

Teshuvah

What Return Actually Means

*Return us to You, O HaShem, and we shall return;
renew our days as of old.*

LAMENTATIONS 5:21

An entry point for anyone drawn to the G-d of Israel and ready to come home. Wherever you are starting from, this guide walks you through what return means and how to begin.



L'ETS ECHAD

Into One Stick - Ezek 37:19

Teshuvah

What Return Actually Means

An entry point for anyone learning to walk with the G-d of Israel.

In Hebrew, teshuvah comes from the root *shuv*, to turn back. In the Hebrew Scriptures, so many of the calls to repent are calls to turn. Not to despise yourself, and not to become someone new. To come home. This guide explains what the word actually means, how to do the work of return inwardly and outwardly, how the Psalms soften a hard heart for the turning, and how you can begin this week.

1. The word is bigger than “repent”

Start with how many of us first learned the word. Repentance came to us chiefly as feeling sorry and thinking differently. Feel bad about what you did, decide to do better. Neither of those is empty, and neither is wrong. But teshuvah makes visible the part that framing tends to lose, which is direction. It does not just tell you to feel sorry. It tells you which way to walk next. And it does not carry the idea, tucked inside so much repentance teaching, that the goal is to leave your old self behind and become someone else.

Teshuvah is different. Teshuvah means return. It is not self-erasure. It does not begin by declaring that your true self is rotten and must be swapped out for a new one. It begins by going back. Back to the relationship you had with G-d. Back to the person you were made to be. Rav Kook says it plainly, that the primary teshuvah is when a person returns to himself, to the root of his soul, and then he immediately returns to G-d, the soul of all souls. (Orot HaTeshuvah 15:10) When you remember that you are a child of the Most High, made in His image, you do not have to become someone else. You run home. And that return changes you. Yes, we are sorry, and yes, we change our mind. But we do not stop there. We fix what we can, and we return.

Here is a picture that lands at home. You are driving and you drift. You miss the turn, you leave the road, you go through one fence and out the other, and now you are sitting in a field you were never supposed to be in. Regret is sitting there feeling terrible. Changing your mind is deciding you do not like the field. Teshuvah is turning the vehicle around, finding the road, and driving home. The Torah is the map. Teshuvah is what puts you back on the road.

2. In Torah, hearing means heeding

We translate teshuvah as repentance, and the translation is too small. Scripture does not leave inward change sitting by itself. In Deuteronomy, to hear HaShem, *shema*, is to heed Him. The hearing is meant to reach the hands. So with teshuvah we also look for what shows up on the outside. Teshuvah is not a mood. It is a movement, and the movement has two halves. There is an inward turning, where you stop facing the wrong direction. And there is an outward return, where you walk back toward G-d and repair what you broke. A change of heart that never reaches your hands is not yet teshuvah. Watch how this fails in the Torah itself.

Deuteronomy 1:41–45, excerpts *Then you answered, We have sinned, we will go up and fight. And you girded on every man his weapons of war. And HaShem said, Say to them, Go not up, neither fight, for I am not among you. So I spoke to you, and you would not hear, but rebelled and went up into the hill... And you returned and wept before HaShem, but He would not listen to your voice.*

Moshe is retelling the sin of the spies to the second generation. Judgment has fallen. The people say the right words, strap on their weapons, and charge up the hill anyway. G-d says do not go, I am not among you. They go, and they are driven back. Verse 45 says they returned and wept before G-d, but the decree did not change. That word *returned* is our *shuv* word, and there is the irony. Their move on the hill was not obedience. Whether the tears

afterward were full teshuvah or only grief, the consequence stood. They recognized. They resolved. They even acted. But they were still moving against G-d's command. Action without turning back to obedience is not return. Being driven back is not the same as coming home. Obedience would have spared them the hill. And notice the other lesson hiding here, that even real turning does not always erase what our choices set in motion. Learn from their mistake so you do not repeat it.

3. The five movements of return

Rambam does not arrange teshuvah into five neat words. He gives us the pieces. In his laws of teshuvah he names abandoning the sin, regretting it, resolving not to return, confessing it aloud, and, where another person was harmed, repairing the damage. He calls it complete teshuvah when the same test returns and you choose differently. (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 1:1, 2:1-2, 2:9) For this guide I have gathered those pieces into five movements you can hold in your hand. The first three deal chiefly with your own turning. The last two carry it outward into repair.

MOVEMENT	WHERE	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE
1. Recognize	INTERNAL	See that what you are doing is wrong, name it, and stop the act itself. You cannot return while still walking away.
2. Regret	INTERNAL	Feel the weight of it and deal with the desire underneath, not just the deed. Confess it before HaShem plainly. This is vidui, naming it aloud without excuse.
3. Resolve	INTERNAL	Set your heart not to return to the sin. Put markers in place that strengthen the resolve, a fixed prayer time, a psalm a day.
4. Restore	EXTERNAL	Make right any damage you can. If you stole, pay it back. The one who caused the rift is the one who repairs it.
5. Resist	EXTERNAL	The same scenario returns, no one is watching, and you choose differently. Rambam calls that complete teshuvah, the fullest proof of return, not a condition that holds forgiveness hostage until the test comes.

One verse holds the whole shape of it, the leaving and the returning together.

Isaiah 55:7 *Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return to Adonai, and He will have mercy on him, and to our G-d, for He will abundantly pardon.*

Forsake his way is recognizing and stopping. His thoughts is the change of mind. Let him return, there it is, the movement that makes it teshuvah and not just a bad conscience. And the promise is not stingy. He will have mercy. He will abundantly pardon.

4. “I did wrong” is not “I am wrong”

Recognize and regret with no path forward will crush a person. I watched it happen to the daughter of a friend of mine. Years after a small childhood failure she was still carrying it, weeping that she had betrayed G-d and her family. She had recognized. She had regretted. But no one had given her the movements that come next, and she slipped from *I did wrong* into *I am wrong*. She lost hold of her identity as a child of G-d. That is not teshuvah. That is despair wearing its clothes.

So we hold two things together. Identity, that you are a child of the living G-d, created *b'tselem Elohim*, in His image. (Genesis 1:27) And teshuvah, the pattern of return. Identity gives you a place to return to. We are teaching our children, and ourselves, to love G-d with all the heart and to stand in awe of Him. Awe of G-d is more than fear of consequence. The tradition knows a turning that begins in fear and a turning that begins in love, and both are real. (Yoma 86b) Fear may begin the turning. Love is what draws the child home.

5. The blueprint — Isaiah 1:16-18

Shabbat Chazon reads the vision of Isaiah, one of the most severe haftarahs of the year. It charges Judah and Jerusalem with rebellion, corrupted worship, and a betrayed calling. It is not gentle. But G-d does not leave it

there. He is not handing us a legal checklist. He is giving a prophetic pattern, the same two halves we have been tracing, the turning and the return. Isaiah gives in prophetic form what this guide gathers from Rambam.

Isaiah 1:16–18 *Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean, remove the evil of your doings from before My eyes, cease to do evil. Learn to do well, seek justice, relieve the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, says HaShem. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.*

THE TURNING · FROM EVIL	THE RETURN · TO THE GOOD
Wash yourselves. Recognize the sin or the drift, and physically stop it.	Learn to do good. Leave no void where the bad habits were. Learn to think differently.
Make yourselves clean. Go deeper, to the heart. Work to remove the desire. Regret.	Seek justice. Put righteousness into practice around you.
Remove the evil. Clear out whatever reminds you of it and draws you back.	Relieve the oppressed. Put life into someone. This is restore.
Cease to do evil. The resolve sealed. The turning from evil is complete.	Defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Selfless repair of the community for the most vulnerable.

And then G-d says, Come, let us reason together. That is the invitation waiting on the other side of the turning. Scarlet to snow. The haftarah closes on the same note, *Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and those within her who return, with righteousness* (Isaiah 1:27). The word for those who return is built on *shuv*, the root of teshuvah. The destruction does not get the final word. Return does.

6. Tehillim — softening the heart to return

You now know the movements. But knowing the steps does not make a hard heart soft, and a hard heart will not turn. This is where the Psalms do their work. Teshuvah begins in the heart, because that is where the turning away began.

Ezekiel 14:3, 6 *These men have brought their idols up into their heart. Therefore say to the house of Israel, Return, and turn away from your idols.*

The idols live in the heart, so that is where return has to start. The Psalms are a tool that reaches that place. Rebbe Nachman taught his students to say every psalm as if it were written about them, to find themselves in every chapter, to read the struggles of the psalmist as their own. (Likutey Moharan II:125; and see II:73, 92 on Psalms and return) Read that way, Tehillim stops being someone else's ancient poetry and becomes a mirror. You see your own drift in the words, and the seeing softens you. This is close to how David prayed, pouring his heart out to HaShem in his own words, and much of that heart is preserved for us in the Psalms.

It answers a real problem. Often when we most need to return, we have no words of our own. The prophet already knew this.

Hosea 14:2–3 (14:1–2 in some editions) *O Israel, return to Adonai your G-d, for you have fallen because of your iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to Adonai.*

Take with you words. Not a caravan of gifts. Words. When you cannot form your own, David hands you his. And the model for all of it is the psalm David wrote after his gravest sin, where he names exactly what G-d is after.

Psalms 51:18–19 (51:16–17 in some editions) *For You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it. You do not take pleasure in burnt offering. The sacrifices of G-d are a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart, O G-d, You will not despise.*

David lived within the sacrificial system and could bring an offering. He is not abolishing sacrifice here. He is saying no offering can stand in for a heart that will not break. The broken and contrite heart is what G-d is after, and a heart softened before Him is what the Psalms can awaken in you. So keep a psalter close, and when the moment of return comes, take these words with you.

WHEN YOU...	BEGIN HERE
When you cannot find your own words	Psalm 51 — David's own return. A broken and contrite heart.
When guilt is crushing you	Psalm 32 — Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven.
When you feel far off, in the depths	Psalm 130 — Out of the depths I cry. With You there is forgiveness.
When your soul is thirsty for Him	Psalm 42 — As the deer pants for the water brooks.
When you need Him near	Psalm 27 — The L-rd is my light and my salvation.

Judah has carried the Psalms this way for generations, not only as prayer but as *tikkun*, repair. In Breslov tradition, Rebbe Nachman gathered ten psalms into what is called the Tikkun HaKlali, the general remedy, a fixed order to say over the soul. It is a particular practice, not a required sequence for teshuvah, but if you want a marked set to pray in order, this is it: **16, 32, 41, 42, 59, 77, 90, 105, 137, 150**. You do not need any specific list to begin. Open the Psalms, find yourself in them, and let them turn your heart toward home.

7. Return from drift, and the return of Ephraim

Not every return starts with a deliberate sin. Sometimes it starts as drift that hardens into something worse. The prodigal son is the picture. (Luke 15:11–32) He takes his inheritance, wanders off, wastes it, suffers, and then physically returns, planning to work as a servant because he no longer feels worthy to be called a son. He lost hold of his identity too. And the father runs to him. Jeremiah heard that same return long before, spoken from far off in exile by Ephraim, a name the prophets use for the scattered northern kingdom of Israel, lost among the nations and being called home.

Jeremiah 31:18–20 *I have surely heard Ephraim grieving. Bring me back and I will return, for You are HaShem my G-d. Is Ephraim My dear son? For whenever I speak of him, I earnestly remember him still. Therefore My heart yearns for him, declares HaShem.*

Bring me back and I will return. Ephraim recognizes the need to turn, and recognizes he cannot do it without help. That is the two-way turning Judah has prayed for centuries, *Return us to You, O HaShem, and we shall return, renew our days as of old* (Lamentations 5:21). He brings you back, and you return. And no one returns alone. Judah has kept this covenant the whole time, not without failure, but without ever abandoning it, and for those being called home, return also means returning to relationship with Judah, the Jewish people, not as a critic but as a student. This guide is the door. The road is longer, and you do not walk it by yourself.

8. How this is handled in practice

1. **Name one thing.** Not everything. One thing. Say it before HaShem plainly this week. Take with you words. (Hosea 14:2)
2. **Stop it.** Whatever the one thing is, leave it. Recognizing without stopping is just commentary.
3. **If it wronged a person, repair with them first.** The tradition is clear that teshuvah covers what is between you and G-d, but a wrong against another person is not settled until you have made it right with them and sought their forgiveness. (Mishnah Yoma 8:9) Make restitution and seek forgiveness where contact is safe and appropriate. Repair does not give you the right to demand reconciliation.
4. **Set road markers.** Put something concrete in place so the way back stays marked. A fixed prayer time, a weekly appointment to learn the rhythms of Shabbat with your household or community, a psalm a day, a study partner. (Jeremiah 31:21)
5. **Open one room.** Pick one area of life you have kept shut off from G-d and give Him access to it.
6. **Watch for the test.** When the old scenario comes back around and no one is watching, choose differently. That is complete teshuvah.

7. **Check your direction, not your perfection.** Fruit takes a season to ripen. The weekly question is not, am I finished, but am I facing home.

9. For discussion

1. Teshuvah means return, not regret alone. Regret is one of the five movements, but it is not the whole of it. What is the practical difference between feeling sorry about something and returning from it? Where in your own life have you stopped at the turning and never reached the return?
2. In Deuteronomy 1:41–45 the people confess and even act, and still fail to return. What was missing? Where have you done the same thing?
3. How does knowing you are b'tselem Elohim, made in His image, guard a person from sliding from “I did wrong” into “I am wrong”?
4. Walk through the five movements. Which one are you standing in right now, and what is the next one?
5. Rebbe Nachman said to find yourself in every psalm. Read Psalm 51 out loud and slowly. Which line is your own voice, and which line is the answer you needed to hear?
6. Read Jeremiah 31:18–20. Ephraim says, bring me back and I will return. Where do you need G-d's help to turn, and have you asked for it?

10. Sources and further study

Scripture quotations are the author's own rendering. HaShem means The Name. Adonai is the traditional reading used in prayer and Scripture for the four-letter Name of G-d, which Jewish tradition does not pronounce as it is written. In keeping with that reverence, this guide writes G-d and does not spell the Name. The five movements are the author's synthesis of the classical elements Rambam names, not a fixed list in his words.

The covenant of return: Deuteronomy 30:1–10 · Deuteronomy 4:29–31 · 1 Kings 8:46–50

The prophetic call to turn: Isaiah 44:22 · 55:6–7 · Jeremiah 3:12–14, 22; 4:1 · Hosea 14:1–4 · Joel 2:12–13

Return, and I will return to you: Lamentations 5:21 · Zechariah 1:3 · Malachi 3:7 · Jeremiah 31:18–21

Turn and live — Ezekiel 18:21–23, 30–32 · 33:11 · Ezekiel 14:3, 6 · 2 Chronicles 7:14

The blueprint and the failed return: Isaiah 1:16–18, 27 · Deuteronomy 1:41–45 · Psalm 51

The tradition: Rambam, Hilchot Teshuvah 1:1; 2:1–2, 9 · Mishnah Yoma 8:9 · Yoma 86b

Rav Kook, Orot HaTeshuvah 15:10 · Rebbe Nachman, Likutey Moharan II:73, 92, 125

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