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Minhagim of Elul

1. The Ashkenazic minhag is to blow the Shofar after Shacharit during Elul. Some have the practice to start on the first day of Rosh Chodesh Elul, while others start on the second day of Rosh Chodesh.¹
2. The Sephardic minhag is to say Selichot from the day after Rosh Chodesh Elul. It is preferable to say them at night after Chatzot, but if this is difficult, one may say them during the day before Shacharit or Mincha.²
3. Some pious individuals have the minhag of checking their Tefillin and Mezuzot during Elul.³

1. The Rosh (Rosh Hashana 4:14) quotes Pirkei D'Rabi Eliezer, which says that Chazal established a practice of blowing the shofar on Rosh Chodesh Elul because a shofar was blown when Moshe ascended Har Sinai on Rosh Chodesh Elul. It continues that the shofar is blown in order to motivate Bnei Yisrael to do teshuva and to confuse the Satan. The Rosh adds that this is the basis for the Ashkenazic minhag of blowing shofar during Elul. The Rama 581:1 writes that the minhag is to blow the shofar during Elul after Shacharit, and some do so also after Maariv.

2. The Rosh (Rosh Hashana 4:14) writes that a number of Geonim had the minhag of saying Selichot during the Aseret Yemei Teshuva, while other places said them from Rosh Chodesh Elul because that is when Moshe was on Har Sinai receiving the second Luchot. While the Rambam (Teshuva 3:4) follows the minhag of the Geonim, S"A 581:1 writes that the Sephardic minhag is to say Selichot from Rosh Chodesh Elul. The Rama, however, says that the Ashkenazic minhag is to say Selichot the week prior to Rosh Hashana unless Rosh Hashana falls out on Monday or Tuesday, in which case the minhag is to begin a week earlier. Yalkut

Yosef 581:1 writes that Sephardic minhag is to begin the day after Rosh Chodesh Elul.

The Magen Avraham 565:5 quotes the Arizal as saying that one should not say Selichot, particularly the 13 middot of rachamim, prior to Chatzot at night. The Birkei Yosef 581:1 and Mishna Brurah 565:12 agree. Rav Moshe Feinstein (Igrot Moshe 2:105) writes that although prior to Chatzot is not the ideal time, there is no prohibition to say Selichot at such a time, and as a Hora'at Sha'ah, one may be lenient. However, Rav Ovadyah Yosef (Chazon Ovadyah Yamim Nora'im p. 3-6) argues that there is a prohibition based on Kabbalah. He concludes that if the congregation can't wake up to say Selichot at night, it may say them during the day before Shacharit or Mincha.

3. Mateh Efraim 581:10 writes that as part of being introspective during Elul, some pious individuals check their Tefillin and Mezuzot during Elul. He concludes that it is a good minhag. This is quoted by the Kitzur S"A 128:3 and Chazon Ovadyah (p. 26).

It is noteworthy that S"A 39:10 rules that Tefillin that were established as being kosher do not have to be checked if they are used frequently. Additionally, S"A Y.D. 291:1 rules that Mezuzot should be checked twice every seven years.