

A new year has begun.

May we have the courage
to see clearly.

May we have the honesty
to acknowledge what we find.

May we have the strength
to repair what we can.

May we have the humility
to change our minds.

May we have the courage
to stand together despite our differences.

And may we remember:

We do not know
what the coming year will bring.

But we have some say
in what we bring to it.

שנה טובה

Shanah tovah.

A good year.

גמר חתימה טובה

G'mar chatimah tovah.

May we bring this process
to a good completion.

And now—

let us begin.

A Secular Liturgy for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur

Days of Awe: A Secular Liturgy



ROSH HASHANAH

I. ENTERING THE NEW YEAR

Opening

We enter these days together.

Not because the universe has promised us a particular future,
but because we do not know what the future will bring.

A year has ended.

Some of what we hoped for happened.
Some did not.
Some things were within our control.
Much was not.

Today we pause.

We look backward without pretending that the past can be changed.

We look forward without pretending that the future can be known.

And we ask:

How shall we live?

The Beginning of a Year

Rosh Hashanah is called *Yom HaDin*—
the Day of Judgment.

Today we become our own witnesses.

We examine the year that has passed
and ask what our actions have made of it.

Not:

Was I a good person?

But:

What did I do?

Whom did I help?
Whom did I hurt?
What did I avoid?

*Shema Yisrael,
Adonai Eloheinu,
Adonai Echad.*

Hear, Israel:

Life is one.

We are not separate from the world we inhabit.

Our lives affect other lives.

What we do matters beyond ourselves.

Let us therefore listen.

Let us pay attention.

Let us act.

XIX. THE FINAL SHOFAR

The shofar sounds once more.

Not to announce that we have been forgiven.

Not to announce that our fate has been decided.

But to announce:

The day is ending.

The year continues.

Now we must live.

[Shofar — Tekiah Gedolah]

XX. AFTER THE SHOFAR

The gates do not close because some supernatural judgment has been made.

They close because time passes.

The question is no longer:

What should I have done?

The question becomes:

What will I do now?

What do I need to change?
Who needs me?
What am I responsible for?
What am I avoiding?
What kind of person do I want my actions to demonstrate?
[Silence]

XVII. A FINAL COMMITMENT

Not:
I will become perfect.
Not:
I will never make this mistake again.
Instead:
I will pay attention.
I will tell the truth.
I will accept correction.
I will repair what I can.
I will act when action is needed.
I will remain open to changing my mind.
I will not confuse certainty with wisdom.
I will treat other people as singular human beings.
I will use what power I have responsibly.
I will begin again when I fail.

XVIII. SHEMA

The traditional final movement of Yom Kippur culminates in the *Shema*.

שמע ישראל
יהוה אלהינו
יהוה אחד

What did I make possible?
Where was I brave?
Where was I afraid?
And most importantly:
What can I do differently now?

II. AVINU MALKEINU

The traditional prayer begins:
אבינו מלכנו
Avinu Malkeinu
Our parent, our sovereign.
Traditionally these words address God as the one who judges, protects, forgives, and determines our fate. The prayer is among the central prayers of the Ten Days of Repentance. ([Voices](#))
Here we hear the words differently.
We are not asking a supernatural power to change our lives.
We are reminding ourselves that our lives are held within something larger than any one person:

our families,
our communities,
our ancestors,
our descendants,
the natural world,
and the generations yet to come.

Avinu Malkeinu — Our Parent, Our Sovereign

אבינו מלכנו
Avinu Malkeinu
Our parent, our sovereign—
we belong to one another.
We have inherited a world
we did not create.
We will leave behind a world
we cannot completely control.
May we therefore act with care.

May we recognize our power
and our limitations.

May we remember that no one lives alone.

אבינו מלכנו
Avinu Malkeinu

May we begin again.

III. ZIKHRONOT — REMEMBERING

Rosh Hashanah is also a day of remembrance.

Memory is not merely looking backward.

Memory gives us the ability
to see patterns.

What have we repeated?

What have we learned?

What have we forgotten?

A Moment of Memory

Think of one moment from the past year
that you want to carry forward.

Not because it was perfect.

Because it taught you something.

[Silence]

Now think of something you would rather leave behind.

A habit.

A way of speaking.

A way of avoiding.

A judgment.

A fear.

A resentment.

[Silence]

The past cannot be erased.

But the future does not have to repeat it.

Their lives entered ours.

Their choices affected us.

Their words remain in us.

Their example remains available to us.

Their unfinished work may now become partly ours.

A Moment of Memory

Name silently someone you remember.

[Silence]

What did they teach you?

What quality of theirs do you want to carry forward?

What unfinished value of theirs
might you continue?

[Silence]

May remembering become action.

XVI. NE'ILAH — THE CLOSING OF THE GATES

The traditional *Ne'ilah* imagines the gates closing at the end of Yom Kippur.

For us, the image can mean something different.

Time is closing.

This particular day will not come again.

This particular year will not come again.

This particular version of ourselves
will not come again.

The gates are closing
because time moves.

So we must act.

The Final Reflection

What have I learned?

We can retain their rhythm
while changing what we hear.

Our lives are dependent upon others.

We did not create ourselves.

We did not create the world.

We did not choose every circumstance
into which we were born.

But we do possess some freedom.

And with freedom comes responsibility.

So:

Avinu Malkeinu,

let us be gentle with ourselves
without excusing ourselves.

Let us be demanding of ourselves
without becoming cruel.

Let us recognize our limits
without using them as excuses.

Let us recognize our power
without becoming arrogant.

Let us seek forgiveness
without demanding it.

Let us forgive
without pretending harm did not occur.

Let us begin again.

XV. YIZKOR — REMEMBERING THE DEAD

We remember those who are no longer here.

We do not ask them to return.

We do not pretend that death can be overcome.

Instead, we acknowledge something simple:

They were here.

IV. UNETANEH TOKEF

The ancient poem *Unetaneh Tokef* asks us to confront the uncertainty of life: who will live, who will die, who will flourish, who will suffer. Its famous images place every human being before the uncertainty of existence. ([Chabad](#))

We retain that confrontation,
but not the supernatural judge.

ונתנה תקף

Unetaneh tokef

Let us acknowledge the force of this day.

For life is powerful,
fragile,
and uncertain.

We do not know
what the coming year will contain.

Who will be here next year?

Who will be gone?

Who will become ill?

Who will recover?

Who will prosper?

Who will struggle?

Who will find love?

Who will experience loss?

Who will change?

Who will remain the same?

We cannot know.

And precisely because we cannot know,
our choices matter.

מי יחיה ומי ימות

Mi yichyeh u-mi yamut?

Who will live
and who will die?

Who will be born
and who will pass away?

Who will find peace
and who will wander?

Who will have abundance
and who will have less?

Who will be lifted up
and who will be brought low?

These are not questions
we can answer.

They are reminders.

Life is temporary.

Therefore:

What we do with the life we have matters.

V. TESHUVAH — TURNING

The traditional answer to the uncertainty of *Unetaneh Tokefis*:

ותשובה ותפלה וצדקה

U-teshuvah, u-tefillah, u-tzedakah.

Traditionally:

repentance,
prayer,
and righteous giving.

For a secular life, we might understand these as:

change, reflection, and action.

Teshuvah

Teshuvah literally carries the sense of turning or returning.

We do not have to return to who we were.

We can turn toward who we want to become.

Forgiveness cannot be demanded.

Trust cannot be demanded.

A changed life must be demonstrated.

XIII. BETWEEN PEOPLE

Yom Kippur cannot repair what we refuse to repair ourselves.

Before we ask the world to forgive us,
we should ask:

Is there someone I owe an apology?

Is there someone I have avoided?

Is there something I need to make right?

Is there a conversation I need to have?

Is there a debt I need to repay?

Is there a boundary I need to respect?

Is there someone whose humanity
I have allowed myself to forget?

[Silence]

Choose one action.

Not ten.

One.

And make it concrete.

XIV. AVINU MALKEINU — REIMAGINED

אבינו מלכנו

Avinu Malkeinu

Our parent.

Our sovereign.

The traditional words express vulnerability and the hope for mercy. ([Voices](#))

For the person we reduced to a label.

For the person we refused to listen to.

For our impatience.

For our contempt.

For our vanity.

For our cowardice.

For the times we chose belonging
over honesty.

For the times we chose winning
over understanding.

For the times we demanded certainty
when humility was called for.

For the ways we have failed
to use our freedom responsibly.

For all these, we turn.

XII. SORRY IS NOT THE END

To say "I am sorry"
is not the same as making amends.

Teshuvah asks more.

First:

recognize the harm.

Then:

admit it.

Then:

repair what can be repaired.

Then:

change the behavior.

And finally:

**accept that the other person is not required
to erase the consequences for us.**

Teshuvah begins when we stop defending ourselves long enough
to see ourselves clearly.

It asks:

What have I done?

What have I failed to do?

What harm have I caused?

What can I repair?

What must I accept?

What can I change?

Tefillah

Prayer can become something other than asking the universe for favors.

It can be an act of attention.

A deliberate pause.

A willingness to say:

This is what is true.

This is what I do not know.

This is what I cannot control.

This is what I can do.

Tzedakah

Tzedakah comes from a root associated with justice and righteousness.

It reminds us that renewal is not only private.

A better year is not simply
a happier year for me.

It is a year in which
my actions contribute to the lives of others.

VI. THE SHOFAR

The shofar is traditionally one of the defining sounds of Rosh Hashanah.

Today we hear it as a summons.

Not a message from heaven.

A call from one human being to another.

Before the Shofar

There are things we know
but do not want to hear.

There are truths we recognize
but postpone.

There are changes we know we need
but resist.

The shofar interrupts us.

Listen.

[Shofar]

תקיעה

Tekiah

One clear sound.

A beginning.

A single decision.

What is one thing you know
you need to face?

[Silence]

שברים

Shevarim

Three broken sounds.

Life is not whole.

Neither are we.

We have mistaken certainty for truth.

We have mistaken being right
for doing right.

We have avoided difficult conversations.

We have allowed resentment to become a way of life.

We have failed to notice the consequences
of our actions.

We have asked others to change
while refusing to change ourselves.

We have treated people as categories
instead of as individuals.

We have forgotten that every person
is more complicated than our opinion of them.

For all of these:

we acknowledge.

we take responsibility.

we turn toward change.

XI. AL CHET — FOR THE THINGS WE HAVE DONE

The traditional *Al Chet* lists many forms of wrongdoing, repeating the phrase "for the sin..." as a communal inventory.

We adapt that structure:

על חטא

Al chet.

For the harm we caused knowingly.

For the harm we caused without noticing.

For the truth we avoided.

For the truth we distorted.

For the apology we withheld.

For the apology we offered without changing.

We have betrayed trust.

גזלנו

Gazalnu.

We have taken what was not ours.

דיברנו דופי

Dibarnu dofi.

We have spoken unfairly about others.

כיחשנו

Kichashnu.

We have denied what was true.

טפלנו שקר

Tipalnu sheker.

We have attached ourselves to falsehood.

יעצנו רע

Ya'atznu ra.

We have given harmful advice.

תפלנו שקר

Tipalnu sheker.

We have helped falsehood appear true.

A Secular Vidui

We have been dishonest.

We have been cowardly.

We have judged people without knowing them.

We have spoken when silence would have been wiser.

We have remained silent when speaking was necessary.

We have protected our comfort
at someone else's expense.

We make mistakes.

We contradict ourselves.

We fail.

Brokenness does not make change impossible.

It makes change necessary.

[Shofar]

תרועה

Teruah

Many short sounds.

An awakening.

A disturbance.

A reminder not to become too comfortable
with the person we have been.

[Shofar]

תקיעה גדולה

Tekiah gedolah

One long sound.

Stay with it.

Do not rush away.

Let the sound end only when it has ended.

[Shofar]

VII. A NEW YEAR

שנה טובה

Shanah tovah.

A good year.

We do not know whether the year will be good.

So let this greeting become a commitment:

May we help make it good.

For ourselves.
For those close to us.
For those we do not know.
For the communities of which we are a part.
For the world we share.
Shanah tovah.

YOM KIPPUR

VIII. KOL NIDRE

Yom Kippur begins with *Kol Nidre*, the traditional declaration concerning vows and obligations. Rather than treating it as a supernatural annulment of promises, we can use it as a meditation on the promises we make, the promises we break, and the responsibility of speaking honestly.

Kol Nidre

כל נדרי

Kol nidrei

All our vows.
All the promises we have made.
All the commitments we have spoken carelessly.
All the things we said we would do
and did not do.
All the things we promised ourselves.
Tonight we do not ask to be released
from responsibility.
We ask to become more responsible
with our words.
A promise matters.
An apology matters.
A commitment matters.

And when we cannot fulfill a promise,
honesty matters.

IX. THE DAY OF ATONEMENT

Yom Kippur is traditionally a day of fasting, confession, repentance, and reconciliation.

But no ritual can repair a relationship
that our actions have damaged.

Words alone cannot undo harm.

We therefore enter this day
not to declare ourselves forgiven,
but to become more capable
of making things right.

X. VIDUI — CONFESSION

The traditional *Vidui* is communal.

This is important.

We do not say only:

I have done these things.

We say:

We have done these things.

Human beings are capable of wrongdoing
not only as individuals
but as families, institutions, communities, and societies.

We therefore confess together.

אשמנו

Ashamnu.

We have caused harm.

בגדנו

Bagadnu.