

ISRAEL Teaching Letter

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A Call to *Repentance*

AS I WRITE THIS ISRAEL TEACHING LETTER MY HEART IS HEAVY.

On every side we are bombarded with evidence of how far we are from God's perfect plans for our world. The morality of the western world seems to be in free fall. Financially, the world is rocking, with nations like Greece on the verge of total financial collapse. World leaders posture as they attempt to elevate their position—for example, Putin's attempts to restore the glory of Russia to the dismay of NATO. Rogue nations like Iran and North Korea continue to develop weapons of destruction. Islamic attacks around the world continue to claim the lives of those who are considered infidels. In Israel, rocket fire from three borders and terror attacks within our borders, keep every one on edge.

Many look forward to autumn 2015 with wonder, and others, with trepidation as the fourth blood moon in the tetrad cycle approaches on *Sukkot* (Feast of Tabernacles). Others speak of the fact that this is a *shmitah* year, the seventh year in the biblical cycle in which the land is to rest. The *shmitah* also ends in September. Some say that it is a signal of coming judgment, others that it is a sign of blessing for Israel. Many are hoping that the Messiah will come very soon. Although there is much speculation about what it all means, one thing is clear—these are not ordinary days.

The prophet Joel prophesied of signs in the heavens, "*The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. And it shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the remnant whom the LORD calls*" (Joel 2:31–32).

Therefore you
also be **ready**, for
the Son of Man is
coming at an hour
you do not expect.

– Matt. 24:44



In Matthew 24, Yeshua (Jesus) told His followers to watch for His return, saying that there will be signs in the heavens before His coming. The passage goes on to say that we will not know the time of His coming, so we must watch and always be ready. *“Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect”* (Matt. 24:44).

In Matthew 25 we find the story of the 10 virgins waiting for the bridegroom to come and claim his bride. The passage tells us that when the bridegroom came, five were ready and five were not. This is a clear call to all of us to be ready. How? We need to repent and keep ourselves in a constant state of readiness before the Lord.

I remember as a child saying my prayers at night. My mother would ask me if I needed to repent of anything. We were in the habit of repenting frequently—we wanted to be sure we were always in a right relationship with God.

I spoke with a Christian leader a few days ago. He is calling his community to 40 days of repentance with fasting. He is not alone. Pastors all over the United States are calling for repentance in light of the recent decision by the Supreme Court. I just typed “repentance 2015” in the Google search engine and in half a second the results showed 2,940,000 entries. Many godly Christian leaders are calling for repentance!

There is also an emphasis on repentance in the Jewish world. One of the benefits of living in Israel is the opportunity to see the Bible through different eyes. After many years of living among the Jewish people, studying the *Tanakh* (Gen.–Mal.) with Jewish teachers, and experiencing the annual festival cycle, my understanding of Scripture has been enhanced. This month the Jewish people enter into the biblical holiday of *Elul*. It is a holiday marked by heart searching and repentance. For 40 days from the first of *Elul* until *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement), there is a special emphasis on repentance—repentance between man and God and between one another.

Jewish Sage Eliezer Hyrcanus is famous for saying to his students that they should repent one day before their death. One of his students replied by saying that no one knows when they will die. The teacher said, “Therefore repent today.”

Breakingisraelnews.com reported in April that a rabbi living in southern Israel considers the blood moons to be a sign from God and is urging all Jews to pray and repent. At the time of the third blood moon, he called for a prayer gathering at the Western Wall to encourage the coming of the Messiah and the redemption of Israel and the world.

God’s Remedy for a Sick World

God is yearning for human beings, created in His image, to repent of their evil ways and turn to Him. The Bible outlines His perfect plan for mankind. Throughout the centuries men have continually rebelled against their creator. Patiently, God calls them repeatedly back to Himself. He promises restoration of our land if we will seek Him and repent.

“If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14).

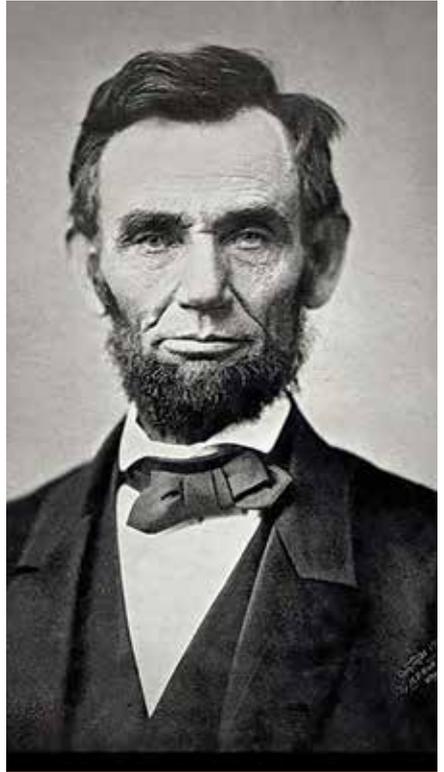
The word translated “turn” in this passage is *shuv* (שוב). It is the root of the Hebrew word for repentance—*teshuvah* (תשובה)! Repentance is different from saying you are sorry. Repentance is a heart deep sorrow over one’s sins, and a turning to face the opposite direction with a determination to sin no more. Yeshua, when presented with the woman caught in adultery, said to her, “Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more” (John 8:11). Today many call for Christians to not condemn sinners. While Yeshua certainly modeled love for us, he also expected the woman to repent—“Go and sin no more.” We are thankful for God’s grace and forgiveness, but we must understand that His mercy is not a license to sin.



This is the most urgent need of our times. The body of Christ (Messiah) needs to devote itself to seeking God in humility and prayer and to repent. As concerned believers we must repent on behalf of our own sin, and then seek God's mercy for our family, church, community and nation.

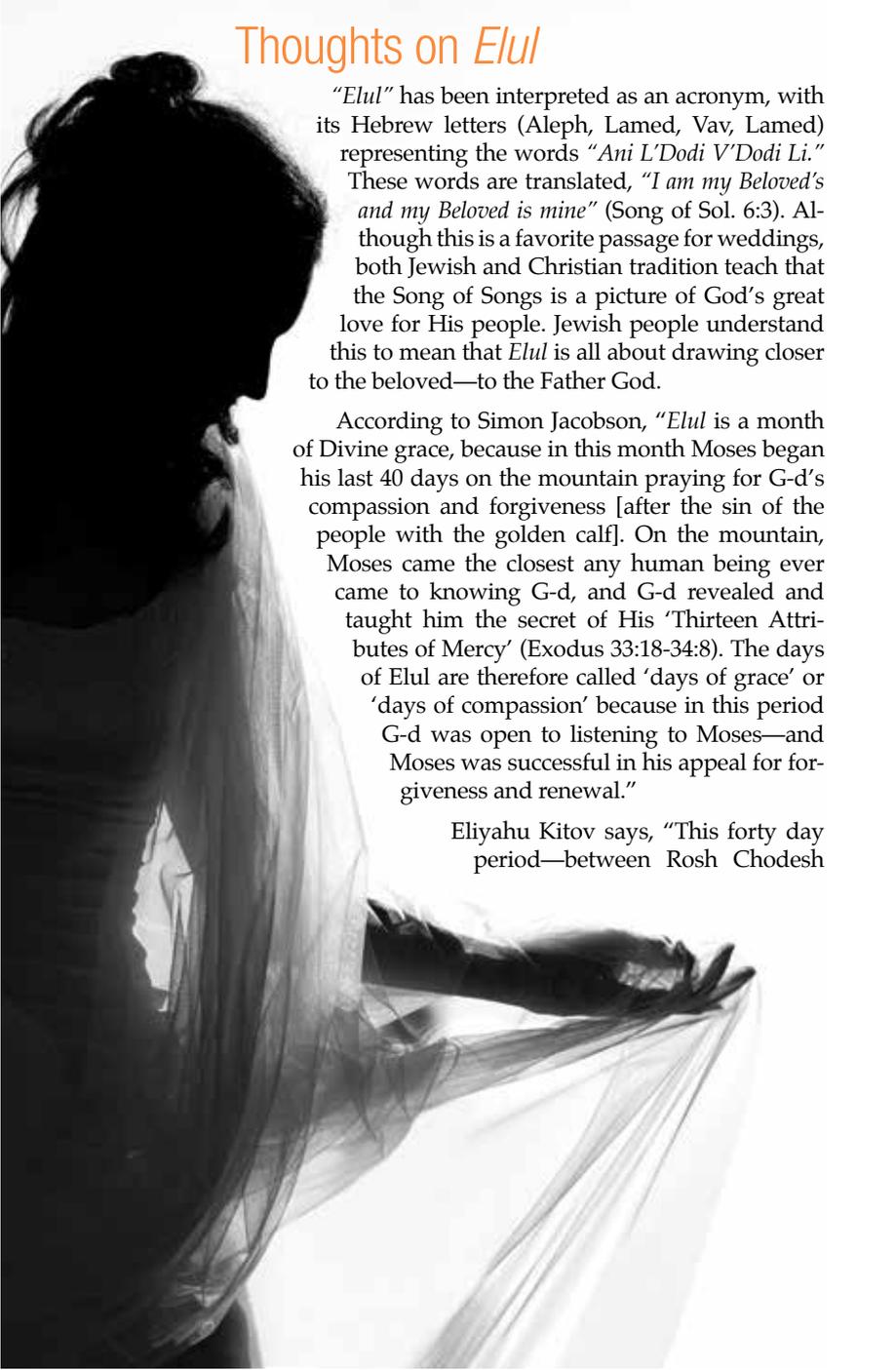
In 1863 at a national proclamation of prayer and repentance, President Abraham Lincoln wrote, "We have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand, which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us! It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness" (The Presidential Prayer Team website).

Many say that God's judgment is coming and certainly He would be justified in acting with His strong arm. What should our response be? We need to humble ourselves and pray. We need to repent! We need to turn from our wicked ways. We need to ask God for His mercy. Just as He would have saved Sodom and Gomorrah, at Abraham's request, if only ten righteous men were found, so we can pray that for the sake of the righteous, God will show us His mercy rather than His judgment. As the Church of the Lord Yeshua, we need to be a bright shining light of goodness and righteousness in the midst of darkness.



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— Abraham Lincoln



Thoughts on *Elul*

“Elul” has been interpreted as an acronym, with its Hebrew letters (Aleph, Lamed, Vav, Lamed) representing the words *“Ani L’Dodi V’Dodi Li.”* These words are translated, *“I am my Beloved’s and my Beloved is mine”* (Song of Sol. 6:3). Although this is a favorite passage for weddings, both Jewish and Christian tradition teach that the Song of Songs is a picture of God’s great love for His people. Jewish people understand this to mean that *Elul* is all about drawing closer to the beloved—to the Father God.

According to Simon Jacobson, *“Elul* is a month of Divine grace, because in this month Moses began his last 40 days on the mountain praying for G-d’s compassion and forgiveness [after the sin of the people with the golden calf]. On the mountain, Moses came the closest any human being ever came to knowing G-d, and G-d revealed and taught him the secret of His ‘Thirteen Attributes of Mercy’ (Exodus 33:18-34:8). The days of *Elul* are therefore called ‘days of grace’ or ‘days of compassion’ because in this period G-d was open to listening to Moses—and Moses was successful in his appeal for forgiveness and renewal.”

Eliyahu Kitov says, *“This forty day period—between Rosh Chodesh*

Elul (beginning of the month) and the tenth of Tishrei—was fixed for all generations as a time of reconciliation, a period of repentance and forgiveness.”

Many penitential prayers to God mark this 40-day period. In some Jewish communities the custom is to rise during the final hours of the night for the entire month of *Elul* to pray. The shofar is also sounded daily during the *Shacharis* service (morning). The shofar is sounded to remind the people to prepare their hearts in repentance for the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*).

Kitov describes the shofar saying, “It is the nature of the shofar sounds to arouse trepidation in men’s hearts as the verse in Amos 3:6 states, ‘If a shofar is sounded in the city, will the people not tremble?’ The very sounding of the shofar announces to the people: ‘Awaken, you sleepers from your sleep, you slumberers from your slumber—search your actions and return in penitence!’”

This reminds me of Ephesians 5:14–16: “Therefore He says: ‘Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ (Messiah) will give you light.’ See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.”

Historical Background of “*Elul*”

According to Jewish tradition, God created the world on the twenty-fifth of *Elul*, and six days later Adam and Eve were created on the first of *Tishrei*, which is *Rosh HaShanah* (Feast of Trumpets).

Elul is mentioned in Scripture. When Nehemiah came up from Babylon to Jerusalem and saw the city in ruins, its walls filled with gaps and its gates burnt with fire, he urged the Jewish people to rebuild the walls, in order that they would no longer be a shame among the nations. “So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of *Elul*, in fifty-two days. And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God” (Neh. 6:15–16).



Also according to Jewish tradition, it was on the 17th of *Elul*, that the spies who gave the tragic and catastrophic report about *Eretz Yisrael* (the Land of Israel) died. Rabbi Elazar son of Parta said, “Come and see how great is the negative power of evil speech and consequently the greatness of the punishment that it brings! We learn this lesson from the spies. For they slandered only trees and stones (the Land of Israel)—how much worse is the punishment if someone slanders a human being!”

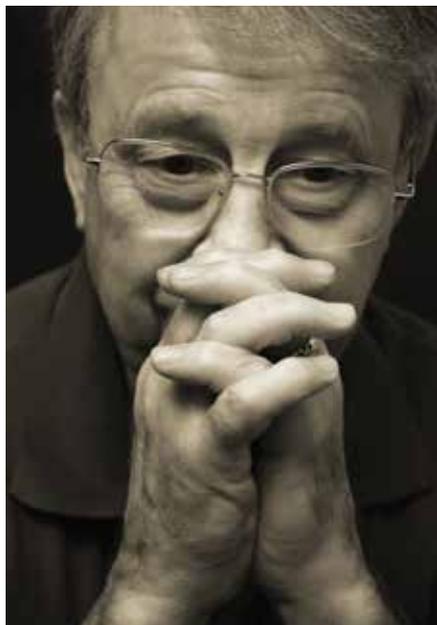
This is one of the reasons why in Judaism great emphasis is placed on the importance of making things right with other human beings as well as with God (Aish.com).

Elul Prayer Emphasis

Many Psalms are prayed during this time. But one passage is read and prayed daily—Psalm 27. *The Artscroll Tenach* says, “With this Psalm, Jews all over the world usher in the spirit of the Days of Awe. It is recited at the conclusion of services throughout the month of Elul and during the 10 days of Repentance (or Awe)...This Psalm says nothing of repentance. Nevertheless, it combats sin by teaching how to prevent it at its source. David declares that the mind, which is fully engrossed in single-minded dedication to God’s service, has no room for sin—and he exhorts us to not be distracted from concentration on this one goal. ‘One thing I asked of HASHEM (The LORD), that shall I seek: That I dwell in the house of HASHEM’” (*Artscroll Tenach*).

As a Christian leader, I also feel that this is the most important thing we need today. Only by clinging to our God will we find the grace and love to deal with the dire circumstances that surround us. We need more than nice sermons and moving worship services. We need to truly love God with all our hearts, minds, soul and strength (Mark 12). We need to cling to our loving God. Unfortunately, our sin separates us from a holy God. We must repent and draw near to Him.

We are blessed that God is a God of mercy. He longs for us to turn from our sin and run into His arms. Even after the children of Israel sinned with the golden calf, God revealed His merciful character to Moses. This is known in the Jewish world as the 13 attributes of God’s mercy. “*Now the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The*





LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation.'" (Exod. 34:5-7). This passage also plays an integral role in the prayers of the Jewish people during the month of *Elul*.

How Should We Repent?

Moses Maimonides, the great 12th century Jewish sage, wrote a treatise on repentance. He answered the question of how to repent by talking about the essence of confession, which included three main components.

1. Acknowledgment of sin (*"I have sinned, I have acted perversely, I have transgressed"*);
2. Remorse (*"I am contrite and ashamed of my deeds"*);
3. Resolution for the future (*"I will never do this again"*).

Maimonides also said, "The more one confesses and elaborates on this matter, the more praiseworthy he is. And, also, those under an obligation to bring sin offerings and trespass offerings, who bring their sacrifices for sins committed either in error or willfully, are not acquitted [of their sins] by means of these offerings until they repent and confess in words..."

In an article on the jewishvirtuallibrary.com site, I found an explanation of the Jewish thoughts on repentance:

"Jewish tradition holds that *teshuvah* [repentance] consists of several stages: The sinner must recognize his sin, feel sincere remorse, undo any damage he has done and pacify the victim of his offense, and resolve never to commit the sin again.

"Jewish law also offers some guidelines to the victim of the sin. In the normal order of events, if the offender *sincerely* requests forgiveness, the victim is required

to grant it—certainly by the third request. Withholding forgiveness is considered cruel and is itself a sin.

“Concerning offenses committed against God, a characteristic Jewish teaching is that of Rabbi Bunam of Pzsyha, who once asked his disciples: ‘How can you tell when a sin you have committed has been pardoned?’ His disciples gave various answers but none of them pleased the rabbi. ‘We can tell,’ he said, ‘by the fact that we no longer commit that sin.’”

The Writings of the Apostles contain some of these same concepts. *“This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:5–9). Here we see the need to acknowledge our sin and the need to confess to the Lord.

What about the need to confess our sins to others? *“Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much”* (James 5:16). Yeshua, in the Sermon on the Mount says, *“Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift”* (Matt. 5:23–24). The Apostle Paul, when giving instruction on taking communion says, *“Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup”* (1 Cor. 11:27–28).



Clearly the Bible teaches that we need to repent of our sins to God and to confess our sins against others to them, asking for forgiveness and providing restitution (when possible).

I spoke with an Orthodox Jewish friend asking about these concepts and he told me that they believe that they have a responsibility to ask for forgiveness three times from those they have wronged. If after that time forgiveness is still withheld they believe that they are released before God. It may not always be possible to receive forgiveness. Each person has free will and God does not violate that free will. As my friend was explaining this concept, I was reminded of the conversation Yeshua had with His disciples on the subject of forgiveness. “Then Peter came to Him and said, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven’” (Matt. 18:21–22).

As followers of Yeshua, we are clearly called to a very high standard. We are called to walk in the light, confess our sins when we fail, confess our sins to each other, and readily and repeatedly forgive one another. When it comes to repentance I firmly believe that once is not enough. Yes, the gift of God’s grace is there for us when we confess our sins, but we should never confuse that to mean that we have permission to continue sinning. Remember that repentance means to turn and go the opposite direction—“Go and sin no more.”

40 Days of Repentance

The team of Bridges for Peace is joining with the Jewish people during *Elul* and the ten days of *Tishrei* leading up to the Day of Atonement in a special emphasis on seeking the Lord, humbling ourselves, fasting in one way or another

“If we *confess* our sins, He is *faithful* and just to forgive us our sins and to *cleans*e us from all unrighteousness.”

— 1 John 1:5-9

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(from food, television, games or anything the Lord lays on our hearts), and repentance. There is power in unity. As we join together to call on the Lord, we will see the hand of the Lord at work in our midst. Please join us in reading Psalm 27 each day, praying for insights from this special passage of Scripture.

We will be sending a weekly email, which will include passages of Scripture, and messages of encouragement or challenge for each day of the week. We would love to have you join us in this season of repentance, seeking God and intercession. If you want to be on the list to receive this *Elul*/Repentance email please send your name and email address to intl.assistant@bridgesforpeace.com before August 10th. The first message will be sent out sometime between August 14th and 17th.

Be Ready

In Matthew 24 and 25, as Yeshua described events at the end of the age, He told us to be ready, alert and faithful. We may not be able to change all that is troubling in the world around us, but we should not throw our hands up in defeat. We need to take the message of 2 Chronicles 7:14 to heart. Church, now is the time to seek God as never before. Now is the time to repent. Now is the time to make things right with those who we have offended or who have offended us. Now is the time to walk in the light. Now is time to wake from our sleep and allow the light of God to shine in the midst of the darkness.

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