

HIGH HOLIDAYS

Conversation Guide

The Jewish High Holidays are a series of holidays including [Rosh Hashanah](#) (the Jewish New Year) and [Yom Kippur](#) (the Jewish Day of Atonement). Together, these holidays offer us a chance to reflect on the past year's difficulties and guide us toward a more hopeful vision for the year ahead.

The past few years have been particularly challenging for many of us, as the pain and turmoil in the world seem more visible in our daily lives. Whether we're grappling with personal, professional, or family struggles, witnessing the rise in anti-Semitism, divisive politics, and polarized discourse in our country, or observing the ongoing conflict and suffering in Israel and the region following the October 7th attacks, it's evident that the world around us is deeply fractured.

The High Holidays offer each of us and our community the opportunity to reflect on the past year, take account of our actions, and envision our future. There are various traditions throughout this season to give each of us an opportunity to reflect and think about our past year and set intentions for the year ahead.

One unique holiday tradition is the [sounding of the shofar](#), a ram's horn, which is blown like a trumpet throughout the High Holidays. Traditionally, the horn is blown every day during the month leading up to the High Holidays and during Rosh Hashanah services. It makes four distinct sounds, with their own meaning. The sounding of the shofar serves as a call to action acknowledging the brokenness of our world and concluding with a hopeful vision for the future.



Hearing the shofar is something we must each do thoughtfully, a practice we might call active listening. In this conversation guide, we will use the shofar as a metaphor to help us actively listen to one another as we reflect on the past year and prepare for the new one ahead.

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“Suddenly you are awakening to a strange noise, a noise that fills the full field of your consciousness and then splits into several jagged strands, shattering that field, shaking you awake. The ram’s horn, the shofar...is blown to call you to wakefulness. You awake to confusion. Where are you? Who are you?” - Rabbi Alan Lew

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Hosting Notes: This conversation can take place *anywhere*, such as around a table, in a backyard or park. It can be a part of a meal or around another fun activity like making candied apples for Rosh Hashanah or sipping hot chocolate under the stars in the Sukkah.

Before you begin, ground your group by taking collective breaths or listening to contemplative music together.

You can choose to think about the prompts in community, with your partner, or on your own. We encourage you to adapt the guide to help provide meaning to you and your community. *There's no wrong way to participate.*

Part 1: Ground Yourself - On Your Own

The first sound of the shofar, known as *tekiah* (pronounced tu-key-ah), meaning "blast," is a single, resonant note that serves as an initial wake-up call. This powerful sound is intended to jolt us from our everyday routines, remind us of our purpose, and help ground us as we prepare for the year ahead.

Take a moment on your own to reflect on or journal an answer to this question:

1. What event or experience this year made you feel most awake? Share a positive new experience or something you found inspiring this year.

Part 2: Brokenness - In Small Groups (2-3 people, not your partner)

The second sound, called *shevarim* (pronounced sh-va-reem), consists of a series of three blasts and translates to "broken." These fragmented tones reflect the brokenness and pain in the world around us. This year, the *shevarim* blasts resonate with particular significance, underscoring the deep fractures we are experiencing.

In your small groups, answer these questions. Go one question at a time:

1. Share a story of a time this year that your world has felt broken.
2. After everyone has shared, do you notice any themes or trends your stories have in common? What are the differences?

Part 3: Leaning on Others - With Your Partner

The third sound, called *teruah* (pronounced true-ah), consists of nine rapid, staccato blasts and means "cry." This urgent, piercing cry represents a plea for help and a call for a better future. It provides us with a moment to reflect on what we need and aspire to in the year ahead.

Sit with your partner, discuss these questions:

1. What is one current challenge for you and for your family?
2. How can you and your partner work together to support each other through this challenge?

Part 4: The Year Ahead - As a Whole Group

The final sound of the shofar is *tekiah gedolah* pronounced (tu-key-ah guh-dole-ah), a single, extended blast that means "the great blast." This enduring tone is meant to carry us into the new year with a sense of hope and collective direction. It serves as a reminder that we're not alone on this journey; we have our partners, families, and communities to support us in achieving the future we envision together.

In our small groups and with our partners, we have reflected on the past year and the year ahead. We discussed the brokenness we observe in our world and in our lives, shared our personal cries for help, and considered how we can support each other in overcoming these challenges. Now is the time to think about how our entire group and community can unite to address and mend the brokenness within our control.

1. Who is bringing you hope this year? What person or movement are you hoping brings a "great blast" in the year ahead?
2. What small or everyday things have a big impact on your feelings of hope and joy right now?

This year has been incredibly difficult and challenging for so many of us. Let's end together with some words of hope. When we offer a toast in Hebrew, we say the word, *l'chaim* (pronounced l-chai-im), meaning "to life." It's a hopeful phrase. Now that each of us has shared what is bringing us hope in the year ahead, let's offer a toast and say "*l'chaim*" together. Let this new year be full of life and hope for us and for the whole world.