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Your Pathway Journey Guide

# FOUR PATHS TO TESHUVA IN THE TIME OF COVID:

## *An At-Home Toolkit for the Soul*

How do we begin the work of teshuva (repentance) in preparation for the Yamim Nora'im (the Days of Awe from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur)? We may recall that the Passover Haggadah describes four children, who are a metaphor for different types of personalities and especially different types of learners that we encounter. By instructing us to explain the meaning of Pesach differently based on the question a child asks, the Haggadah is really saying that we need to help every person connect to Judaism in ways that suit them. That lesson applies to the entire Jewish calendar. Since the onset of the pandemic, we have had to take our in-person learning and interactions to a virtual space. This sudden transition has made it clear how different we all are as learners and as social beings. For some, virtual learning is terrific while for others it is less so. Some may have liked it at first but then grown tired of it, or vice versa. We are all different and we are also always changing. In that spirit, this series of prompts is designed to spark reflection regardless of the way in which you best learn - in conversation with others or alone, visually or by listening. Feel free to start with the format that speaks most to you, but then see if you can push yourself out of your comfort zone into another reflection mode. The content below is relevant for all.



### **PATH I: For the extrovert, a text to discuss with a friend or family member**

Yona of Gerondi, Shaarei Teshuva, Gates of Repentance (13th C. Spain)

“It is explained in the Torah that God will help those who repent beyond what their natural ability would allow; and that [God] renews a pure spirit within them, to reach great heights in [God’s] love - as it is stated (Deuteronomy 30:2), “And you return to Adonai your God, and you and your children heed [God’s] command with all your heart and soul, just as I enjoin upon you this day.” ...And the Prophets and Writings constantly speak on the subject of repentance, such that the principles of repentance are all explained in their words.”

- What is the value of sincere repentance?
- How is it possible to repent “beyond what their natural ability would allow”?
- In what areas do we need to do collective teshuva in order to better live out the words of the Prophets, both as a Jewish community and as a greater society?

“Repentance is more difficult for one who repeats his sin; for the sin becomes as if it were permitted to him. And his sin is very weighty with regards to this, as it is stated (Jeremiah 3:5), ‘that is how you spoke; you did wrong, and you were able.’ The meaning of, ‘you were able,’ is that the evil deeds have become like that which is permitted to you.”

- What patterns of non-constructive behavior have you fallen into this year? What do you need to do in order to stop this cycle of behavior?

“Now understand - listen to this, for it is a great principle. It is true that there are righteous people who sometimes stumble into sin - like the matter that is stated (Ecclesiastes 7:20), ‘For there is no person that is righteous on earth, who does good and does not sin.’ However they conquer their impulses from in front of them. And if they do fall to sin once, they will not repeat it.”

- Reflect on a time in the past year (and the past six months in particular!) when you caught yourself before reacting - i.e. by taking a breath or thinking through the consequences - in order to preserve relationship. What moments are you most proud of?
- Conversely, when did you not pause before reacting? What actions or words do you most regret? Have you sought forgiveness?



## **PATH II: For the introvert, questions for journaling or walking meditation**

- In what ways was I too harsh with family, friends and/or co-workers this year?
- What do I most regret? What could I do to repair my actions or words?
- What have I learned about myself and my loved ones during this pandemic?
- What am I most grateful for from the past year?
- How have I grown? What am I the most proud of this year?
- What do I need to let go of?
- How will I become kinder? More compassionate? More committed to justice?



## **PATH III: For visual learners**

Watch this video by Rabbi Brad Artson and then discuss these questions with a loved one:

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eH8Sg7RITPs>**

Malchuyot – The world is one and is mostly reliable

- What are the greatest sources of stability in your life?
- What about this time of COVID has been most destabilizing and challenging for you and your family?
- How do you see your family differently as a result of the pandemic? Have you or your family been able to tap into new resilience?

Zichronot – Our past is full of meaning and calls us to live at a higher level

- What events in the history of the Jewish people inform your life and values?
- How do you honor the lessons of the past in your life and the life of your family?
- How will you ensure you pass these on to your children?

Shofarot – There is suffering, sickness, pain and injustice and it's our duty to sound the call that mobilizes us toward repair and toward one another

- Where do you hear the cry of suffering in the world today?
- How will you respond this year?



#### **PATH IV: For aural learners and feelers**

Listen to Rabbi Shai Held, "Why Don't People Ever Seem to Change? (And How We Could)"

<https://elmad.pardes.org/2017/09/why-dont-people-ever-seem-to-change-and-how-we-could/>

Listen to Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach's "Return Again" a few of times until the melody comes naturally to you. Sing along with the original recording or Cantor Segal's version with choir and then try singing it on your own. Come back to the melody when you take walks or cook, and use it as an opportunity to meditate on teshuva.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEsMIW3mB4I>

Cantor Segal and Choir sing Carlebach's Return Again:  
<https://tinyurl.com/y4radhjm>

- What aspects of your Self do you want to return to?
- What patterns of behavior are getting in the way of that return?

#### **Coda for Everyone: Tashlich on Your Own, or with Family or a Pod**

Tashlich, the outdoor High Holy Day ritual, means "casting off." It's a folk custom to release sins by assigning each pebble (or seashell) a sin or negative thought-pattern and throwing it into a natural body of water. Traditionally practiced on Rosh HaShanah or the Days of Awe before Yom Kippur, it echoes the imagery of forgiveness from the Book of Micah, which reads:

*Who is a God like you?  
Forgiving sin, absolving transgressions  
Of the remnant of your heritage,  
You who do not cling to anger,  
But desire only kindness,  
You who act mercifully once again,  
Subduing the effects of our transgressions,  
Casting to the ocean waters all our wrongs.  
You show faithfulness to Jacob,  
Love to Abraham,  
As you have sworn to Abraham  
From days of old.*

--Micah 7:18-20

The ritual of tashlich presents an opportunity to let go not only of sins, but also habits, behaviors, and thought patterns that get in the way of being one's best Self.

If you are performing tashlich on your own, try starting with a session of hitbodedut, or heartfelt conversation with God. Do this in your own words and in nature. Reb Nachman of Breslov, who popularized hitbodedut (literally "seclusion") instructed his followers to talk to God in a "simple, straightforward manner, as if he were conversing with a close friend." (Tzaddik #439; Kochavei Or p.12 #54) According to Reb Nachman, "Hitbodedut consists of conversation with God. One can pour out their words before their Creator. This can include complaints, excuses, or words seeking grace, acceptance and reconciliation. One must beg and plead that God bring them close and allow them to serve God in truth." The important thing is to enter a flow and to speak out loud what's in your heart. This can be done privately at any time throughout the year. If it proves awkward or difficult for you,

begin with a single sincere word and repeat it until this word gives way to a waterfall of prayers to God."

If you are doing tashlich with your family, pod, or a friend, each person in the group can take turns holding up a pebble/seashell and saying out loud the habit or wrong-doing they seek to let go of. This can be an opportunity to support each other's personal growth. Just remember: "While Yom Kippur atones for sins between a person and God, it does not atone for sins between a person and his fellow until he becomes reconciled with the one he wronged." (R' Elazar ben Azariah, Mishna Yoma 8:9) Tashlich is but one important part in our High Holy Day toolkit of teshuva. We still need to seek forgiveness directly from those we've wronged.

Additional spiritual preparation provided by the Union for Reform Judaism:

<https://reflect.reformjudaism.org>

