In the Torah the Israelites are perpetually lost and their teacher, Moses, enjoys reminding them. Indeed, in this week’s portion, they have been wandering in the desert for forty years and haven’t learned a darned thing. He says to them:

You have seen all the Eternal did before your very eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his courtiers and to his whole country. The wondrous feats that you saw with your own eyes, those prodigious signs and marvels. Yet to this day the Eternal has NOT given you a heart to understand or eyes to see, ears to hear (Deuteronomy 29: 1-3).

Even after all of this time, and all of those miracles, the Israelites still cannot take to heart the blessings that they have been given.

Instead of truly getting it—getting the full signage and deeper perception, the Israelites wandered around lost for 40 years . . . k’veetching. In place of reflection, they complained. In place of full transformation, they protested. Because of their reluctance, the spiritual work of the Israelites was not finished as they entered the Promised Land. They (we) need to develop eyes that see-- eyes that perceive, a heart to understand--that feels, and ears that listen--that can really take in the meaning of life, and the meaning of daily miracles. So that’s where we come in—as the descendants of this lost and often griping people-- to complete the work so that we can become people who can see, hear, and understand. People who attune ourselves to the miracles placed before us. How do we get it right in ways that the Israelites apparently couldn’t? Can we change the story from one of complaint to one of completion?
In the desert the Israelites had not yet developed the maturity to accept their blessings, and become an awakened people. They had their problems, their blind-spots, as do we. Like them, we don’t always appreciate what we have. After all, the Israelites were miraculously fed and clothed in the wilderness. The sandals on their feet did not wear out for 40 years. We too are clothed, we have food on our tables, nice vacations, hobbies, in spite of the struggles that life offers. Do we see the blessings in what we have, our equivalents to manna from heaven for forty years?

Fortunately we are in the season to complete the work of the Israelites and learn to truly see, hear, and understand. This month of Elul that precedes the High Holy Days gives us guidance on how to deepen our seeing, hearing, and understanding. First, Elul teaches that the King is in the field, meaning that as the sun is still in summer, we can access the fullness of the light that in just a couple of months will be more difficult to absorb. To me this means: go out in nature and absorb the last vestiges of the sun, gaze upon a fading flower, take in the autumnal breeze, watch the birds fly south, feel the air change and the light slowly lessen in its intensity, and know that while the light may lessen outside, it can strengthen within you. It also means that the Holy One, signified by the light of our leading star the sun, may be less accessible, but never truly fades. So in Elul we gather the outer light of the season in order to take it with us as a reminder of God’s eternal flame.

Second, Elul wakes us up from our habitual way of living with the daily sound of the shofar. Although in Scarsdale and at WRT we may not blow the shofar every morning of Elul at 5:00 a.m. like the way they do in Israel, we can still embrace Elul’s alarm clock for the soul which asks us to wake up, to get up, to turn toward the deeper levels of existence, of meaning,
and of understanding. This month we are encouraged to greet the soul by strengthening our insight and by allowing the sound of the shofar to knock our hearts open. It invites us to examine our lives and make amends to loved ones we may have wronged. Although the sun has begun its descent, the shofar heralds the beginning of the inner work. How will we examine our lives, what should be retained, what should be released, can we open our hearts enough to feel the shofar’s resonance and to hear its call telling us to return, to repent, to become better?

Third, Elul, through the meaning of its acronym, “Ani l’dodi v’dodi li, I am my beloved and my beloved is mine,” (Song of Songs 6:3) reminds us that our true soul mate, the Eternal, is ever near. Preparing for the High Holy Days means reminding ourselves of this spiritual truth: this hidden nature can be uncovered within us. We get to remember who we are and seek understanding in the heart.

Fourth, Elul has us read Psalm 27 which says: “One thing I ask of the Lord, only that do I seek: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, to frequent His temple” (27:4). Here lies the remedy for the Israelite’s inability to see: a yearning for closeness with the divine is part of the soul’s restoration. Gazing and recognizing the beauty of our world is needed medicine that acts as a salve upon our wounds.

If we do these 4 things this month in preparation for the High Holy Days, we will slowly develop eyes to see, ears to hear, a heart to understand in the ways that our ancestors could not. Our job is to personally fulfill the command, to develop our senses to take in the world, to take in each other, and to take in God more fully. The good news is that we all have ears and eyes and hearts that can learn to gaze upon God’s temple, wake up to a more enriched sense
of being, unite with our innermost selves, and run to see the beauty when the King and Queen are still in the field. And then, maybe then, the next 40 years won’t be spent k’vetching but rather coaxing our friends, neighbors, and families to accompany us into the innermost temple, to celebrate and witness miracles both big and small.