

# How to Prepare Your Heart for the High Holy Days

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By Rabbi Stuart W. Gershon

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

The High Holy Days are coming. Erev Rosh Hashanah begins on Monday night, September 29. Yom Kippur begins on Wednesday night, October 8.

It's time for us to prepare our hearts for the High Holy Days. We need to prepare because we all have private pains and secret sorrows to address. We need to prepare because we are 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?

But as much as we want change we also resist it. Change is scary, especially inner change, the kind of change that the High Holy Days require of us. So we tend to evade, to avoid, to deny what we know we have to do.

Our Jewish spiritual tradition gives us three entry ways, three portals, to get ourselves ready for the High Holy Days, to get ourselves into gear.

The first portal to prepare takes place one full month before Rosh Hashanah with the first day of the Hebrew month of Elul. To mark the occasion, the shofar is blown in synagogue every day of this month. And we shall hear the blast of the shofar tonight.

The second portal is the beautiful and inspirational Selichot service, a sort of prelude to the High Holy Days, which always takes place on the Saturday night one full week before Rosh Hashanah. This year, we will observe Selichot tomorrow night.

Now if Rosh Hashanah comes and goes, and we find ourselves still unconnected to the High Holy Days, there is still one more chance to enter. The third portal is Shabbat Shuvah, the Sabbath in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, which occurs on October 3-4.

Now many of us approach the High Holy Days as cultural activities. They are all about family and food. Suppose you are really interested in preparing for the holy days on a spiritual level. What does that mean? What do you do?

We begin to prepare spiritually 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?

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 still want to be.

The next step is asking for forgiveness. Some of us are under the impression that all we need to do is come to synagogue on the High Holy Days and God will forgive us for all the times we have hurt our loved ones.

This is not correct. Our prayers on the High Holy Days make up only for the mistakes we make with God. In Jewish ethics, it is deemed a moral obligation to directly apologize 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.

The next 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.

We have been given the gifts of self-determination and introspection. Let us put these gifts to work! And now, to proclaim that it is time for all of us to prepare spiritually for the New Year of 5769, we shall hear the traditional blasts of the shofar.

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.”