

Rabbi Jill Zimmerman

# Return:

## 30 Days of Reflection

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

2021 Edition



## Introduction

Starting in late summer, Jews begin a soul journey of return. We point our hearts back to our spiritual center, to home. We consider the past year and how we can:

- Return to our best selves.
- Return to the sacred.
- Return to compassion.
- Return to The One/Eternal/God
- Return to our intentions.
- Return to community.

**Engaging in the process of return promises nothing less than transformation.**

This practice is so valuable that the entire month of *Elul*, which precedes the Jewish New Year, is set aside for reflection.

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

*Return: 30 Days of Reflection* is your guide for this month. You'll take a thorough look at your life using one prompt a day for journaling or dialogue with a partner.

## The Journey We Take Every Year

The turning toward home is both an individual and a collective journey. When you take the first step on the path, you join the stream of souls who are also seeking to return.

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

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

You do *teshuvah* when you engage in self-reflection and repair. You examine the past year in all its facets, take responsibility, and attempt to set things right. In doing so, you recommit to becoming your best self.

## Brokenness and Wholeness

Every year at this time, we return to the same metaphors of brokenness and wholeness in our prayers and texts.

These themes are urgently relevant right now in our worlds that have been profoundly disrupted by the global pandemic with all its ramifications, personally and communally. Climate degradation, racial injustice, and assaults on democratic ideals have become part of our consciousness and daily concerns.

Using the lens of what is broken and whole helps us tell the truth about our own lives at this moment in time. What needs repair in ourselves and our relationships and our world?

## Reflecting With Compassion

Our sages believed that the process of *teshuvah* involves being honest about the condition of our own lives and relationships, coupled with an attitude of compassion and forgiveness.

The Jewish High Holy Days are often mischaracterized by an overemphasis on judgment (*din*). Equally present, however, is the quality of compassion (*rachamim*).

Compassion is especially important this year. The catastrophic death toll from the pandemic and continued uncertainty about our family's health and safety weigh on us. The interferences to our normal daily lives are painful. We are living in a world in tremendous need of healing. Please bring kindness to your own reflections.

### How To Use This Workbook

*Return* is divided into four weeks for each week of *Elul*. There is a question for each day, although please use the workbook in whatever way feels meaningful for you. You can journal each day, or set aside time each week to meet with a partner and dialogue. There are extra pages at the back of the book for more journaling.

A word about the spiral graphic used throughout: the spiral represents the familiar movement toward home, recognizing that this year, we are different. The path is similar and yet totally new.

May this workbook be supportive of your own reflections, and may your journey of *teshuvah* (return) be one of transformation and transcendence.

Blessings,

~ **Rabbi Jill**

Founding Rabbi, Path With Heart

“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

**PS:** Please join us for all our [High Holy Day Offerings](#) – workshops, courses, and Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur Gatherings. [Find out more here.](#)

If you used this workbook last year, it will be interesting to compare your responses, as many of the questions are the same, but YOU are different.

## 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). However, the shattering is not the end of the story because the creative Judaism of today was birthed in the aftermath. This historic fact is also true when we consider what is broken in our own lives. When we fully face what has crumbled, we begin to see what can arise from the ashes. This week we take a broad sweep of the past year and reflect on **what good has been created and what is broken in our lives**. We will begin with the good.

*“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?

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What or whom has brought you joy or inspiration?

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For whom and for what are you grateful?

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

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

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

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

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

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## Week 2: Turning Towards Yourself

As human beings, we often lose track of what's important. It is remarkably easy to fall asleep in our lives. Sometimes, we put parts of ourselves in exile. **This time of year beckons us to come back home to ourselves and our center.** This week we take time to stop and reflect on our own soul growth.

“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  
[HTTPS://AMZN.TO/2FGXBZR](https://amzn.to/2FGXBZR)

In what ways have you grown emotionally or spiritually this year?

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What did you discover this year about your core values?

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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, and how has this felt?

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



Who have been your greatest teachers this year?

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What parts of yourself have you forgotten to nurture?

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### Week 3: Turning Towards Others

This week is about taking a good look at your relationships: 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 who 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  
[HTTPS://AMZN.TO/2FGXBZR](https://amzn.to/2FGXBZR)

What relationships need repair or healing in some way?

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

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What is your pattern around apology? Do you freely say you're sorry when you are wrong? Do you apologize too much?

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

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

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

During this past year, 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, a baby's birth, or in a sanctuary. We may feel the boundaries of our own egos soften or disappear, and feel connected to All-That-Is. These moments are often fleeting. It is in these experiences that we get a sense of the unity that shimmers below the separateness of our daily lives. **How awesome would it be to increase our awareness of when the sacred pierces the ordinary?** This week is about calling attention to the ways we have been lifted out of the ordinary this year.

“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?

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Describe an experience when you recognized a connection with others, or the world as a whole.

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

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Which spiritual practices, such as meditation, prayer, or study, helped keep you centered?

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How has your understanding of the Divine/Great Mystery/God shifted this year?

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Describe some times this year when you have been able to express your most authentic self.

How might you build in more time for spiritual connection this year? Brainstorm some ideas.

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## 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>) which is a supportive, loving, learning community.

Please join us for all our High Holy Day Offerings - workshops, courses, and Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur Gatherings. [Find out more here.](#)

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

~ **Rabbi Jill**

Founding Rabbi, Path With Heart

\*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.



