

Elul Project  
5781

תִּדְּשׁ יָמֵינוּ כְּקֶדֶם

**renew our days as in the past *or* renew our days as in the beginning**

This phrase, which is sung at the conclusion of every Torah service, originates from the Book of Lamentations recited on Tisha B'av. It expresses the hope that God will restore our days to resemble a time before the destruction of the Temple. The final word, kedem, not only evokes longing for a past time, but a primordial time, a beginning time, when the world was freshly born, creation. Furthermore, the root letters of kedem, kuf-dalet-mem, yield a number of additional meanings. Derived from kadim, which means east, kuf-dalet-mem also paradoxically points to the future and is used to convey forward motion. Kuf-dalet-mem connects a sense of progress and development not only to the past, but to a time that is essentially new.

We are living in a period of global mourning, uncertainty, transition, reflection, and hope. What have we been through, who are we now, and where are we going? This Elul, what does it mean to move forward? What role does looking back, remembering, and restoring play in our personal and collective progress? And how might we be guided by the vision of a new world?

### **Elul Day 1:**

Lamentations 5:22

השיבנו יהוה אליך ונשובה חדש ימינו כקדם

Take us back, ADONAI, to Yourself, And let us come back; Renew our days as of old!

#### **Question:**

*What have you returned to this year? What is something that has made you feel renewed?*

### **Elul Day 2:**

Leonard Cohen - By the Rivers Dark

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rr69CkB1S4s>

“By the rivers dark  
I wandered on.  
I lived my life  
In Babylon”

#### **Question:**

*How has the past year shaped your concept of exile?*

### **Elul Day 3:**

“You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait, be quiet, still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.”

- Franz Kafka

#### **Questions:**

*What's something that you have discovered from waiting? Wisdom you have found in solitude, stillness, or a quiet place? OR Describe a meaningful moment of stillness or solitude.*

### **Elul Day 4:**

Asa- Fire On The Mountain

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jIhNOrVG58>

“There is fire on the mountain  
And nobody seems to be on the run  
Oh, there is fire on the mountaintop  
And no one is a-runnin’”

**Question:**

*How has this year informed or changed how you look at the future?*

**Elul Day 5:**

“And in fact that selfsame strange urge I had when I was small - the desire to grant a second chance to something that could never have one - is still one of the urges that set me going today whenever I sit down to write a story.”

- Amos Oz, A Tale of Love and Darkness

**Question:**

*What second chances have you come across this year? How do these chances continue manifesting today?*

**Elul Day 6:**

“Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short, the work is great, the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the Master of the house presses.”

- Pirkei Avot chapter 2:15

**Question:**

*What is something you started doing this year inspired by a sense of urgency?*

**Elul Day 7:**

יום שישי Yom shishi – Yehuda Poliker

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-ZA1TalhFg>

השבוע מתחיל

מאוחר כרגיל

אין לי כח לקום

אין לי חשק לכלום

יום ראשון דיכאון

יום שני עצבני

יום שלישי לא ניגמר

רביעי מיותר

וביום חמישי

מצב רוח חופשי

זה כבר סוף השבוע

ומחר יום שישי

“The week starts,

late as usual,

I don't have the strength to get up,

I don't have the will to do anything,

Sunday - depression,

Monday - nervous,

Tuesday doesn't end; Wednesday improves,

and Thursday - the mood is free,

it's already the end of the week,

and tomorrow is Friday.

**Question:**

*When have you felt relief this year? When were you able to rest? How did it impact the way you were able to move forward?*

***Elul Day 8:***

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Amos Imre, *Before my Great-Grandmother's Mirror*, 1935

The painting entitled *Before my Great-Grandmother's Mirror* (1935) condenses into a single space a visual memory and the fleeting moment of an afternoon in the small town. Beyond reflecting the pictures hanging on the opposite wall and the bed – made up with a high stack of pillows underneath the bedspread as was the custom in the countryside – the mirror is filled with blurred, floating images of the ancestors, representing the cohesive force of family across generations or, if you will, the eternal chain of being. The painting successfully challenges

conventional unitary notions of time and space by conjuring up present and past simultaneously, literally on the same plane. This bears out the *ars poetica* Ámos articulated in one of his journal entries:

*It does not suffice to paint an object, a figure or a landscape as just a motif. I believe it is the painter's task to project, through his subjective vision, the soul of his themes, in other words the impact they have on their surroundings, as entities that somehow stay alive even in death.*

- Katalin Petényi, IMRE ÁMOS, PAINTER OF THE APOCALYPSE, From The Hungarian Review 2016

**Question:**

*How does memory impact the way you envision the future? Jewish memory?*

**Elul Day 9:**

“Well, one survives that, no matter how... You survive this and in some terrible way, which I suppose no one can ever describe, you are compelled, you are corralled, you are bullwhipped into dealing with whatever it is that hurt you. And what is crucial here is that if it hurt you, that is not what's important. Everybody's hurt. What is important, what corrals you, what bullwhips you, what drives you, torments you, is that you must find some way of using this to connect you with everyone else alive. This is all you have to do it with. You must understand that your pain is trivial except insofar as you can use it to connect with other people's pain; and insofar as you can do that with your pain, you can be released from it, and then hopefully it works the other way around too; insofar as I can tell you what it is to suffer, perhaps I can help you to suffer less.”

- James Baldwin “The Artist Struggle for Integrity”

**Question:**

*When have you felt connected to the greater human picture this year?*

**Elul Day 10:**

This American Life Podcast

The Weight of Words—by Ira Glass

[https://www.thisamericanlife.org/741/the-weight-of-words?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=feed&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+talpodcast+%28This+American+Life+Podcast%29](https://www.thisamericanlife.org/741/the-weight-of-words?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+talpodcast+%28This+American+Life+Podcast%29)

(Listen from .24—7:00)

**Question:**

*When has routine or ritual brought you meaning or comfort? Has doing the same thing over and over again ever helped you move forward?*

**Elul Day 11:**

Where might I go to find You, Exalted, Hidden One?

Yet where would I not go to find You, Everpresent, Eternal One?

My heart cries out to You:

Please draw near to me.

The moment I reach out for You, I find You reaching in for me.

- By Yehudah Halevi, translated in Mishkan T'filah

**Question:**

*What are you reaching for this Elul?*

***Elul Day 12:***

Habanot Nechama - So Far

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iB-ao\\_cLGJM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iB-ao_cLGJM)

[http://motolyrics.com/habanot-nechama/\\_18ef36c-lyrics-english-translation.html](http://motolyrics.com/habanot-nechama/_18ef36c-lyrics-english-translation.html)  
(Full English translation)

“So far, you see the sky  
You cry, you don't know why  
Its joy, its happiness  
The rainbow makes you feel high  
So far, you see the sky.”

**Question:**

*Describe a time you were moved by the beauty or truth of a moment.*

**Elul Day 13:**

Hatikvah—Israeli National Anthem by Naftali Herz Imber

As long as within our hearts	כל עוד בלִבֵּב פְּנִימָה
The Jewish soul sings,	נִפְּשׁ יְהוּדִי הוֹמֶה,
As long as forward to the <b>East</b>	וּלְפָאֲתֵי מִזְרַח קְדִימָה,
To Zion, looks the eye –	עֵינַי לְצִיּוֹן צוֹפֶה;
Our hope is not yet lost,	עוֹד לֹא אֲבָדָה תְּקוּמָתֵנוּ,
It is two thousand years old,	הַתְּקִנָּה בֵּת שְׁנוֹת אֲלָפִים,
To be a free people in our land	לְהִיּוֹת עִם הַפְּשִׁי בְּאַרְצֵנוּ
The land of Zion and Jerusalem.	אֶרֶץ צִיּוֹן וִירוּשָׁלַיִם.
	לְהִיּוֹת עִם הַפְּשִׁי בְּאַרְצֵנוּ
	אֶרֶץ צִיּוֹן וִירוּשָׁלַיִם.

**Question:**

*What has imbued in you a sense of hope this year?*

**Elul Day 14:**

“According to the teachings of the Torah, history does not unfold along a time-line but a time-spiral. For example, the High Holiday of Rosh Hashanah celebrates among many things — the anniversary of the creation of Humankind, of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden — and Torah teaches that on Rosh Hashanah a person should act like his or her best, actualized self, because the qualities of time that have returned on Rosh Hashanah empower a person to create his self and who he will be for the coming year. Movement on a spiral implies growth: In traveling on a spiral, there is a circular motion revolving around a center, but it is also combined with a vertical movement. You don’t come back to the same place you started but a similar place farther along the spiral.”

- “Time Spirals and Other Insights Into the Jewish Calendar” Huffpost article by Eitan Press

**Question:**

*How are you moving vertically? Closer to “the center”? Consider one way you have grown this year.*

**Elul Day 15:**



Adi Nes, Untitled (The Last Supper Before Going Out to Battle), 1999, Chromogenic print

**Question:**

*Each year at many Passover seders l'shana ha-ba'ah bi-y'rushalayim (next year in Jerusalem) is proclaimed. We do not hope to go back to a biblical Jerusalem of the past, rather, a future redemption in Jerusalem, a better time, still ahead of us. What does your dinner table look like in a world redeemed? How is it different or the same as your table today?*

**Elul Day 16:**

This Is Why I Sing- Dan Nichols

<https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=9B0prJXDdNY&list=RDAMVM9B0prJXDdNY>

“For the call and response of the hope I hear  
Thanks and the trust in a God I don't fear  
For my relief in a Holy one of blessing  
And my belief in a lifetime of wrestling

This is why I sing, this is why I sing,  
All I have I bring, this is why I sing

**Question:**

*This Elul, what is making you sing?*

**Elul Day 17:**

“Do you want to see something new? Take the same walk You took yesterday.”

“To learn something new, take the path you took yesterday.”

- John Burroughs

**Question:**

*Identify a time that felt like an endpoint but was actually a new beginning*

**Elul Day 18:**

A child is something else again. Wakes up  
in the afternoon and in an instant he's full of words,  
in an instant he's humming, in an instant warm,  
instant light, instant darkness.

A child is Job. They've already placed their bets on him  
but he doesn't know it. He scratches his body  
for pleasure. Nothing hurts yet.

They're training him to be a polite Job,  
to say “Thank you” when the Lord has given,  
to say “You're welcome” when the Lord has taken away.

A child is vengeance.

A child is a missile into the coming generations.

I launched him: I'm still trembling.

A child is something else again: on a rainy spring day

glimpsing the Garden of Eden through the fence,

kissing him in his sleep,

hearing footsteps in the wet pine needles.

A child delivers you from death.

Child, Garden, Rain, Fate.

- A Child is Something Else Again by Yehuda Amichai and translated by Chana Bloch

**Question:**

*How do you embody your inner child? How does your inner child impact the way you dwell and create in the world?*

**Elul Day 19:**



Amos Imre, *Dreamer*, 1938

“Ámos is increasingly concerned with ways to project memory and dream in images. Indeed, the dream appears as the manifestation of desire throughout his work, in which the unconscious never disintegrates into discrete fragments. In these images, dream and reality merge to the effect of raising reality to the higher plane of the mythical. For Ámos, the dream offers a means to rid himself of the seemingly immutable facts of waking life, a way of casting off the shackles of reality. More than just the protagonist, the painter becomes the director of his dreams. Unlike surrealist painters, Ámos never for a moment disables consciousness and emotion which provide a link between associations. In his paintings, dreams always appear in real-life situations, enriching the gist of the tactile image by a wealth of intimated correspondences.

This complexity of the dream is treated extensively in his *Dreamer* (1938), which replaces modal unity by a concatenation of contradictory dream fragments. The dream here is no longer simply a projection of childhood fantasy or desire. The objects of the room may still convey the sense of a sheltered home, but the world outside as glimpsed through the window is now teeming with portentous signs as the painter enacts his own double, so to speak. The crown of thorns gracing the head of the imagined painter deep in slumber foreshadows the artist’s persecution and death anxiety.”

- Katalin Petényi, IMRE ÁMOS, PAINTER OF THE APOCALYPSE, From The Hungarian Review 2016

**Question:**

*How has imagination motivated, grounded, or challenged you over the past year?*

**Elul Day 20:**

"When reading my present treatise, bear in mind that by "faith" we do not understand merely that which is uttered with the lips, but also that which is apprehended by the soul, the conviction that the object [of belief] is exactly as it is apprehended. If, as regards real or supposed truths, you content yourself with giving utterance to them in words, without apprehending them or believing in them, especially if you do not seek real truth, you have a very easy task as, in fact, you will find many ignorant people professing articles of faith without connecting any idea with them."

- Maimonides, The Guide for the Perplexed

**Question:**

*How does/has faith inform your vision for the future?*

**Elul Day 21:**

To be a Jew in the twentieth century  
Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,  
Wishing to be invisible, you choose  
Death of the spirit, the stone insanity.  
Accepting, take full life. Full agonies:  
Your evening deep in labyrinthine blood  
Of those who resist, fail, and resist; and God  
Reduced to a hostage among hostages.

The gift is torment. Not alone the still  
Torture, isolation; or torture of the flesh.  
That may come also. But the accepting wish,  
The whole and fertile spirit as guarantee  
For every human freedom, suffering to be free,  
Daring to live for the impossible.

- To be a Jew in the twentieth century by Muriel Rukeyser. Originally number 7 in a longer poem called "Letter to the Front."

**Question:**

*Describe a gift you have received this year.*

*Or*

*How has faith grounded your fear or uncertainty this year?*

**Elul Day 22:**

“In this there is no measuring with time, a year doesn’t matter, and ten years are nothing. Being an artist means: not numbering and counting, but ripening like a tree, which doesn’t force its sap, and stands confidently in the storms of spring, not afraid that afterward summer may not come. It does come. But it comes only to those who are patient, who are there as if eternity lay before them, so unconcernedly silent and vast. I learn it every day of my life, learn it with pain I am grateful for: patience is everything!”

- Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet

**Question:**

*Over the past year, how has your concept of patience changed or remained the same?*

**Elul Day 23:**

We spend all our lives trying to get somewhere, to work or the store

or graduation, and we look back only to remind ourselves

of where we need to be. Sometimes we remember

not to go anywhere, but

the hardest place to travel

is inside, folding into ourselves, seeing if where we're trying to get is where we want to go,

spinning if we can

with our arms open wide, letting the world rush by.

- Turning by Nancie S. Martin from West End Synagogue’s “Interpretive Liturgy for The High Holidays”

**Question:**

*This Elul, what do you find yourself open wide to?*

**Elul Day 24:**

Azov- by Shye Ben Tzur, Jonny Greenwood and The Rajasthan Express

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDya3nllfz0>

*Azov= leave or give up*

*“Leave your traps*

*Leave your sacrifices*

*Leave your doubt*

*Leaving your suffering*

*Leave, leave, leave”*

**Question:**

*What's something you have given up this year and why? How does its absence impact you today?*

**Elul Day 25:**

Shafts of bright sun, haze of mist

And there again a perfect bow –

God's palette;

The spectrum of promise:

Never again will God bring a flood

To end humanity,

To start anew.

But roll back the scroll,

Read the black fire again

Carefully; read the white,

The unwritten.

Our task:

To take care

Of God's world.

Between the letters,  
The warning of our failure.  
God will not flood the earth.  
But we, who thought our tiny choices  
Would have no effect on this world...  
We have left it late to awaken.  
The sun still shines,  
The haze of mist  
And there again –  
No need for human hand –  
The perfect bow  
God gave.

- Morning Blessing from Mishkan T'Filah, A Progressive Siddur, p.472, World Union for Progressive Judaism Edition

**Question:**

*What is the failure that you most cherish?*

**Elul Day 26:**

הישן יתחדש והחדש יתקדש  
*ha-yashan yitchadesh v'ha- chadash yitkadesh*  
the old shall be made new, and the new shall be made holy

- Rav Abraham Isaac Kook

**Question:**

*This Elul, what strikes you as new? What strikes you as holy?*

**Elul Day 27:**

4. I think of the image brought into my room  
Of the sage and the thin young man who flickers and asks.  
He is asking about the moment when the Buddha  
Offers the lotus, a flower held out as declaration.

“Isn’t that fragile?” he asks. The sage answers:  
“I speak to you. You speak to me. Is that fragile?”

- Fragile, by Muriel Rukeyser. 4<sup>th</sup> poem in a collection called Waterlily Fire

**Question:**

*What is something that you understand to be fragile?*

**Elul Day 28:**

“God is a woman and she is growing older. She moves more slowly now. She cannot stand erect. Her face is lined. Her voice is scratchy. Sometimes she has to strain to hear. God is a woman and she is growing older; yet, she remembers everything.

On Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the day on which she gave us birth, God sits down at her kitchen table, opens the Book of Memories, and begins turning the pages; and God remembers.

“There, there is the world when it was new and my children when they were young.” As she turns each page she smiles, seeing before her, like so many dolls in a department store window, all the beautiful colors of our skin, all the varied shapes and sizes of our bodies. She marvels at our accomplishments: the music we have written, the gardens we have planted, the stories we have told, the ideas we have spun.

“They now can fly faster than the winds I send,” she says to herself, “and they sail across the waters which I gathered into seas. They even visit the moon which I set in the sky. But they rarely visit me.” There pasted into the pages of her book are all the cards we have ever sent to her when we did not bother to visit. She notices our signatures scrawled beneath the printed words someone else has composed.

Then there are the pages she would rather skip. Things she wishes she could forget. But they stare her in the face and she cannot help but remember: her children spoiling the home she created for us, brothers putting each other in chains. She remembers seeing us racing down dangerous roads—herself unable to stop us. She remembers the dreams she had for us—dreams we never fulfilled. And she remembers the names, so many names, inscribed in the book, names of all the children she has lost through war and famine, earthquake and accident, disease and suicide. And God remembers the many times she sat by a bedside weeping that she could not halt the process she herself set into motion. On Yom Kippur, God lights candles, one for each of her children, millions of candles lighting up the night making it bright as day. God stays awake all night turning the pages of her book.

God is lonely, longing for her children, her playful ones. All that dwells on earth does perish. But God endures, so she suffers the sadness of losing all that she holds dear.

God is home, turning the pages of her book. “Come home,” she wants to say to us, “Come home.” But she won’t call. For she is afraid that we will say, “No.” She can anticipate the conversation: “We are so busy. We’d love to see you but we just can’t come. Too much to do.”

Even if we don’t realize it, God knows that our business is just an excuse. She knows that we avoid returning to her because we don’t want to look into her age-worn face. It is hard for us to face a god who disappointed our childhood expectations: She did not give us everything we wanted. She did not make us triumphant in battle, successful in business and invincible to pain. We avoid going home to protect ourselves from our disappointment and to protect her. We don’t want her to see the disappointment in our eyes. Yet, God knows that it is there and she would have us come home anyway.”

- From the Sermon “God Is A Woman and She Is Growing Older” written and delivered by Rabbi Maggie Wenig at Beth Am, The Peoples Temple, New York, Yom Kippur 1990

**Question:**

*When and why do you find yourself visiting with God?*

**Elul Day 29:**

I thought I’d awaken to a world in mourning.

Heavy clouds crowding, a society storming.

But there’s something different on this golden morning.

Something magical in the sunlight, wide and warming.

I see a dad with a stroller taking a jog.

Across the street, a bright-eyed girl chases her dog.

A grandma on a porch fingers her rosaries.

She grins as her young neighbor brings her groceries.

While we might feel small, separate, and all alone,

Our people have never been more closely tethered.

The question isn't if we will weather this unknown,

But how we will weather this unknown together.

So on this meaningful morn, we mourn and we mend.

Like light, we can't be broken, even when we bend.

As one, we will defeat both despair and disease.

We stand with healthcare heroes and all employees;

With families, libraries, schools, waiters, artists;

Businesses, restaurants, and hospitals hit hardest.

We ignite not in the light, but in lack thereof,

For it is in loss that we truly learn to love.

In this chaos, we will discover clarity.

In suffering, we must find solidarity.

For it's our grief that gives us our gratitude,

Shows us how to find hope, if we ever lose it.

So ensure that this ache wasn't endured in vain:

Do not ignore the pain. Give it purpose. Use it.

Read children's books, dance alone to DJ music.

Know that this distance will make our hearts grow fonder.

From a wave of woes our world will emerge stronger.

We'll observe how the burdens braved by humankind

Are also the moments that make us humans kind;

Let every dawn find us courageous, brought closer;

Heeding the light before the fight is over.

When this ends, we'll smile sweetly, finally seeing

In testing times, we became the best of beings.

- The Miracle of Morning by Amanda Gorman

**Question:**

*Every day the sun emerges, wakes up, and rises from kedem, the east. On this new morning, as we enter Tishrei and a new year, how do we continue mourning and mending?*

