

## Of Elul, L'David & Golems

Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

There is near universal Ashkenazic custom during the month of Elul to recite the Chapter of Tehillim (27) "L'Dovid Hashem Ori" during davening, both every morning and evening, and all the way up to Shmini Atzeres[1], as preparation for the Yomim Noraim. This custom is based on the Midrash Shochar Tov[2] that elucidates that various phrases of this chapter contain allusions to the holidays of the repentance period - Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Sukkos, as well as to the month of Elul itself[3].

The Malbim, in his commentary on Tehillim, offers an alternate explanation. In this chapter, Dovid HaMelech, the author of Tehillim, asked to cleave to Hashem and that all obstacles that block coming close to Him should be removed. The Malbim[4] explains that when we strive to do so, Hashem will attach Himself to us with a higher level of personalized supervision. It is thus quite apropos to recite "L'Dovid" during the month of Elul, whose name hints to the acronym "Ani L'dodi V'dodi Li - I am to my beloved and my beloved is to me"(Shir HaShirim Ch. 6, verse 3). Elul is a month which symbolizes our relationship to Hashem, and one in which proper repentance is more readily accepted[5].

Where's the source?

But, the obvious question is where and when did this minhag start? It is not mentioned in the Gemara, nor in the Rishonim, and not even referenced in the Shulchan Aruch or its main commentaries. It seems a bit odd that such a common custom would not stem from a primary source! Much research has been done and many works have been written to try to find the earliest source for this meaningful minhag[6].

Although many erroneously concluded that the original source of reciting "L'Dovid" throughout the entire month of Elul was the controversial 'Chemdas Yamim', first printed in 1731, history has since proven that an earlier source has been found. Many now attribute this minhag to the noted Kabbalist and famed author of "Amtachas Binyomin", Rav Binyomin Beinisch Cohen, in his sefer "Shem Tov Kattan[7]", first printed in 1706. There he writes that one should be scrupulous with reciting "L'Dovid" daily from Rosh Chodesh Elul until after Simchas Torah, averring that this has the potential to avert and even nullify Heavenly decrees.

Who's Who?

Yet, there is possibly an earlier source. In the sefer "Nezer Hakodesh - Minhagei Beis Ropschitz"[8] a story is told about the Baal Shem Tov, where he mentioned a Tzaddik, known as Rav Eliyahu Baal Shem, who had saved the Jews of a certain town from eviction by successfully promising the childless non-Jewish mayor a son within a year. The Baal Shem Tov mentioned that this Tzaddik, who lived in the late

1600s, was the one who established the custom of reciting “L’Dovid” during Elul. However, it is unclear whom exactly he was referring to.

Although much detailed information has been obscured with the passage of time, still history has shown that there were two Tzaddikim known by this name[9]. The better known of the two was Rav Eliyahu Baal Shem of Chelm, a talmid of the great Maharshal, Rav Shlomo Luria, and an ancestor of the luminaries commonly known as the Chacham Tzvi (Rav Tzvi Ashkenazi) and his son, the Ya’avetz (Rav Yaakov Emden).

#### A Golem as a Tzenter?

Here is where it gets interesting. Rav Eliyahu Baal Shem of Chelm was best known for being of such stature that he created a Golem[10]. In fact, both of his aforementioned illustrious descendants have written responsa on the topic of the Golem that their grandfather created. The Chid”a[11], in his encyclopedia of Gedolim throughout Jewish history, ‘Shem Gedolim’ also attested to its existence.

But before our readers decry the supernatural turn this article has taken, they should realize that Golems actually do have a place in the halachic realm as well. The issue that these Gedolim were debating was whether a Golem can count for a minyan! Although the Chacham Tzvi (Shu”t Chacham Tzvi 93) at first remained undecided, his son, Rav Yaakov Emden (Shu”t Sheilas Ya’avetz vol. 2, 82) ruled unequivocally that a Golem cannot count for a minyan! Apparently not just a theoretical topic, it is even cited and debated by such contemporary authorities as the Mishna Berura (55, 4)[12] and the Chazon Ish (Yoreh Deah 116, 1)!

The Mishna Berura does not actually rule, but rather addresses the issue and concludes that it is a safeik; which is actually the main thrust of the Chacham Tzvi’s teshuvah – that he personally was undecided as to the proper halacha. Although the majority consensus is that a Golem would not count for a minyan, there were several other authorities who defended the Chacham Tzvi’s logic allowing a Golem to count for a minyan.

The Chazon Ish, conversely, concluded, akin to the Ya’avetz’s position, that a Golem would undeniably not be able to count for a minyan, as it not only would be excluded from the rights and privileges of a Jew, but even from those of a human being. One of Rav Yaakov Emden’s main proofs to this is that we find that in order to be considered having a neshama, a creation needs to have the potential for speech [see, for example the Ramban’s commentary to Parshas Bereishis (Ch. 2, verse 7; based on Targum Onkelus ad loc.)], an ability a Golem sorely lacks[13].

What is lesser known (and actually seemingly unknown to many later authorities, including the Mishna Berura) is that, posthumously, another son of the Chacham Tzvi, Rav Meshulem Ashkenazi, in his responsa, appended and printed a later teshuva from his father (Shu"t Divrei HaRav Meshulem vol. 1, 10 s.v. shayach); in it the Chacham Tzvi actually retracted his original position and ruled strictly as well. Either way, and regardless of what one might want to assume about his fellow mispallelim, the vast majority of poskim rule conclusively that a Golem cannot be counted for a minyan[14].

### The Second Rav Eliyahu

Back to figuring out who originated the recital of "L'Dovid" in Elul. The other Rav Eliyahu Baal Shem was Rav Eliyahu Luentz, known as a master Kabbalist in the 17th century. He authored a seminal volume on the Zohar titled "Aderes Eliyahu", and was a disciple of my ancestor and namesake, the renowned Maharal M'Prague, (who, as an interesting side point, and incredible Torah works aside, is regrettably nowadays best 'known' for having also created a Golem[15]).

In conclusion, although we are left uncertain as to whom the originator of this powerful minhag was, we can rest assured that it has a reliable source. We can thus appreciate the significance of saying this chapter of Tehillim throughout Elul, as it underscores the major goals of the season of repentance.

Postscript: There are a few communities, including many of Germanic origin, and the Chassidic communities of Sanz, Bobov, and Kamarna, however, who do not recite "L'Dovid" during Elul[16]. The Kamarna Rebbe of Yerushalayim recently told this author that although in his shul "L'Dovid" is recited, as most of his congregants are not Kamarna Chassidim and nearly everyone's custom is to recite it, nevertheless, he personally does not. It is also known that the Vilna Gaon and the Maharsha did not approve of this addition to davening as it possibly constitutes 'tircha d'tzibura'[17]. The general Sefardi minhag as well is not necessarily to recite "L'Dovid" specifically during Elul, but many nonetheless recite it all year long as an addition after Shacharis, with many Moroccans reciting it instead daily before Ma'ariv[18]. There are other variations of reciting "L'Dovid" during 'Yemei HaRachamin V'HaSelichos' as well, with some communities doing so only after Shacharis (including Telz and KAJ), while most communities additionally recite it either at the end of Mincha (generally Nusach Sefard) or Maariv (generally Nusach Ashkenaz).

Much of this article is based on Rabbi Eliezer Brodt's fascinating sefer Likutei Eliezer - Ch. 1.

This article was written L'Iluy Nishmas R' Chaim Baruch Yehuda ben Dovid Tzvi, L'Refuah Sheleimah for R' Shlomo Yoel ben Chaya Leah and l'zechus Shira Yaffa bas Rochel Miriam v'chol yotzei chalatzeha for a yeshua sheleimah teikif u'miyad!

For any questions, comments or for the full Mareh Mekomos / sources, please email the author:  
yspitz@ohr.edu.

[1] See Matteh Ephraim (581, 6; and Katzeh HaMatteh ad loc.), Shulchan Aruch HaRav (Siddur, Hilchos Krias Shma U'Tefillah), Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (128, 2), Mishna Berura (581, 2), Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin's Shu"t Gevuros Eliyahu (Orach Chaim 155, 1; based on his annual Ezras Torah Luach, Ikrei Dinei Chodesh Elul), Rav Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky's annual Luach Eretz Yisrael (Rosh Chodesh Elul), Shu"t Shevet Halevi (vol. 10, 87, 1), Chazon Ovadia (Yomim Noraim pg. 24), and Yalkut Yosef (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 581, Ode B'hilchos Chodesh Elul 2). See also Emes L'Yaakov (on Tur & Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 581, 1 and footnote 535) for an explanation why 'Borchi Nafshi' is nevertheless recited prior to 'L'Dovid' on Rosh Chodesh Elul, even though 'L'Dovid', as an addition to davening, is recited more often.

[2] Midrash Shochar Tov (Tehillim Ch. 27), which famously elucidates that "Ori" refers to Rosh Hashana, "Yishi" to Yom Kippur, and "Yitzpineini B'Sukkoh" on Sukkos.

[3] See Panim Yafos (Parshas Acharei Mos, Ch. 16: 29 s.v. v'keivan), as well as Rabbi Elchanan Shoff's V'ani BaHashem Atzapeh (pg. 71, footnote 13), quoting Rav Chaim Palag'i. These explanations include that "Lulei" is referring to Elul (which has the same letters re-arranged) and that the 13 times Hashem's name is mentioned in this Kapital is referencing the 13 Middos of Hashem, essential during the Yomam Noraim. Additionally, the combined Gematria of Zikaron and Kippurim (the proper names of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, respectively) add up to 639, the same value of the words "Hashem Ori V'Yishi".

[4] Malbim (introduction to Tehillim Chapter 27); quoted in Rabbi Simcha Groffman's 'Awesome Days' (pg. 31).

[5] See the Mishna Berura's introduction to Orach Chaim 581. For more on the various connections between Elul and "L'Dovid", see Rav Asher Weiss' Minchas Asher (Sichos on Moadim, Elul). For more on the various themes hidden in L'Dovid, see Rabbi Elchanan Shoff's recent excellent book titled 'Lord, Get Me High!'.

[6] For long list of recent works addressing this topic, see Rabbi Eliezer Brodt's Likutei Eliezer (pg. 1, footnote 2).

[7] See, for example Katzeh HaMatteh (Glosses on the Matteh Efraim 581, 13) and Likutei Eliezer (pg. 4).

[8] Cited in Likutei Eliezer (pg. 7).

[9] Likutei Eliezer ibid.

[10] For more on this topic see Yeshurun (vol. 17, pg. 665 - 666), in the article by Rabbi M.D. Chichik about Rav Eliyahu Baal Shem from Chelm. In fact, the story of Rav Eliyahu and his Golem was recently adapted as a hardcover comic book entitled "The Golem of Chelm – Hayah V'Nivra".

[11] Shem Gedolim (vol. 1, Ma'areches Gedolim - Ma'areches Alef, 166). See also Rav Yitzchok Zilberstein's Chashukei Chemed (Sanhedrin 65b) at length, for a list of historical Golems created, as well as many potential halachic inyanim related to Golems.

[12] Although the majority consensus is that a Golem would not count for a minyan (as detailed in footnote 14), there were several other authorities who defended the Chacham Tzvi's original rationale that a Golem would be able to count for a minyan, including Rav Yosef Engel (Gilyonei HaShas, Sanhedrin 19b s.v. sham maaleh alav) and the Likutei Chaver Ben Chaim (vol. 5, pg. 64a, comments on Chacham Tzvi 93), who dismisses one of the Chid"ra's counter-arguments, explaining that even a Golem should need to be 13 years old from the day he was created to count for a minyan! [On the other hand, Rav Menashe Klein (Shu"t Mishna Halachos (vol. 15, 27) counters that that would only hold true for an actual Jew, whose status changes as he increases in age and intelligence; a Golem, who does not gain intelligence as he ages would not.] See also Shu"t B'tzeil HaChochma (vol. 6, 99 s.v. uvmch"t) who explains that the very fact that the Chacham Tzvi was originally undecided whether a Golem can be included as part of Bnei Yisrael and count for a minyan (and although not the halacha l'maaseh) shows that he held that a Golem is mechuyev b'mitzvos; otherwise, there is no hava amina to count him for a minyan. [Conversely, Rav Dovid Sperber (Shu"t Afraksta D'Anyah vol. 4, 388 s.v. v'hadavar) and the Matteh Reuven (16) counter that that was not the Chacham Tzvi's intent, but rather that since a Golem would have been created via 'maaseh tzaddikim', it is feasible that his status might be somewhat elevated than a non-Jew's; and that was the crux of the Chacham Tzvi's dilemma whether or not he may be included in a minyan.] However, it is important to note that although it was apparently not known to the Mishna Berura nor these authorities, the Chacham Tzvi actually later retracted his position! See footnote 14.

[13] See also Maharsha (Sanhedrin 65b, Chiddushei Aggados s.v. v'lo), Shu"t Yehuda Ya'aleh (vol. 1, Orach Chaim 26), Shu"t Afraksta D'Anyah (vol. 4, 388 s.v. puk), and the Radzhiner Rebbe's Seder Taharos on Maseches Ohalos (pg. 5a, Pirush Ha'aruch). Accordingly, in layman's terms, a Golem is technically considered 'an animal in human form' as it lacks the power of speech.

[14] Including the Chid"ra (Birkei Yosef, Orach Chaim 55, 4 s.v. u'Imai - also quoting Rav Yosef Leib Katz, son of the Shaar Efraim, although he personally does not agree to his proofs; Machazik Bracha ad loc; Tzavarei Shalal to Parshas Va'eschanan; Midbar Kedmos - Maareches Yud, 27; and sefer Maris HaAyin on Sanhedrin 65; also quoting his ancestor, the Chessed L'Avrohom), Ikrei HaDat (Ikrei Dinim, Orach Chaim 3, 15), Baruch Taam (Ha'aros on Chacham Tzvi, 93), Sidrei Taharos (Ohelos 4b), Ben Ish Chai (Binayahu, Sanhedrin 65b), the Rogatchover Gaon (Shu"t Tzafnas Paneach vol. 2, 7), Afraksta D'Anyah (Shu"t vol. 4, 388), Pardes Yosef (Hashalem - new print; Parshas Vayeishev 4, s.v. v'ayen ode), Kaf Hachaim (Orach Chaim 55, 12), Rivevos Efraim (Shu"t vol. 7, 385; in a teshuva from Rav Yosef Binyamin Tzarfati of Antwerp), Mishna Halachos (Shu"t vol. 15, 27), and Minchas Asher (Parshas Noach, 12, 2). Similarly, Rav Tzadok HaKohen M'Lublin, in his sefer written on Torah topics that occurred to him while dreaming (Kuntress Divrei Chalomos, 6; appended to his sefer Resisei Laylah; cited in Rabbi Mordechai Zev Trenk's 'Treasures: Illuminating Insights on Esoteric Torah Topics', pg. 44 - 45; second edition pg. 48 - 50), as well, argues that the Ya'avetz's psak that a Golem cannot be counted for a minyan is the correct ruling. Interestingly, the Mahar"i Assad (Shu"t Yehuda Ya'aleh vol. 1, Orach Chaim 26 s.v. v'da), ties this machlokes to the machlokes whether someone sleeping can count for a minyan [see Orach Chaim 55, 6; with the Taz and Pri Chodosh taking an opposing viewpoint to the Shulchan Aruch and Magen Avraham].

[15] Although legends about the Maharal's Golem have been in print since 1837, the well known stories that captivated the public's imagination were actually first published in the early 20th century (Niflaos HaMaharal) by Rav Yudel Rosenberg, author of the famed Yados Nedarim. He was also known for translating the Zohar into Hebrew, and later served as the Av Beis Din of Montreal, Canada. For more on this topic see Prof. Shneur Zalman Leiman's excellent "R Yudel Rosenberg and the Golem of Prague", (Tradition vol. 36, 1 - 2002). There is a famous related quote attributed to the renowned author of the Shu"t Imrei Yosher, Rav Meir Arik zt"l, [originally printed in Zer Zahav (Tzitzernbaum; published in 5693), and later cited in the introduction to Machon Yerushalayim's recent Chiddushei Maharal M'Prague on Bava Metzia (pg. 14, footnote 1)] that "it is unknown whether the Maharal actually created a Golem. However, to have 'created' a talmid of the stature of the Tosafos Yom Tov, is certainly a greater wonder!"

[16] See Shu"t Divrei Yatziv (vol. Lekutim, 52), Shu"t Divrei Moshe (34), sefer Minhagei Kamarna, (printed in the back of Shulchan HaTahor; Elul, 381), as well as Likutei Eliezer (pg. 5, footnotes 30 - 31).

[17] See the recent Weinreb edition of Maaseh Rav (53; 5771), with the accompanying comment (Kovetz Mefarshim ad loc. 30) gleaned from the Aderes' Tefillas Dovid.

[18] See Rav Mordechai Eliyahu's Darchei Halacha glosses to the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch (128, footnote 4). On the other hand, see Rav Ovadiah Yosef's Chazon Ovadia (Yomim Noraim pg. 24), and his son, Rav Yitzchak Yosef's Yalkut Yosef (Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 581, Ode B'hilchos Chodesh Elul 2),

citing precedent mainly from Ashkenazic authorities, and maintaining that nonetheless, it is a 'minhag yafeh' to recite "L'Dovid" after Shacharis, throughout Elul until Hoshana Rabba. Rav Yaakov Hillel's Ahavat Shalom Luach (5777 English edition; Laws of the Month of Elul, 30 Av) writes simply "Some say L'David Hashem Ori V'yish'i (T'hillim 27) every day after Shaharit, and say Kaddish afterwards." Interestingly, both divergent Sefardic minhagim can possibly be traced back to the Chida (Avodas Hakodesh, end Kuntress Sansan L'Yair; and similarly in Moreh B'etzba 2, 37) who approvingly cites the minhag of reciting "L'Dovid" during Elul until Motzai Yom Kippur, as well as on Hoshana Rabba, adding that it is the minhag in Chevron as well, yet concludes 'u'mah tov l'omro Kol Hashana achar HaTefillah'. The Ben Ish Chai (Year 1, Parshas Pekudei end 6), citing a letter from Rav Eliyahu Mani, Av Beis Din of Chevron, also attests to reciting "L'Dovid" from Rosh Chodesh Elul until Shemini Atzeres as the Minhag Chevron. The Ahavat Shalom Luach (ibid. footnote 7) notes that history has since proven that in the full text of Rav Mani's aforementioned letter to the Ben Ish Chai (printed in Kovetz Min Hagnazim vol. 7, pg. 295) he added that in his Beis Midrash – Beis Yaakov, as well as in Yeshivas Beit E-I (for Mekubalim) the minhag is not to recite "L'Dovid" during Eul, as it is not mentioned in the Arizal's writings. As such, the Luach asserts that "one should take note" that the Ben Ish Chai mentioned only the first half of the responsum (the minhag to recite "L'Dovid"), whereas he did not quote the second half of the responsum (the minhag not to recite it), which, in their words, "is unusual for him", but does imply his preference to reciting it.

Disclaimer: This is not a comprehensive guide, rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issues. In any real case one should ask a competent Halachic authority.

L'iluy Nishmas the Rosh HaYeshiva - Rav Chonoh Menachem Mendel ben R' Yechezkel Shraga, Rav Yaakov Yeshaya ben R' Boruch Yehuda.