

How To Prepare Your Heart For The High Holy Days

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Abstract: "It's time for us to prepare our hearts for the High Holy Days. But why do we need to prepare? We need to prepare because we all have private pains and secret sorrows. We need to prepare because we're all looking for ways to get back home. We're all in need of forgiveness. Is there anyone here who does not yearn for inner peace? Is there anyone here who doesn't crave a new and fresh start?"

As we all know the High Holy Days are coming. Erev Rosh Hashanah is next Friday night, September 22. Yom Kippur begins Sunday night, October 1. It's time for us to prepare our hearts for the High Holy Days. But why do we need to prepare?

We need to prepare because we all have private pains and secret sorrows. We need to prepare because we're all looking for ways to get back home. We're all in need of forgiveness. Is there anyone here who does not yearn for inner peace? Is there anyone here who doesn't crave a new and fresh start?

So it's time for all of us to prepare for the coming High Holy Days, and our Jewish tradition wisely understands that it's not so easy to do. No one likes change, especially not inner change. So we tend to evade, to avoid, to deny what we know we have to do. Cognizant of this propensity in human nature, our Jewish tradition gives us three opportunities, three markers, to get ourselves ready for the High Holy Days.

Tonight begins the 23rd day of the Hebrew month of Elul. The first marker actually began on the first day of this month with the blowing of the shofar announcing it's time to get ourselves in gear. In the traditional synagogue, the shofar is blown every day of the month of Elul.

The second marker is the Selichot service that always takes place one week before Rosh Hashanah – and that happens tomorrow night.

Finally, if we haven't gotten ourselves moving by Rosh Hashanah itself, the third marker is Shabbat Shuvah, the Sabbath in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Now the question that begs to be addressed is this: how do we prepare our hearts for the High Holy Days? Obviously, it's not so simple as pressing a button. What exactly are we supposed to do? There are many actions we can take and here are three very major ones:

We begin to prepare by asking ourselves questions. Questions about the past year: what brought you the most joy? What brought you the most regret? Did you look for God in others? Did you look for God in yourself?

We also prepare our hearts for the New Year by asking questions of the year about to be born: what new experiences, what new treasured moments, do you plan to accumulate for yourself and your loved ones in this new year? What do you most hope to achieve? What do you

most hope to birth within yourself? Will you look for God within others? Will you look for God within yourself?

After questions, the next step is *cheshbon hanefesh* – personal introspection. Set aside a few minutes each day, or at least once a week, for reflection, for personal soul-searching about who you are, how you live, and who you want to be.

After personal introspection, the next step is asking for forgiveness. Some of us are under the erroneous impression that all we need to do is come to synagogue on the High Holy Days and God will forgive us for all the mistakes we make with other human beings. But this is not correct. Our prayers on the high holy days make up for only the mistakes we make with God. In Jewish ethics, it is deemed a moral obligation to apologize directly to those we have hurt. So think about the relatives and friends and co-workers you may have unintentionally offended over the past year. Talk to them and ask them to forgive you.

Conversely, the third step is also to be quick to forgive. Jewish ethics forbids the holding of a grudge. And while some things are truly unforgivable, they are very rare. We can forgive far more than we do. So be quick to forgive. And try to turn an enemy into a friend. There are other steps you can take and you can find them in this article by Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson that I am now giving you from [It's a Mitzvah: Step By Step to Jewish Living](#)

Let us conclude our exploration of how to prepare our hearts for the High Holy Days by offering this prayer by Rabbi Jack Reimer, called “Now is the Time for Turning.” We have been given the gift of self-determination and introspection. Let us put these gifts to work!