Shema Koleinu
שמע קולינו
High Holy Days Guide
5779-5780

Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad
שמע ישראל יהוה אלוהינו יהוה אחד
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Dear friends,

Any holiday can be difficult when healing from abuse. The High Holy Days, with their themes of self-reflection and teshuva, can be even more difficult. We hope that this guide will help you through this challenging time of year.

May you find healing and peace.

- L’shanah tovah tikatev v’taihatem.

May you and yours be inscribed and sealed for a good and sweet new year.

- From all of us at Shema Koleinu
## Printable List of High Holy Days And Dates

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Holy Day</th>
<th>Gregorian</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
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<tr>
<td>Erev Rosh Hashanah</td>
<td>Sunday, September 29</td>
<td>1 Tishrei</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rosh Hashanah Day 1</td>
<td>Monday, September 30</td>
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<td>Rosh Hashanah Day 2</td>
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<td>Erev Yom Kippur</td>
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<td>Yom Kippur</td>
<td>Wednesday, October 9</td>
<td>10 Tishrei</td>
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List Of Synagogues Offering Live-Streams of Services

In the US: MyJewishLearning.com provides a list of synagogues in the US that live-stream High Holy Day services, organized by time zone.

In the UK: The Movement for Reform Judaism provides a list of synagogues in the UK that live-stream High Holy Day services.
Tips For Dealing With Grief And Triggers

- **Grounding**: Feel the parts of your body that are touching something non-moving, such as your feet on the ground, your back against the chair, etc.

- **Resourcing**: Recall a time and place where you felt stable, secure, and safest.

- **Scanning**: Scan your body for where you feel overwhelmed, and for where you feel safe. Move your awareness to the part(s) of your body that contain safety, and then let that feeling expand.

- **Three-part-breaths**: Inhale to your chest, middle, and lower belly. Exhale from your lower belly, then middle, then chest. Combine this with the following exercise.

- **Pause between breaths**: Inhale for 3 counts. Pause for 1 count. Exhale for 3 or 6 counts.

- **Have an escape plan and take breaks**: If going to synagogue, find a room that you can go to for retreat if services become too much.

- **Ask for help**: Many synagogues have paramedics on site at Yom Kippur. If you feel faint, dizzy, or are having a serious panic attack, do not hesitate to ask for help.
• **Remember**: It’s okay if you feel overwhelmed, or like you are literally going crazy. That is a normal part of healing, especially from exposure therapy (intentional exposure to triggers). Your mind will not be stuck like this forever.

• **Check-in**: Does it feel like you are re-living or re-processing your abuse experience? Re-processing is healthy and conducive to healing, and feels like part of you is still in the present. Re-living, on the other hand, feels like all of you is in the past and you are just re-experiencing the trauma. The body and breathing exercises above can help you to reconnect to the present and move away from re-experiencing and into re-processing (healing).

Rest! Take breaks, set boundaries, and respect your limits. If going to synagogue, find a room that you can go to for retreat if services become too much. Proactively use this room for breaks throughout the day. **DO NOT** try to push yourself to stay present for all of services with no breaks. Psychologically, emotionally, it is important to pause, gather oneself, and reflect. **You have been through a TRAUMA and need to take care of yourself.**

If spending time with family and friends, it is even more important to take breaks and find intentional solitude. Create some space for yourself in every activity. Set boundaries early and often so that you do not feel obligated to keep up with friends and family who are not also recovering from religious/spiritual trauma and who may not know when you are being overly taxed.

**Crisis Hotlines**

National Sexual Assault Hotline 1-800-656-4673  
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)
Common Triggers

The following are some common triggers for people who were abused by clergy:

- Things your abuser said, did, liked, or taught (e.g., “my abuser played guitar and seeing men play guitar on the bimah was a trigger early in my healing, and still sometimes is.”)

- Things that you clung to during the abuse (e.g., “I clung to certain prayers and parts of the synagogue to feel less alone during my abuse, and now they remind me of all the pain that I was in and how isolated I was.”)

- Familiar songs/melodies

- Talk of forgiveness as a virtue

- Just seeing a male rabbi in the pulpit giving a sermon

- Spiritual bypass type stuff (e.g., “the song with the lyrics ‘we shall build this world of love’ makes me physically ill after the communal abuse that I suffered by the synagogue.”)

- Social interactions at break the fast and other events (e.g., “I am afraid to trust anyone, and experience a pervasive feeling of isolation. People have no idea what I lived through and would never understand and may not believe me. Worst of all, I feel like they wouldn’t want to know anyway.”)
What are some things that might trigger you, going into this High Holy Day season? List them below. You can discuss your list with a therapist, supporter, or another rabbinic sex abuse survivor.
Safety Plan: On the previous page, you listed some probable triggers. What are some things that you can do to prepare, so that you can feel safe and supported even when exposed to those triggers? For instance, “I will use the three-part-breathing exercise when I see a man playing guitar on the bimah, and I give myself permission to leave or to take a break if I have to.”
**Contacts:** List three people that you will call for support if things get really difficult. If you cannot think of three, that is okay. Try to list at least two.

**Self-Reflection:** “What will my bread crumbs represent this year?” “What personal goals was I working on this year? What progress have I made? How will I find closure in the coming days?” For ideas, see page 13 (Tashlich).

**Goal Setting:** “What do I want to feel at the conclusion of Yom Kippur? What spiritual goal or goals am I trying to achieve?”
What three things are you most anxious about this High Holy Day season? For example, “I am afraid of hearing the shofar for the first time without him, and how that will make me feel.” or “I am afraid to go to a synagogue again.”

It might be hard to think of any at this time, but what are three things that you are most looking forward to, or most hope to experience? For example, “I really like apples and honey, and I know I could use a nice walk through nature for tashlich, and I do love the first bites of break the fast!”

Mantras: What are three things that you can remind yourself of to help give yourself strength when you feel overwhelmed, triggered, isolated, or otherwise unable to go on? For example: “I will remind myself of the other survivors I have been talking to, and remember that I am not alone. I will remember some of my accomplishments over the past year in my professional or personal life to remind myself of my competence and strength. I will remember my children and how much they need me.”
Erev Rosh Hashanah (Sunday 9/29/2019)

Welcome! You have made it this far in your healing journey. This may be your first High Holy Days since the abuse, or perhaps you are still entangled and this might be your last holiday with your abuser. Tonight’s service may even be your first time entering a synagogue since what happened to you, or since you came to understand that what happened to you was significant. It can be very scary. You are not alone.

No matter where you are or how long it has been, erev Rosh Hashanah marks the beginning of the Days of Awe, otherwise known as “the ten days of repentance.” This is a journey within a journey, and an opportunity for renewing your relationship with G-d and with Judaism and with yourself, and for deep and meaningful healing.

A survivor says: “Erev Rosh HaShanah, for me, means two things: (1) surviving and enjoying services, (2) visualizing and setting intentions for the following 10 days. By giving myself explicit tasks to focus on for each day, I find the High Holy Days easier to navigate.”

Surviving and enjoying services: “To get the most out of services, I plan ahead by visualizing what I hope to do when I get there, and by using the tips on the “Tips for Dealing with Triggers” list on pages 5-6.”

Intention setting: “On erev Rosh Hashanah, I begin to seriously think about what I will cast away during tashlich. “What will my bread crumbs represent this year? I also think all the way to Yom Kippur. ‘What do I want to feel at the conclusion of Yom Kippur? What spiritual goal or goals and I trying to achieve? What was I working to grow out of this year? What progress have I made? How will I find closure in the coming days?’”
Rosh Hashanah (Monday 9/30/2019 & Tuesday 10/1/2019)

Friends And Family

Apples, honey, leeks, challah, brisket… Rosh Hashanah is a time that we may find ourselves surrounded by friends and family. Some friends and family may love us but not know how to process or respond to the abuse that we suffered. In many cases, we are still carrying the full weight of secrecy and have not told our loved ones about the abuse.

Some of us might come from families where it is not okay to be anything but happy all of the time, and where there is little emotional bonding or support. We hope that this booklet and groups like Shema Koleinu offer some strength and solace.

When you are sitting around the Rosh Hashanah dinner table and all you can think about is your abuser, please know that there are others like you out there, and that you are not defective, bad, or crazy, and that you did not cause your abuse. It is not atypical to not be able to stop thinking about the trauma, even years later, particularly on significant days like this one. You are experiencing a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.

Take care of yourself one moment at a time. Wrap yourself in a heavy blanket and take some time alone after lengthy interactions with family who you find it hard work to be around. You are working very hard at this time in your life, even when you do not realize it. Be sure to eat enough and stay well hydrated from now through erev Yom Kippur. Take advantage of all of these meals to build your strength.

What if I have nowhere to go? What if my abuser is still active in my community?

Some survivors come from non-Jewish families or otherwise do not have any family to spend the High Holidays with. This is particularly painful if there is no safe Jewish community to rely on due to the abuse and the enabling of that abuse. Many survivors have found themselves completely alone and feeling isolated during the High Holy Days. Some do not observe Judaism at all for many years or ever again, and others observe by immersing themselves in texts, live-streaming services, taking long walks and talking to G-d (hitbodedut).

If you abuser is still active in your community, this can be incredibly triggering, and also produce a deep and painful cognitive dissonance. One survivor spoke of buying plane tickets in order to spend Yom Kippur in another state at a completely unfamiliar congregation. To make it meaningful and interesting, she chose to visit a historical congregation that was of interest to

Shema Koleinu שמע קולינו High Holy Days Guide
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her, and this turned out to be an enriching experience. If you have the means and flexibility to travel, this can be a great impetus to explore old, historic synagogues and congregations, and different Jewish cities. If you are unable to leave, then it is important to reach out to other survivors, a therapist or counselor, and to find some sort of support. It is not a sign of weakness or defeat to need help!

A survivor says: “I could not afford to move and I had to wait until I finished my degree program to start working. None of the rabbis in my community believed me or supported me, and my abuser lived nearby. I almost had to put myself in the hospital because the helplessness and rage and pain were so intense. I got through the two years by not leaving my apartment much, except for to travel to other cities every few months to visit friends or attend services somewhere else. I actually joined a congregation in another state at the student rate, and that was good. I had weekly video chats with a rebbetzin counselor in another state, weekly trauma therapy, a rape crisis center support group and weekly phone counseling, as well as weekly video chats with another rabbinic abuse survivor, and weekly video chat for Torah study with a friend. Even though I had no local Jewish community to speak of, and my abuser was known and loved nationally, I managed to piece together a community for myself out of people from different parts of the country, and along with therapy this helped me to feel less helpless.”

Services

Whether attending services online or in person, there are many potential triggers if your abuser was a rabbi. Some questions to ask as you check in with yourself:

- What stands out to you when you read the texts and prayers? Anything different from previous years?
- Does being around other people whose innocence and trust in the Jewish community has not been disrupted make you feel lonely? Angry? Resentful? (If so, these are perfectly normal feelings to have in this situation.)
- How present am I? Am I overwhelmed? If so, what might have been the trigger, and what do I need to feel safe in this moment?
- Where do I feel overwhelm in my body? Where is there calm?

Things might be going completely smoothly and then you might suddenly realize that you have not been paying attention, or that you feel dysphoric or dissociated. Keep checking in with yourself, using the pauses between prayers and songs to do so. Remember to take breaks. Do not be afraid to walk in and out of the sanctuary as needed.
Tashlich

You may prefer to perform this ritual alone, for added privacy and time.

A survivor says: "In the first year after my abuse, I was so traumatized that I do not even remember if I did *tashlich*. My mistakes had not been against others as much as they had been against myself and G-d. I had stayed with my abuser, defended him and kept his secrets, and by doing so had been complicit in his abuse and duplicity. By casting those errors into the water, I was finally transcending the worldliness of my abuser and re-entering the state of relationship with G-d that I had before the abuse."
Interim Days of Awe (Wednesday 10/2/2019 - Tuesday 10/8/2019)

This is a good time to reach out to other survivors and to support one another. It is also time to rest, reflect, restore, and prepare for Yom Kippur. Some thoughts that survivors might have during this time include:

- “What am I repenting for? I was victimized and then too traumatized to function. What is my job here? Do I have anything to offer, any purpose this year? I am sad that I can’t think of anything to repent for, anything that was not done under duress. There must be something…”
- “What is my responsibility and what is not my responsibility? Am I feeling feelings that do not belong to me? Guilt that does not belong to me?”
- “Yet another year my abuser does not apologize or repent… There is so much heaviness/sorrow here.”
- “I feel drained. How do I make the holidays my own and meaningful again?”

Post-traumatic Growth

There is something called “post-traumatic growth” where trauma survivors experience positive psychological change and learning after a trauma. One survivor described deepening her Jewish education and involvement after her abuse as a way of unlearning the warped spiritual concepts taught to her by her abuser, and so that she would never feel reliant on another person for her spiritual growth and knowledge again. In other words, she became more autonomous and took greater responsibility for her own learning, which strengthened her confidence, boundaries, and sense of self.

The High Holidays combined with the trauma of a major betrayal of trust by an abusive rabbi provides a great opportunity for the survivor (that’s you!) to challenge their existing paradigms about forgiveness, repentance, and atonement. It is a time to unlearn or relearn, and rise to a higher level of knowledge.

You can use this time to research and reflect on what teshuvah really means, and to sharpen your Jewish education/knowledge so that you truly understand that you are under no obligation to forgive an unrepentant abuser, and are free to focus on your own healing and welfare.

For some survivors, healing includes a pursuit of justice and warning of others in the community, and there is a period of reflection and guilt that is experienced beforehand. The Days of Awe are perhaps a good time to reflect on which guilt is healthy, true, and fact-based, and which guilt is emotional and a remnant of who you were before or during the abuse.

A survivor says: "I am my own and G-d’s now."
A Note On Forgiveness

This is a particularly hard time of year for survivors on many levels, especially the forgiveness/repentance level. We may expect our abusers or their enablers to think of us during their reflections at this time of year, and we may be disappointed when we do not hear from them. Or we may blame ourselves and contemplate apologizing to our abusers! Self-blame might be amplified by the lack of teshuva on our abuser’s end.

During the High Holidays, you may hear many sermons about the beauty and power of forgiveness (as opposed to repentance, interestingly). You may find this particularly triggering and need to walk out during such sermons for a drink of water or to just breathe.

No matter what rhetoric you hear, remember this:

In Judaism, the burden of forgiveness is on the perpetrator. The perpetrator has to seek it, and work for it. If someone does not make an authentic, genuine apology and actually change and make reparations etc. then you are under no obligation to forgive. Your only obligation is to let them make teshuva if they genuinely want to, and to accept it, if it is genuine and adequate. Your job this (or any) high holiday season is not to forgive your abuser, but to focus on yourself, feel your feelings, and to heal.

A survivor says: “Acceptance is the nearest thing to ‘forgiveness’ that I have arrived at. Teshuva and corresponding forgiveness is the responsibility of my perpetrator and not mine. I am free to live my life. If he wants to make this right, he can. Otherwise, the natural consequences to his chosen way of life are going to follow him, and he certainly does not get to be held in positive regard by me or anyone in my family.”

An Immersion Into The Mikveh

There is a tradition of immersing oneself in the mikvah prior to sunset on the day before Yom Kippur.

A survivor says: “I booked a private appointment at a Mikvah and this was incredibly helpful. The experience helped me to feel safe and embraced by G-d in a more physical way. It set the somber and serious and purifying tone of Yom Kippur. The body cleaning ritual prior to the immersion felt like removing any last trace of my abuser from my body. It marked the physical ending to the abuse, and created a sense of finality, closure.”

Take these days and use them to make an appointment or otherwise plan for mikvah immersion.
Erev Yom Kippur (Tuesday 10/8/2019)

Jonas entsteigt dem Rachen des Walfisches
Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625)
Alte Pinakothek, Bavarian State Painting Collections
Whale as a vehicle for transformation

Being swallowed by something can be an awakening experience. Like an abusive relationship or other trauma, the belly of a whale can be terrifying, dark, confining, and isolating. It can also be a time of deep transformation.

Who was Jonah before and after the experience? How were you changed once you were “spit out” from the whale? What do you do differently now?

There are other ways that survivors might relate to Jonah. He was a prophet and he felt resentful of his task. Some survivors are called by their conscience to speak truth to power, and to expose their abuser and enabling institutions.
Yom Kippur (Wednesday 10/9/2019)

Remember: Fasting is a physical stressor just like PTSD and grief. Fasting, PTSD, and grief might amplify each other, resulting in too much physical stress for the body. Get help sooner rather than later if you feel *lightheaded, dizzy, confused, disoriented, or weak*. Get help IMMEDIATELY if your vision or hearing begin to fade or you find it difficult to sit up or stand.

This day is between you and G-d. It is not about forgiving your abuser or feeling bad for any of the things that you had to do in order to survive. Focus on renewing your relationship with yourself and Hashem, and let the fasting and prayer serve as vehicles for doing just that.

Some things that survivors may experience or be reminded of on Yom Kippur:

- The heartbreak of finality
- A sense of urgency and yearning
- Grief
- Closure and reconciliation with G-d and self
- A sense of cleansing, release, and relief
Prayer for Victims of Clergy Sexual Abuse and their Advocates

By Rebecca bat Avraham

Our Father in Heaven, Rock and Redeemer of Israel, bless the survivors of clergy sexual abuse and exploitation. Shield them with Your lovingkindness, envelop them in Your peace, and bestow Your light and truth upon those who surround them, and grace them with Your good counsel. Strengthen the hands of those who endeavor to uphold the sacred status of the rabbinate, grant them deliverance, and adorn them in a mantle of victory. Ordain peace in their souls and grant them eternal happiness.