

ELEMENTS OF JEWISH MEDITATION

Introduction

Jewish meditation is an ancient tradition that elevates Jewish thought, inspires Jewish practice, and deepens Jewish prayer. In its initial stages, Jewish meditation is a way to become more focused and aware. It enables the meditator to free the mind of all judgments, fears, doubts, and limiting ideas so that the voice of the soul is heard. With practice, the experience can be transformational, opening us to experience the Divine Presence during prayer, helping us discover deeper meaning in our lives, and connecting us spiritually to Jewish tradition. Jewish meditation can ultimately lead us to understand the true essence of Y-H-V-H through the practice of deeds of loving kindness and joyful compassion. Through meditation we can become attentive to the Divine imprint on our lives.

I hope that Jewish meditation will become your practice for the rest of your life. It takes time to develop and refine a meditation practice. In this process it is useful to have a spiritual partner with whom you can explore the wondrous moments and the difficult ones. It is also important to keep a journal, where you write your thoughts down after each meditation and share them with your spiritual partner. Over the years Jewish meditation can lead to great spiritual transformation.

What is Jewish Meditation?

Jewish meditation is based in Jewish mysticism, a tradition present throughout Jewish history with strong ties to traditional Judaism. Jewish mysticism seeks to answer basic questions of life, such as the nature of God, the meaning of creation, and the existence of good and evil. It is also a pathway to an intense connection with the Divine. Kabbalah means *to receive* in Hebrew. It refers to the mystical tradition within Judaism that began in the twelfth century and continues today. Kabbalah is a collection of many teachings about the structure and nature of reality. Its practice is directed toward union with God.

The purpose of Jewish meditation is to increase an individual's understanding of and experience of the Divine. We generally assume there is a chasm separating us from God. Though we may pray to God and hope that our petitions are heard, God often seems remote—transcendent. Meditation is a bridge that enables us to approach the Ultimate.

How Does Jewish Meditation Compare to Other Kinds of Meditation?

All types of meditation direct the meditator to let go of everyday concerns and open the mind to spiritual experience. All are a means of self-refinement, of dissolving ego defenses and becoming aware of who we are. Meditation strengthens our positive qualities and helps us reveal our soul.

In Jewish meditation, unlike some other traditions, meditation brings the meditator closer to God and involves the meditator in making the world better (*tikkun olam*). Jewish meditation uses images, Hebrew words or letters, and symbols that come from the Jewish tradition. It takes place in a prescribed time (in other words, it has a beginning and an end). Jewish meditation can be distinguished from other meditative traditions by its content.

How Does Meditation Bring About Personal Change?

One of the ways Jewish meditation brings about change is by teaching concentration. During meditation the mind is trained to remain focused. Another change that comes with meditation is increased awareness. Increased awareness leads to greater knowledge of the self and others. Taking time to explore the broken places within ourselves can lead to healing. Awareness also helps us be present in our relationships at home and at work. We are able to negotiate difficulties that arise with greater honesty.

Meditation helps us to become less attached to our thoughts. We can see our thoughts come and go, and we realize that they are not permanent.

As we learn to concentrate, our experience of the spiritual realm will deepen. If we focus on the name of God, our mind will be drawn in a spiritual direction at least part of the time. Then we will experience the spiritual more fully. Meditation gives a heightened spiritual dimension to life. We become more aware of our environment, seeing its beauty. All of life is more vivid and real. Even if we connect only a moment with the Divine, in whatever way that is experienced, we cannot help but be affected.

Where is God in Meditation?

Kabbalistic mystics had an understanding of God that was broader than the Torah image. God is both feminine and masculine. The world is seen as ever changing, radiant, and reflective of God. All life contains a spark of holiness. The greatest concern of the mystics was drawing closer to God, known as *devekut*, cleaving to the Divine.

Kavanah is holy intention and refers to being in a ready, directed state when we meditate or pray. The tradition understands that a relationship exists between the intention of the seeker and the spiritual experience that follows. We recognize the importance of kavanah and strive to meditate with a pure intention, one that is not clouded by ulterior motives such as impressing other people or proving something to ourselves. We have to diminish such thoughts and feelings before our kavanah can be strong and move us toward *devekut*.

The concept of *hitbodedut* refers to the act of drawing into the self or self-isolation. The understanding of *hitbodedut* is expanded within Jewish mysticism to include emotional and psychic distance from our daily lives. Jewish mysticism goes even further, saying that through meditation we isolate our soul, or essence, from the rest of our being. As our internal chatter quiets down, we move to greater spiritual realms. We exist in those moments as soul rather than self. Our awareness of daily concerns and our ego distractions are not present. This state of internal isolation is *hitbodedut*.

Through meditation we sometimes experience ourselves as part of the Divine Whole. We no longer are single beings: The all-important *I* has temporarily disappeared. At these times we are in a state of *teshuvah* or return to our essential nature. We are one with God. Boundaries do not exist. In this state of consciousness we experience a great healing. Like other mind states, *teshuvah* does not last. But we are deeply affected by the experience of our holiness and the holiness of all life during our moments in this state. This leads us to see our everyday routines through a different lens; one that is more God-centered.

What Are Some Forms of Meditation?

Focused Meditation

In focused meditation the meditator concentrates on a single point. This can be the breath, a word or phrase, a Jewish symbol, or a sound. We begin this type of meditation by bringing our attention to a single point. If the meditation specifies a Hebrew word, we might repeat it silently, or visualize the letters, or experience the meaning of the word.

After settling into the meditation our minds begin to wander. One thought leads to another until we notice what we are doing. Then we gently bring our attention back to the focus, and the process begins all over again. We are encouraged to simply notice without judgment what we are thinking when our minds wander. In Hasidic tradition every thought is considered to contain a spark of Divinity even if it is negative.

Focused meditation benefits us in several ways. Thirty minutes of meditation on *chesed*, or Divine loving kindness, will radiate through the rest of the day, even if our minds refuse to stay fixed on chesed most of the time while we meditate. Sometimes we experience an open space around the single point on which we are focusing. In this space we may become deeply connected to God, in a state of *devekut*. Or we may become one with the Holy, so that the separate self dissolves into a state of non-duality. This experience can be transitory, but it can be profound. Focused meditations are the backbone of meditation.

Emptiness Meditation

In emptiness meditation we seek to empty the mind of all thought. We do this by quieting the mental processes so that we enter into a deep state of not-thinking. It's impossible to remain in this state long, but we find spaciousness between thoughts and experience moments when our minds are still. Over time we learn to prolong these moments so that we become familiar with the state of nothingness, or *ayin* as it is called in Hebrew.

We can begin to still the mind by focusing on the breath. As thought drops away we simply exit in a state of nothingness. The mind begins to chatter, and we are propelled back to the world of thought. But the moments of nothingness bring on a feeling of renewal and interconnectedness. Emptiness meditation should only be done after experience with focused meditation.

What About Chanting and Singing?

Within the Jewish tradition, other possibilities for meditation exist, such as chanting sacred phrases and words and singing *niggunim*, wordless melodies. Chanting is primarily a meditative process which requires an inward focus. As with any type of meditation, at some point you simply surrender to the power of the chant, and the sense of transformation that is moving through you. Repetition becomes a way of stilling the mind and opening the heart. Chanting for a few minutes before meditation will support a more contemplative state. The silence is even more powerful after singing together. Nothing takes the place of sitting silently and learning to guide your mind to the vast territory within.

Where Does Prayer Fit In?

Prayer and meditation are similar in that they can be done alone or with others. Both prayer and meditation appear to be directed toward a connection with God. In prayer, the intention is to communicate directly with the Divine. We are actively reaching out, whether it be through words of praise, or blessing,

or thankfulness. We voice what is in our hearts, and God is felt to be listening. In our prayer book (Siddur) there is a prescribed order of fixed prayers and a small amount of time set aside for personal prayer. Our task is to align ourselves with the words of the service and infuse them with meaning so that we are not mechanically repeating them but praying with deep sincerity and pure intention.

What About the Breath?

The breath is used as a focusing point. It is central to Jewish meditation, helping meditators settle into a quiet state. At the beginning of a meditation, we take several deep breaths and make a sound with each exhalation. The sound can be as soft as a whisper or a sigh. After breathing this way several times, we resume ordinary breathing. By paying attention only to the breadth, we feel a quietness begin to descend over us. Within a minute or two we will be ready to move into a longer core meditation. The breath acts as a bridge between everyday life and meditation.

In addition, there are special mystical qualities of the breadth. In Genesis, God breathed into *ha-adam*, the first human on earth, and made *ha-adam* a living being. The most intimate of acts, the transfer of Divine breath to the human, is interpreted to mean that all life is dependent on the breath of the Divine.

The word for breath in Hebrew is *neshimah* is related to one of the words for soul, *neshamah*. Thus, the breath and the soul are seen in Judaism as closely related, both gifts coming from God. The breath contains the soul-energy, and the soul like the breath, filling us and then returning to the Source.

In the morning prayer service, one of the prayers says: *Nishmat kol chai, y'varech et-shimcha, Adonai Eloheinu*, "Let the breath of all life bless God." This prayer expresses the holiness of our breath. Not only do we receive our breath from the Divine, but we also contribute to the blessing of God through our breath/soul and our holy work in the world.