

Elul

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Hebrew month of Elul which leads up to the New Year, brings daily shofar blasts, extra prayers, selichot, and the serious mood of awesome anticipation that replaces the carefree, happy, fun days of the summer season. But for me, Elul always reminds me of the birth of my passion for religion.

I was born into an Anglo-Orthodox family. My father's parents had emigrated from Radomsk, my mother's from the Ukraine. My father, although born in London, was sent to study in Mir in Lithuania and returned to eventually become the Principal Rabbi of the Federation of Synagogues in London (to the right of the centrist United Synagogue). He left the rabbinate to found Carmel College, an English, residential, Public school, run on religious lines but mainly for non-religious boys. Thus I came to be brought up in the English countryside, far from any center of intensive Jewish life. And the lack of religious enthusiasm that most of my contemporaries evinced rubbed off on me. I was more interested in playing football than studying Torah.

I was sixteen when my father decided that I needed a change, so he packed me off to yeshiva in Jerusalem. The route to Israel in the 1950s was arduous. I was seen off at Victoria Station in London, went by train down to Marseilles, and boarded the Theodore Herzl liner to sail to Haifa.

Haifa from the sea was idyllic, with its golden Bahai dome halfway up the wooded Carmel. The port itself was rather different—coarse, hot, rushed, and frenetic. I was amazed to discover that wearing a kapel meant that I was looked at with scorn, jostled, and even told I didn't need such a relic of the ghetto now that I was in Israel. In the fifties Haifa was the outpost of secularism. It refused to close public services and transport on Shabbat.

I was hosted by very kind ex-Mancunian friends of my father, who shipped me off after a few days, in a sherut up to Jerusalem to arrive in time for the start of the religious academic year, Elul. I arrived at Kol Torah Yeshiva in Bayit Vegan. My father had picked it from the others because it was a new building and not too primitive for a relatively spoilt English kid. It was run by old colleagues of my father from Mir in Lithuania, and Dayan Abramsky, my father's mentor, lived nearby. I found Kol Torah a bit too Germanic for my liking, and two months later I transferred myself down the hill to Be'er Ya'akov, which I adored. But a couple of experiences I had while I was in Jerusalem, had really profound impacts on me.

The center of the yeshiva was a huge hall where hundreds of young men were studying, shouting, arguing, and gesticulating in an atmosphere of noisy enthusiasm that was initially confusing and strange, so different from the decorum of the English academic tradition. But soon the freedom, the ability to argue, to challenge, to go to someone else for another opinion, the feeling of study for the pleasure of it, not the burden or duty, was liberating. Then at prayer time, to see the chaos transformed in to a solid,

disciplined communal expression of concentrated spirituality, was unlike anything I had ever experienced in any synagogue ever in my whole life so far. This was stage one in my transformation.

The first Friday night the two other English boys in the yeshiva decided I needed further educating. Together we walked down the five miles to the Gerrer Chasidic center, which was then in Machane Yehuda. It was midnight; the building was crowded with hundreds of black-coated Gerrer Chasidim with tall fur spodik on their heads, swaggering around the hall, erect, tummies stuck out in front of them, pacing up and down nodding to each other, altogether like a hive of busy bees. Suddenly there was a hush. In swaggered a small, little man, dressed in the same way as the others. Wherever he walked, the crowd parted. Like thrashing sardines in a net, they pushed back to make way. The rebbe strutted about; his look split through the throng, and everyone struggled back to get out of the way of his piercing glance. After walking around the hall, he retreated to a top table behind a wooden crash barrier. Everyone swept up to the barrier. Those behind pressed those in front to get nearer; young strapping youths hurled themselves over other bodies to get closer.

As a well-brought-up Englishman, I stood back from the fray. My rugger-playing friend grabbed me, and completely disregarding our staid English upbringing, we bored through the bodies to the front. There sat the Rebbe, protected by a wooden crash barrier, at a long table, with apparent clones, dressed identically, sitting solemnly on either side. The Rebbe's assistant stood on a chair and called out individual names to come up for a glass of wine, then some challah. There was singing, strong martial rhythms; everyone joined in. Then silence. The Rebbe talked—quietly, briefly, something to do with the opening words of the weekly Sedra—in a yiddish I didn't understand. Then singing again. Late into the night. The power, the control, the enthusiasm, the excitement, and the ecstasy were totally unlike anything I had ever experienced anywhere. Could this really be the same religion as the United Synagogue I knew in London?

The following day I was taken to lunch at Sam Khan's. Sam was as far from a Gerrer Chasid as you could imagine. He was a German Jew who had fled to England, where his Germanic rigidity was softened by a dose of English reserve. and then he had come on to settle in Israel. He was as morally straight and correct and ethical a person as you could ever wish to meet, living modestly, a little haven of European Gemutlichkeit in a Middle Eastern turmoil of hot, nervous chaos. He devoted his life to others, to charities and good works, to saving others from poverty, from humiliation, and from missionaries. He and his wife had an open home and bestowed abundant hospitality, particularly on English waifs and strays.

Within a day or so, I was exposed to three entirely different paradigms of religious Jewry—the Lithuanian academic, the Chasidic ecstatic, and the Germanic controlled and highly ethical—all of them impressive in very different ways. I realized there was so much depth and variety and choice in Judaism, something I had no inkling of in the Britain of my youth. This was the first Elul I consciously remembered as a religiously positively experience.

Each year I try to recreate the excitement and the novelty of that year. Recurring routines, even annual ones, can be the same—boring, uninspiring—unless we try to make them otherwise. And the way to do that is to remember the positive, the happy and the good things in life.