

OLAMI MENTORSHIP



**ELUL
UNPACKED**

Imagine you're using your phone and a notification pops up: "System update available." You have a choice. You can ignore it and keep using the old version, or you can install the update and unlock new features, better performance, and a smoother experience. Judaism has its own version of a system update. Every year, beginning on the first day of the month of Elul (this year 8/14/26) and continuing through Rosh Hashanah until Yom Kippur, we enter a unique forty-day period designed for personal growth, reflection, and renewal. It's an invitation to take an honest look at who we are, reconnect with what matters most, and become the people we were created to be. In a sense, Elul is The Almighty's annual notification: "A better version of you is available."

THE ONLY QUESTION IS: WILL WE INSTALL THE UPDATE?



WHY NOW?

The answer goes back to one of the most pivotal moments in Jewish history. Just weeks after receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai, the Jewish people made the tragic mistake of the Golden Calf, seemingly shattering their relationship with God. On Rosh Chodesh Elul (first day of the month of Elul), Moshe returned to Mount Sinai for forty days to pray, plead, and rebuild that relationship. Then, on Yom Kippur, at the conclusion of those forty days, the Almighty proclaimed, "I have forgiven you as you have spoken", and Moshe descended with the second Tablets, a powerful symbol that failure does not have to be the end of the story.

Since then, these forty days have become Judaism's annual "system update," an opportunity to pause, take an honest look at our lives, repair our relationships, reconnect with our values, and become a better version of ourselves. Elul reminds us that no matter where we've been or how far we've drifted, growth is always possible, and it's never too late to begin again.





HOW DO WE DO THIS?

Of course, a system update doesn't happen automatically. We have to choose to install it. So how do we update ourselves during Elul? Judaism teaches that lasting change begins with honest self-reflection and a renewed connection to God and His Torah. We pause long enough to ask ourselves some important questions: Am I becoming the person God created me to be? Have I been living according to the values of the Torah, or have I simply been reacting to life's demands? Are there relationships that need repairing, whether with family, friends, or with God Himself? Elul invites us to slow down, take an honest inventory of our lives, reconnect with our Creator and the timeless wisdom of the Torah, and make small, meaningful changes. We don't strive for perfection overnight. We simply take the next step toward becoming the person we were created to be.

WHAT TOOLS DOES JUDAISM GIVE US TO UPDATE OURSELVES?

Judaism recognizes that meaningful change doesn't happen through good intentions alone. That's why the month of Elul is filled with customs and practices designed to keep us focused on our spiritual goals. These traditions serve as daily reminders that this is a unique time of year, an opportunity to slow down, reflect, and draw closer to God. Some of the most well-known customs include:



1. Hearing the Shofar: Beginning on the second day of Elul (in Ashkenazic communities), the shofar is sounded each weekday after the morning prayers. Its piercing blast serves as a spiritual wake-up call, urging us not to drift through life on autopilot.

2. Reciting Psalm 27: Many Jews add Psalm 27 (L'David Hashem Ori V'Yishi) to their daily prayers throughout Elul and the High Holiday season. The psalm emphasizes trust in God, hope, courage, and the longing to feel close to Him.

3. Selichot (Prayers for Forgiveness): It is customary to have one's mezuzot and tefillin inspected to ensure they are kosher. Symbolically, just as we examine these sacred objects, we also take the time to examine ourselves. In the days leading up to Rosh Hashanah, special prayers are recited that encourage us to reflect on our actions, seek forgiveness, and remember God's boundless compassion.



4. Increasing Torah Study and Mitzvot: Many people use Elul as an opportunity to dedicate more time to learning Torah, praying with greater focus, performing acts of kindness, giving charity, and repairing relationships with family and friends.

5. Checking Mezuzot and Tefillin: It is customary to have one's mezuzot and tefillin inspected to ensure they are kosher. Symbolically, just as we examine these sacred objects, we also take the time to examine ourselves.

Each of these customs points to the same powerful idea:

ELUL IS NOT SIMPLY ABOUT PREPARING FOR THE HIGH HOLIDAYS. IT IS ABOUT PREPARING OURSELVES.

Through these daily reminders and meaningful practices, Judaism helps us reconnect with God, strengthen our relationship with the Torah, and become the people we were created to be.

IS THERE ANY SIGNIFICANCE TO THE NUMBER FORTY IN JUDAISM?

Many commentators point out that throughout Jewish tradition, the number forty consistently appears at moments of profound transformation, when one reality gives way to another.

- **The Torah:** Moshe spent forty days atop Mount Sinai before bringing the Torah to the Jewish people, marking the transition from a world without the Torah to a world illuminated by its teachings.
- **The Mikvah:** A mikvah, the ritual bath used for spiritual purification, must contain a minimum of forty se'ah of water, symbolizing the transition from a state of spiritual impurity to one of purity.
- **The Developing Child:** The Talmud teaches that after forty days, a developing fetus reaches a significant milestone in its formation, representing the transition from the earliest stages of development toward recognizable human life.
- **Noah's Flood:** The Great Flood lasted forty days and forty nights, cleansing a world filled with corruption and ushering in a new beginning for humanity.

It is therefore fitting that the journey from Rosh Chodesh Elul to Yom Kippur spans forty days. Just as the number forty throughout Judaism represents profound transformation, these forty days invite us to undergo our own transformation: to reconnect with God, strengthen our relationship with the Torah, leave behind the person we have been, and become the person we were created to be.



WHY DOES GOD GIVE US AN ENTIRE MONTH BEFORE ROSH HASHANAH?

One of the greatest gifts of Elul is that it gives us time to prepare. Imagine walking into the most important meeting of your life without any warning or opportunity to get ready. That isn't how Judaism works. Before Rosh Hashanah, the day on which God judges every individual and sets the course for the coming year, He lovingly gives us an entire month to reflect, grow, and return to Him.

Elul is then followed by the Aseret Yemei Teshuvah, the Ten Days of Repentance, which bridge Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and provide an even more intense opportunity for introspection, prayer, and change. The journey culminates on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, when we stand before God seeking forgiveness, repairing our relationship with Him and with others, and emerging spiritually cleansed. Rather than surprising us with judgment, God first extends an invitation. He gives us forty days to prepare our hearts, improve our lives, and become worthy of the blessings He longs to bestow upon us in the year ahead.



ONE FINAL THOUGHT

The Chassidic master Rav Chaim of Sanz shared a powerful parable:
A man was wandering through a dense forest for several days,
completely lost and unsure which path would lead him out. Suddenly,
he saw another person approaching. Filled with hope, he thought,
"Finally, I will meet someone who knows the way."

He quickly asked, "Can you please tell me which path leads out of this
forest? I have been wandering here for days and cannot find my way."





The man looked at him and replied, "I wish I could help you, but I am lost as well. I do not know the way out. However, I can tell you one thing: do not take the path that I was following, because it only led me deeper into the forest. Let us stop, search together, and find a new path out."

This is the message of Elul. We may not always know exactly how to become the people we want to be. We may not have all the answers. But the first step toward growth is honesty: recognizing which paths have taken us further away from where we want to go and having the courage to choose a new direction.

**ELUL IS THE ALMIGHTY'S INVITATION TO STOP
WANDERING, TO REFLECT ON WHERE WE ARE,
AND TO BEGIN THE JOURNEY HOME.**

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