

תשובה

TESHUVAH
return

*Take Responsibility for
Your Actions*

The Jewish approach recognizes that humans often fail to live up to our best selves, and demands and honors learning from our mistakes.

Change is always possible.

SENSIBILITY CARD

On One Foot: Teshuvah

IMPORTANT TEXTS

“Before anything else, a person is obligated to reflect upon and search out what is his/her unique mission for the sake of which he/she descended to the world.”

— Rabbi Sholom Brezovsky (1911-2000), *Netivot Shalom*, Vol. 1, *Netivei Da’at*, Chapter 6:2, p. 30

“The matter then depends upon me alone!” — *Babylonian Talmud, Avoda Zara 17a*

“In the place that a ba’al teshuvah (someone who has conquered his or her flaws) stands, a purely righteous person is not worthy to stand.” — *Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 34b*



The Implications

We will look at **Teshuvah** in the context of:

- *Teshuvah: Who Am I?* **138**
- *Change Your Habits, Change Your Life* **142**
- *Teshuvah Soul Session: It Is All Up to Me* **146**
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Teshuvah: Who Am I?

This Activity is Great For



Learning

- Group Learning
- *Rosh Chodesh*



Pastoral Counseling



Holidays

- High Holidays



Identity & Relationships

- Art and Creative Play

Big Idea

By understanding who we are and improving ourselves when we inevitably fail, we can become the people we were meant to be.

I. Beginning the Conversation

Supplies:

- If using mirrors, 1 mirror for each person (something like <https://www.amazon.com/Darice-1633-86-Round-Mirror-6-Inch/dp/B000IM7FB2>), and dry erase markers or washable window markers (like https://www.amazon.com/Crayola-Count-Washable-Window-Markers/dp/B001FQKPSU?ie=UTF8&*Version*=1&*entries*=0)
- OR: paper and pen

Ask for a volunteer to read the poem "Zebra Question" by Shel Silverstein. The poem, though whimsical, contains some very deep Jewish wisdom, and can be found at: <https://allpoetry.com/Zebra-Question>.



TALK IT OUT

Teshuvah

- What do you think this poem is really about?
- How would you answer the zebra's questions in the poem?
- What words would you use to describe who you really are?



II. A Deeper Dive

Note to Facilitator:

Many of us are accustomed to thinking about *teshuvah* as repenting from the bad things that we have done. In the following text, Rabbi Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook, the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, gives a very different understanding of *teshuvah*. It is not only — or primarily — about regretting the bad things we have done. Instead, it is about becoming the person we are supposed to be. As we progress on the path of who we are meant to be, we may sin or turn away from our true nature. *Teshuvah* means “helping [our] inherent character to develop” by returning to our deepest, truest self and expressing it in the world.

- Read the following texts together or in *chavruta*, and discuss the “obligation” to know who you are and bring your true self out into the world. If you are leading this session on *Rosh Hashana* or *Yom Kippur*, note Rabbi Kook’s revolutionary understanding of what *teshuvah* (repentance or return) truly is.
- If the Rabbi Kook text is too dense for your crowd, consider paraphrasing it and instead reading together only the *Netivot Shalom* text.

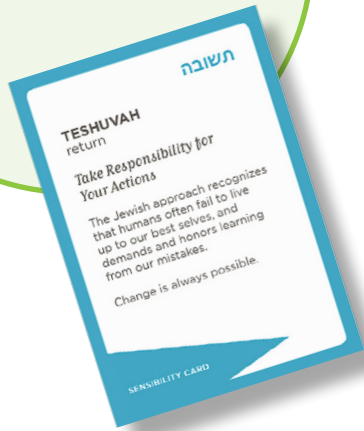
A. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook, *Orot haTeshuvah* 5:6

שלמותם של החיים היא דוקא עם המשך התגלותם על פי טבעם העצמי. וכיון שהטבע היא מצד עצמו אינו בעל הסתכלות והבחנה, הרי החטא מכרח הוא מצד זה. ואין אדם צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה טוב ולא יחטא. ובטול עצם טבעיותם של החיים, כדי שיהיה האדם בלתי-חוטא, זהו עצמו החטא היותר גדול, “וכפר עליו מאשר חטא על הנפש”. על כן התשובה מתקנת את הקלקול ומחזירה את העולם ואת החיים למקורו דוקא בגילוי יסוד עצמיותם העליון, עולם החרות, ועל שם כך מכנים שם ה' אלקים חיים.

A person’s life is perfected by developing his inherent character. And since one’s still-undeveloped character lacks insight, sin is guaranteed along this path of development. “There is no righteous person in the land who will commit good and not sin.” [Kohelet 7:20] On the other hand, eliminating one’s natural character in order to prevent sin is itself the greatest sin, [regarding which the *Torah* says of the *nazir* in Bamidbar 6:11,] “He shall atone for his sin against life.”

Therefore, *Teshuvah* repairs the damage [caused by sin and trying to be someone you are not] and restores the world and this person’s life to its root, precisely by helping the inherent character to develop. (Translation adapted from: <http://rechovot.blogspot.com/2010/08/rav-kook-on-teshuvah-healthy-natural.html>.)

Teshuvah



B. Rabbi Shalom Brezovsky, *Netivot Shalom*, Vol. 1, *Netivei Da'at*, Chapter 6:2, p. 30

בראש כל האדם חייב להתבונן היטב
ולחקור ולדעת מהי חובתו המיוחדת
בעולמו, מהו הענין המיוחד שבשבילו ירד
לעולם . . .

Before anything else, a person is obligated to reflect upon and search out what is his/her unique mission for the sake of which he descended to the world . . .

(Excerpt and translation from Morasha Syllabus, <http://www.morashasyllabus.com/class/Defining%20Ones%20Role%20in%20Life.pdf>, p. 7.)

OFF THE PAGE AND INTO LIFE



Character Trait Circles

This activity is designed to help students access their true selves and unique mission in the world, using Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe's "Character Trait Circles." (Adapted from: Dina Coopersmith, *Four Elements: Jewish Personality Typing*, <http://www.aish.com/sp/pg/83525102.html>.) In his *mussar* book *Alei Shur*, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe advises drawing a character trait circle to help us understand who we are and what are our missions in life.

- If you are using this session as a coffee date, you may wish to simply use paper and pen to complete this exercise.
- If you are teaching this as a group lesson, and/or to an individual or group that responds to craft activities, you may wish to do this exercise as a mirror craft activity. See above for supplies needed.

Step 1:

Give out the mirrors or paper and pens.

Step 2:

Explain that we will now create a "character trait circle" based on an exercise in Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe's book *Alei Shur*. If using the mirrors, tell students that every time we look our reflections, we will be reminded of who we really are and what we are truly capable of.



**Step 3:**

Students should draw the circle, or use the frame around the mirror as their circle. On the top of the circle, write your biggest strength, your best quality. At the bottom of the circle, write your worst flaw. Near the top, write some of your other good traits. As you go lower in the circle, write down some of your other, more neutral traits, and then towards the bottom, write down other challenging qualities you have.

Step 4:

Tell students that we each have a special mission in the world. To discover our mission, we should look to the top of the circle and consider how we can use our best qualities to fulfill our mission. To understand what we need to repair (*tikkun*), we should look to the bottom of the circle.

Divide students into small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions:

1. What are the strengths that you wrote at the top of the circle? What mission could you accomplish that is related to those strengths?
2. What is the main challenge that you wrote on the bottom of the circle? How could you use your strengths to help you address your challenge?

Reconvene the group, and ask them to write in the center of the circle, or on a certain spot on the mirror, a mission statement or phrase that they would like to remember based on the discussions they just had. Invite students to share their mission statements. Encourage students to put these mirrors someplace where they will see them every morning. Check in with students after about a week to see if these mirror reminders have led to any changes or impacted their decision-making.



Change Your Habits, Change Your Life

This Activity is Great For



Learning

- Group Learning
- Rosh Chodesh



Pastoral Counseling

- Self-Worth



Holidays

- High Holidays



Coffee Dates

Big Idea

By becoming mindful of cues, routines and rewards, we can do *teshuvah* for our bad habits and replace them with better practices.

I. Beginning the Conversation

Supplies:

Regular index cards, or dissolving paper if you plan to do a symbolic *Tashlich*

If this session takes place during the month of *Elul* or around the High Holidays, introduce the concept that we are now in a time of thinking about our lives and what we want to change going forward. Give out paper (if you are going to throw the paper in the water later for *tashlich*, use dissolving paper) and ask everyone to write down one bad habit that they would like to break this year.

TALK IT OUT

- Have you tried to break this habit before? What happened?
- Why do you think we use the phrase "break a habit"? Do you ever feel like your habit has such a tight grip on you that it needs to be broken?
- What will you do to change this habit?

II. A Deeper Dive

Teshuvah

The Four Steps of *Teshuvah*

Tell students that one of the most radical ideas that Judaism introduced to the world is the concept of *teshuvah*. According to Judaism, we can improve and change. The bad things that we have done don't define us forever. Bad habits — and worse — can be overcome through the hard work of *teshuvah*. In fact, the Sages say:

Babylonian *Talmud Brachot* 34b

במקום שבעלי תשובה עומדין צדיקים
גמורים אינם עומדין

In the place that a *ba'al teshuvah* (someone who has conquered his or her flaws) stands, a purely righteous person is not worthy to stand.

Not only are we told that we can do *teshuvah*, we are also told the steps to follow for complete repentance. In the following source, the great Jewish sage Maimonides lays out the steps for *teshuvah*. As you read through this source together, challenge students to find the four elements of *teshuvah* that Maimonides describes.

Maimonides *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah, Chapter 2, Halacha 3*

וְיָמָה הִיא הַתְּשׁוּבָה--הוּא שְׂיַעֲזֵב הַחֹטָא חֲטָאוֹ, וְיִסְרְנוּ
מִמַּחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ וְיִגְמַר בְּלִבּוֹ שְׂלֵא יַעֲשֶׂהוּ עוֹד, שְׂנִאָמַר "יַעֲזֹב
רְשָׁע דַּרְכּוֹ, וְאִישׁ אֶן מַחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ" (ישעיהו נה, ז). וְכֵן יִתְנַחֵם
עַל שְׂעֵבֵר, שְׂנִאָמַר "כִּי-אֲחֵרֵי שׁוּבִי, נִחַמְתִּי, וְאֲחֵרֵי הַיּוֹדְעִי,
סָפְקִיתִי עַל-יַרְךָ" (ירמיהו לא, יח); וְיַעֲדֵד עָלָיו יוֹדֵעַ תַּעֲלוּמוֹת
שְׂלֵא יֵשׁוּב לְזֶה הַחֲטָא לְעוֹלָם, שְׂנִאָמַר "וְלֹא-נֹאמַר עוֹד
אֱלֹהֵינוּ, לְמַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵינוּ--אֲשֶׁר-בָּךְ, יִרְחַם יְתוֹם" (הושע יד, ד).
וְצָרִיף לְהַתְּוֹדוֹת בְּשִׁפְתָיו, וְלֹאמַר עֲבִיבוֹת אֵלָיו שְׂגָמַר בְּלִבּוֹ.

What constitutes *Teshuvah*? That a sinner should abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart, never to commit them again as [Isaiah 55:7] states "May the wicked abandon his ways...." Similarly, he must regret the past as [Jeremiah 31:18] states: "After I returned, I regretted." [He must reach the level where] He who knows the hidden will testify concerning him that he will never return to this sin again as [Hoshea 14:4] states: "We will no longer say to the work of our hands: 'You are our gods.'" He must verbally confess and state these matters which he resolved in his heart.
(Translation from: http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/911891/jewish/Teshuvah-Chapter-Two.htm)

Ask students if they were able to spot the four steps of *teshuvah* listed in the Rambam.

They are usually described as:

1. *Azivat ha-chet* — stop doing the bad action
2. *Charatah* — remorse for having done the bad action
3. *Viduy* — verbal confession
4. *Kabbalah l'atid* — resolving, and making a plan, to never repeat these actions





TALK IT OUT

- Ask students about the last step: making a plan to never repeat the action. How do you make a successful plan to abandon a bad habit?
- Is it really possible to make sure that you don't repeat the action in the future?

B. How to Break a Habit: Research from the Field

Tell students that a New York Times writer, Charles Duhigg, was also concerned with the question of how to break a habit. In fact, he was so concerned with this question that he wrote a book about habits: *The Power of Habit*. Duhigg found that there are three elements to a habit, what he calls the "habit loop": cue, routine and reward. In the following video, he describes how he used his knowledge of the habit loop to break his afternoon cookie habit.

Watch together "How to Break A Habit" — <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1eYrhGeffc>

Discuss the three elements of the Habit Loop

- Cue — trigger for an automatic behavior to start unfolding
- Routine — behavior itself
- Reward — tells our brain whether we should store it for future use or not

Duhigg found that if we become mindful of our habits, we can start to change them.

Duhigg's 4 Steps to Changing Your Habits

1. Isolate the routine that you want to change, e.g. eating a cookie in the afternoon.
2. Next, figure out the reward that you are really craving.
 - a. In Duhigg's cookie experiment, he realized that the reward he was craving was socializing with his colleagues. He realized that he could change his routine to get the same reward. When he changed his routine so that he was able to socialize away from the cafeteria, his desire for a cookie disappeared.
 - b. To figure out your desired reward, adjust your routine so that it gives you different rewards. Duhigg walked around the block, bought an apple in the cafeteria, and went to a friend's desk to experiment with different rewards. After you test the different rewards, write down a few words that come to mind. Then set an alarm for 15 minutes and see if you still have the desire for the same routine.
3. Observe your routine to figure out the cues that prompt the bad habit. Usually, a cue falls into one of five categories: location, time, emotional state, other people, immediately preceding action. Observe these 5 cues over the course of a week or two to figure out what is triggering your behavior.

4. Have a plan — Decide in advance what you will do when you experience the cue, so that you will get the reward you desire without engaging in the bad routine. For instance, in the video Duhigg decided he would socialize at a colleague's desk every day at 3:30 PM. Notice that the last step here -- *Have a Plan* -- is the same step Maimonides wrote about over 800 years ago: *Kabalah l'Atid*.

OFF THE PAGE AND INTO LIFE

Brainstorming

Ask students to apply some of Duhigg's research to the following typical bad habits. Discuss together what some of the possible cues and rewards might be for these habits, and what plan one could implement to change the habit:

- Fights with roommates
- Staying up too late surfing the internet
- Eating too much junk food
- Gossiping about someone else

Once you have brainstormed together as a group, divide students into *chavruta* pairs and have them brainstorm some of the cues and rewards for the bad habits (routines) they originally wrote down, and how they can change those bad habits based on what the group has talked about today.

Tashlich

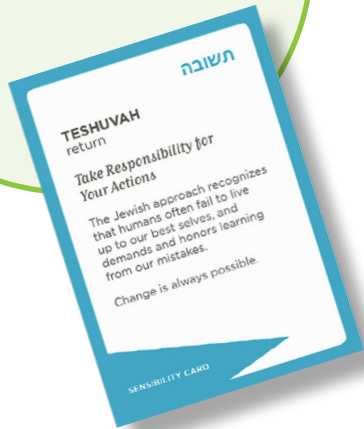
Reconvene the group. Tell participants that in the month of *Tishrei*, Jews traditionally gather around a stream or other place of flowing water, and symbolically throw away their sins. This custom, known as *Tashlich*, is meant to be a physical reminder to repent -- not to replace the hard work of *teshuvah*. Take students to a stream, river or other water source on campus (a fountain?) and (if allowed) throw the dissolving paper into the water, as a way to symbolically cast away the bad habit.

Follow-Up

Check in with students over the next week or two to see if they were able to change their bad habits by changing their cues or finding a new routine that gives them the same reward. If it has not worked, talk with them to further clarify their cues, routines and rewards to try to find a way to change the bad habit.



Teshuvah Soul Session: It is All Up to Me



This Activity is Great For



Spirituality

- Alternative Service



Holidays

- High Holidays

I. Beginning the Conversation

Soul sessions are based on the work of Parker Palmer, specifically his development of the “circle of trust” and his emphasis on drawing out the soul and giving it safe space. In these soul sessions, we will read a piece of text connected to a sensibility, and give ourselves the time and safe space to fully experience the text and discover our relationship to it. Our goals in these sessions are: (1) to get in touch with the wisdom that we have within; (2) to have real, meaningful encounters with Jewish ideas; and (3) to create a welcoming community that nurtures true, honest and kind communication.

For more information about Parker Palmer, the Center for Courage and Renewal, and the principles and procedures of Circles of Trust, see <http://www.couragerenewal.org/approach/>.

Note to Facilitator:

As the facilitator, your role is to help the circle participants create a secure space where they can meaningfully encounter themselves, each other and the text. As much as possible, try to facilitate and not teach: you should be involved in the discussions, journaling and small discussions like other members of the group. Give the group the space and trust to proceed without telling them what they should think or how they should interpret.

How to conduct a soul session:

1. Set up chairs in a circle, where everyone can see each other.
2. Welcome students to the soul session, and explain what a soul session/circle of trust is. You may wish to distribute the Courage and Renewal touchstones, and read each touchstone out loud, in order to set the stage for the work that the group will do together. ([http://www.couragerenewal.org/PDFs/CourageRenewal-Circle-of-Trust-Touchstones-\(c\)2015.pdf](http://www.couragerenewal.org/PDFs/CourageRenewal-Circle-of-Trust-Touchstones-(c)2015.pdf))

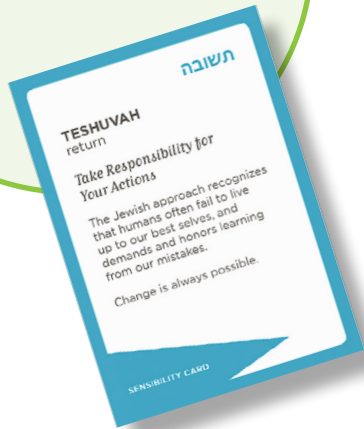




3. Explain that the principle of double confidentiality will apply to this session: What other people mention in this soul session, and in the breakout sessions, is totally confidential. You may not tell anyone what someone else said in this session. In addition, if you see participants from this soul session after the session has concluded, you may not ask them about what they talked about here, unless they specifically invite you to do so.
4. Introduce the text: Introduce the radical Jewish idea of *teshuvah*, that we are all capable of repentance, return and growth. If you are leading this session as an alternative High Holiday service or around the time of the High Holidays, explain that the rituals this time of year encourage us to engage in *teshuvah* by reflecting upon our actions and striving to do better. Tell students that we will now read a funny and profound story from the Babylonian *Talmud* about a man who you might not think of as the model for *teshuvah*. Encourage them to open their hearts to the story and the meaning that it holds for them. Tell students: In our session today, it does not matter whether you have heard this story many times before or if this is your first encounter with the story. What we will do is read it as if it is the first time, and create the space and atmosphere to have a deep and meaningful personal encounter with the text.
5. Ask for two volunteers to read the text out loud, one after the other, so that we can hear the text in two different voices. (See below for text)
6. Invite members of the circle to comment on what resonates for them in the piece they just read. You should be involved as a member of the circle, but don't rush to fill the silence; give participants the time and space to comment and reflect. Encourage participants to speak into the middle of the circle, rather than to each other.
7. Journaling: Before the session, write out the following questions - or any other questions you would like to pose — on a large sheet of paper. At this point in the session, post the paper on the wall and read out the questions.
 - What kind of person does Eleazar ben Dordaya seem to be? Do you identify with Eleazar in any way?
 - Why do you think Eleazar was so disturbed by the prostitute's exhaled breath and words?
 - What scares Eleazar when he says "then the matter depends on me alone"? Does that scare you?
 - Why do you think the heavenly voice announced that Eleazar was accepted into the World to Come? What did he do to deserve it?
 - Have you ever felt like you hit rock bottom? What have you done to climb back out? What could you do in the future?

Invite students to spend 10 minutes writing in their journal, or if this session occurs on *Shabbat* or a holiday, silently reflecting on these questions. They should find a place to sit comfortably, and take their time. Their written reflections will be kept private unless they choose to reveal them.

8. Small Group Discussion: Bring the group back together and explain that you will now separate them into groups of two or three (depending on how much time you have carved out for this session, and your space constraints). Each group will find someplace to gather, and then each individual in the group will have 10 minutes to talk about their reflections on the text and questions, or whatever thoughts the text has prompted in them. Each group should appoint a timekeeper to raise his or her hand when the 10 minutes are up. After each member of the group has had his or her ten minutes, they should return to the circle.



Ground rules for the breakout groups:

- a. Sit in silence and give the individual who is speaking the space and time to talk at his or her own pace. Do not jump in with questions or comments. Hold the space for them to talk. If they take all 10 minutes to talk, then your job is simply to listen. If they decide they do not want to talk at all, sit in silence with them for 10 minutes. If they have finished what they have to say, and they invite questions before the 10 minutes are up, ask brief, open and honest questions - without introducing your own opinion or offering advice.
 - b. Do not give advice - your job is not to tell the others what they should do. Your job is to help create a safe, open space where honest, soulful reflection can occur.
 - c. The rule of double confidentiality applies. Members of the group may not tell anyone else what they heard in this conversation. In addition, if you see a member of your group later on, you may not ask them about what they talked about, unless they specifically invite you to do so.
9. Whole Group Reflection: When everyone returns to the circle, invite participants to share with the whole group something they have discovered (about themselves only — no talking about what others had said) through their journaling and small group discussions, or to reflect on the soul session and its process of reflection and building of safe space. Allow students to sit in silence to reflect; do not rush to close.
10. Closing: Thank students for their time and for creating a welcoming, honest, safe space. Remind them again that double confidentiality applies. Tell students that you are always happy to speak with them about some of the issues that have come up for them in this session, but that because of double confidentiality you will not refer back to what they said unless they explicitly and proactively invite you to do so (make sure to let them know that, so no misunderstandings occur).

The Story of Rabbi Eleazar ben Dordaya, Babylonian *Talmud*, *Avoda Zara* 17a

אמרו עליו על ר"א בן דורדיא שלא הניח זונה אחת בעולם
 שלא בא עליה פעם אחת שמע שיש זונה אחת בכרכי
 הים והיתה נוטלת כיס דינרין בשכרה נטל כיס דינרין והלך
 ועבר עליה שבעה נהרות בשעת הרגל דבר הפיחה אמרה
 כשם שהפיחה זו אינה חוזרת למקומה כך אלעזר בן
 דורדיא אין מקבלין אותו בתשובה הלך וישב בין שני הרים
 וגבעות אמר הרים וגבעות בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו עד
 שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו שנאמר (ישעיהו
 נד) כי ההרים ימושו והגבעות תמוטינה אמר שמים וארץ
 בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על
 עצמנו שנאמר (ישעיהו נא) כי שמים כעשן נמלחו והארץ
 כבגד תבלה אמר חמה ולבנה בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו
 עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו שנאמר (ישעיהו
 כד) וחפרה הלבנה ובושה החמה אמר כוכבים ומזלות

It was said of Rabbi Eleazar ben Dordaya that he did not leave out any harlot in the world without coming to her. Once, on hearing that there was a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted a purse of denarii for her hire, he took a purse of denarii and crossed seven rivers for her sake. As he was with her, she blew forth breath (another translation: she passed gas) and said: As this blown breath will not return to its place, so will Eleazar ben Dordaya never be received in repentance. He thereupon went, sat between two hills and mountains and exclaimed: "O, you hills and mountains, plead for mercy for me!" They replied: "How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, 'For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed.'" (Isaiah 54:10) So he exclaimed: "Heaven and earth, plead you for mercy for me!" They, too, replied: "How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, 'For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment.'" (Isaiah 51:6)



The Story of Rabbi Eleazer ben Dordaya, Babylonian *Talmud*, *Avoda Zara 17a* (continued)

בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו עד שאנו מבק־
שים עליך נבקש על עצמנו שנאמר (ישעיהו
לד) ונמקו כל צבא השמים אמר אין הדבר
תלוי אלא בי הניח ראשו בין ברכיו וגעה
בבכיה עד שיצתה נשמתו יצתה בת קול
ואמרה ר"א בן דורדיא מזומן לחיי העולם
הבא. . . בכה רבי ואמר יש קונה עולמו
בכמה שנים ויש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת
ואמר רבי לא דיין לבעלי תשובה שמקבלין
אותן אלא שקורין אותן רבי

He then exclaimed: "Sun and moon, plead you for mercy for me!" But they also replied: "How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, 'Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed.'" (Isaiah 24:23) He exclaimed: "You stars and constellations, plead you for mercy for me!" Said they: How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, 'And all the hosts of heaven shall moulder away.'" (Isaiah 34:4) Said he: "The matter then depends upon me alone!" Having placed his head between his knees, he wept aloud until his soul departed. Then a bat-kol (heavenly voice) was heard proclaiming: "Rabbi Eleazar ben Dordaya is destined for the life of the world to come!" . . . Rabbi [on hearing of it] wept and said: One may acquire eternal life after many years, another in one hour! Rabbi also said: Not only are penitents accepted, they are even called 'Rabbi'!

Teshuvah





Just for Hillel Professionals: Dealing with Failure

This Activity is Great For



**Just for Hillel
Professionals**

I. Beginning the Conversation

Hillel professionals work hard on a day-to-day basis connecting with students, planning and implementing programs, and teaching classes. Inevitably, some of these encounters, programs or classes will not go as well as we had hoped. Use these questions to reflect on how you can incorporate some of the lessons of *teshuvah* to make things right and move forward.

1. Have there been any recent interactions with colleagues or students that you have regretted?
 - a. What did you do about it?
 - b. If you could do it over, what would you do?
 - c. What can you do about it now?
2. What are some specific things you will do this year to deal with personal or professional situations that you find challenging?
3. What are your strengths as a person and Hillel professional?
4. What are some specific things you will do this year to use your strengths to greater effect in both your personal and professional lives?

Textsheets for Students

Teshuvah

On the next pages, you'll find just the texts mentioned in each of the sections of this curriculum, without the facilitator's guide. Use these sheets if you would like to make copies of the texts for students, while keeping the facilitator's notes just for you!



Teshuvah: Who Am I?



“The Zebra Question” by Shel Silverstein

The poem, though whimsical, contains some very deep Jewish wisdom, and can be found at: <https://allpoetry.com/Zebra-Question>.



Teshuvah: Who Am I? (continued)**A. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Hakohen Kook, *Orot haTeshuvah* 5:6**

שלמותם של החיים היא דוקא עם המשך התגלותם על פי טבעם העצמי. וכיון שהטבע היא מצד עצמו אינו בעל הסתכלות והבחנה, הרי החטא מכרח הוא מצד זה. ואין אדם צדיק בארץ אשר יעשה טוב ולא יחטא. ובטול עצם טבעיותם של החיים, כדי שיהיה האדם בלתי-חוטא, זהו עצמו החטא היותר גדול, "וכפר עליו מאשר חטא על הנפש". על כן התשובה מתקנת את הקלקול ומחזירה את העולם ואת החיים למקורו דוקא בגילוי יסוד עצמיותם העליון, עולם החרות, ועל שם כך מכנים שם ה' אלקים חיים.

A person's life is perfected by developing his inherent character. And since one's still-undeveloped character lacks insight, sin is guaranteed along this path of development. "There is no righteous person in the land who will commit good and not sin." [Kohelet 7:20] On the other hand, eliminating one's natural character in order to prevent sin is itself the greatest sin, [regarding which the *Torah* says of the *nazir* in *Bamidbar* 6:11,] "He shall atone for his sin against life."

Therefore, *Teshuvah* repairs the damage [caused by sin and trying to be someone you are not.] and restores the world and this person's life to its root, precisely by helping the inherent character to develop. (Translation adapted from: <http://rechovot.blogspot.com/2010/08/rav-kook-on-teshuvah-healthy-natural.html>.)

B. Rabbi Shalom Brezovsky, *Netivot Shalom*, Vol. 1, *Netivei Da'at*, Chapter 6:2, p. 30

(Excerpt and translation from *Morasha Syllabus*, <http://www.morashasyllabus.com/class/Defining%20ones%20Role%20in%20Life.pdf>, p. 7.)

בראש כל האדם חייב להתבונן היטב ולחקור ולדעת מהי חובתו המיוחדת בעולמו, מהו הענין המיוחד שבשבילו ירד לעולם . . .

Before anything else, a person is obligated to reflect upon and search out what is his/her unique mission for the sake of which he descended to the world . . .





Change Your Habits, Change Your Life

Babylonian Talmud Brachot 34b

במקום שבעלי תשובה עומדין צדיקים
גמורים אינם עומדין

In the place that a *ba'al teshuvah* (someone who has conquered his or her flaws) stands, a purely righteous person is not worthy to stand.

Maimonides Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah, Chapter 2, Halacha 3

ומה היא התשובה--הוא שיעזב החטא
חטאו, ויסירנו ממחשבתו ויגמר בלבו שלא
יעשהו עוד, שנאמר "יעזב רשע דרכו, ואיש
און מחשבתיו" (ישעיהו נה, ז). וכן יתנחם
על שעבר, שנאמר "כי-אחרי שובי, נחמתי,
ואחרי הידעי, ספקתי על-יך" (ירמיהו
לא, יח); ויעיד עליו יודע תעלומות שלא
ישוב לזה החטא לעולם, שנאמר "ולא-
נאמר עוד אלהינו, למעשה ידינו--אשר-בך,
ירחם יתום" (הושע יד, ד). וצריך להתודות
בשפתינו, ולומר ענינות אלו שגמר בלבו.

What constitutes *Teshuvah*? That a sinner should abandon his sins and remove them from his thoughts, resolving in his heart, never to commit them again as [Isaiah 55:7] states "May the wicked abandon his ways...." Similarly, he must regret the past as [Jeremiah 31:18] states: "After I returned, I regretted." [He must reach the level where] He who knows the hidden will testify concerning him that he will never return to this sin again as [Hoshea 14:4] states: "We will no longer say to the work of our hands: `You are our gods.'" He must verbally confess and state these matters which he resolved in his heart.

(Translation from: http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/911891/jewish/Teshuvah-Chapter-Two.htm)



Teshuvah Soul Session: It is All Up to Me

The Story of Rabbi Eleazar ben Dordaya, Babylonian *Talmud*, *Avoda Zara* 17a

אמרו עליו על ר"א בן דורדיא שלא הניח זונה אחת בעולם שלא בא עליה פעם אחת שמע שיש זונה אחת בכרכי הים והיתה נוטלת כיס דינרין בשכרה נטל כיס דינרין והלך ועבר עליה שבעה נהרות בשעת הרגל דבר הפיחה אמרה כשם שהפיחה זו אינה חוזרת למקוֹ מה כן אלעזר בן דורדיא אין מקבלין אותו בתשובה הלך וישב בין שני הרים וגבעות אמר הרים וגבעות בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו שנאמר (ישעיהו נד) כי ההרים ימושו והגבעות תמוטינה אמר שמים וארץ בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו שנאמר (ישעיהו נא) כי שמים כעשן נמלחו והארץ כבגד תבלה אמר חמה ולבנה בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו שנאמר (ישעיהו כד) וחפרה הלבנה ובושה החמה אמר כוכבים ומזלות בקשו עלי רחמים אמרו לו עד שאנו מבקשים עליך נבקש על עצמנו שנאמר (ישעיהו לד) ונמקו כל צבא השמים אמר אין הדבר תלוי אלא בי הניח ראשו בין ברכיו וגעה בבכיה עד שיצתה נשמתו יצתה בת קול ואמרה ר"א בן דורדיא מזומן לחיי העולם הבא. . . בכה רבי ואמר יש קונה עולמו בכמה שנים ויש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת ואמר רבי לא דיין לבעלי תשובה שמקבלין אותן אלא שקורין אותן רבי

It was said of Rabbi Eleazar ben Dordaya that he did not leave out any harlot in the world without coming to her. Once, on hearing that there was a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted a purse of denarii for her hire, he took a purse of denarii and crossed seven rivers for her sake. As he was with her, she blew forth breath (another translation: she passed gas) and said: As this blown breath will not return to its place, so will Eleazar ben Dordaya never be received in repentance. He thereupon went, sat between two hills and mountains and exclaimed: "O, you hills and mountains, plead for mercy for me!" They replied: "How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, 'For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed!'" (Isaiah 54:10) So he exclaimed: "Heaven and earth, plead you for mercy for me!" They, too, replied: "How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, 'For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment.'" (Isaiah 51:6) He then exclaimed: "Sun and moon, plead you for mercy for me!" But they also replied: "How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, 'Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed.'" (Isaiah 24:23) He exclaimed: "You stars and constellations, plead you for mercy for me!" Said they: How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, 'And all the hosts of heaven shall moulder away.'" (Isaiah 34:4) Said he: "The matter then depends upon me alone!" Having placed his head between his knees, he wept aloud until his soul departed. Then a bat-kol (heavenly voice) was heard proclaiming: "Rabbi Eleazar ben Dordaya is destined for the life of the world to come!" . . . Rabbi [on hearing of it] wept and said: One may acquire eternal life after many years, another in one hour! Rabbi also said: Not only are penitents accepted, they are even called 'Rabbi'!

