Repair the World

FALL NATIONAL DAYS OF JEWISH SERVICE 2026

Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur

Returning Through Service

Jewish Service Learning Facilitation Resource

September 10 – October 10, 2026

The High Holy Days invite us into one of Judaism's most enduring practices: *teshuvah*. Often translated as "repentance," *teshuvah* is also about return; returning to ourselves, our values, our communities, and the kind of world we hope to help create. *Teshuvah* reminds us that growth is about embracing the possibility of who we can become, and being a part of creating the world we want to see. As we show up for our neighbors and communities, we put reflection into action, recognizing that repair—of ourselves, our relationships, and our communities—isn't only an internal journey; it's something we build together.

Jewish Learning on *Teshuvah*

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto 1941, Rosh Hashana

Rabbi Shapira was the Grand Rabbi of Piaseczno, Poland, who authored a number of works and was murdered by the Nazis during the Holocaust. He is best remembered for a series of homilies on parshah (weekly Torah portions) that were delivered almost every Shabbat during the time he spent with his students in the Warsaw ghetto between the years 1939 and 1942.

> The time for *teshuvah* is Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the creation of the world. This is because *teshuvah* is also a kind of creativity. The Hebrew word *teshuvah* means repentance and return. However, as a creative act, *teshuvah* is not a simple return. We return to who we are meant to be, but have not yet become. We return to growth and possibility that has lain dormant within us and not yet flourished, much as a sculpture lies hidden within a brute block of stone. That is why the process of *teshuvah*, as painful and even humiliating as it can be, is in fact very joyous and hopeful.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

01 Rabbi Shapira teaches that *teshuvah* uncovers the person we are meant to become. What qualities within yourself could help bring about greater belonging or care in your community?

02 A sculptor creates not only by shaping stone, but by chiseling away what doesn't belong. What is one habit, assumption, or fear you hope to chip away this year?

03 How can today's service be an act of creation, helping to shape both the person you are becoming and the kind of community or world you hope to see?

Mishneh Torah, Repentance 3:4

The Mishneh Torah is a code of Rabbinic Jewish religious law authored by Maimonides. One of the most organized, comprehensive, and influential works of Jewish law, The Mishneh Torah was compiled between 1170 and 1180 CE, and systematically categorizes and clearly explains all aspects of Jewish observance, including those applicable only in Temple times.

> Even though the sounding of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is a decree, it contains an allusion. It is as if [the *shofar*'s call] is saying: "Wake up, you sleepy ones from your sleep, and you who slumber, arise. Inspect your deeds, repent, remember your Creator. Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time and throughout the entire year, devote their energies to vanity and emptiness, which will not benefit or save: Look to your souls. Improve your ways and your deeds, and let every one of you abandon [their] evil path and thoughts." Accordingly, throughout the entire year, a person should always look at [themself] as equally balanced between merit and sin and the world as equally balanced between merit and sin.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

01 The text describes the *shofar* as a wake-up call, urging us to "inspect your deeds" and "look to your souls." What are some things that can cause us to become "asleep" to ourselves, our values, or the needs of others?

02 Maimonides teaches that the *shofar* calls us to "improve your ways (internal thoughts and patterns) and your deeds (actions)." How do you see those shaping one another? Where do you think lasting change begins, and what does that suggest about how you approach service?

03 What is one way you hope to turn reflection into action this year?

VALUES TENSION

Commandedness and Personal Discovery

Jewish tradition teaches that service is shaped by two powerful ideas. One is commandedness–the belief that serving our communities is not optional, but a sacred and divinely given responsibility. The other is personal discovery–the understanding that service becomes profound when it reflects our own values, experiences, and sense of purpose; and in turn, that service changes us.

This tension raises powerful questions: Do we serve because we're told to, or because we feel called to? Can obligation and authenticity exist side by side? Jewish tradition teaches both ideas. Discovering meaning can deepen a sense of responsibility, and those responsibilities can be something we grow into and become a meaningful part of who we are. Whether we begin with a sense of duty or personal passion, both can lead to lives of purpose, responsibility, and connection.

Teshuvah naturally sits in this tension: there is something we are called back to (obligation, covenant, responsibility), and something we discover within ourselves (growth, values, possibility). The High Holidays invite us to reflect on who we are becoming, and service offers us one way to live out that reflection.

01 The High Holy Days invite us to return to our highest values. How do our personal values shape the way we show up for others?

02 Jewish tradition holds that caring for others can be both a responsibility we inherit and a choice we make. Where do you see those two ideas coming together in your own life?

03 As you serve today, what is one way this experience might help you grow into the person you hope to become?

Service Project Ideas

Below are sample service project ideas organized by issue area. Each includes examples of how the project can connect to the themes of Rosh Hashanah and/or Yom Kippur, along with a few project ideas to bring those themes to life.

IMMIGRATION

Rosh Hashanah's themes of renewal and fresh starts mirror the hope so many immigrants carry into a new home. Yom Kippur's themes of return speak to the hope embedded in an immigrant's journey toward a new home. Showing up for immigrant neighbors through a meal, a ride, or a welcome is one way we live out that hope for a good new year.

PROJECTS

- Pack welcome kits (household supplies, hygiene items, etc.) for new neighbors with a local refugee resettlement agency or immigrant support organization
- Make a meal at a center for immigrant housing
- Help translate resources, organize information packets, or create multilingual guides for a local immigrant-serving organization

HEALTH

Rosh Hashanah asks us to take stock of our inner lives, an honest self-reflection that mirrors the vulnerability of naming a mental health struggle. The *shofar* service is full of varied sounds, broken and whole, echoing the range of ability the tradition makes room for. Yom Kippur's call to *teshuvah* asks us to examine not only our individual actions, but the ways our communities can return to greater compassion, inclusion, and care for people living with mental health challenges and disabilities. A new year is a chance to personally reach out and make our spaces feel like home to everyone in them.

PROJECTS

- Create wellness kits with journals, fidget toys, etc to be dropped off at a mental health center
- Write letters, create art, or spend time at a school for people with disabilities
- Partner with a local organization to identify and implement accessibility improvements

FOOD / HUNGER

Rosh Hashanah reminds us to notice the blessings in our lives while asking how those blessings can be shared more widely. Isaiah 58, the Yom Kippur haftarah, is direct: Isaiah declares that the fast we should choose is to share our bread with the hungry. It's an invitation to let the fast move us toward the very physical act of preparing and sharing a meal with someone who needs one. Cheshbon hanefesh, the accounting of the soul, can include simply asking who around us hasn't eaten today.

PROJECTS

- Pack shelf-stable meals, or meals for a community fridge
- Volunteer at a food pantry
- Prepare meals for shelters or soup kitchens

ENVIRONMENTALISM

Rosh Hashanah marks the birthday of the world, hayom harat olam, inviting us to consider our relationship to creation itself. On Yom Kippur, we are called to acknowledge where we have fallen short and imagine how we might do better. The *shofar*'s blast is a wake-up call, and celebrating the world's birth is a natural moment to care for it directly, through a clean-up, a planting project, or tending shared land.

PROJECTS

- Run a neighborhood cleanup with a local parks department or conservation organization
- Plant native plants or pollinator gardens to improve oxygen with a local environmental organization
- Create a composting initiative or food waste reduction project with a community garden

INCARCERATION & REENTRY

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur invite us to imagine who we are becoming and how we can return to our values. For people navigating reentry after incarceration, this same journey of reflection, growth, and renewal is often met with barriers and stigma. Living out *teshuvah* means not only believing in the possibility of change, but creating communities that offer dignity, support, and a true welcome home.

PROJECTS

- Assemble welcome home kits in partnership with a re-entry organization
- Volunteer at employment centers and halfway houses
- Start a letter-writing initiative with an organization that supports people who are currently incarcerated

Reflection

In Jewish tradition, Shabbat ends with the ceremony of havdalah, which means 'differentiation' or 'distinction' in Hebrew. The purpose of havdalah is to savor the last moments of Shabbat and mark the transition to the routine rhythms of everyday life until Shabbat returns. It is about paying special attention to each of our senses to remember the embodied nature of the Shabbat experience. We're going to borrow from this idea of havdalah to help us differentiate between the service and learning we've done together here today and the routines in our daily lives we will return to after we wrap up.

Jewish tradition reminds us that meaningful moments are meant to shape what comes next. Just as we seek to extend the light of Shabbat into the week ahead, so too can we try to grasp some of the light that we've experienced here today and carry it into the days ahead.

Finish the following sentence: "As today's service comes to an end, the thing I want to carry with me into the days ahead is _____."