



חֶשְׁבֹן הַנֶּפֶשׁ

HESHBON HANEFESH

a contemporary Jewish journey of reflection, repair, and renewal

ELUL

A SPIRITUAL HUMANISTIC JEWISH JOURNAL



How to use this journal

Set aside 10–20 minutes each day. You don't need to believe in a divine judge or supernatural forgiveness.

Heshbon HaNefesh can be understood as an honest accounting of the life we are creating, and the effects our choices have on ourselves, other people, and the world.

Each day has four parts:

PAUSE

take a breath, and become present.

REFLECT

answer the questions honestly.

ACT

choose one small action when action is called for.

REMEMBER

connect your personal reflection to your Jewish values and human responsibility.

The thirty days move outward: first what you can see, then the people you share a life with, then what you say you value, then the turning itself, and last the year that has not happened yet.

On the transliteration: ḥ is always ḥet (ח), sounded deep in the throat, as in *Aḥrayut* and *Ḥesed*.

THE THIRTY DAYS

I	רְאִיָּה	Looking Back	<i>Days 1 – 7</i>
II	תְּקוּן	Relationships	<i>Days 8 – 14</i>
III	אֲחֻרִּיּוֹת	Values and Responsibility	<i>Days 15 – 21</i>
IV	תְּשׁוּבָה	Teshuvah	<i>Days 22 – 28</i>
V	הַתְּחַדְּשׁוֹת	Renewal	<i>Days 29 – 30</i>
—		Psalm 27 (<i>adapted</i>)	

I

רֵאִיָּה

LOOKING BACK

Seeing the Year Honestly

DAYS 1 – 7

DAY ONE

Begin Where You Are

What has this past year been like for me?

Write freely about the year without trying to make it sound better or worse than it was.

- What changed?
- What surprised me?
- What challenged me?
- What brought me joy and gratitude?

HUMANISTIC PRACTICE

Resist the urge to judge yourself. Today is about seeing clearly.

VALUE

אֱמֶת *Emet* — truth.

DAY TWO

What Went Well?

What am I proud of?

List at least five things, large or small.

CONSIDER

- A difficult thing you handled
- A relationship you strengthened
- A risk you took
- A kindness you offered
- Something you learned
- A time you acted courageously

HUMANISTIC PRACTICE

Give yourself credit without turning it into self-congratulation.

VALUE

הַכָּרַת הַטוֹב *Hakarat hatov* — recognizing what is good.

DAY THREE

Where Did I Fall Short

Where did I fail to be the person I want to be?

Choose one or two moments.

ASK

- What did I do?
- What was I feeling?
- What did I want?
- What did my actions cost someone else?
- What would I do differently now?

HUMANISTIC PRACTICE

Replace “I’m a bad person” with “I made a choice I want to understand and change.”

VALUE

אֲחֵרַיִט *Ahrayut* — responsibility.

My Patterns

What keeps happening?

LOOK FOR RECURRING PATTERNS IN

- Arguments
- Relationships
- Work
- Money
- Anger
- Avoidance
- Anxiety
- Communication
- Self-care

COMPLETE “When _____ happens, I tend to _____, because _____.”

THEN “A different response might be _____.”

The People Who Shaped My Year

Choose three people.

— What did they give me?

— What did I learn from them?

— What do I wish I had said?

If appropriate, send one person a brief message of appreciation.

חסד *Hesed* — lovingkindness.

Consider family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, community members, and strangers.

— Where did I make someone's life harder?

Don't stop at intention. Consider impact.

DAY SEVEN

What Am I Avoiding?

What truth about myself have I been reluctant to face?

COMPLETE *“If I were completely honest with myself, I would have to admit that.....”*

Sit with the answer — you don’t have to solve it today.

HUMANISTIC PRACTICE

Courage begins with accurate self-knowledge.

VALUE

אומץ Ometz — courage.

II

תקון

RELATIONSHIPS

Repairing What We Can

DAYS 8 - 14

An Apology I Owe

ASK

- What exactly did I do?
- What might they have experienced?
- What do I owe them?

A meaningful apology does not require: “I’m sorry if you were offended.” Instead, take ownership of the behavior and its impact.

If appropriate, make the apology.

An Apology I Am Waiting For

Is there someone whose apology I am still waiting for?

Write about the hurt. Then ask: What is in my control, even if they never apologize?

Humanistic teshuvah does not require us to pretend that harm didn't happen. It asks what we can do with what happened.

DAY TEN

Forgiveness

What does forgiveness mean to me?

CONSIDER THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN

- Forgiving
- Forgetting
- Reconciliation
- Releasing resentment
- Setting a boundary
- Accepting that the past cannot be changed

You do not have to forgive simply because the calendar says Elul. Sometimes the healthiest teshuvah is a boundary.

DAY ELEVEN

Listening

When was the last time I truly listened?

TODAY, PRACTICE LISTENING WITHOUT IMMEDIATELY

- correcting
- advising
- defending
- comparing
- fixing

ACTION

Have one conversation in which your primary goal is understanding.

VALUE

כבוד *Kavod* — dignity and respect.

Someone I Take For Granted

Who quietly makes your life better?

A Partner. Parent. Friend. Neighbor. Caregiver. Colleague. Community Member.

Tell them specifically what you appreciate.

The Relationship With Myself

HAVE I BEEN

- compassionate?
- honest?
- excessively critical?
- patient?
- neglectful?
- courageous?

COMPLETE *"I want to speak to myself the way I would speak to someone I love." What would that sound like?*

III

אַחֲרִיּוֹת

VALUES AND RESPONSIBILITY

Becoming Intentional

DAYS 15 – 21

Choose five values that mean most to you. For example:

Justice · Kindness · Truth · Courage · Freedom
Community · Curiosity · Dignity · Compassion · Responsibility

Then rank your top three and ask: Do my actions actually reflect these values?

Values vs. Habits

Choose one value. Example: *Value — Compassion.*

ASK

- What do I currently do that expresses compassion?
- What do I do that contradicts it?
- What one behavior would make compassion more visible in my life?

DAY SEVENTEEN

Power

How do I use the power I have?

Every person has some power over someone else.

CONSIDER

- Who depends on me?
- Who listens to me?
- Who might be afraid to disagree with me?
- Who has less institutional or social power than I do?

VALUE

 Tzedek — justice.

Humanistic Judaism understands Jewish life as a responsibility we undertake together.

— Help someone

— Volunteer

— Give resources

— Speak up

- Teach something

—Join something

— Repair something

— Make something better

Where have I been playing it safe?

What conversation, decision, boundary, or action have you postponed because you're afraid?

Ask: What would courage look like — not recklessness, but one honest next step?

- More money
- More recognition
- More productivity
- More possessions
- More approval

Ask: What would enough look like here?

My Jewish Life

What does being Jewish mean to me?

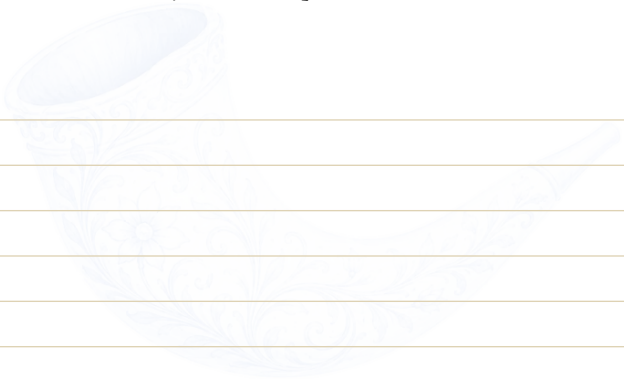
Finish these sentences:

Judaism matters to me because _____

The Jewish value I most want to embody is _____

The Jewish practice I want to deepen is _____

The kind of Jewish community I want to help create is _____



IV

תְּשׁוּבָה

TESHUVAH

Turning Toward Change

DAYS 22 – 28

One Thing To Stop

What behavior do you want to leave behind?

Make it specific.

NOT “*Stop being selfish.*”

BUT *"When I am angry, I will not send messages until I have cooled down."*

Make it small enough that you can actually do it.

My new practice

When will I do it _____

How often _____

One Thing To Continue

What are you already doing that deserves protection?

Not everything needs fixing.

— a friendship

— a ritual

— exercise

— learning

—generosity

—creativity

- community involvement

—time with family

Repair

People I owe an apology _____

People I owe gratitude _____

Promises I need to keep _____

Things I need to return or repair _____

Conversations I need to have _____

Choose one concrete action.

Imagine yourself one year from now. Perhaps:

- “They became more patient.”
- “They kept their word.”
- “They became more courageous.”
- “They listened.”
- “They were there when people needed them.”

Write your own description.

Specific · Realistic · Observable

—“I will call my parents twice a month.”

—“I will participate in my community once a month.”

—“I will have difficult conversations rather than avoiding them.”

What I Cannot Control

Where am I spending energy trying to control the uncontrollable?

Make two columns. Put your current worries into the appropriate column.

I CAN INFLUENCE

I CANNOT CONTROL

Then ask: Where do I have more agency than I have been using?

V

הַתְּחַדְּשׁוֹת

RENEWAL

Preparing for Rosh Hashanah

DAYS 29 – 30

Review anything you have written. Complete:

This year I learned _____

I am proud that _____

I need to repair _____

I need to forgive myself for _____

I need to stop _____

I need to begin _____

I want to continue _____

I want to become _____

Now identify the one insight from Elul you most want to remember. Write it somewhere you will see it during the year.

A Humanistic Elul Covenant

Sit somewhere quiet.

Take several breaths.

Think about the people whose lives intersect with yours.

Think about the generations of Jews who came before you — not as supernatural witnesses, but as human beings who struggled with many of the same questions:

- How we should live?
- How should we treat one another?
- What do we owe the future?
- How do we become better than we were?

THEN WRITE

I cannot change the past.

I can take responsibility for it.

I cannot control what others do.

I can choose how I respond.

I cannot become perfect.

I can become more courageous, more aware, more compassionate, and more responsible.

I honor the people who have shaped me by deciding what I will carry forward.

I honor the future by deciding what I will change.

In the coming year, I choose to live more intentionally.

I choose to repair where I can.

I choose to keep becoming.

Then ask yourself one final question:

What is one thing I will do tomorrow that proves I mean it?

Do that thing.

That is the first act of the new year.

Psalm 27, adapted

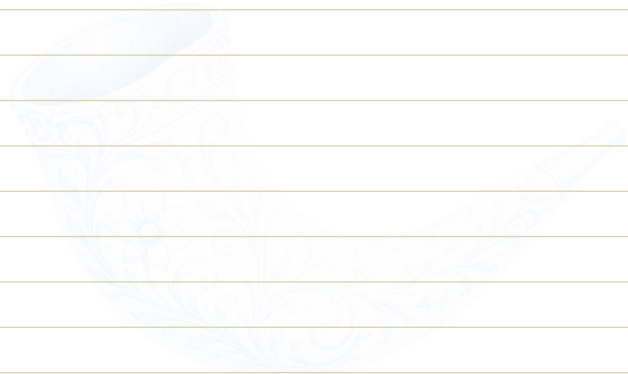
During the month of Elul, it is traditional to recite Psalm 27 every day. Here is a shortened Humanistic version:

מְזִמּוֹר כ"ז

May Wisdom be my light,
Courage be my strength,
And Compassion guide my way,
In times of fear, may I seek what is good
And help bring it into the world.

NOTES

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שְׁנָה טוֹבָה

Prepared by Rabbi Frank Tamburello
Westchester Community for Humanistic Judaism
Elul 5786 · 2026

*Set in EB Garamond and Frank Ruehl, in the type and ornament of Selihot — a
service of return, so that the two may be used together.*

