

Rabbi Jill Zimmerman

Return:

30 Days of Reflection

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



**Interactive
Workbook**

Print out pages or write
responses on screen.



**PATH
WITH HEART
community**

Approaching the High Holy Days in This Unimaginable Year

Let's face it: this past year has been painful for Jews all over the world. We come to these holiest of days with both trepidation and deep hope. We yearn for wholeness and comfort in a world that feels broken.

We start from where we are. We tell the truth. And we hope that the ancient wisdom will both soothe and guide us.

Like salmon who instinctively swim upstream to their home, we too begin to turn inwards and toward community.

The anguished cries from the October 7 massacre in Israel continues to torment us. In the aftermath of that horrific attack, a torrent of blood and destruction has devastated the people of Gaza. Children go hungry while parents risk their lives to get food. Israeli hostages are near death in the tunnels of Gaza. There are no real plans to rescue them.

This ongoing tragedy has been and will continue to be, both the backdrop and the forefront of our season of reflection and re-alignment for many years.

The division and strife among Jews - young and old - has reached a fever pitch. Israel faces the world's outrage, and we argue about which pain is most important and which petitions to sign. Our hope rises with each mention of a possible end to the war, only to be dashed by corrupt leaders.

Our community has witnessed and experienced the largest surge in antisemitism since the Nazi era. Ugly anti-Jewish rhetoric has infiltrated local city councils, arts organizations, and progressive spaces where we once felt safe.

Many of us have felt betrayed.

Adding to this, those of us in the United States are engaged in a battle for democracy that we never thought possible. Institutions that we believed would hold the line have caved. People are being rounded up in the streets by masked men, sanctioned by our government.

Broken and Whole

It is urgent that we gather: to reflect, sing, pray and be in community. Every High Holy Days gives us the opportunity to begin again. To come back to center. To remember our humanity.

The High Holy Day season writ large is about the soul's journey from brokenness to wholeness. Core stories from our tradition that help us explore brokenness frame the High Holy Day season.

The High Holy Days also highlight the quality of compassion. This, too, is deeply significant this year. Each year we have the opportunity to return to our best selves, and come home in all its manifestations.

Themes of This Season in Our Community

In this unusual year, we have been thinking deeply about what prayers, music and poetry would feel most relevant in this moment.

How To Engage

As People of the Book who cherish words, we are confronted with the most repeated phrase from the last two years: “I have no words.” And yet here we stand, at a season that will be filled with words.

I encourage you to be gentle with yourself in your reflections this year. You may have feelings of betrayal, fear, and worry about the future. Put your feet on solid ground and say:

“Hineni: I am present.”

Set aside time for yourself to do your spiritual work: take our soul preparation course, journal in this Return/Teshuvah workbook, and come join us for our [High Holy Day Gatherings](#) in any way you can.

~ Rabbi Jill Zimmerman

Founding Rabbi

Path With Heart Community



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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 community.
- Return to compassion.
- Return to The One/Eternal/God
- Return to our intentions.

Engaging in this process of return promises nothing less than transformation.

This practice is so valuable that the entire Jewish month of *Elul*, which precedes the High Holy Days, 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*.

תשובה

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. Our world continues to be profoundly disrupted by war, injustice and heartbreaking division. Climate degradation, racial injustice, global migration, and assaults on democratic ideals have become part of our consciousness and daily concerns. This is the water we swim in.

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 believe 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 so important this year. We are living in a world in tremendous need of healing personally and nationally. 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 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.

You may choose to print the book or use the interactive form fields to write your answers in this PDF on your computer. ([Get Adobe Reader](#))

A word about the spiral graphics used throughout: the spiral represents movement. Every year, we point ourselves back home, to our center. However, every year, we are different. The path is similar and yet totally new.

“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

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

Blessings,

~ **Rabbi Jill**

Founding Rabbi

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Week 1: Beginning to Turn: Acknowledging What Is True

Preparing for the High Holy Days typically starts in August. As late summer bursts into full bloom, we remember the destruction of the ancient Temples in Jerusalem on *Tisha B'Av* (the 9th of Av). Yet, this devastation wasn't the end, as today's vibrant Judaism emerged from its aftermath. This lesson applies to our lives too: by confronting what has broken, we can see what can rise from the ashes. This week, we review the past year, reflecting on both the whole and the broken.

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

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



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



What or who has brought you joy or inspiration?

For whom and for what are you grateful?

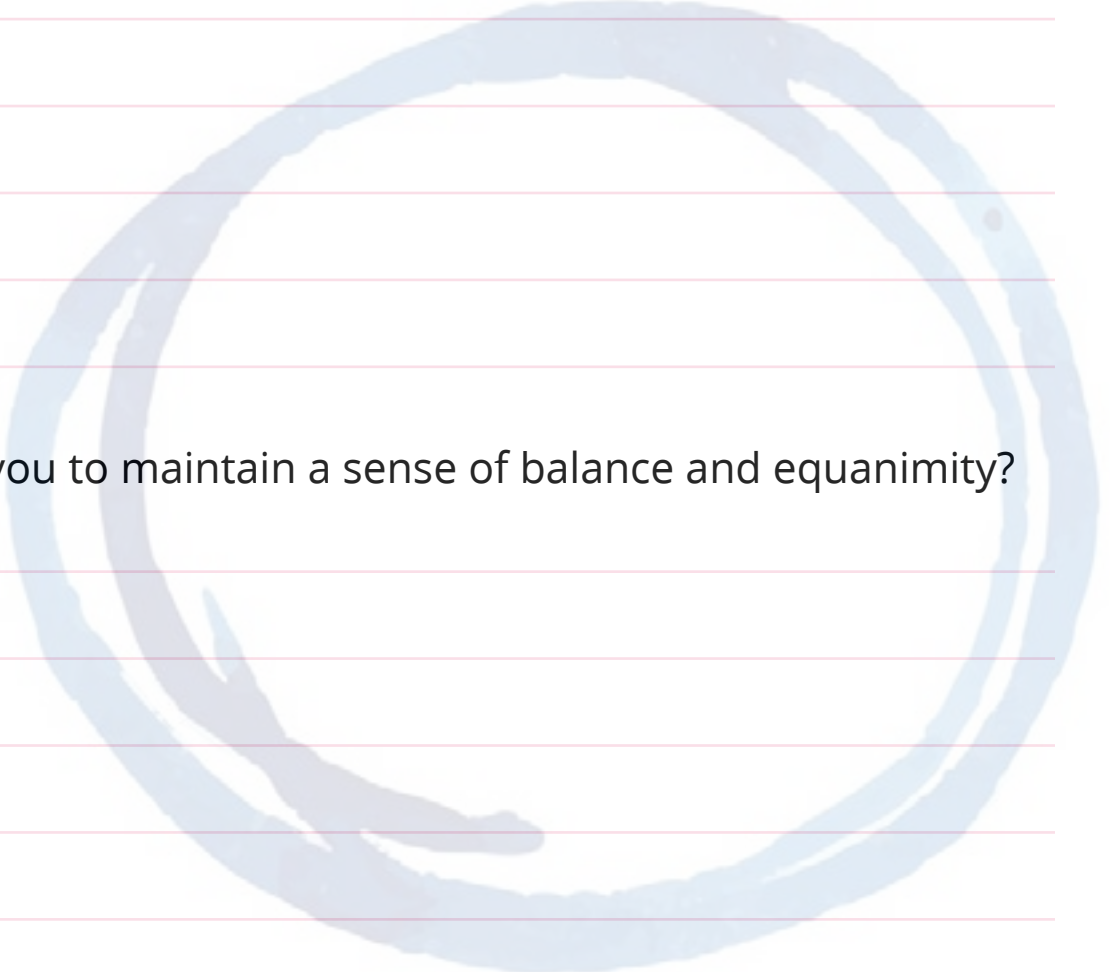
What experiences brought you a feeling of wholeness, or peace (*shalom*)?



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



What was most challenging and why?



Week 2: Turning Towards Yourself

As human beings, we often lose sight of what's important. It's surprisingly easy to drift through life, sometimes exiling parts of ourselves. **The process of Teshuvah 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
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How have you experienced spiritual growth this year?

What did you learn this year about what truly matters?

How have you demonstrated strength?

Who or what has provided you with spiritual nourishment?

When have you been quiet or reflective, and how did this feel?

What experiences this year have opened your heart?

Which aspects of yourself have you neglected to nurture?

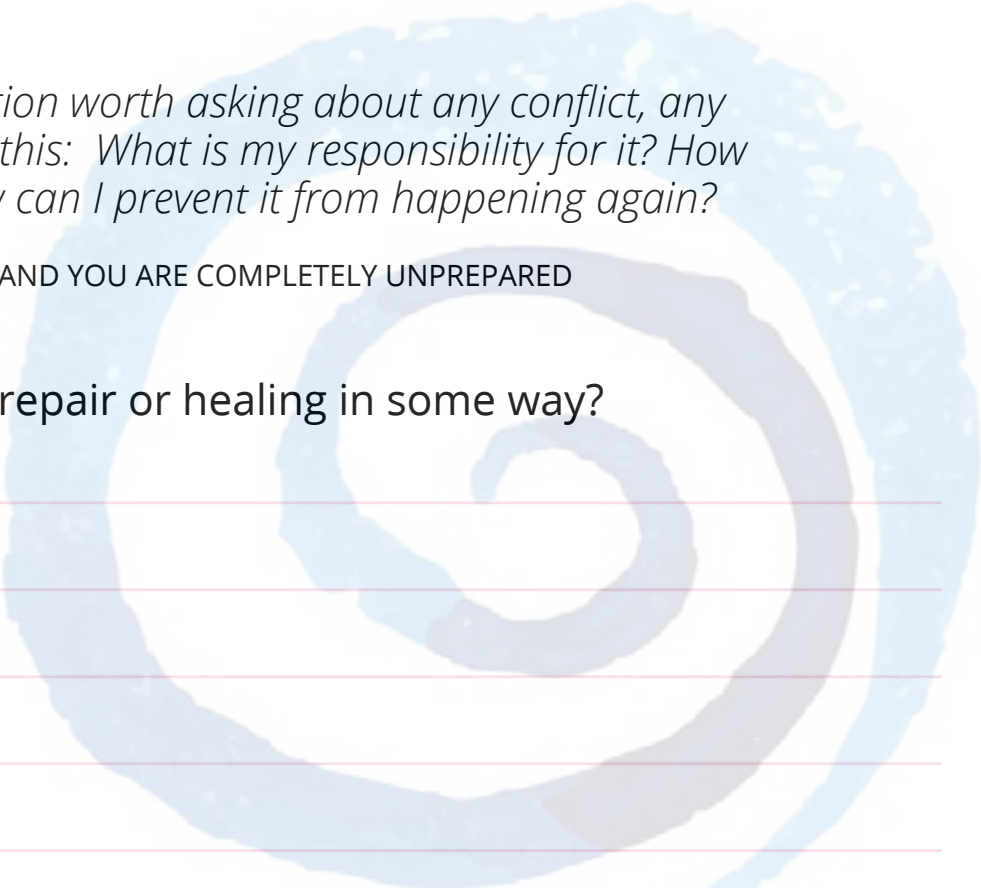
Week 3: Turning Towards Others

This week is dedicated to examining your relationships—family, friends, and community. Take a moment to review your calendar and reflect on those you’ve spent time with this year and those who have fallen off your schedule. It’s a **good opportunity for repair and reassessment** of relationships that may need attention.

“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?



What role have you played in relationships that need mending?

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

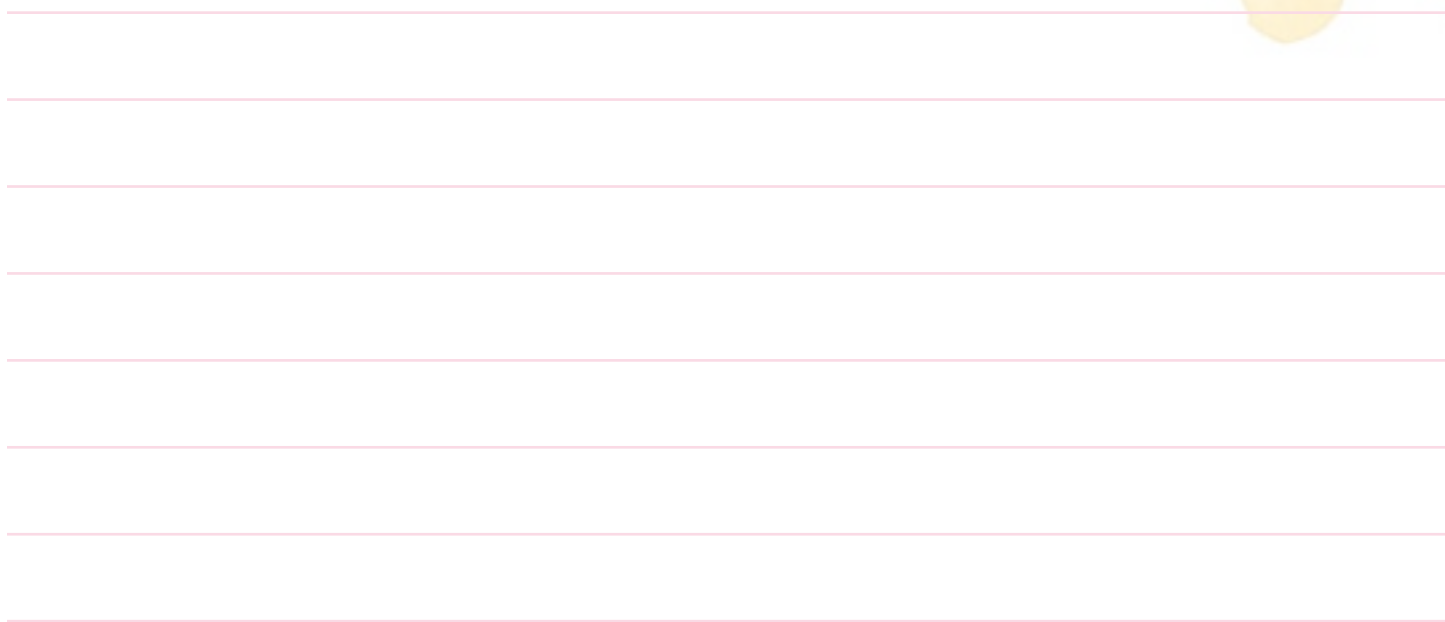
How have you contributed to your community this year, either through your time or financial support?

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

Which relationships need reassessment because they are exhausting, and which ones require more attention?



During this past year, how have your relationships either grown stronger or faced challenges?



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

Many of us have experienced profound spiritual connections—whether in a redwood forest, at a baby’s birth, or in a sanctuary. In these moments, you may feel your ego’s boundaries soften or vanish, sensing a connection to All-That-Is. Though fleeting, these experiences reveal a unity beneath the separateness of daily life. **How awesome would it be to heighten your awareness of when the sacred intersects with the ordinary?** This week, reflect on moments that have lifted you out of the mundane this year.

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

~ RABBI LAWRENCE KUSHNER
FIVE CITIES OF REFUGE
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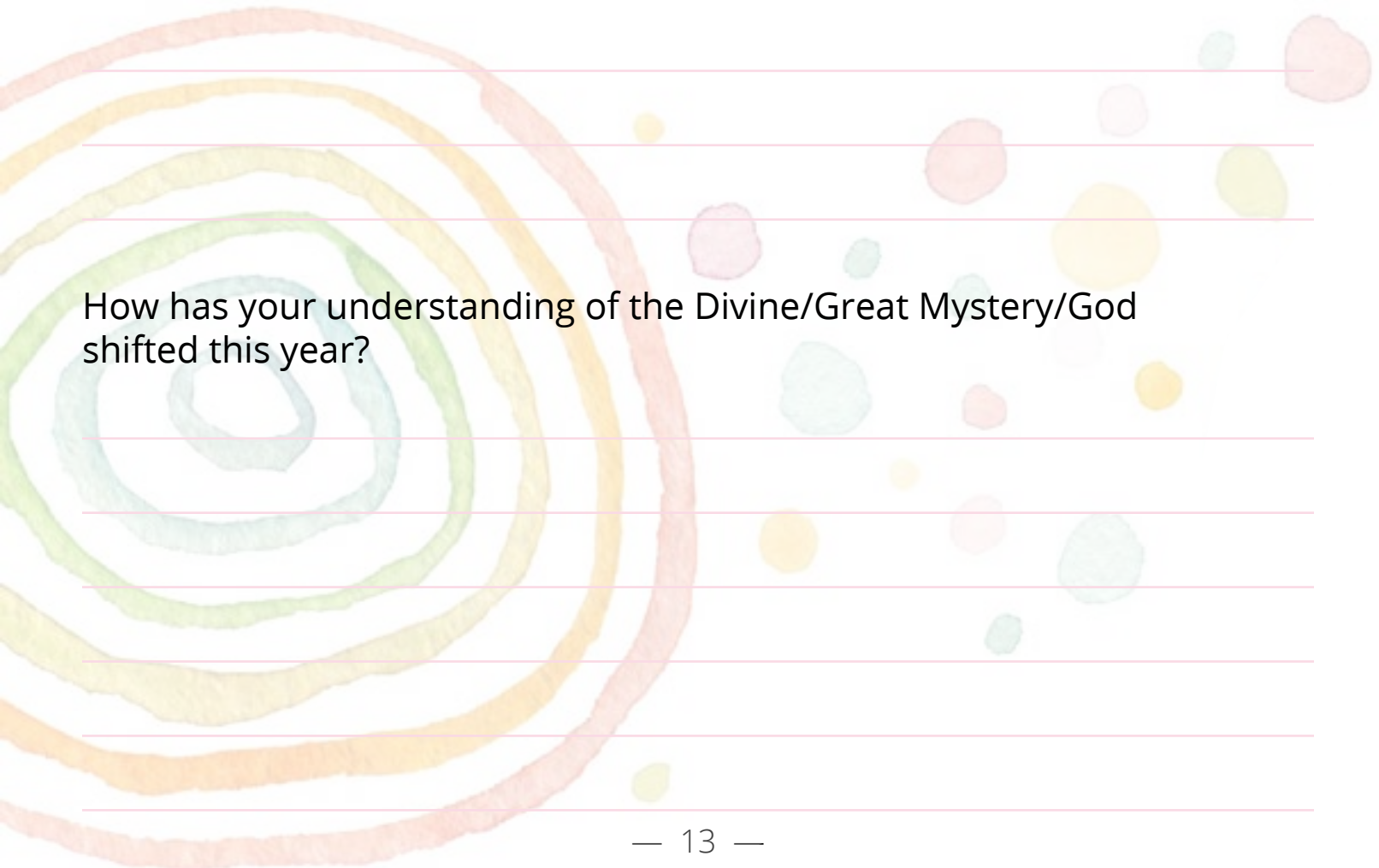
Who or what has uplifted you this year?

Describe a moment when you felt a sense of sacred connection.

What experiences this year have lifted you out of the mundane?

Which spiritual practices, like meditation, prayer, or study, have helped you stay centered?

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



Describe moments this year when you've been able to express your most authentic self.

How might you carve out meaningful time for spiritual growth this upcoming year? Brainstorm some ideas.

תשובה

Looking Forward:

These remarkable times call for each of us to play a crucial role. With every small contribution, we have the power to move our world closer to unity and wholeness.

How might you contribute this coming year to a cause or issue about which you care deeply?

Who in your life could benefit from your compassion and love right now? Are there ways you've hesitated to reach out that you might consider?

How will you work for justice this year?

Thank you. *Todah Rabah*

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

Teshuvah, the process of returning, is a sacred practice in itself. According to the rabbis, *teshuvah* is inherent in the fabric of creation*. This teaching recognizes that as humans, we inevitably make mistakes, fall short of our intentions, and stray from our paths. Yet, there is always 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.

I would love to connect with you on your favorite social media platform, or in the courses I teach throughout the year. Please check out the spiritual community I founded and lead, **Hineni** which is a supportive, loving, learning community.

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

~ **Rabbi Jill**

Founding Rabbi

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



<https://jewishmindful.org>



<https://jewishmindful.org/hineni>



Journaling to Heal the Spirit

Here are some extra pages for additional writing or notes to help you reflect on the past year and how to return to your best self.





The page contains 18 horizontal lines for writing. In the background, there is a faint, light green illustration of a tree with many small leaves, some of which are scattered around the base of the tree.



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