**How to Utilize Chodesh Elul towards**

**Reconnecting to Hakodesh Baruch Hu**

By Daniel Keren

 Hundreds of men and women took advantage of last week’s Labor Day legal holiday to devote an entire morning at the Flatbush Hakhel Yarchei Kallah at the Agudath Israel of Madison and gain inspiration as four prominent rabbonim offered tips on how to utilize Chodesh Elul properly in order to be able to gain the most advantage from the upcoming Yomim Noraim, High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

 Hakhel if a Flatbush-based organization dedicated to promoting a greater awareness of Torah-true values in our community. Every legal holiday is made into a Yarchei Kallah, series of hashkafah and halacha shiurim to give participants an opportunity to enhance their Avodas Hashem, service to G-d.

 The Labor Day Hakhel Event began with a lecture by Rabbi Yisroel Reisman, Mora D’Asra of the host shul who spoke on “Lessons from Chaggai Hanavi.”

 Sefer Chaggai is the tenth in the Tanach sefer of Trei Asar, often interpreted as the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets. Actually each of the prophets and their messages are very important, but because their recorded prophecies are short in comparison to for example to the larger books of navuah of Yeremiyahu (Jeremiah) or Yeshaya (Isaiah); they are called minor.

**Just Two Chapters and 36 Verses**

 Sefer Chaggai contains just two perakim, chapters with a total of 36 pasukim, verses. Rashi explains that this Sefer begins in the second year of the Melech Daryavesh, King Darius who as Rabbi Reisman explained was the son of Achashvarus and Queen Esther. Although Daryavesh was halachically Jewish, he was raised and considered himself to be a goy, non-Jew.

 The Abarbanel writes that most of the Navuahs recorded in Tanach, the Jewish Bible are not dated and on those few occasions that the prophecy is dated, there has to be a reason and it behooves us to understand that reason.

 Rabbi Reisman noted that Chaggai’s first prophecy is dated and occurred on Rosh Chodesh Elul which this year was last week on Sunday. Most of the Jews did not take advantage of Daryavesh’s permission to leave Bavel, Babylonia and return to Eretz Yisroel and also rebuild the Beis Hamikdash, the Sanctuary in Yerushalayim that had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. They were comfortable in their new homes in galus, exile and said that it wasn’t the time to rebuild the Bais Hamikdash.

 Chaggai in his prophecy declared “Is it [an appropriate] time for you yourselves to sit in your houses, when this house [the Bais Hamikdash] is in ruins? (Chaggai 1:4)

 In his prophecy, Chaggai disagreed with the attitude of those Yidden who remained in Bavel and rather prophesized “Ascend the mountain, bring wood, and build the house and I [G-d] will accept it, and I will be honored said the L-rd.” (1:8)

**What is Rosh Chodesh Elul?**

 Rabbi Reisman quoted the Abarbanel as asking what is Rosh Chodesh Elul? It was the day that Moshe Rabbeinu went up Har Sinai, Mt. Sinai to get from Hashem the second Luchos, Tablets containing the Aseres Hadibros, Ten Commandments. On that occasion, Moshe Rabbeinu was utilizing the first day of the sixth month (Elul) to fix past failures (the cheit ha’eigel, the sin of the golden calf). That is the message for us even today to use Rosh Chodesh Elul to fix up the spiritual failures of the year that is soon ending.

 Chaggai in the body of his first navuah delivered on Rosh Chodesh Elul challenged the people to look at their lives. What is the purpose of your life: “You have sown much and you bring in little. You eat without being satiated. You drink without getting your fill. You dress, and it has no warmth. And he who profits, profits into a bundle with holes [your money is squandered without spiritual purpose.] (1:6)

 Rabbi Reisman warned that Chaggai’s prophecy has relevance to all of us today, even though we can’t rebuild the Bais Hamikdash. Many people pursue a life similar to the ant, striving hard for wealth to give to their children and grandchildren. Why not also pursue something of enduring spiritual wealth such as the study of Hashem’s eternal Torah [and the mehudar performance of mitzvahs?]

 Wealth can either give a person clarity of mind (symbolized by silver) or unfortunately a confusion (symbolized by the redness of gold.) Similarly, human beings are motivated either by their moach (mind which is also symbolic of white, clarity) or their lev (heart or emotions which are also symbolized by red, confusion.)

**One’s Intellect Should be in Control of His Emotions**

 There is Rabbi Reisman said an advantage to living a life in which one’s intellect is in control of his emotions. It is the job of every Jew to live one’s life and strive to see the Yad Hashem, Divine purpose in everything that you do and everything that happens to you.

 It takes a certain amount of awareness to discern that in specific events in one’s life, Hashem is indeed speaking to you. Chaggai prophesizes that in Olam Haze, this World, there are both moments of clarity and moments of confusion. Our job is to search for those times of clarity that Hakodesh Baruch Hu provides us with. We are, Rabbi Reisman declared standing at the footsteps of the Bayis Hashlishi [the Third and eternal Sanctuary in Jerusalem.] We too have to take those moments of clarity, especially in Chodesh Elul as we look back on the failures of our spiritual Avodas Hashem in this past year and try to fix them in order to get ready for the coming Year 5777.

 The second speaker in last week’s Labor Day Hakhel Yarchei Kallah in Flatbush was Rabbi Eliyahu Brudny, the Rosh Mesivta of Yeshivas Mir in Flatbush and the subject of his shiur was “The Road to Teshuva.”

 He began by noting that the Chofetz Chaim in his Mishna Berura brings two concepts of Chodesh Elul. The first is that of “Ani Li’Dodi v’Dodi Li/I am to my Beloved (Hashem) and my Beloved is to me.” This hints to our desire to make our relationship to Hakodesh Baruch Hu closer and more meaningful. Hakodesh Baruch Hu in His infinite kindness allows us as Jews to in Elul renew the cycle of our relationship that unfortunately gets colder as the year drags on. That is our job in Elul to restart rebuilding our connection with Hakodesh Baruch Hu.

**Eliminating the Separation Between Us and G-d**

 The second concept that we can in Elul understand is that yes we can be successful in allowing Hakodesh Baruch Hu to remove the orlah or spiritual blockage that in much of the year if we are not careful causes a separation between us and Him.

 The blowing of the shofar [that Ashkenazi Jews begin on Rosh Chodesh Elul after Shachris is like the roar of the lion. And who cannot be terrified of the coming din (Divine judgment of the Yomim Noraim.) But Elul is also a month of opportunity. Hakodesh Baruch Hu is smiling at us in this month, throwing us a precious lifeline to save us [from spiritual punishment] and bringing us closer to Him.

 Elul is laden with 30 days of Ani Li’Dodi v’Dodi Li. But the days are ticking away and like the rich man who invites a desperate businessman who needs funding for a business deal [symbolic of a good year to come in 5777] we Jews have to be careful not to waste the precious opportunity of Chodesh Elul.

 In Elul, Rabbi Brudny said, we should strive to make fundamental changes in our life to remake our relationship, both individually and communal to the Ribono shel Olam in order to prepare us to be ready for the awesome Rosh Hashanah.

 Without utilizing the 30 days of Elul to make step-by-step changes [improvements in our spiritual avodah], we can’t go into Rosh Hashanah and expect to suddenly be ready for this holy Yom Hadin.

**Elul is a Time for Introspection**

 The third speaker in last week’s Labor Day Yarchei Kallah was Rabbi Sholom Kamenetsky, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva of Philadelphia. He addressed the theme of “Elul: Days of Distinction.” He noted the Elul is a time for introspection. We understand it as the end of the year, but also as a preparation of the year to come. The Birchas Hachodesh of Elul is inclusive of Rosh Chodesh Tishrei that falls on Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur [and even until Simchos Torah.]

 There is a concept of Rosh Chodesh Elul that it leads to Yom Kippur and which includes the important Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, the Ten Day of Repentance beginning with Rosh Hashanah and concluding with Yom Kippur. It was on Rosh Chodesh Elul that Hakodesh Baruch Hu called out to Moshe Rabbeinu to climb Har Sinai [to receive the Second set of Luchos] and the shofar was blown to warn the rest of the Jewish nation so they wouldn’t make the same mistake as occurred the first time that Moshe ascended the mountain to receive the Luchos.

 And today, Rabbi Kamenetsky said, we blow the shofar beginning on the first day of Elul to remind us to not be careless of doing a michshul, but rather to be ready for Rosh Hashanah [the Yom Hadin.]

 Although we speak of Chodesh Elul as a hakdamah, a preparation for the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, it has in and of itself a great importance. For it has the ability [Ani Li’Dodi v’Dodi Li] to enable the Jew to do teshuvah and to be prepared for Rosh Hashanah, the Yom Hadin.

**The Ability to Forge a Teshuva Based on Love of Hashem**

 The Bach teaches that Elul and the aspect of Ani Li’Dodi v’Dodi Li gives us the ability to forge a powerful teshuvah based on ahavah, love of Hashem. The Mechaber of the Shulchan Aruch agrees that there is an important relationship between Chodesh Elul and the awesome days of the Aseres Yemei Teshuva. Our ability to properly and most effectively utilize the Aseres Yemei Teshuva is dependent on how we take advantage of Chodesh Elul.

 Rabbi Kamenetsky quoted the Baal Akeida who writes that every person has within himself both his Luchos Harishonah and the Luchos Acharona. In our regular year, perhaps we don’t do everything we should. This is like the original Luchos or Tablets that our imperfections caused to be broken. But come Elul, Hakodesh Baruch Hu calls to us again to come closer, to climb again so-to-speak our Har Sinai and start over again with the more perfect Luchos Acharona [that Moshe Rabbeinu brought down to the Jewish nation on Yom Kippur] as we prepare to begin a new Jewish Year [5777.]

 The fourth and final speak of the Labor Day Hakhel Event was Rabbi Avrohom Schorr, Mora D’Asra of Beis Medrash Nezer Gedalyah in Flatbush. The title of his shiur was “Bringing Bracha into the Coming Year.” He began by commenting on the fact that the most common Roshei Tovos is that Elul is “Ani Li’Dodi v’Dodi Li.” What does this come to teach us?

 Rabbi Schorr recalled a certain topic brought in the sefer Michtav Eliyahu by Rav Eliyahu Dessler who notes that a person can be a nosein (giver) or a mekabel (receiver) and that one should strive to be a nosein.

**“What Can We Get Out of this Relationship?”**

 Naturally in any given relationship between a person and another person or with his job, the natural tendency is to ask “What can we [as a mekabel] get from this relationship.” But in Elul as we get closer to the awesome High Holy Days, we should instead be asking Hakodesh Baruch Hu to utilize His kindness to release us from our spiritual imprisonment, whether individually or as part of the klal (community). We are asking the Ribono shel Olam to release all the shackles that hamper us bi’ruchnius, spiritually.

 Rabbi Schorr asked “What is the major problem of our generation?” It is our focus on ourselves, a self-centeredness on the Ani, the “I” of the person. The avodah or spiritual service of Rosh Chodesh Elul is to work on eliminating this self-centeredness by transferring the “Ani” by declaring our desire to come closer to the Abishter via the month’s unique concept of “Ani Li’Dodi v’Dodi Li.”

 Why was it necessary on Rosh Chodesh Elul for the shofar to be blown the second time as a warning to Klal Yisroel when Moshe Ascended Har Sinai [to receive the second set of Luchos?] Wasn’t it enough that the Bnei Yisroel saw that the Annamim Hakavod [Clouds of Glory that had protected them] was taken away because of the cheit ha’eigel, sin of the golden calf following the first giving of the Luchos, Tablets bearing the Ten Commandments?

 Rabbi Schorr answered in the negative. No the lesson is that we cannot assume that we can ever be sure of ourselves. One has to accept upon himself that everything that happens in his life comes from the Abishter and from nobody else. Are we clearly communicating to our children and grandchildren that we can only turn to the Abishter and to nobody else for that which we need? That is what is meant when we declare in Chodesh Elul – “Ani Li’Dodi v’Dodi Li.”

 Those unable to have attended the Labor Day Hakhel Yarchei Kallah can purchase CDs of the above four shiurim by calling Mr. Zalman Umlas at (718) 252-5274.