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Parshat Shoftim:
Elul: "It's Not About the Destination, it's the Journey"
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It has become a custom for me to take a trip as the summer comes to an end, usually right around the start of the month of Elul, which we welcomed this week. Elul carries special significance as the month which begins our journey towards the Yamim Noraim- it invites us to open a 40 day personal spiritual accounting. Reflecting on where we've been over the last year and where we are now, what we've gained or lost, how we've succeeded in realizing personal goals and ways in which we might want to improve. Going out of my home into nature allows me to clear my head and focus on introspection, to gain perspective by taking myself out of my usual spaces and take a look from the outside in.

I once took a drive with a friend up to New England. This trip, for me, was a most welcome escape from summer in the hot, bustling city. We drove along long stretches of highway, sky stretching out wider and wider above us until the buildings dotting the horizon were slowly replaced by expanses of blue sky, green fields, and then towering mountains. One day my friend and I were walking a path through a forest. This wasn't one of the more spectacular hikes, just a perfectly lovely path, some wooden bridges laid out over streams, maybe a small waterfall or two. As we were walking, my friend asked if there were any major sights to see, and if so how long until we would get there. I've definitely had these thoughts before on a hike, I could identify with the desire to reach the viewpoint already, to just see what we're "supposed" to see and get to where we're "supposed" to go already. But this time I had my Elul glasses on. I was having a different experience, which my friends' comment brought into focus. This trip had allowed me to show up to the trail, and just be. I didn't need to get somewhere. My time was my own, the path I walked and the pace I went, were my choices to make. Embracing this feeling of presence was liberating. There were moments when each tree felt like a revelation, each with its own pattern of branches winding to the sky and roots crawling into the ground. Moments when "this rock", "this earth", "this moment" was all that occupied my consciousness.

In answer to my friend's comment my mind echoed with a line from a shiur I recently attended at Drisha with Ruti Yair Nusbaum: "לא התוצאה אלא התנועה" - "It's not about the outcome, but about the movement." It was a moment which brought me some clarity about the teshuva process, which we are now undertaking. The work of introspection is not limited to these 40 days, but living a "well examined life" is a project for all the years we're blessed with on this earth. But it's a process with no real endgame, it's not necessarily about "getting somewhere", achieving a certain outcome, because often the outcome isn't really within our control. What is in our hands is the cultivation of a healthy awareness in the present moment: What potentials does this place on the path, this moment, hold? What is my attitude towards the current moment and what it presents before me? What feelings and thoughts am I cultivating towards the choices I make?



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Parshat Shoftim, which coincides with the first Shabbat in Elul, teaches about the ערי מקלט, the cities of refuge where the accidental murderer flees to be protected from vengeful relatives of the person who was killed. The accidental murderer remains mostly confined to these cities, until the Kohen Gadol's death. Chazal, however, understand the accidental murderer's time there not only as punishment for their crime, but as an opportunity for their rehabilitation. It is a time for them to study with their teacher of Torah, to engage in a process of self reflection, feel remorse for the actions they've taken which led to the killing, and envision how their lives might be different going forward. Rav Moshe Tzvi Neria quotes an idea from the Arizal which compares the month of Elul to these cities of refuge. Elul is the parallel in time to the physical city of refuge in space: a time to retreat from our rote ways of acting and thinking and allow ourselves to lean into the process of self reflection-- to think about missteps we've made and become aware of the path which led us to where we are now.

Like the wandering trail through the forest, there isn't a specific endpoint to reach at the end of the teshuva process when we know that we've been "fixed" and we won't make mistakes again, because we will. Elul is rather an invitation to take a step back and breathe, to see individual moments and choices with more clarity. Elul is an opening. It is an opportunity to bring more consciousness to the present, to be open to this moment and the paths it presents before us, and to know that we always have the the choice to turn, and to return. The outcome may not be in our hands, but we can choose to be present, here and now. And all it takes is this moment. To see the openings and opportunities, and be attuned to the movement that has begun within.



Rabbanit Goldie Guy serves as Rabbinics faculty at Carmel Academy. She holds a BA in Religion, and has studied at Migdal Oz, was a Collegiate Fellow at the Drisha Institute over four summers and completed the two-year Graduate Program for Advanced Talmudic Studies (GPATS) at Stern College, where she served as the inaugural Jewish chaplaincy intern at North Shore University Hospital. She has taught at Columbia-Barnard Hillel, as a scholar-in-residence at Congregation Ahavas Torah in Woodside, Maryland, as an instructor in an undergraduate Talmud chabura at Stern College and as gemara faculty at Maharat.