

*Therefore, bear fruit  
in keeping  
with repentance.*

*Matt. 3:8*

*The Month of  
Elul*

*A Season of  
Repentance*

A Family Discussion Guide

## Maimonides' Call to Repentance

*"Awake, you sleepers, from your sleep!  
Rouse yourselves you slumberers, out of  
your slumber! Examine your deeds, and  
turn to God in repentance.*

*Remember your Creator, and don't be  
like those who are caught up in the daily  
round, losing sight of eternal truth.*

*Don't waste your year in vain pursuits  
that neither profit nor save. Look closely  
at yourselves.*

*Abandon your evil ways and thoughts,  
and return to the Lord, so that He might  
have mercy on you!"*

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# Introduction

The month of Elul precedes the fall festivals of Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Sukkot. It is commonly called the season of “teshuvah”, which means “returning.” Historically, Elul has been associated with repentance, forgiveness, and restoration.

The four Hebrew letters of the word Elul (aleph-lamed-vav-lamed) are the first letters of the four words *Ani l'dodi v'dodi lee* – “I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved is mine” (Song of Solomon 6:3). These words sum up the relationship between God and His people. The month of Elul is a special time to focus on that relationship. Are our hearts totally dedicated to Him? Are our lives pleasing to Him? Are our goals the same as His?

## *The History of Elul*

Following the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt, Moses ascended Mount Sinai three times. The first time was to receive the words of the Torah. The second was to plead with God for His forgiveness after the people sinned in worshipping the golden calf. Then

## *Week Four: A Change of Behavior*

Repentance not only requires that we turn in a certain direction, but also that we then walk in that direction. In other words, we need to change our behavior, not just what we say we believe.

1. Why isn’t it enough to just say “I’m sorry” to God for our sin?
2. What should a change of behavior look like?
3. The concept of living consistently with your belief is called “faithfulness.” Where do we get faithfulness? How can it become part of our normal way of living?
4. Read Acts 9:1-22 and 1 Tim. 1:12-15
  - What elements of teshuva are found in this story?
  - What changed Saul from a “blasphemer and persecutor and violent aggressor” into one who was considered faithful (1 Tim. 1:12)? List the things that happened, and how and why they changed him.
  - Read 1 Tim. 1:16 and explain how teshuvah is one way of sanctifying God’s name in the

### *Week Three: A Change of Mind*

The next step toward repentance is a change of mind.

1. How does our thinking affect our behavior?
2. How can we avoid wrong thinking?
3. What sort of mind are we to have?
4. How can our thinking be changed?
5. Read 2 Kings 22:8-11, 19; 23:1-3

–What elements of teshuva are in this story?

–Compare 2 Kings 22:2 with 2 Kings 23:3.

What changed? WHY did it change? How do you think Josiah's behavior was different after 2 Kings 23:3 than it was before? (Hint: read the rest of 2 Kings 23).

–How could this principle be applied in your own family?

Moses ascended the mountain a third time, to invoke God's abundant mercy for the complete atonement of the people, that God might not remove His presence from them. The Talmud says that this third trip up the mountain began on the first day of Elul and ended 40 days later on Yom Kippur, when God cleansed the people completely, making a covenant with them, and writing on the new tablets of stone the words of the Law once again.

In Jewish history, these 40 days have retained special significance as a period of Divine Grace. It is a time to focus on forsaking our sin and trusting in the mercy of God as Moses and the people did.

#### *Traditions of Elul*

\*\*Daily recitation of Ps. 27. David's heart's cry in this psalm is: "One thing I ask...is to dwell in the house of God all the days of my life." If I could choose only one thing, would it be God? This custom is a daily reminder of what our primary love should be.

\*\*The Shofar is sounded every weekday morn-

ing (not on Sabbath), except on the last day of Elul (the eve of Rosh Hashana). This is meant as a call to awaken ourselves to repentance, a warning to remember that judgment is coming and we must be sober minded. Maimonides gives the following call as the meaning of the sound of the shofar during this time: “Awake sleeper, arise from your slumber and examine your deeds...” Compare this to Eph. 5:14 (and surrounding verses), and it becomes evident that this tradition has probably been around for a very long time!

### ***Messianic Significance***

Yeshua said, “Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation.” (Luke 22:46). As followers of Messiah, it is imperative that we continue to obey this challenge—to continually rouse ourselves to watch and pray that our lives might reflect the character of Yeshua.

Jewish tradition speaks of Rosh Hashana, the Days of Awe, and Yom Kippur as being a period of judgment, a time when we stand before God to give an account of our lives and

## ***Week Two: A Change of Heart***

The first step toward repentance is a change of heart.

1. What sort of change is required?
2. How is this change accomplished?
3. Read Luke 18:9-14

—Is true repentance possible without a change of heart?

—What would the Pharisee have done after this happened?

—What would the publican have done after this happened if he was serious about teshuva? Would he now be any different from the pharisee? If so, in what way would he be different? Would other people be able to tell?

—When other people look at your family, what do they see? A family of Pharisees as found in this story? A family of publicans? A family of repentant publicans? Discuss specific things that others might see when they interact with your family. Does your “attitude” make change and growth possible?

### ***Week One: What is Teshuvah?***

Teshuvah is a Hebrew word meaning “returning” and is associated with the English word “repentance.” What is teshuvah and how is it expressed?

The Hebrew root of teshuvah literally means “to turn.” It implies turning toward one thing and away from something else. In the Tanakh (Old Testament), God uses this word repeatedly to plead with His people to forsake sin and follow after Him.

1. What is it that God asks us to turn toward? What action does this require?

2. What are we to turn away from?

3. Read Luke 15:11-24

–Which of the elements of teshuvah are demonstrated in this story?

–What motivated him to return? Is motive important if the end result is the same?

–What did he do besides saying the right words? Are the words important? How about the other things he did?

–What would the son have done after this if

it is decided whether or not we are to be inscribed in the Book of Life. In Jewish tradition, the Book of Life speaks not of eternal life, but of physical life on earth for the coming year. What is in store for us in the next year? Are we to inherit a blessing because of obedience or discipline because of disobedience?

As believers in Messiah, we are no longer under condemnation for our sin (Rom. 8:1). However, does this mean that we do not answer to God for our behavior while in the body? In 2 Cor. 5:10, 11, the Apostle Paul said, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Messiah, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men...” Jewish tradition keeps this final judgment always in view in the yearly tradition of Elul.

Yeshua, as the embodiment of God’s mercy, made atonement for us, but our response must always be a heart of repentance and a change of life. As we approach Yom Kippur,

the Day of Atonement, it is important to remember that the Messiah's atonement for us has accomplished a transformation of heart in His people, a transformation that must find its expression in repentance and obedience. It is because we are His people that we are compelled to "be holy as He is holy." May this Elul be a time to rededicate ourselves to wholeheartedly follow God and His ways.

### *A Suggested Format for Elul*

On the following pages are studies focusing on the meaning and application of repentance. There is one study for each of the four weeks preceding Rosh Hashana. Each family member should have a personal workbook. After everyone has already spent the time on their own doing the study in the workbook, schedule a family meeting to discuss what you found. This booklet contains questions to help your discussion get started.

The remaining 10 days of Teshuvah, beginning with Rosh Hashana and culminating with Yom Kippur, have a slightly different focus. Studies appropriate for these ten days

are listed in a separate publication.

Additional activities might include memorizing Ps. 27 during this month, and also perhaps memorizing the 13 Attributes as listed in Ex. 34:6, 7, which are part of the liturgy of the Days of Awe between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Sounding the shofar at the beginning of study times would also be appropriate, as well as reciting Maimonides' call to repentance at least once in order to explain the meaning of the shofar during this time.

For the younger children, it might be helpful to create and put up posters representing the themes of each week's study (for example, week one might have a poster with a picture of the Prodigal Son, illustrating the concept of teshuvah; week two might have a heart, representing the change of heart required for repentance; week three might have a Torah scroll, representing the change of thinking that must accompany repentance; week four might have two gates, representing the need for a choice). Use the posters as visual aids to review the meaning of repentance each week.