

KOL NIDRE SERMON 2025

“Teshuvah: The Golden Journey”

On this most solemn of nights, when the haunting melody of Kol Nidre still lingers in the sanctuary air, we are invited to turn inward. The gates of return stand open, and we are called once again to the work of atonement — of teshuvah. Every year we come back to this night, wrapped in white, hushed by the weight of tradition, and every year we are reminded that the work of return and repairing our brokenness is never finished.

There is a Japanese art form called *kintsugi*, which means “golden joinery.” When a vessel of pottery breaks, rather than discarding it or hiding the cracks, the artist repairs it with lacquer mixed with powdered gold. The cracks do not disappear; they are illuminated. The breakage becomes part of the history of the vessel — and in some ways, it becomes even more beautiful for having been broken.

Teshuvah works in much the same way. We do not erase the past. We do not pretend the cracks in our lives never happened. Instead, we hold them up to the light. We fill them with the gold of honesty, compassion, and growth. The repaired vessel tells the truth of its history: it was broken, but not ruined; shattered, but not discarded; made stronger and more beautiful because of its wounds.

When we practice teshuvah, we return to what is most essential: to our values, to our integrity, to the person we long to become. Teshuvah is the invitation to realign our lives, to soften what has hardened, to turn back toward the path we know is ours.

Our tradition even teaches something radical: when teshuvah is done out of love — not fear or guilt, but love — our past misdeeds don’t just fall away. They can be transformed into merits, reminders of how far we’ve come and what we’ve learned along the way. That

is *kintsugi* in spiritual form: our very mistakes, when faced with courage and transformed through growth, can become the shining seams of our lives.

Tonight, I want to suggest another frame: teshuvah not as a burden, but as a possibility. Teshuvah as the way we claim that life is still unfolding. It is the sacred reminder that no matter how far down a path we have traveled — in our habits, in our relationships, in our choices — the possibility of return is always before us.

If we believe we are defined by our past mistakes, then we become prisoners of them. Our failures harden into our identity, our worst moments lock us in a cage. But teshuvah invites us to find the key. It asks us to believe that repair is possible, that growth is real, that our next step matters more than our last misstep. Life, it teaches, is not the sum of what has already gone wrong, but the unfolding promise of what can still be made right.

The psychologist Carol Dweck describes what she calls a “growth mindset” — the conviction that our qualities, our abilities, even our moral capacity are not fixed traits, but living possibilities. Judaism has known this all along. Teshuvah is our ancient way of saying: you are not finished yet. You can become.

We see this truth in the life of King David. His story is not one of flawless leadership or unbroken virtue. David — the shepherd boy who became king, the poet who gave us the Psalms — also faltered in terrible ways. When he saw Bathsheba, desire overpowered his judgment, and he arranged for her husband, Uriah, to be sent to the front lines of battle where he would surely be killed. David misused his power and betrayed his calling.

It was the prophet Nathan who confronted him with a parable. “There were two men,” Nathan began, “one rich and one poor. The rich man had flocks beyond counting. The poor

man had nothing — nothing but one small lamb he had raised like a daughter. It ate from his table, drank from his cup, and slept in his arms.

One day a traveler came to the rich man. And instead of taking from his own abundance, the rich man seized the poor man's lamb, slaughtered it, and served it to his guest."

When David heard these words, he leapt up in fury. "As God lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay four times over, for he had no pity."

And Nathan turned to him and said: "You are that man."

In that moment, David could have denied, deflected, or doubled down. Instead, he admitted his sin. And out of that confrontation, David composed one of the most searing prayers of teshuvah we have: "*Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me*" (Psalm 51:12). Even the greatest figures in our tradition are not defined forever by their worst moment, but by their willingness to turn, to seek renewal, and to step toward transformation.

This is teshuvah in its purest form: not erasing the past, but allowing brokenness itself to become the starting point for a new chapter. Each of us is a work in progress, written in pencil rather than stone.

Growth requires struggle. It takes the courage to admit where we have fallen short, and the daring to try again. Teshuvah is not a single act — it is a process: reflection, regret, restitution, and better action. We stumble, we try, we fail, we rise, and we return. Again and again. And here lies the deeper truth: it's not how we make mistakes, but how we correct them that defines us.

The poet Maya Angelou put it simply: *“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”* This allows us to forgive ourselves. You see, none of us arrives at this night perfect. We are all works in progress, doing the best we can with what we know. And then life teaches us something new — through failure, through pain, through the quiet voice of conscience. Teshuvah is not about shame for what we didn’t know then; it is about the courage to change once we know better now.

Angelou reminds us that perfection has never been the Jewish expectation. Our tradition does not say: do it right every time. It says: learn, grow, return. Again and again. Each mistake, each regret, each shortcoming is also an invitation — to begin again, to do better, to become more whole. That turning, that correcting, is what shapes who we truly are.

Teshuvah helps us become closer to the “you” you long to be — the more patient parent, the more present friend, the more just citizen, the more compassionate human being.

We see this in our daily lives. When a relationship is strained, we can risk the first apology. When we face injustice in our world, we can act, however small our steps, toward repair. Even the broken pieces of our lives can become the raw material of holiness. Imagine your regrets, your missteps, your pain — transfigured into something that teaches you, shapes you, gives you depth and compassion. This is a growth mindset in its most sacred form.

Think of how a tree grows. It does not shoot up in a straight, perfect line. It bends toward the light. Its branches twist, sometimes break, and grow again. Its rings show seasons of drought and seasons of abundance. And yet each year it puts forth new leaves. Our lives are like that tree. Teshuvah is how we bend back toward the light. The gift of teshuvah is, as the poet Rumi said so simply: *“The wound is where the light enters you.”*

Kol Nidre is recited in the plural, not the singular. For tonight we stand together, confessing not only our own failures but those where our community, our society, our people have missed the mark. We are bound together not by perfection, but by the possibility of return. Teshuvah is never a solitary act. When one of us turns back — toward kindness, toward truth, toward God — it pulls the rest of us along, widening the path for others to follow. That is why our prayers on these Days of Awe are spoken in the plural: *ashamnu*, *bagadnu* — we have strayed, we have betrayed — because our failings and our repair are shared. Each individual step of return draws the whole people closer to the Source of Life.

And so, as we prepare for this day of repentance, let us remember: there is no mistake too large, no past too heavy, that God's mercy cannot reach inside and bring healing. Our tradition insists that compassion is woven into the very fabric of creation. Even when we feel beyond repair, the gates of return are still open. Teshuvah whispers that we are never disqualified from growth, never too far to return, never too broken to be made whole.

The path is before us. No matter how long we have been going in the wrong direction, we can turn around. No matter how many times we have stumbled, we can rise. No matter how many cracks line our vessels, they can be filled with gold.

Tonight let us give pause to who we can still become. We can write a brave new ending. To love ourselves enough to keep turning, even when it is hard, is itself an act of courage. And that is the promise of this night: that each of us, in our own way, can pick up our pencils and begin again.

As Yom Kippur dawns, we are reminded that this day is not about punishment, but possibility. It is the gift of time carved out for us to turn, to repair, to begin again. For tonight, the gates are open, the path is before us, and the journey home has already begun.

May our turning draw us closer to the people we are meant to be. May it bring tenderness to our hearts, courage to our spirits, and compassion to our deeds. And may God inscribe us and seal us in the Book of Life, looking upon us with mercy and with love.

May this new year be one of forgiveness, resilience, and peace.