

Parsha Ponders

Elul / Aseres Yemei HaTeshuva | August 27, 2021 | 19 Elul 5781

*The beginning or the end*¹

טוב אחרית דבר מראשיתו וגו'

The end of something is better than/from its beginning...²

The period of time leading towards Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur can be looked at in different ways. In one aspect, it's the end of the year. It's also the preparation period for the Days of Awe. Finally, it's the beginning of the year. There's a verse which can be read to say that the end of something is better than its beginning. Simply put, we could say that the month of Elul is so special because it is the end of the year. Everything is defined by how it ends³.

However, another way to look at things, is the beginning is everything. Take a building for example. Without proper foundations, the building will collapse. If there's limited high quality cement, it will be reserved for the foundations. The rest of the building will suffice with lower quality cement. The verse we started with could then be read to mean the end of something is better, *from* its beginning. Meaning, because of how it started, the end was better off. The same is with the time period that we are in. It could be the most important part of our year. It is the foundation for how the rest of the year will turn out.

We see this idea manifested in different areas. Our Sages tell us⁴ that one of our greatest sages, Elisha ben Avuya, became a heretic. What went wrong? They tell us⁵ that it all started from his beginning. His father Avuya was very wealthy. He invited the entire town for Elisha's bris. The townspeople were drinking and dancing, and the Torah scholars were learning in honor of the occasion. The scholars learned so strongly that a fire came down from heaven. Avuya was petrified that his house would burn down, but the scholars reassured him. They said that since learned with such intensity, the same spiritual fire that was at Mount Sinai had descended upon them.

Avuya was so amazed at what learning Torah could accomplish, he committed to enroll his son in the best schools. Elisha became one of the greatest sages of his day, and eventually became the teacher of the famous Rabbi Meir. However, it didn't last. Elisha eventually became a heretic and dropped his observance of Judaism. How could this happen? Our sages say it was because his start was for the wrong intentions. His father encouraged his studies for ulterior motives, not for the sake of Heaven. The foundation has to be perfect, otherwise the building is liable to collapse.

Another example is evident from a seemingly unusual law during these days. The Sages prohibited⁶ consuming bread, even if it is completely kosher, if it was baked by a non-Jew. However, many have the custom to eat bread baked by a non-Jewish baker. Some are stringent even in such a case⁷. However,

¹ Based on a *shiur* heard from [Rav Zev Leff](#) in 5781

² [Ecclesiastes 7:8](#)

³ הכל הולך אחר החיתום ([Berachos 12a](#))

⁴ [Chagigah 14b, 15a](#), quoting [Tosefta Chagigah 2:2](#)

⁵ [Yerushalmi Chagigah 2:1](#), brought by [Tosafos](#) to [Chagigah 15a](#) s.v. שובו בנים שובים

⁶ [Avodah Zarah 2:6](#)

⁷ See [Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah § 112](#) and its commentaries

the Shulchan Aruch codifies⁸ that during the ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, even those who are lenient should refrain from bread baked by a non-Jewish baker.

At first glance, this seems hypocritical. If the law was that if someone wanted to consider testing out such a stringency, then the best time is before Yom Kippur, that would make sense. But we're talking about someone who has zero intent on continuing this stringency. It appears like they are pretending to be stringent during the days of Hashem's judgement, when that's not really who they are. Who do they think they are fooling? Hashem knows what they are thinking...

However, if we consider this time period to be the foundation for the year, it all makes sense. The foundation has to be absolutely perfect. If there's the opportunity to add a stringency to our lives, this is the best time to do it. It doesn't matter that it's temporary. The point is that if the year begins with a great start, then we can be assured that what's to follow will be good. We're laying the foundations for our year. The end of something is better off due to its beginning.

May we use this time properly, and ensure we have a solid foundation for the rest of the year.

Good Shabbos, and Kesiva VeChasima Tovah

⁸ *Ibid* Orach Chaim 603:1