

Lesson Guide: Class Ten

The Days of Awe



Miller Introduction to
Judaism Program

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY



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Lesson Guide for Class #10: Days of Awe

Class Summary:

Themes and observances of the *Yamim Nora'im* (High Holy Day) period — from Elul through Yom Kippur, with an emphasis on the practice of *teshuvah*. Exploration of key symbols, prayers, and observances for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

Objectives:

Students will:

- Understand that the High Holy Days are not just Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but a 40-day period dedicated to the themes of reflection and renewal.
- Explore the concept of *teshuvah* and gain an in-depth understanding of its process.
- Become familiar with some of the major observances, symbols, and prayers of the High Holy Days and increase their comfort in attending synagogue services during this period.

Key Vocabulary:

- Yamim Nora'im
- Elul
- Rosh HaShanah
- Yom Kippur
- Teshuvah
- Heshbon Nefesh
- Aseret Y'mei Teshuvah
- Selichot
- Shofar
- Tashlikh
- Makhzor
- Kol Nidre
- Neilah
- L'Shanah Tovah

In-Person Teaching Materials:

- Room and door signs
- Name tags and pens
- Chalkboard, white-board, or large flip chart
- Colored markers or chalk
- On One Foot course books or printed PDFs
- Projector, computer & screen if using Class Slide Decks, On One Foot videos
- *Recommended:* Shofar, Makhzor

Online Teaching Materials:

- Zoom Pro Account
- PDF of On One Foot chapter
- PowerPoint Class Slide Deck
- Appropriate background, lighting, and sound setup.
- *Recommended:* Shofar, Makhzor

Set Induction: “Awe”

In English, this time is usually referred to as the “High Holidays” or “High Holy Days.” In Hebrew it is called the “Yamim Nora’im” meaning: “The Days of Awe.”

Ask: What does “awe” mean to you? What have been the most “awe-inspiring” experiences of your life? What common themes can we identify in the types of experiences that cause us to feel “awe”?

In this class, we will be exploring what it is about the *Yamim Nora’im* that connect them with the experience of awe.

Lecture: From Elul to Yom Kippur

The *Yamim Nora’im* are more than just Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, they are a forty-day period dedicated to reflection and renewal. The overall theme of these days is “**teshuvah**” – the process of introspection, repentance, and amends making that we pay special attention to during this time.

Some of the key moments to highlight include:

Elul The Hebrew month preceding Rosh Ha-Shanah. It is a time for a *heshbon nefesh*, a personal

inventory taking to determine what failures need to be atoned for, patterns need to be broken, and relationships need to be healed.

Rosh HaShanah

The Jewish New Year, celebrated over two days. It is a time for celebrating a new beginning, for contemplating the events of the past year, and for resolving to make a change. The major symbol of Rosh Ha-Shanah is the *shofar*, an ancient instrument made from a ram's horn, which serves as a "wake-up" call to engage in the spiritual work of teshuvah. If in person, bring a shofar to class and, if possible, sound a few blasts. If online, use the shofar video embedded in the PowerPoint.

Aseret Y'mei Teshuvah

The Ten Days of Repentance are dedicated to actualizing the process of teshuvah that we've been preparing for through Elul and Rosh Ha-Shanah, by reaching out to those we have harmed and trying to make amends. One ritual way of marking that is through *tashlikh*, the symbolic casting away of our sins onto a body of water.

Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur is the final act of these forty days of teshuvah work, reconciling us with God after we have spent so much time reconciling with others. It begins with *Kol Nidre*, in which we acknowledge that despite our best efforts and commitment to change, we often fall short. Yom Kippur continues through a long day of prayer, fasting, and introspection that culminates with *Neilah*, the final service of the day, when we imagine that the open gates of heaven are about to symbolically swing shut.

Break

Text Study: “Hilkhoh Teshuvah”

Having now surveyed the overall arc of the High Holy Day period, and identified teshuvah as its primary theme, we can now engage in some text study to deepen our understanding of how teshuvah works.

Briefly introduce Maimonides (Rambam): Lived 1135-1204. Born in Spain, family migrated to Egypt. Served as the court physician of the sultan, the rabbi of the local Jewish community, and somehow found the time to write the most important work of Jewish law and the most important work of Jewish philosophy ever written. His legal work, the Mishneh Torah, is the first comprehensive attempt to distill all the laws of the Torah and the Talmud into a single code. It includes a volume on the Laws of Teshuvah, from which we will study selections.

Divide students into small groups, either in-person or by creating break-out rooms and invite them to study the selections from Hilkhoh Teshuvah from the coursebook. They should use the following two questions to guide them in studying each section:

1. What, according to each passage, does Rambam add to help us create a definition of teshuvah?
2. What, according to each passage, are the necessary steps for teshuvah to be fully achieved?

Bring the class back together for a group discussion, unpacking each selection and the questions it raises. This is a potentially very meaningful discussion; give it time to explore the texts fully. Some of the primary ideas and questions that arise from each passage may be:

2:1 Complete teshuvah involves facing the situation where one previously sinned and not repeating the transgression. Is this an appropriate test of teshuvah? What is the difference between “complete” and “incomplete” teshuvah – is there partial credit here?

2:3 Teshuvah requires an internal, honest commitment to change. How do people react to the image of a “slimy lizard in the mikveh”? What is Maimonides trying to convey with this image? Is there a way that false teshuvah “pollutes” the process for others?

2:9a Yom Kippur only atones for sins between people and God. To do teshuvah for actions taken against other people, one must approach the injured party and ask forgiveness and make restitution. Why does the Jewish tradition require this level of personal accountability – what is it saying about our relationship with God and each other? How does one determine what is meaningful restitution? What if there is no restitution possible?

2:9b If a person is unsuccessful in their first attempt to reconcile, they have an obligation to return two more times to try to appease the other party. What is the value of bringing others? Have you personally ever faced this situation of seeking forgiveness and being unable to obtain it or having someone seek forgiveness and feeling unable to grant it?

2:10 It is the responsibility of the injured party to try to forgive, when genuine teshuvah and meaningful restitution are offered. Why is forgiveness so hard? Does forgiveness mean reconciliation? What are the limits of what we are being asked to forgive?

As a conclusion, the teacher may show the video of Portia Nelson's poem "Autobiography in Five Short Chapters" (linked in the PowerPoint presentation). How does this poem reflect the principles of teshuvah that Maimonides explains?

Group Discussion: "Feeling Comfortable at High Holy Day Services"

High Holy Day services are the most common occasions for Jews to visit a synagogue, and they are also among the most complicated days of the year in terms of liturgy and logistics. This discussion aims to have students at various points in their Jewish journeys help one another by setting expectations, minimizing anxiety, and maximizing participation.

Ask all students to raise their hands. 1) "Put your hand down if you have never attended a High Holy Day service." 2) "Put your hand down if you have recently started attending High Holy Day services." 3) "Put your hand down if you have attended High Holy Days services for most or all of your life."

Based on visually seeing the range of levels of participation, the teacher can judge whether this portion of the session will be primarily a discussion or, if few people have experience with services, needs to be more frontally delivered.

If you facilitate a discussion, ask students who have never attended a service to make a list of questions about what to expect, and allow those who have more experience to answer – stepping in to guide and facilitate the conversation or clear up misstatements. Also, ask students who recently began attending services about things that surprised them or they wish they had known.

Some general points to make sure to cover:

- 1) Prayer services are quite long and use a distinctive prayerbook, the makhzor. If possible, bring in/show on-screen several mahzorim for students to look at.
- 2) There are distinctive melodies to many High Holy Day prayers. There are recordings in the video companion of a few traditional melodies. Other melodies could be played from YouTube or other sources.
- 3) Preparations and tips for handling the fast on Yom Kippur.
- 4) Basic logistics – purchasing tickets, expected dress (wearing white on Yom Kippur, if applicable), online vs. in-person options, etc.

Wrap Up and Reflection

Journal Prompt: “My definition of teshuvah is...” “Something I find empowering about teshuvah is...” “Something I find difficult about teshuvah is...”

Instructors should be checking for understanding throughout the lesson and regularly pausing for questions. However, it is essential to do so at the close of each class. In addition to using the journal prompts included in the coursebook, the instructor may do a group check using one of the following methods:

- As a whole class, have students go around and briefly state/write in chat one thing they learned/that surprised them/that interested them in class.
- Have students divide into pairs and share with their partner something they learned/that surprised them/that particularly interested them.

If you want to check that the students understand primary content, at the end of this class, students should be able to define *Elul*, *Rosh Ha-Shanah*, *Ten Days of Teshuvah*,

tashlikh, *Yom Kippur*, and *shofar*. In addition, students should be able to explain the meaning and process of *teshuvah* and its significance.

At Home Work

Students should be told to watch the "Days of Awe" video and answer the review questions and journal prompt.