

To learn the spiritual meaning of the fall holy days, just reach into your pockets and see what's there. I learned this simple truth several years ago from Rabbi Lawrence Kushner of Congregation Beth El in Sudbury, Massachusetts, one Shabbat eve shortly before Rosh Hashanah. Rabbi Kushner invited us to feel around in our pockets and identify what we found. Some people reported finding keys, coins, or gum. Some, though, found nothing—they claimed their pockets were bare. But the truth is, said Rabbi Kushner, no one's pockets are ever truly empty. If you dig deep enough, even if the pants are new, there's always something hidden in their pockets—fuzzy stuff, lint—in short, that which we most appropriately describe as *schmutz*.

Our pockets are hiding places. Sometimes we intend to conceal things there: wallets, keys, makeup, Chapstick, or Binaca. Yet sometimes the contents of our pockets are hidden from us, and we carry them around unknowingly. The "pockets" of our lives, too, are full of secrets: things we meant to hide or deny, things we imagined we'd forgotten or lost, things we meant to throw out, things we didn't even know we had. And over the course of the year, the *schmutz* can accumulate.

On the afternoon of the first day of Rosh Hashanah, (or on the second day when the first day falls on Shabbat), Jews participate in *tashlich*, a custom that involves removing some breadcrumbs from our pockets and tossing them into a body of living water. We symbolically rid ourselves of our errors and assert our determination to begin the new year with a fresh slate. The objective of *tashlich* is to empty our pockets literally and figuratively, to reveal our secrets to ourselves and to God. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the High Holy Days, are about facing our secrets, realizing that if we let them into the light, we need not feel scared, embarrassed, or guilty. Quite the opposite—if we find a safe context for revealing that which we have hidden from ourselves and from others, we can experience *shalom*, a true sense of wholeness and well-being.

Tashlich and the rituals of the fall holy days teach us that we can transcend our mistakes if we honestly acknowledge them and resolve to try to do better. We don't have to deny them, pretend to be someone else, or imagine ourselves to be better than we really are. We can simply, honestly, be ourselves.

The Hebrew word describing the Jewish conception of repentance, *teshuvah* ("return") is instructive. In Judaism, repentance involves returning to who we really are, not pre-



tending to be someone or something we are not. If thinking about our secrets and our mistakes depresses us, then we're not really doing *teshuvah*. We are doing *teshuvah* properly if, as we consider the kind of people we've been this year, we begin to feel a little bit lighter, a little bit better about ourselves.

STARTING YOUR NEW YEAR JEWISHLY EMPTYING YOUR POCKETS

by Rabbi Marc Margolius



Teshuvah is about coming clean, with ourselves and with God. Our tradition recognizes that human beings are imperfect. No matter how energetically we clean our pockets, the fact is that almost immediately the *schmutz*, the errors, begin to accumulate again. Our job during the fall holidays is to empty our pockets, to be as honest as we can with ourselves, with others, and with God. In the year ahead, we try to keep our pockets as clean as possible until the holidays return the next fall.

These holy days teach us that we are all fallible human beings who are not expected to be perfect, but only to try our best. They remind us that parental and divine love and acceptance ultimately are unconditional and independent of our performance. And by providing that security, they offer us a fresh start, an opportunity to admit our failings and to begin all over again.

TESHUVAH IS ABOUT COMING CLEAN, WITH OURSELVES AND WITH GOD

Families can integrate these lessons into their lives. The fall holy days are opportunities to learn how to forgive and how to be forgiven. Some families have "*teshuvah*" meetings, making time for one-on-one conversations in which each person apologizes for something they wish they had



not done to the other. Some find it easier to apologize in writing and sit down to write each other "*teshuvah*" notes. Other families meet to make a list of goals, as individuals and as a group, for the coming year, such as spending more time together, being more patient, or creating more opportunities for cooperation. The list can then be posted on the refrigerator or in a place where everyone will be reminded of the goals throughout the year.

Try *tashlich* as a family. Walk to the nearest body of water with some bread. Encourage your children to think about things from the past year which were making them feel sad or for which they were sorry. Do the same yourself. Share with your children some of the things you regret, and ask their forgiveness. Tell them that it's OK to just think about them and not to say them, if they wish. Explain that Rosh Hashanah is a time to get rid of these regrets and sad feelings, and to start a new year fresh. Then toss the crumbs into the water, watch them float away, take a deep breath of the autumn air, and walk back home into the new year.



It's almost 5777!

1. Did I say “thanks” today?

This isn't the kind of “thank you” you say to someone to be polite. This is the kind of thanks you feel when you open your eyes in the morning and are happy to be awake and to see the face of someone you love or the thanks you feel when you eat a great meal.

Every day, make a point of giving thanks for something.

2. Did I do something helpful today?

How we act towards everyone and everything we come in contact with—people, animals, the environment—is an important part of *teshuvah*. When we do something helpful and caring, it helps us remember that we are connected to everything around us.

Do something helpful each day—say something nice to the cashier at the store, listen to someone’s problem, take your dog for a walk, pick up a piece of trash in the street.

3. Did I notice something new today?

In the traditional morning prayers it says that Creation is made anew each and every day. But when we are too busy rushing around we don't see things that are right in front of us, and the world becomes a more boring place.

Stop for a moment during the day—in your house, at school, walking outside—and just look around. Is there something you haven't noticed before?

4. Did I say “that’s great” today?

The world can be a pretty wonderful place, but often we forget that. Giving praise helps remind us that there is a lot of goodness all around us, if we just remember to look for it.

Every day during *Elul*, give some praise to someone in your family, to a friend, to yourself, or to the world.



5. Did I pray today?

Prayer means different things to different people—from talking to God to silent meditation to a quiet walk in the woods. Prayer can feel like connecting to something bigger than your-

self, or connecting to something deep inside yourself.

Each day during *Elul*, make some time to pray in a way that is meaningful for you. You may also want to try a new way of praying. How do different members of your family pray?



6. Is there anyone

I need to say “I’m sorry” to?

Jewish tradition teaches us that we can't ask forgiveness from God for a problem we're having with another person—we have to go and work it out with that person. Is there someone you haven't talked to in a long time, or someone you had a fight with, or someone you'd like to say “I'm sorry” to?

Think about whether there's anything you've done that you want to ask forgiveness for, or think about how you might talk to someone you're having a hard time with.

As a family, you can help each other by acting out a situation before doing it for real, to see how it might go. You may also want to check in with one another as a family—does anyone need to say “I'm sorry” to anyone else?

7. Did I have fun today?

Playing is important! Kids tend to know this, but grown-ups often forget.

Kids, help your parents with this one!

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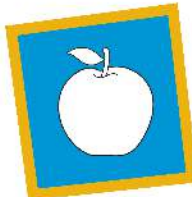
ELUL INVENTORY

By Rabbi Toba Spitzer

In Jewish tradition, there is a special time of year when we check in on how we're doing in our lives—our spiritual lives and our lives with other people. That time is the month of *Elul*, the month leading up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

During *Elul* we are preparing for the work of *teshuvah*. *Teshuvah* means “return.” The assumption is that if all things were as they should be, we would all be loving, open, aware and connected people. But the fact is it's pretty easy to get off track—and so “returning” takes some work. This work is something that parents and kids can help each other with.

This exercise is a guide to your own *teshuvah* preparation. There are seven questions, followed by suggestions for practice. Your family may choose to do all or part of the inventory each evening in the month of *Elul*.



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