

YOM KIPPUR

Day of Atonement

BONUS!
Viduy
Companion

Connect to
the age-old
words

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**What is
Yom Kippur?**

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**Erev
Yom Kippur**

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**Special Tefillos
of Yom Kippur**

What is Yom Kippur?



In a Nutshell

Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is on the 10th of *Tishrei*. It is the holiest day of the year: a day of fasting, *teshuvah*, and *tefillah*. On Yom Kippur, we get as close as possible to Hashem and to our true self—who we really are deep down—pure, holy souls. It's our final opportunity to change our decree for the coming year before it is "sealed." Hashem "opens His arms wide," waiting for us to come home. No matter where we've been, He's ready to welcome us back with love.

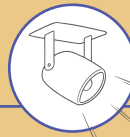
Torah Source

The source for Yom Kippur in the Torah is the *posuk* (sentence) in *Sefer Vayikra*, "For on this day [Hashem] will forgive you to cleanse you. You will be cleansed from all your sins before Hashem."⁸ After *Cheit Ha'egel* (the sin of the Golden Calf), the Jews deserved to be wiped out. Moshe pleaded with Hashem to forgive Bnei Yisrael. Finally, Hashem said, "*Salachti K'dvarecha*," (I have forgiven, according to your word).⁹ Moshe once again went up to Heaven, and this time received the second set of *luchos*. He returned on the 10th of *Tishrei*. From that day on, Yom Kippur became a time that Hashem forgives us and cleanses us from our sins. It's not just a great time to reconnect—there is actually a specific mitzvah to do teshuvah on Yom Kippur!¹⁰

Yom Kippur Halachos

Numerous actions are forbidden on Yom Kippur,² including:

- Eating or drinking (*If one cannot fast for a medical reason, they should speak to an Orthodox Rabbi to get guidance.*)
- Wearing leather shoes
- Applying lotions or creams (including many forms of makeup)
- Washing or bathing (*One may wash off dirt, as well as wash their hands until the knuckles after waking up or going to the bathroom.*)



Spotlight

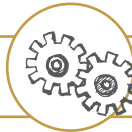
Yom Kippur a day of teshuvah, when Hashem cleanses us from our sins with lots of love.

A Serious Holiday

Yom Kippur is the most serious day of the year, but it is also filled with joy. We are confident that Hashem will accept our *teshuvah* and seal our verdict for a year of life, health and happiness. However, since it is the awesome day of judgement, we do not wear fancy jewelry like on Shabbos and Yom Tov.¹

Shabbos of Shabbasos!

On Yom Kippur, we don't do any *melacha*, just like on Shabbos.⁶ In fact, the Torah calls the day *Shabbos Shabbason*, the ultimate day of rest.⁷



Conditional Clean

The day of Yom Kippur itself purifies us, but we must meet two conditions in order to merit this special cleansing of Yom Kippur:

- 1 **Do teshuvah.**³ Teshuvah involves four steps:

Step 1 – Stop: Stop doing the aveirah.

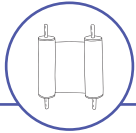
Step 2 – Regret: Feel sincere remorse for the aveirah (sin).

Step 3 – Confess: Admit out loud what you did wrong.

Step 4 – Make a Commitment: Commit to avoid doing the aveirah again in the future.

- 2 **Seek forgiveness** from others that we have hurt.

Even though teshuvah and Yom Kippur can wipe away sins between us and Hashem, they don't erase the wrongs we've done to other people unless we appease the person we harmed.⁴ That's why we have a custom before Yom Kippur to go over to friends, relatives, and acquaintances and ask for forgiveness. Be careful not to forget anyone you may have hurt and make sure you are sincere and not just doing lip service. If you owe someone money, pay them back before Yom Kippur.⁵ Hashem only forgives us after we've done our part.



On Yom Kippur It is Sealed

The Gemara teaches that on Rosh Hashanah, Hashem judges the completely righteous and the completely wicked. For everyone else, the decree is not sealed until Yom Kippur.¹¹ They say that “there are three ‘books’ open on Rosh Hashana: one for the completely wicked, one for the completely righteous and one for the people in between. Perfect *tzaddikim* are written and sealed immediately for life. Total *rashaim* are written and sealed immediately for death. Everyone else has their ‘case’ is suspended from until Yom Kippur. Then, if they merit it, they’ll be written for life. If not, they’ll be written for death. Yom Kippur is the day! Nowhere is this more clear than in the famous “*Unesaneh Tokef*” prayer that is one of the highlights of Ashkenazic davening on both Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. There we say: “On Rosh Hashana they are written and on the fast day of Yom Kippur they are sealed. How many shall pass away and how many shall be born...”. This is serious stuff, and our attitude should reflect this seriousness as we consider how much is at stake.

As we proceed to the final Ne’ilah prayer at the end of Yom Kippur, we notice that the wording of the prayers are modified to reflect this reality. Instead of asking Hashem to “write us” (“*kasveinu*”), we begin to ask Him to “seal us” (“*chasmeinu*”) for a good year. Our approach to Yom Kippur is to view it as our last chance to do teshuvah before the decree is finalized. Because so much is hanging in the balance, we fast all day, daven with extra *kavana* (intention) and many have a *minhag* wear a *kittel* (special white ‘jacket’).

A famous *Mishna* can help us understand what is going on during this powerful time: “*Akavia ben Mahalalel says, ‘Look at three things and you won’t come to do transgressions: Know where you came from, to where you are headed, and in front of Whom you will in the future give judgment and accounting.’*”¹² The Vilna Gaon¹³ explains that the two terms, *judgment* and *accounting*, refer to two different aspects that a person will be held accountable for each *aveirah* (transgression). Firstly, we will be held accountable for the transgression itself, and secondly, for all the good deeds we could have been doing at the time that we

were busy doing the sin. This leaves us with a problem. We know we can do *teshuvah* for the actual *aveirah*, but how can we fix the fact that we didn’t do *mitzvos* at the time that we were busy with sin?

There is a way out. The *gemara* says one who does *teshuvah* motivated by his love for Hashem actually causes his *aveiros* to be turned into mitzvos!¹⁴ The Maharsha¹⁵ explains that this is because someone who serves his master out of love will go out of his way to work as much as he can for his beloved master. He is not like a worker whose only concern is getting paid and tries to get away with the bare minimum. A loving servant uses all of his resources: his time, energy, and everything he has, to serve his master in the most ideal way. When someone does *teshuvah* because he loves Hashem, all the extra time and effort that he will certainly now put into his *avodas Hashem* (service of Hashem) is what makes up for all the missed opportunities and time he wasted while doing *aveiros*. The way to address this second aspect of spiritual accounting and “undo” the wasted time is by doing *teshuvah* out of love.

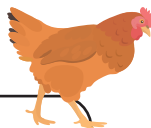
However, during the *Yamim Noraim*, when the books of life and death are lying open before Hashem there is a feeling of awe and fear that makes it difficult for a person to feel joy. In fact, this is the reason that we don’t say *Hallel* on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, as *Hallel* needs to be said with joy.¹⁶ This atmosphere of awe motivates us to do *teshuvah*, but usually only a *teshuvah* of fear, not of love.¹⁷ This fear-motivated *teshuvah* does not fully account for the time we wasted while doing *aveiros*. We should try, nonetheless, to base our *teshuvah* on a sincere desire to improve our relationship with Hashem and not only because of the fear engendered by the seriousness of the day.

We should remember that it’s never too late to do *teshuvah* and our relationship with our Father in Heaven is super important to us. We are fortunate that out of His great love for us, He gave us this great day of Yom Kippur where He “cleans the slate” and forgives us for our misdeeds if only we do *teshuvah* and sincerely want to come back to Him.

How can you make the most of the time between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur?

Erev Yom Kippur

Cock-a-doodle-doo



There's a *minhag* called "*kaparos*" before Yom Kippur.²¹ This involves taking an animal, (commonly a chicken) or money, and swinging it over one's head three times while saying a special *tefillah*. If an animal is used, it's then slaughtered according to *halacha* and donated to the poor or other charitable cause as a *z'chus* (merit). If money is used, it's likewise given to *tzedakah*, which is an important part of repentance. While we do *kaparos*, we should recognize that due to our sins, we really deserve everything that is happening to the animal.²² This thought should encourage us to do *teshuvah*. *Kaparos* is not a sacrifice, and it doesn't magically erase our sins—it just helps us wake up and do *teshuvah* before Yom Kippur.

Minchah and Mikva

Many have the custom to go to the *mikvah* before *Mincha* to purify themselves and enter Yom Kippur spiritually pure and ready for a fresh start.¹⁸ Then comes a special *Minchah* that includes *Viduy*—confessing our sins. *Viduy* is such an important part of *teshuvah*¹⁹ that Chazal said we should even say it before Yom Kippur begins, in case something unexpected stops us from saying it later. This is also why we say *Minchah* with *Viduy* even before the *Seudah Hamafsekes* (see Food Mood), just to be sure nothing will prevent us from confessing our sins.²⁰

Food Mood

Ever wish it was a mitzvah to eat? Well, now it is! There is a *mitzvah de'Oraisah* (from the Torah) to eat on Erev Yom Kippur!²³ The main meal is called *Seudah Hamafsekes*, and some have an additional meal earlier in the day, too. We start the *seudah* by dipping our challah into honey, just like on Rosh Hashanah. Some eat stuffed cabbage and/or *Kreplach* (meat covered in dough), which may symbolize our hope for the harsh judgment to be covered by Hashem's mercy.²⁴ It's better to eat light foods like chicken instead of heavy foods like beef.²⁵ And be careful not to overeat at this meal! A normal, balanced meal is the best way to feel strong and clear-headed going into Yom Kippur. If you plan to eat or drink again after the *Seudah Hamafsekes*, make sure to say or have that in mind before you say *Birchas Hamazon*. That way, you're still allowed to eat until the fast begins. Lastly, be very careful to stop eating a few minutes before Yom Kipper begins!

Beautiful Blessing

There's a lot of love and blessing in the air as Yom Kippur rolls in. Before the fast begins, there's a beautiful custom for parents to place one or both hands on their child's head and bless them *Birchas Kohanim*. They can then add their own personal blessings for their child. It's a powerful way to enter a powerful day!²⁶

Light up

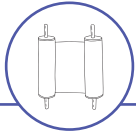
We light Yom Tov candles before *shkia* (sundown), just like on Erev Shabbos. First make the bracha, "*lehadlik ner shel yom-hakipurim*," and then the joyous *Shehecheyanu* blessing. With that, we welcome in the holiest day of the year. The Yom Kippur fast starts before sundown and lasts for approximately 25 hours until nightfall the next day. There is also a custom to light a *yizkor* candle. If someone lost a parent, before lighting the Yom Tov candles, they first light a *yizkor* candle that remains lit over the entire Yom Kippur.



Did You Know?

Extra *tzedakah* is given on Erev Yom Kippur, especially before *Minchah*. Many shuls set up trays for donations so everyone can give according to their means.²⁷ Helping others brings us extra merit on this day.





The Mitzvah to Eat

After the Torah gives us the commandment of Yom Kippur, the *posuk* says, “And you shall afflict your soul on the ninth of the month in the evening.”²⁸ What does this mean? Yom Kippur is on the tenth, not the ninth! We don’t afflict ourselves or fast on Erev Yom Kippur. Just the opposite!

Our Sages explain that Hashem said that if we eat on Erev Yom Kippur, He will consider it *as if we fasted* for two days—on both the ninth and the tenth.²⁹ In fact, there is a *mitzvah de’oraisa* to eat on Erev Yom Kippur. The mitzvah of eating on Erev Yom Kippur is so important that we even cut back on the amount of Selichos we say on Erev Yom Kippur to leave ample time for eating!³⁰

Numerous explanations are given for this interesting reality. Some say that Hashem, in His boundless love for us,³¹ was concerned that we may have so much trepidation for the day of Yom Kippur that we would endanger ourselves by fasting for two days, on Erev Yom Kippur and on Yom Kippur. Hashem therefore gave us a specific mitzvah to eat on Erev Yom Kippur, and told us eating would be instead of fasting on this day.

Another explanation given is that Yom Kippur is a Yom Tov, but unlike other Yamim Tovim, we’re not allowed to eat on this holiday, and cannot have a *seudah* as we usually do. We therefore have the festive meals in advance, on Erev Yom Kippur. Eating well on Erev Yom Kippur also helps prepare us for the fast ahead and gives us the strength we need to daven with focus and intensity throughout Yom Kippur.³² The *Tur* explains it beautifully: *This [eating on Erev Yom Kippur] stems from*

*[Hashem’s] great love for His people, for He commanded them to fast only one day a year - for their benefit, so that their sins might be atoned. He commanded them to first eat and drink so that they might fast and the affliction would not harm them.*³³

These explanations all shed light on the mitzvah to eat on Erev Yom Kippur. However, in what way is the eating like fasting? We know there is a mitzvah to eat, but how is it equivalent to its opposite, fasting?

Our Rabbis explain that eating on Erev Yom Kippur actually intensifies the experience of the fast itself. After a day of satisfying meals, the sudden shift into complete fasting makes the fast more deeply felt. This does not contradict the idea that eating on Erev Yom Kippur gives us strength for Yom Kippur. The nutrients stay in our system to support us, even though the sensation of hunger becomes sharper.³⁴ While it’s a great mitzvah to eat heartily on this day, one should be careful to eat only foods that are easy to digest. The righteous would eat only light foods, often in small meals spaced throughout the day, savoring the opportunity to perform the mitzvah of eating with joy and purpose in every bite.

How can physical pleasures, like a festive meal, help prepare us for deep spiritual work?



Valuable Fish

The *Midrash* tells over a story that shows how devoted Jews were to this mitzvah: One *Erev Yom Kippur* in Rome, a Jewish tailor entered the market to buy fish. Only one fish was available—desired by both him and the servant of the Roman governor. A bidding war ensued, with each increasing the price until the tailor won it for twelve *dinars*. That evening, during the governor’s meal, the servant was questioned for failing to bring fish. He explained the bidding dispute with the tailor, concluding: “Would you want me to spend twelve *dinars* on a fish?” The governor, curious, demanded to meet the tailor. When asked why he had paid so much, the tailor responded with heartfelt sincerity: “We have only one day a year—*Yom Kippur*—when all our sins are atoned for. Should we not honor that day properly?” Impressed by his devotion, the governor pardoned him. Hashem repaid this sincere tailor. When the tailor cut open the fish, he discovered a precious gem inside. He was able to use it to support himself for the rest of his life!³⁶



Tefillah Time

No Thanks, But Still Thanks!

Usually, we say *Mizmor L’sodah*³⁵ in *Shacharis*, right after *Boruch She’amar*. It’s a song of thanks that replaces the *korban todah* (thanksgiving offering) that used to be brought in the *Beis Hamikdash*. But on *Erev Yom Kippur* we skip it because a *korban todah* couldn’t be brought the day before Yom Kippur (since it had to be eaten that day and night, and we can’t eat on the night of Yom Kippur).

Special Tefillos of Yom Kippur

Five Yom Kippur Prayers

On *Rosh Hashanah*, Hashem opens the Books of Life and Death and writes each person's decree for the coming year. For most people, the decision isn't sealed then—it hangs in the balance for the next ten days, until Yom Kippur. That's why the *tefillos* of Yom Kippur are so powerful. They're designed to wake us up, shake us up, and inspire us to change. We do *teshuvah* and beg Hashem to forgive us and seal us for a year of life, blessing, and peace. We add on both a Mussaf and a special fifth tefillah called "Neila" on Yom Kippur to our usual Shacharis, Mincha, and Maariv tefillos, to come to a total of 5 Shemoneh Esrays. See below for other additional prayers that are special for this holy day.

White as Snow

On Yom Kippur, many men wear *kittels*—special white outer garments, and many women wear clean white clothing to honor the day. Why white? It's the color of angels, who are totally spiritual beings. All the mitzvos of Yom Kippur are meant to help us let go of physical things as much as possible so we can be reach that level.³⁸ We even say *Baruch Shem* after *Shema* loud and clear, just like the angels do.³⁹ But white also reminds us of burial shrouds. That may seem frightening, but it's meant to wake us up and remind us of the day of death when a person faces judgment. Life is precious, and Yom Kippur is the ultimate opportunity to do *teshuvah* and change.⁴⁰

Kol Nidrei

The tefillos of Yom Kippur start with the haunting melody of *Kol Nidrei*. Many shuls take all of the *Sifrei Torah* out of the *Aron*, and the *chazzan* chants the *Kol Nidrei* prayer three times, each time rising in intensity. In *Kol Nidrei*, we ask Hashem to release us from vows we made and may not keep.³⁷ This does not allow us to break our word! In fact, stepping into the holiest day of the year with *Kol Nidrei* shows the extreme seriousness the Torah attaches to keeping our word.

Krias HaTorah

During *Shacharis* on Yom Kippur, we read a section from *Vayikra* that describes the *Kohen Gadol's* *Avodah* in the *Beis Hamikdash*—the special service he performed to bring atonement for all of *Klal Yisrael*.⁴² The *haftarah* comes from *Sefer Yeshaya*.⁴³ The *Navi* teaches us that fasting alone isn't enough. Real *teshuvah* means changing our actions—being kind, helping those in need, and living the way Hashem wants us to.

Crashing the Heavens

During the Chazzan's repetition of *Shemoneh Esrei*, *Selichos* prayers are recited, including the powerful *Shlosh Esrei Middos Harachamim* – the Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy, recited in unison. These are only said with a *minyan*, not when davening at home. After each *Tefillah*, the *Aron Kodesh* is opened for the great prayer of *Avinu Malkeinu*, composed by the great Rabbi Akiva. When Yom Kippur falls on Shabbos, *Avinu Malkeinu* is only recited at Ne'ilah.

Yizkor

The *Yizkor* service is an ancient custom of remembering the souls of the departed and pledging *tzedakah* in their memory.⁴¹ We know that even after a person dies, the soul lives on and can attain higher levels of purity and holiness. However, they can only achieve that through the actions of the living. The *tzedakah* we give in their memory gives their *neshamah* an *aliya* (raise). All those with two living parents leave Shul during *Yizkor*.



Viduy: Owning Our Mistakes

Viduy means admitting the wrong things we've done. It's one of the most important parts of doing teshuvah and of all the tefillos of Yom Kippur! We say *Viduy* ten times throughout Yom Kippur – during each of the five times we recite *Shemoneh Esrei* as well as during the *Chazaras Hashatz* (Chazzan's repetition of *Shemoneh Esrei*). It's written in the order of the *aleph-beis* to make it easier to remember.⁴⁴ We stand humbly, slightly bent over,⁴⁵ and as we list each sin, we lightly strike our chest with our fist. It's like saying: "It was my impulses—my heart—that led me to mess up." If you remember a specific sin not included in the regular *viduy*, quietly express it here.⁴⁶ By speaking honestly and showing regret, we start to clean our slate and return to Hashem.

Viduy Companion

This Viduy companion is not meant to replace the Viduy itself, but to serve as an additional resource to make it easier to connect more deeply with its age-old words. It can be used as a springboard for reflecting on areas in need of teshuvah.

Ashamnu – We have become guilty, we have damaged our spiritual core

- We've exposed ourselves to things that dull our sensitivity to growth.
- We waste energy looking at others' lives instead of fixing our own.
- We've viewed or shared content that lowers us.
- We neglect the things and people that matter most.

Reflection: *What's one thing holding you back from being your ideal self?*

Bagadnu – We have betrayed

- We ask Hashem for what we lack but forget to thank Him for what we have.
- We project our inner frustration onto others.
- We don't truly listen—we interpret instead.

Reflection: *List 10 things Hashem has given you this past week.*

Gazalnu – We have robbed

- We hide our real selves from others.
- We use work time for personal needs.
- We make decisions for convenience, not integrity.
- We laugh off dishonesty instead of confronting it.

Reflection: *Where can I be more honest and courageous?*

Dibarnu Dofi – We have spoken slander

- We say things about people we wouldn't say to their face.
- We enjoy or spread gossip.
- We dismiss others too quickly.
- Our words of criticism outweigh praise.
- We consume media that mocks or tears others down.

Reflection: *Can I shift my speech toward the positive?*

He'veinu – We have perverted

- We've chosen what's easy over what's right.
- We've influenced others negatively.
- We don't talk about spiritual topics.
- We focus too much on ourselves.
- We encourage others to waste time too.

Reflection: *Think of someone you can uplift—and start now.*

Ve'hirshanu – We have led others to sin

- We encourage people to sin.
- We don't try to make the world a better place.
- We don't speak up when something is wrong.
- We drain others with negativity instead of radiating positivity

Reflection: *How can I help the people around me grow?*

Zadnu – We have sinned intentionally and justified it

- When did I last give something up for Hashem?
- We allow outside influences to shape our values.
- We choose role models who do not help us become better people.
- We avoid making the right decision by claiming it's "complicated"?

Reflection: *Try arguing the other side of a disagreement to honestly assess what is right.*

Chamasnu – We have taken advantage of others

- We look down on others.
- We use people for what they can do for us.
- We favor people based on status.
- We point out others' limits without encouraging their strengths.

Reflection: *What strength does someone else have that I admire?*

Tafalnu Sheker – We have clung to falsehood

- We exaggerate or misrepresent reality.
- We believe other's distorted views.
- We believe and pass along rumors.
- We judge others too fast.

Reflection: *Can I unplug from sources that don't value truth?*



Ya'atznu Ra – We have given bad advice

- We give advice too quickly without thinking.
- We don't take other people's problems seriously.
- We give biased advice that benefit us instead of them.

Reflection: *When someone asks you for advice, first stop and make sure you really understand their situation.*

Kizavnu – We have deceived

- We promise things we don't intend to keep.
- We excuse ourselves by saying people don't expect others to keep their word.
- We mislead with words.
- We follow the crowd over our own values.

Reflection: *Avoid words like "always" or "never" unless they're true.*

Latznu – We have mocked

- We make fun of meaningful things.
- We ridiculed honest and dedicated people.
- We accept a world that steps on others to succeed.
- We sometimes hide our Judaism.

Reflection: *When have I chosen long-term meaning over short-term fun?*

Maradnu – We have rebelled

- We know what Hashem wants, but defy Him.
- We haven't made a plan of how to accomplish what we know Hashem wants.
- We refused to keep a halacha because we don't think it makes sense.
- We treat mitzvos like feel-good customs, not commands.

Reflection: *Speak about Hashem at your next Shabbos or Yom Tov seudah (meal).*

Ni'atznu – We have angered Hashem

- We showed disrespect for Hashem.
- We give more time to our bodies than to our souls.
- We lack reverence for mitzvos.

Reflection: *How much time do I spend focusing on spiritual pursuits?*

Sararnu – We have turned away

- We don't care about mitzvos.
- We've allowed gifts of blessing and prosperity to make us complacent.
- We dodge responsibility and avoid leadership roles.
- We're quick to form opinions without learning.

Reflection: *How often do I miss opportunities for mitzvos?*

Avinu – We have become twisted

- We exchange simple honesty for corrupted reasoning.
- We get drawn into undignified conversations.
- We don't distance ourselves from vulgar content.

Reflection: *How can I identify with my higher self?*

Pashanu – We have denied the validity of mitzvos

- We pick and choose parts of Judaism.
- Our priorities are conflicted.
- We don't think enough about our values.

Reflection: *Which mitzvah can I strengthen this year?*

Tzararnu – We have caused pain

- We hurt others and walk away.
- We ignore others' pain and just focus on our own lives.
- We have made commitments that cause us spiritual harm.

Reflection: *Think of someone you know who is in pain, and focus on experiencing their pain with them.*

Kishinu Oref – We have been stubborn

- We blame Hashem when things go wrong but forget Him when they go right.
- We treat life like a string of coincidences.
- We see difficulties as chance, not a result of our sins.
- We stubbornly resist growth.

Reflection: *How much in my day do I really control?*

Rashanu – We have acted wickedly

- We forget we're here to spread goodness.
- We do things that the Torah categorizes as wicked, like hitting others, stealing and planning to sin
- We see morals as opinions, not truths.
- We show off our sins.

Reflection: *What's something I did that I'm ashamed of?*

Shichasnu – We have corrupted our character

- We've been arrogant.
- We've gotten extremely angry.
- We are apathetic towards charities.
- We don't care about sins related to immorality.

Reflection: *Before Yom Kippur, Write up a character analysis of yourself and decide which areas you want to improve in.*

Ti'avnu – We have been abominable

- We lost our self-respect.
- We ignore what shapes our character.
- We do things that are disgusting in Hashem's eyes.

Reflection: *What filters can I add to protect my soul?*

Ta'inu – We have gone astray

- We've lost sight of our goals and direction.
- We reject criticism.
- We limit Judaism to specific times or places.

Reflection: *Find a friend to grow with.*

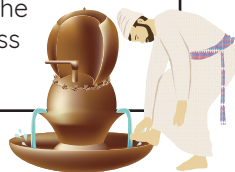
Titanu – We have scorned those who could guide us

- We don't ask Hashem for help with our spirituality.
- We have strayed and brought others along with us.
- We don't seek guidance from those that are moral.
- We don't feel the pain of distancing ourselves from Hashem.

Reflection: *Think of a role model you could ask for guidance from.*

Reliving the Avodah

Like all *Mussaf* prayers, the Yom Kippur *Mussaf* replaces the additional *korbanos* once brought in the *Beis Hamikdash*. That's why we mention the animals used in the *Avodah*. In *Chazaras HaShatz*, the *chazzan* recites a detailed description of the Yom Kippur *Avodah* in the *Beis Hamikdash*. The highlight is when the *Kohen Gadol* entered the *Kodesh HaKadashim*—the Holy of Holies. He was the only person allowed in that sacred space, and only once a year. We also recall how the *Kohen Gadol* would pronounce Hashem's holy Name, and the people would respond by bowing down in awe. When we reach these parts, many have the custom to bow down, with their face to the ground.⁵⁷ And just like on *Rosh Hashanah*, Ashkenazim are moved by the powerful *Unesaneh Tokef* prayer, which captures the awesome power and seriousness of the day.



Sefer Yona

Before *Minchah* on Yom Kippur, we read *Sefer Yonah*—a powerful story that shows the unbelievable strength of *teshuvah* to reverse even the harshest decree.⁴⁹ *Yonah HaNavi* was sent by Hashem to tell the people of *Ninveh* to repent. He didn't want to go—he worried it would make *Bnei Yisrael* look bad if non-Jews did *teshuvah* and the Jews didn't.⁵⁰ So he ran away... or so he thought. Yonah boarded a ship, but Hashem sent a huge storm. The sailors threw him into the sea, and he was swallowed by a giant fish. In the belly of the fish, Yonah realized a message integral to Yom Kippur: you can't run from Hashem.⁵¹ He *davened*, and thanked Hashem for saving him.⁵² Hashem made the fish spit Yonah out on dry land and again commanded Yonah to go to *Ninveh*. Now, faced with the same choice as when he started out, Yonah was able to show his complete repentance,⁵³ as he went to do his mission in *Ninveh*. The people there listened to him and did such a sincere *teshuvah*, that it remains an example for us to follow.⁵⁴



Ne'ilah: The Gates Are Closing

Yom Kippur has one extra *tefillah*—*Ne'ilah*, the fifth and final prayer of the day. It means "closing," because we say it as the Heavenly gates are about to shut. The sun is setting, Yom Kippur is ending—and this is our last chance to change our verdict for a year of life, blessing and peace. We may be tired and hungry, but these are the most powerful moments of the whole day – of the whole year, really! Try to give it one more push by having *kavanah* and sending up a heartfelt *tefillah*, maybe even with a few sincere tears.⁵⁵ During this time, as the heavenly books are closing, we switch from asking for being "written," to being "sealed," for a good year. At the end of *Ne'ilah*, we blow the *shofar*,⁵⁶ and a feeling of joy and relief fill the room. We are confident that Hashem has accepted our *teshuvah*, *tefillos* and fasting and will forgive us with mercy and love. With hope in our hearts, we call out: "*L'shanah haba'ah b'Yerushalayim!*" (Next year in Jerusalem!)

Havdalah & ... Breakfast!

After Yom Kippur ends, we make *Havdalah* over a cup of wine. We don't say the *brachah* on *besamim* unless Yom Kippur was on *Shabbos*. We do use a *Havdalah* candle—but it should be lit from a flame that burned throughout Yom Kippur, like a *yahrtzeit* candle. Then comes break-fast! The night after Yom Kippur is considered a mini *Yom Tov* and we eat a festive meal to celebrate our clean slate.⁴⁷ There's also a beautiful custom to start building your *sukkah* right after Yom Kippur, in order to go straight from one mitzvah to another.⁴⁸



Corny Corner

What happened to the guy who wouldn't stop joking on Yom Kippur?

He got pun-ished!

Zoniac Zone



Key Takeaways

The Torah says, “On this day, He will atone for you...”⁵⁸ Yom Kippur holds incredible spiritual power. There is one opinion in the *Gemara* that even if someone doesn’t do *teshuvah*, the holiness of the day alone brings atonement. While we don’t follow that opinion in halacha, it teaches us just how special and powerful this day is. Yom Kippur isn’t just a deadline—it’s a

gift. Hashem gave us this day so that *teshuvah* could be easier and more effective. It’s a time to review, reflect, and reconnect. When we sincerely return to Hashem, not only are our *aveiros* wiped away, even the spiritual destruction they caused is repaired. The darkness lifts, and we’re brought back to a place of holiness and closeness with Hashem.⁵⁹



Yom Kippur Prayers — Too Long

Rabbi Chaim Mintz
from *Ask The Rabbi*, Book 1 pg.285

I find Yom Kippur services to be too long. I know it should be a meaningful day, but I find myself just waiting for it to be over. What should I do?

On a basic level, one way to look at the strain of a long Yom Kippur davening is, “L’fum tzaara agra — The reward is in proportion to the pain” (Pirkei Avos 5:26). When a mitzvah is difficult for you to do but you do it anyway, your reward is much greater than it would have been if the mitzvah had been easy.

However, it would be a shame if you would stop at that. There is so much more to the Yom Kippur davening than simply suffering through it. Your trouble comes from a lack of understanding about what is happening in shul, in your life, and in Heaven, as you say these prayers. If you would appreciate what is happening and what the prayers are all about, you would enjoy every minute!

One way to appreciate what is happening is by preparing for the davening and learning the meaning of the words. Obtain a machzor with a good translation, read the explanations of the prayers, and review the service ahead of time. Then you will understand what you are saying and new worlds will be opened.

Another way to prepare for this wonderful day is by listening to lectures expounding the greatness of the day. There are so many different options of all types of speakers, there is no doubt that you can find one that resonates with you. This will help you

gain a greater appreciation for this auspicious day, and what can be accomplished by every individual.

Another very helpful tool is learning about the great, awesome Yom Kippur service that took place each year in the Holy Temple (Beis HaMikdash). The Jewish nation felt incredible joy at its conclusion, knowing that their slate had been wiped clean and they could once again serve Hashem unburdened by sin. Although we don’t have this service today, the Mussaf prayer of Yom Kippur is its substitute. An understanding and appreciation of its greatness will transform the davening from mere lip service into a deep and meaningful prayer, enabling you to relive that glorious time and feel more deeply the special joy of this day.

So with the right preparation, you can join the many people who look forward to Yom Kippur as a day in which they can recharge their spiritual batteries, focusing completely on their connection with Hashem. They appreciate the greatness of this day, when we can clean our slates of sin and reach very high levels of spirituality. These people are so engaged in what is happening that they don’t even notice the time. This can happen even if you’re reading the prayers in English. Yom Kippur is the opportunity to begin anew — perhaps the most precious gift Hashem has given us. It takes effort and preparation to appreciate this gift, but it is time well spent.

IN SHORT: Prepare for the davening by learning the meaning of the words, or by learning about the greatness of this day.



Dust In the Wind

I close my eyes
Only for a moment and the moments gone
All my dreams
Pass before my eyes, ooh so fleetingly

Chorus:

Dust in the wind
All we are is dust in the wind

All we do
Crumbles to the ground, but we choose to deny
It slips away
And all your money won't another minute buy

Chorus

Adam Yesodo M'Afar....

(But) All our deeds
Mitzvos that we do last for eternity
His lasting faith
Stays with us even when we don't believe

Chorus x2

Everyone can rise from dust again
V'Atah Hu Melech...



Zoniac Challenge

Teshuvah Taboo

One of the key steps of teshuvah is *viduy* — admitting our mistakes with words. Think you've got the skills to speak... even when certain words are taboo?

Instructions: One TorahMate is the Clue-Giver. The other is the Guesser. (Guesser - don't look at the upside-down words!) The Clue-Giver chooses a word or phrase from the list below and must get the Guesser to guess it, all without saying any of the taboo words underneath it. Set a 1-minute timer. The goal is to get through as many as possible!

FOR CLUE GIVER ONLY:

- 1 DON'T SAY: confession, sin, chest, ashamnu, al chet
- 2 Ne'ilah
- 3 DON'T SAY: final, gates, close, end, judgment
- 4 Kittel
- 5 DON'T SAY: white, robe, clothing, worn, men
- 6 Kaparos
- 7 DON'T SAY: chicken, wave, money, sins, tzedakah
- 8 Seudas Hamafsekes
- 9 DON'T SAY: meal, last, drink, fast, eat
- 10 Book of Life
- 11 DON'T SAY: write, inscribe, sealed, judged, year



Zoniac Dilemma

TOO LATE?

Eli had a rough start to the summer. He let his temper get the best of him and spread a rumor about someone in his bunk. At first, he felt guilty and apologized, but deep down, he figured it was too late. The damage was done. His bunkmate stopped talking to him, and the other guys looked at him differently. Over time, Eli just stopped thinking about it. Now it's Yom Kippur night. There's a somber feeling in the air. As Eli starts saying *Viduy*, he suddenly remembers his camp fiasco. The guilt rushes back. He wants to mean what he's saying. He wants to fix things. But a voice in his head whispers, "Come on, you really think one day of davening can undo all that?"

Can Yom Kippur really make a difference—especially when the mistake already left its mark?



Helpful Tip!



Make your fast easier by hydrating well before the fast. Skip the coffee or soda—caffeine can make fasting harder. In the days leading up to Yom Kippur, try to cut back on caffeine to avoid a headache. They also sell delayed release pills such as "fastaid" and "kalei tzom" to take before the fast to prevent headaches.



Daily Challenge

Think of one thing you regret doing and how that action hurts you or others.

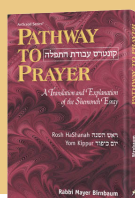


Sources

- 1) Mishna Berurah 610:16
- 2) Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 612-614
- 3) Orach Chaim 607:6
- 4) Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 2:9, Yuma 85b
- 5) Orach Chaim 606:1
- 6) Orach Chaim 611:2
- 7) Vayikra 16:31 with Ibn Ezra there
- 8) Vayikra 16:30
- 9) Bamidbar 14:20
- 10) Sefer Hachinuch, Mitzvah 185
- 11) Rosh Hashanah 16a and 16b
- 12) Avos 3:1
- 13) Gra on Pirkei Avos 3:1
- 14) Yoma 86b
- 15) Maharsha on Gemara Yoma 86b
- 16) Rosh Hashanah 32a
- 17) Beis Efraim
- 18) Orach Chaim 606:4, Mishna Berurah 606:17-18
- 19) Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah, 1:1 and 2:5
- 20) Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah, 2:7
- 21) Rosh Yuma 8:23 and Mordechai start of Yuma
- 22) Mishna Berurah 605:2
- 23) Magen Avraham 570:9 and Aruch Hashulchan 604:7-9
- 24) See Taamei Haminhagim, ch. 36 (p. 328 in Jerusalem edition)
- 25) Mishnah Berurah 608:16
- 26) Beis Yaakov, as quoted in the Artscroll Yom Kippur Machzor
- 27) Matte Efraim 607:3
- 28) Vayikra 23:32
- 29) Gemara Yuma 81b as brought by the Tur 604
- 30) S.A. O. C. 604:1 and Mishna Berurah 604:1
- 31) Bach 604:2
- 32) Rabbeinu Yona in Shaarei Teshuvah 4:10
- 33) Tur, Orach Chaim 604
- 34) Shiblei Leket 307 as brought by Eliyahu Rabbah in Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 604:1
- 35) Tehillim 100
- 36) Bereshis Rabbah 11:4
- 37) The generally accepted opinion of Rabbeinu Tam, based on nullifying future vows Nedarim 23b
- 38) Drashos Maharal for Shabbos Shuva (Maharal of Prague)
- 39) Orach Chaim 619:2 and Mishna Brura 619:8
- 40) Orach Chaim 610:4
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- 42) Vayikra Perek 16
- 43) Yeshaya 57:14-58:14
- 44) Kaf Hachaim 607:18
- 45) Mishna Berurah 607:10
- 46) Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 607:1-2, with Mishna Berurah
- 47) Rama, Orach Chaim 624:5
- 48) Ibid
- 49) Levush, quoted by Artscroll Yom Kippur Machzor
- 50) Rashi, citing mehilta Bo
- 51) Abudarham, quoted by Artscroll Yom Kippur Machzor
- 52) Ramban, HaEmunah V'Habitachon Ch.15
- 53) Rambam, Hilchos Teshuvah 2:1
- 54) Shelah, quoted by Artscroll Yom Kippur Machzor
- 55) Mishna Berurah 623:3
- 56) Orach Chaim 623:6
- 57) Ibid 621:4
- 58) Vayikra 16:30
- 59) Derech Hashem 4: Mitzvos Zemanim 5



Dig Deeper *Resources for Advanced Learning*



**Pathway to
Prayer Rosh
Hashana/Yom
Kippur**
More info



**Orot Sephardi
Yom Kippur
Machzor**
More info



**Yom Kippur:
The Key to
Forgiveness**

<https://www.torahmates.org/jewish-resources/the-key-to-forgiveness/>

TESHUVAH

Returning to G-d

❶

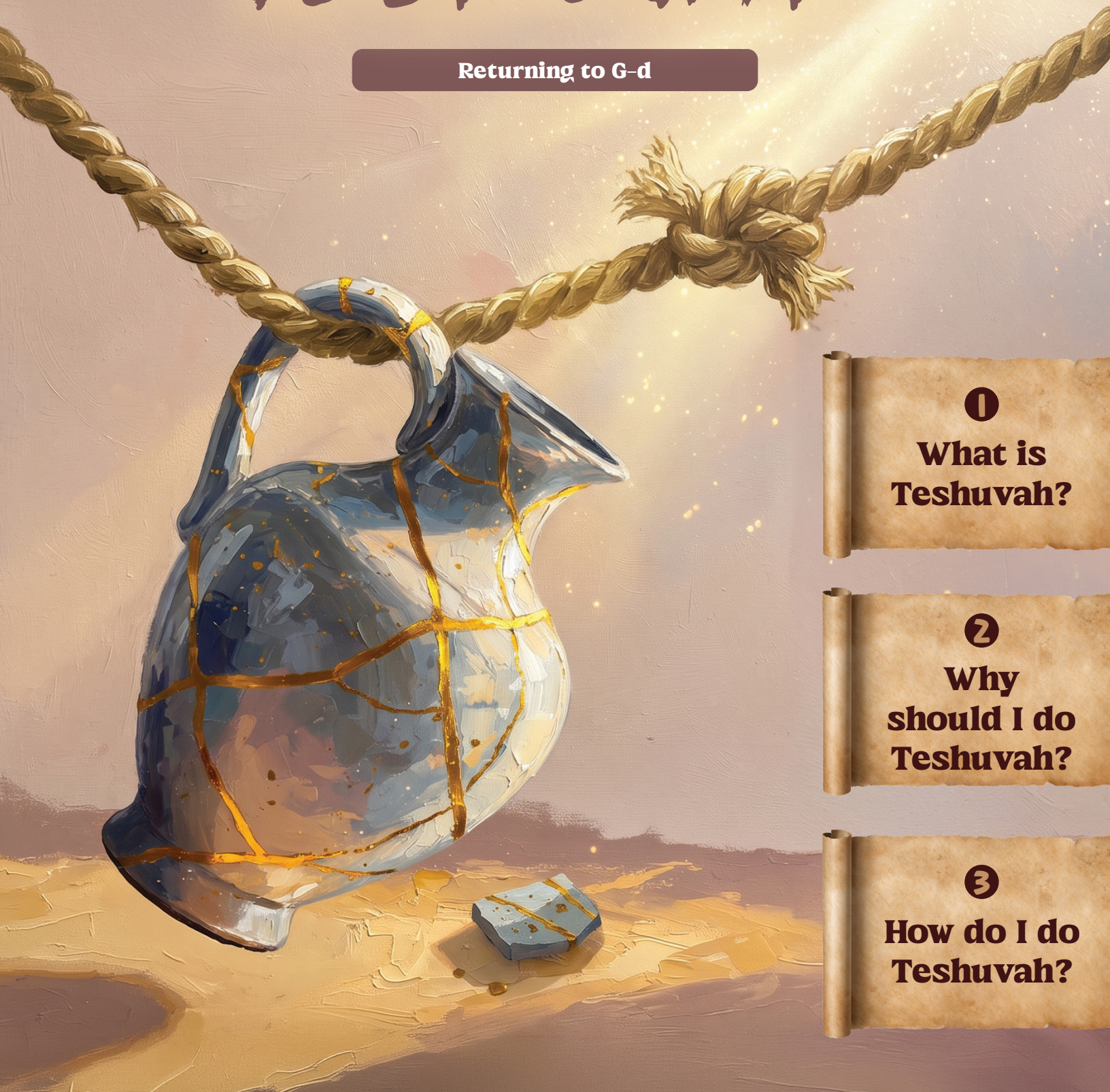
**What is
Teshuvah?**

❷

**Why
should I do
Teshuvah?**

❸

**How do I do
Teshuvah?**



What is Teshuvah?

Ctrl + Z

The word teshuvah means to return. When we do something wrong, it distances us from Hashem. But teshuvah allows us to fix our mistakes and brings us back, closer than ever. Hashem gave us this miraculous gift because He loves us deeply and wants us to be close to Him. Hashem prepared a step-by-step guide for us, showing us exactly what to do when we make a mistake, so that we never have to give up, no matter how lost or far from we feel from Him. No matter what we've done, teshuvah gives us a way to fix our wrongdoings and return to Hashem.

Magic Eraser

So, I made a mistake because I'm human. I really messed up. Now what? Am I just stuck with this sin forever? It might feel that way because, naturally, we can't change the past. What's done is done, right?

Imagine spending months creating a beautiful drawing. Suddenly, you spill ink all over it. No matter how much you regret it, the stain is there, and your art is ruined forever.

Hashem, in His kindness, gave us a miraculous gift—teshuvah! Teshuvah is like a giant eraser that lets us go back and fix our mistakes. We can take responsibility, make changes, and even undo the damage! We are never stuck with our sins or beyond repair.

And here's where it gets even more amazing: if we do teshuvah out of love for Hashem—not just regret or guilt—our mistakes don't just disappear. Instead, they're transformed into mitzvos! The very thing we regret becomes an opportunity for growth and connection with Hashem.

Teshuvah doesn't just help us clean up our mistakes. It actually brings us closer to Hashem than we were before. This incredible gift reminds us that no matter how much we mess up, Hashem always gives us a way to fix things, grow, and move forward.



Spotlight

**It's ok to mess up –
you can fix your mistakes!**

Humans Make Mistakes

Everyone makes mistakes—that's just part of being human! Hashem, our Creator, knows this better than anyone. In fact, He made us with flaws and imperfections on purpose! King Shlomo, the wisest of all men, said,¹ "There is no person on Earth who only does good and never sins." Even the greatest people in Jewish history made big mistakes. From Adam eating from the *Eitz Hada'as* to the sins of Bnei Yisroel in the desert, the Torah openly shares their struggles and mistakes.

It's impossible to live a perfect life—and that's okay! Hashem didn't create us to be perfect. He put us in this world to learn, grow, and work on becoming better versions of ourselves. Mistakes are part of that process. We try our best, learn from our mistakes, and aim to improve. After all, making mistakes is simply part of being human.



Torah Challenge

In *Lashon Kodesh*, the *shoresh*, root, of a word, tells us about the essence of the word. Therefore, different words with the same *shoresh* will share some similarity:

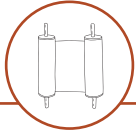
All these words share the shoresh שב.

Can you see a connection in all these things?

- | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. שְׁבֶּת (Shabbos) | 3. שׁוּב (To return) |
| 2. תְּשׁוּבָה (Repentance) | 4. תְּשׁוּבָה (An answer) |
| | 5. יוֹשֵׁב (To sit or dwell) |

Which Came First?

Teshuvah is the ultimate goal of creation! Teshuvah wasn't created because we make mistakes, Hashem created us capable of making mistakes so that we can do teshuvah.



The Perfection of Imperfection

The Torah teaches us that Hashem created teshuvah even before He created the world.² This means that before the planets existed, before He created humans, before anyone could've possibly sinned, teshuvah was already set up for us.

This challenges us to rethink what teshuvah really means. Why would teshuvah exist before the Creation, before man had ever sinned? It must be that the true essence of teshuvah is much more than just fixing mistakes, as it existed long before mistakes did.

We tend to think of teshuvah as a spiritual reset—a way to clean up our mistakes and regain purity. But it's not just about wiping the slate clean and returning to the same reality as before. Teshuvah holds a deeper, cosmic purpose, important enough to precede the creation of the Universe itself! To understand this, let's take a closer look at what a mistake is, and how the "fixing" process affects the person.

By definition, mistakes aren't supposed to happen. However, they are also an essential part of life. Without them, a person wouldn't grow or learn. The Torah highlights the mistakes of some of the greatest figures in our history—Adam, Reuven, Yehudah, and David HaMelech, to name a few. Torah isn't a history book, detailing the lives and struggles of our ancestors just to document what happened. Every incident and story is there to teach us a monumental life lesson. These accounts show us that even the holiest people stumble, but through teshuvah, rise to even greater heights.

Our greatest, most revered leaders are known to have made tremendous, even devastating mistakes, yet were able to restore and develop their connection to Hashem through the process of teshuvah. What truly matters is resilience—the strength to get up again, learn from your errors, and grow stronger in your understanding of yourself and your connection to Hashem.

Hashem created humans as imperfect beings on purpose! Mistakes give us the ability to climb the ladder of self-understanding

and really work on ourselves in a way that brings us closer to Hashem. Teshuvah is about uncovering the hidden opportunity within mistakes and turning our failures into something even greater than never messing up.

Of course, this doesn't mean we can take sin lightly, or that we should sin so that we could grow from it, G-d forbid! Someone who sins because they know that they can do teshuvah after actually loses the ability to do teshuvah³.

Teshuvah, which means "to return," is about realigning ourselves with Hashem. It encompasses two levels.⁴ The first level focuses on our behavior, which means following Hashem's Torah, doing His mitzvos, and avoiding sin. A person at this stage might still struggle with the desire to do wrong but works hard to overcome it. This is where most of us are—fighting the battle between our physical, human impulses and our holy neshamah, which longs to do Hashem's will. The goal is to win that fight and do what's right.

The second level of teshuvah goes beyond actions. It's about transforming who we are inside by changing our thoughts and desires so they align completely with Hashem's will. At this level, there's no inner conflict; a person naturally wants what Hashem wants, and their actions flow from a pure, holy place.

Most people aren't yet up to this level, and that's okay. Hashem placed us in a world where struggle is part of our purpose, yet we can still strive for this higher level and allow our mistakes to lead us through the teshuvah process. This not only changes our actions but also what we want and who we are.

This deeper understanding of teshuvah helps explain why it was created before the world. teshuvah, and the closeness to Hashem it creates, is the ultimate goal of creation! Hashem didn't make teshuvah merely as a backup plan for when we fail. He created us purposefully with the ability to make mistakes so that we could grow closer to Him through teshuvah.

Most people would translate teshuvah as repentance. But its literal meaning is "returning".

Why do you think teshuvah is called "returning" and not "repentance" or "undoing"?

Why Should I Do Teshuvah?

Double Credit

Teshuvah is a mitzvah by itself, which means that each time you go through the process of teshuvah successfully, you gain the “credit” of accomplishing this mitzvah. However, the credit keeps on rolling! When genuine teshuvah is done out of love for Hashem and a sincere desire to be closer to Him, our sins get transformed into *zechuyos*, merits!

Clear Connection

Hashem loves us more deeply than we can ever imagine. When we commit aveiros (sins), it causes Him great pain, much like the heartache a father feels when his child runs away and cuts off contact. Yet even in those moments, Hashem waits patiently for us to return, no matter how far we feel we’ve strayed⁵. He desires a genuine relationship with us!

Living a Torah lifestyle isn’t just about following rules—it’s about building a meaningful connection with Hashem. When we sin, it creates a separation between us and Him, making it harder for our tefillos (prayers) and mitzvos to reach Him⁶. However, when we do teshuvah, that separation disappears. Hashem lovingly accepts our teshuvah, welcoming us back with open arms. Our relationship with Him becomes stronger and closer than ever, reminding us of the endless depth of His love and forgiveness.

On Top of the World

People who return to Hashem after sinning, called Ba’alei Teshuvah, have a unique strength. Even the most righteous people can’t stand in the place that a Ba’al Teshuvah stands, because it takes incredible effort and courage to turn your life around and grow closer to Hashem!⁷

One example is the story of Rachav, a woman who sinned terribly for most of her life. At the age of fifty, she did teshuvah and used the same tools she had once sinned with to save two righteous individuals. Because of her teshuvah, Rachav became so great that she married Yehoshua, the leader of the Jewish people, and merited to have eight prophets come from her!⁸ Teshuvah didn’t just give her a fresh start, it made her greater than ever, even worthy of marrying the leader of the Jewish people.



Fix Up



Kintsugi is a traditional Japanese art form that transforms broken pottery into something uniquely beautiful and valuable. When a piece of pottery breaks, it is not discarded but lovingly and painstakingly repaired, using lacquer mixed with powdered gold, silver, or other precious metals. The fragments are carefully reassembled, and the cracks, rather than being concealed, are deliberately highlighted with the shimmering metals.

This process not only restores the pottery’s functionality but also adds new layers of character and beauty to it. The once-damaged item is now more precious than it was in its original, unbroken state. The philosophy behind Kintsugi recognizes imperfection and brokenness as a step in creating something more valuable. The cracks and repairs tell a story of resilience and transformation, turning what might have been seen as failure into a source of beauty. This profound approach reflects the idea that setbacks and imperfections are not unfortunate obstacles but opportunities for growth, renewal, and new levels of beauty.

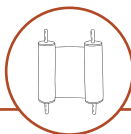
How is Kintsugi art a metaphor for teshuvah?



Corny Corner

What do you call the study of saying “I’m sorry?”

Anthropology



Letter to a Student

Rav Yitzchok Hutner was a great Torah teacher and leader from the past generation. This is an adapted version of a letter he wrote¹¹ to encourage a student who felt hopeless because of his repeated mistakes and failures.

Greatness is measured by your response to failure.

My Dear and Beloved Student,

I received your letter, and your words deeply touched my heart. Know, my dear student, that your letter itself contradicts the descriptions within it. Allow me to explain what I mean.

When we think of our great leaders, we often focus only on their final achievements, skipping over the internal struggles that shaped their greatness. We recount their lives as though they were born perfect and never faced any challenges.

Take Rav Yisroel Meir Kagan, the Tzaddik known by the name of his sefer, Chofetz Chaim. He is the picture of a righteous man, someone who never spoke negatively or hurt anyone with his words. But who really knows of the countless struggles, setbacks, and falls he endured as he fought his Yetzer Hara? He is just one of thousands of examples I could give you.

Because we don't recognize that our great leaders struggled and even failed at times, a young man with spirit and ambition may feel defeated when he encounters obstacles and inner turmoil. He may think that being close to Hashem means connecting to Him peacefully and without any setbacks.

This is a misconception. Know this: you are most connected to Hashem not when everything is easy and smooth, but when you are "in battle"! Your heartfelt letter is the strongest testimony that you are a loyal warrior in the army of the Yetzer Tov.

They say, "Lose a battle and win the war." Surely, you will stumble at times and lose some battles. But I promise you, even after losing individual battles, you will emerge from the war crowned in victory. The wisest of all men, King Solomon, said, "The righteous will fall seven times and rise."⁹ People often misunderstand this to mean that the righteous rise despite

falling seven times. But the truth is the opposite. The righteous rise because of these seven falls. They become great through their struggles.

When Hashem looked at creation, He declared it both "good" and "very good." Our Sages teach that "good" refers to the Yetzer Tov, while "very good" refers to the Yetzer Hara¹⁰. Hashem saw our inclination to do evil as better than our inclination to do good! Why? Because Hashem desires the struggle the Yetzer Hara presents. It brings out our inherent greatness.

My dear student, please take these words to heart. If your letter had been filled with accounts of your mitzvos and good deeds, I would have said, "This is a good letter." But because your letter reveals your struggles, falls, and obstacles, I say, "This is a **very** good letter."

Your strong spirit and struggle to achieve greatness are clear. Do not think that the Gedolim were naturally aligned with their Yetzer Tov. On the contrary! Their greatness came from fierce and incredible battles against their lower tendencies. When you feel the storm of the Yetzer Hara within you, know that this is when you resemble our great leaders most! It is precisely in the areas where you experience your greatest challenges that you will ultimately bring Hashem the most pleasure.

When the Yetzer Hara overcomes you, you may believe all hope is lost. My dear, your words make me smile, even as I share in your pain, because I know that this struggle is the source of your greatness! You are so close to Hashem!

*With you in your struggles,
Confident in your victory,
Praying for your success,*

Yitzchok Hutner

P.S. Now you can understand the first sentence of this letter, that your letter itself contradicts the descriptions within them.

How Do I Do Teshuvah?

Step 1 – Confess

Admit verbally what you did wrong. This is far more challenging than it seems. We find it painful to confront our mistakes. Instead, we make excuses, shift blame, deny the truth, and rationalize our actions. However, when we muster the courage to honestly say out loud, “I have sinned,” instead of just thinking it, we give our teshuvah lasting meaning. Ideally, you should be specific when you repeat what your sin was, such as “I ate something that wasn’t kosher,” or “I badmouthed my friend.” This might sound intimidating, but it’s a weight off of your shoulders when you can admit your mistake and plan the path to forgiveness and change!

Step 2 – Regret

Feel sincere remorse for the *aveirah* (sin) without justifying it with excuses like, “Everyone does it!” or “It wasn’t on purpose!” It’s easy for someone to fall into the trap of feeling shame or thinking “I am a bad person,” but true regret is the opposite. Teshuvah reminds us of our inherent goodness, and then we can deeply regret the actions that do not reflect who we really are inside.

Step 3 – Stop Doing the Wrong Action

Cease the harmful action immediately. Imagine how insincere it would feel to ask someone for forgiveness while continuing to harm them at the same time. Stopping the wrong action is not just a practical step—it’s a clear expression of your commitment to change. Without this step, the teshuvah process is incomplete, as true repentance requires taking responsibility and making an active effort to distance yourself from the sin. By stopping the behavior, you show a genuine desire to repair the damage and realign yourself with the values and principles you strive to uphold.

Step 4 – Focus on the Future

Make a strong commitment to yourself and to Hashem to change. Be aware of situations in which you’re likely to stumble and keep a safe distance from them. When a person does find themselves in the same situation as when they originally sinned, yet they are successful and don’t repeat the misdeed, they have completed the final step of teshuvah! They are as good as new, and it’s like the sin never happened!¹²



Seeking Forgiveness

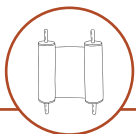
Before asking Hashem for forgiveness, a person must first seek forgiveness from the one they hurt. Hashem wants us to mend our relationships with others before turning to Him in teshuvah.

He cares about how we treat others just as much as He cares about how we keep all the other mitzvos.

The Luchos (Tablets) were divided into two equal sections. One half contained mitzvos involving a person and Hashem, like keeping Shabbos, and the other half contained mitzvos between people, like not stealing. This shows that neither is more important than the other. A person cannot say, “I’m a good enough Jew because I do mitzvos,” while mistreating others, nor can they say, “I’m a good enough Jew because I’m kind,” while neglecting their connection with Hashem.

Just as we must keep both sides of the Luchos, only seeking forgiveness from others and not doing teshuvah is also half the process! If someone wronged a friend, their relationship with Hashem was affected, too and they must do teshuvah. True forgiveness requires making things right with both the person and Hashem.





Order Depends on Circumstance

Rabbeinu Yonah teaches that the process of teshuvah is not the same for everyone. It depends on the person and the type of sins they have committed.

If a person occasionally sins due to a moment of weakness or a lapse in self-control, the process of teshuvah begins with regret *charatah* (regret)¹³. Such a person still has a strong sense of right and wrong, so their first step is to reflect on their actions, feel remorse for their mistakes, and use that regret as a motivation to return to Hashem.

However, someone entrenched in bad habits and repeatedly makes the same mistakes, dulls their sense of wrongdoing. In this case, the first step is to stop the sinful behavior entirely. Only by breaking free from these harmful patterns can they regain clarity, feel genuine regret, and make a firm commitment not to repeat those actions (*kabbalah al ha'asid*).¹⁴

Rav Shternbuch highlights an intriguing observation in the Rambam's writings. Initially, the Rambam explains that teshuvah starts with regret for past sins, followed by a commitment to avoid them in the future. Later, however, he reverses the order, stating that the first step is to resolve to change for the future, with reflection on the past coming afterward.

Why does the Rambam change the order? Rav Shternbuch explains that this teaches an essential lesson for those burdened by guilt. If such a person begins by focusing on their past mistakes, they may become overwhelmed and feel hopeless, believing their actions are beyond repair. To prevent this despair, the Rambam advises starting with a focus on the future. The first step is to resolve to change and envision oneself as a new person, unbound by past failures and ready to live according to Hashem's will. Once this confidence and resolve are established, they can reflect on their past actions with true regret and move forward with a renewed sense of purpose.¹⁵

Teshuvah is a transformative process that helps a person reconnect with Hashem. The starting point varies depending on the individual's situation: some begin with heartfelt regret for their actions, while others first need to break free from harmful habits and focus on creating a better future. For those weighed down by guilt and discouragement, prioritizing the future can provide the strength and hope needed to eventually address and repair the past. Everyone, regardless of their struggles, has a clear path back to Hashem.

Think of an aveirah that you may have done recently.

What would be the correct order of teshuvah in your situation?



An Everyday Necessity

When you think of teshuvah, you might think of Elul, or Yom Kippur. But doing teshuvah is actually a Mitzvah for every day and it is far too precious to only take advantage of once a year.

You can do teshuvah at any time, day or night, but Judaism has multiple built-in teshuvah-times in our davening (prayers).

In Shemoneh Esrei, which is said three times a day in Shacharis, Mincha, and Maariv, we daven for help doing teshuvah in the two Brachos of *Hashiveinu Avinu* and *Selach Lanu*. Two of the eighteen brachos are dedicated to the process of teshuvah! Doing Teshuva three times a day helps us get right back on track when we mess up, instead of letting all our mistakes pile up.

הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ אֲבִינוּ לְתוֹרָתְךָ וְקִרְבֵנוּ מִלְכֵנוּ לְעִבּוּדֶיךָ
וְהַחְזִירֵנוּ בְּתִשׁוּבָה שְׁלֵמָה לְפָנֶיךָ: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'. הַרּוּצָה
בְּתִשׁוּבָה:

*Cause us to return, our Father, to Your Torah;
draw us near, our King, to Your service; and bring
us back, with complete Teshuvah, before You.
Blessed are You, Hashem, who desires Teshuvah.*

סֶלַח לָנוּ אֲבִינוּ כִּי חָטָאנוּ מַחֵל לָנוּ מִלְכֵנוּ כִּי פָשַׁעְנוּ כִּי
מוֹחֵל וְסוֹלֵחַ אַתָּה: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה'. חֲנוּן הַמִּרְבֶּה לְסִלּוֹת:

*Pardon us, our Father, for we have sinned;
forgive us, our King, for we have transgressed,
because You are a forgiver and a pardoner.
Blessed are You, Hashem, gracious One who
pardons abundantly.*

Zoniac Zone



Key Takeaways

Teshuvah is the incredible gift that allows us to return to Hashem, no matter how far we feel. It's not just about correcting mistakes—it's about restoring and strengthening our relationship with Him. Living a Torah life is not just about following rules but building a deep and meaningful connection with Hashem. Sin acts as a separation between us and Hashem, but Hashem, in His infinite love, welcomes us back with open arms when we sincerely do teshuvah.

Real Teshuvah includes a whole change in mindset. It means saying, "Hashem, I'm sorry I haven't been living the way You want. I want to change. I want to be close to You." True teshuvah

means aligning our will with Ratzon Hashem (G-d's will). Life is like a bus ride. Changing which direction you face in the bus will not make much of a difference. What matters most where your bus is headed! What is your direction in life? Are you coming closer to Hashem?

A Ba'al Teshuva's journey requires immense courage and effort, but it's payoff is more valuable than you can ever imagine. Even the most righteous people cannot achieve the heights that they do! Hashem doesn't expect perfection. What He values most is our response to failure. Teshuvah ensures that no mistake is final. No matter where we are, Hashem is always ready to welcome us home.



Mikey's Story

Mikey was your typical 15-year-old—fun, full of energy, and a huge baseball fan. He was spending his summer at TheZone, in the Teen division, and was enjoying every minute. One afternoon, he sat in the beis medrash listening to Rabbi Mozes, their mashpia, talk about teshuvah. It was almost Elul, and Rabbi Mozes was explaining how Hashem always gives us the chance to do teshuvah and make things right, no matter how many times we mess up.

Mikey tried to focus, but his mind kept drifting back to baseball. Still, something about what Rabbi Mozes said stuck with him. "Teshuvah isn't like baseball," he thought. "It's not three strikes and you're out. Hashem lets you try again and again! That's pretty cool."

For Mikey, keeping Shabbos had been a challenge. Every week, he'd start with the best intentions, but it never went as planned. One week, he'd accidentally flip on a light switch; another week, he'd tear open a package or start sketching in his notebook. Every time he slipped, he'd feel terrible and give up for the rest of Shabbos. "What's the point if I already messed up?" he'd think.

But this week felt different. Mikey started Friday night with a fresh determination, and it went really well. He was careful and focused, and he went to sleep feeling proud of himself. The next morning, though, he messed up again—his hand instinctively reached out to turn off his alarm clock. His heart sank. "Shoots, I did it again," he thought. "Might as well not bother anymore."

But then, Rabbi Mozes's words came flooding back: "Teshuvah can happen at any moment, day or night. You can always turn things around." Mikey took a deep breath. Instead of throwing in the towel, he paused, reminded himself that it wasn't about being perfect—it was about trying. He whispered a quiet "Sorry, Hashem" and committed to doing better, and decided to keep Shabbos as best as he could for the rest of the day.

And he did. For the first time, Mikey didn't let a mistake derail him. By the end of Shabbos, he realized something amazing: keeping Shabbos wasn't about being flawless. It was about staying in the game, no matter how many times he stumbled. Just like in baseball, the real win came from getting back up to bat.



Zoniac Challenge

- 1 Take a piece of string and measure it.
- 2 Rip the string in half.
- 3 Tie it back together again.
- 4 Measure it again.
- 5 Repeat steps 2-4



What do you notice?

How can you connect this idea to teshuvah?



Never Too Late

King Menashe had led the Jewish people terribly astray. He filled Yerushalayim with idols, even placing one inside the Beis Hamikdash! His sins were so great that Hashem decreed the city's destruction.

The Assyrian army captured King Menashe, bound him in chains, and brought him to Bavel (Babylon). There, they placed him in a boiling copper pot, preparing to boil him alive.

As the flames rose, Menashe cried out to every idol he had worshipped. Nothing happened. Then, he remembered his father teaching him as a young child "After exile and suffering, return to Hashem, and He will accept you."

With his last hope he called out to Hashem to save him. His prayer reached the heavens, but the angels blocked it. "This man put an idol in Your sanctuary! How can You forgive him?"

Hashem replied, "If I reject him, others will lose hope in their ability to do teshuvah. The door must stay open." So Hashem accepted his teshuvah.

A gust of wind suddenly lifted Menashe from the pot and carried him back to Yerushalayim. Shaken and alive, he saw his city—filled with idols, just as he had left it. But now, he knew the truth. They were nothing. From that moment on, Menashe worked to undo his mistakes. He destroyed the idols and tried to return his people to Hashem.

Menashe had sinned beyond imagination, yet Hashem still accepted him. No matter how far we've fallen, Hashem is always ready to take us back. It is never too late to do teshuvah.



Zoniac Dilemma

Who Really Cares?

Talia always forgets to bentch after eating bread. It's not that she means to ignore it, it's just that she gets distracted. A conversation starts, her phone buzzes, or something else pulls her away. Each time she realizes later, she shrugs it off. I should remember, but it's not a big deal. It's not like I'm hurting anyone.

One day, she's at a friend's house for a Shabbos meal. As they finish eating, another friend surprises them at the door. Shira and Talia jump up and leave the table. Later that day, Shira gasps and turns to Talia, "We forgot to bentch!" she says, her face serious. "I can't believe I just left without thinking! She sighed. "I have to do teshuvah. I think I'll try to always leave a bentcher in front of me when I eat bread, as a reminder."

Talia watches, confused. She doesn't understand why Shira is so upset. "I forget to bentch all the time, and I don't even care or feel sorry. I make much bigger mistakes! Nobody gets hurt if I don't bentch. If I forced myself to say I'm sorry to Hashem, wouldn't that even be dishonest? How can I do teshuvah if I don't even feel bad? Should I?"

Can you do Teshuva if you don't regret what you did? What should Talia do?



Daily Challenge

Before you go to sleep tonight, think over your day and say:

"I did _____. I regret it, and I'll try not to do it again."



Sources

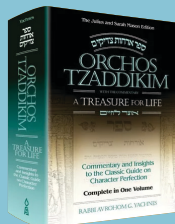
- 1) Koheles 7:20
- 2) Beraishis Rabbah 1:4
- 3) Maseches Yoma 85b
- 4) Iggeres Teshuvah 7 Cheilek 3
- 5) Yirmiya 3:22
- 6) Rambam Hilchos Teshuvah 7, quoting Pesikta D'rav Kahana
- 7) Brachos 34b
- 8) Megillah 14:2
- 9) Mishlei 24:16
- 10) Bereishis Rabbah 9
- 11) Sefer Pachad Yitzchak: Iggeros Ukesavim (Gur Aryeh, 1981), no. 128, 217-18
- 12) Rabeinu Yonah, Shaarei Teshuvah
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- 14) Alavodas Hamelech Al HaRambam
- 15) Harav Moshe Sternbuch, Haderech L'teshuvah



Dig Deeper *Resources for Advanced Learning*



Shaarei Teshuva
The Gates of Repentance



Orchos Tzaddikim,
A Treasure for Life, Shaar Hateshuvah



Watch: How to do Teshuva (Repentance) in 3 Minutes!

torahmates.org/jewish-resources/watch-how-to-do-teshuva-repentance-in-3-minutes/