

Teshuva – A guide for leaders

Teshuva [te-shoo-vah] תְּשׁוּבָה (f.n.)

1. return.
2. revolution, period.
3. answer, reply.
4. repentance.



In a year where impossible decisions have had to be made, where physical and mental health, economy and safety have had to be balanced, where what's best for an individual and what's best for an organisation don't easily line up...

Leaders have been held to higher standards than ever. We've held many people's emotional and physical safety in our hands. Yet, we are as human as everyone else and inevitably we've not always got it right. We've made mistakes. We've maybe even caused unintentional hurt.

This Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we ask - What should teshuva look like for leaders? Does saying sorry and showing vulnerability demonstrate strength or weakness? When and how should we say sorry? And how can we do that in a way which actually makes up for the harm we may have caused?

Maybe we think we've done quite well

We've held things together and delivered
We've had to respond, pivot, go online fast
We've survived, coped and delivered services

Maybe we see areas where our actions caused hurt

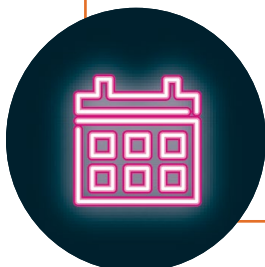
Cutting costs had an impact on morale and livelihood. Pivoting and responding fast suited some, but left others feeling demoralised. Maybe we could have been more sensitive to people's circumstances and feelings? Our decisions around new working practices have had a real impact on health and wellbeing

A look through the lens of teshuva

“Teshuva and Yom Kippur only atone for transgression between humans and God ... But transgressions between a person and their fellow, such as physical harm, or verbal harm, or stealing, those are never forgiven until one gives their fellow what they owe them, and they are appeased.”

Rambam, Mishneh Torah

In the past year, could your decisions, even those made in good faith, have caused physical or emotional harm? Is there something you can do about it?



How do you do teshuva with fellow human beings

“Offences between human and human, for example, like one who injures their neighbour, or curses their neighbour or steals from them, or similar, is ever not absolved unless they make restitution of what is owed and begs the forgiveness of the neighbour... Even if the offence was only made through words, one is obliged to appease them and implore them until forgiveness is granted.”

Rambam, Mishneh Torah

Rambam sets the bar high for apologising. “I’m sorry you feel hurt” is not going to cut it. That wouldn’t technically count as teshuva, which literally means “return”.

[Greg Ward’s Forbes article](#) on how to properly apologise is a leadership reformulation of Rambam’s approach: apologise sincerely, make amends and resolve to correct your behaviour in future.

Begging forgiveness sounds a lot... How can leaders today take the lessons forward?

How can we build the art of teshuva into our daily leadership lives? Leadership consultant Larry Shulman advises undertaking a regular behavioural stock-take of how we’ve been treating our colleagues where we reflect and seek feedback. We give annual-appraisals to others – what about a self-appraisal?

And this shouldn’t just be annual. The siddur includes opportunities to do teshuva three times a day in the amida (silent prayer). If that sounds a bit much, perhaps on a monthly basis, try asking yourself these questions:

What were the big relational interactions I’ve had in the last month?

Where didn’t I act as well as I could have?

Did I apologise and rectify it at the time? Could I still now?

What action do I need to take?

What self-work is needed so that I don’t repeat my mistake?

[There’s no doubt that this is part of the work of an effective leader.](#)

[Karen J Hardwick, Forbes](#)



Should a leader really show this level of vulnerability?

It is easy to believe that strength in leadership comes in ploughing forward with full confidence in your past actions. But expert research and advice, as well as Jewish wisdom, tell a different story.

“Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change”

Brene Brown

[Brene Brown's TED talk on vulnerability](#) changed the field in 2014.

Since then, the [leadership thinking on vulnerability](#) has continued to develop. [Jeff Haden, Inc.com](#)

“A rope that is cut and re-tied is doubly strong at the point where it was severed”
Jewish saying

“A perfectly righteous person - this is someone who sees themselves as complete in all of their words and actions. A person such as this resides on a lower rung than one who has done teshuva since their heart is broken [over their wrongdoing]”.

Rabbi Simcha Bunem from Peshishcha

And yet, the world is still not perfect...

Even if you are ready to do the work of teshuva as a leader, there may be some parts of our community which may not feel like they're there yet, where apologising is seen as a sign of weakness. In these situations, be part of the change you want to see, while understanding that the world is a work in progress.

[3 Steps to build a culture of vulnerability in the wake of the pandemic.](#)
[Advisory Board Daily Briefing](#)

Rabbi Hama bar Hanina said:

“Great is repentance, as it brings healing to the world

Yoma 86a:14



שְׁנָה טוֹבָה

Wishing you a year ahead of leadership which is full of opportunities for development and recovery in equal measure. As we continue to emerge, adapt and build on the lessons learnt from the last year, we hope to be able to support you on the next steps of your leadership journey.

We'd love to hear from you if this resource prompted any thoughts or actions in your leadership. Tell us how you used it at laurence@thejlc.org