

## Opening Words for Elul Zman

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We are honored to be hosting the honorable President, Mr. Reuven (Ruvi) Rivlin.

Mr. President, thank you for joining us at the opening of Elul Zman.

Today, standing here as a Jew, as an Israeli, as a new *oleh* able to actualize the 2000 year old dream of living in Israel, and as a citizen of the world, I would like to state on behalf of our yeshiva Ohr Torah Stone Robert Beren Machanayim and all our students:

The terrorists tried to break our spirit. Despite this, we stand here today to begin Elul Zman, our ineffable spirit undaunted.

As the People of Israel have done throughout all of our history, we state clearly and resoundly that the enemy will not triumph.

While we mourn deeply our brothers and sisters who have been attacked or murdered, we stand here as proof that the Nation of Israel is eternal.

And as such, we continue to study Torah; we continue to raise the banner of ethics and morality among the nations of the world.

We continue to act out of a prism of love for all of humanity, rather than from one of hate.

And we will continue to maintain our belief that there is goodness in the world, and that we have the potential and the responsibility to bring that goodness into being.

The following true story is known among the students in our *beit midrash*. During the course of the past school year, Dvir came across a wounded donkey belonging to a resident of one of the nearby villages. Dvir paid handsomely for the donkey, nurtured it back to health and then released it. This one incident reflects so much more than what appears on the surface. Dvir's deed, in its truest sense, is a manifestation of his religious and ethical core. Despite the prevailing tensions in our region, Dvir showed compassion towards a living creature and in so doing, fulfilled the Torah commandment of helping a donkey that has collapsed under its heavy burden.

But this is not the entire story. There is beautiful symbolism rooted in this incident that is Biblical in scope.

The words *chamor* or *aton* (donkey) appears about ten times in Tanach. When examining these instances, it becomes patently clear that when a donkey is mentioned, it represents much more than a mode of transportation. The donkey carries a symbolic importance. When Avraham arrives at the location where he was to offer his son Yitzchak, he does so on a donkey

– "And Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey"; when Moshe's family is to return to Egypt, they do so on a donkey – "And Moses took his wife and his sons and set them upon the donkey." And perhaps the most well-known incident of all – Bil'am, the infamous sorcerer, is reprimanded by his very own *aton*.

While it could be simply an interesting detail to note-- that a donkey was used for the journey-- one cannot but wonder why the Torah, known for its succinct descriptions, chooses to include such a minor detail. In most instances, when the Torah describes a trek, it does not mention details such as how the individuals travelled, the modes of transportation or what the journey was like. Avraham journeys from Ur Kasdim to Canaan, yet we are given no details of the trip. When Moshe fled from Egypt, we are not told upon which animal he rode. Therefore, when this particular detail is mentioned, its insertion into the text rightfully evokes surprise and requires an explanation.

This detail does not go unnoticed by our Sages:

"The donkey upon which Abraham rode is the offspring of the *aton* created at sunset on the eve of the first Shabbat of Creation ... this is the very same donkey upon which Moses rode when coming down to Egypt ... this is the very donkey that the Messiah will ride upon ... (*Pirkei De'Rabi Eliezer*:30).

Each time that a donkey or *aton* is described as the method of transportation, we find the journey takes an unexpected turn and the original purpose of the journey does not materialize.

- We know that in the Binding of Isaac, Yitzchak is not sacrificed and is not even to be touched.
- When Moshe returns to Egypt with his family, he returns alone and his family goes to live with Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law in Midian.
- Bil'am set out on his journey with the aim of cursing the Jewish people. Instead of cursing, he is forced to praise them: "How goodly are they tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling O Israel!"

Although we all have goals, aspirations, and dreams, one of the lessons of life is that which is suggested by the motif of the donkey – they do not always materialize, they do not always turn out as we envisioned them. The only thing we have control over is the values *we bring* to our journey of life.

Not every destination materializes into the purpose or the goal for which we had hoped. Although life is a journey taken, in part, to fulfill one's dreams and hopes, we are not given any assurance that our dreams and aspirations will ultimately actualize, that our sought-after destination will inevitably materialize. We can only define ourselves through the values *we bring to the journey*.

The biggest achievement of any journey is the values we bring to it. Even when we do not merit to realize our dreams, it does not mean that that our journey was devoid of meaning and purpose. This is because the values we have consciously chosen to bring to the journey will profoundly impact us and those around us.

When our Sages aver that Avraham's donkey is the same donkey used by Moshe and the same one belonging to Bil'am--as well as the future donkey to be used by the Messiah- they are emphasizing the importance of the Jewish journey throughout the generations. The travels of Avraham, Moshe Bil'aam and the Moshiach are linked by the values we share, the values that we have carried through the ages.

Dvir, of blessed memory, through his exceptional deed of tending to a wounded donkey, gave us a critical perspective on good deeds. Good deeds are not merely objectives, in and of themselves, that must be realized or fulfilled. Rather, it is the intentions and underlying values we bring to our deeds, the meaning and sense of purpose that we chose to bestow upon our deeds, that will impact the world around us.

The *chamor*, the donkey, or in its more symbolic sense – *chomer* (that which is physical and mundane), reminds us to consider both our daily activities and the material pursuits of our lives. We are told that the *aton* “was created at sunset right before Shabbat.” This is the twilight time between the mundane and the sacred, and hence uniquely suggestive of both. There must be a similar connection between our everyday activities and lofty ideals; between the small sanctities of weekdays and the ethereal values of Shabbat.

Let us consider the *mitzva* of Torah study as an example. One aspect of Torah study is gaining knowledge in order to practice the mitzvot. But another aspect of Torah study, which is no less importance, is learning for the sake of learning Torah and the excitement within us that learning *L'Shma* creates. The very fact that we have embarked upon a journey into the sea of Torah, regardless of any practical conclusions we might derive from it, changes our spiritual identity and fills the journey of our lifetime with values. This, in itself, turns the learning into a worthy purpose. It makes no difference which Talmudic tractate we are tackling, or which concepts we are engaged in studying. The most important goal is to maintain the connection between the everyday and the spiritual, thus bringing the most worthy of values to the journey of life.

The light of Dvir's countenance still warms our Beit Midrash. We will take his message and for our lifetime integrate into our daily learning.