

# **40**Days of T'shuvah

**A Guide and Journal to Prepare for the High Holy Days 5781**

**by Rabbi Jeffrey Goldwasser**



## Introduction

This packet, *40 Days of T'shuvah*, is a series of short daily reflections and teachings to help you prepare for the High Holy Days. It is also a daily journal for you to write down your own thoughts and reflections to help you in the process of *t'shuvah* – making changes in your life for the better, returning to God, and repentance. You can use it as you have received it, as an electronic file on your computer or mobile device, or you can print it out as a physical journal to write in every day.

The first reflection is scheduled for Thursday, August 20. That is *Rosh Chodesh Elul*, the beginning of the Hebrew month of Elul, a minor holiday that is a traditional day to begin the process of *t'shuvah* in earnest. There is a reflection for every day through Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It is recommended that you make a set time during the day to read and reflect on the entry and to write your brief response. It should take no more than five to fifteen minutes a day. Many people find that the morning is the best time for this.

Remember that a day in the Jewish calendar begins and ends at sunset. If you choose to do this practice at night, do it on the date before the secular date at the top of each page.

You may find that the reflections and written responses are very personal. You don't need to share what you have written with anyone. Think of this packet as you would think of a diary, a place to write personal reflection, a book to be kept in a private place, something for you alone.

The intention of the questions and suggested practices in this packet are to gently guide you toward deeper understanding of yourself and to motivate you toward making positive changes to help you find deeper happiness. It is not, by any means, meant as a substitute for therapy. If you find the questions and practices are bringing up painful or disquieting thoughts or emotions, please consider seeking the help of a qualified professional. I am always available to make references.

You will notice that there are only three lines for your written responses on each day. This is by design. You don't need to write an essay. It is sufficient to jot down a few ideas that will help you to solidify your thoughts and intentions, and to give you a way to remember your responses when you review your progress every ten days.

What should you do if you forget a day or fall behind? Just continue with the page for the present day. If you want to go back to read reflections for days you missed, you certainly may do so, but don't allow that to become a hindrance to continuing. The most important thing is to make some progress right now – in the present moment. You will have your whole life ahead of you to do more.

May you be written and sealed for a good year!  
Rabbi Jeffrey Goldwasser

## DAY 1

Thursday, August 20, 2020

Thirtieth Day of Av 5780

Rosh Chodesh Elul

The first day of every month in the Hebrew calendar is a minor holiday called *Rosh Chodesh*, literally, “the head of the month.” Because the Hebrew calendar is based on lunar cycles, and because one lunar cycle is approximately 29-1/2 days, each Hebrew month has either 29 or 30 days. (There are no half days!) When a month has 30 days, we celebrate a new month on the 30th day and also on the next day, the first day of the next month. That is why today, the 30th day of the month of Av, is celebrated as the first day of *Rosh Chodesh* for the month of Elul.

The month of Elul is regarded in Jewish tradition as the beginning of the process of *t’shuvah*, the repentance that we strive to achieve as we approach the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Medieval rabbis observed that the letters that spell *Elul* (אלול) stand for the Hebrew phrase “*Ani l’dodi v’dodi li*,” “I am my beloved and my beloved is mine.” The phrase is a quote from the biblical book Song of Songs (chapter 6, verse 3) and is understood in Jewish tradition as a statement about the relationship between God and the Jewish people. The rabbis also noted that the last letter of the word *Elul* in Hebrew is *lamed*, which has the numerical value of forty. From this, they stated that during the forty days that begin with *Rosh Chodesh Elul* and end with Yom Kippur, people should “bring their hearts near to their beloved God in *t’shuvah* knowing that God, in return, will accept their *t’shuvah* with love” (Mishnah Berurah 581).

*Practice for this day:*

On this minor holiday of *Rosh Chodesh Elul*, take some time to think of all the ways that love touches your life. Think about the people you love and the people who love you. Feel your heart swell with happiness and love as you think about them. Intentionally feel yourself wish goodness and wellbeing to the people you love; imagine how they, too, wish goodness and wellbeing upon you. Hold that feeling a few minutes and allow it to sink into every part of your mind, feel it physically in every corner of your body. Allow yourself to be comforted by the feeling of loving and being loved.

Let this feeling – and let the past and present loving relationships in your life – be the source of energy that will power you through the next forty days until Yom Kippur. As you work to seek forgiveness, make changes in yourself, and commit to being a better person, let this love sustain you and become your motivation to transform yourself.

Write down below the most important people in your life whom you love and who love you:

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**DAY 2**  
**Friday, August 21, 2020**  
**First Day of Elul 5780**  
**Rosh Chodesh Elul**

In the story of the giving of the Ten Commandments, the Israelites all stand at the base of Mount Sinai and hear God’s voice from the mountaintop declare, “I am Adonai your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods beside Me” (Exodus 20:2-3). It is a foundational moment in the Jewish relationship with God.

We describe that relationship as a covenant – a two-way agreement. God pledges devotion to us and we pledge our devotion to God. The Ten Commandments and the Torah given at Mount Sinai are the foundation of that agreement. We strive to live up to our end of the deal by trying to live by God’s commandments and by being the best people we can be.

However, because we are human, we make mistakes. There are many different kinds of mistakes, but the most common Hebrew word for this kind of human failing is “*cheit*.” Fittingly, the word comes from a root that means “to miss the target.” When we make a mistake in our relationship with God, it is compared to an archer missing the bullseye. It is an error. It is something we can make up for by trying harder and learning to do better.

In English, we usually translate the word *cheit* as “sin,” and that is sometimes a problem. In English, “sin” sounds like something that requires a punishment, an offense that makes God angry. In Hebrew, not every *cheit* rises to that level. *T’shuvah* is the process for correcting our mistakes. It is not about feeling guilty for horrible things we have done that make God want to punish us. *T’shuvah* is about correcting our mistakes and renewing our covenant with God.

*Practice for this day:*

Think about some of the recent mistakes you may have made in life that make you feel badly – times when you hurt someone’s feelings or times when you were less than forthright. How would it feel if you could feel totally and completely forgiven for those mistakes? How would it feel if you were entirely forgiven for every mistake you had made in your life? That is what *t’shuvah* is about. It’s about releasing yourself from guilt and hard feelings you direct against yourself. It’s about correcting your tendencies to make the same mistakes over and over again. It’s about making a mid-flight course correction in your life that gets you going in the right direction.

Write a few words about the course corrections you would like to make in life and the feeling of forgiveness you would like to feel.

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**Day 3**  
**Saturday, August 22, 2020**  
**Second Day of Elul 5780**  
***Shabbat Shoftim***

Today is Shabbat, the most holy day in Jewish tradition. It is our day of rest and our day of joyfully feeling God’s presence all around us.

This particular Shabbat is called *Shabbat Shoftim* for the Torah portion we read today. The portion includes laws about warfare. One of the laws prohibits an attacking army from destroying their enemy’s fruit trees. The army is allowed to chop down other trees to build weapons to attack the city, but not the fruit trees. The Torah asks the rhetorical question, “Is a tree of the field a human being who can withdraw from you into the besieged city?” (Deuteronomy 20:19).

According to medieval Jewish commentators, this verse teaches us to have compassion for trees and the natural world. Under a principle called *Bal Tashchit*, (“You shall not destroy”), we are forbidden from the unnecessary destruction of natural resources. We are taught to treat the world with compassion and love. That commandment, of course, includes the requirement to treat other human beings lovingly, and also to treat ourselves lovingly. We are all a part of the natural world.

*Practice for this day:*

Take some time to think about the ways you treat the natural world around you. In what ways do you treat the world kindly by not wasting natural resources like water and energy? How do you love the earth by practicing recycling to make sure that resources are given another chance to be useful, instead of just being buried in a landfill? What other things could you do to treat nature with compassion?

Decide on one resolution for loving nature and treating it well. It could be something you have not done up until now that you would like to resolve to do from now on. Or, it could be something harmful you have done that you would like to resolve *not* to do again. Write down your resolution.

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**DAY 4**

**Sunday, August 23, 2020**

**Third Day of Elul 5780**

The Hebrew word “*t’shuvah*,” which we usually translate as “repentance” actually comes from a Hebrew root that means “turn” or “return.” To “make *t’shuvah*” really means to return back to the path that you intend to walk in life. It does not mean that you have to become a different person (as if that were possible). Doing *t’shuvah* means finding a way to return to being yourself.

We all get derailed in life sometimes and find that we have become a different person from the person we would like to be. *T’shuvah* is our invitation to make a course correction in life, to *turn*, and to *return* to being the person we intend to be.

*Practice for this day:*

Think about the words that describe the fundamental qualities that describe who you really are. Let these be words that describe your deep nature – not the things you have achieved, the skills you have mastered, or the titles you have earned – but the words that describe who you have always been. For example, you may remember things that people have told you about yourself – times when people told you that you were “kind,” “energetic,” or “inquisitive.” Find the words that describe you at your best, and the things you like about yourself at your best, and write them.

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## DAY 5

Monday, August 24, 2020

Fourth Day of Elul 5780

In the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis, there is a moment when Joseph's half-brothers appeared before him without recognizing him. They came to Egypt to ask for food to survive a famine, so they were desperate and hungry. They did not know that the high Egyptian official they had to ask was actually the half-brother they had sold into slavery many years before.

At first, Joseph taunted his half-brothers. He seemed to want revenge for their past cruelty to him. He told them that he would not give them any more food until they brought their youngest sibling, Benjamin, to him. (Benjamin was Joseph's only full brother, the one he and his father, Jacob, loved the most, and the only one who was not part of selling Joseph into slavery). When the brothers, at last, brought Benjamin to Joseph, he took the boy as a captive and told the others that he would not allow them to take Benjamin back to their father, Jacob.

In response, one of Joseph's half-brothers, Judah, spoke in a way that broke Joseph's heart. He told Joseph that Benjamin was the only son their father had left from Rachel, the love of his life who died while giving birth to Benjamin. Rachel's only other son, Judah explained, had died many years earlier. (Joseph, of course, knew that this other son, the one who supposedly had died, was actually himself.) Judah told Joseph that if he and his brothers returned home without Benjamin, it would cause Jacob to die of grief. Joseph was so moved by Judah's speech that he cried out and revealed his true identity and told the brothers that he forgave them and would not punish them for selling him into slavery.

In the story, we see Joseph make the transition from anger and feelings of revenge and hurt to compassion and feelings of forgiveness. The story is one of the models used by the rabbis to describe the experience of *t'shuvah*. Part of repentance is the experience of letting go of past pain and resentment. It is the experience of allowing love to wash away hurt feelings, to allow forgiveness to overcome hatred. (Note: This can be very difficult for people who carry deep wounds from past abuse and cruelty. If you struggle with this, consider seeking help from a professional.)

*Practice for this day:*

Think of a moment in your life when you let go of anger to forgive someone who had hurt you. For now, don't think about a *really big* experience. Think of something small and specific that reminds you of how Joseph let go of anger and moved toward forgiveness.

Describe it briefly below:

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## DAY 6

Tuesday, August 25, 2020

Fifth Day of Elul 5780

The Talmud teaches: “The person who has made *t’shuvah* stands in a place where not even a purely righteous person can stand” (B. Berachot 34b). The statement is understood to mean that *t’shuvah* not only cleanses a person of sin, it actually places that person above those who have never sinned at all. It is one of Jewish tradition’s most paradoxical statements about repentance, and it is one of the most difficult for us to believe. Yet, it is essential.

Why do we not believe the statement? It is because we learn from a young age that the mistakes we make leave a permanent mark on us. When we feel guilty or ashamed of things we have done wrong, we tend to believe that there is an accuser who will always remember our mistakes and bring it as evidence against us. For many of us, the accuser we imagine is actually ourselves. We ourselves are the person whose accusations we fear the most.

Jewish tradition wisely understands how unhealthy this is. We will never be able to grow and become better people if we can never forgive ourselves, if we can never believe that we can be better. If we believe that we are forever guilty, we will also believe that trying to change is futile. We will believe that we are somehow bad by our nature.

Do you see how counterproductive this belief is? If you think that you cannot improve yourself because you believe that your past wrongs make it impossible for you to be better, then what chance do you have? What chance does anyone have? If you believe that only a “perfectly righteous person” is deserving of being a good person, then no one would ever improve, find forgiveness, or believe themselves to be good. No one would ever be good.

You have to believe that it is possible for human beings to learn from their mistakes, find forgiveness, and become better. Not only that, you also have to believe that once you have gone through this experience of changing, you will be better than you were before because the experience will have taught you how to change. You will be standing in a better place.

*Practice for this day:*

Think of a past mistake in your life, even one from long ago, that makes you feel guilty to this day. In your mind, weigh the pros and cons of continuing to feel guilty. What benefit do you get from your feelings of guilt? How do your feelings of inadequacy and shame hold you down? How would you benefit if you were able to release your guilty feelings and feel forgiven? What benefit would you get from feeling that you had overcome your past mistake?

Write down your past mistake and whether you want to feel forgiven:

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## DAY 7

Wednesday, August 26, 2020

Sixth Day of Elul 5780

The first Jewish prayer that most of us learn is the *Shema*. The six Hebrew words are *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*, “Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.”

We often understand that final word, “One,” as a statement that there are no other gods. We hear it as a statement of monotheism and a rejection of the belief in many gods. But Jewish tradition gives an even deeper meaning to that word, “One.”

If you think about it, the *Shema* cannot possibly be only about there not being any other gods. If it were, it would have said, “Adonai is the only one,” instead of saying, “Adonai is One.” (In Hebrew, this would be *rak Adonai* instead of *Adonai Echad*.)

What the *Shema* really means when it says, “Adonai is One,” is that God is the unity *par excellence*, the perfect unity that makes everything that exists into One. This is the deep meaning of the *Shema* and one of the most essential teachings of Judaism. We and everything that exists are all a part of God.

What does that mean for making *t’shuvah*? If the deepest truth of your existence is that you are a part of God, then God cannot possibly reject you. Instead, God yearns for you. God knows this deep truth that you are an essential part of God and the universe as a whole. God wants you to have this awareness, too. God wants you to *return* to God, which is just another way of saying that God wants you to return to yourself. The process of returning, which we call *t’shuvah*, requires work and it requires judgment, but it is not about decreeing yourself to be guilty or innocent. Rather it is about finding your way back home to God, which is really the only place you have ever been.

*Practice for this day:*

Recite the *Shema* out loud and understand it as a statement about unity. Feel it as an affirmation of your unity with God. Repeat saying it as many times as you need to feel yourself to be a part of God.

Write down how this experience feels. What new insights does it give you about the task of forgiveness and personal change for the better?

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## DAY 8

Thursday, August 27, 2020

Seventh Day of Elul 5780

In the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, God forbade the first two human beings from eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Despite God's warning, Adam and Eve ate the fruit. Feeling ashamed, they tried to hide from God. God called out to them and says, *Ayeka?*, literally, "Where are you?"

Now, when we think about this story, we notice that it is impossible that God did not know the answer to the question. Of course God knew where they were. God is God. So, why did God have to ask?

One answer is that God was not asking because God did not know. God was asking because Adam and Eve did not know. They didn't know where they were. They did not even know who they were. By doing something they knew they were not supposed to do, they lost themselves. They became different than they had been and they were disoriented, unsure about how to get back to where they were before.

This is another moment of *t'shuvah*. Whenever our lives go off track, whenever we behave in ways that are different from the person we want to be, we get lost. God is in the voice that calls us back by asking, "Where are you?" That voice helps us to recognize that we are lost, and helps us find our way back to ourselves. That is *t'shuvah*.

*Practice for this day:*

Ask yourself the primal question, "Where am I?" If you want, you can answer, "I'm at home in Rhode Island, of course!" but you know that there is a deeper answer. Where are you in your life? Right now, are you the person you want to be? In what ways have you gotten off course? If there is something in your life that is off kilter, that is keeping you from being the person you want to be, name it.

Write down, very briefly, one to three ways in which your life is on the wrong course that you would like to correct.

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## DAY 9

Friday, August 28, 2020

Eighth Day of Elul 5780

Previously, we considered the story of Joseph and his brothers as a model for *t'shuvah*. That story (Genesis chapters 37-50) contains many lessons about how people get off track in life and how they can return. Today, we'll consider another.

Deception is a recurring theme in the story of Joseph. Jacob's sons deceived their father when they showed him Joseph's blood-stained coat and allowed Jacob to believe that Joseph was dead. Judah deceived Tamar when he told her that he would allow her to marry his son Shelah. Joseph deceived his brothers the entire time they appeared before him by hiding his true identity.

In all these cases, deception actually resulted from self-deception. The brothers were driven to deceive Jacob because of their unacknowledged shame of feeling unloved by him. Judah denied his fear of losing his son by punishing his daughter-in-law, Tamar. Joseph deceived himself into believing that he did not need the love of his family.

We human beings are skilled at self-deception. We bury our feelings and pretend that we do not need other people or care about their feelings. Self-deception is what we do when we are too angry, ashamed or scared to see ourselves. Ironically and tragically, self-deception only makes us feel worse and propels us into a spiral of lack of self-respect or feeling that we are an imposter.

This is one of the greatest obstacles to *t'shuvah*. If we cannot admit our feelings and our habits to ourselves, we are unlikely to feel motivated to improve. Overcoming self-deception is hard work. It requires us to lower the guard of our ego and to look at ourselves honestly. It takes time, courage, patience and self-forgiveness.

*Practice for this day:*

Have a conversation with yourself. Talk to yourself out loud about who you are and the things about yourself that you would like to improve. Notice the moments that make you feel uncomfortable, ashamed, defensive, or sad. Speaking out loud to yourself may feel embarrassing or awkward, but it really helps. This is very hard work. Practice kindness and gentleness with yourself. If thoughts become too painful, take a break and remember the things you like about yourself, too.

Write down some brief notes about your observations. What positive truths about yourself will help you to better accept yourself as you are?

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## DAY 10

Saturday, August 29, 2020

Ninth Day of Elul 5780

*Shabbat Ki Teitzei*

Today is Shabbat, the most holy day in Jewish tradition. It is our day of rest and our day of joyfully feeling God's presence all around us.

This particular Shabbat is called *Shabbat Ki Teitzei* for the Torah portion we read today. Like last week, this week's Torah portion focuses on laws of warfare. In one verse, the Torah states, "When you go out to war against your enemies, and Adonai your God will deliver them into your power, and you take some of them captive..." (Deuteronomy 21:10).

Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the 18th-century founder of Chasidism known as the Baal Shem Tov, personalized this verse into a lesson about *t'shuvah*. He said that in life we all must do battle with our own *yetzer ha-ra*, "the evil inclination" that leads us away from doing the right thing. When we join this battle, we should know that "Adonai your God will deliver it into your power," that is, the Torah promises that we will be victorious in overcoming our own baser impulses when we truly choose to struggle with them. But, not only that, the Baal Shem Tov also teaches that we will "take it captive." He explains that this means that we will be able to "harness the power of the *yetzer ha-ra* to the service of God."

What does that mean? How can a person use her or his evil inclination to do good? This is one of the great insights of rabbinic Judaism into the human psyche.

You see, the *yetzer ha-ra* may be the part of our minds that responds to egotism, selfishness, greed, and eagerness to feed our cravings, but that does not make it all bad. Egotism can lead us astray, but it also can lead us to self-preservation, industriousness, creativity and ambition to do good. Judaism does not teach that we must all become self-denying monks, renouncing all comfort and pleasure. Not at all. Jewish teaching asks us, rather, to direct our desires and ambitions toward doing good for ourselves, for society, and for the world.

*Practice for this day:*

Consider the qualities you possess that can be used for both good or bad. Are you creative? Ambitious? Determined? Sensuous? Extravagant? Think about the times one or more of these qualities has helped you do good for others and for yourself. Think also of times when one or more of these qualities have led you into behavior you regret or that proved harmful. What choices can you make to avoid the negative consequences of your strongest personality traits? What choices can you make to use your strongest personality traits to turn you in the direction of improvement and benefit? Note these here:

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**DAY 11**  
**Sunday, August 30, 2020**  
**Tenth Day of Elul 5780**

We have completed ten days of our forty-day journey toward *t'shuvah*. It is a good time to review the work you have done to get to this point and to set your sights on where you wish to go.

*Practice for this day:*

Review the teachings and your responses to the practices from the first ten days. If you have not read or completed the practices for some of the days up to this point, or for any of them, do not become discouraged. *T'shuvah* is a lifelong process. There are many opportunities to begin again. There is no better time to start than right now.

As you look over the teachings, are there any ideas or responses that seem particularly powerful to you? Are there any ideas or feelings you particularly want to remember? Are there any thoughts you have written that you now wish to revise?

Jot down your thoughts here:

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As we continue the journey toward *t'shuvah*, do you wish to make any commitments to goals you would like to achieve by Yom Kippur or beyond?

Jot down your thoughts here:

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**DAY 12**  
**Monday, August 31, 2020**  
**Eleventh Day of Elul 5780**

The Talmud states, “For transgressions between a person and God, Yom Kippur atones; but for transgressions between one person and another, Yom Kippur does not atone until the person appeases the other” (B. Yoma 85a).

This teaching means that no amount of praying and appealing to God will help you be forgiven for the harm you have done to another person until you approach that person with a sincere apology and ask that person to forgive you. For many people, this is the hardest part of *t’shuvah*. We are genuinely frightened of what will happen if we confess our mistakes and hurtful actions to the people they hurt. We are terrified of the response we may get if we ask to be forgiven.

This is why it is so important to accept apologies. If a person offers a sincere apology for a specific hurt to you, you should accept it. It can be difficult, but it is the right thing to do.

People often ask: What if the person I hurt refuses to accept my apology? What if the person also hurt me and doesn’t admit it? What if it was so long ago that they have forgotten? What if my confession will only reignite old hurts and bad feelings? What if the person I hurt has died?

The answers to all these questions are the same. You do the best you can. Tell the person what you did, accept responsibility, say you will not do it again, apologize and ask forgiveness. Express your feelings the best way you can in a way that does the least harm. You can even talk to dead people. Most people do at some point in their lives, even if they don’t expect an answer.

There is one important exception. You do not have to ask forgiveness of someone who abused you physically or emotionally. Seeking face-to-face forgiveness from a past or present abuser is not safe and will not be successful. If you have had such an experience, consider seeking the help of a professional.

*Practice for this day:*

To begin this difficult process, think of one to three times you hurt someone and wish to be forgiven. (It does not matter if it was recent or a long time ago; it does not matter if the person you hurt knows about it or not). At this point, you are just naming the hurt you did. That, by itself is a big positive step. Later, you will create a plan to apologize and ask forgiveness.

Write down the hurt you caused. Say it out loud.

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Take note of how it feels to say this.

**DAY 13**  
**Tuesday, September 1, 2020**  
**Twelfth Day of Elul 5780**

The Bible’s psalms were written thousands of years ago, but they capture timeless truths about human nature. One psalm teaches, “Give up anger, abandon fury, do not be vexed. It can only do harm” (Psalm 37:8).

Of course, no emotion is always bad. There are some things that should anger us, like injustice and intentional cruelty. But there are few emotional experiences that have greater potential for harm than unbridled anger.

Has this happened to you? You hear or experience something that triggers a reflex that causes your face to tighten and flush. Your heart begins to beat faster. At the same time, although you usually don’t notice it, your ability to process information and to monitor your behavior is compromised. You may have had this experience of “losing control,” speaking or acting hurtfully or aggressively in anger in ways that “only do harm.”

When people today talk about things they want to change about themselves, the one thing they say more than anything else is the ability to be patient and control anger. This may be because they recognize that anger has hurt their ability to form lasting, meaningful relationships. Being angry frequently, repeatedly, or constantly can also be deeply harmful to your physical health.

It is important to note that healthy expressions of anger are better than “bottling it up.” You can try saying (or even yelling), “I’m very angry right now! But this is not a good time to talk about it! I’m going to wait until I’m feeling calmer and we’ll talk then!” It may sound odd, but releasing anger in ways that express feelings without inflicting harm can save a relationship.

Unfortunately, there is no easy or simple solution to chronic, uncontrolled anger. Learning to “give up anger,” as the psalmist advises, requires hard work and a lot of self-forgiveness. Be patient and loving with yourself in learning to use time-outs, meditation, relaxation, humor, forgiveness, and even physical exercise (it really helps) to learn to release anger in healthy ways.

*Practice for this day:*

Recall a time when you were able to recover from feeling “out of control” with anger. What worked? Write down some notes about the strategies that work for you to release anger in ways that do not damage you and your relationships. Try practicing them when you notice yourself getting agitated, upset or angered.

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## DAY 14

Wednesday, September 2, 2020

Thirteenth Day of Elul 5780

The most famous commandment in the Hebrew Bible (apart from the Big Ten) is the commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). This Golden Rule is expressed in almost all religions, but we do not often consider how difficult it really is. It takes a lot of compassion to care about other people with the same intensity that you care about yourself.

So, in order to love others as you love yourself, first be willing to forgive yourself when you feel you have fallen short. Remember that it is hard. Give yourself a pat on the back for being a good friend, caring about people in need, and working to make the world a better place.

And also know this: You have to love yourself before you are able to love others. Note that the verse says, “Love your neighbor *as you love yourself*.” You can’t do it if you don’t love yourself first.

*Practice for this day:*

Here is a well-known exercise you can do to expand your compassion and caring for others. It’s called the “Loving-Kindness Meditation.” (Google it to find other versions).

Sit in a comfortable position. Breathe and relax. Think of a person who loves you very much. Keeping your eyes closed, imagine that person sitting in front of you sending you their love. Feel the warmth of that person’s love washing over you. Feel the happiness it brings you.

Now imagine other people who love you surrounding you. Feel them sending their love to you, too. Bathe yourself in the comfort, safety and wellbeing that their love brings.

Now remember that the person in front of you, and all the others who surround you, need and enjoy feeling your love as much as you need and enjoy feeling their love. Send your love back to them, one person at a time. Repeat this phrase over and over: “**May you be happy. May you be healthy. May you be free of pain.**” You can say the words out loud or in your mind.

After you’ve done this practice thinking about people you love, expand it to imagine other people you know, but with whom you do not have a loving relationship. Repeat for them the same three wishes for their happiness, health and comfort. Notice how it feels to do this.

Finally, expand the practice again by imagining the whole world and all living creatures. Repeat the same three wishes for the whole world. Notice how this feels and how your body and mind respond to it. Write down your impressions of the experience.

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**DAY 15**  
**Thursday, September 3, 2020**  
**Fourteenth Day of Elul 5780**

Asking forgiveness from people we have hurt is a central part of *t'shuvah*. It's a hard thing to do, but it is not an optional activity in preparing for the High Holy Days. Let's get started.

In our society, we often see people making apologies that aren't real apologies. You've probably experienced a non-apology or fake apology when someone says, "I'm sorry if you think I did something wrong," or, "I'm sorry for what I did, but what you did was worse." We need to do better than that. A real apology, from a Jewish perspective, is a sacred act. It repairs our relationship with someone we have hurt and it repairs our relationship with God.

The first step to a real apology is simply stating clearly and specifically what you did that was wrong. Here are some examples:

- "Yesterday when we were talking with other people, I told a story about you that I should have known would be embarrassing for you. That was wrong of me."
- "I promised you that I would call you when I know I'll be home late, but tonight I forgot and didn't call. I should have called you. It was wrong of me not to."
- "I owe you an apology because you asked me to turn in my work by Friday and I agreed that I would. Not only did I not give it to you, I didn't even tell you that I would be late. I should have turned it in on time, or at least explained to you why it would be late."

Why is it so hard to clearly state what we have done wrong when we apologize? Very simply, because we are embarrassed and we don't want to take responsibility for our actions. Our instinct is often to deny or deflect blame when we know we have done something wrong rather than take responsibility. Jewish ethics insist that we do the opposite; it insists that we own our behavior and admit it.

*Practice for this day:*

Think of a mistake or hurt that you have committed that you want to apologize for. (It's good to choose a small one. This isn't the time to confront a big, life-altering issue.) It should be something specific that you did and the apology should be directed to a specific person. Write down the words that you want to say to that person that express what you did wrong. Be as specific as possible.

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Try practicing saying it out loud.

**DAY 16**  
**Friday, September 4, 2020**  
**Fifteenth Day of Elul 5780**

Yesterday, we considered the first step of a good apology, stating what you did wrong. The second step is harder: expressing remorse.

Twenty years ago, there was a television show called *Allie McBeal* about a young attorney. There was a character on the show named Fish who repeatedly made fake apologies by saying, “My bad – bygones,” and walked away. The joke, of course, was that this was nothing like a real apology. Fish said nothing about how he felt about what he had done. He never promised not to do it again. It felt meaningless.

For an apology to be real, the person making the apology must express remorse. Our apologies need to say clearly that we recognize the harm we have done, that we feel badly about it, and that we are determined not to do the same thing again. Here are some examples:

- “In telling that embarrassing story about you, I know I hurt you. I recognize that I might also have damaged our friendship, which makes me feel terrible. I am so sorry. I really want to try to never do that again, to you or anyone.”
- “I know that by not calling to tell you that I would be home late, I made you worry about me needlessly. I also broke a promise, which undermines our relationship. I am so sorry. I want to make sure I don’t do things like that because I don’t want to hurt you or us.”
- “I recognize that you asked me to turn in my work by Friday for a reason. You needed it. I imagine that by not turning it in, and not even telling you that it would be late, I created difficulties for you and for others. I am very sorry for doing that. It won’t happen again.”

Note that regret is different from remorse. When you say, “I regret what I did,” it sounds like you just wish the whole thing had never happened, but you don’t feel badly about it. That’s not enough. When someone feels hurt by your actions, he or she needs to know that you understand why your actions hurt, that you feel badly about it, and that you will try not to do it again.

*Practice for this day:*

Think of a mistake or hurt that you have committed that you want to apologize for. (Again, pick a small one). Write down the words that you want to say to the person you hurt that will let her or him know that you feel remorse and will try not to do something like that again.

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Try practicing saying it out loud.

**DAY 17**  
**Saturday, September 5, 2020**  
**Sixteenth Day of Elul 5780**  
**Shabbat Ki Tavo**

Today is Shabbat, the most holy day in Jewish tradition. It is our day of rest and our day of joyfully feeling God's presence all around us.

This particular Shabbat is called *Shabbat Ki Tavo* for the Torah portion we read today. In this portion, Moses gives a sermon to the Israelites at the end of their forty year journey. He told them, "You have seen all that Adonai did before your very eyes in the land of Egypt... Yet, Adonai has not given you a heart to know or eyes to see or ears to hear until this day" (Deuteronomy 29:1-3). Moses appears to say that, despite the miracles that God did for the Israelites, they failed to appreciate it.

However, Rashi, the great medieval commentator, understood this verse in a gentler, more forgiving way. He wrote that Moses did not appreciate how much the Israelites had learned "until this day," that is, until his final speech at the end of forty years. Rashi wrote that it takes a long time for students to really grasp the meaning of their teacher's words, and that it takes a long time for teachers to recognize all that their students have learned.

That's a good lesson for us as we travel through this season of *t'shuvah*. It is easy for us to be discouraged in the process of *t'shuvah*. We are likely to say to ourselves, "Here I am, year after year, seeing the same faults in myself as last Yom Kippur, making the same promises to change. What's the point of doing this if I just keep making the same mistakes over and over again?"

We need to remember that change can take a very long time and, because of this, we might not notice it while it is happening. If you cast your mind back to the person you were forty years ago – or even ten years ago – you probably will recognize that you have changed for the better in many ways. You have learned lessons from life and you have learned from this process of introspection and self-improvement. It just takes time.

Of course, we want to learn and become better more quickly. There are ways to help ourselves to do that. Doing the work of *t'shuvah* can help along life's journey. However, the greatest enemies of change and improvement are feelings of despair, hopelessness and frustration. Stay positive. Stay hopeful. You have come far. You will go farther.

*Practice for this day:*

Write down one to three ways in which you are a better person today than you were ten, twenty, thirty or forty years ago.

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## DAY 18

Sunday, September 6, 2020

Seventeenth Day of Elul 5780

We have considered the first two steps we have to take to make a real apology and ask forgiveness from someone we have hurt. We have resolved to state clearly and specifically what we did wrong, and we have resolved to express remorse and determination to do better. Today, we'll go on to the third step, making amends.

Making amends means doing whatever we can to make up for the hurt we have caused. It means taking steps to right our wrongs. This is never easy because it is never completely possible to undo something that has been done, but we can try.

How do we do that? Start by asking the person you have hurt, "What can I do to make this up to you?" The person may say, "There is nothing you can do," or "you don't need to do anything," but you still may want to consider doing something like this:

- If there is a direct way to make up for a harm, do it. Offer to pay with money, time, or replacement goods to make up for what was lost.
- Making amends can be amending your behavior. Let the person you have hurt know that you are making a tangible change to prevent a recurrence. This could be making a plan for keeping better track of your time and commitments, changing the way you operate your business, or seeking outside help for a recurring problem in your behavior.
- Offer to help the person you hurt with something unrelated to the harm, but which is important to them. You could donate to a charity they care about, help them with a problem they are facing, or just do a simple favor. Remember that actions speak louder than words and your help may restore faith and goodwill in a relationship.

*Practice for this day:*

Think of a mistake or hurt that you have committed that you want to apologize for. (Again, pick something small). Write down something you can offer to do to make amends for the hurt you caused. Be sure that it is something that is real, reasonable, doable, and likely to be seen as helpful by the person you hurt.

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**DAY 19**  
**Monday, September 7, 2020**  
**Eighteenth Day of Elul 5780**  
**Labor Day**

We have now put together all the pieces of a good apology: a statement of what we did wrong, an expression of genuine remorse, and an offer to make amends. There is one more important step to make *t'shuvah* for your mistake or the hurt you caused someone. You have to make a long-term change in your behavior.

The Rambam, the great Jewish philosopher and legal authority of the 12th century, put it this way: “*T'shuvah* is completed when an opportunity to commit your original transgression again arises but you do not commit it and, instead, you commit not to do it” (*Hilchot T'shuvah* 2:1).

We can feel good about ourselves once we have said, “I’m sorry,” but that does not end the process. Hearing someone say, “I accept your(R) apology,” should make us feel that we have taken a positive step, but we still have more work to do. We have to make sure that we have made a long-term change in our behavior so that we won’t keep making the same mistake over and over again. *T'shuvah* is about becoming a better person in large ways and in small ways – not just for a moment, but for good. It’s something we should always be working on.

We remind ourselves throughout the process of *t'shuvah* that our goal is not to become perfect. There is no such thing as perfect where human beings are concerned. Our goal is to be striving to become better and to appreciate the sense of meaning and purpose that we get from making that effort.

*Practice for this day:*

Think of a bad habit you have had in the past which you have managed to change. It can be something relatively small, like being late for appointments or leaving dirty dishes in the sink. What made you change that habit? What feelings do you associate with making that change? How do your reflections on that change affect your feelings about the changes you want to make now? Does it make change seem less daunting?

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## DAY 20

Tuesday, September 8, 2020

Nineteenth Day of Elul 5780

The most common stumbling blocks for apologizing are the thoughts we make up about the person to whom we should apologize. We get hung up on thoughts like, “Why should I change if the other person won’t change?” or “Why should I apologize to that person if she or he won’t apologize to me first?” For many of us, this can be a very powerful distraction from *t’shuvah*.

There are some important things to remember about this. The first is that *t’shuvah* is a process toward greater joy and fulfillment in life that is available to everyone, but it is something you can only do for yourself. You cannot do *t’shuvah* for someone else. Release your resentment, anger or fear of that other person in order to focus on your own *t’shuvah*.

The second thing to notice is that you need to do *t’shuvah* even if the person you hurt has also hurt you (except for cases where there has been abuse.) You may have a difficult relationship with another person in which you feel you are only ten percent to blame and the other person owns the other ninety percent. You may believe, therefore, that the other person needs to apologize first. This is a trap. It will keep you from healing yourself. Take the first step by apologizing and see how it feels.

Third, we sometimes hold back from making an apology because we fear the other person will vent anger at us. This is a possibility. When people feel hurt, they often are not ready to accept an apology until they release their anger. When this happens, you do not have to do anything more than to listen compassionately. You can repeat the apology, but you do not have to argue. You do not have to say things you do not believe. You do not have to agree. You just have to listen.

*Practice for this day:*

Think of a relationship in which you feel the need for repair, but you feel unable to apologize. What is the story you tell yourself about your inability? Is it embarrassment or shame? Is it fear that your apology won’t be accepted, that it will spark anger, or that it will be misunderstood? Is it that you don’t expect the other person to take responsibility for their own wrongdoing?

Remember that the goal of *t’shuvah* is to release yourself from your own feelings of guilt and shame in order to become a happier and more fulfilled person. With that in mind, imagine a conversation with this other person that will allow you to express your true feelings about your own behavior in a way that the other person will be able to hear and accept. Write some notes about what you hope to say.

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If you feel ready, now is the time to make your apologies.

**DAY 21**  
**Wednesday, September 9, 2020**  
**Twentieth Day of Elul 5780**

We have completed twenty days in our forty-day journey toward *t'shuvah*. It is a good time to review the work you have done to get to this point and to set your sights on where you wish to go.

*Practice for this day:*

If you have not done so already, you should start making plans for conversations with people to whom you would like to apologize. You should have those conversations soon.

Review the teachings and your responses to the practices from the first twenty days. If you have not read or completed the practices for some of the days up to this point, or for any of them, do not become discouraged. *T'shuvah* is a lifelong process. There are many opportunities to begin again. There is no better time to start than right now.

As you look over the teachings, are there any ideas or responses that seem particularly powerful to you? Are there any ideas or feelings you particularly want to remember? Are there any thoughts you have written that you now wish to revise?

Jot down your thoughts here:

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As we continue the journey toward *t'shuvah*, do you wish to make any commitments to goals you would like to achieve by Yom Kippur or beyond?

Jot down your thoughts here:

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**DAY 22**

**Thursday, September 10, 2020**

**Twenty-First Day of Elul 5780**

As we approach Rosh Hashanah, we begin to think of the day's complex and seemingly contradictory meanings. Rosh Hashanah is a day of celebration and joy for the beginning of the new year. Paradoxically, it is also a solemn day of introspection and asking God for forgiveness. In the Torah it is called *Yom T'ruah*, the Day of Shofar Blasts. Just as the shofar was sounded in ancient times both for celebration and as an alarm, Rosh Hashanah remains a day that contains both types of messages.

Rosh Hashanah is not unlike our secular New Year's Eve, which is observed both as a time for merrymaking and for making resolutions about overcoming our faults in the new year. It is a moment when we stand at the crossroads of life, looking backwards and forwards at the same time – happy about a new beginning and trepidatious about repeating the mistakes of the past.

In the Jewish understanding of Rosh Hashanah, though, there is an added dimension. The changes we seek to make in ourselves at this time of year are not just about self-improvement, they are also about our relationship with God. Rosh Hashanah calls us to see ourselves not just from an egotistical, self-centered perspective. We begin the new year by considering that we need to make our lives right, not just for our own sake, but for the sake of the world and for God. We remember that we are loved by a God who wants the best for us. God does that by helping us become the best people we can be. But we are not the final judge of our behavior. God is.

That may be the best way of resolving the apparent contradiction of Rosh Hashanah being both a day of celebration and a day of solemn introspection. It is the day when we recall how God loves us and also asks us to become better.

*Practice for this day:*

As we approach Rosh Hashanah, think back on how you have observed Rosh Hashanah in the past. What memories do you have that seem particularly joyful and celebratory? What memories seem solemn and serious?

Write down some memories of Rosh Hashanah that seem most important to you.

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## DAY 23

Friday, September 11, 2020

Twenty-Second Day of Elul 5780

One of the most memorable and famous prayers of the High Holy Days is *Hineni*, which is sung by the cantor as a meditation on the sacred duty of leading the congregation in prayer. The cantor sings, “Behold, here I am, impoverished in deeds and merits...” In this prayer, the cantor contemplates the awesome responsibility of being the *shaliach tzibbur*, literally, “The representative of the community” before God.

In *Hineni*, the prayer leader pleads to God, “Accept my prayer as though it were offered by one more worthy of this task.” The prayer sets a tone of humility for the entire congregation. We do not come to God with the arrogant belief that on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur our words alone will wipe away all our sins. In order for *t’shuvah* to work on us, we have to be willing to enter it with the humble recognition that we depend on God’s grace and mercy to forgive us. We have to know that forgiveness is a gift we receive – not *despite the fact* that we are unworthy of it, but rather – *because* we are unworthy of it. God forgives us because forgiveness is our only path to escape the mistakes of our past.

Letting go of our ego is one of the most difficult spiritual tasks of the High Holy Days. There is a part of our minds that insists on saying, “I don’t need to be forgiven. My actions are all justified. Why should I have to plead for forgiveness?” On Rosh Hashanah, we enter a period when we realize that this part of our minds will destroy us if it is left unchecked. It will isolate us from other people and from God. It will harden our hearts and make us believe that the universe revolves around us. It will turn us into selfish, self-centered ingrates.

That thought should terrify us even more than our fear of humbling ourselves before God.

*Practice for this day:*

Take some time today to remember all the ways in which you depend on others for your survival and happiness. Recall all the ways in which your life is bound up with the lives of other people. Think of the many times when others came to help you recover from your shortcomings and mistakes.

Write down one or two of these powerful memories.

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**DAY 24**  
**Saturday, September 12, 2020**  
**Twenty-Third Day of Elul 5780**  
**Shabbat Nitzavim-Vayeilech**

Today is Shabbat, the most holy day in Jewish tradition. It is our day of rest and our day of joyfully feeling God's presence all around us.

After this Shabbat ends tonight, we will be entering the night of Selichot. Temple Sinai will have a Selichot service on Zoom at 8:00 PM. The reflection for Day 25 will introduce the Selichot service. You should review it tonight before the service.

This particular Shabbat is called *Shabbat Nitzavim-Vayeilech* for the double Torah portion we read today. In the first part of the Torah reading, we read Moses' powerful statement of inclusion in the covenant with God. He states, "You stand this day, all of you, before Adonai your God – your tribal heads, your elders, and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer – to enter into the covenant of Adonai your God..." (Deuteronomy 29:9-11).

Moses' speech to the Israelites as they stood ready to enter the Land of Israel said that no one was left outside of the covenant with God. Regardless of social status or prestige, all were in the covenant together. All were equally needed.

This idea would later be expressed by the rabbis of the Talmud in the phrase: *Kol Yisrael aravim zeh bazeh*, "All Jews bear responsibility for one another" (B. Shevuot 39a). In the 20th century, the great Jewish philosopher Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel would say it this way: "Indifference to evil is worse than evil itself... in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible" ("The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement," 1972).

The responsibility we carry for each other as part of a communal covenant is both a burden and a gift. When one person behaves badly or causes someone else harm, we are all implicated. However, we also are all assured that we are not alone in the work of accounting for our own faults and striving to do better. We all stand together before God, which is certainly easier than standing alone. We all draw strength from each other in our striving toward *t'shuvah*.

*Practice for this day:*

From whom do you draw strength? Who are the people – past and present – who have inspired you, defended you, encouraged you, guided you, and supported you? Think of a few of these people in your life and think of the ways that you express gratitude to them. Think of the ways that you return the favor by supporting them.

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**DAY 25**

**Sunday, September 13, 2020**

**Twenty-Fourth Day of Elul 5780**

**L'eil Selichot**

Selichot is a service of penitential prayers recited late at night in the days before Rosh Hashanah. Ashkenazic Jews begin reciting these prayers on the night following the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah. (There have to be at least three days of Selichot before Rosh Hashanah. In years when Rosh Hashanah begins on a Monday or a Tuesday, Selichot begins a week earlier.) Sephardic Jews always recite Selichot, but they start on the second day of Elul and recite the prayers on weekdays for the whole month.

Much of our preparation for the Days of Awe so far have been directed inward. We have been thinking about our mistakes and flaws and focusing on how to become a better person. That is appropriate, but it misses an important dimension of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. More than being days for putting ourselves on the therapist's couch, these holy days are supposed to be directed *outward* – toward God.

At our Selichot service tonight, we will offer prayers to God that speak of the mistakes we have made and sins we have committed. We will ask God to forgive us and to be compassionate with us in remembering our sins. We address these prayers to God because we need to know that, as much as *t'shuvah* is about self-forgiveness, it is also about divine forgiveness. If we only seek forgiveness from ourselves, we won't be able to escape the trap of egotism, self-involvement, and arrogance. We need to address our prayers outward to God.

*Practice for this day:*

The Rambam, the great Jewish philosopher and legal authority of the 12th century, put special emphasis on verbal confession to God recited out loud. Confession begins with thoughts inside of our heads, but it feels very different to actually say the words, "Please forgive me, God, for the sin I have sinned by..." than it does to just think them. When we say the words out loud it helps us to really recognize what we have done and the need to seek forgiveness. It helps us to really feel contrition for our actions. It also helps us to feel that God really hears us and forgives us.

At our Selichot service tonight, we will write down the mistakes, sins and faults for which we wish to ask God to forgive us. We will write them in the form, "Forgive me for the sin I have sinned by..." In the space below, write down your confession and say it out loud. You may wish to repeat saying what you have written several times to make sure that you really hear it.

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**DAY 26**  
**Monday, September 14, 2020**  
**Twenty-Fifth Day of Elul 5780**

The prayer *Avinu Malkeinu* (Our Father, Our King), is possibly the most beloved and iconic of all prayers associated with the High Holy Days. The popularity of the prayer is due, at least in part, to its powerful musical settings.

The prayer comes from a story in the Talmud (B. Taanit 25b) about a deadly drought. Rabbi Eliezer, the greatest sage of his time, led the congregation in prayers to end the drought. He made twenty-four blessings in which he asked God to bring rain, but no rain fell. After Rabbi Eliezer's failure, his younger student, Rabbi Akiva, stood before the ark and prayed with just two sentences, "*Avinu Malkeinu*, we have no ruler other than You. *Avinu Malkeinu*, for Your sake have compassion on us." Immediately the rain fell.

The Talmud says that the rabbis looked at each other in astonishment that God had failed to answer the extended prayers of the great Rabbi Eliezer but brought rain for the simple prayer of Rabbi Akiva. In response, a voice came down from heaven saying, "It is not because this one [Akiva] is greater than that one [Eliezer]. It is because he is yielding and compassionate and the other is not." (In later years, Akiva did come to be regarded as the greatest sage of his time.)

Because of this story, *Avinu Malkeinu* is seen as Judaism's greatest prayer of humble pleading before God in a time of distress. It is a prayer in which we recognize that, in order to evoke God's forgiveness and compassion, we ourselves must be forgiving and compassionate.

*Practice for this day:*

Think of times when you have been judgmental or critical toward people you thought were doing something wrong. How do moments like that make you feel about yourself? Do you feel righteous and powerful? Do you feel harsh and unyielding? Where in your body do you hold those feelings?

Imagine now that, instead of behaving in a judgmental way, you had been forgiving, humble and compassionate toward the person or people whose behavior bothered you. What outcomes would have been different? How would you feel differently about yourself? Where in your body do you feel the difference?

Letting go of ego, self-righteousness, arrogance and our tendency to be judgmental is one of the hardest tasks of *t'shuvah*. It can help to notice the bodily sensations we feel when we are being harshly critical and to remember the feeling of releasing judgment. Write some of your thoughts about being more yielding and compassionate toward others.

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## DAY 27

Tuesday, September 15, 2020

Twenty-Sixth Day of Elul 5780

The Torah reading that we most associate with Rosh Hashanah is the story of the Binding of Isaac, called the *Akeidah* in Hebrew. (In traditional practice, it is read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, but most Reform congregations read it on the first day). It is one of the most difficult stories in the entire Torah. It tells how God told Abraham, his first and most faithful follower, to sacrifice Isaac, the son Abraham had prayed to have for many years. People often ask: Of all the stories in the Torah, why do we read this one on Rosh Hashanah?

To the rabbis of the Talmud, the *Akeida* was, above all, a story about self-sacrifice and divine forgiveness. According to a midrash, Abraham followed God's command to prepare Isaac as a sacrifice, but he did so with anger toward God. After God commanded Abraham to release Isaac unharmed, the midrash says that Abraham spoke to God, saying, "Just as I suppressed my anger and did not talk back to you when you asked me to sacrifice Isaac, in the future, when Isaac's descendants sin, You, too, must suppress Your anger. When they come to You in sorrow for their sins, You must remember the Binding of Isaac and forgive them!"

In the midrash, God responded to Abraham, saying, "Your children will sin and they will come to Me on Rosh Hashanah in sorrow and I will judge them. If they ask Me for forgiveness and blow on this ram's horn, I will forgive them."

To this, Abraham asked, "What ram's horn?" and God said, "Turn around." Immediately, Abraham saw the ram caught in the thicket by its horns (Genesis 22:13). Abraham sacrificed the ram in place of Isaac and its horns became the source of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah (Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Vayera 46:12).

We can respond to this story in a number of ways. We can (and should) continue to ask why God would be so cruel as to ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. However, the story also teaches us about forgiveness. God recognizes that terrible things happen to us in life and we are not expected to just accept them quietly. We can be angry with God. We are, though, asked to put aside our anger enough to humbly recognize our own responsibility.

When we do things that are wrong, we still have to ask forgiveness no matter how bad our situation may be. God responds to the difficulties we all face in life with compassion and with the invitation to make *t'shuvah*. That invitation is always open, but it is up to us to do it.

*Practice for this day:*

Reflect on what the *Akeida* says to you about releasing anger and seeking forgiveness.

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## DAY 28

Wednesday, September 16, 2020

Twenty-Seventh Day of Elul 5780

The sounding of the shofar is the most memorable moment of Rosh Hashanah. It is the very symbol of the holiday. However, the meaning of the shofar blasts is not always well understood. The sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is divided into three parts, each with its own themes and meanings. Today, we are going to consider the first section, which is called *Malchuyot*, or “Sovereignty.” It reminds us how shofar blasts were used in ancient times to announce the entrance of a sovereign king.

The *Malchuyot* section includes the prayer we call The Great *Aleinu*. This prayer originated as a Rosh Hashanah prayer, but was later added to the end of every service, all year, simply as “the *Aleinu*.” In this prayer we accept God as the ruler of our lives and of all existence. It includes a prostration in which the prayer leaders bow, get on their knees, and place their foreheads on the ground. In ancient times, this was a sign of obeisance, humble submission, and deep respect.

This is a difficult idea for contemporary Americans to accept. We are taught to believe in the values of liberal democracy where everyone is equal under the law and each person has the right to make their own choices for their lives. We recoil at the idea of submitting ourselves to an authority who rules over us.

However, this idea of God’s sovereignty is central to the journey of *t’shuvah*. In order to return to the life that we intend to live, each of us has to give up the egotistical belief that we are the center of the universe. We find that this idea is a cause of selfishness and misery for ourselves and for others.

We need to accept the idea that there is a moral compass to the universe and a meaning to life that does not originate with our own ego. We accept God as sovereign as a way of modeling ourselves according to something outside ourselves – something that embodies the highest and best aspirations for the world and for all life.

*Practice for this day:*

Consider the central ideas or goals that motivate you in life. Do they include ideas like family, kindness, peace or justice? Do they also include striving for material wealth, power over other people, your own pleasure or prestige? We are all guided by all sorts of goals and aspirations in life. The ones we prize the most determine the kind of people we will be. Make a conscious choice about what will be sovereign over you in the coming year. Write down the aspirations to which you wish to declare loyalty and to which you will make obeisance in your life. Consider prostration as a physical embodiment of your declaration of loyalty.

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## DAY 29

Thursday, September 17, 2020

Twenty-Eighth Day of Elul 5780

Today, we are going to consider the second section of the shofar service, the section called *Zichronot*, usually translated as “Remembrance.” The word in Hebrew has the added meaning of “calling attention” or “making note of.” In this section, the sound of the shofar calls our attention to God and, just as significantly, marks the ways that God takes note of us.

The very first use of the verb “remember” in the Torah comes in the story of Noah. After Noah had spent one hundred and fifty days on the ark with all the animals he had collected, the Torah tells us that “God remembered Noah” (Genesis 8:1). The ancient rabbis wondered about this phrase. Certainly it is not possible that God had forgotten Noah before this. The rabbis interpreted it to mean that this was a turning point in the relationship between God and humanity (Rashi on Genesis 8:1).

The rabbis believed that God threatened to destroy the world with the flood because God was acting according to justice alone, and saw that human beings were wicked and deserved to be punished. It was not until God saw Noah in the ark, alone in the world, that God’s sense of compassion was aroused. In that moment, God chose forgiveness and caring over strict law and justice.

This is the sense in which we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah to ask God to remember us. We ask God to turn away from strict justice, by which we all must be found guilty, and to view us instead through the divine attributes of love and compassion.

At the same time that the sound of the shofar reminds God to have compassion on us, it should also awaken us to remember God. It should call us to the task of *t’shuvah*. The Rambam wrote in the 12th century that we should hear the shofar blasts as a wake up call that says, “Awake, awake, O sleeper, from your sleep. Arouse yourselves, slumberer, from your slumbers. Examine your deeds, return in repentance, and remember your Creator!” (Hilchot T’shuvah 3:1).

*Practice for this day:*

What have you forgotten? As you think about your behavior – the ways you treat people and the ways you expect others to treat you – do you find that you sometimes forget to give people the benefit of the doubt, or to forgive other people’s faults (as you see them)? Remember that we are all fallible and we all depend on others to forgive us. Think of specific scenarios in which you wish to be more forgiving. Think also of specific ways in which you need the forgiveness of other people and the forgiveness of God.

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**DAY 30**  
**Friday, September 18, 2020**  
**Twenty-Ninth Day of Elul 5780**  
**Erev Rosh Hashanah**

This is the last day of the month of Elul, the last day to prepare for the Days of Awe. Rosh Hashanah begins at sunset.

Today we consider the third section of the shofar service, the section called *Shofarot*, meaning “Shofars.” In this section, we hear the shofar as an echo of the shofar that sounded at Mount Sinai during God’s revelation of the Torah and the Ten Commandments. We also hear the shofar as a symbol of hope for the great shofar that announces the redemption of the world.

In the book of Exodus, the day of the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai is described: “On the third day as morning broke, there was thunder and lightening. A dense cloud was upon the mountain and there was the very loud sound of a shofar. All the people in the camp trembled” (Exodus 19:16).

The sounding of the shofar is our symbol of experiencing God. It announces the moment when we feel God palpably all around us. It also is the moment in which we see ourselves as we truly are. All at once, we know that we are a speck within a universe that is vast beyond our comprehension. At the same time, paradoxically, it is also the moment when we know ourselves to be a part of God, part of that which gives the universe purpose and meaning. With the sound of the shofar we experience deep humility and inexpressible joy all at the same time. We experience the revelation that all is One, and that we are included in it.

*Practice for this day:*

When in your life have you heard the metaphoric sound of the shofar? What have been your moments of feeling deeply that you are part of something far beyond yourself that gives your life meaning and hope? Was it while experiencing the beauty of the natural world? Was it while being close to the people you love? Was it a moment of deep insight or of personal transformation? Write about your shofar moments. Hold onto those moments in your life to help you find the strength in the task of *t’shuvah*, the task of returning yourself to the sound of the shofar.

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**DAY 31**  
**Saturday, September 19, 2020**  
**First Day of Tishrei 5781**  
**First Day of Rosh Hashanah**

Today is Shabbat, the most holy day in Jewish tradition. It is our day of rest and our day of joyfully feeling God's presence all around us. Today is Rosh Hashanah, the day of re-experiencing the world's creation.

Once again, this is a day to review the work you have done to get to this point and to set your sights on where you wish to go.

*Practice for this day:*

Review the teachings and your responses to the practices from the first thirty days. If you have not read or completed the practices for some of the days up to this point, or for any of them, do not become discouraged. *T'shuvah* is a lifelong process. There are many opportunities to begin again. There is no better time to start than right now.

As you look over the teachings, are there any ideas or responses that seem particularly powerful to you? Are there any ideas or feelings you particularly want to remember? Are there any thoughts you have written that you now wish to revise?

Jot down your thoughts here:

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As we continue the journey toward *t'shuvah*, do you wish to make any commitments to goals you would like to achieve by Yom Kippur or beyond?

Jot down your thoughts here:

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## DAY 32

Sunday, September 20, 2020

Second Day of Tishrei 5781

Second Day of Rosh Hashanah

Today is the second day of Rosh Hashanah. In Orthodox and Conservative communities this year, the sounding of the shofar and the reciting of *Avinu Malkeinu* are postponed until today because the first day of Rosh Hashanah fell on Shabbat.

We are now in the final stretch of the journey toward *t'shuvah*. Yom Kippur is our deadline. It is now just nine days away. We have just nine days to ask the people we have hurt to forgive us. We have just nine days to ask God for forgiveness, too. In the days before Rosh Hashanah, we discussed in detail how we apologize to the people we have hurt. That step is indispensable. God is not interested in hearing our pleas for forgiveness until we have asked forgiveness from the people we have hurt.

But, once we have apologized to those people, how are we supposed to apologize to God? In the twelfth century, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, known as the Rambam, offered this suggested prayer to ask for God's forgiveness:

*Please, God, I have sinned, I have erred, I have transgressed before You. I have done thus-and-such [state the specific things for which you seek forgiveness]. I am remorseful and ashamed of my actions and I will never do this again.* (Hilchot T'shuvah 1:1)

The Rambam says that this is the essence of confession to God. While it is good to expand upon these words, saying this is sufficient as long as it is said out loud and with sincerity. You do not need to wait until Yom Kippur to say it. You do not need to say it in a synagogue. You can make your apologies to God any time and anywhere you wish. Yom Kippur services are just the deadline, the last chance to get it done.

Why not do it now?

*Practice for this day:*

Recite the Rambam's prayer for forgiveness from God. Be as specific as you can in stating the things for which you seek forgiveness. You can do this as often as you wish. It does not need to be perfect. Each time, you may find that you have a clearer sense of the actions you regret and a clearer sense of the forgiveness you want to achieve. Write down some thoughts about what you find out from doing this.

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## DAY 33

Monday, September 21, 2020

Third Day of Tishrei 5781

The Fast of Gedaliah

Today is the Fast of Gedaliah. It is a minor fast day, observed only from dawn to dusk, mostly by Orthodox Jews. The fast is to lament the assassination of Gedaliah, a righteous Jewish leader who was appointed governor of Judah by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar after he conquered the land of Israel. Gedaliah was murdered by fellow Jews who resented his collaboration with the Babylonians. As a result of his assassination, the Jews lost all autonomy in the land of Israel. Some Jews today see the story of Gedaliah as a warning against extremism.

Yom Kippur is one of only two full-day fasts in Jewish tradition. (The other is Tisha B'Av, which recalls the destruction of the First and Second Temples). On Yom Kippur, from sunset until after sunset on the next day, we abstain from eating, drinking, bathing and anointing (wearing perfume or makeup), wearing leather shoes, and sexual relations. This is in response to the verse from Torah that says, "In the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall practice self-denial...for on this day, atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins. You shall be clean before Adonai" (Leviticus 16:29-30).

People sometimes ask why they should fast on Yom Kippur, since fasting makes it harder to focus on remembering our sins and asking for forgiveness. There certainly are people who are exempt from fasting: anyone under the age thirteen (some say girls under twelve) and anyone who is sick or whose health would be imperiled by fasting.

For the rest of us, though, fasting is not a distraction, it is intended to be part of the process of Yom Kippur. We ignore our physical needs on Yom Kippur to confront our mortality. The idea is that, in order to truly feel renewed by *t'shuvah*, we need to be willing to let our old self die a little. By fasting, we experience a small foretaste of our own deaths so we can be reborn.

Here's another way to understand it. Yom Kippur is intended to wear us down. We start Yom Kippur by speaking words of repentance. But do we really believe them? By fasting on Yom Kippur, we push ourselves to the brink until we realize that our very lives are at stake. We fast to help ourselves feel down to our bones that without repentance we are on a path to spiritual death. We fast to convince ourselves to change.

*Practice for this day:*

Decide how you wish to fast on Yom Kippur. Write down your plan now so you remain committed to your choice on Yom Kippur.

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## DAY 34

Tuesday, September 22, 2020

Fourth Day of Tishrei 5781

One of the most famous prayers of the High Holy Days – and one of the most difficult – is *Untaneh Tokef*. Today, we will consider the origins and content of the prayer. Tomorrow we will look at how we understand it in our lives today.

*Untaneh Tokef* is a *piyyut*, a liturgical poem. Like other poems in the prayerbook, it is not meant as a precise statement of Jewish belief. Rather, it is intended to move us to faithful devotion and spiritual awakening. You do not have to literally believe the words in order to pray it.

There is a legend that the prayer was written by an 11th century German rabbi, Amnon of Mainz, after he was tortured for his refusal to convert to Christianity. In fact, the prayer is much older. Most scholars believe that it was written in the land of Israel around the 6th century.

The poem begins with a retelling of a story from the Talmud in which God writes in three books on Rosh Hashanah, one with the names of the completely righteous, one with the names of the completely wicked, and one with the names of everyone in between. The righteous are rewarded and the wicked are punished immediately. Everyone else has ten days to tip the scales in their favor by Yom Kippur (B. Rosh Hashanah 16b). In *Unetaneh Tokef*, the three books are combined into one “Book of Memories,” and it is not God, but we ourselves, who write our names into it.

The poem then describes how God decides who will die in various ways – who by fire, who by water, who by war, who by beast, and so on. This section concludes by stating that each of us can soften God’s judgment through *t’shuvah*, prayer, and acts of righteousness.

The poem states that God does not wish to punish us, but hopes for us to live by returning to God. It concludes by recalling that our lives are temporary and fragile – “a cloud passing by, mere dust on the wind, a dream that flies away” – but that God is limitless and infinite, “a glorious mystery none can decipher.”

The popularity of *Untaneh Tokef* is undoubtedly related to the beauty of the language and to the powerful image of God ruling over life and death. It is a poem intended to move us toward *t’shuvah* by making us mindful of our mortality and our need to change our ways to escape death.

*Practice for this day:*

Recall how *Untaneh Tokef* has struck you in the past. What is moving? What is disquieting?

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## DAY 35

Wednesday, September 23, 2020

Fifth Day of Tishrei 5781

As we explored yesterday, the prayer *Untaneh Tokef* is meant as an inspirational poem to move us toward *t'shuvah* with images of our mortality and our dependence on God who loves us, cares for us, and wishes us to be the best people we can be. All of this is very much in keeping with the themes of *t'shuvah* we have explored over the past thirty-four days.

However, the difficulty that most people today have with *Untaneh Tokef* is the suggestion that God pre-determines the time and means of each person's death. That is not the way most of us think about God today. Worse, the poem implies that death is a punishment that God brings on people for their sins. Taken to an extreme, this implies that people who die – especially those who die a cruel or untimely death – have been judged by God to be wicked. Especially in this time of pandemic, we must be clear that this is not the intent or the theology behind the poem.

One key to understanding the poem's meaning is to notice how the author changed the talmudic story upon which it is based. There is no book of the “completely righteous” or of the “completely wicked” in this poem, only a Book of Memory that includes all of us. The poem does not accept that there is such a thing as a completely good or completely bad person; we're all “in between,” and we all have to work to become better by changing ourselves, by praying, and by acting righteously. Death is not a punishment for being wicked; death is the common fate of us all.

There is also another way of answering the difficult questions raised by the poem. When *Untaneh Tokef* speaks of death, we don't have to understand it as meaning literal death – the end of our bodily life. There is ample precedent in Jewish tradition to read this as a figurative, spiritual death.

For example, the psalms proclaim, “The dead cannot praise Adonai” (Psalms 115:17). This verse has been interpreted to refer to those who are “spiritually dead,” people who are physically alive but who have no feeling for or connection to life's meaning. If we read *Untaneh Tokef* this way, all of those descriptions of different kinds of death take on new meaning. We can understand the poem to be asking, “Who shall drown in their selfishness? Who shall burn with unchecked anger? Who shall be devoured by their own envy?”

*Practice for this day:*

What does it mean to you to be “spiritually alive”? When do you feel most alive? What are the things you can do to live your life that way more deeply and consistently?

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## DAY 36

Thursday, September 24, 2020

Sixth Day of Tishrei 5781

At each of the services of Yom Kippur, we recite confessional prayers called *Selichot*. In these prayers we admit that we are arrogant and stubborn people who spend much our lives thinking that all of our mistakes and misdeeds are somehow justified or unimportant. In the *Selichot* prayers, we back down from this position and admit that we have done wrong and that we have to reconcile ourselves with the people we have hurt and we have to reconcile ourselves with God. We admit that without such reconciliation, we will lead futile and meaningless lives in which we will just continue to make the same mistakes over and over again.

The focal point of the *Selichot* prayers are the two confessional prayers. Today, we will consider the first of these prayers, called *Vidui Zuta*, Aramaic for “The Short Confession.” It is also called “*Ashamnu*” for the first word of the prayer.

*Ashamnu* is recited by the entire congregation while standing. The prayer is really a list of words that begin with each letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order. We begin with the letter *aleph* and say, “*Ashamnu*,” meaning, “We have been guilty.” We continue with the letter *bet* and say, “*Bagadnu*,” meaning, “We have betrayed.” Next, we say, “*Gazalnu*,” which begins with the letter *gimmel* and means, “We have have robbed,” and so on through the entire Hebrew alphabet.

Now, you will notice that not everyone in the congregation will have committed each of these sins. Some person might say, “Why should I say ‘*Gazalnu*’ if I never robbed anyone in my entire life?” It’s a good question. The point of the prayer, though, is not that we have all done all of the sins listed. It’s not even that the list of twenty-four sins (three for the letter *tav*) is comprehensive and exhaustive. Rather, with this prayer we stand together in solidarity with all the other members of the congregation in confessing our communal responsibility.

Think of it this way. You may not have robbed anyone, but somebody has. In reciting the prayer, you accept that person, accept their confession, support them in their striving for *t’shuvah*, and accept your responsibility for making sure that it doesn’t happen again. None of that is easy, but it is a necessary part of *t’shuvah*. It is a way of recognizing that none of us can make *t’shuvah* without the strength and support of everyone else to help us.

*Practice for this day:*

Is there a misdeed or mistake for which you feel particularly guilty or ashamed? Can you identify why that one hurts you more than others? Does it help to know that other people support you in your quest for forgiveness, even if they don’t know specifically what you did? Do you feel that your support helps others?

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## DAY 37

Friday, September 25, 2020

Seventh Day of Tishrei 5781

The second confessional prayer on Yom Kippur is called, “*Vidui Rabbah*,” Aramaic for “The Long Confession.” This prayer is commonly referred to as the “*Al Cheit*” for its first two words.

The *Al Cheit* is really just an elongated version of *Ashamnu*. Instead of just one word for each sin, there is a full sentence in which we say, “For the sin we have sinned against You by...” At three points through the list of sins, there is an interlude in which we pray, “For all these, God of Forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.”

The *Al Cheit* is recited at all the services of Yom Kippur except for *Ne'ilah*, the closing service. During that service, our prayers become more urgent and compressed. At *Ne'ilah*, we recite only the short confession, *Ashamnu*.

You may have noticed that many people hold their hand over their chest while reciting *Ashamnu* and the *Al Cheit*, tapping or thumping on their heart as they name each sin. Sometimes, people think of this as a form of self-flagellation, as if we are punishing ourselves for our sins. But this is not the best way to think about the gesture. Judaism does not teach us to punish ourselves for our misdeeds. In fact, we believe the opposite – we believe in the need for self-forgiveness.

Rather, you can think of the gesture as a way of “knocking on the door” of your heart. Each tap is a wake-up call to your conscience, stirring yourself to feel remorse for your misdeeds. Reciting the confession should be an experience that encourages and motivates you to think deeply about the things you have done that have hurt others and yourself, and to resolve to change your behavior. As we have seen, we are required to say out loud the remorse we feel and our determination to change. *Ashamnu* and *Al Cheit* are prayers that are intended to motivate us in that process.

*Practice for this day:*

The tapping or thumping that we make on our hearts during the confessional prayers may help us to feel remorse and the need to change, but it is not the only thing we can do to elicit that feeling. What other things do you want to try to do to help you remember and to stay motivated to change for the better?

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**DAY 38**  
**Saturday, September 26, 2020**  
**Eighth Day of Tishrei 5781**  
***Shabbat Shuva***

Today is Shabbat, the most holy day in Jewish tradition. It is our day of rest and our day of joyfully feeling God's presence all around us.

This particular Shabbat is called *Shabbat Shuva*, the Shabbat that falls between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Its name comes from the Haftarah portion we read today. In that reading, the prophet Hosea says, "Return [*Shuva*], O Israel, to Adonai your God, for you have fallen because of your sin." In response, God says, "I will heal their affliction. Generously will I take them back in love, for My anger has turned away from them" (Hosea 14:2,5).

This is the essential teaching of *t'shuvah* and of Yom Kippur. The Jewish idea of repentance is not, as many people suppose, to feel guilty about our misdeeds. God does not want us to feel guilty. Rather, God wants us to feel forgiven. In order to get there, though, we need to recognize what we have done, raise ourselves up, return to the right path, and accept healing love. It is not an easy thing to do. It is not supposed to be. But it is a process that is meant to make us feel good about ourselves.

Compare this to how a loving parent treats a child who has misbehaved. Parents help their children to recognize what they have done wrong, to apologize, and to learn to do better in the future. Ideally, parents do this out of love for their children, not out of anger or vindictiveness. They do it because they know that their children's future happiness can only be improved by learning to behave well, to do what is right, and to become self-knowing and self-regulating. That is also what God wants for us. It is what *t'shuvah* is all about.

*Practice for this day:*

Knowing and feeling God's love for us is a central idea of Judaism. The blessing we recite at every service right before the *Shema* states that God loves us with a great and eternal love. Feeling and accepting God's love is difficult for many people.

As we prepare for Yom Kippur, it is a good time to open yourself to feeling God's love. Take some time to sit comfortably, close your eyes, and allow yourself to feel God's love shining on you like sunshine on your face on a summer day. Breathe in and breathe out, feeling God's love with each breath.

How does it feel? Where in your body do you feel it? Write down your thoughts and feelings.

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## DAY 39

Sunday, September 27, 2020

Ninth Day of Tishrei 5781

Erev Yom Kippur

Here is a teaching from Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav (Likutei Mohoran 282) to help you prepare for tomorrow, Yom Kippur.

“Know this. You must judge everyone favorably (Pirkei Avot 1:6). Even for a person who is completely wicked, it is necessary to search and find in that person some point of goodness, some little bit that is not wicked. By finding that point and regarding that person favorably, you genuinely elevate that person in the scale of merit and can bring that person to *t’shuvah*...

“Likewise, you must find some good point within yourself, too! You must take care to be happy always and to keep very far away from depression. It may be that when you begin examining yourself, you will see no good in yourself and believe that you are filled with sin, allowing your own harsh judgment to push you into depression and sadness. God forbid! It is forbidden to fall into such despair!

“Rather, you must search until you find in yourself some little bit of good. For how is it possible that you never once did some good deed? Ah, but even when you do find that good deed, you will say that this, too, is filled with flaws and contains no purity. You will think that your holy deeds are comprised of impure motives, external thoughts, and many other faults. Nevertheless, how is it possible that this good deed did not contain even a little bit of good? There must be some good point in what you did.

“You have to search and seek to find in yourself some little bit of good in order to revive yourself and bring back your joy. By searching until you find a remaining little bit of good in yourself, you genuinely move from the scale of guilt to the scale of merit and can return to God in *t’shuvah*...

“Once you gather more and more of those good points from the darkness and impurity within you, you can begin to join them together like musical notes to create melodies. Then, you will be able to sing them to give praise to God. In this way, you will bring vitality and joy to your life!”

*Practice for this day:*

Find the points of real goodness within yourself. Find another. Sing your song.

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**DAY 40**  
**Monday, September 28, 2020**  
**Tenth Day of Tishrei 5781**  
**Yom Kippur**

Today is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonment. *Shabbat Shabbaton*. The Sabbath of Sabbaths.

On this day, review the work you have done leading up to this day. Acknowledge your accomplishments. Recognize the ways that you have changed. Ask for forgiveness and notice what this day does for you.

*Practice for this day:*

Review the teachings and your responses to the practices over the past forty days. If you have not read or completed the practices for some of the days up to this point, or for any of them, do not become discouraged. *T'shuvah* is a lifelong process. There are many opportunities to begin again. There is no better time to start than right now. After all – it's Yom Kippur.

As you look over the teachings, are there any ideas or responses that seem particularly powerful to you? Are there any ideas or feelings you particularly want to remember? Are there any thoughts you have written that you now wish to revise?

Jot down your thoughts here:

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The process of *t'shuvah* does not end with Yom Kippur. Continue to make commitments to ways you still would like to change and grow. Jot down your thoughts here:

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## **The Next Day...And Every Day After**

*T'shuvah* does not end with Yom Kippur. It never ends. For those seeking closure or some sense of completion, Yom Kippur offers this advice: Go and live your life. Do the best that you can to make wise and compassionate choices. Know ahead of time that you will make mistakes and that the same mistakes will keep coming up again and again in your thoughts and actions.

That is inevitable because we human beings are imperfect. That is the way that God designed us. That is the way that God wants us to be. It's okay.

It's okay because the doors of *t'shuvah* are always open. It is always possible for us to look at our mistakes, learn from them, and grow. You will never be perfect, but you will always have another chance to become better, to get a little bit closer to living the life that God wants for you. And that is enough.

In Jewish wisdom we understand that the effort we make to come closer to being the person we should be ... is itself being the person we should be. As we read in *Pirkei Avot*, "It is not up to you to complete the task, nevertheless you are not free to give up trying" (*Pirkei Avot* 2:16). Keep trying. Keep striving. Live your life that best way you can. When you make a mistake, return.