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## Starting Over: The High Holy Days

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Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur are our annual opportunities to examine our lives and start fresh. In this class, we'll learn how the High Holy Days can help you repair relationships, gain new perspective, and return to the best in you.



# Season of Awe

## ELUL

40 DAYS UNTIL YOM KIPPUR

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### Heshbon ha-Nefesh

## ROSH HA-SHANAH

10 DAYS UNTIL YOM KIPPUR

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### Day 1

### Day 2

# ASERET YEMEI TESHUVAH

10 DAYS OF REPENTANCE

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## Tashlikh

# YOM KIPPUR

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## Kol Nidre

## Yom Kippur Day

## Neilah

# Mishneh Torah

## Laws of Teshuvah

### 2:1

What is complete teshuvah? A person who confronts the same situation in which he sinned when he has the potential to commit the sin again and, nevertheless, refrains and does not commit it because he has resolved to live differently and not because he is being watched or is physically unable.

### 2:3

Anyone who verbalizes their confession aloud without resolving in their heart to change their ways can be compared to a person who immerses himself in a mikvah while holding the carcass of a slimy lizard in his hand.

### 2:9a

Teshuvah and Yom Kippur only atone for sins between people and God (*bein adam l'Makom*); for example, if a person ate a forbidden food or engaged in work on Shabbat, and the like. However, sins between human beings (*bein adam l'havero*); for example, someone who injures someone, curses at someone, steals from him, or the like will not be forgiven until he seeks forgiveness from the person he harmed and makes the necessary restitution.

### 2:9b

If one makes restitution and approaches another to ask forgiveness, and the offended party will not forgive, he should bring a group of three of his friends and approach him again. If the offended person is still not appeased, he should return a second and a third time. If the person continues to refuse to grant forgiveness, he may leave him alone and the person who refuses to forgive is the one considered the sinner.

### 2:10

It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and refuse to be appeased. Rather, one should be easily pacified, but hard to anger. When the person who wronged you asks for forgiveness, you should forgive him with a complete heart and a willing spirit. Even if he wronged you severely, you should not seek revenge or bear a grudge.

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Rabbi Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), often referred to as Rambam, was the greatest legal scholar and philosopher of medieval Judaism. His legal treatise, the Mishneh Torah, was the first work to systematically compile all of rabbinic law into one code. His philosophic work, the Guide for the Perplexed, is considered one of the greatest works of philosophy ever written for its attempt to integrate religion, logic, and science.

# Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

By Portia Nelson

I

I walk down the street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I fall in.  
I am lost ... I am helpless.  
It isn't my fault.  
It takes me forever to find a way out.

II

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I pretend I don't see it.  
I fall in again.  
I can't believe I am in the same place  
but, it isn't my fault.  
It still takes a long time to get out.

III

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I see it is there.  
I still fall in ... it's a habit.  
My eyes are open.  
I know where I am.  
It is my fault.  
I get out immediately.

IV

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I walk around it.

V

I walk down another street.

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Portia Nelson (1920-2001) was an author, singer, composer, lyricist, painter, photographer, and actress. She appeared in such films as *The Sound of Music*, *Dr. Dolittle*, *The Trouble with Angels*, and *The Other*, and she starred on the television soap opera *All My Children*. Nelson wrote, directed, and performed a musical based on *There's a Hole in My Sidewalk*.

# Everyday Teshuvah

## Talmud, Megillah 28a

Rabbi Nehunya said: "I never allow resentment caused by my colleagues' actions to go up with me upon my bed." Mar Zutra had the practice of when he would go to bed at night, he would first say: "I hereby forgive anyone who has angered me."

### The Bedtime Sh'ma

Master of the Universe,  
 I forgive and pardon anyone who has angered or mocked me,  
 or sinned against me,  
 either my body or my property,  
 either my honor or anything that is mine, either by accident or willingly,  
 either unintentionally or intentionally, either by word or by act,  
 either in this lifetime or in any other lifetime.  
 All of this I forgive,  
 and let no one be punished on my account.  
 May it be your will, Adonai, my God and God of my ancestors, that I don't sin anymore.  
 And any sin that I sinned before you, erase it with your great compassion.

Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.

## Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (2003)

Forgiveness is more than a technique of conflict resolution. It is a stunningly original strategy. In a world without forgiveness, evil begets evil, harm begets harm, and there is no way short of exhaustion or forgetfulness of breaking the sequence. Forgiveness breaks the chain; it introduces into the logic of interpersonal encounter the unpredictability of grace.

Forgiveness means that we are not destined to endlessly replay the grievances of yesterday. It is the ability to live with the past without being held captive by the past. It would not be an exaggeration to say that forgiveness is the most compelling testimony to human freedom.



**My definition of teshuvah:**

**Something I find empowering about teshuvah:**

**Something I find difficult about teshuvah:**

# Rosh Ha-Shanah

## Why we celebrate:

Rosh Ha-Shanah marks the Jewish New Year, celebrated over two days in the Fall. It is a time for celebrating a new beginning, for contemplating the events of the past year, and for resolving to make a change.

## How we celebrate:

### Hearing the Shofar

The shofar, or ram's horn, is blown throughout the High Holy Day season. The cry of the shofar is meant to arouse one to spiritual wakefulness and to stir the desire to do teshuvah. It is blown on each of the days of Elul leading up to the High Holy Days, one hundred times on Rosh Ha-Shanah, and at the close of Yom Kippur services.

### Festive Meals

The New Year is a time for celebration, something that for Jews is inevitably linked to food. Meals on Rosh Ha-Shanah often feature sweet foods, expressing our hope for a sweet new year. They may also involve other symbolic foods, as detailed to the right.

### Tashlikh

A folk ritual, practiced between Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur, that involves going to a body of water and casting either bread crumbs or something similar onto the water as a way of symbolically "throwing away" our sins from the past year.

### Symbolic Foods for Rosh Ha-Shanah

For Ashkenazi Jews, the primary symbolic food of Rosh Ha-Shanah is apples dipped in honey, a way of wishing for a sweet new year.

Before eating apples and honey, say the following blessings:

*Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha'olam borei pri ha-eitz.*

*Yehi ratzon lifanecha, Adonai Eloheinu, v'Elohai avoteinu, she'te'hadesh aleinu shanah tovah u'metukah.*

There are many other symbolic foods that Sephardic Jews eat on Rosh Ha-Shanah. Here are a few of them:

- Beets
- Dates
- Fish or sheep heads
- Gourds
- Leeks
- Peas
- Pomegranates



# Yom Kippur

## Why we celebrate:

Yes, celebrate! For the Rabbis of the Talmud, Yom Kippur was among the most joyful days of the year. What began as a ceremony for the cleansing of the Temple became an opportunity for each individual to purify their soul. What could be better than a clean slate for a new year?

## How we celebrate:

### Fasting

Fasting is the best known ritual of Yom Kippur, a spiritual practice meant to focus the mind on the work of spiritual purification rather than physical pleasure. The six prohibitions of Yom Kippur are listed to the right.

### Teshuvah

The primary work of Yom Kippur is the practice of teshuvah, of restoring our relationships with other people and with God by acknowledging our past failures and resolving to change our actions in the future. The liturgy of Yom Kippur includes two confessional prayers, one short and one long, which are each repeated five times during the day. We stand together, beat our chests, and communally confess our sins.

### White Clothing

Many people have the custom of wearing white clothing on Yom Kippur as a symbol of purity. Some people wear a kittel, a white robe with no pockets that resembles the burial shroud; it is worn by observant Jews as a mark of humility and a recognition of mortality.

### The Six Prohibitions of Yom Kippur

The Torah instructs us to “afflict our souls” on Yom Kippur in order to atone for our sins in the previous year.

The Rabbis of the Talmud clarify that there are six things that we abstain from on Yom Kippur in order to fulfill this Biblical mandate:

1. Eating
2. Drinking
3. Sex
4. Bathing
5. Wearing makeup
6. Wearing leather shoes

# Selections from the High Holy Day Liturgy

## Kol Nidre

The famous declaration chanted on Erev Yom Kippur, in which we pray to be released from promises made in the previous year that we honestly meant but were unable to fulfill.

All vows, oaths and promises which we made to God,  
And were not able to fulfill —  
From last Yom Kippur to this Yom Kippur —  
May all such vows be annulled, may they be void and without effect.

## Avinu Malkeynu

A prayer that asks God, as our Parent and Ruler, to show us compassion and grant us forgiveness. The majestic tune to which its last lines are sung is one of the musical highlights of the Jewish year.

Our Father, our Ruler,  
Have mercy on us and answer us,  
Even though we are without merit.  
Deal with us with charity and compassion,  
And save us!

## Ashamnu/Al Chet

The communal confessions of sin, in which we stand as one community and beat our chests while recounting our misdeeds.

We have trespassed, we have dealt treacherously,  
We have stolen, we have slandered,  
We have sinned, we have done wrong,  
We have been arrogant, we have done violence, we have been dishonest ...

## Unetaneh Tokef

A medieval prayer, of unknown authorship, recited in the Musaf Service of both Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur. Unetaneh Tokef affirms our own mortality, asking, “Who shall live and who shall die?” In it, we state that through *teshuvah* (repentance), *tefilah* (prayer), and *tzedakah* (acts of justice) we can transform our destiny and give meaning to our lives.

We shall ascribe holiness to this day, for it is awesome and terrifying. Your kingship is exalted upon it. Your throne is established in mercy. You are enthroned upon it in truth. You are the judge, the exhorter, the all-knowing, the witness. You are the One who inscribes and seals, remembering all that is forgotten. You open the book of remembrance, which speaks for itself, and the signature of each person is found there.

The great shofar is sounded. A still small voice is heard. The angels are dismayed, they are seized by fear and trembling as they proclaim: Behold the Day of Judgment! For all the hosts of heaven are brought for judgment, they shall not be innocent in Your eyes. All creatures shall parade before You as a troop. As a shepherd herds his flock, causing his sheep to pass beneath his staff, so do You count and record all the souls of the living, decreeing the length of their days, inscribing their judgment.

**On Rosh Ha-Shanah it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed:**

How many shall pass away and how many shall be born? Who shall live and who shall die? Who shall reach the end of his days and who shall not? Who shall perish by water and who by fire? Who by sword and who by wild beast? Who by famine and who by thirst? Who by earthquake and who by plague? Who by strangulation and who by stoning? Who shall have rest and who shall wander? Who shall be at peace and who

shall be pursued? Who shall be at rest and who shall be tormented? Who shall be exalted and who shall be brought low? Who shall become rich and who shall be impoverished?

**But repentance (*teshuvah*), prayer (*tefilah*), and righteousness (*tzedaka*) transform the severe decree.**

You are our Creator and You understand our inclination, for we are but flesh and blood. The origin of man is dust, his end is dust. He earns his bread by exertion and is like a broken shard, like dry grass, like a withered flower, like a passing shadow and a vanishing cloud, like a breeze that blows away and dust that scatters, like a dream that fades. But You are Sovereign, God who lives for all eternity!

# Change: 10 Ways to Get More from the High Holy Days

- **Participate in Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur services**

We pack the year's most angelic melodies, inspiring sermons, and intense reflection into these powerful days. Get your tickets early; High Holy Day services are often standing-room only.
- **Fast on Yom Kippur**

This Biblical method for inspiring repentance isn't easy; however, refraining from these necessities allows us to turn inward and focus on transforming our lives.
- **Send Rosh Ha-Shanah cards**

Wish people a "*L'Shanah Tovah*" (Happy New Year!) and let them know that they are important to you by sending New Year's cards to friends and family.
- **Participate in Tashlikh**

Head down to the riverside (or a lake, duck pond, ocean, or golf course water trap) and toss bread crumbs into the water as a way of symbolically casting away your sins.
- **Engage in a thorough heshbon ha-nefesh**

Take a good, hard look at yourself — an "accounting for your soul" — and examine your ambitions, desires, strengths, and faults. The first step to changing is admitting you're not perfect — no matter what your mother says.
- **Reach out during the Aseret Y'mei Teshuvah**

"I'm sorry" and "I forgive you" are two of the hardest, and most redemptive, sentences in the English language. Take the risk — write a letter, pick up the phone, meet for coffee. It's time.
- **Read about the High Holy Days during the month of Elul**

Reading books about these days in advance is a great way of getting into the right mindset. We recommend *Entering the High Holy Days* by Reuven Hammer and *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared* by Alan Lew.
- **Purchase, and mark-up, your own machzor**

Before a concert, a musician reads the score, and before a play, an actor reads the script. The experience of the High Holy Days is infinitely richer if you have spent time with the prayerbook, the *machzor*, ahead of time.
- **Volunteer in your synagogue for High Holy Days**

Some of us have a little too much *shpilkes* (energy) to sit for hours at a time. Volunteer to be an usher or ticket taker and help others while giving yourself a break.
- **Attend Selichot**

On the Saturday night before Rosh Hashanah, Jews traditionally gather and start ushering in the High Holy Day season with familiar melodies and beautiful prayers.

# Additional Readings

## Books

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The best way to familiarize yourself with the liturgy of the High Holy Days is to purchase a copy of the machzor used at the synagogue you attend and spend time reading through it (together with Reuven Hammer's book, below), marking it up, and making it yours. Some recommended machzorim are:

- *Mahzor Lev Shalem* (Conservative)
  - *Koren Sacks Rosh Ha-Shanah & Yom Kippur Machzor* (Orthodox)
  - *Days of Awe: The Velveteen Rabbi's Machzor* (Renewal)
  - *On Wings of Awe* (Reform)
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- Reuven Hammer, *Entering the High Holy Days*  
This work provides a detailed, yet accessible, introduction to the history, development, and customs of the High Holy Days liturgy. We highly recommend reading this book together with your machzor.
  - Alan Lew, *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*  
Drawing on both Jewish and Buddhist teaching, this is a powerful guide to the emotional, spiritual, physical, and metaphysical change possible with the High Holy Days.
  - Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness*  
Imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, Wiesenthal was asked to hear the death-bed confession of a dying SS officer and to offer forgiveness. In this work, fifty-three diverse thinkers, scholars, and activists seek to answer Wiesenthal's question: "What would you have done?"
  - S.Y. Agnon, *Days of Awe: A Treasury of Wisdom, Repentance, and Renewal on the High Holidays*  
A collection of short, moving tales about Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur. Put it in your tallit bag and pull it out whenever your attention starts to drift in services.