

Elul Week 3: We Become Holy Together

Dear Friends,

In our recent reflections, we explored how the building blocks of a meaningful life rest on the pillars of deep listening and the courage and loyalty we owe one another and ourselves. But as we experience the introspective month of *Elul*, the calendar calls us to take these individual practices and weave them into something larger. *Elul* is a time for self-reflection, yet Jewish tradition reminds us that we cannot transform ourselves in a vacuum. True spiritual growth is a collaborative effort. As we prepare our hearts and our minds for the High Holy Days, our focus shifts to a beautiful, collective truth: we become holy together.

The Torah commands us in Leviticus 19:2, "*Kedoshim tihyu*" - "You shall be holy." The great 19th-century commentator Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch noted a profound linguistic detail in this verse: the command is stated entirely in the plural. Holiness in Judaism is not a solo pursuit. It is not achieved by retreating to our study or a mountaintop to meditate in isolation. Instead, Hirsch teaches that true sanctity is realized only within the sometimes messy, beautiful context of community. We achieve a state of holiness by showing up for one another.

Our tradition teaches that a community is only as strong as the qualities of heart and character that each member brings to the table. When we look inward during *Elul*, we aren't just engaging in self-improvement; we are actively preparing the gifts of spirit we bring to one another. Four values, in particular, come to mind for me this year:

Kindness (*Chesed*)

Kindness is the heartbeat of community. In the Talmud (*Pirkei Avot* 1:2), the renowned high priest Simon the Righteous taught that the entire world stands on three things: *Torah*, *Avodah*, spiritual service, and *Gimilut Chasadim*, acts of loving-kindness. Rabbi Israel Salanter, the 19th-century founder of the *Mussar* movement, took this further. He famously taught that "another person's physical needs are my spiritual responsibility." When we extend *chesed* to a fellow congregant - whether by delivering a meal, visiting

the sick, or offering a warm smile to a newcomer or an old friend - we are answering another person's everyday human needs.

Patience (*Savlanut*)

The Hebrew word for patience, *savlanut*, shares a linguistic root with *saval*, meaning "to bear a burden." Patience is the gentle spiritual capacity to hold space for another person's imperfections, grief, or slow progress. During *Elul*, we often look for grand transformations, but the *Mussar* master Rabbi Elya Lopian reminded us that real spiritual work happens gradually. He beautifully noted that the true goal of our spiritual life is simply "making the heart feel what the intellect already understands." We practice patience when we let our hearts truly feel and absorb the vulnerabilities of those around us. It means giving others the benefit of the doubt when they misspeak and withholding judgment when someone is simply having a difficult day. Patience is the gentle reassurance that, in this community, you are allowed to be a work in progress.

Gratitude (*Hakarat HaTov*) & Generosity (*Nedivut Lev*)

Literally meaning "recognizing the good," ***hakarat hatov*** is the practice of noticing the blessings already present among us. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov emphasized gratitude as a path to pure joy, teaching that the greatest spiritual pleasure we can experience is a genuine state of thankfulness. For example, when we voice our thankfulness for the people who make our temple community run - from our devoted clergy to our dedicated staff and all the volunteers who give of their generous heart and spirit - gratitude opens the heart.

Once the heart is open, generosity sustains and nourishes it. True communal generosity is not abstract; it is deeply practical. It is found in the way we share our presence, our skills, our energy, and our time. The Chassidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzchok of Berditchev, renowned for his boundless love for the Jewish people, taught that God looks at the practical, everyday deeds of community members with immense pride. When we generously give of ourselves in these everyday ways, we nourish and sustain the very soul of our congregation.

The Talmud famously declares, "*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh*" - "All of Israel are responsible for one another". Spiritual leaders such as Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson point out that the Hebrew root of *arevim* doesn't just mean responsibility; it is the same root used to describe things that are sweet, as well as things that are blended and interwoven. The Rebbe taught that we are not isolated individuals trying to tolerate one another. Instead, our very souls are mixed together, and we are responsible for making life sweeter for everyone around us.

This *Elul*, let us commit to being the spiritual safety net for one another. Through everyday acts of kindness, patience, gratitude, and generosity, we do not just maintain a building or an institution; we build each other up.

A practice for the week:

Show up unasked. This week, I will perform one act of chesed for someone in our community who could use it - a call, a visit, a note - without waiting to be asked.

This week's musical selections:

Avinu Malkeinu - "Our Father, Our King," one of the oldest and most moving prayers of the Days of Awe, recited communally throughout the Ten Days of Repentance. Its origin is a Talmudic story: Rabbi Eliezer prayed alone for rain and was not answered; only when Rabbi Akiva led the congregation in reciting these words together did the rain finally come. It has carried that lesson ever since - that some pleas are only fully heard when we bring them as one voice, not many separate ones. My favorite rendition is Lior's a cappella performance, whose intimate, haunting voice moves me deeply each time I hear it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iuj9A7tTDPM>

Hine Ma Tov - "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for people to dwell together in unity," from Psalm 133. I love this song because it is almost always sung as a group, which makes it less a song about togetherness than an actual experience of togetherness. A favorite rendition is by the late Harry Belafonte, who had deep Jewish roots and connections - including a paternal grandfather who was a Jewish immigrant to Jamaica, and his marriage to his Jewish wife, Julie Robinson, for over four decades. I enjoy

this particular rendition knowing what I do of his lifelong relationship with the Jewish community.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjrrIssev7I>

Kenny Loggins, "Conviction of the Heart" - its refrain, "one with the earth, with the sky, one with everything in life," is really Rabbi Hirsch's teaching set to music: that we are never meant to become holy alone, but only in connection with everything and everyone around us. The song doesn't just ask us to believe that connection exists - it asks us to actually live it, which is the same challenge Abra and I now pose to our community with this teaching.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rQZbB5CUXFI>

These three songs come from very different places, but they all say the same thing: none of them are complete with just one voice. In a few weeks, the shofar will sound in the same way - not to wake any one of us alone, but to wake all of us together. Until then, let these songs - and the people you share them with - be our practice.

Shavuah tov, a good week,

Alan