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Ani LeDodi VeDodi Li: The Month of Elul - Section I

From the teachings of Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi; adapted by Eli Touger

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אני The first letters of the words of the verse, **אני לדודי ודודי לי** — “*Shir HaShirim* 6:3. **I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved is mine,**” spell out the name אלול — Elul.¹ The [spiritual service] beginning in Elul is that of “I am my Beloved’s,” i.e., an “arousal from below,” [an initiative taken by the Jewish people to draw closer to G-d].

*Shir HaShirim (“The Song of Songs”) is an analogy describing the love relationship between G-d and the Jewish people. There are two verses that point to an intensification of this relationship: the verse cited above and *ibid.* 2:16: “My Beloved is mine and I am His.” It is explained (*Sefer HaMaamarim* 5627, p. 224) that “My Beloved is mine...” represents a cycle where the initiative comes from Above (אתערותא דלעילא in kabbalistic terminology). This spiritual dynamic characterizes the Divine service of the month of Nissan in which G-d redeems the Jewish people even if they are unworthy. He takes them out of spiritual bondage and arouses them to turn to Him.*

As the Alter Rebbe proceeds to explain in this maamar, the months of Elul and Tishrei, by contrast, are characterized by the opposite spiritual dynamic: “I am my Beloved’s.” This phrase points to an אתערותא דלתתא, an arousal from below, where the initiative is taken by the Jewish people. They turn to G-d in teshuvah and sincere prayer and He responds with the revelations of the month of Tishrei.

עד [This phase continues] until Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, when G-dliness is drawn down in an apparent manner. [This G-dly response is twofold, as alluded to] in the verse:² “His left hand is under my head and His right hand embraces me.”

The middos (Divine attributes) are revealed in two vectors: the right vector is identified with the quality of love and kindness, while the left vector is identified with might, awe, and judgment. The verse cited reflects how both these vectors find expression in the month of Tishrei. Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur are “days of awe,” while Sukkos and Simchas Torah are days when G-d’s kindness and love are manifest.

The period from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur reflects “His left hand,” the aspect of fear, which results

from the [awe-inspiring] revelation of G-d's sovereignty at this time.ⁱ

This makes it possible for “His right hand to embrace me”; i.e., for there to be an expression of Divine love.

ולכן [During this period,] therefore, we refer to G-d [in our prayers] as “the King,”

In this vein, our Sages (Rosh HaShanah 16a, 34b) teach that on Rosh HaShanah, G-d asks man to “accept Me as King over you.” Similarly, the first reason given by Rav Saadiah Gaon for the sounding of the shofar (see R. David Avudraham’s explanation for this mitzvah) is that it echoes the sounding of trumpets at the coronation of a king.

for [at that time, it is revealed that] “Your kingship is kingship over *all* the worlds.”³ Even the hidden [spiritual] realms

I.e., the realms which are too transcendent to be perceived by limited beings.

are struck with the awe and fear of the King. This [influence] is also drawn down upon all Jewish souls, arousing them to accept the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven and [motivating them to hold] G-d in awe [throughout] the entire year. For the fear and the love of G-d are not generated and implanted in a person's heart through his own efforts [alone], but rather have their source in the radiance [of G-dliness] drawn down from Above at [specific] times of revelation.

I.e., there is a certain dimension of awe and fear that man evokes through his own efforts. On the other hand, the primary element of the awe described here comes from Above. Just as a person becomes awestruck in the presence of a person whom he respects and honors, so too, the revelation of G-dliness from Above at this time humbles us and leaves us overwhelmed by His greatness.

Regarding the fear of G-d, the time for its revelation is Rosh HaShanah.ⁱⁱ

I.e., each of the festivals serves as the paradigm for a particular element of Divine service. Rosh HaShanah is the time associated with the fear of G-d and the acceptance of His yoke. The revelation of these qualities at this time empowers us to continue to express them throughout the year.

ודודו “My Beloved is mine” — ודודי לי — refers to [this revelation from Above]. Nevertheless, [to merit this revelation,] one must first awaken love and fear through an arousal from below. [This is man's spiritual task] in Elul.

As mentioned above, the spiritual motif of Elul is that the revelation from Above comes in response to man's Divine service below. Hence, it is necessary that man arouse his love for G-d to evoke this revelation. This arousal is alluded to by the phrase אני לדודי, "I am my Beloved's."

When the revelation of G-dliness is preceded by man's Divine service, it will make a far more lasting and deep-felt impression. Even though the revelation from Above is more powerful than what man could achieve on his own, it is only when man prepares himself and takes the initiative on his own that he will become a k'li ("vessel") for this revelation and be able to internalize it.

והנה [Although the Divine service of Elul is to be initiated by man, there is also a revelation of G-dliness at this time which inspires that arousal.]

As will be explained, even though there is a revelation from Above that facilitates the Jew's Divine service, it is still considered to come on his own initiative.

[Thus,] it is known that Elul is a time when the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy are revealed.

As elaborated upon below, although the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy are "revealed" during the month of Elul, their "revelation" is not felt in the same manner as the revelation of the G-dly light that characterizes the Shabbosos and festivals.

ולהבין [If so, it is necessary to] understand:⁴ Why are [the days of Elul] ordinary weekdays and not festivals? The *Shabbosos* and the festivals [are distinguished] because they are days when [a dimension of] G-dliness [transcending the natural order] is revealed; [on them,] His G-dliness radiates [downward].

To explain: On the Shabbosos and festivals, G-dly light that transcends the natural order is revealed. Indeed, that revelation is so powerful that ordinary mundane activity is naturally brought to a halt. To illustrate by analogy: When a person involved in his ordinary activities witnesses something amazing and awe-inspiring, he stops work and marvels at the sight he sees. Similarly, in the analogy, the spiritual revelations of the Shabbosos and festivals are so great that they motivate us to halt our everyday activities and focus on these spiritual revelations. The prohibitions of Torah Law are intended to sensitize us to this spiritual motif, because carrying out the prohibited activities would stand in the way of our receiving these revelations.

In particular, the revelation of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy reflects a very elevated level of G-dliness

and [seemingly should merit distinction], for this is the level revealed on Yom Kippur.

To continue the above analogy: the revelations of Yom Kippur are so great, that not only do they motivate us to stop work, but also to cease eating and drinking.

Now, obviously, there is a great difference between Elul and Yom Kippur.

Although the same spiritual influences that are revealed on Yom Kippur are revealed during Elul, the days of Elul are ordinary weekdays. Thus the Alter Rebbe is asking: Since the prohibitions against work, eating, and drinking on Yom Kippur are natural consequences of the awesome spiritual revelations of the day, why do these prohibitions not apply during Elul when the same spiritual influences are also revealed? See also Sefer HaMaamarim, 5700, p. 166ff.

אך This concept can be illustrated by way of analogy: Before a king enters a city, its inhabitants

Lit., “the men of the city.” Even though the people are found in the field, i.e., amidst mundane realities, they are “men of the city,” i.e., the king’s men. Applying the analogy to the Jewish people, although they are found “in the field,” as the maamar proceeds to explain, they possess an inherent G-dly potential, and thus are “men of the city.” For that reason, they are aroused when the King comes out to them in the field (the maamar entitled Ani LeDodi, 5735).

go out to greet him and receive him in the field. At that time, anyone who so desires may approach

In Sefer HaMaamarim 5700, p. 167, the Rebbe Rayatz quotes this analogy and uses the expression, “are granted permission and can....”

and greet him. He receives them all pleasantly and shows a smiling countenance to all. As he proceeds to his city, they follow him. Afterwards, when he reaches his royal palace, one may only enter [his throne room] with permission — and this is granted only to the nation’s elite, to a select few.

In the analogue, the fundamental revelation during Elul is the same as on Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur, G-d’s Thirteen Attributes of Mercy are revealed as He is “in His throne room” with all the grandeur — but also with all the accompanying restrictions — implied. For that reason, Yom Kippur is a day when all worldly activity is forbidden.

During Elul, these same qualities are revealed “in the field,” i.e., as they are encloded within the lower levels of the Spiritual Cosmos. Since they are not in the “Palace,” the revelation

does not call forth the restrictions of Yom Kippur.

The particular aspects of the analogy are also discussed in Likkutei Sichos, Vol. II, p. 378ff.; Vol. IV, p. 1342ff.; the Sichos of Shabbos Nitzavim, 5710, et al.

וּכְר [To explain the] analogy: In the month of Elul, [we establish a relationship with G-d within the context of our mundane realities].

Although G-d's coming to the field invites the Jews to approach Him, as it were, since He comes to the field in ordinary clothes, i.e., en clothed in the limitations of nature, it is not considered as an arousal from Above. To use the terms of the analogy, since the king is coming without all the pomp and majesty that is usually associated with his regal presence, there is nothing to arouse the people. His appearance does not motivate the people to approach him because he does not look kingly. It is necessary for the people to look within themselves, recall their bond with the king, and because of that bond, go forth to greet him.

From a deeper perspective, however, the question still remains: Since the king comes to the field, he is inviting the people to come to him. True, the outward expressions of his majesty are lacking, but he seems to have taken the initiative by going out to them. How then can we say that Elul is a time of Ani LeDodi, that the Jews are the ones who initiate the intensification of the relationship?

In resolution, it can be explained that the drawback that generally results from man's service coming as a response to an arousal from Above is that it involves only the external aspects of his being, the aspect of himself that relates to others. His inner being is not affected. When, by contrast, the arousal begins from below (i.e., within man), the person's inner being is involved. In this instance, however, even though the arousal comes from Above, it comes from G-d's Essence, not His external dimensions. As such, it awakens the essence of the Jew, his innermost being. And once his innermost being is aroused, chronological precedence does not matter. It still can be said: "Ani LeDodi," that a Jew is giving himself over completely to G-d, "his Beloved," even though in fact G-d took the first step, as it were (the maamar entitled Ani LeDodi, Sefer HaMaamarim Melukat, Vol. 4, p. 363ff.).

We go out to receive the light of His countenance in the field, so to speak, as it is written:⁵ "G-d will cause His countenance to shine upon you." This refers to the emanation of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy in a manner that allows them to be received "face to face";

People can be physically close, but if they are not facing each other, their communication will lack the inner bond established through face-to-face communication (see the maamar entitled Ki BaYom HaZeh (Likkutei Torah, Vayikra, p. 26d ff., translated in Vol. I of this series). Similar concepts apply in the analogue as the Alter Rebbe proceeds to explain.

i.e., the revelation of His inner will illuminates the source of the Jewish souls.

This results from turning the essence of our inner will toward Him, cleaving to Him with our hearts and souls — [indeed,] from the very depths of our hearts

The Hebrew term פנים means both “face” and “inner dimension.” Indeed, a person’s vitality and inner qualities are revealed in his face. Turning our faces to G-d implies approaching Him with our inner dimensions.

— and with self-sacrifice, as is explained in other texts.

והארה This emanation is drawn down from the attribute of א-ל,

One of the names of G-d, identified with the attribute of kindness.

which is the first

I.e., “first” denotes primacy. Implied is that G-d is turning to us with His inner dimensions.

of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.⁶ It is the source for the others and includes them all, as implied by the verse:⁷ “א-ל (Keil) is י-ה-ו-ה (Havayah), and He shines light to us.” This refers to the light of G-d’s infinity itself,

The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy reflect an unlimited dimension of G-dliness that surpasses the Divine qualities which serve as the source for bringing the Spiritual Cosmos into being and maintaining it.

as it is written:⁸ “G-d, your L-rd, is a consuming fire.”

The analogy of fire illustrates how the light that radiates from G-d’s infinity is not a separate entity from G-d Himself.

To explain by analogy: In a general sense, there is no distinction between fire itself and the light and rays which radiate from it.

Here the Alter Rebbe is alluding to the difference between or (“light”) and shefa (“influence”).

Light reflects the source of light, revealing the qualities of that source as they are, without adapting itself to the nature of the recipient. Influence, by contrast, involves a process of adaptation in which the influence is tailored to the capacities of the recipient (see Selections from Derech Mitzvosecha, Vol. II, Mitzvas HaAmanas Elokus, sec. 5). For example, when a teacher desires to convey an idea to a student, he does not teach the concept as it exists in his own understanding. Instead, he structures his presentation to fit the student's understanding (the maamar entitled Ani LeDodi, loc. cit.).

From the analogy of light and radiance, we appreciate that the G-dly light granted to the Jewish people shines forth in a manner that reflects its essential quality. It is not dependent on the individual qualities of the people or the degree to which they have refined themselves. Instead, G-dliness is revealed on His initiative, in a manner that reflects His infinity.

Similarly, as it were, the light of His countenance that shines to the entire Jewish people [emanates] from the attribute of א-ל and is the actual light of G-d's infinity itself.ⁱⁱⁱ

The intent is not only that this light and revelation shines to the Jewish people as they already exist, but that it is the force that brings them into being. As such, it defines their spiritual personalities, as the Alter Rebbe proceeds to explain.

ולכן Because of [their connection to this level of G-dliness,]the Jewish people are called Israel, ישראל, i.e., שר א-ל means “א-ל is a ruler.”⁹

Implied is that the essential light which shines toward the Jewish people defines and dominates their personalities and continuously sets the tone for their conduct.

The *yud* [which begins the term] implies that this is an ongoing activity. We find the *yud* serving this purpose in the verse:¹⁰ “This is what [לְיוֹם] would do (יעשה).” This means that the attribute of א-ל enfolded within each Jew is ruler and master of his inner [being in an ongoing manner].^{iv}

To relate these concepts to the month of Elul: Since their G-dly nature dominates their personality (שר א-ל, as above), the revelation of essential G-dliness in Elul (the King in the field) has an effect on the internal dimensions of the Jewish people, arousing their essential quality (the maamar entitled Ani LeDodi, loc. cit.).

דהיינו For each Jew has an actual spark of G-dliness which grants life to his G-dly soul. This spark is naturally drawn upward, seeking “to be illumined by the Light of Life,”¹¹ and to sacrifice itself for Him.

I.e., the essence of the Jewish soul is G-dly, infinite and unbounded as He is. Therefore it

seeks expression in a mode of service that is also unlimited and unbounded: mesirus nefesh, self-sacrifice, in which a person gives up his entire existence for G-d. See Tanya, ch. 19.

[This G-dly spark] transcends [the powers of] wisdom or knowledge that exist in one's soul. For through wisdom or knowledge, one could not attain this aspect [of Divine service] — to efface one's own identity and to abandon all self-concern for G-d's sake.

For intellect is, by nature, limited and defined. Similarly, within the personal realm, intellect does not motivate a person to personal sacrifice and self-transcendence. Instead, one seeks to preserve his personal identity and selfhood.

זרה This is the meaning of the verse:¹² “You are children of G-d, your L-rd.” A child is “the foot, [i.e., an extension,] of his father,”¹³ accepting his father's will [with a commitment] that disregards intellect or knowledge, just as the foot does not exist as a separate entity from the head and has no will of its own.

Thus like a foot naturally and innately follows a person's will, the Jewish people naturally follow G-d's will.

זרה This is the meaning of our Sages' counsel:¹⁴ “Negate your will before His will.”

That mishnah states previously, “Make G-d's will as your will,” implying that a person made a commitment to carry out G-d's will. Negating one's will reflects a deeper commitment, one in which a person transcends his individual identity entirely.

In order for G-d's inner will to shine upon a person, he must negate all his personal desires to the point that he has no other desires at all.

Such an approach makes a person a k'li, a receptacle, for G-d's infinite light. To relate these concepts to the expression of the love relationship between the Jews and G-d during Elul and Tishrei mentioned above: Through the expression of a heartfelt commitment of teshuvah in the month of Elul, the Jews make themselves mediums to relate to the infinite dimensions of G-dliness revealed during Tishrei.

Summary

In Elul,¹⁵ [the love relationship between G-d and the Jewish people is intensified. As implied by the verse]: “I am my Beloved's [and my Beloved is mine,] it is the Jewish people who] initiate [the strengthening of these bonds, through] an arousal from below. [This awakens an arousal from Above that brings about awesome revelations of G-dliness] on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. [Then it is revealed how] “My

Beloved is mine.” G-dliness is drawn down to this material plane [and is revealed according to the pattern suggested by the verse]: “His left hand is under my head [and His right hand embraces me.”] First, awe [of G-d, the left hand, is called forth and then love, the right hand, is elicited].

[Man’s spiritual arousal is invited by G-d, as reflected in the fact that] the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy [are revealed] in Elul. [Now these Thirteen Attributes are revealed on Yom Kippur, making it a sacred festival.] If so, why are [the days] of Elul not marked as festivals?^v

[To explain by analogy:] It is like a king [whose countrymen] come out to meet him in the field [without the pomp and ceremony present in his throne room]. [Similarly, in Elul, G-d] “shines His countenance upon” us, revealing the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy “in the field,” i.e., within our mundane reality.

The term “shines” points to the verse: “י-ה-ו-ה is א-ל, and He shines light to us,”^{vi} [awakening the G-dly potential every one of us possesses. This potential is alluded to in the name] Israel, ישראל, [which can be divided into the words,] ישר אל, “direct [from] G-d,”¹⁶, ^{vii} [and whose letters can be rearranged to form the words,] א-ל — “א-ל is a ruler,” [i.e.,] the potential of א-ל [encloded within each Jew] is a ruler and a master of his inner [being. This motivates every Jew to dedicate himself to G-d without restraints, to the point of self-sacrifice.]

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FOOTNOTES

1. *Avudraham*, The Order of the Prayers of Rosh HaShanah, ch. 1; *Pri Etz Chayim*, *Shaar Rosh HaShanah*, ch. 1, *Bach*, *Orach Chayim* 581.
2. *Shir HaShirim* 8:3.
3. *Tehillim* 145:13.
4. See also *Or HaTorah*, *Re'eh*, p. 802ff.
5. *Bamidbar* 6:25.
6. *Zohar*, Vol. I, p. 131b. In his *Igros Kodesh* (Vol. II, p. 369ff., Letter 387; translated in *I Will Write It In Their Hearts*, Vol. III), the Rebbe explains the different views as to which is the first of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.
7. *Tehillim* 118:27.
8. *Devarim* 4:24.
9. See *Pri Etz Chayim*, *Shaar Tekias Shofar*, ch. 9.
10. *Iyov* 1:5. See *Rashi's* interpretation of the verse.
11. *Iyov* 33:30.
12. *Devarim* 14:1.
13. *Etz Chayim*, *Shaar* 24, ch. 1.
14. *Avos* 2:4.
15. The summary is a translation of the *kitzurim* for this *maamar* prepared by the *Tzemach Tzedek*. As in the text of the *maamar*, the translator's additions are set off by brackets [].
16. Significantly, here in the summary, the *Tzemach Tzedek* is introducing a new concept that does not feature in the *maamar* itself.

FROM THE TEACHINGS OF RABBI SCHNEUR ZALMAN OF LIADI; ADAPTED BY ELI TOUGER

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (18 Elul 1745-24 Tevet 1812), known as "the Alter Rebbe," was one of the main disciples of the Maggid of Mezritch, and the founder of the Chabad Chassidism. He is the author of *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* and *Tanya* as well as many other major works in both Jewish law and the mystical teachings.

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