

THE ELUL ROAD MAP

Where Are We Going?

Complete Reader's Edition

Based on Rav Shimshon Dovid Pinkus zt'l, Sichos - Elul and Yamim Noraim, pp. 33-37

Developed and Presented by Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz

Central question: We have already travelled through more than three weeks of Elul. Are we closer to the destination - and do we know which city we are trying to reach?

The Road, the City - and the Traveller Who Is No Longer Sure

Before GPS and Waze, travelling to an unfamiliar city required written directions. Someone would tell you: remain on this highway for thirty miles, turn left after the second traffic light, continue until you pass a gas station, and then look for a small road on the right.

At the beginning, everything would proceed perfectly. You passed the first landmark exactly when the directions said you would. You made the first turn. You crossed the bridge. You were confident that you were on the correct road.

Then you would drive for fifteen or twenty minutes without seeing any of the landmarks mentioned in the directions. That was when the doubts began. Did we miss the turn? Have we not driven far enough? Was that the gas station they meant, or is there another one farther ahead? You would take out the directions and read the same lines for the fifth time, hoping that some new instruction would suddenly appear.

At that moment, what did you want more than anything else? A road sign. You did not necessarily need a sign announcing, 'You have arrived.' You simply wanted to see the name of a town that appeared on your directions. Even a sign saying that the city was still eighty kilometres away would be reassuring. At least you would know that you were travelling in the correct direction.

That is where we find ourselves this Shabbos. This material might initially sound like a class that should have been delivered on Rosh Chodesh Elul. We are no longer standing at the beginning of the road. We have already been travelling for more than three weeks. We have heard the shofar each morning. We have said *לדוד ה' אורי* twice each day. The Sephardim have been saying Selichos, and the Ashkenazim are about to begin. Rosh Hashanah is less than one week away.

But perhaps that makes this class more urgent now than it would have been at the beginning of Elul. After travelling for more than three weeks, are we any closer to

the destination? Do we even know which city we are attempting to reach? Have we been moving spiritually, or have we merely been following the calendar?

It is possible to perform every Elul practice correctly and still become spiritually lost. We may know the next instruction without knowing the destination. We blew the shofar because it was Rosh Chodesh Elul. We began לְדוֹד ה' אורי because that is what comes next. We are preparing for Selichos because the calendar tells us to do so. But where is all of this supposed to take us?

Rav Shimshon Dovid Pinkus begins with a phrase from the Navi: זֶה הַדֶּרֶךְ וְלֹא זֶה הָעִיר - 'This is not the road, and this is not the city.' From those words, Rav Pinkus extracts a fundamental principle. Before beginning any serious journey, a person must determine two things: What is the road, and what is the city? The road consists of all the directions, turns and stops. The city is the destination toward which everything is leading.

We know the road remarkably well: Elul, the shofar, לְדוֹד ה' אורי, Selichos, Rosh Hashanah, the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, Yom Kippur, Sukkos, Hoshana Rabbah and Simchas Torah. But what is the city?

We might answer that the destination is a favourable judgment on Rosh Hashanah. But if that were the complete destination, the journey would end on Rosh Hashanah. We might answer that the destination is forgiveness. But if forgiveness were the complete destination, the road would end with the final shofar blast after Neilah. Why do we continue into Sukkos, Hoshana Rabbah and Simchas Torah? Apparently, judgment and forgiveness are indispensable stops, but neither is the final city.

The First Road Sign

Rav Pinkus says that when someone is uncertain about his direction, he must look for the road signs. And what was the first road sign standing at the entrance to Elul? אֲנִי לְדוֹדִי וְדוֹדִי לִי. The first letters spell אלוּל. Before the shofar, Selichos and all our resolutions, the first sign already told us where the road was leading: 'I am for my Beloved, and my Beloved is for me.' The destination is a relationship with Hashem.

Perhaps we passed that sign three weeks ago without reading it carefully. But that does not mean we must abandon the journey. It means that with one week remaining before Rosh Hashanah, we must finally allow the sign to redirect us.

If that is what the first sign says, we should be able to recognize the same destination when we finally arrive at the end of the road. Rav Pinkus therefore directs our attention to the beginning of the hakafos on Simchas Torah. After Elul, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkos and Hoshana Rabbah, we stand holding the Sifrei Torah and declare: אַתָּה הָרֵאָתָה לְדַעַת כִּי ה' הוּא הָאֱלֹקִים אִין עוֹד מַלְבְּדוּ - 'You have been shown in order to know that Hashem is God; there is nothing besides Him.'

That is the city. The entire journey is meant to bring us to **אין עוד מלבדו**. However, **אין עוד מלבדו** cannot remain merely a theological statement. It is not enough to believe intellectually that Hashem created and controls the world. The destination is to experience that truth in the way we live.

Most of us would never say that we live independently of Hashem. We believe in Hashem. We daven three times a day, make brachos and observe Torah and mitzvos. Nevertheless, it is possible to live most of one's day as an independent person and turn to Hashem only when something goes wrong. As long as life is proceeding according to plan, we manage it ourselves. When we face something that we cannot manage, we call Hashem.

Rav Pinkus wants to move Hashem from the emergency department into the centre of our lives. **אין עוד מלבדו** means that I am not an independent individual who occasionally requests divine assistance. My life itself is lived with Hashem. My decisions, responsibilities, challenges, relationships and aspirations are all part of an ongoing relationship with Him.

The Apparent Contradiction in the Parsha

This allows us to confront a major question arising from Parshas Nitzavim. The Torah says: **לעשותו... כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוך היום לא נפלאה היא ממך ולא רחוקה היא** - 'This mitzvah that I command you today is not hidden from you, and it is not distant... Rather, the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it.'

The Torah could hardly say it more clearly. Torah and teshuvah are not beyond us. They are not inaccessible. They are not distant. **קרוב אליך הדבר מאוד** - they are exceedingly close to us. We can do this.

Yet Rav Pinkus appears to say the opposite. He looks at the level of the earlier generations and asks how people as spiritually small as we are can possibly be expected to observe the same Torah. We confront desires, distractions, fears and pressures that we often cannot control. We make resolutions and repeatedly fail to maintain them. Rav Pinkus writes that the demands of Torah and mitzvos are beyond what we can accomplish through our natural strength alone.

Which is true? Is Torah exceedingly close to us, or is it beyond our unaided strength?

The answer is found in the adjoining parsha, Vayeilech. Moshe tells the Jewish people: **יִרְפָּךְ וְלֹא יַעֲזֹבְךָ, כִּי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ הוּא הַהוֹלֵךְ עִמָּךְ, אֶל תִּירָאוּ וְאֵל תַּעֲרֹצוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם, חֲזָקוּ וְאִמְצוּ** - 'Be strong and courageous. Do not fear and do not be broken before them, because Hashem, your God, is the One who walks with you; He will not weaken His hold upon you, and He will not abandon you.'

Moshe presents two truths within the same sentence. First, **חֲזָקוּ וְאִמְצוּ** - you must be strong. You must act, struggle, prepare and accept responsibility. But why

should you believe that you can succeed? כי ה' אלקיך הוא ההולך עמך - because Hashem walks with you.

The Torah is attainable, but it is not autonomous. קרוב אליך הדבר מאוד does not mean that we possess unlimited spiritual strength within ourselves. It means that the strength we need is close to us because Hashem is close to us.

Attainable does not mean independent. It means that we never have to do it alone.

We can now appreciate the conclusion of the verse in Nitzavim: בפִּי וּבִלְבָבְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ - 'in your mouth and in your heart, to do it.' The Torah does not simply say that the matter is in your hands. The mouth turns toward Hashem through Torah, tefillah and vidui. The heart establishes the direction of the relationship. From that mouth and that heart comes the ability לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ - to carry the resolution into action.

The Physician Who Tried to Work Alone

Rav Pinkus illustrates this with a powerful mashal. A hospital had a department filled with seriously ill patients. One night, a relatively new physician was assigned to cover the entire department. Every bed was occupied, and many patients required immediate and complicated treatment.

The doctor began running from room to room. One patient required medication. Another required an urgent test. A third patient's condition suddenly deteriorated. Every time the doctor began treating one person, he was summoned to another emergency.

The physician worked with tremendous devotion. He did not sit down. He did not rest. He ran through the corridors throughout the night, trying desperately to keep up with the needs of every patient. But he could not. There were simply too many critically ill people and only one physician. By morning, a patient had died because the doctor had not reached him in time.

The doctor was brought before a court on a charge of medical negligence. He pleaded with the judge: 'How can you accuse me of negligence? I worked with complete self-sacrifice. I ran from bed to bed throughout the night. I did everything humanly possible. I simply could not reach every patient. What you expected from me was beyond human ability.'

The judge answered, 'That is exactly why you are responsible. No one expected you to manage the entire department alone. The hospital had additional physicians and emergency personnel available. The moment you realized that the situation exceeded your ability, you were required to call for reinforcements. Your mistake was not that you failed to work. Your mistake was that you tried to work alone.'

Rav Pinkus says that this is a picture of our avodas Hashem. A person enters Elul and looks at his spiritual department. One patient is his davening. Another is his Torah learning. Another is his patience at home. Another is the way he speaks

about people. Another is his tendency to worry. Another is his struggle with resentment or discouragement. Another is the amount of time and concentration he loses to distractions. Every patient requires attention, and every patient seems to be calling at once.

The person then creates an Elul plan. 'This year, I will control my temper. I will never speak improperly. I will concentrate throughout davening. I will learn consistently. I will not become discouraged. I will respond calmly whenever someone frustrates me.' These are excellent resolutions. We require specific plans. Rav Pinkus himself writes that we must prepare a programme for our spiritual growth. But if the entire programme consists of what I am going to accomplish through my own strength, the most important element is missing.

Suppose a person has struggled with the same reaction for twenty years. Something happens at home or in shul, he feels offended, and before he has time to think, he reacts. Every Elul, he resolves that it will not happen again. But in that crucial moment, all the speeches, plans and resolutions disappear.

What would happen if, instead of merely resolving again, he began speaking to Hashem about that struggle every day? 'Ribbono Shel Olam, You know that when I feel insulted, I lose control of myself. I know how I am supposed to react, but I have repeatedly demonstrated that I cannot do this properly by myself. Please be with me when it happens. Help me remember that You are present before I answer.'

That brief tefillah does not eliminate his responsibility. He still must learn, plan and exercise self-control. The physician must continue treating the patients. But now he has summoned the assistance that was always available.

The same applies to concentration in davening. A person may devise a better schedule, obtain a clearer siddur and resolve to arrive earlier. All of that is valuable. But before Shemoneh Esrei he can also say, 'Hashem, I am about to speak to You, but my mind wanders everywhere. Please help me remain here with You.'

It applies to worry. A person knows intellectually that Hashem runs the world, yet he replays the same concern throughout the day. He can say, 'Hashem, I do not know how this situation will be resolved. I will take every responsible step available to me, but I cannot carry the entire world in my mind. Please carry this with me.'

This is not weakness. It is the deepest expression of *אין עוד מלבדו*. The illusion of strength is believing that I must control everything alone. Real strength is knowing where to obtain the power I do not possess.

Does This Remove Human Responsibility?

At this point, we must be careful. A person could hear Rav Pinkus and conclude, 'If everything depends upon Hashem, why should I make plans? Why should I struggle? I will simply daven and wait for Hashem to change me.' That is not Rav Pinkus's message. The doctor in the mashal was not told to leave the patients and call someone else. He had to continue working with every ounce of strength while summoning the necessary assistance.

The Torah therefore says both חזקו ואמצו and ה' אלקיך הוא ההולך עמך. Hashem's presence does not excuse us from effort. It allows our effort to accomplish what effort alone could never accomplish.

Someone who wants to improve his davening should still arrive on time and remove distractions. Someone who wants to improve his speech should learn the halachos and avoid dangerous conversations. Someone who wants to control anger should recognize the situations that trigger him and prepare a response. Someone who wants to strengthen Torah learning must establish a realistic and protected time.

But before, during and after those efforts, he must remain connected to Hashem. The spiritual plan is incomplete until it includes the words, 'Hashem, I cannot succeed without You.'

Perhaps that is why so many resolutions disappear after the Yamim Noraim. The resolution may have been sincere, but it was constructed as a private project. I selected the goal, I created the method, and I expected myself to produce the result. Hashem was the Judge before whom I announced the resolution, but He was not yet the Partner whom I invited into it.

Rav Pinkus is teaching us to transform a kabbalah into a relationship. The question is not merely, 'What will I do differently?' It is, 'What will I begin doing with Hashem?'

How the Road Produces the Relationship

We can now understand why the journey contains so many different stages. Each stage weakens a different form of independence and teaches another dimension of the relationship.

Elul begins with אני לדודי. We take the initiative. We turn around and face Hashem. We blow the shofar to awaken ourselves because before a person can travel, he must recognize that he is standing still.

On Rosh Hashanah, we accept Hashem as King. Malchus means that the world is not ownerless and my life is not a private kingdom. There is a King, and I belong within His world.

During the Aseres Yemei Teshuvah, we speak of Hashem's extraordinary closeness: קראוהו בהיותו קרוב, דרשו ה' בהמצאו - 'Seek Hashem when He is to be

found; call Him when He is close.' We are not merely trying to repair a record. We are taking advantage of nearness.

On Yom Kippur, we put aside eating, drinking and ordinary physical life. We discover that the deepest part of our identity is not the body and its needs. For one day, the Jew stands almost like a malach and says, 'My mistakes are not the essence of who I am. Beneath them is a neshamah that still belongs to Hashem.'

Then comes Sukkos. We leave the permanent house that creates the impression of stability and enter a fragile sukkah beneath Hashem's protection. The walls may move and the roof may allow us to see the sky, but that temporary dwelling can contain more security than the permanent house because the Shechinah is present within it.

At Hoshana Rabbah, we continue to call הושע נא - 'Please save us.' Finally, on Simchas Torah, we take the Torah into our arms and declare אין עוד מלבדו. The road has brought us from awakening, through judgment and forgiveness, into the embrace of Sukkos and the dance of Simchas Torah. The city is not merely that Hashem has forgiven us. The city is that we are living with Him.

Your Kindness Is Better Than Life

Rav Pinkus then brings a remarkable pasuk from Tehillim: ישבחונו, כי טוב חסדך מחיים - 'Because Your kindness is better than life, my lips will praise You.' What does it mean that Hashem's chesed is better than life? Isn't life itself the greatest chesed? What can a person possess if he does not possess life?

Rav Pinkus, based upon the Malbim, explains that Hashem's chesed certainly gives us life. Hashem gives health, sustenance, ability and opportunity. But something exists that is even greater than the gifts produced by His chesed: the relationship expressed through that chesed.

Imagine a person who becomes desperately ill. He searches throughout the world until he finds an extraordinary physician capable of treating his condition. The doctor accepts him as a patient, devotes himself to the case and, with Hashem's help, saves the man's life. During the months of treatment, however, something else happens. The physician and patient form an unusually close bond. The doctor becomes not only the person who saved him but a deeply trusted friend.

The patient has now received two gifts. He has received his life, and he has received the relationship. If we ask him which is more valuable, he will naturally answer, 'My life. Without the doctor, I would not be alive.'

Rav Pinkus says that in our relationship with Hashem, David HaMelech teaches us to see more deeply. כי טוב חסדך מחיים. The relationship with the Source of life is greater even than the particular forms of life that flow from Him.

We ordinarily want Hashem because we want life. Rav Pinkus teaches us to want life because we want Hashem.

That is why the pasuk continues, שפתי ישבחוך - 'My lips will praise You.' Life is precious because through life I can recognize Hashem, praise Him, serve Him and live with Him. The gift is meaningful because it carries me toward the Giver.

Tefillah Is Not Only a Means

This produces Rav Pinkus's great chiddush about tefillah. Ordinarily, we view tefillah as a means. I need health, so I daven. I need parnassah, so I daven. I need help with a child, a shidduch or a difficult decision, so I daven. If Hashem gives me what I requested, the tefillah has succeeded.

But perhaps the request was not the entire destination. Through asking, hoping, pleading and thanking, I stood in a relationship with Hashem. The assistance I received is precious, but the relationship created through the tefillah is even more precious.

We must be careful how we phrase this. We cannot explain why Hashem gives one person an easy road and another person a terribly difficult road. We cannot tell a suffering person that we know why his hardship occurred. But once a challenge exists, it does not have to remain a wall between the person and Hashem. Through tefillah, it can become a door.

A person may enter a difficult period thinking, 'I must somehow get through this.' Tefillah adds another possibility: 'Hashem and I will go through this together.' That is not a secondary benefit of prayer. According to Rav Pinkus, that may be its greatest accomplishment.

This changes the way we hear the central requests of the Yamim Noraim: לחיים זכרנו למענך אלקים חיים, וכתבנו בספר החיים, מלך חפץ בחיים, זכרנו - 'Remember us for life, King who desires life, and inscribe us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, living God.'

Certainly, we are asking for life. We want health, nachas, security and a good year. But the request concludes למענך אלקים חיים. We do not merely ask Hashem for another year because we want another year. We ask for a year that can be lived למענך - for Hashem, with Hashem and in a manner that reveals Hashem.

We are asking: 'Give us life, but do not allow the gift of life to cause us to forget the Giver of life. Give us a year in which You become more present within our homes, our choices, our worries, our celebrations and our struggles.' Tefillah is therefore not simply part of the road to a good year. Tefillah itself begins to bring us into the city.

Returning to the Road Sign

We can now return to Rav Pinkus's road sign. A traveller who wants to know where a road leads looks at the first sign. At the entrance to Elul, before all the stops and experiences, the sign reads אני לדודי ודודי לי.

The words themselves describe the complete journey. First comes אני - I must act. I cannot remain passive and expect Elul to carry me. I must awaken, choose, plan,

pray and take responsibility. But where is the **לדודי אני** directed? - toward my Beloved. My effort is not a private self-improvement project. It is movement toward Hashem.

Then comes **לדודי לי**. When I move toward Hashem, I discover that Hashem is present for me. He walks with me. He supplies the strength that I do not possess alone. **לא ירפך ולא יעזבך** - He does not release me, and He does not abandon me.

The first road sign already contains the answer to the contradiction in the parsha. **לדודי לי** - the task is close and attainable because Hashem has not asked us to travel alone.

When we finally arrive at Simchas Torah and proclaim **אין עוד מלבדו** **כי ה' הוא האלקים**, we have not discovered a new destination. We have arrived at the destination written on the very first sign.

We are not beginning Elul this morning. We cannot return to Rosh Chodesh and travel these weeks again. But when a traveller realizes that he may be lost, he does not say, 'It is too late to ask for directions because I have already been driving for three hours.' The distance he has travelled makes finding the correct direction more urgent.

We still have one enormously consequential week. We can continue following the religious itinerary without knowing where it leads, or we can read the road sign that has been standing before us since Rosh Chodesh: **לדודי אני לדודי לי**. The sign does not tell us that we have already arrived. It tells us which direction to travel now.

Perhaps our practical kabbalah should be small enough to keep but significant enough to change the direction of our Elul. Each person can choose one recurring challenge. Continue making the necessary practical effort. But once each day, before confronting that challenge, say: 'Ribbono Shel Olam, I know what I am responsible to do. I will make the effort, but I cannot do it properly without You. Please walk with me through this.'

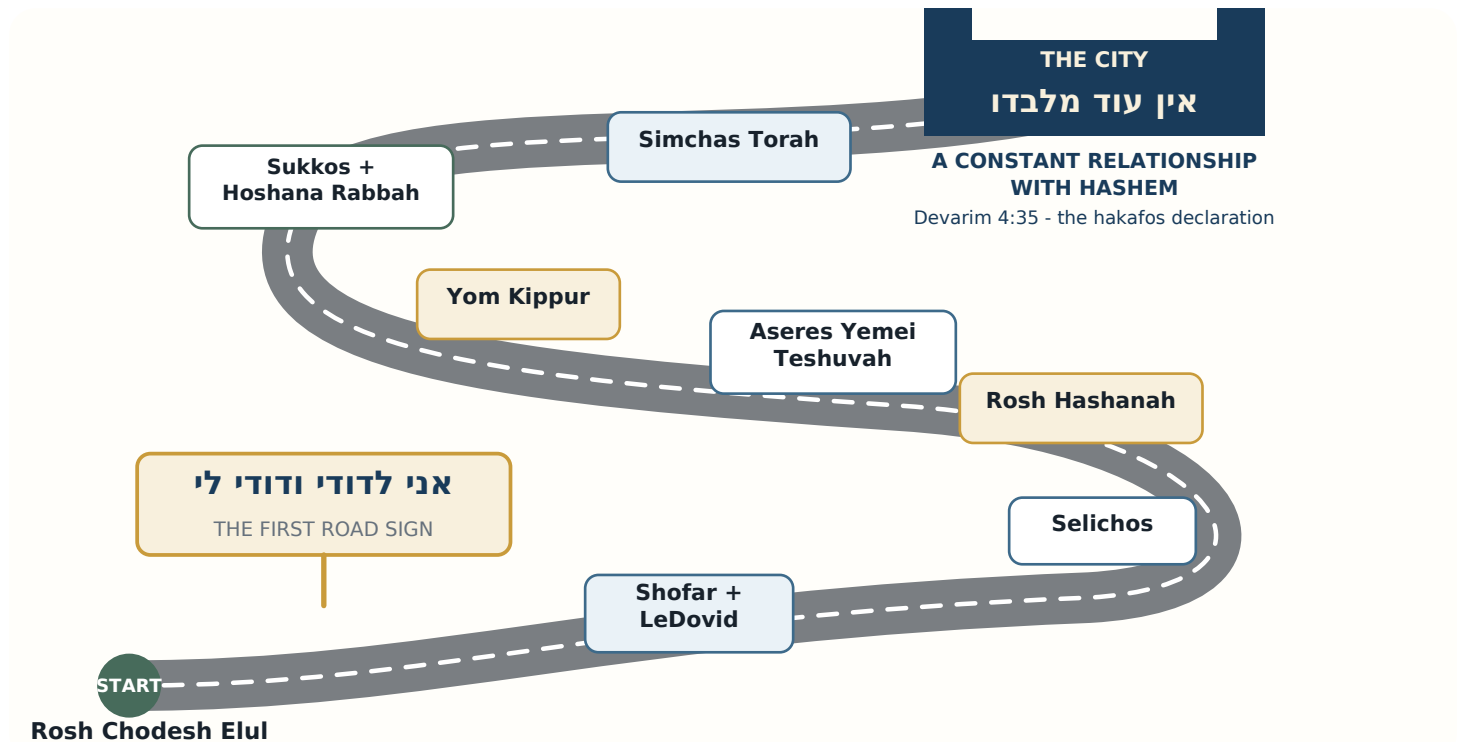
If we do that consistently, the challenge becomes more than a problem to conquer. It becomes a place of meeting with Hashem.

Elul will not be successful merely because we blew the shofar, said Selichos, made resolutions and eventually reached Yom Kippur. Those are all indispensable stops along the road. The deeper question is whether Hashem has become more real within our lives.

The goal of Elul is not only that we emerge as better people. It is that we no longer emerge alone. Elul begins with **לדודי אני - I am travelling toward Hashem. It ends with **אין עוד מלבדו** - I have discovered that I was never travelling alone.**

THE ELUL ROAD MAP

Where Are We Going?



We have already travelled through more than three weeks of Elul. Are we closer to the destination - and do we know which city we are trying to reach?

1. Melachim II 6:19 and Rav Pinkus - The Road and the City

לא זה הדרך ולא זו העיר. ניתן ללמוד מדברים אלו של הנביא שכדי להשיג מטרה כלשהי בחיים, יש לקבוע מראש הן את המטרה והן את האמצעים הנכונים המובילים אליה. האמצעים למטרה הם "הדרך". המטרה עצמה היא "העיר".

"This is not the road, and this is not the city." Rav Pinkus learns from these words that to reach any goal in life, we must first establish both the destination and the correct means that lead to it. The means are the "road"; the goal itself is the "city."

2. Shir HaShirim 6:3 - The First Road Sign

אני לדודי ודודי לי.
"I am for my Beloved, and my Beloved is for me." The opening letters spell אלול. The first sign already identifies the destination: a relationship with Hashem.

3. Devarim 30:11, 14 - Is It Within Our Reach?

כי המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוך היום לא נפלאה היא ממך ולא רחוקה היא... כי קרוב אליך הדבר מאוד בפיו ובלבבך לעשותו.
"This mitzvah that I command you today is not hidden from you, and it is not distant... Rather, the matter is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it."

THE SOURCES BEHIND THE JOURNEY

Developed and Presented by Rabbi Yossi Michalowicz

4. Devarim 31:6 - The Source of Our Strength

חזקו ואמצו, אל תיראו ואל תערצו מפניהם, כי ה' אלקיך הוא ההולך עמך, לא ירפך ולא יעזבך.
"Be strong and courageous... because Hashem, your God, is the One who walks with you; He will not weaken His hold upon you, and He will not abandon you." Attainable does not mean independent.

5. Rav Pinkus - The Practical Destination

הגדרנו לעצמנו איפוא, את היעד, את המטרה, את "העיר". היעד הוא "לתפוס" קשר עם הקב"ה, כביכול לחסות בצלו. ואז הרי אין מגבלות, אז ניתן להשיג כל דבר. והנה הקב"ה סידר את העולם באופן שיש תקופה מיוחדת המתאימה ביותר להתקשרות עמו. התקופה הזאת היא מתחילת חודש אלול עד אחרי סוכות. ההתקשרות עם הקב"ה היא המטרה שלנו בכל המערכת הזו.
We have now defined the goal, the destination, the "city": to establish a bond with Hashem and take shelter in His presence. Hashem created a special period particularly suited to forming that bond, from the beginning of Elul until after Sukkos. Connection with Hashem is the goal of this entire system.

6. Tehillim 63:4 - The Relationship Is Greater Than the Gift

כי טוב חסדך מחיים, שפתי ישבחונו.
"Because Your kindness is better than life, my lips will praise You." We ordinarily want Hashem because we want life. Rav Pinkus teaches us to want life because we want Hashem.

7. Rav Pinkus - Tefillah and the Road Sign

על ידי התפילה בכוונה, עבודת האלול וימי התשובה מכניסים את הקב"ה לתוך החיים שלנו - מתקרבים אליו ומרגישים שייכות עם השי"ת. וזה יותר חשוב מעצם החיים - "כי טוב חסדך מחיים". כשאנו רוצים להגיע לעיר מסוימת מחפשים שלט המורה על הכיוון הנכון כבר בראשית הדרך. מהו השלט הראשון שנתקלים בו כבר בראש חודש אלול? "אני לדודי ודודי לי"! כביכול לתפוס חברותא עם השי"ת, שהקב"ה יהפוך לחלק מחיינו.
Through tefillah with concentration and the avodah of Elul and the days of teshuvah, we bring Hashem into our lives. When travelling to a city, we look at the first sign to discover the correct direction. Elul's first sign is "I am for my Beloved, and my Beloved is for me": to form a companionship with Hashem, so that He becomes part of our lives.

The sign does not tell us that we have already arrived. It tells us which direction to travel now.