



The Jewish High Holy Days

Lesson One: What Is True Repentance?

Lesson Objectives

Through this lesson, students of the Bible will:

- Understand that repentance is a major theme throughout *Rosh Hashanah* and the High Holy Days
- Understand what repentance looks like from the story of David and Nathan
- Understand how to practice repentance from reading Psalm 51

Key Bible Verses

“The LORD said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelites: On the first day of the seventh month you are to have a day of rest, a sacred assembly commemorated with trumpet blasts. Do no regular work, but present an offering made to the LORD by fire.’” Leviticus 23:23–25

“Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.” Psalm 34:14

Scriptures to Read: 2 Samuel 12:1–14; Psalm 51

Before You Begin

Rosh Hashanah has its origins as the Feast of the Trumpets (Leviticus 23:23–25; Numbers 29:1–6). At some point, the Feast of the Trumpets became the day on which the Jewish New Year is celebrated. Today, it is known as *Rosh Hashanah*, meaning, literally, “head of the year.”

While *Rosh Hashanah* is a day of celebration, blessing, and joyful anticipation, it also begins a time of earnest reflection and repentance culminating in *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the Jewish year.

The ten-day period between *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* is called the “High Holy Days,” or “Days of Awe.” These are the most widely observed of all Jewish holy days.



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The Hebrew month of *Elul*, preceding the High Holy Days, is set aside as a time for reflection and soul-searching. The dominant theme during this 40-day period from the beginning of *Elul* through *Yom Kippur* is *teshuvah*, or repentance (literally, “returning to one’s self.”)

As Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein points out in his book *How Firm a Foundation* (pp. 111–114), repentance is more than just a “change of mind.” True repentance involves a “change in action” as well—a turning away from bad and a turning toward good. In the words of the psalmist, “*Depart from evil and do good*” (Psalm 34:14).

Real Repentance (2 Samuel 12:1–14)

What does real repentance look like? The Bible gives us an example in the sin and repentance of David. After his adultery with Bathsheba, David conspired to have her husband, Uriah, murdered. In the passage above, the prophet Nathan confronts David about these sins. After reading the Scripture passage together, answer the following:

1. How does David respond to Nathan’s story about the man with the lamb?

2. How does David respond when Nathan says, “You are that man!”?

3. How did God punish David for his sins? What was particularly painful about the punishment he would have to undergo (v. 12)?

4. From what you know about David’s life, how was God’s judgment in v. 11 fulfilled? (See 2 Samuel 16:21–22.)

5. From Nathan’s statement in v. 13, we know that God forgave David for his sin, but we also know that David suffered the consequences of his sins. What does this tell you about God and about the sin in your own life?

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Practicing Repentance (Psalm 51)

Psalm 51 is a beautiful expression of David’s heartfelt plea for mercy, forgiveness, and cleansing. Read through this psalm aloud. Notice the language of repentance throughout.

6. What do you learn about sin from the following verses:

v. 3 _____

v. 4 _____

v. 5 _____

7. In *How Firm a Foundation*, Rabbi Eckstein writes that in the Jewish faith, four conditions are necessary for *teshuvah*, repentance: 1) regret for the past; 2) desisting from sinful behavior; 3) confession before God; and 4) resolving not to sin in the future. How do you see David exhibiting *teshuvah* through this psalm?

8. Consider the activities that David pledges himself to in vv. 13–17. What are those acts? What bearing do they have on David and others?

9. What is the role of worship and thanksgiving in renewing, maintaining, and deepening our own repentance?

10. How does one person’s repentance influence others?

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Extra Credit

Personalize Psalm 51 by making it your own song of repentance. Take time to reflect on the sin in your life right now. Using Psalm 51 as a model, express your regret for your sin; confess your sin before God, pledging to stop sinning, and finally, in worship, thank God for His forgiveness, and resolve to not engage in that sinful behavior again.

A Christian Reflection

Repenting from sins may not be our favorite activity, but it is a theme repeated throughout Scripture. Look up the following passages from the New Testament and record who was speaking and what the person was trying to communicate.

Verse	Speaker	Message
Matthew 3:1–10		
Matthew 4:17		
Luke 5:31–32		
Luke 15:10		
Acts 2:38		
Acts 3:17–20		
Acts 13:23–24		
Acts 20:21		
Acts 26:20		

Reflect on your own need to repent. What do you need to change in your thinking about your own sin?

God's Book

During *Rosh Hashanah*, people typically greet each other with the words “*le-shanah tovah tikatevu v'taychataymu*,” which means “May you be inscribed and sealed for a good year.” The practice stems from the imagery of God sitting in judgment during the Days of Awe, deciding the fate of every living thing. According to Jewish tradition, during this time God opens up three books—one for those who were righteous during the year, one for those who were wicked, and one for those whose good and bad deeds balance.

Everyone's fate is inscribed in one of those three books. During the Days of Awe, a person can alter his or her destiny by repenting, praying, and doing acts of charity. On *Yom Kippur*, Jewish tradition teaches that God closes all three books and seals humankind's fate for the coming year.

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The Shofar

The blowing of the *shofar* (a trumpet made from a ram's horn) is the main ritual associated with *Rosh Hashanah*. In fact, it is where the feast day derived its name:

“On the first day of the seventh month hold a sacred assembly and do no regular work. It is a day for you to sound the trumpets.” Numbers 29:1

According to Jewish tradition, three types of blasts are sounded—a long, drawn-out sound (*tekiah*), a broken plaintive sound (*shevarim*), and a series of sharp, wailing, staccato sounds (*teruah*). One hundred blasts are sounded on each of the two days of *Rosh Hashanah*, followed by the congregational recitation of biblical verses reminding them of their covenant with God.

A variety of explanations are offered for the sounding of the *shofar*. It is:

- **A symbol of revelation**—a call to renew the commitment to live by God's *Torah*, since it is associated with the trumpet blast at the giving of the *Torah* at Mt. Sinai. Exodus 19:16, 19
- **A symbol of God's coronation**—a reaffirmation of God's sovereignty and kingship, just as the *shofar* was blasted in ancient Israel at a king's coronation. Psalm 98:6
- **A symbol of the binding of Isaac** (*akedah*)—representing the ram's horn, which was caught in the branches of a bush, and which is an eternal symbol of Abraham's and Isaac's trust in God, even in the face of death. The story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son is read in the synagogue on *Rosh Hashanah*.
- **A symbol of our need to repent**—a call to arouse ourselves from our reverie and to alert us to the need to engage in *teshuvah*, repentance. In biblical times, the *shofar* was sounded in the camp to alert the people to assemble, to move the camp, or to warn the people of impending danger.
- **A symbol of the messianic era**—a reminder of God's promise to bring the Messiah who will usher into the world an era of physical and spiritual peace, and who will herald Israel's redemption and ingathering to Zion. Isaiah 27:13

SOURCES

Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, *How Firm A Foundation*, Paraclete Press, Brewster, Massachusetts, 1997.

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