

# ELUL READING SERIES

The Gift: 12 Lessons to  
Save Your Life

Welcome to Temple Beth El's Elul Study of Edith Eger's "[The Gift: 12 Lessons to Save Your Life](#)." This study will be co-facilitated by Rabbis Knight and Erdheim. These questions will help you consider and reflect upon your own life, using Eger's book as a lens through which to discover more about yourself in the month of Elul, the month leading to the High Holy Days.

**Tuesdays: August 30 September 6, 13, and 20 from 7:00pm-8:30pm | [Temple Beth El and Online](#)**

## Guiding Principles for Our Discussion.

1. **Presence:** When we are together, I'll be present and mindful. I will listen and share. Life (and our mobile devices) offer many distractions, but I will stay present and engaged.
2. **Confidentiality:** What I hear and say stays here.
3. **Vulnerability:** I'll stretch myself to be as open and honest as possible with my perspectives and experiences to create a safe environment that might encourage others to take risks as well.
4. **Respect:** I will remember that all of us are here for a common purpose, and I will respect and acknowledge everyone in my group.
5. **No Fixing, Advising, Saving or Setting Straight:** I will give each person the gift of true attention without trying to "solve their problem." No advice unless it's asked.
6. **Stepping Up & Stepping Back:** I understand that some of us are natural talkers while others are quieter. I'll pay attention to how much I am contributing, and will seek to balance how much I am talking with how much I'm listening
7. **Curiosity:** Judaism is a religion of exploration; of big questions more than answers. I will get the most out of my group by being open to our discussions and the people around me.
8. **Ownership:** This is our community to create. While we have guidelines and suggestions, it is ours to shape and form. We will get out of it what we put into it.

## **August 30<sup>th</sup> – Session 1**

### **Introduction: Unlocking Our Mental Prisons**

Dr. Eger believes that freedom comes from choice. She has four principles that she uses as a psychologist.

1. Learned Optimism over learned helplessness.
2. Our thoughts create our feelings and behaviors.
3. The importance of self-regard.
4. Our worst experiences are our best teachers.

The mind can be a mental prison. We can also remain hopeful and choose inner strength to find freedom.

#### **Questions:**

- 1) How did Dr. Eger's background help her develop these four principles?
- 2) Which principle do you feel like you need most practice with and why?
- 3) What is the goal of changing? And what would you want to change about yourself in the coming year?

### **Chapter 1: What Now?**

According to Eger, a difference between victims and survivors is that victims ask, "why me?" while survivors ask, "what now?" She also argues that victims look towards the past while survivors move to the future.

#### **Questions**

- 1) For you, what is the difference between the question, "Why me" and the question "what now?" Which one have you been saying? How would changing the questions help you change your outlook?
- 2) Why is it important to love yourself?
- 3) Have you ever felt imprisoned in your mind?
- 4) What positive changes can disruption bring?

### **Chapter 2: No Prozac at Auschwitz**

Eger is not arguing that we should ignore painful memories. Rather, she explains that we have to learn how to feel our emotions so we can work through them and heal from our pain.

**Questions:**

- 1) Why shouldn't we ignore how we feel? When have you found yourself ignoring your own feelings and how has it affected you?
- 2) Dr. Eger says that the opposite of depression is expression. How did Auschwitz teach Dr. Eger about expressing emotions and finding inner strength? What would that look like for you?
- 3) What holds you back from the kind of emotional growth you want to have?

**Chapter Three: All Other Relationships Will End**

**Affection, Acceptance and Approval.** We are often so focused on earning the affection, approval, and acceptance of others that we abandon ourselves. We also often neglect ourselves and overmedicate with food, alcohol, sugar, drinking, sex, work, etc. We cannot abandon ourselves.

**Questions:**

- 1) What fears do you have?
- 2) Describe in your own words what affection, acceptance, and approval mean and feel like to you.
- 3) How have your childhood labels influenced your actions as an adult? Have you ever been living with a label that someone else has given you?
- 4) How can you stop abandoning yourself in the coming year?

**For Practice:**

- A. Two Letters – write two letters to a person who hurt you, either recently or in the past. In the first letter, explain what the person did. Be as specific as possible about what the person did, or about what happened that you didn't like. Say how the actions, words or events affected you. Then, write a second letter to that same person, but this time offer gratitude for what the person has taught you about yourself or how the situation has instilled growth in you.

---OR---

B. Work, love, play – make a chart marking your waking hours of the week. Chart the time that you spend every day, working, loving and playing. At the end of the week, count up how your hours were divided. Do you have balance between the three in your life? Or is it weighted in one direction or the other? How could you structure your life differently so you do more of whatever is currently receiving the least of your time?

## **September 6<sup>th</sup> – Session 2**

### **Chapter Four: One Butt, Two Chairs**

Hungarians have an expression: "If you sit with one butt on two chairs, you become half-assed." When you live a double life, you become someone living without authenticity. One of the most common ways we cause relationships to grow stagnant is by withdrawing and not sharing our true feelings, which then fosters resentment and hurt. Secrets are harmful to yourself and to the person you're keeping the secret from.

#### **Questions:**

- 1) Eger describes the Vital Signs procedure. Ask yourself: "Do I feel soft and warm, or cold and stiff?" What is it and how could you use it to interrupt the pattern?
- 2) Have you ever hidden your pain and, thus, carried a secret? How did it affect you?
- 3) How can secrets keep you from living authentically?

### **Chapter Five: No One Rejects You But You**

Rejection is never about us; it's always about the preferences of the other person. We do not need to be liked or accepted by everyone - there will always be people who are not our people, and we will be "not our people" to others, as well. We need to replace our critical self-talk with kindness. So often we are our own worst enemies.

#### **Questions:**

- 1) In what ways do you speak to yourself in ways that are uplifting? In what ways do you speak to yourself in ways that put you down? How do each affect how you interact with those around you?

- 2) Have you ever felt shame in your body? What do you think caused you to feel that way?
- 3) How can you reframe rejection?
- 4) Why is positive self-talk important? What is one of the first areas you would like to begin thinking positively about yourself?

## **Chapter Six: What Didn't Happen**

Grief is often about what we want that we don't have. We often experience regret, a wish to change the past, and it makes us feel powerless. We learn to minimize and deny our grief when we hold on to regret. When we have unresolved grief, it often leads to anger. Grief is a part of everyone's life. We can learn how to foster it in a positive way that allows us to celebrate life.

### **Questions:**

- 1) What is grief and are you currently experiencing it?
- 2) How are grief and regret connected? How are grief and anger connected?
- 3) What is the meaning of the phrase, "time heals all wounds" and how is it or isn't it accurate?
- 4) When is the last time you let yourself truly grieve the loss of a person who died - gone through letters, seen pictures, etc.??

For Practice:

A. Try the Vital Signs exercise. Several times during the day, make an effort to check in with yourself and ask, "do I feel soft and warm, or cold and stiff?" Then when you have a good daily rhythm, begin to use the procedure of pattern interruption to change some habits that are not healthy.

--OR--

B. Listen to yourself: Spend a day listening to your self-talk. Consider how you can replace messages of shame or guilt with kind and loving self-talk.

## September 13<sup>th</sup> – Session 3

### Chapter Seven: Nothing To Prove

So often we try to avoid conflict but doing so also may mean giving into the other person. It is important to speak your truth and do what's best for yourself. When we let go of the need for conflict, or the need to be "right" all the time, we can experience more joy. Rigidity in life can only lead to disappointment and really robs us of joy.

#### Questions:

- 1) Why is conflict important? When have you found yourself avoiding conflict? Are you prone to avoiding conflict?
- 2) How have you felt with conflict in the past?
- 3) Dr. Eger says we should seek kindness amid conflict and take back our power. How does the thought of showing kindness to the person we are in conflict with make you feel?
- 4) How could "letting go" lead to joy? Could you consider letting go of your need to be right?

### Chapter Eight: Would you Like to Be Married to You?

In marriages, resentment festers when we are unable to make changes that affect our relationships positively.

- 1) What is the difference between the feeling of love and the action of love?
- 2) When have you felt resentment in a partnership? What was your role?
- 3) Do your relationships hurt you, empower you, or both?

### Chapter Nine: Are You Evolving or Revolving?

We must learn to live in the present and to allow ourselves to enjoy the moment. We must embrace change as growth. Fear plays a vital role in keeping us from living in the present. One of the most important things we can do when facing fears is to write them down and decide how realistic they are.

#### Questions:

- 1) Now thinking about the fears that you reflected upon in Chapter 3, how realistic are they?
- 2) When have fears stopped you from accomplishing something?

- 3) What are some of the things that you could say to replace the "I can't" and "I'm trying" phrases?
- 4) What is the difference between stress and distress? When have you been stressed? When have you felt that you were distressed?

#### For Practice

A. Visualize a person with whom you are in conflict. Imagine this person's highest self. You can even close your eyes and pictured the person surrounded by light. Put your hand over your heart and say, "I see you"

--OR--

B. Choose a day where you do one thing differently than you did the day before. It can be something small, like taking a different route to work, chatting with the cashier at the grocery store or sitting down to a meal together with your family without the TV or cell phones. How did that small change affect your day, your mood, your outlook?

## **September 20<sup>th</sup> – Session 4**

### **Chapter Ten: The Nazi In You**

Many people worry that the trauma of their parents will negatively affect them. We judge and criticize ourselves and others, before approaching with compassion and kindness. We are born to love. We learn to hate.

- 1) Should you hold yourself accountable for the actions of your ancestors? Why or why not? When have you felt accountable because of their actions?
- 2) How can you re-direct anger to those who hurt you?
- 3) As a child, were you taught to see certain people in a negative way? How have you addressed that as an adult?

### **Chapter Eleven: If I survive Today, Tomorrow Will Be Free**

Hope is so powerful and can be the difference between life and death. If hope is alive, the spirit is alive. Hope is an investment in our curiosity. When we have hope we are able to look at the future with the desire to unlock and see the potential. Hope is essential for helping us move forward with faith in a better tomorrow.

#### **Questions:**

- 1) What is hope to you? Are you feeling hopeful for yourself, our community, our world?
- 2) What does the phrase "don't try to cover garlic with chocolate" mean to you?
- 3) How can you use your past to create a better future?

### **Chapter Twelve: There is No Forgiveness Without Rage**

Forgiveness isn't for the person who wronged you, it's for you. When we harbor unforgiveness, we keep ourselves from moving forward and allowing the other person's actions to have a hold on our lives. The harm has been done. We can't change it. What we can control is how we act, how we react, and how we heal. The hardest person to forgive is ourselves. When we struggle with forgiving ourselves, we hold on to anger, grief, and pain that we have inflicted.



**Questions:**

- 1) What does forgiveness mean? Are you ready to forgive? What would you need to forgive yourself or others?
- 2) What do you think Eger means when she says you can't have forgiveness without rage?
- 3) In the past, what has happened when you haven't been able to forgive yourself?

**For Practice:**

A. Make a list of the messages you heard growing up that divided people into categories, such as good/bad, us/them, right/wrong. Circle anything that describes how you see the world today, and notice where you may be holding onto judgement. How is that judgement affecting your relationships?

--OR--

B. Set a timer for 10 minutes and make a list of things that are better now than they were 5 years ago, whether global or personal. Let the work that still needs to be done be a catalyst for hope.