: *vedodi li*.

When a person goes to learn Torah in Elul, it’s not approached as: “it’s something that I’m *chayav* to do; I’m *metzuveh*, and have to do it.” Rather, it should come from a feeling of *yedidus*. It has to come from the understanding that: “Hakadosh Baruch Hu, Torah is Your *ratzon*. Torah is what You delight in all day long. I’m going to delight in the Torah together with Hakadosh Baruch Hu.” That’s the right perspective. When a husband brings his wife a cup of coffee and something to eat on the morning of their anniversary and says, “with this, I begin a day of celebrating,” that’s step number one. It’s not the same coffee that he brought her the day before. It’s an *andere* cup of coffee. You have to know it’s the same with Hakadosh Baruch Hu and the *kiyum* of his *hamitzvos*.

Now, in Yiddishkeit there are certain *peulos*, certain actions, that are actions of *yedidus*. *Bris milah* is one of them. There are some people who were *zocheh* to get a name of *yedidim*. Avraham was considered a *yedid Hashem*. Shabbos is a time of *yedidus*. מה ידידות ממתיר. *Lecha dodi*. The whole concept of Shabbos is spending time *beyedidus* with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Shabbos is also a tremendous time of *rachamim*. The Vilna Gaon says that *tefillos* are *neskabel* on Shabbos just like they’re *neskabel* during the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah. But during the *yemei haElul*, the humdrum life, the normal *holech yeilech*, has to manifest itself, has to express, has to show that I appreciate the opportunity of *yedidus* with Hashem.

We have the famous *tefillah, Avinu Malkeinuu*. Elul is *Avinu*. We’re בניים אתם לה' אלוקים. Not *avadim*. *Banim*, sons and fathers - this aspect brings out a *yedidus*. Tishrei, the next month, will be a month where we proclaim Hashem as our *Melech*. But Hashem gives us a month to spend *beyedidus*.

WE ALL NEED RACHAMIM

Now, who amongst us does not need *rachamim*? Who amongst us does not have his *pekel*? Everybody has a *pekel*. If not today, you’ll have it tomorrow.

If not tomorrow, maybe next year. Look how many people were facing awful *misos meshunos* last Yom Hakippurim. How many people perished *rachmana litzlan* in Meiron in such a strange, awful way?! How many people died in Surfside last week?! A group of *bachurim* died in a plane crash, and many other things happened over this year in terrible ways. When I was in Eretz Yisrael, I read an article that this summer had a higher number of drowning deaths compared to previous years. The article was telling everybody to be careful and take precautions. Elul is the *eis rachamim*. Had we perhaps been *mechazek* ourselves last Elul, we would have been *zocheh* to tremendous *rachamim* maybe. Maybe we would have been spared. The *chiddush* is not that the house collapsed. The *chiddush* is that houses don't collapse all the time. The *chiddush* is not that planes crash. The *chiddush* is that planes don't crash. The only One that controls every single thing is Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

How many people suffered from COVID this past year? How many people got the Delta? I just spoke to somebody recently who got the Delta variant of the COVID. They said they wanted to die. It was worse than anything you could imagine. The only reason they didn't go to the hospital was they didn't want to die for sure. That's why they didn't go to the hospital. They suffered tremendously. Day and night, they had constant suffering. Tremendous. They never had the vaccine. The spouse who had the vaccine also got the Delta variant, but it wasn't *mashpia* terribly on the spouse.

Who knows what we're facing? How many of us have children who need a *shidduch*? How many of us need children? How many of us need *parnasah*? There's no end to the needs of Klal Yisrael. Elul is כולו רחמים. You have to tap into that *rachamim*. In Elul Hashem offers us a very unique opportunity. The way I picture Elul is that we're in the ocean and we're looking for some help, and suddenly a hand comes out from *shamayim*. The *gemara* says there's a concept of hands coming out from *shamayim* and offering help. A hand comes out from *shamayim* and it says: You want to be with Me? Seize My hand. Why don't you grab Me? You've got to seize My hand.

Ani ledodi, the word *yedidus* means *yad yad*. *Yad* equals fourteen *begematria*. Fourteen and fourteen *begematria* is twenty-eight. You know what that equals? *Koach*. The *gematria* of *koach* is twenty-eight. The *koach* that one gets from grasping the hand of Hashem. And this opportunity for *rachamin* exists day and night. I saw in a *chassidische sefer* that big rebbes said *Tehillim* at night. Even though usually you don't say *Tehillim* at night, they would say *Tehillim* at night in Elul because the Arizal says it's *sha'as rachamim* day and night. You don't realize that every single time you reach out to Hakadosh Baruch Hu, you are being *mechazek* that *rachamim*. You are bringing that *rachamim* to yourself. There's no time like this!

Even the smallest action that a person does, for example, a person was to say at any time, "Hakadosh Baruch Hu, I love You, and I appreciate the tremendous opportunity of Elul!" You know what that is?! That's tremendous! Imagine a person went to his relative and said, "You know, I'd like to offer you my hand and my help, whatever I can do for you." It would make a person feel tremendous. Hakadosh Baruch Hu is waiting.

There was once a Yid, a tremendous *tzaddik*, a *talmid chacham*. His name was Rav Moshe Rosenstein (1881-1940). He was the *menahel* of Lomza

Yeshivah in Europe. He was an *adam gadol meod*. He was *zocheh* to learn in Telz by Rav Lazer Gordon and also by Rav Shimon Shkop in Grodno. Later, he even learned in Kelm. He became a tremendous *ba'al mussar*. He was a special personality. One time Rav Moshe happened to be in the city of Bialystok where the Novardok Yeshivah was. The *rosh yeshivah*, Rav Avraham Yafin (1887-1970), the son-in-law of the Alter of Novardok, came to greet him. He asked him if he could please say some words of *chizuk* to the *bachurim*. It was the time of Elul. Sadly, they didn't have tapes or other recording devices back then. What we do have is somebody who was present, Rav Yankel Galinsky (1920-2014).

SOLDIERS IN THE GENERAL'S BUNKER DON'T WORRY

He said Rav Moshe came to the *bachurim* and began to speak. He said, "There's one *perek* in *Tehillim* that when reading it and studying its sentences, you could almost get the feeling that it was not said by Dovid Hamelech." "An *andere* Dovid," he said. A different Dovid wrote this. It's not the usual *nusach* that Dovid Hamelech uses. They looked at him and wondered which *perek* he was referring to.

Rav Moshe said, "I'm talking about *perek chaf zayin* in *Tehillim*." The one we say during Chodesh Elul אורי וישעי לודוד ה' אורי וישעי. He said to the *bachurim*, "Why could you get the impression that it is not from Dovid Hamelech?" He said, "It's a different *shprach*. It's a whole different *nusach* than the rest of the *perakim* in *Tehillim*. Throughout *sefer Tehillim*, we're accustomed to read again and again the language of Dovid showing his yearning, his hope to be saved through *yeshuas Hashem*. He needs the *yeshuah* of Hashem and he's reaching out for that salvation. Dovid Hamelech found himself in very challenging situations from his birth until his death. People were pursuing him, he had *tzaros*. And he's pleading with Hashem throughout his life to save him. But in this *mizmor*, in this *perek*, you suddenly see a whole different tune. He gets a strength that we don't know where it comes from. Suddenly, he's not afraid of anybody. He's not afraid of his enemies. He's not afraid of people who want to harm him. ממי אירא, ממי אפחד, who shall I be afraid of? ממי אירא, ממי אפחד, who shall I fear? בקרב עלי מרעים לאכול את בשרי צרי ואויבי לי, when my enemies surround me to devour me, what happens to them? הםה כשלו ונפלו, they stumble and they fall. אם תחנה עלי מחנה, if a whole camp of enemies will gather against me, לא יירא, I won't be afraid, אם תקום עלי מלחמה בזאת אני בוטח, He found new strength in this *perek*. What's different?" Rav Moshe asked, "*Mah nishtaneh* this *mizmor*, this *perek*, over all the other *mizmorei Tehillim*?" Where did Dovid Hamelech find this newfound confidence?

He said to the *bochurim*, "I'm going to tell you. Imagine there's a soldier in battle and bullets are flying. All kinds of weaponry are going back and forward. The guy is in a trench. The guy is *mamash* petrified. He's lost. Imagine the guy is suddenly invited into the protected bunker of the general of the army. No less. The second he gets into that bunker with the general of the army, you know what he feels? He's safe. Because even though the enemies are searching out the general and even though they're shooting the same as before, he knows when you're next to the general, the guy in charge of the whole battle, the protection that he's going to be granted and that he offers, is going to be a unique protection."

Dovid Hamelech describes in this *perek* that he's in a new place with Hakadosh Baruch Hu. He has a new relationship with Hashem. He's together with Hashem *bechvodo uweatzmo*. And when a person is in the *Beis Hashem*, when he's in the bunker and Hashem is with him there, when Hashem's light and salvation are with him, then he has nothing to be afraid of. He now finds himself in the most protected of places. *כי יצפני בסכה ביום רעה יסתרי בסתר אהלו*, I will hide in the *sukkah* on the day of evil. I will hide in a hidden place of His tents. I will be elevated. The second the *tzarah* comes, I'm going to be covered.

Rav Moshe told them, "You *bnei yeshivos* who are spending your lives toiling in Torah and *avodas Hashem*, you should know that you are always in the 'bunker' with Hashem. You don't have what to be afraid of. You just have to remember that you're in the 'bunker' with Hashem."

SEEK RACHAMIM FROM YEDIDUS

In Elul, every person should renew his awareness that he's with Hashem. It's worth it. Even if right now you don't see anything that you're eminently worried about, just look back on the previous year at all those people who had no *hava mina* that there was any danger lurking in their future. But it was lurking. It was there. And perhaps had they reached out to Hashem, they could have been *zocheh* *לחסות בנועם ה' ולבקר בהיכלו*, and be spared the trials and tribulations. Thank Hashem. When you say *מודים אנחנו לך*, tell Hashem: "I'm thankful to You. I'm grateful to You that you've given me this opportunity to celebrate my *yedidus* with You." Think of personal things you went through this past year, and you were spared. Think of the things, the challenges, the health challenges, the physical challenges, the emotional challenges, the family challenges, the *parnasah* challenges, all the challenges that you went through this year, and you were spared. That's tremendous. And you tell Hashem, "I really appreciate that, and I want to spend some moments with You."

It's amazing! We have no idea what goes on by somebody else, but if we did, we'd be shocked to see how many challenges people really have. You tell Hashem, "I want to make amends. I'm sorry if I rejected Your advice, Your counsel, Your direction. I'm sorry if I rebelled against You, whether *beshogeg* or even *bemeizid* sometimes. I'm sorry, Hakadosh Baruch Hu." If a person will do that, there's no *safek* that he will earn himself a lot of *rachamim* from Hakadosh Baruch Hu.

SEEK RACHAMIM BEFORE THE GEZEIRAH COMES

Now, it says if a person seeks *rachamim* before the *gezeirah* comes down upon a person, it's much easier to get *rachamim* then and avoid the *tzarah*, than to get *rachamim* later on. I never dreamed last year that I was getting cancer. I knew it was *shayach* but I never dreamed it would happen, and it happened. And I'm overwhelmed with gratitude to Hakadosh Baruch Hu for having given me and shown me *rachamim merubim*, unlimited *rachamim merubim*.

When I was in Eretz Yisrael, I met a very special young man from America whose life is dedicated to helping cancer patients. The *mesiras nefesh* that this guy has for people is amazing. At four o'clock in the morning, he leaves his house to visit different hospitals. He makes his rounds from hospital to

hospital, talking to doctors and being an advocate for patients and their families. He'll bring them breakfast, bring them a coffee. The small things that he thinks of are just amazing, and he's there for you before, during, and after.

I met him in Yerushalayim, and he didn't know what to say. It finally got out that he was aware of my health situation, and he said to me, "I was waiting for you to call. You have my personal number." I said, "I knew. I would have called you had I needed you." He said, "What do you mean?! You didn't need me?!" He said, "How did you deal with all the suffering?" I said, "I have to tell you that I didn't suffer." He said, "What do you mean?! In my experience, the cancer that you had has the most severe pain compared to any other cancer." He told me, "I was *davening* so hard for you. I had your name. I was *davening* for you. I felt terrible for you." I said, "*Baruch Hashem*." That was *rachamim*.

But now you know what I'm thinking? If it came once, it could happen again. Now it's much more real. I'm *davening* to Hashem now for *rachamim*. I appreciate now all the years that I didn't have to deal with this. I still don't have to deal with it any more. But who knows what the future will hold. You need *rachamim* from Hashem. You have to *daven* to Hashem and say to Hashem, "Take care of me so that I can stay healthy." You cozy up to Hashem. You act *beyedidus* with Hashem. You do *mitzvos* out of a show of *yedidus*. There's no *safek* that then Hashem will shower us with *rachamim* in this next month, and then we'll be *zocheh badin*.

It's much easier to regret something you did wrong when you're *beyedidus* with somebody. I read a story recently about a lady who came to a *beis hakevaros* and *punkt* there was a *minyán* there. She said to the *minyán*, "I need you. Could you please come with me?" They said, "What did you do wrong? What's the matter?" She said, "I have an emergency." She took them to another *kever* just three rows away. She said, "I need *mechilah* from this person." She said, "Our husbands were best friends. They got into an argument over business and she and I became the worst enemies. This lady was a very nice lady and I did the worst things that a human being could do. I forgot everything nice that she had done. I did terrible, terrible things to her. I lied about her. I attempted to destroy her life." And she burst out crying terrible sobs. She said, "I understand if you don't want to forgive me, but now I realize I was terrible. Please be *mochel* me."

SERVE HASHEM BEYEDIDUS

When a person acknowledges a friendship it's much easier to do *teshuvah* and regret what he did wrong. When a person is *beyedidus* with Hakadosh Baruch Hu, and he's thinking about all the *tovos* that Hashem did for him this year and all the *brachah*, the millions of *chassadim* that Hashem did for him, millions of *tovos veniflaos*, and a person tells Hashem, "I'm really sorry Hashem, that I treated You in this inappropriate fashion, and that I didn't act to You in the way You were acting to me" - it's easier to ask Hashem for *rachmanus* in that case.

Let us be *mechazek* ourselves, rabbosai. Let us tap into this goldmine of *rachamim* of Elul. Let us serve Hashem *beyedidus*. Think of things.

Contemplate the things throughout the day. *Im yirtzeh Hashem* we'll be *zocheh badin*.

IN SUMMARY

A person must be prepared to take advantage of the *yemei rachamimi* of Elul; in contrast to the rest of the year, Elul is כולו רחמים. Elul is a time of *ahavah* from Hashem and *yedidus*. The Arizal says that the *yud gimmel middos* of *rachamim* can work for our benefit throughout Elul. Since Elul is the perfect time to strengthen our relationship with Hashem, Elul is also the time when our *teshuvah* is accepted more easily. Hashem is waiting for us to strengthen the relationship in this way during Elul. There is a 'give and receive' - Hashem offers us *rachamim* and *chessed*, and we respond by adding awareness and receiving Hashem's *yedidus*. Elul is an opportunity to demonstrate a close relationship with Hashem in our daily lives, and when we reach out to Hashem and have a greater awareness of Hashem in Elul, it brings tremendous protection and *rachmanus*. Elul is a time when we can review the year that passed and think about the future. We can thank Hashem for the challenges from which we were spared this past year, seek *rachamim* for where we erred, and ask Hashem to spare us from future *tzaros*. This is accomplished much more easily when we are in a place of *yedidus*. This week (*bli neder*), when it is time to daven and learn Torah, I will have the mindset that my *maasim* come from a place of *yedidus* - to positively strengthen my relationship with Hashem, and *besiyata diShamaya*, I will merit drawing down *chessed* and *rachamim* and have a positive and effective journey of *teshuvah*.

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