

Rabbi Jill Zimmerman

Return:

30 Days of Reflection

**Your Workbook for the
High Holy Days Season**



Introduction

Engaging in the process of “return” promises you nothing less than transformation.

Starting in late summer, Jews begin a soul journey of return, by pointing our hearts back “home” to our center. We:

- Return to our best selves.
- Return to the sacred.
- Return to compassion.
- Return to God.
- Return to our intentions.
- Return to community.

The entire month of “*Elul*”, which precedes the Jewish New Year by one month, is set aside for this kind of reflection.

In *Elul* you take stock of where you are, who you are, and who you are meant to be.

This workbook is your guide through this exploration, with at least one prompt a day to steer your writing or conversation with a partner.

This journey, every year, is one you take individually, but we also travel as a collective. When you take the first step on

this path, you join the stream of souls who seek to come home and restore unity.

The primary cosmic energy at this time of year is summed up in the Hebrew word for return: *teshuvah*.

תשובה

Teshuvah has multiple meanings: return, a turning, turn back, turn, to turn about, restore, repair, refresh.

You do *teshuvah* when you engage in the process of self-reflection and repair. You examine the past year in all its facets, take responsibility and set things straight. By doing so, you recommit to being your best self.

The sages believed that this process involves both an honest assessment, and an attitude of compassion and forgiveness.

“Transformation does not have a beginning, a middle, or an end. We never reach the end of *Teshuvah*. It is always going on. We are awake for a moment, and then we are asleep again. *Teshuvah* seems to proceed in a circular motion. Every step away is also a step toward home.

~ RABBI ALAN LEW

THIS IS REAL AND YOU ARE COMPLETELY UNPREPARED

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Every year, we return to the same themes, of brokenness and wholeness in prayers and texts, which is part of the genius of this season.

You may wonder if these ideas are relevant right now in a world that has been so profoundly disrupted by a global pandemic.

This year, we live with uncertainty about our very safety. Most of us are unable to gather as usual with our families and community. The death toll is catastrophic.

The metaphors of this season are even *more* meaningful this year. For example, the themes of brokenness and wholeness take on new resonance. We have an opportunity to see these texts and stories with fresh eyes this year and learn more about how to be our best selves.

The Jewish High Holy Days are often mischaracterized by an overemphasis on judgment. However, equally present is the quality of compassion.

This compassion is especially important this year, in the context of the pandemic. An unimaginable death toll and enormous division and suffering has shaken our worlds. The disruption to our daily lives has been painful, and there is no end in sight. We are a world in great need of healing. Please bring kindness to your own reflections.

How To Use This Workbook

A word about the spiral graphic used throughout this workbook: The spiral represents the familiar movement toward

home, but because the very conditions are different, and so are we, the path is both similar and totally new.

The workbook is divided into 4 weeks for each week of *Elul*, a question per day, although please use the workbook in whatever way feels meaningful for you. You can journal to one question a day, and there are some further questions at the end along with extra pages for more journaling. It is designed to be printed so that you can write to the questions. Or, you may use these prompts for discussions with your partner or in a Zoom-style group with friends.

May this workbook be supportive of your own reflections, and may your journey of return – *teshuvah* – be transformational..

Blessings,

~ *Rabbi Jill*

PS: I would love to hear about your experience with this workbook. Please write to me at Hineni@ravjill.com.

“If you don't know the answer to the question, the answer is always compassion. It is the answer to any question. We want to live with hearts able to resonate with the human experience so that we will meet the world as friends. That we will live in such a way that our mind will be a good neighborhood.

~ SYLVIA BOORSTEIN, TALK AT SPIRIT ROCK

Week 1: Beginning to Turn: Acknowledging What Is True

The beginning of the process of preparing for the High Holy Days usually begins in August. In the riotous bloom of late summer, we recall the destruction of the ancient Temples in Jerusalem on *Tisha B'Av* (the 9th of Av). But, **the disintegration is not the end of the story.** This is also true when we consider what is broken in our own lives. As we move along in the process of healing, we begin to see what can arise from the ashes. In this year, we are facing an unprecedented pandemic. This week we take a broad sweep of this past year and reflect on **what good has been created and what has been broken in our lives.**

“While the Hebrew word teshuvah is usually translated “repentance,” its meaning is not entirely conveyed by this word. Teshuvah is somewhat broader and deeper, meaning also “return.” The urge to take a look back is prompted by a spiritual disquiet rather than a guilty feeling. Indeed, we feel as if we are no longer the right person in the right place, we feel that we are being outsiders in a world whose scheme of things has escaped us.

~ RABBI ADIN STEINSALTZ, *TESHUVAH*

In this unusual year, what have you learned or created?

What or whom has brought you joy or inspiration?

For whom and for what are you grateful?

What experiences of “wholeness” (however you define this) did you have this year?

What has allowed you to maintain a sense of balance and equanimity?

In what ways have you experienced brokenness
and what has fallen apart?

(Perhaps hopes, relationships, trust, structures you have depended on...)

Were there times this year that really shook you up or challenged your
core values, and why?

Week 2: Turning Towards Yourself

As human beings, we forget what's important. It is remarkably easy to fall asleep in our lives. We lose track. In some ways, we put parts of ourselves in exile. **This time of year beckons us to come back home to ourselves and our center.**

“Teshuvah begins with a turn, a turn away from the external world and toward the inner realm of the heart. We effect this turn in many ways. If we are not used to solitude or contemplation, if we are normally consumed by a frantic round of activity...then simply stopping - can suddenly leave us in confrontation with the contents of our heart. Often all that's required of us is to be still for a moment, and the heart begins to disclose itself to us of its own accord.

~ RABBI ALAN LEW, THIS IS REAL AND YOU ARE COMPLETELY UNPREPARED
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How have you grown emotionally or spiritually this year?

What did you discover this year about your core values?

In what ways have you been strong?



What or who has been a source of spiritual sustenance for you?

When have you been quiet or reflective?

(Has the pandemic opened you up to more silence or alone-time?)

Who or what have been your greatest teachers this year?

What parts of yourself have you forgotten to nurture?



Week 3: Turning Towards Others

Take a good look at your relationships: your family, friends, and community. It is helpful to pull out your calendar to remind yourself of who you have spent time with this year, and what has dropped off your schedule. **This is the time of year to do some fixing and repair.** It is also the time to consider which relationships need to be re-evaluated.

“Spiritually, the only question worth asking about any conflict, any recurring catastrophe, is this: What is my responsibility for it? How am I complicit in it? How can I prevent it from happening again?”

~ RABBI ALAN LEW, THIS IS REAL AND YOU ARE COMPLETELY UNPREPARED
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What relationships need repair or healing in some way?

In relationships that need mending, what has been your part of the story?

What's your relationship to apology, either on the receiving or offering end? Is there a specific relationship or memory that comes to mind?

How have you contributed to your community this year, either with time or money?

Through the lens of compassion and kindness, for what could you forgive yourself and others this year?

Which relationships need re-assessment because they are exhausting, and which ones need more attention?

During the pandemic, how have your relationships either been strengthened or suffered?

Week 4: Turning Towards Wholeness – Divine Oneness – God – the Sacred & Holy

Most of us have had some experience of profound spiritual connection, whether that was in a redwood forest, at a baby's birth, or in a sanctuary. These moments are often fleeting. We may feel the boundaries of our own egos soften or disappear. Some people call that "God" or "Oneness" or "Mystery." **It is in these experiences that we get a sense of the unity that shimmers below the separateness of our daily lives.**

“All God ever says is, “Return to Me.”

~ RABBI LAWRENCE KUSHNER
FIVE CITIES OF REFUGE
[HTTPS://AMZN.TO/31TCNW6](https://amzn.to/31TCNW6)

Who or what lifted you up this year?



Where there times or moments this year when you recognized a connection with others, or the world as a whole?

In what ways has the pandemic given you insight into your understanding of the sacred?

Were there spiritual practices, such as meditation, prayer, or study, that helped keep you centered?

In the midst of the suffering of this past year, where have there been moments of connection or unity for you?

Where have you felt most like your authentic self?

What would you like to build this coming year?

תשובה

Looking Forward:

We live in the most extraordinary times. Each one of us is needed. If we all contribute even a little bit, we can bring our world closer to wholeness.

How might you contribute your gifts as a human being this coming year?

Who in your world needs your compassion and love? Are there ways you have held back and might want to reach out?

How will you work for justice this year?

Thank you.

I hope you have found this workbook supportive of your soulwork this season.

Teshuvah is the process of returning - and it is itself a holy practice. The rabbis believed *teshuvah* was built into the very structure of creation.* This teaching acknowledges that the nature of human beings is to make mistakes, miss the mark, and stray from our intention. And there is a way to come back.

Again and again, we return. We are called back to center.

Every day and each moment contains the possibility of practicing *teshuvah*. In meditation, we practice *teshuvah* by returning over and over to our breath or point of focus. The important thing is to return. This is true not only at this season but always.

Please connect with me on your favorite social media platform. Check out the spiritual community I founded and lead, **Hineni** (<https://ravjill.com/hineni>) to discover the ways I am helping others remain present and balanced during challenging times. I will be teaching a course that goes deeper into the concepts outlined in this workbook. Please write to me at Hineni@ravjill.com to learn more.

Wishing you peace – shalom – overflowing blessings and a year of renewal.

— Rabbi Jill

*Talmud (Pesachim 54a) & Pirke DeRabbi Eliezer 3:1.



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Journaling to Heal the Spirit

Here are some extra pages for additional writing or notes to help you return.



A series of horizontal blue lines for writing, spanning the width of the page.

Handwriting practice lines consisting of 18 horizontal blue lines.

