

Making the High Holidays Meaningful

Resources for Adults



What are the High Holidays?

The High Holidays begin with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. They end with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, and encompass the period of ten days from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur, which are called the Days of Awe.

These days invite us to welcome the New Year and offer us tools of reflection, self-examination, and seeking forgiveness so we can move into the year having come closer to being our best selves.

The key theme of the High Holidays is teshuvah. This Hebrew word has several meanings: turning, returning, responding, repenting. The process of teshuvah is one of empowerment and choice. While there is much in life that we cannot control, we are free to envision the kind of people we want to be and to take steps in that direction. We do teshuvah by reflecting on the year now ending, reconnecting with our deepest values, repairing relationships, and seeking ways to become better people in the New Year, for ourselves, our communities, and the world.

The High Holidays may seem to come "early" or "late," depending on the year. That's because Rosh Hashanah is celebrated on the first day of the Hebrew month of Tishrei, and the Jewish calendar, which is both lunar and solar, is calculated differently from the secular calendar.

Though the High Holidays are often observed mainly by attending holiday services, they can also be observed at home or wherever else you choose, whether or not you attend services. Home traditions include special blessings; candle lighting; holiday foods; coming together with family and friends for festive meals; and reflecting on, writing about, and/or talking with others about how we want to make teshuvah as we enter the new year. Another tradition that can be carried out anywhere is tashlich, a ritual for tossing away regrets. A core observance of Yom Kippur, fasting, can also be carried out anywhere. Remember, however, that Jewish tradition does not encourage fasting for anyone for whom it might cause health problems.

In this resource guide you will find more information on meaningful ways to mark these important holidays, both at home and by participating in holiday services.



Teshuvah: What Is It?

Most of us would like to be better people and live more in keeping with our deepest values. It's an appealing idea, but how do we actually do it, in the midst of life's pains, difficulties, annoyances, and the challenges of interacting with others whose behavior we cannot control?

This is the question teshuvah is here to help us address. It offers us the opportunity to heal from our mistakes, make amends for wrongdoing, and grow as individuals.

The process of teshuvah may begin with a sense of sadness or even despair, the feeling that we're stuck and unable to change. Yet teshuvah can be a positive, empowering, and transformative experience. It is meant to be at the forefront of our consciousness during these ten days and to be an ongoing process that we engage in throughout our lives.

Wrongdoing: A building block of teshuvah is Judaism's understanding that people are not born sinful. Rather, we are all imperfect and a major task in each life is, over time, to turn our choices and energies more towards the good. The High Holidays can be an opportunity to do that and to be encouraged by being among community members who are also reflecting and making changes.

The Hebrew word most commonly used for sin, *het*, literally means something that goes astray, like an arrow that misses the mark. It is not a permanent failure. Rather, we can keep trying to direct our intentions and actions closer to the target and ultimately to its center.

It is helpful to make the process of teshuvah as concrete as possible. There are various descriptions of the process; the one below draws on [Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg's understanding of teshuvah](#) as taught by the Jewish philosopher Maimonides, who lived in Cairo about 1,000 years ago.



The Steps of Teshuvah

1. Acknowledgment: We begin by recognizing that we have done something harmful, to others, to ourselves, to the environment... Naming and owning our misdeeds is key. We may resist acknowledging our less-than-optimal choices because we feel guilty or ashamed, or because we don't want to face the consequences of our actions. Yet bringing self-awareness and humility to this process, rather than minimizing, ignoring, or justifying problematic choices, is the first step towards change and the more positive future it can help create.

2. Starting to Change: This step can take a long time and can coexist with the steps that follow. Changing ourselves is not one-and-done; it's continuous work. It asks us to look inward and discern why we do the things we do, to notice and root out preconceptions and prejudice that get in the way of seeing clearly, and to search for the learning, practices, or support we need to change. It is important that we find a balance between judging ourselves harshly, and not judging ourselves seriously enough. If we lack compassion for ourselves, we will be demoralized, and it will be more difficult to change. If we do not look searchingly at our actions, we will not have the information or the impetus to become better than we have been.

3. Repair: We need to understand and then repair the harm we have caused as much as we are able to. If I broke your favorite mug, I must buy you a new one that you will like at least as much as the old one. If I took money from you, I need to repay it and perhaps then some. When it comes to harms like stealing or property damage this is relatively straightforward. But it is also true for other kinds of harm, such as emotional or spiritual harm, or harming a person's reputation. The goal is to make restitution that is appropriate and significant enough that the injured party will truly experience our actions as repair.

Many harms cannot be undone. In that case we may choose to examine our actions carefully, perhaps with others, to explore any ways we can take positive steps towards repair that is related to the original harm.



Continuing the Steps of Teshuvah

This third step also involves accepting consequences. For example, if we have hurt someone badly, we may do our best to repair the situation, but the person may still decide they do not want to be in our presence.

4. Apology: This is a genuine apology to those harmed. The focus is on the needs, including the mental and emotional state, of the person who was harmed. As Maimonides wrote, even after a person has made “restitution of monetary debt, they are obliged to pacify [the person harmed] and to beg their forgiveness...”

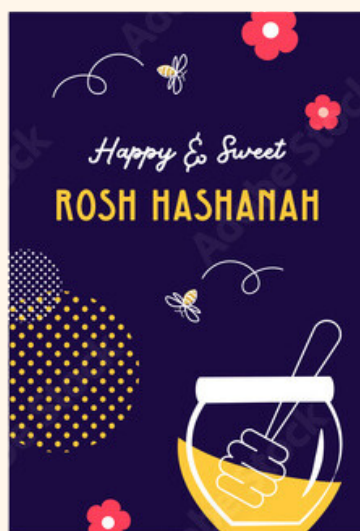
It may seem surprising that we have come to number four on the list before getting to “I’m sorry.” This might seem counterintuitive: if I realize I’ve harmed someone, shouldn’t I apologize right away?

Both Maimonides and Rabbi Ruttenberg say we must acknowledge our misdeeds, start doing the work necessary to become a better person, make restitution and accept whatever consequences come my way, and only then can we apologize.

And, Rabbi Ruttenberg points out, the apology must be genuine, spoken from a place of vulnerability, reflecting real regret and sorrow. “I’m sorry if you were hurt by this perfectly reasonable thing that I did” is not an apology.

5. Making Different Choices: Our goal is, when we face the opportunity to cause harm like that we have in the past, to have become a person who would not make that choice. This is how we know we have changed. That is teshuvah: growing into the self we know we could be if we lived up to our highest ideals. As Rabbi Ruttenberg writes, teshuvah “isn’t merely making amends. It’s transformation.”

At the end of this resource guide, you will find a worksheet you can use to reflect on and write about how you would like to make teshuvah.



Prepare and Celebrate



Round Challah: Learn two ways to shape this holiday bread, which symbolizes the cycle of the year.



The Sound of the Shofar: Explore the sounds and the meanings of the different types of shofar blasts.



Enjoy a festive meal with family or friends, with candles, wine or juice, round challah, apples and honey for a sweet New Year, and more. Try delicious traditional New Year recipes.



Listen to and perhaps learn the music of the High Holidays. You can do this in preparation for participating in holiday services or simply as a means to connect with the holidays and their themes.



What About Prayer?

Some Thoughts from Rabbi Bridget Wynne

Perhaps you come to High Holiday services for the prayers, but many come despite them.

Most of us do not read or understand Hebrew, but even if the prayers are in English, they still may not ring true. The problem, more often, is that we haven't been offered Judaism's sophisticated, adult ways to think about prayer.

The portrayals of prayer we usually see suggest that it's a way to ask God for what we need or want. But God, if God exists, often doesn't seem to answer, so why bother?

Many of those who find prayer meaningful do not expect God to answer "yes" or "no" to specific requests.

Yet if the main point of prayer is not to change God's "mind," what is it?

One purpose is to change ourselves.

Rabbi Shefa Gold describes it this way:

I'm not trying to understand the words. I'm trying to be the words.

Rabbi David Wolpe says:

If you saw somebody pulling a boat to the shore and were mistaken about mechanics and motion, you might think that she was pulling the shore to the boat. And that's what prayer is like. You think that you're pulling God to you, but, in fact, if you pray well, you pull yourself to God.

Some pray to experience a connection with something larger, which you may call "God," or may think of as Mystery, conscience, your deepest self, the Holy, the wisdom of your people, or in many other ways.

Rabbi Jamie Korngold describes it like this:

When my voice is joining with twenty other people's voices, chanting the prayers, I experience God through that moment. I'm not praying to God for something to happen.



What About Prayer?

Many who find purpose in prayer also do not confuse the means with the end. In other words, we need not define prayer by the prayer book. The prayer book is meant to be a launching pad, not a prison. We should feel free to step away from the shared words to reflect on a phrase that catches our attention, or to express or meditate on our own thoughts, feelings, or personal prayers.

A crucial understanding of prayer is that it, like poetry, does not have to be “rational” to be real. If we experience a moment of greater understanding of our life’s purpose, or of spiritual connection, we can reflect on it without having to figure out what caused it.

As Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi says:

I never let theology get in the way of my spiritual life.

God is Not a Guy in the Sky...

Many people struggle with the dominant image of divinity in western religion – God as a powerful, bearded, white man.

This is only one of many metaphors for the sacred. When we encounter words, or our own thoughts, that point to this image, it can be helpful to remember that these metaphors are not intended as statements of belief. They are invitations to experience.

Instead of asking, “Do I believe this?” we can ask, “What connection to something larger, what metaphor for the sacred, might speak to me?”

Jewish tradition offers a much broader range of metaphors for the divine than is found in most Jewish prayer books. God’s “name” in the Torah is a word we do not know how to pronounce or translate. It means something like, “Was, Is, Will Be,” “Possibility for Transformation,” or “Beingness.” It’s usually written in prayers as Adonai or Eternal, neither of which captures its openness and mystery.

Besides God’s “name” in the Torah, our tradition has many other metaphors for God: Place, Presence, Everlasting, Voice, Oneness, Love, Without End, Compassionate One, Source of Life, Most High, One Who Nourishes, Friend, Guardian, Holy One of Blessing, the Name ...



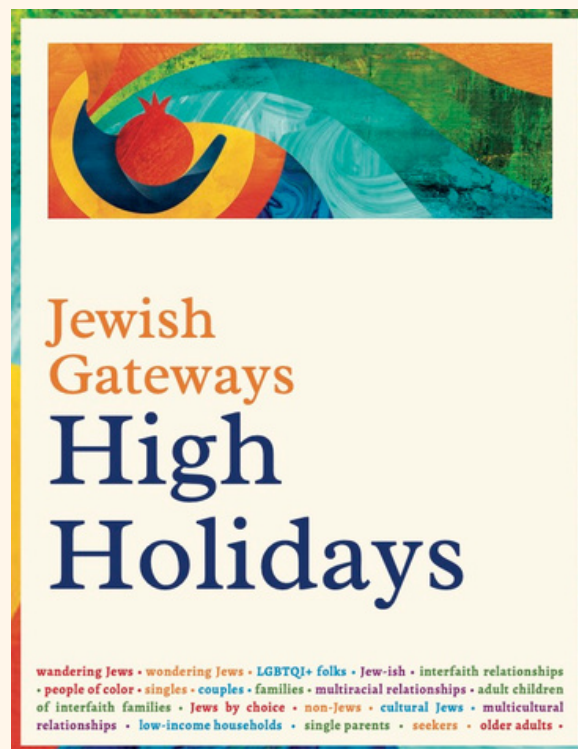
What About Prayer?

It may take effort to put aside the “God is a Guy in the Sky” metaphor and make room for other ways of imagining and experiencing the divine, yet as we experiment with possibilities, we open more to our truths and those of our tradition.

I invite you to put aside questions about how we might describe the reality of God – if God exists – about how prayer “works” – or does not, about whether you are, or could be, a religious or spiritual person...

...and instead to bring your heart, your soul, your wonderings and wanderings, your pain and your joy, your hopes and your fears, so that you may open to the moment, to the words or melodies or silences that speak to you, that help you to open...

...to change, to gratitude, to compassion for yourself and others, to connection, to bravery
...to your deepest, truest self, and perhaps to a larger Mystery as well.



Preview Jewish Gateways' unique High Holiday prayer book, to prepare for services or to reflect on as you choose.



Blessings for Erev (the Eve of) Rosh Hashanah

1. Lighting the Candles on the Eve of Rosh Hashanah

Hear the blessing sung

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוְּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק גֶּר שֶׁל [שַׁבָּת וְשָׁל] יוֹם טוֹב.

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel [Shabbat v' shel] yom tov.

Blessed are You, Eternal, whose presence fills creation, who makes us holy through the mitzvah of lighting the [Shabbat and] festival candles.

2. Shehechyanu

Hear the blessing sung

We say the Shehechyanu blessing to express our gratitude for reaching new and special moments.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁהַחַיָּנוּ, וְקִיָּמָנוּ, וְהַגִּיעָנוּ לְזֶמַן הַזֶּה.

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, shehecheyanu, v'kiyimanu, v'higiyanu la'zman ha'zeh.

Blessed are You, Eternal, whose presence fills creation, who gave us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this moment.

3. Kiddush (Blessing over Wine or Juice)

Hear the blessing sung

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם בּוֹרֵא פְּרִי הַגָּפֶן.

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, borei p'ri hagafen.

Blessed are You, Eternal, whose presence fills creation, who creates the fruit of the vine.

4. Blessing for Dipping Apples in Honey for a Sweet New Year

Before dipping an apple slice into honey:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרִי הָעֵץ.

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, borei p'ri ha'eitz.

Blessed are You, Eternal, whose presence fills creation, who creates the fruit of the tree.

5. Ha'motzi (Blessing over Bread/Challah)

Hear the blessing sung

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַמוֹצִיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, ha'motzi lechem min ha'aretz.

Blessed are You, Eternal, whose presence fills creation, who brings forth bread from the earth.



Blessings for Erev (the Eve of) Yom Kippur

1. Ha'motzi (Blessing over Bread/Challah)

Hear the blessing sung

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַמוֹצֵיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, ha'motzi lechem min ha'aretz.

Blessed are You, Eternal, whose presence fills creation, who brings forth bread from the earth.

3. Lighting the Candles on the Eve of Yom Kippur

Hear the blessing sung

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוְּנוּ לְהַדְלִיק נֵר שֶׁל [שַׁבָּת וְ] יוֹם הַכִּיפּוּרִים

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitz'votav, v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel [Shabbat v' shel] yom ha'kippurim.

Blessed are You, Eternal, whose presence fills creation, who makes us holy through the mitzvah of lighting the candles [for Shabbat and] for the Day of Atonement.

2. Eat the holiday meal before lighting candles.

It is traditional to remember loved ones on Yom Kippur by kindling 24-hour **yahrzeit candles**. Yahrzeit candles are lit before lighting the holiday candles. There are no special prayers or blessings for lighting a yahrzeit candle. It offers a moment to remember the person and perhaps to share memories with others present.

There is no kiddush blessing over wine or juice for Yom Kippur.

4. Shehechyanu

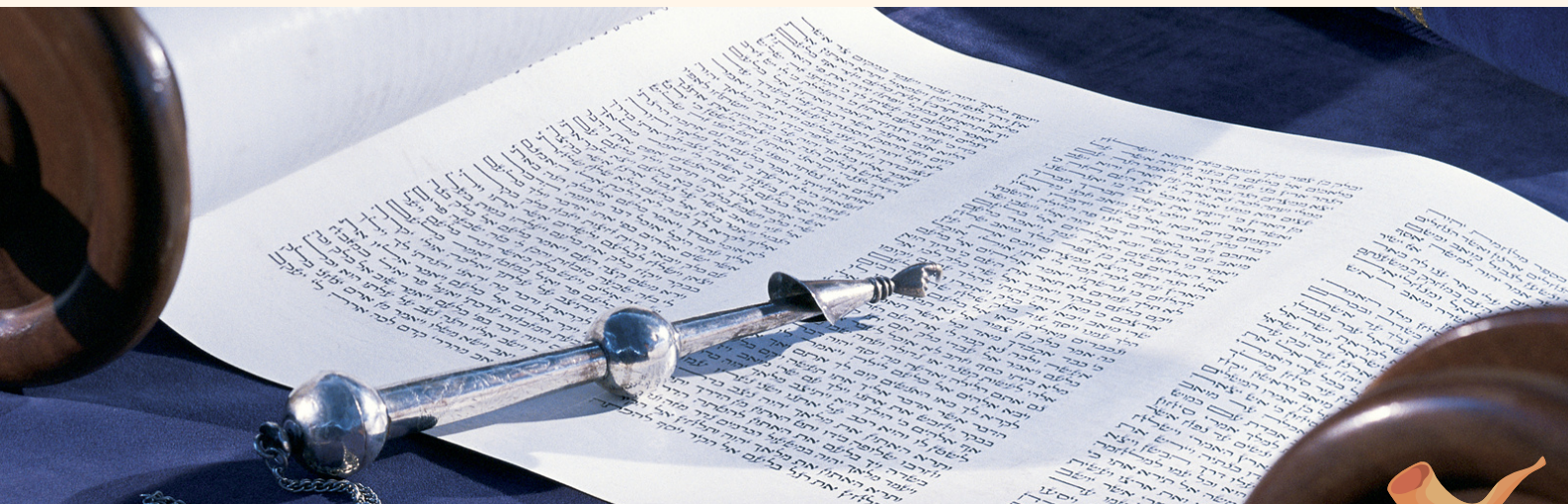
Hear the blessing sung

We say the Shehechyanu blessing to express our gratitude for reaching new and special moments.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם. שְׁהַחַיְנוּ, וְהַגִּיעֵנוּ לְזֵמַן הַזֶּה.

Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha'olam, shehecheyanu, v'kiyimanu, v'higiyanu la'zman ha'zeh.

Blessed are You, Eternal, whose presence fills creation, who gave us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this moment.



How Will You Make Teshuvah?

Please use this worksheet in whatever way you think will work best for you. You might choose one situation or wrongdoing and write about the five steps in regard to it, or you might focus on the first steps only and come back to the others later. It can also be helpful to talk with a “teshuvah buddy” about what you write. If you get overwhelmed, stop and ask yourself: Reflecting on my answers so far, what is one step I might take, as we enter the New Year, to come closer to being the person I want to be? What help do I need to do that?

1. Acknowledgment: Which of your deeds during the past year do not speak to the best that is within you? What have you done in the past year that you regret?

You might consider your actions, including words, in relation to family members, friends, co-workers--whether in paid or volunteer work, people you interact with in public spaces such as a gym, store, or while driving, and choices you have made about issues of caring for the vulnerable and supporting justice, whether locally or more broadly. And, how about the ways you have treated and spoken to yourself? This is not a complete list but are some ideas to get you started.

Remember, we are all imperfect, and bringing self-awareness, compassion, and humility to this process is the first step towards change and the self-transformation it can help create.



How Will You Make Teshuvah?

2. Starting to Change: Having acknowledged the actions and words you regret, do you have ideas about what may be behind these choices? Fear, lack of knowledge, habit, anger, wanting to fit in... there are many possibilities. If you can identify any reasons for your behavior, this may give you ideas about what you may need to help you change. Consider what learning, support, or practices might make it more possible for you to start to change. If you get stuck, talk with someone you trust. Note all your ideas, even if you're not sure they are "right." Then choose one small step you will take to try one of them. Your job will be to learn from that experience, then choose another small step, and so on.



How Will You Make Teshuvah?

3. Repair: What actions could you take to repair the damage done to others, the world, or yourself? Do you have ways to know those actions will meet *their* needs?

What help or support might you need to take those actions?

In the case of harms that cannot be repaired directly, examine your actions, perhaps with others, to explore ways you can take positive steps towards repair that is related to the original harm. What ideas did you come up with? What help or support might you need to take those actions?



How Will You Make Teshuvah?

4. Apology: After you have acknowledged misdeeds, started doing the work necessary to become a better person, made restitution and accepted whatever consequences results from those deeds, only then can you apologize.

To whom might you need to apologize? Have you written above some of the steps to take to move towards that goal?



How Will You Make Teshuvah?

5. Making Different Choices: In what situations can you imagine yourself that would provide the opportunity for you to cause harm like you have in the past? Have you written above steps to take to help prevent that from happening, knowing that this is a process, and it will likely take time and practice to reach that goal?

