

**THE TWELVE STEPS
OF ATONEMENT
ANONYMOUS**

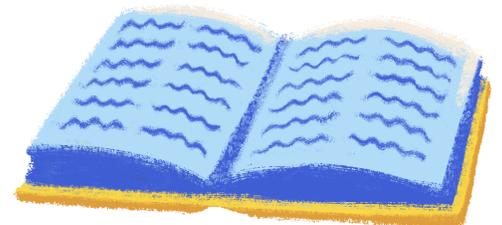


THE TWELVE STEPS OF ATONEMENT ANONYMOUS

The High Holidays are the holiest days of the Jewish calendar and consist of the Days of Awe, a ten-day period of reflection and repentance that begins on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, and ends on Yom Kippur, the “Day of Atonement.” On Rosh Hashanah, we pray to be inscribed for another year in the Book of Life, and on Yom Kippur, we pray that what was written on Rosh Hashanah is sealed. We ask for a life of blessings, peace, and good livelihood, one in which we grow through our rigorous reflection and dedication to self-improvement.

Yet what is intended to be a period of transformation can be easily corrupted by uncontrolled self-criticism, leading to destructive consequences on the practitioner's mental health. Such individuals are in need of a structured approach to repentance, much like those in or striving for recovery need structure to live their lives effectively and healthily. Thankfully, the popularized Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous connect beautifully with the High Holidays, offering us a dependable and effective approach to this issue. Each of the Twelve Steps has a mirror in the practices and beliefs that make up the High Holiday experience, and each of the steps and traditions can be used to help one grow into their best self by focusing on accountability, forgiveness, and reaching a new level of being — themes that are a major part of recovery.

Judaism creates a foundation we can use as a springboard to take care of our mental well-being. We invite you to explore these steps, executing them in any order you think best matches your personal needs and aspirations for the holiday season.





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1

**We admitted our ultimate powerlessness over parts of our lives
– that our lives had become unmanageable.**

One of the first practices of Yom Kippur is called “kaporot,” a practice used to put practitioners in the mindset of the season, reminding us what’s at stake as our lives “hang in the balance” as well as the power of repentance to turn our lives around. Linguistically, this prayer consists of nine biblical verses strung together, except for the opening two words, “Children of Man.” This phrase comes from the book of Ezekiel and is a callback to the creation of humankind, utilized to stress that the practitioner seeks atonement for their mistakes in order to once again fulfill our God-given purposes in life and return to the pristine state of being in the Garden of Eden.

Children of humankind who sit in darkness and the shadow of death – God will bring them out of darkness...Wrongdoers afflicted because of their sinful ways and their mistakes...they cry out to God in their distress; God save them from their afflictions. God sends forth God's word and heals them...

[\(See Full Text\)](#)

Yom Kippur begins with us admitting our own flaws and humanity, not from a place of shame but from a place of recognition that we are human beings who can always improve.





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2

Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

The traditional greeting for Yom Kippur is:



“גִּמְרַר חַטִּימָה טוֹבָה - G'mar chatima tova,”
May you be sealed in the Book of Life.

Once we acknowledge our humanness, we look toward a higher power to restore us or renew us for the next year.





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3 Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand God.



There is a Hassidic story about a boy who didn't know how to pray:

In a small Polish village, there lived a simple shepherd boy. He did not know how to read; indeed, he could barely say the letters of the alef-beis, the Hebrew alphabet. As the intensity of feeling in the synagogue began to mount, he decided he also wanted to pray. But he did not know how. He could not read the words of the prayer book or mimic the prayers of the other congregants. He opened the prayer book to the first page and began to recite the letters alef, beis, veis – reading the entire alphabet. He then called out to God, “This is all I can do. God, You know how the prayers should be pronounced. Please, arrange the letters in the proper way.” This simple, genuine prayer resounded powerfully within the Heavenly court. God rescinded all the harsh decrees and granted the Jews blessing and good fortune.

Yom Kippur, a day dedicated to reflection and connection with a higher power, is one of the most widely celebrated holidays across Jewish denominations. There is a reason we participate, whether it's to connect to community, to be inscribed, or just to self-reflect and do better in the next year. But ultimately, [we take a step forward by just showing up with a dedication to growth.](#)



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4 Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

In many Jewish communities, the month preceding the High Holy Days consists of “Selichot,” a collection of prayers and poems meant to elicit repentance in the coming weeks. Selichot includes the prayer of Vidui, literally “Confessions,” in which we acknowledge and list the mistakes we have made.

Our God and God of our ancestors, let our prayer come before you and do not ignore our supplication. For we are not so brazen-faced as to say “We are righteous and have not sinned.” But, indeed, we have sinned. We have trespassed [against God and humankind, and we are devastated by our guilt]; we have betrayed [God and humankind, and we have been ungrateful for the good done to us]; we have stolen; we have slandered...We have sinned with malicious intent; we have forcibly taken other’s possessions; we have added falsehood upon falsehood...We have given harmful advice; we have deceived; we have mocked...We have caused our friends grief...We have gone astray...(See Full Text)

This kind of self-reflection and acceptance of our past is key to true repentance and transformation. Only by acknowledging our past can we do better in the coming year. ([To learn more about self-acceptance, check out our Rosh Hashanah Resource.](#))



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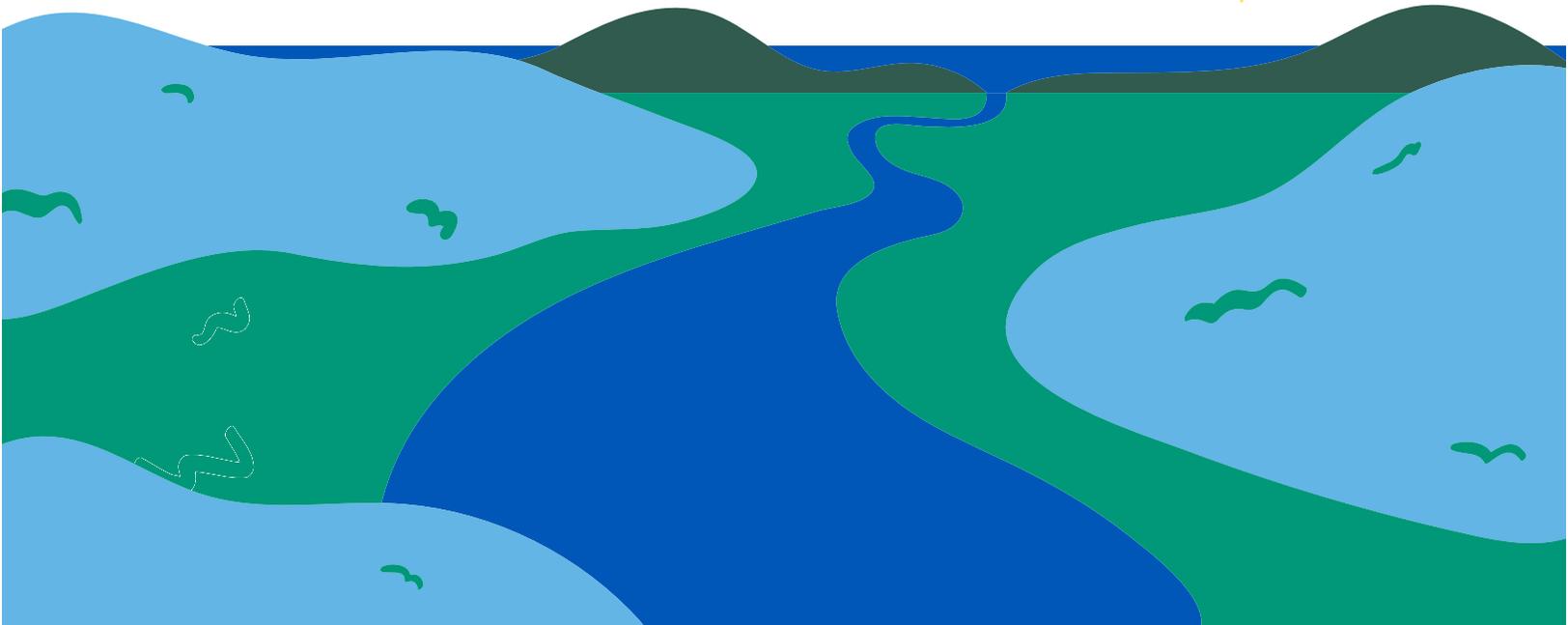
5

Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we engage in another tradition called [Tashlich](#).

Tashlich, meaning “you will cast,” [represents repentance, acceptance, and forgiveness](#). We acknowledge any harm we have done, accept that we have harmed others, and forgive ourselves with a commitment to move forward and do better.

During this ritual, we consider our actions of the past year and use the symbology of water and bread crumbs to let go of the mistakes we have made. ([Learn more about Tashlich from our Mental Health Tashlich resource](#))





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6 We're entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

At the start of the ten Days of Awe, Jews recite the “[Annulment of Vows](#)” prayer. According to Biblical law, the promises and commitments we make have a binding quality to them, and on the eve of the new year, it is a custom to formally annul any vows that have not been completed. This practice of annulment happens in the presence of an informal assembly of three colleagues and represents the beginning of the process of reflection on who we were in the past year, from the mistakes we made to the promises we failed to keep. We perform these rituals with the belief we can do better next year. [The goal is not to shame our past but to aspire to a brighter future, and admitting our goals to our fellow man sets us on a trajectory to do just that, proving we are ready to take those next steps.](#)

After asking for pardon of the vows of the previous year, our colleagues validate our request and desire for change by saying:



**Hearing your regret, we release you.
All is forgiven,
all is released,
and may it be that
in the same way that we here below
release you from these vows and obligations,
so may you be released from the court above from the same.**



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7 Humbly asked God to remove all these defects of character.

Throughout the entire holiday, we ask God to help us do better. We can look to the words of S'lach Lanu, a prayer for forgiveness we repeat throughout Yom Kippur.

In this prayer we ask God to show us compassion — to redeem us, treat us kindly, and renew us for the next year.

"Forgive us our Sovereign for we have sinned, pardon us our Sovereign for we have willfully transgressed, for You pardon and forgive. Blessed are You, O God, Who is gracious and ever willing to forgive."

8 Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.

On Yom Kippur it is a tradition to ask for forgiveness from those we know we have harmed or wronged. Some traditions even state we should apologize to all our friends, just in case we have unknowingly hurt them.

Transgressions between people are not subject to atonement on Yom Kippur, unless the offender forgives the offended party. Even if one aggrieved another with words alone, this forgiveness is necessary. (Shulchan Aruch, Jewish Code of Law)



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9

Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

It's worth noting we aren't commanded to forgive others but rather to seek forgiveness. The person who has been harmed is allowed to turn you down. Tradition says if we try our best, we are atoned even if they do not forgive our actions, because it's about us being accountable, not pushing others.

If someone won't give you forgiveness right away for a mistake you made, you shouldn't ask for forgiveness more than three times. (Shulchan Aruch (Jewish Code of Law))

10

Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong we promptly admitted it.



Much like engaging with the Torah, we don't do the Twelve Steps only once. We walk through them and then begin again, constantly engaging with the material and finding new meaning. For the month before Yom Kippur, Elul, Jewish tradition encourages us to do [cheshbon hanefesh](#), or “[the accounting of the soul](#),” as we prepare for the holiday. Cheshbon hasnefesh is a mindfulness exercise where we take stock of all our actions over the last year and introspect.

We recognize that Yom Kippur happens every year. We are not asking to be permanently inscribed; we are asking for another year, knowing we will be back next year to engage with the same ritual to teach us to be accountable for our actions while also being compassionate toward ourselves.



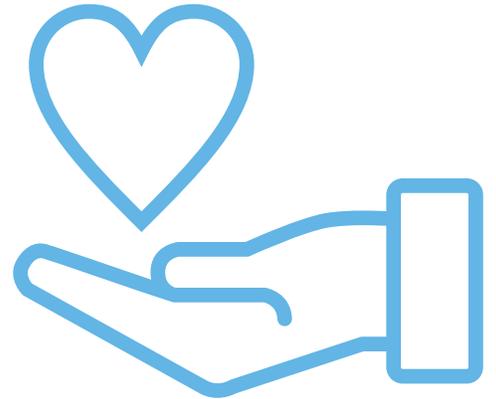
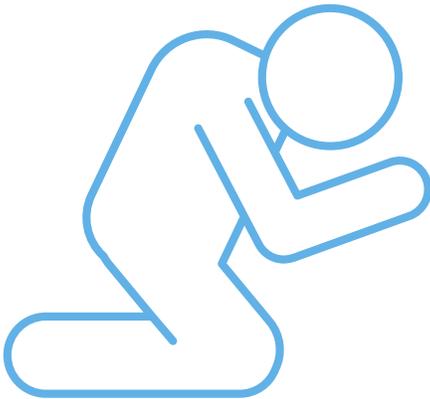
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11

Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with the God of our understanding, praying only for knowledge of Their will for us and the power to carry that out.

The High Holidays serve this purpose exactly. We spend the day in prayer and meditation seeking to deepen our understanding of how we can live more compassionately next year. In fact, with the final shofar blast on Rosh Hashanah, the congregation declares:

“Teshuvah, Tefillah, Tzedakah”
Repentance, Prayer, Righteousness,



as if to say doing these things will undo any punishments — and also improve our lives as a whole.





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12

Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to others and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

It is meritorious to start building the sukkah immediately after Yom Kippur, even if it is Friday, because a chance to perform a precept should not be put off. One should choose a clean site. Everyone should build the sukkah, even if one is an eminent person (Condensed Code of Jewish Law, Chapter 134).

As soon as Yom Kipper is over, Jewish tradition advises us to begin preparations for the upcoming holiday of Sukkot. On that holiday, Jews highlight the fact that a higher power runs the world by building temporary dwellings called sukkot, where we eat and sleep — where we live — for seven days. [That is to say, tradition teaches us that after a spiritual awakening and a life-changing experience, we shouldn't delay in actualizing our new perspective, living our truth fully.](#)





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Ultimately, Yom Kippur doesn't stop at the end of the day; the focus is on taking our growth and what we learn into the next year. We commit to deal with others in a kinder way and to try and do better. We acknowledge that our actions affect others, and we have an obligation to the Jewish value *kol Yisrael arevim zeh la zeh* – all Jews are responsible for one another.

In simple terms, we are interconnected and must be invested in the mental wellness and overall well-being of everyone. We must be willing, informed, and prepared to help one another, because we all benefit.

