The King Is Near by Rabbi Aryeh Mandella

We have entered the month of Elul, the final month before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. But tonight, I want to step back and look at the larger invitation of this season.

And if you remember only one sentence from tonight, remember this:

The King is near.

There are seasons when Hashem feels very near to us. Prayer flows. The Scriptures feel alive. We recognize His hand. Our hearts are tender.

Then there are other seasons when He seems far away. We pray, but the words feel dry. We open the Scriptures, but our thoughts wander. We know what we believe, but we do not always feel what we know.

Sometimes that distance grows because of pain. Sometimes it grows because of disappointment. Sometimes because we are tired. And sometimes, if we are honest, it grows because we have allowed something into our lives that has slowly pulled our hearts away.

We do not all wander in the same way. But all of us know what it is for the heart to wander.

The message of Elul is not that we have to pretend we have never wandered. The message of Elul is that returning is still possible.

Why?

Because the King is near.

The King Leaves the Palace

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Chabad Rebbe, offered a beautiful parable about the month of Elul. It is a Chasidic teaching, but it gives us an image that helps illuminate something already present throughout Scripture.

Imagine a king living inside a royal palace. If an ordinary person wants to approach him there, it is not easy. There are gates. There are guards. There is protocol. You cannot simply walk into the throne room whenever you please.

But before the king returns to his palace, he travels through the countryside. He passes through the fields where ordinary people are working. While the king is in the field, everyone has access to him. People come as they are, in their ordinary clothes, carrying the concerns of ordinary life. And the king receives them graciously.

That, the Chasidic teaching says, is Elul.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur carry the majesty of the palace. We stand before Hashem as King and Judge. The shofar sounds. Our lives are examined. We confess. We seek cleansing, forgiveness, restoration, and renewal.

But before the King receives us in the palace, He comes to meet us in the field.

The field is where ordinary life happens.

It is where we work. It is where we become tired. It is where we struggle with people. It is where we worry about money. It is where we raise our children. It is where we carry disappointment. It is where we fight temptations that nobody else sees.

The field is not the polished part of our life. It is the real part.

And the message of Elul is that Hashem is not asking us to escape our real life in order to find Him. He comes near to us within it.

Maybe you feel spiritually strong tonight. The King is near.

Maybe you feel tired. The King is near.

Maybe you have been faithful. The King is near.

Maybe you know there is something in your life that needs to change. The King is near.

His nearness is not permission to remain as we are. His nearness is the invitation that makes change possible.

Seek Hashem While He Is Near

Listen to the words of Isaiah 55:6-7:

> *"Seek Adonai while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked abandon his way, and the unrighteous person his thoughts. Let him return to Hashem, that He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon."*

Notice the movement in this passage.

Seek. Call. Abandon. Return.

And then what do we encounter?

Compassion. Abundant pardon.

Isaiah does not minimize the seriousness of sin. He tells us that there are ways we must abandon and thoughts we must leave behind. Teshuvah is not merely feeling bad. Teshuvah is turning. It is a change of direction.

But Isaiah also tells us something about the One toward whom we are turning.

He has compassion.

He abundantly pardons.

Hashem calls us to return because He desires us near.

Some people hear a message about repentance and immediately hear rejection. They think, "Hashem must be finished with me. Hashem must be disgusted with me. I have failed too many times. I should have been further along by now."

But if Hashem were finished with us, He would not call us to return.

The call to teshuvah is itself an expression of mercy.

Conviction is not Hashem slamming the door. Conviction is Hashem showing us the open door.

You may need to leave something behind. You may need to make something right. You may need to confess honestly. You may need to change a habit, repair a relationship, forgive someone, or ask someone to forgive you.

But do not confuse Hashem's correction with abandonment.

The King is near.

Yeshua Announces the Nearness of the Kingdom

This is also the language with which Yeshua begins announcing his mission.

Mark 1:14-15 says that Yeshua came into the Galilee proclaiming the good news of Hashem and saying:

> *"The appointed time has been fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has drawn near. Make teshuvah and trust in the good news."*

The usual English translation says, "Repent and believe." But within Yeshua's Jewish world, we should hear the concept of **teshuvah** - return - and **emunah** - faithful trust.

The Kingdom has drawn near. Therefore, return and trust.

Do you hear how closely that echoes Isaiah?

Isaiah says, "Call upon Him while He is near. Let him return to Hashem."

Yeshua says, "The Kingdom of God has drawn near. Return and trust the good news."

Yeshua is not announcing the rejection of Israel's covenantal story. He is standing within that story and announcing that the reign and redemptive activity of the God of Israel has come near in a decisive way.

Hashem is the ultimate King. Yeshua is the Messiah whom He has sent - the Son of David, the faithful shaliach, the one appointed to announce and carry forward the King's redemptive purpose.

Through Yeshua, the King calls His people home.

Yeshua does not merely tell us that we have wandered. He reveals the mercy of the One who receives those who return.

And that means teshuvah is not just turning away from something bad. It is turning toward Someone good.

It is not only leaving sin. It is returning to relationship.

It is not merely fear of judgment. It is the awakening of love.

I Am My Beloved's

That is why another traditional Elul image is so powerful.

Song of Songs 6:3 says:

> *"Ani l'dodi v'dodi li."*

"I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine."

The initial Hebrew letters of those four words spell **Elul**:

Aleph - Lamed - Vav - Lamed.

Elul is not only the language of a courtroom. It is also the language of love.

The King is also our Beloved.

We do not prepare for the High Holy Days only because a Judge will examine us. We prepare because we belong to Hashem, and we do not want anything to remain between our heart and His.

Fear may cause a person to hide. Love brings a person home.

Healthy awe tells us that our choices matter. Love tells us that returning is still possible.

And we need both.

We need enough awe to take sin seriously. But we also need enough confidence in Hashem's mercy to come out of hiding.

There may be someone listening tonight who is not resisting Hashem because you love sin. You are resisting Him because you are ashamed.

You know where you have failed. You know what you promised. You know how many times you said, "I will never do that again," and then found yourself back in the same place.

So you keep your distance.

But shame says, "Hide until you can make yourself worthy."

Elul says, "The King has entered the field. Come meet Him here."

Come honestly. Come humbly. Come ready to change. But come.

What Does the King Find in Your Field?

Now I want to take the Chasidic image one step further.

The King is in the field. But Scripture also teaches us that the human heart is itself like a field.

Hosea 10:12 says:

"Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap according to chesed; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek Hashem, until He comes and rains righteousness upon you."

Fallow ground is ground that has not been cultivated. Over time, it becomes hard. Seed can fall on it, but it cannot sink deeply into the soil.

Sometimes the heart becomes like that.

Pain can harden it.

Disappointment can harden it.

Repeated compromise can harden it.

Even religious routine can harden it. We can say the prayers, attend the services, read the words, and still keep certain rooms of the heart closed.

Sometimes hardness begins as a form of protection. We were hurt, so we built a wall. We were disappointed, so we stopped expecting. We were betrayed, so we decided never to become vulnerable again.

But what protected us in one season can prevent new seed from growing in the next.

Hashem does not tell Israel to throw the field away. He says, "Break up the fallow ground."

Why?

Because He still intends to grow something there.

That is hope.

Hashem looks at places in us that we have written off, and He still sees ground capable of receiving seed.

You may look at your prayer life and see only dryness. Hashem sees ground that can be softened.

You may look at a broken relationship and see only years of resentment. Hashem sees a place where truth, humility, forgiveness, and wisdom can still be planted.

You may look at a calling you neglected and think the season has passed. Hashem may still be asking you for one faithful step.

You may look at a recurring struggle and see only failure. Hashem sees someone whom He is still calling to return.

The field is not worthless because it became hard.

But it must be opened.

It must be plowed.

It must become receptive again.

So here is the heart question for Elul:

When the King comes into the field of my heart, what does He find growing there?

Does He find bitterness that I have been feeding?

Does He find a fear that I have allowed to make my decisions?

Does He find a private compromise that I keep excusing?

Does He find a gift that I have neglected?

Does He find a wound I have refused to place before Him?

Does He find good seed that needs to be watered again?

The purpose of that question is not shame. It is honesty.

We cannot cultivate a field we refuse to examine.

The Father Who Runs Toward the Returning Child

Yeshua gives us another picture of teshuvah in Luke 15.

A son leaves his father's house. He takes what he has been given and wastes it in a distant land. Eventually, everything collapses. He is empty, humiliated, and far from home.

Then the text says something important:

> *"He came to himself."*

Teshuvah begins when he sees clearly again.

He remembers his father's house. He recognizes the truth about where his choices have taken him. He prepares an honest confession, rises, and begins the journey home.

But while he is still far away, his father sees him.

The father is moved with compassion.

The father runs.

The father embraces him.

The son returns carrying a confession. The father meets him carrying compassion.

Grace does not make confession unnecessary. Grace makes confession safe.

The son does not come home pretending nothing happened. But neither does the father make him earn the right to return.

This is what Yeshua wants us to understand about the heart of Hashem toward the one who makes teshuvah.

The distance may be real, but the Father's compassion is also real.

The consequences may be real, but mercy is also real.

Your failure may be real, but it does not have to choose your direction.

You do not have to pretend the past did not happen in order to turn toward home.

You only have to turn.

And maybe that is the word someone needs tonight:

Turn.

Not tomorrow. Not when you feel more spiritual. Not when you have answered every question. Turn now.

The King is near.

Three Questions for Elul

I want to give us three questions to carry into this month. Do not try to repair every part of your life tonight. Ask Hashem to show you one honest place to begin.

1. Where has the soil of my heart become hard?

Where have disappointment, pain, pride, routine, or compromise made me less responsive to Hashem?

Do not condemn yourself. Name it. Bring it into the light. Ask Hashem to soften what has become hard.

2. What has been growing that needs to be uprooted?

Maybe it is resentment. Maybe it is envy. Maybe it is a habit. Maybe it is dishonest speech. Maybe it is something you watch, something you keep returning to, or an attitude you have defended for too long.

Teshuvah becomes practical when we stop speaking only in generalities.

Do not merely say, "Adonai, forgive all my sins." Ask, "Adonai, what are You placing Your finger on? What must I stop feeding?"

3. What good seed have I neglected?

Teshuvah is not only turning away from sin. It is returning to faithfulness.

Is there a prayer you need to begin praying again?

Is there a mitzvah you have neglected?

Is there someone you need to encourage?

Is there reconciliation you need to seek?

Is there a calling, discipline, or act of obedience that you have kept postponing?

What is one faithful step you can take within the next twenty-four hours?

Not ten steps. One.

Make the call. Offer the apology. Open the Scriptures. Set aside the time to pray. Remove the temptation. Ask for help. Begin again.

You belong to Hashem. Therefore, you can return.

You have not been abandoned. Therefore, you can take the next step.

The King has come near. Therefore, you do not have to remain where you are.

A Quiet Moment of Teshuvah

I want us to take a quiet moment before we close.

Psalm 27:8 says:

> *"My heart says of You, 'Seek His face.' Your face, Hashem, I will seek."*

Let that become our prayer during Elul.

Hashem, where has my heart become hard?

What needs to be uprooted?

What good seed are You asking me to cultivate again?

Closing Exhortation

As we enter Elul, do not begin with the thought, "I have so far to go."

Begin here:

The King is near.

Return when prayer feels dry.

Return when you have failed.

Return when you are tired.

Return when you are embarrassed by how many times you have wandered.

Return when part of you is still afraid.

Return because Hashem is merciful.

Return because His covenant faithfulness is greater than your instability.

Return because Yeshua the Messiah has announced that the Kingdom has drawn near.

Return because the Father still receives the child who rises and comes home.

Before the shofar summons us to stand before the King in His palace, Elul gives us the opportunity to meet Him here - in the field.

And when the King enters your field, do not hide among the weeds.

Come out to meet Him.

Bring Him the hard ground.

Bring Him the neglected seed.

Bring Him the failure you cannot undo and the obedience you can still begin.

The King is near.

Return.