

I'm spending the last days of summer cleaning out my garage. I'm taking old paint cans to Anawalt, putting stuff that had been hidden for years on e-Bay (with Stuart Goldurs' help), and giving away what I can't actually sell. There certainly was a lot of accumulated stuff in that garage!

This image captures the spiritual work of transformation central to the month of Elul, which begins this Friday night. The work of Elul is to go through all the "stuff" of our lives, to look at all we carry around with us, and to decide what we should save, what we need to get rid of, and what new energy, new spaciousness, we need to bring into our lives in order to be ready for a New Year and a new beginning.

This week's Torah portion Re'eh challenges us with the words: "See: I have set before you this day blessing and curse, life and death." Seems like a no brainer. Who wouldn't choose life? But do we? Or are we deadened by the constrictions of habit, or regret, or anger, or guilt? Choosing life means believing the change is possible.

According to tradition, Moses descended from Mount Sinai on Rosh Hodesh Elul, only to find that the Israelites had built a golden calf. In anger, he smashed the tablets – or, perhaps the heavenly fire that formed the words burned out and suddenly the tablets were too heavy to carry. On this very same day, the first day of Elul, he climbed back up the mountain. This time we waited...for forty days. We waited. We worked on ourselves, and we were able to change.

Forty days later, the day that will be Yom Kippur, Moses descended again. He carried the new tablets, our second chance. We put both the broken tablets and the whole tablets in the ark that we carried through the wilderness.

We carry our brokenness and the possibility of wholeness with us as we journey through our lives. None of us are perfect, but if we work on ourselves, we can begin to make ourselves whole again, ready for a New Year. And the way to get ready is to do

“Chesbon ha-nefesh” – an accounting of our souls, deciding what we should keep and what we should throw away.

I heard a story from my friend Rabbi Jack Reimer. He was once visiting Berkeley and as he walked by a new age book store he noticed a big sign that said: “Yoga doesn’t work.” He walked closer. Below it in smaller letters the sign said: “Kabbalah doesn’t work.” Below that in even smaller letters, it said: “Psychoanalysis doesn’t work.” And then, on the last line, in great big letters, the sign said; “You have to work.”

That sign sums up the whole point of the month of Elul: We have to work. We have to look inside ourselves. We have to see the dirt that gets in the way of seeing clearly, and scrub it away. We need to decide what we need to get rid of and what is really important.

Rabbi Menachem Mendl of Kotsk was once asked: “What is the essence of Judaism?” His answer was: “Working on yourself.”

Start the work now. And choose life.

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Some spiritual tools for Elul:

- 1) Read “This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared” by Rabbi Alan Lew.
- 2) Sign up for a regular daily Elul meditation that will challenge you to do the work. Two possibilities include: <http://mishkan.org/an-accounting-of-the-soul-elul-series-of-prayers-and-practices-begins-august-5> and <http://www.meaningfullife.com/>.
- 3) Sign up for a daily journaling prompt that will arrive in your inbox, created by Merle Fled who wrote a powerful article about journaling as a spiritual practice for Richard’s and my book Getting Good at Getting Older.  
<https://www.derekh.org/elul2019/welcome-to-elul>  
Purchase your copy of Getting Good at Getting Older on Amazon [here](#).