

The Meaning of *Teshuvah*

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By Rabbi Stuart W. Gershon

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What is *Teshuvah*? *Teshuvah* means to return to God and to our highest and best selves. *Teshuvah* means to turn your life round. *Teshuvah* is making yourself a better person today than you were yesterday. *Teshuvah* is transforming yourself from the person you are into the person you always wanted to be.

This Shabbat between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur holds a special title and distinction. Tonight begins *Shabbat Shuvah*, the Sabbath of Return, the Sabbath of doing *teshuvah*.

The term “*teshuvah*” is most frequently translated as “repentance” but that does not do justice to the Hebrew term. Where “repentance” connotes guilt and remorse, “*teshuvah*” is all about taking positive and constructive action.

“*Teshuvah*” is derived from the Hebrew root “to turn” or “to return.” *Teshuvah* means to return to God and to our highest and best selves. *Teshuvah* means to turn your life around. *Teshuvah* is making yourself a better person today than you were yesterday. *Teshuvah* is transforming yourself from the person you are into the person you always wanted to be. Our spiritual tradition summons us to engage in the process of *teshuvah*, most especially during these ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Shabbat Shuvah holds a sense of urgency. Rosh Hashanah has already come and gone. The New Year of 5770 has begun. Yom Kippur is just around the corner. Will this New Year be just like the last, no better and no worse? Or will we resolve to make this New Year truly different?

If we want this New Year to be truly qualitatively different from the last, we have *teshuvah* to do. Here’s how we do it:

First: Set aside some time each day for *cheshbon hanefesh*, time for personal introspection and soul-searching. Revisit the past year, its triumphs and its tribulations. What brought you the most joy? What brought you the most regret? How will you choose to think differently, feel differently, and act differently for this New Year?

Step two: As I taught in my Rosh Hashanah sermon, Judaism wants us to be forgiving and empathetic people. Well, now is the time to forgive. Now is the time to give people the chance to make amends. Life’s too short to be unforgiving or unforgiven.

Step three: Now is the time to apologize. It's not enough just to come to services to say to God, "I'm sorry for what I did." Now is the time to offer words of confession, remorse, and apology to those we have hurt, and to take reparative actions to make things right. If we can forgive far more than we do, we can apologize far more often too.

Step four: It is a hallowed Jewish custom to visit the graves of our loved ones between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. In these anxious times, we lean upon the legacy of our loved ones for strength, wisdom, and insight.

If we will follow through on these 4 steps of doing *teshuvah*, I guarantee that this New Year will be very different from the last.

I conclude with this prayer for the New Year of
5770:

May you find it easy to give and to receive

May you know when to surrender and do so with grace

May you find beauty in unexpected places

May you carry your loads with ease amid sweetness

May you learn and teach well

May your home be filled with fresh air and light

May your tense and angry times be shortlived

May you be delighted by new beginnings

May you play with friends and hear beautiful music

May you come to the surface for air when you need it

May you take exquisite care of yourself and all those you love