



Greetings, Beth Tikvah, from Boise! We have not yet met but we are already connected as Jews who have, together, entered the Hebrew month of *Elul*: a time for the entire Jewish world to prepare spiritually for our new year, 5770.

In mid-July I ran my first 10K (Somehow I manage to work this into a wide range of conversations that really have no conceivable relationship to racing!). The reason I force everyone around me to hear of this achievement is that I am among the ranks of those picked last in every gym class – as klutzy and lacking in endurance as every tired stereotype of the Eastern-European Jew. Before about seven years ago, I couldn't have run a lap on a bet.

My unimaginable transformation from walker to runner moved at a glacial pace – weeks or months of determined effort would result in only a quarter mile advance. And even just a couple of weeks away from the treadmill or trail would erase months of progress. But, eventually, all those small steps forward (and a bunch back) resulted in my running across the finish line of a course 6.2 miles long: for me, an amazing feat.

My personal story is a universal one. Each of us has, in our lifetime, mastered a skill or reached a goal that required from us persistence, determination and a lot of time and energy. Each of us has had to endure setbacks and frustrations in order to move beyond our natural limitations. And the only way we've been able to continue to move ahead is through desire, focus and a lot of faith.

Thus is the story of our current month of *Elul*. Our task through these weeks leading up to the *Yamim Nora-im* is, with determination and faith, to do the training necessary to move ourselves ahead spiritually, emotionally and morally. This is the season to form a vision of ourselves that is more caring, thoughtful, outward-focused and open than the self of today. We are enjoined to spend this time visualizing how this new, more evolved self thinks and speaks and acts. It is this personal vision, shaped during the weeks of *Elul*, that we take with us to our communal Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur services – it is the blueprint that guides our hearts and souls through the worship experiences of the High Holy Days.

What is your own personal story of moving closer to a desired but distant goal? Did you learn guitar? Gain mastery of a new and overwhelming job? Learn a language? Build a piece of furniture or a car engine or a house? Take off on a backpacking adventure? Finish a degree? Overcome a physical injury or illness? Chances are, your journey included times of frustrations and self-doubt, some expressions of doubt from others, various setbacks and times when you wanted to simply throw in the towel. But your journey also included joyous success, discovery of capabilities you didn't know you had, emergence of inner resilience and strength and great satisfaction.

Take some time over the weeks ahead to set a personal goal for yourself: a goal of a loftier you, one more in line with a person created in the Divine image. Remember that the journey toward this vision will include frustrations and setbacks as well as successes and fulfillment. Step by step – including a few steps backward – you really can move toward this most holy of Jewish goals: the refinement and strengthening of individual character. As the Vilna Gaon (great 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish leader and teacher) taught, “For a person is alive only in order to break a [negative] character trait that he has not broken until now. Therefore one should always strengthen one’s self; for if he does not strengthen himself, why is he alive?”

Wishing you all a very meaningful *Elul*,  
Rabbi Laura Rappaport

Some resources to help and support you on your personal journey:

<http://scheinerman.net/judaism/hhd/teshuvah/index.html>

(A wonderful systematic guide to help make the most of the four weeks of Elul: it utilizes Psalm 27, the psalm traditionally associated with this holy month. I recommend this comprehensive site.)

[http://www.nfty.org/kd/Items/actions.cfm?action=Show&item\\_id=1026&destination=ShowItem](http://www.nfty.org/kd/Items/actions.cfm?action=Show&item_id=1026&destination=ShowItem)

(a basic one-page worksheet that you can use to begin your process of self-reflection and change)

<http://www.urj.org/holidays/highholidays/>

(includes links on High Holy Day topics from the Reform movement)

<http://www.mussarinstitute.org/>

<http://www.aish.com/sp/pg/48906487.html>

(Sites about Mussar: a Jewish movement originating in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that emphasizes character development as the center of Jewish life)

[http://www.chabad.org/holidays/JewishNewYear/template\\_cdo/aid/293704/jewish/Elul-Observances-in-a-Nutshell.htm](http://www.chabad.org/holidays/JewishNewYear/template_cdo/aid/293704/jewish/Elul-Observances-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

(Information from a Chabad perspective on intellectually and spiritually preparing for entering the Holy day period)

[http://www.amazon.com/Preparing-Your-Heart-High-Holy/dp/0827605781/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1251066294&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Preparing-Your-Heart-High-Holy/dp/0827605781/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1251066294&sr=1-1)

(This sourcebook/workbook contains quotes from Jewish tradition and space for daily journaling in the 40 days preceding Rosh Hashanah.)