

ELUL 5777 PRACTICE

Week 1 — Journaling

We will be assigning a practice for each week of this Elul program, and for this Week #1 the practice is to create a special journal for the month of Elul and the days leading up to Yom Kippur.

If you are not currently keeping a journal, this exercise in writing and reflection will give you a five-week taste of the power of journaling. Or, if you already do keep a journal, we won't tell you not to continue with that one, but Elul really is a time to give a special focus to the specific types of introspection we'll be guiding you to do in this program.

We begin our Elul practice with journaling because we want you to continue to take notes throughout the five weeks of this program, even as we assign different additional practices. Journaling is the constant and the backbone. This is an opportunity for new people to try journaling and for Mussar students to renew or refresh their practice.

Each of the daily lessons you will receive by email will suggest a focus or even provide a specific question about which you can journal.

To begin, you should get yourself a small notebook to keep by your bed to record your reflections at the end of the day. Keep your journal beside your bed, along with a pen, and just before you go to bed, reflect back over your day to see what you can identify that in any way reveals something about the daily lesson or the prompt question that was asked. Can you use an iPad or smartphone to journal? Of course! The medium you use is less important than the fact that you record thoughts and experiences that relate to the particular focus as assigned for that day.

A blank journal of any kind can be used for this practice, but you might find it helpful to use some special [Mussar journaling pages](#) we have created, which you can download here. This journal template provides you with a full week's pages for your use. You will find one page for every day of the week, and at the end of the template, a "Page 2" that you can copy and insert for any day of the week when you need an extra page. Photocopy or download one copy of the template for every week that you are doing the practice.

The notes you write should be brief, just an outline of the facts that reveal something of how you experienced that particular focus that day. Don't worry if what you write wouldn't pass as literature. No one but you ever need see this notebook. More important than the amount you write or the floweriness of the prose is the honesty you bring to your introspection. Shine a bright light on your day and see what there is to see about the focus for that day. Then write down just what you need to record to clarify the facts of your motives, actions and reactions.

It is crucially important that you not beat up on yourself for the slip-ups you identify nor heap praises on yourself for your victories. What you're after is just a factual and accurate picture of the play of your inner life as it shapes your thoughts, words and deeds in action. The details contain the underlying patterns that recur in your life, and by examining them, you get something like a read-out on the contents of your unconscious, as these express themselves in the particulars of your life. Self-awareness builds.

Because Jewish law considers writing as a type of "work" that is forbidden on the Sabbath, the guideline is to write in your diary on Friday before evening, and then on Saturday evening after Shabbat has ended.

It is not uncommon for people to find it hard to get into the rhythm of keeping the diary. It's a habit you need to cultivate, and one that sometimes requires a stratagem or two. To begin, commit to yourself to write something EVERY evening. Consistency is key to the practice. Recognize that you are creating a new habit for yourself and that's not an easy thing to do.

If you find you have nothing to write, or you are too tired, or it's too late, or you have an inner debate raging about whether you should or should not pick up your journal, you have our permission to just write your name on the page. It is much, much better to write something as minimal as your name rather than nothing at all, because if you write your name, you have still kept up with consistent practice and habit-building and, in the beginning, that is the most important thing.

Finally, you might find it helpful – now or in the future – to see [the journaling tips and suggestions](#) to support your introspective practice that we have accumulated over our many years of guiding students in journaling.

To begin, at the end of your Day 1 email in this program you will find a question to consider in your journal that very evening:

*What do you hear when you hear the sounding of the shofar?
Journal your response.*

You can see that from Day 1 of this program, we have our eye on Rosh Hashana when we will all hear the shofar's blast. Many communities have the practice of sounding the shofar each day during the month of Elul. What does the blare of the ram's horn say to you personally? What will you listen for this year especially? Is there something you know you need to wake up to? Journal about that, and that will be the practice to continue tomorrow, with its unique focus, and then onward every day throughout this program.

To access the video for this week, [click here](#).