

## **Elul: Inward & Outward**

### **Parashat Ki Tavo**

**Rabbi Evan Traylor**

**August 29, 2026**

Caroline, yasher koach! Thank you for your wisdom this morning. In looking deep into this week's Torah portion, Ki Tavo, you taught us about the importance of teshuvah, a Hebrew word that we typically translate as "repentance", but could be more closely translated as "return." You also showed us how the role of punishment in any situation shouldn't be collective, impacting an entire community or population, but should be specific to the person who has acted poorly. And that all of this should be used to guide this person back to teshuvah, to be able to return to who they truly are, to make amends, and to hopefully spread blessings throughout the world.

Your d'var Torah speaks directly and perfectly to this moment in our Jewish calendar. We find ourselves in the month of Elul, the month leading up to the High Holy Days. This is a time of deep introspection, reflection, and consideration of our lives and the world around us. It's a time for exploring the ways in which we have fallen short in the past year, and commit ourselves to making changes for the year to come. Elul invites us into the difficult work of teshuvah, of returning to ourselves, who we truly are, and who we want to be in the world.

There is an often quoted book during this time of year written by Rabbi Alan Lew titled *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*. The title itself recognizes the magnitude and confusion that can come with this time of year. It is a deep and beautiful examination of this stretch of the Jewish calendar, moving from Tisha B'av in July, in which we remember devastating moments throughout Jewish history; through the month of Elul right now; to Selichot, a spiritual highpoint of Elul that is happening one week from today; to Rosh Hashanah, our Jewish new year; to Yom Kippur, our day of atonement and repentance; to Sukkot, our harvest festival focused on fragility and impermanence; to Simchat Torah, our celebration to mark the end of our reading of Torah and beginning it all over again. These days, weeks, and months encompass an enormous amount of Jewish tradition, bring forth moments of realization, wonder, and awe that stretch our minds and touch our souls, and create beautiful memories that inspire us for years to come. In this book, Rabbi Lew features three main practices for the month of Elul that can help us engage in *chesbon hanefesh*, literally a spiritual accounting, of our lives. These practices can center us, focus our attention on this work of introspection and reflection, and, as you called upon us to do Caroline, help us create more blessings in the world.

First, prayer. We have been praying all throughout this morning, moving through all of the hopes, dreams, anxieties, worries, and more of our ancestors. Engaging in prayer is beautiful; and, it is not without complication. When I speak with members of this community about prayer, many questions arise: What should I pray about? What if I don't know the words in Hebrew? I don't really understand God...who do I pray to? Does prayer really do anything? Each of these questions are valid, and open up even more questions. Two thousand years ago, after the destruction of the Second Temple, our ancestors shifted our daily sacrificial system to one of prayer. In Hebrew, the word for sacrifice is *korban*; its root letters signify "nearness, or coming close." This is one way we could think about prayer: coming close or near to God, the divine, or to something bigger than ourselves. Our prayer books can help, but sometimes, just like our silent moment at the end of the Amidah, the prayer of our hearts is what is needed, especially during this month of Elul.

Second, meditation. Meditation and prayer are often lumped together as part of one's spiritual practice, and they certainly complement one another. Where meditation expands beyond the realm of prayer is allowing the quiet or silence to more fully inhabit exactly who we are, as a human being, in that moment in time. That noticing and understanding can help us identify more fully our *teshuvah* work, the areas in our life in which we need to make changes for the year to come.

And, third, focusing on one thing. Rabbi Lew notes that it is not realistic to change everything about ourselves throughout the course of Elul. So why not focus on one thing? One thing in the coming year that you want to change. Treat it like a Jewish New Year's Resolution! Giving tzedakah more regularly to organizations; rebuilding a broken relationship; engaging in prayer and meditation; lighting Shabbat candles on Friday night; whatever it is, give yourself time during Elul to reflect on this one thing. Engaging in each of these practices can help make this time of year, this holy time, even more meaningful and reflective, and prepare for the year to come.<sup>1</sup>

Despite being most focused on ourselves, these practices can also help us direct our work of teshuvah, our work of repentance, repair, and return, outward, beyond ourselves. In her book, *On Repentance & Repair*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg explains the wide scope of teshuvah that we are called upon to consider during Elul:

“The challenges surrounding apologies and forgiveness, repentance and reconciliation, amends and atonement invite a lot of questions, and they're neither simple nor theoretical. They impact the very structure of our criminal justice system. They are ever-present in our rapidly shifting conversation on sexual abuse. These questions haunt the legacies of every country touched by colonialism and white supremacy, and they hang painfully over our intimate bonds, our family and professional relationships, and our communities.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Alan Lew, *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*, Pg. 68-76.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, *On Repentance & Repair*, Pg. 3.

Caroline, you shared with us the important work of the Innocence Project, an example of pointing teshuvah outward, into the world. Hearing the tragic and unjust story of Alan Newton made me think about the many people currently incarcerated on Rikers Island, only a few miles from here. I visited the site a few years ago with Rabbi Timoner, Rabbi Kolin, and members of our Dismantling Racism Team. The vast majority of the nearly 7,000 people incarcerated on Rikers Island are there pre-trial, meaning they have been arrested, but are awaiting their day in court. In other words, they haven't actually been found guilty of anything yet. For some of the people there, this means years of incarceration without a full trial. In addition to the inhumane conditions, the deteriorating infrastructure, and the inadequate physical and mental health support systems, the family and friends of people incarcerated at Rikers also suffer because of its isolated location, restrictions on visits, and the overall emotional toll of missing their loved ones. This country's racist and unjust criminal justice system, what Michelle Alexander has deemed *The New Jim Crow*, serves as a form of collective punishment. It is a system in desperate need of teshuvah - repentance, repair, and return.

The month of Elul invites us, urges us, calls upon us to do the necessary work of teshuvah on a variety of levels. And although it takes time and effort, it is ultimately a holy gift. A gift for ourselves, giving us the chance to learn and grow, reflect and change, to build a life of meaning and purpose. It is also a gift to our world, our chance to play our part in making this world a better place. As we move towards the High Holy Days, may the next two weeks of Elul be one of reflection, connection, and joy. Shabbat Shalom.