

*Today marks the first day of the rest of your life. Here's an Israelite method for making that concept real.*

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The most auspicious time to embark on a program of self-development is the first day of the Hebrew month of "Elul." For many generations, Elul has been a time for personal change and renewal. Elul, as the month preceding the High Holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, is the time specifically set aside for preparing for those events.

### **The First Elul**

To put Elul into historical perspective, recall the story of the Israelite people at Mount Sinai. They had blundered badly with the Golden Calf, and things were not looking good vis a vis their relationship with God.

It was on the first day of Elul that the reconciliation process began. On that day, Moses ascended Mount Sinai (for a third time), where he spent 40 days in prayer on behalf of the nation. At the same time, the Israelites themselves plumbed the depths of their hearts and renewed their conviction to accept the challenge they'd received at Sinai.

Forty days later, the Israelites had raised themselves up to a spiritual position where they were once again fitting for a relationship with the Divine. On that day Moses descended the mountain with a second set of the Ten Commandments, symbolizing God's forgiveness and the reinstatement of the Israelites as the people who would bear God's message. That day of reunification was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

### **Pattern of Forties**

Why did the process take specifically 40 days? What's more, the theme of 40 seems to show up in dozens of places in the Torah. The first time Moses ascended the mountain, he was also there for 40 days. Also, in the story of Noah and the flood, the rain fell for 40 days. The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years. And an Israelite ritual bath ("*mikveh*") must hold a minimum of 40 units of water. And the list of "forties" goes longer still...

Forty represents the concept of renewal — a new beginning. Forty means that something might look like the same old thing on the surface, but its essence is totally new. Consider:

The first time Moses ascended Mount Sinai for 40 days to receive the Torah, Israelites were transformed from a collection of individuals into a nation. Noah's 40 days of rain symbolized the world starting again from scratch. The 40 years of wandering was the transformation of the Israelites, entrenched in Egyptian slave mentality, to one that understood true freedom. And immersion in a mikveh is the consummate Israelite symbol of spiritual renewal. (Similarly, it is no coincidence that God designated 40 weeks of human development in utero.)

The 40 days from Elul until Yom Kippur was crucial to renewing the relationship between God and the Israelite people. Whenever we perceive God as being distant, we can be certain that God wasn't the one who moved away. The people had become unworthy of such an intimate relationship. They spent those 40 days changing their inner selves, and ever since then, Elul is the ideal time for personal improvement and renewal.

## **Who Would You Like To Be?**

The Sages teach that from the moment of human conception, it takes 40 days before the soul enters the body for the first time.

Yom Kippur, which is 40 days after Elul, is the day of spiritual re-birth. That is to say, it is the day on which a "new you" will be born. Thus the first of Elul marks the "conception" of the new spiritual you.

The development necessary to receive your renewed soul begins now.

So who would you like to be in 40 days? Imagine for a few minutes that anything is possible. Suppose you could remove all that is bad and enhance all that is good about yourself. Who would you like to be?

Spend a few minutes visualizing the ideal "you." (It's best to write this down.) Think about these types of questions:

- What kind of friend, or parent would you like to be?
- How would you act in public?
- How would you run your private affairs?
- What habits would you like to break?
- How would you like to speak?
- What would you devote your time and energies toward?
- What would you like to understand?
- What spheres would you like to have greater control over?
- What things would you rather not repeatedly enter your mind?
- What condition would you like your body to be in?
- In what areas would you like to be more careful?
- In which areas would you rather be more carefree?

Once you have generalized the ideal you, try to describe that person in the most specific detail possible. This is not to say you will necessarily become that person in the next year, but if you don't know where you are trying to go, you won't get there.

Articulate some concrete goals. That is the first step toward permanent change for the better. As the Talmud says:

In the way in which a person wants to go, that is the way in which he will be led. (Makkot 10b)

*Excerpted from "Spiritual Accounting — A Practical Guide to Permanent Change," by Rabbi Joel Padowitz*

## About the Author

### Rabbi Joel Padowitz

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Rabbi Joel Padowitz, MBA CFA is a successful entrepreneur who has been involved adult Jewish education for nearly 20 years, specializing in the interface between traditional Judaism & modernity. Rabbi Padowitz is the founder and CEO of New York-based investment bank Palladium Capital Advisors, which is one of the top-25 most active placement agents in the USA. In 2009 he founded Jew IQ which develops mobile applications, content, and curricula for Jewish education and travel. He is also the author of *Triumph and Tragedy: Journeying through 1000 Years of Jewish Life in Poland*. Rabbi Padowitz gives regular classes in Talmud, Jewish thought, and Jewish law, and previously served as rabbi for Aish HaTorah's young professional community in London. He is an award-winning speaker and writer whose articles have been published widely in mainstream Jewish media. Aside from rabbinic ordination, he received his MBA from Bar Ilan University where he finished first in his class, holds the Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) designation, and was honored at the White House by President George H.W. Bush for outstanding achievements in science.