

Sh'ma Yisrael, Notice Israel:
Jewish Mindfulness Meditation & The
Reform Rabbinate

*Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for ordination*

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of
Religion

2019

Primary Referee, Professor Julie Schwartz
Secondary Referee, Professor Mark Washofsky

Table of Contents

Abstract: This thesis is an investigation of mindfulness meditation in contemporary Reform Jewish life. It asks the questions: What is the story of contemporary Jewish mindfulness meditation, especially in the Reform movement? How and why do Reform rabbis practice mindfulness meditation and what lessons come from their personal stories? What are the tensions, opportunities and best practices of a process of enculturation? After exploring these questions through personal story and history, a final chapter frames the question in terms of Jewish legal norms and *halacha*.

Introduction	2
Situating Jewish Mindfulness in America	5
Reform Rabbis' Motivations for Practicing Mindfulness Meditation	23
Challenges and Tensions	37
Integration and Best Practices	59
A Reform Halachic Approach to Mindfulness Meditation in Judaism	79
Conclusion	98
Acknowledgements	100
Works Cited	101

Introduction

Picture it. The worshippers arrive in sweatpants and running shoes, with slim rubber mats rolled up under their arms. After rolling out their mats, they take off their shoes and lay on the floor. A leader, herself barefoot and clothed in sweats and a tank top, sets the intention of using the next hour to focus on gratitude. Jewish texts on gratitude are shared, explained, and connected to the upcoming holiday of Thanksgiving. The teacher walks participants through various stretches and postures. People sweat and exhale loudly. Some do their own thing, stretching in ways that suit their bodies' needs. The session concludes with communal deep breathing and chanting of the word 'Shalom'. This is 'Mussar Yoga.' This is Shabbat morning at a mainstream Reform synagogue. It is not the only service in the building that morning and there was a dynamic Torah study a few hours earlier. However, for the 15 people in attendance at Mussar Yoga, it is their only observance of Shabbat and many wouldn't be at the synagogue otherwise.

The lay leader who taught the class explains her journey. Long ago she'd rejected Judaism, feeling it was stiff, irrelevant and too much head over heart. She drifted towards yoga practice, eventually becoming a yoga teacher with advanced credentials. She appreciated the way it opened her heart, improved her as a person and prompted deep introspection. But one day, a friend told her that Judaism had its own process of this. The friend introduced her to Alan Morinis and *Mussar*. She read avidly, partnered with a chevruta for regular study and eventually attended a conference to train as a *Mussar* yoga teacher. She is now teaching this class at her large, classically Reform suburban synagogue. Her way back to Judaism was roundabout and she picked up new tools along the way, not leaving them behind when she arrived. When asked

about this borrowing she paused and said, “you know, I don’t think of it as borrowing. Instead, I experienced this new way of being, and this stuff from the outside world prompted me to seek it out in my own background and my own culture. And it was there, in my own religion, in Judaism.”¹

This experience of this congregant is the story of one person’s journey to a mindfulness practice, it was rooted in movement and yoga. Contained within this thesis are the stories of many others, all rabbis trained in the Reform movement of Judaism. Not as many of them traveled as far afield as did this congregant on her journey, but all practice mindfulness meditation personally and bring it into their work as spiritual leaders. In this thesis I will answer the questions of how and why Reform rabbis themselves have incorporated mindfulness meditation into their lives, discuss the ethical, *halachic* and social tensions that this phenomenon presents, and define an appropriate Reform Jewish response.

I will first explore the history of mindfulness meditation and those reasons that have contributed to its enthusiastic adoption by individuals from diverse religious backgrounds as well and from the perspective of scientific research. Next I will examine the motivations of those rabbis who have chosen to not only accept mindfulness meditation groups as being of value but have also become its leaders and advocates within Reform Judaism. What questions are raised when rabbis bring this practice, once proscribed from Jewish environs, into the sacred space of the sanctuary? I will present and assess the rabbinic and halachic texts which discuss the Jewish sensibilities that are challenged by the appropriation of this practice into Judaism and into Jewish

¹ Anonymous, Personal Interview. November 24th, 2018.

spaces. At the conclusion of this thesis, I will offer my contribution to the responsa literature. I will seek to answer, based on the traditional texts of Judaism and in the spirit of Reform Judaism the question which is central to responding to the phenomenon of Jewish mindfulness meditation groups: What is the proper place of the ancient and now modern discipline of mindfulness meditation for one who wishes to live honestly and authentically within Reform Jewish practice?

My mind recalls the statement made by Israel Jacobson, a lay leader himself, who was a founder of one of the first reform synagogues in Seesen, Germany. In his speech at the opening of the synagogue he stated, “On all sides enlightenment opens up new areas for religious development. Why should we Jews be left behind?”² This is the same story, though Jacobson and his contemporaries were clothed in robes and not leggings, and nourished by the sounds of the organ instead of deep breathing.

Sh'ma yisrael. Listen, Israel. What is happening in the lives of rabbis, congregants and the community of humans that inspires the trend of mindfulness meditation? Notice, Israel. What tensions and openings does this Jewish embrace of mindfulness meditation create? Bring into awareness, Israel. What does Jewish wisdom from the past and present demand that rabbis bring into awareness as they navigate these needs, these tensions and these opportunities?

² <https://reformjudaism.org/history-reform-judaism-and-look-ahead-search-belonging>

Chapter 1: Situating Jewish Mindfulness in America

Jewish Meditation in the Pre-Modern Period

Sacred Texts

In order to understand the modern phenomenon of mindfulness meditation amongst American Jews and their leaders, it is helpful to have an understanding of meditative practice in Judaism historically. Numerous books can provide a comprehensive interdisciplinary exploration of the history of Jewish meditation practice, touching on theology, ritual, textual analysis. This will provide a basic orientation for understanding the diversity of approaches to Jewish contemplative practice, some of the historical roots of these practices and how they have changed over time.

At a basic level, the Torah portrays characters who take time for solitude and contemplation. In certain instances this is quite literal, with characters journeying out into the fields for reflection or praying literal words to God. In other cases, interpreters read certain scenes in the text as symbolic of a spiritual seeking or meditative experience. Some examples include Jacob's wrestling with a man on the eve of facing his own brother Esau, and Moses' vision of the burning bush and ensuing encounter with God there. Medieval commentator Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (d. 1167) interprets Abraham's visions of men visiting him after his circumcision as an act of the patriarch's divinely inspired mind, rather than a scene of realistic encounter.³

³ ibn Ezra, Rabbi Abraham. Commentary on Vayera, Chapter 18 (12th century)

Older texts such as the Psalms invoke the importance of silence. Psalm 23, for example, could be considered a sort of guided meditation to encourage equanimity in the face of mortality. What do we know about the early spiritual life of Jews and practices of meditation outside of text?

Post-Biblical Spirituality

Scholar Mark Verman's history of Jewish meditation sheds light on disparate Jewish groups who inherited this textual tradition of meditation, and visualization, creating communities of spiritual practice as early as the period of the Maccabees in the 2nd century BCE. The *Hasidim Rishonim*, who are referred to in the Book of Maccabees and the Talmud⁴, are described as an extremely pious group who practiced self restraint and prayed for as much as 9 hours a day.⁵ The *Therapeutae*, based in Alexandria, Egypt were an altogether different group documented by Philo around the beginning of the common era. Philo described them as 'therapists of the spirit' whose practice consisted of six days a week of solitude in search of spiritual healing. They spent this time chanting and studying, in isolation. As Verman tells it, their purpose was to fulfil the biblical directive to be "continuously mindful of God." It is telling that Verman uses the term 'mindful' to describe the spiritual goals of the group.⁶ The mindfulness was not theologically neutral, however. The groups were intentionally focused on increasing awareness of the deity, and its immanence. The practices of the *Therapeutae* acknowledged a connection between personal health and this divine awareness.

⁴ Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nezikin, Tractate Sanhedrin 10b and Seder Zeraim and Tractate Berachot v.1

⁵ Verman, M. (1996). *The History and Varieties of Jewish Meditation*. 1st ed. Jason Aronson, p.p. 8.

⁶ Ibid, p.10

These diverse groups demonstrated the ways in which Jewish text and traditions catalyzed spiritual practice amongst individuals and groups in the earliest stages. These post biblical but pre-rabbinic groups challenge the assumption that religious life was centralized and only sacrificially based in the times before the Rabbinic revolution. Systems of practice were not limited to the temple cult and sacrificial systems.

Rabbinic Revolution

The destruction of the 2nd Temple and the influence of the rabbis nourished a centralization of prayer practice and *mitzvot*, which evolved into what we know of as '*halacha*.' However, the editors of the Talmud still include spiritual practices outside of the proscribed *halachic* system. This diversity of practices reflects an openness to personalization of practice despite our impression of emergent halacha is proscribed and strict. The rabbinic texts are in fact a primary source for the practices of spiritual groups of earlier times, such as the *Hechalot* mystics of 2nd century BCE who meditated fervently on the vivid visions of the divine found in Ezekiel. Certain scholars believe that the *Hechalot* mystics were actually co-existent with the rabbis, and not a more ancient group.⁷ The diversity of practices in the rabbinic period are described as well, with Rabbis Akiva and Ishmael mentioned in relation to fasting and mind-focusing practices. One Talmud text describes an embodied practice encouraged by the rabbis. One should "place his head between his knees until the fast has conquered him, then he shall whisper to the earth and not heaven, for the earth shall hear him but not the heaven."⁸ The description of this practice is curious. The fast is a preparation for the practice of speaking to 'earth'. The individual fasts to be

⁷ Ibid, p.10

⁸ Ibid, p. 12-16

‘conquered’, to feel a state of powerlessness and humility, embodied by the placement of the head between the knees. Even in this moment of realizing a lack of personal power and submission to something greater, the person is to direct their quiet words to the material rather than the divine world. This contradictory act demonstrates the complexity of Jewish meditation practice. While one is to negate the power of the self, the present world one occupies is the target of those focused moments. While this particular text reflects complexity, many of the pietistic practices of isolation and fasting aimed to increase awareness of God alone. The question of the relationship between Jewish meditation and theological belief is complex and multifaceted from its deepest roots.

That said, these contradictory approaches demonstrate the lack of unifying approach to spiritual practice. The rabbis attempted to respond to this diversity by fixing a legal system that touched every aspect of life. The rabbis made it their own spiritual practice to proscribe laws governing everything from marital relations, to dietary habits and business relationships. The *halacha* had political, socio-cultural and spiritual aims. Through the more modern concept of spirituality, one can see the way in which a set path of daily religious practice provided something of a system of daily focus and awareness of action and intention, layered onto everything from going to the bathroom, to sex to eating. The permeation of religious law into daily life reinforced a sense of God’s immanence and, created a constant reminder of the sacred and holy nature of life. That these spiritual practices impacted a person’s relationship with the rest of the world and not only their relationship with God, provided a sense that one’s spiritual responsibilities included the obligation to live in a just and moral manner. The fixed nature of the law held communities of

practice together, requiring mutual dependence. Interactions with others were limited to those following the same path (*halacha*) of daily life, the same system of law.

Despite this fixed law, Jewish meditation was not canonized or centralized during the rabbinic period. Verman contrasts this to eastern religions when he writes, “unlike in some eastern religions, there has not been regulated meditation in Judaism - rather, individuals and small groups developed an array of spiritual exercises.”⁹ From this, he concludes that it is futile to try and characterize ‘Jewish meditation,’ other than to say it is enduringly flexible and open ended.

Jewish Spiritual Practice of the Middle Ages

While historically Jewish law maintained its dominance as the ‘path’ of Jewish practice throughout the pre-modern period, over time various Jewish groups focused on mysticism and meditation in response to legal formalism within Judaism and rationalism in the broader world of which they were a part.

This process of productive tension implies that the evolution of Jewish *law* has an intimate relationship with the evolution of Jewish spirituality, mysticism and meditation. The law potentially privileges the importance of external ‘actions’ over the internal world of an individual, but it also provides an embodied practice permeating life. At the same time, numerous groups over time have advocated meaning, intention and heart rather than ‘mindless’ repetition of tasks, or fulfillment of obligations without internal spiritual transformation. Others

⁹ Ibid

objected to the potential for the *halachic* process to overtake the intellectual, the philosophical, and the spiritual aims of the Jewish people. In just this fashion, a progenitor to the later stages of meditative practice was Moses Maimonides (Rambam). Rambam was a legalist who wrote the definitive *halachic* text, the *Mishneh Torah*. His aim in doing so was to fix the law in order to minimize excessive legal discourse.

He professed an appreciation for focused concentration and awareness that could only come from sitting still and just being. He made this point in his canonical legal text the *Mishneh Torah* writing, “the biblical prophets did not prophesize whenever they wanted. Rather they directed their minds and sat joyfully and contentedly in a state of self-isolation- for prophecy does not occur in sadness or lassitude but only in joyousness.”¹⁰ In his book *The Guide For the Perplexed* he elaborated on what it looks like to integrate this ‘directed mind’ into a non-aesthetic lifestyle:

Cause your soul whenever you read or listen to the Torah, to be constantly directed -- the whole of you and your thought -- toward reflection on what you are listening to or reading.

Cause your soul to be in such a way that your thought is always quite free of distraction and gives heed to all that you are reading of the other discourses of the prophets and even when you read all the benedictions, so that you aim at meditating on what you are uttering and at considering its meaning. If, however, while performing these acts of worship, you are free from distraction and not engaged in thinking upon any of the things pertaining to this world, cause your soul -- after this has been achieved -- to occupy your thought with things necessary for you or superfluous in your life, and in general with worldly things, while you eat or drink or bathe or talk with your wife and your small children, or while you talk with the common run of people. Thus I have provided you with many and long stretches of time in which you can think all that needs thinking regarding property, the governance of the household, and the welfare of the body. On the other hand, while performing the actions imposed by the Law, you should occupy your thought only with what you are doing, just as we have explained.

When, however, you are alone with yourself and no one else is there and while you be awake upon your bed, you should take great care during these precious times not to set your thought to work on anything other than that intellectual worship consisting in nearness to God and being in His presence in that true reality that I have made known to you and not by way of

¹⁰ Maimonides, M. (1470). *Mishneh Torah*. Roma. Yesodei HaTorah, 7:4

*affections of the imagination. In my opinion this end can be achieved by those of the men of knowledge who have rendered their souls worthy of it by training of this kind.*¹¹

What Maimonides describes is a practice, building muscles of intellectual focus and concentration over time. He applies this practiced focus not only to holy acts of Torah study, and prayer, but also to household tasks, social business and family relationships. In modern language, he directs his reader to practice being present, in the moment and free of things that might distract from that present moment. By saying, “I have provided you with many and long stretches of time in which you can think all that needs thinking,” he acknowledges the necessity of time to just be, so that each moment can live itself fully, with heart and body aligned. He advocated for using any ‘precious’ idle time to focus intently on the presence of God, in a state of mindful awareness of the divine. This is an extra-halachic way of approaching life that should permeate those things governed by *halacha* and the moments seemingly outside of it.

Evolving around the same time and after Maimonides, were the Kabbalists of 12th-15th century Spain and France. Their esoteric philosophy and practices emphasized the repair - *tikkun*- of the soul for the sake of the repair of the world, *tikkun ha'olam*. They created their own literature (the Zohar) while maintaining active participation in ever-evolving *halachic* practice. Uniquely, a within a subset of the kabbalists, Abraham Abulafia (b.1240, Spain) advocated intense meditation as the primary manner of accessing the divine. He is known as the father of Prophetic Kabbalah.

¹¹ Maimonides, M. in M.Friedlander. (1903). *The Guide for the perplexed*. Part 3, Chapter 51

Abulafia took Maimonides' recommendations to the extreme and created a kabbalistic meditative practice. The goal was to "rejoice in your lot and know that God loves you."¹² To bring about this affect, a person was to wear tefillin, clean white clothes and sit alone in a candlelit room, slowly and repeatedly scribing Hebrew letters. Abulafia also prescribed the thoughts one should have in the process of sitting; focusing on God's name, hearing the internal dialogue with God and focusing on it with the same intensity one might approach a 'scientific problem.' Abulafia demonstrates an appreciation for the spiritual power of traditional halachic ritual (*tefilin*), and text (Hebrew letters), but focuses as much on mental awareness as physical acts. The physical acts are a means to a spiritual end. He also shows how the mystics were in conversation with the growing world of scientific rationalism around them; one could apply one's intellect to spiritual pursuits and pursue intellectual transformation of a non-scientific but equally valid sort.¹³ Abulafia advocated a practice of listening to the internal world which emanated from the spirit.

From this place of listening and experiencing God, Kabbalistic meditation sought a *tikkun*, a repair of the brokenness that begins within the individual but emanates outward to spiritually repair the entire world, ideally ushering in a messianic era. The practitioner is attempting to override the brokenness, the feeling of de-attachment, and loneliness in order to form an attachment with God. The incorporation of breathing exercises in meditation emphasized this exchange of inner and outer worlds.

¹²www2.trincoll.edu. (n.d.). *Moses Maimonides & Abulafia*. [online] Available at: http://www2.trincoll.edu/~kiener/RELG208_Rmbm_Abulafia.htm [Accessed Jul. 2018].

¹³ Ibid

Jewish Meditation and the Birth of Modernity

Hasidism

The mystical schools of the early middle ages were self-limiting because of their elitism.

However, they planted the seeds for the 17th-18th century Hasidic drive against rationalism and legal formalism. As Abulafia was responding to the encroachment of rationalism in his time so too were the Hasidim in theirs. With their pietistic approach, they responded to the over-intellectualization of Jewish law by privileging intense emotion, and faith. Instigated by the Baal Shem Tov in Poland, Hasidism itself was and is not monolithic, and has catalyzed different streams of practice and thought. Yet the core of Hasidism is that God is omnipresent and by focusing on God's ever-present existence through pious practice one can achieve a state of joy and contentment. This state is itself a manifestation of God and can change the spiritual state of others. In contrast to Kabbalah which required great learning for spiritual access, Hasidism was a popular revolution. Hasidism brought mystical Jewish practice into popular life, contending with everyone from intellectual *halachists* to proponents of the *haskalah* (enlightenment) for the mainstage in the Jewish heart.

Hasidism responded to pressures on two fronts. On the one side, Hasidism responded to intellectualized Rabbinic Judaism, which devalued emotion and spirituality. From the other side, they responded to rational, Enlightenment thinking that contended that there were many other essential realities besides the existence of God on which to focus. While Hasidism formulated its approach to these pressures, others were responding to these paradigm shifts in different ways.

This includes the many varied thinkers and leaders who ushered in the Reform movement and sought to adapt Judaism to its historical context rather than attempting to counter it. This meant a revolutionary approach to the full range of Jewish life referenced here so far - textual interpretation, halacha, and spiritual practice.

Reform Judaism

Counterintuitively, Hasidism, and other mystical innovators¹⁴ innovated Judaism and paved the way for Reform's very different set of innovations.

Other religious reformations paved the way for the concept of personal access to the divine, challenging the authority of religious clergy to mediate this experience for others. This broader cultural change in addition to other advancements in science and thought, paved the way for Jews to uphold the individual's freedom and authority with regard to both belief and practice. In some ways, as we've seen in the preceding history, the individual's ability to mediate her own divine experience has been a facet of Jewish meditative practices since biblical times. Reformers continued in this tradition and de-emphasized the divine authority of *halacha* and put the individual in the driver's seat of his or her own religious destiny. As Jews gained national citizenship, they no longer traced their identity only through religion. Rabbinic leaders and lay leaders alike worked together to make sure that Jewish experiences of all kinds were *personally* meaningful, since divine obligation no longer had currency. European reform navigated many internal and external politics, but broadly speaking emphasized the integration of personal

¹⁴ Scholem, G. (1975). *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah 1626-1676*. 2nd ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton.

meaning, preservation of Jewish culture through change and relevance of style and content in religious experience.

Life in America

Reform Judaism in America

Reform Judaism in America met with local religious conditions and uniquely American values. Democracy and pragmatism led to the further evolution of Reform in America, and a continued adaptation to time and place. In Charleston for example, lay leaders demanded that the service be shortened.¹⁵ They did so not to rush through or de-value the liturgy, but in order to make it more meaningful and hold the attendees' 'attention.' The idea of preserving 'attention' harkens back to Maimonides himself, who encouraged acts done with focused concentration and awareness of their meaning - a form of attention all its own. In this way, while American reformers made certain breaks with Jewish tradition, they did so with a mind towards preservation of the rituals and lifeway as a whole. American Jewish Reformers continued to integrate European ideas with local cultural practices and American values as a whole.

While setting aside much nuance, this history has traced mindfulness meditation from biblical times to the birth pangs of modernity. From literary characters going into solitude for contemplation and commune with God, to more sophisticated systems of thought and practice that advocate the same for the sake of personal and communal renewal. The goal of this history has been to set the stage for a more specific set of questions. Mysticism and meditation in

¹⁵ Petition of Adjunta of K.K. Beth Elohim, Charleston, S.C. (1824)

Judaism have historically been responses to rationalism and legal formalism. Those who do participate in such activities were historically considered the most pious (in the plain meaning of the word Hasidism) or the most learned and spiritually adept (*kabbalah*). So how do we arrive at our current context, where mindfulness meditation is likely to be practiced by pious and disengaged Jews alike, led by rabbis of all stripes, some who ascribe to halachic rigidity, some who rejected it entirely? Some who believe in God and some who do not?

The answer emerges from three primary phenomena: 1. the American enculturation of religion; 2. the American enculturation of Buddhism; and 3. the interconnected relationship of psychology and religion in America.

Religion in America: Asia, Psychology and More

In terms of the American enculturation of religion, America has been a country of seekers. The transcendentalists were an early example of this. American transcendentalism emphasized personal meaning through whatever means were available, transcending religious and cultural boundaries. As Jon Kabat Zinn writes of transcendentalists, “there was a willingness to use whatever comes to hand - from whatever culture or tradition suggests itself or is available - to understand what is happening in the here and now. This reflects a perennial American pragmatism, which endures today in much of the discourse of the mindfulness based interventions.”¹⁶ For Kabat-Zinn, a popularizer of mindfulness in general, the American transcendentalists were a turning point in American religion that led to our current integration of

¹⁶ Kabat-Zinn, Jon. Introduction in McCown, D., Micozzi, M. and Reibel, D. (2011). *Teaching mindfulness*. New York: Springer. p.36

mindfulness across religious lines.¹⁷ The pragmatism and openness of the transcendentalists led to greater exploration of Asian religions in general.

The American encounter with Buddhism continued as more Americans went East, whether as soldiers sent to Japan in WWII or on recreational tours. In the 1960s, American laws limiting immigration from Asian countries were repealed and more Asians came to America, bringing Buddhism with them. At the same time, Americans (and many Jews among them) traveled to Asia as seekers and travelers. They learned with Buddhists teachers and transported the teachings back to America with them.

At the same time, American religious pragmatists sought meaning and insight from psychology and other popular sources. Reform Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman's *Peace of Mind* (1946) wove together religious insight and psychotherapy to respond to the human suffering inherent in living life with its moments of loss, sadness and loneliness. He acknowledge the inevitability of these universal human emotions but also offered a path towards peace based through scientific reason and psychological treatment. Reverend Norman Vincent Peale wrote his still influential manifesto, *The Power of Positive Thinking* in 1952, making the case that intentional positive thinking can transform an individual's reality.

Pre-dating these popular trends, Mary Eddy's (d.1910) Christian Science taught that sickness and physical suffering are illusions that could be healed through focus faith in God. Very

¹⁷ Wilson, J. (2014). *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*. 1st ed. Oxford University Press.

controversially, Christian Science withheld medical treatment and substituted prayer and concentrated affirmations in order to vanquish the *perception* of physical illness. Christian Scientists believed the mind held the power to determine experience. Joshua Loth Liebman was Jewish himself, but no doubt Peale and Mary Eddy influenced American Judaism, just as it had always been influenced by the broader American culture. This shows up most prominently in the story of 'Jewish Science' founded by various Reform rabbis in the 1920s, including Rabbi Morris Lichtenstein, and sustained by his wife Tehilla Lichtenstein through the 1970s. Jewish Science was a response to Christian Science and aimed to syphon off the flow of Jews converting to Christian Science.

The Lichtensteins advocated positive affirmations and prayer as a path to healing and internal peace, and saw God as an inner strength and not necessarily a supernatural deity. Tehilla Lichtenstein drew hundreds of worshippers to her Sunday morning services and sermons, and the lessons of Jewish Science were even the topic of a CCAR conference in the 1940s.¹⁸ However, Morris Lichtenstein's death at a young age, among other factors, prevented it from having a larger influence on the Reform movement as a whole at that moment in history. However, the legacy of those who adapted religious trends from broader American culture is also present in the contemporary syncretism occurring between Buddhism, and Judaism.

¹⁸ Lichtenstein, Tehilla. Manuscript Collection of Tehilla Lichtenstein, American Jewish Archives. Cincinnati, Ohio

Americanization and Secularization of Buddhism

While Reform Judaism evolved in tandem with American religious culture in these ways, Buddhism with its path of ‘right thought’ and spiritual enlightenment, experienced its own Americanization and democratization. What had previously been the domain of a clerical elite became accessible to all, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. This occurred during the cultural revolution of the 1960s which held up embodied spiritual experience, and was a reaction against the materialism of the post-World War II period. Buddhist non-attachment fit into this anti-materialist revolution. At the same time, mainstream Jewish life was highly materialistic, leaning into suburban life and middle class consumption practices.

As a result, Jews were chief amongst those spiritual seekers looking towards Buddhism for what they had not found in conventional Jewish life. Michael Friedman in his chapter “From Burma to Brooklyn”, asserts that some of this journeying away from Judaism was a result of post-war Reform Judaism in particular. He lists a series of factors in making his case, “the inaccessibility of traditional Jewish supernatural God; a post-war focus on survival and practicality; leaders and teachers [who] have failed to provide a Jewish life with spiritual dimension.”¹⁹ Friedman claims that it was easier for Jews to turn towards Buddhism because it didn’t “make any demands,” like conversion or accepting a certain dogma. Alan Watts writes on this phenomenon, “the injunctions to relieve suffering and to live a more integrated creative life by paying attention to what is arising in the present moment and turning towards discomfort - mindfulness and

¹⁹ Friedman, Michael. “From Burma to Brooklyn and Back Again: How Mindfulness Captivated Jewish Spirituality” p. 310

acceptance - are easily located within the 3 Abrahamic religions, the ones closest to home, *but the encrustation of tradition and the carelessness of familiarity hide them quite well.*”²⁰

Those Jews who turned towards Buddhism, together with progressive Buddhist teachers in America, founded a new form of meditation called *vipassana* or ‘insight’ meditation. Together they created Buddhist-inspired centers of meditation and study across the United States.

For Jews, this interaction with Buddhism progressed in three stages, according to Friedman. In the first stage Jews became Buddhist and renounced their Jewishness (Kornfeld, Goldstein, Salzberg).²¹ In the second stage they integrated their Jewish and Buddhist beliefs, retaining their Jewish identity and synthesizing the two parts of themselves (Sylvia Boorstein). According to Friedman, our present moment is the third stage, and consists of “Jews who repackage Buddhist wisdom as Jewish spirituality.”²²

Jews were not alone in this adaptation of Buddhism. Indigenous Buddhists like Thich Nhat Hanh and Americans like Jon Kabat Zinn catalyzed mindfulness as a movement in America. Kabat was the creator of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, which was key to the secularization and popularization of mindfulness. His intentional and comprehensive program of mindfulness has been incorporated into the discipline of psychotherapy, traditional medicine, the training of doctors, and the curricula of secular public and private schools alike.

²⁰ Watts, Alan quoted in Kabat-Zinn’s “Introduction” to *Teaching Mindfulness* (2011) p.48

²¹ Friedman, Michael. p.314

²²Ibid, p. 311

These adaptations of Buddhism for an American audience were one step towards what Jeff Wilson author of *Mindful America* calls the ‘secularization, commodification and medicalization’ of mindfulness in America.

Conclusion

In this cursory history we have traced Judaism’s own tradition of contemplative practice, from the biblical period to the kabbalistic thinkers to the Hasidic masters to Joshua Loth Liebman and Tehilla Lichtenstein. This history of spiritual practice has reacted to and worked in tandem with internal Jewish systems of *halacha* and legal formalism and outside forces of modernity. Buddhism evolved along its own path of enculturation into American life. The Americanization of both Judaism and Buddhism bring us to where we are today.

This modern context is one in which Reform Jewish leaders continue to evolve and adapt Judaism to the changes of American life and religion. Reform Judaism has a history of prioritizing head over heart, beauty and decorum over chaos, belief in one God as the one tenet of faith. This same Reform Judaism now actively engages with a spiritual discipline that is contemplative, emotional, heart-opening, honoring of messy suffering and potentially God-neutral. Judaism has remained nimble and adaptive over time, especially in the American context, making way for this transformation.

We now move to examine how this has personally evolved for those rabbis living the reality of this transition their work as communal leaders. What calls *them* towards mindfulness? What

challenges do they encounter? What questions does their experience raise about the future of mindfulness practice in a Jewish context?

Chapter 2: Reform Rabbis' Motivations for Practicing Mindfulness Meditation

Reform rabbis occupy a unique position in American life. They straddle worlds and roles: tradition and innovation, science and faith, authority and humble service. They are thoroughly modern while committed to ancient goods. At the same time, their stories are the stories of typical human beings living in America during a time of social change and disruption.

According to the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, a major engine for the proliferation of mindfulness meditation in Jewish life, more Reform rabbis participate in their programs than rabbis of any other Jewish denomination. The perception in the Jewish world of mindfulness meditation leaders and trainers interviewed for this project, is that Reform rabbis are *particularly* eager to immerse themselves in the practice of mindfulness from a Jewish perspective. One reason for this may relate to the history explored in Chapter 1; Reform Judaism has a history of openness to the broader culture and mindfulness is a popular trend in secular and religious life today.

This chapter will answer the question of how and why Reform rabbis are participating in this trend, drawing from the narratives and reflections of rabbis themselves. After extensive research and interviews with rabbis in the field, they reflect three main motivations: mindfulness is important for rabbis in their role as leaders, mindfulness is important for Jews and Judaism more broadly and mindfulness meditation is important for humanity in general.

Methodology

Participant Demographics

Interviews were conducted with 15 rabbis from across North America. Of these, there were eight women and eight men. Participants were generally seasoned leaders, going on their second or third decades in the field, with one participant in the field for less than ten years. One participant was ordained in the 1970s and has a unique generational perspective for that reason. In terms of seniority and professional roles, nine of these leaders are the senior or solo rabbi of their synagogue, three are associate rabbis or educators at large synagogues, and the remaining three either are currently or have recently been on the national staff of organizations that train Jewish clergy.

Interview Process

Interviews were conducted by phone and consisted of four basic questions, with additional follow-up as needed. Each interview asked about the individual's personal journey and engagement with mindfulness meditation, and their use of it in a professional setting.

Participants were also asked what helped or hindered the changes they sought to make, within themselves and others. Lastly, participants were asked about why they felt mindfulness had a place in the current Reform Jewish landscape. In the case of those who are not congregational rabbis themselves, but teach and train those who are, interview questions included information regarding their impressions and observations of participants in their programs or institutions.

Methodological Issues

The observations and experiences shared here are reflective of the small sample pool interviewed. Therefore, conclusions here are made on the basis of these participants alone and patterns or connections observed in the experiences are reflections of these specific participants. These conclusions are revealing and true, though they may not be the only truths to behold. I caution against generalizing or drawing conclusions about the entire Reform rabbinate, or even all Reform rabbis who practice meditation or incorporate mindfulness principles into their work. No doubt there are numerous perspectives and experiences not represented here. Hopefully these incongruities present their own opportunity for mindfulness - what is missing? How are these experiences different from those of others and what is the meaning of that? Any misrepresentations or inaccuracies are not a reflection of the participants interviewed, but instead reflect the fallibility of this writer. As with any information gathering wherein the research instrument is a human, there is bias involved. No doubt my questions and conclusions are influenced by my own perspective, and the way my interviewees and I co-constructed the knowledge in the interview process.

Rabbis' primary motivations for practicing mindfulness meditation fall into three general categories: to sustain themselves as rabbis, to sustain and deepen Jewish experience, and to care for and repair humanity.

Why Mindfulness for Rabbis in particular?

Personal Needs

In the weeks after September 11th, one associate rabbi was leading her congregation in the Shabbat liturgy, as she said the words, ‘we are thankful for our lives which are in your keeping and our souls which are in your hands.’ “I felt like a phony,” she says. She buried her feelings, letting them simmer for years until after the great recession of 2008 when financial difficulties hit home. This moment in the life of America, combined with the theological self-doubt she had nursed for years, nearly prompted her to leave the rabbinate. Not wanting to make such a big decision from a place of pain, she sought support in a program of clergy retreats rooted in mindfulness and meditation. At the first retreat, spent mostly in silence save for regular check-ins with a *chevruta* (partner), she recalls breaking down in tears, “in order to make it through my days, I’d built up a lot of internal walls. Through practice, they began to crumble.”²³

She is not alone. This story of mindfulness practice emerging out of personal crisis is a pattern in the lives of the rabbis whom I interviewed. From car accidents, to national tragedies, family losses to professional failures, many had a traumatic catalyst that propelled them on this journey. For them, the internal walls crumbled all at once requiring them to find a “space where I could be led and held,”²⁴ as one rabbi put it.

Not unlike their congregants, who in times of struggle, trauma and crisis, turn outward for comfort, guidance and connection, these rabbis too required support and tools to find their way through the darkness and uncertainty of their own lives. Why was mindfulness meditation their

²³ Anonymous. Personal Interview, August 20th, 2018

²⁴ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 13th, 2018

tool of choice? The answer is not simple, yet my research has uncovered some of possible reasons. The previous chapter articulated the increasing popularity of mindfulness meditation in American in general. This makes it an accessible tool for anyone including rabbis. In addition, one rabbi captures the tendency towards mindfulness meditation this way, pointing out that in moments of crisis, “it is easier to look outward rather than inward and meditation relieves that urge.”²⁵ Multiple rabbis echoed this frame, stating that the loneliness of the rabbinate requires one to develop personal tools for reflection and to look inward for strength and truth. As another stated it, mindfulness meditation helps her, “create an oasis, gain control and nurture our inner lives.”

These rabbis plant the seed of an idea; so much of the work of a rabbi is outward facing and reflective of others. The important and precious inner world of the rabbi can be overlooked. One rabbi took a different take, noting that she balances “recognizing I’m an introvert” with “figuring out the right amount of getting other people to help me. You can’t do self care by yourself.”²⁶ Rabbis oft-cited self-care as their reason for practicing mindfulness meditation. While some look inward and others seek external support, all spoke to the necessity of nurturing the self through meditation as a means to nurture community. One cited a specific example, “I noticed in my professional life when I got a phone call to a tragedy - I procrastinate. It is almost too painful to deal with. Practice (mindfulness meditation) has helped me see what I’m doing - that I’m avoiding something because it is painful.”²⁷

²⁵ Anonymous. Personal Interview, June 27th, 2018.

²⁶ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 17th, 2018

²⁷ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 10th, 2018.

Burn-out and Self-Care

The rabbis interviewed described a need for self care specific to the volume and nature of their work, as well as their own tendencies as human beings. The emotional weight of the rabbinate requires self awareness, and capacity for reflection to ensure that one is supportive and able to center the needs of congregants. One participant remarked, “I am a very cerebral person, this (meditation) side steps the thinking and gets straight to the emotions.” Another described very specifically the impact of mindfulness meditation on his ability to function as a rabbi, “it expands your capacity; you can hold more easily the pain of the congregation, the chaos and do it in a healing way. You can carry and let go, carry and let go.”²⁸ Another described mindfulness as a helpful tool for navigating the ups and downs of rabbinic life, “so many things in the rabbinate will grab you emotionally: tearful, frustrated, sad, happy, in one 24 hour period. When I’ve been engaged in practice, I negotiate the waves much better.”²⁹

Nonetheless, rabbis expressed concerns about the expectations of their work, which engender self doubt and burn-out by their very nature. Some felt this to an extreme degree and voiced being overwhelmed by the demands of their positions. This stress and feeling of inadequacy led them to mindfulness meditation as a resource.

Judgement and Self Doubt

²⁸ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 19th, 2018

²⁹ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 19th, 2018 (2)

“I felt self-doubt as a rabbi, as a parent and was looking for a healthy way to respond,³⁰” recalls one senior rabbi. Her feeling of self-doubt was echoed by additional participants, and highlights concerns particular to the congregational rabbinate.

As one participant responded, summarizing his experiences and those of rabbis he knows, “So much of being a rabbi or cantor is modeling, standing for, promoting, encouraging others. We often lose touch with our own experience and we even doubt the validity of our own experience. What is inspiring and what is debilitating or dishonorable? People go through great transformations when that happens.”³¹

As another voiced, “the rabbinate and cantorate are very public professions that carry with them and are intended with a lot of judgement.”³² In some cases, rabbis recall internalizing the judgement and questioning themselves. One remarked that the constant feedback loop gives one a “sense of ‘uh-oh’ I’m in trouble. Mindfulness allows one to experience oneself non-judgmentally and not internalize critique.” This practice of holding one’s own experience in non-judgement is referenced as essential training for those so often asked to hold others’ experiences in loving non-judgement. As one rabbinic leader in the field of mindfulness education remarked, “clergy don’t do themselves this *chesed* (love) often enough!”³³

Theological Uncertainty

³⁰ Anonymous. Personal Interview, June 27th, 2018.

³¹ Anonymous. Personal Interview, August 31st, 2018.

³² Anonymous. Personal Interview, August 31st, 2018.

³³ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 30th, 2018.

For some rabbis, it wasn't crisis that prompted their exploration of mindfulness meditation, but moments of prayer. These individuals often described themselves as 'contemplative,' 'seekers,' 'really open to different prayer experiences,' and 'always trying new things.' One rabbi recalled her challenges leading a classical Reform congregation when her own spiritual needs were met in much more contemplative settings. Only after sampling a yoga class with a friend did she realize what she was missing and that she needed a different context in which to connect with God, other than the one she facilitated for others at work. Eventually she found a way to bridge the gap, by studying Jewish meditation and Hasidic texts.

One rabbi ordained in the 1970s who has a long-time meditation practice spoke of the ways that his spiritual life and personal practice align with his work life, but expressed skepticism that most Reform rabbis have such an integrated experience. He remarked, "my work in the congregation and my personal practice are seamless. I wonder if Reform Rabbis are prayerful apart from their congregations?"³⁴ Indeed, many of the rabbis interviewed described phases of disconnection between their work nurturing the spiritual lives of others in the congregation and their own practice and belief, "many rabbis are broken spiritually, they don't know where they are spiritually."³⁵ One echoed this from personal experience, stating that for most of rabbinical school, "I was disconnected from my own spiritual journey and lived experience."³⁶ This experience was recalled by many. They remark that mindfulness meditation gave them the tools,

³⁴ Anonymous. Personal Interview, August 20th, 2018.

³⁵ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 10th, 2018

³⁶ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 13, 2018.

support and community they needed to sustain a healthy and creative life in the congregational world, and to continue being the people that they sought to be in the world and in their families.

Growing an Authentic Rabbinate

For some this practice of reconnecting to one's own truth and lived experience guided them towards an alternate path away from the congregational rabbinate. As one remarked, "congregational life was not a good fit for me and I was overwhelmed by it."³⁷ However, mindfulness meditation was the key to finding her best rabbinate. She remarked on the transformational power of her practice and the meditation community she built up around it, "it gave me clarity to realize how much the weight of the work I was doing was not what I was supposed to be doing." She now practices as an independent rabbi.

For the majority who stayed in congregational life, moments of deep personal transformation and reflection prompted a need for other spiritual outlets, changes within their rabbinate, and changes within themselves. As one rabbi put it, "I trust myself. I feel the spirit moving through me and guiding me. I can speak totally clearly and from my deepest core and what comes out is alive and real."³⁸ For her, an intensive engagement with mindfulness meditation vanquished the self-doubt and liberated her as a rabbi.

³⁷ Anonymous. Personal Interview, August 29th, 2018

³⁸ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 13th, 2018

Despite the deeply personal nature of most rabbis' experience of mindfulness meditation, all emphasized the important role of mindfulness meditation in the lives of Jews as a community, beyond individual transformation.

Why mindfulness meditation for Jews and Judaism?

Renewal of Jewish Spiritual and Prayer Life

Many of the rabbis interviewed believe that contemporary Jewish prayer and Judaism in general are approached with an attitude of obligation and performativity by both leaders and participants alike. As one put it, “prayer isn’t working, it is broken; there’s someone at the front doing something and everyone else is only pretending that something important is going on.”³⁹ In their opinion, this limits the potential for transformation of the individual Jew or the community. They see mindfulness meditation as an avenue for their own spiritual liberation, which can in turn transform their leadership of Jewish prayer. Even if mindfulness meditation is not happening in the context of regular prayer services, rabbis interviewed believe that incorporating this approach into other areas of synagogue life and activities will renew Jewish prayer. But beyond that, a number of the rabbis interviewed see mindfulness meditation as important because of the history of Jewish pain and suffering in particular.

Navigating Pluralism and Internal Jewish Conflict

³⁹ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 20th, 2018.

For many of the rabbis interviewed, mindfulness meditation is not only a practice of nurturing the self, but is also a tool for cultural change within the Jewish community. They believe mindfulness meditation can help the Jewish people as a whole to navigate conflict, trauma and broader spiritual disconnect as a community. For example, they cite mindfulness as an asset as the Jewish community navigates its own internal conflict around charged flashpoint issues like Israel and intermarriage.

Dealing with Jewish Suffering

As one rabbi phrased it, “Jews are a traumatized people with lots of suffering and pain,” and mindfulness can bring that into awareness and provide a way to deal with it. This approach to mindfulness meditation as a way to respond to suffering shows the imprint of Buddhism on the present culture of Jewish meditation. The first of the four noble truths of the Buddha is the statement, “to live means to suffer.”⁴⁰

As explored in the previous chapter, Jewish meditation historically was a channel to encounter holiness and the divine, to leave the corporeal world with its pain and suffering and attach instead to the divine. Mindfulness meditation in the Buddhist tradition creates a frame of mind where the individual is still very much rooted in the reality of lived experience, with its suffering and pain, but is not crippled by it and achieves a state of non-attachment. In my understanding of these research participants’ approach to Jewish suffering and pain, the rabbis interviewed are influenced by the Buddhist approach. However, the influence is not linear and they explain that

⁴⁰ Zen-buddhism.net. (2019). *The Four Noble Truths | ZEN BUDDHISM*. [online] Available at: <http://www.zen-buddhism.net/buddhist-principles/four-noble-truths.html> [Accessed 31 Oct. 2018].

their awareness of the inevitability of suffering, while sparked by Buddhism, is actually a part of the most ancient roots of Jewish tradition and experience. Later sections will explore the ways these rabbis frame the connection between Jewish and non-Jewish meditation practice. They see mindfulness meditation as a path to healing, awareness and lovingkindness in the face of this inherited but present struggle to live with suffering and brokenness.

Why mindfulness meditation for humanity in general?

Political Context

Participants interviewed believe that mindfulness meditation has even more expansive applications. When asked why mindfulness meditation was a compelling practice for them, and their congregants, a pattern emerged. They see mindfulness meditation as critical to living in the modern world, not only as a Jew but as a human being. They cited, “the anxiety and stress of modern life,” and the “political state of our country,” as conditions requiring a more mindful approach to life in general. Multiple rabbis described this as a process of awakening to one’s purpose and role in the world, and the needs of the world simultaneously. One even co-opted the contemporary catch phrase, ‘getting woke,’ implying that mindfulness can wake a person up to privilege, injustice, suffering and the individual’s role within those systems.

Challenges of Modern Life

When pressed as to what is unique to the contemporary moment, one rabbi remarked that, “there’s a feeling you have to be vigilant all the time, you are constantly buzzed by phones and breaking news. The world itself is never going to give you a break. You have to take it, to refocus on your own agenda, who you are and who you were intended to be.”⁴¹ Living in a constant state of ‘flight or fight’ presents real challenges to an individual’s physical and mental health.⁴² Described in this way, mindfulness is a tool for achieving a state of healthy differentiation, or conceiving of oneself as a distinct and independent being. Psychologists assert that this state is critical for managing day-to-day life, decision making and achieving self-fulfillment.⁴³ One rabbi added that this is particularly challenging in contemporary culture because, “We live in this world in which people and companies are constantly manipulating our time and space. ‘Likes’, ‘Dislikes, we are manipulated and we don’t even know it.”⁴⁴ Mindfulness meditation connects a person with their core beliefs and asks individuals to sit in a state of non-judgement, allowing one to resist this constant manipulation and maintain a sense of self and purpose. Comments by rabbis reflect how this helps the individual rabbi resist self-doubt, and the internalization of critique. The rabbis interviewed also believe this has the potential to renew society more broadly.

Responding to Suffering

⁴¹ Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 31st, 2018.

⁴² WebMD. (2019). *Physical Effects of Worrying*. [online] Available at: <https://www.webmd.com/balance/guide/how-worrying-affects-your-body#2> [Accessed 23 Jan. 2019].

⁴³ Takieddine, N. (2017). *Self-Differentiation and Why It Matters in Families and Relationships*. [online] GoodTherapy.org Therapy Blog. Available at: <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/self-differentiation-why-it-matters-in-families-relationships-0831174> [Accessed 23 Jan. 2019].

⁴⁴ Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 31st, 2018

A number of rabbis interviewed cited the *Jewish* experience of pain and trauma as reason for integrating mindfulness meditation into Jewish life. Another group cited the inevitability of suffering in general as a reason for mindfulness meditation. One rabbi commented on the way in which suffering manifests differently today than in previous time periods, pointing out that the ability to respond is changing,

from neo-capitalism to climate change, to survive the challenges that are coming, we will need contemplative practice. Much of the materialist orientation in the 20th century, which is, 'we can figure out a technology to manage this problem,' may or may not be coming to its end. We will need the ability to sit with suffering, our own and others, and not lash out or be overwhelmed, but to sit with it. We will need to feel it without having to do anything so that ultimately we are able to act wisely and with a diminished sense of self protection, so we can work for others. That is important now.

The rabbis interviewed see mindfulness meditation as a response to their particular roles, to the Jewish experience and the broader experience of being human in 2019 - and beyond. They believe that this is why mindfulness meditation is trending so strongly in religious and secular life and should continue to influence Jewish life in particular.

Chapter 3: Challenges and Tensions

Based upon the many different reasons that I discussed in Chapter Two the rabbis, whom I interviewed, have integrated mindfulness meditation into their rabbinates. They have invested considerable time and money in this process and most interviewed would say that this practice is a cornerstone of their viability in the rabbinate, their leadership strategy and their vision for Judaism in the world. Some of these rabbis also understand it as their vision of that which all people of all faiths need. However, in order to support this cornerstone, the rabbis interviewed also referenced the significant social capital that they have expended. They discussed the complicated process of navigating the challenges encountered in bringing their practice into the world of their congregations. Some of the struggles have been ideological, others moral or social, and still others are practical barriers. In this section, I will review the challenges they described and the answers that they have brought to these situations. Some of these issues stem from the ever-evolving culture, ideology and identity of Reform Judaism.

From Tikkun Atzmi to Tikkun Olam

One rabbi challenged the paradigm put forth by most of his colleagues who were drawn to mindfulness meditation as a Reform Jewish tool for personal spiritual healing. He remarked, “we live in an age of narcissism and there is narcissism in personal spiritual involvement of contemporary Jews. One of the great and powerful dimensions of Reform Judaism is Prophetic Judaism⁴⁵” To those who experienced burnout, crisis or other life lows and started practicing

⁴⁵ Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 20th, 2018

mindfulness meditation he says, “get out into the world and help someone! That will make you feel better.”⁴⁶ His perspective captures the outlook of a generation of rabbis who were public advocates for civil rights and took action on social justice on the national stage as a primary manifestation of their Jewish identity and spiritual impulse.

In theory this approach is in direct conflict with some of the other practitioners of mindful meditation interviewed who see *tikkun atzmi*, repair of the self, as the harder work, “it is easier to look outward than inward,” as one remarked. Yet, ultimately, the binary may not hold up at all. A teacher of mindfulness and *tikkun middot* points out that mindfulness is really a practice of everyday living. He sees his job as “helping people understand that mindfulness is just the idea of paying attention and having an awareness of others,”⁴⁷ The needs of personal, internal spiritual growth intertwined with the external needs of the community. He asserts that “meditation is FOR mindfulness and mindfulness is a grounding for how we live in the world and affect our behavior,”⁴⁸ which in turn impacts others.

Another rabbi states,

For me it is about, how do I turn towards goodness within so that I can bring that goodness to the world around me? *Tikkun atzmi leads to tikkun olam*. We have plateaued in that arena. What if we were all a little more conscious of how we engage with the world around us, and how we impact the world around us? The real purpose of this practice is tikkun olam.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Anonymous, Personal Interview. July 30th, 2018

⁴⁸ Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 31st, 2018

⁴⁹ Anonymous, Personal Interview, August 3rd, 2018.

Another illustrated the reality of this by describing the many roles he plays in the world, “I know that when I meditate and I make it a regular part of my routine, I am a calmer, less impulsive, sweeter and kinder person. This makes me a better rabbi, husband, father.⁵⁰” Many described their ‘lived mindfulness practice’ in connection with parenting and family relationships. As one stated, “mothering was my first informal experience with mindfulness.” As another remarked, when he is consistently ‘practicing,’ he is “more in touch with my heart, calm, focused and present with people,⁵¹” congregants or family.

In the same way that a soccer team *practices* for the sake of a larger goal, so too do the rabbis interviewed *practice* mindfulness with a planned purpose. The moments of meditation and inward self reflection are their practice for meeting daily rabbinic responsibilities. This includes the challenge to live so that one’s actions do not add any more suffering to the world than already exists. One rabbi compares this to the way that he understands salvation, “I talk to my congregants about the nature of salvation being in the small moments, of momentary salvation. The same is true for mindfulness, often it is momentary mindfulness, not necessarily a huge overhaul.⁵²”

Yet, some rabbis testify that seeing the world through the lens of mindfulness *has* transformed their outlook to one of loving kindness and empathy. One rabbi describes that mindfulness has moved him, “from being a *din* Jew, a judgement Jew, to being a *chesed*, compassion Jew.” This theme of increasing the capacity for empathy and compassion is repeated throughout my

⁵⁰ Anonymous, Personal Interview, July 19th, 2018

⁵¹ Anonymous, Personal Interview, July 10th, 2018

⁵² Anonymous, Personal Interview, July 25th, 2018.

interviews. In this way, the challenge that some raise about the narcissism of contemporary spirituality is negated. The self care that is included in the practice is actually difficult ‘self-work’ for the sake of relieving suffering in the world beyond oneself. It is not only about personally ‘feeling better’ but about changing one’s way of thinking and acting in relationship with others. Practitioners come to realize that when one individual or group of individuals lives in judgement, fear or constant anxiety, this has the potential to reverberate far beyond that individual’s experience of the world. One rabbi called for a new paradigm of social justice dialogue and action, “we need to feel our own pain and feel the pain of the other, their fear, their deep concern, so that we can engage in conversation and transformational work differently. This is necessary for the politics of our country. We need to engage in social justice work with a sense of, ‘I may need to say no or disagree,’ but you are not my enemy.”⁵³

In this way, the Reform rabbis of 20th century ‘prophetic Judaism’ are aligned with the goals of contemporary spirituality outlined by nearly all of my participant rabbis, even if they undertake their work differently. For these rabbis, mindfulness meditation is the means to fulfill the words of the prophet Micah and the prophetic mandate, “to do justly, love mercy and live humbly.”⁵⁴ However this consistent pattern of claiming mindfulness meditation as potentially transformative and a continuation of Reform Jewish principles does not remove the other challenges encountered by Reform rabbis in their efforts to implement the practice.

⁵³ Anonymous, Personal interview, August 31st, 2018

⁵⁴ Micah 6:8

Authenticity and Training

Whether rabbis have been successful in creating the cultural change which leads to the embrace of mindfulness in their congregations, they still admit that the process was not easy. Many felt they needed to develop ownership over their own practice before bringing it to their congregants. For some rabbis this meant waiting a year or more after beginning a personal practice before implementing it in their congregations. One rabbi remarked that rabbis who lack a personal practice do a disservice to Jewish mindfulness because “leadership comes from the personal and must come from inside you.”⁵⁵ While this was one individual’s discrete opinion, others shared similar concerns. Some wondered if meditation and mindfulness sometimes lacked staying power because the spiritual leader was not personally confident enough in the practice. Another rabbi remarked that this lack of authenticity or depth also stems from a misunderstanding of the essence of mindfulness.

It takes awhile to understand what mindfulness is. It is easy to mistake mindfulness for yoga, or guided meditation but that is too narrow. Getting people to realize that it isn’t just that. That it is about being more intentional and woke but also learning to love yourself as you are.”⁵⁶

Rabbis required an intensive combination of training, study and coaching in addition to the significant investment of time before they realized the larger nature of mindfulness.

The Institute for Jewish Spirituality (IJS) provided much of the materials that supported rabbis in the development of their personal and professional practice. IJS offers cohort based immersive experiences in a study program of at least one to two years in duration. These courses included

⁵⁵ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 13th, 2018.

⁵⁶ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 30th, 2018.

mindfulness retreats as well as a community of practice for alumni. Programs include text study, a series of annual meditation retreats, ongoing chevruta study with a peer and mindfulness teachers who conduct 1:1 guidance sessions with participants. IJS emphasizes the importance of personal practice in the spiritual development of the Jewish leader.

This educational program is in direct contrast to the HUC-JIR seminary experiences of the subject rabbis. Many remarked that they needed to unlearn the approaches to the rabbinate that had been presented in Reform institutions. They described the seminary approach as, “hyper cognitive,” and one which “emphasized *mind* over body, heart and soul.”⁵⁷ One rabbi remarked that “training at HUC was so much about the head. Texts and practical aspects of service leading are wonderful and important, but no one ever asked me what I believed or what my personal practice is/was.”⁵⁸ In fact, one rabbi who started meditation during his time at HUC was asked dismissively by a faculty member at the time, “is this really something a Jewish leader should be doing?” Another remarked that during her time in rabbinical school she was “disconnected from her own spiritual journey and lived experience.”⁵⁹

Quite a few rabbis felt that after ordination they were unable to provide the amount of ‘heart and soul’ that the actual work of being a rabbi required. They understood that they lacked key skills and needed to change. However they found themselves challenged to articulate their needs and find resources for meeting these needs. IJS, yoga classes, and friends in other careers, including doctors, supported them on their journey to self-care and eventually regular mindfulness practice.

⁵⁷ Anonymous. Person Interview, September 4th, 2018.

⁵⁸ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 25th, 2018.

⁵⁹ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 30th, 2018.

For some, this entirely transformed their perspective. As one rabbi remarked, “I was transfixed by the idea of bringing attention to the present as opposed to the past or future, which are the focus at HUC. Focus on the present is a Jewish idea, Hineini. Present is the place from which the future can be altered.”⁶⁰

In recent years, HUC-JIR has implemented a ‘spirituality initiative’ that directly addresses this challenge. Speaking to a member of the faculty during this transition, she described the issue this way,

rabbis (primarily congregational rabbis) shared tremendous pain that they were experiencing in their professional/personal lives. I would describe this as burnout. Repeatedly people were saying, "if only I'd had this kind of exposure (to spirituality and mindfulness) when I was in rabbinical school." Whether it was true or not, they felt it would have made all the difference in the world. They needed practices that were about self-care but also sustaining the spiritual self and authenticity.⁶¹

At HUC-JIR, A careful and intentional process was necessary in order to introduce a Spirituality Initiative into an environment that had only years before included a professor remarking “is this really something a Jew should be doing?” in critique of mindfulness. A committee of faculty advisors planned the program and incorporated student feedback throughout the process. The initiative addressed the dissonance between spirituality at an academic institution and directly connected the work of spirituality to social justice and anti-racism.

When asked about this process of introducing change and why it was successful, a faculty member who was a proponent of the initiative remarked, “this approach is shaking up our way of

⁶⁰ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 30th, 2018.

⁶¹ Anonymous, Personal Interview, October 12, 2018.

doing this, but not toppling it. It is not better than Reform Judaism, it is OF Reform Judaism because Judaism evolved in relation to the broader culture."⁶² The HUC Spirituality Initiative is a regular component of the HUC-JIR program and signs of its impact are visible to faculty. They remark that students now talk about Judaism as a “practice” and some are now negotiating for benefits like spiritual direction (a component of the initiative) in their initial rabbinic contracts.

Resistance to Change

In the congregational world, the nature of change itself is sometimes the problem. For mindfulness meditation, change creates challenge in two significant areas.. First, at the very core of mindfulness meditation is the impetus for personal and thereby, communal, transformation. A person practices mindfulness to ‘become,’ to change behaviors, to reflect on one’s impact in the world in order to improve it. Especially core to Jewish mindfulness meditation is the idea of making a *tikkun*, a repair. However, this type of repair is not a return to the past. Repair in the Jewish tradition involves transformation. One leader who coaches other rabbis said that there is often resistance to this very idea of personal transformation, “you want me to *change*? Why?!” In response, as teachers, as leaders and as individuals, rabbis balance the idea of self-acceptance and compassion with the charge for transformation and *tikkun*, or repairing something that is broken. As one rabbi phrased it, the non-judgemental nature of mindfulness helps with this, “How can change be non-judgemental of the past?”⁶³

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Anonymous, Personal Interview July 30th, 2018

Some of this resistance to change is directed personally, towards the rabbi. One rabbi remarked, “people saw me changing and they didn’t like it!”⁶⁴ As rabbis repaired their own souls, and started these new spiritual practices, their congregants sensed a change even before the rabbis initiated changes in their work with their congregants. Some rabbis felt that this was a theological issue. As one said, “Saying, ‘be present’ is a theological statement. People don’t want to talk about God and aren’t ready for their leaders to do so.”⁶⁵ Understandably seeking stability in their leaders, congregants reacted to these changes and the personal transformation that they saw in their rabbis. In some cases, rabbis found that transparency helped them share their journey with their people and restored a sense of trust in their leadership.

However, one rabbi and teacher of mindfulness reflected that this very transparency is a double edged sword. Teaching mindfulness, spiritual inquiry and transformation requires vulnerability, and vulnerability can be dangerous for leaders in positions of authority. As he phrased it, “it is often dangerous for clergy to become too vulnerable before they’ve established a foundation of understanding among their leadership.” One rabbi, who practices meditation but lacks any training or formal teaching background in it, spoke to this catch-22, “I know meditation is working when I cry, it is a cathartic release. Then I’m less likely to snap at people or cry for no reason. But our synagogue culture doesn’t approve too much of crying in public.” It goes without saying that this is probably all the more true for *leaders* in public spaces. However, there may be more openness than previously thought, and other interviews reflected this trend.

⁶⁴ Anonymous, Personal Interview, July 10th, 2018.

⁶⁵ Anonymous, Personal Interview, July 30th, 2018.

A few rabbis recall congregants who sought them out to ask about their practice and learn more. For some, this was the first step in incorporating mindfulness meditation into the culture of the congregation. In these cases, once congregants saw that it was “kosher” for their own rabbi to seek personal transformation and repair, it became safe for others to try it too. Once this was framed as part of living Jewishly, and not a personal indictment of inadequacy, possibilities opened up for exploration.

General Discomfort

After rabbis took the risk to integrate mindfulness and meditative practice into their work as rabbis, new challenges arose. Chief among those was a discomfort with the inclusion of silence in worship services, discussions, and meetings. As one rabbi lamented, “our services are all words, so many words, too many words!” Yet, when one rabbi introduced a practice of moments of silence at the beginning of a Shabbat service, she was met with resistance. One rabbi’s congregants said that silence is “depressing.”⁶⁶ Others had stylistic issues with the introduction of mindfulness meditation and, in particular, yoga. Two rabbis (at different congregations), with personal yoga practices introduced yoga on Shabbat at their synagogues and were met with different responses from their congregations. One was confronted with questions from her funding committee who asked, “is this Jewish, should we really be doing this?”⁶⁷ Another had a lay leader tell him, “it is disrespectful to come in your yoga clothes to shul!” Discomfort with silence and attire are based on more stylistic concerns of maintaining decorum and the familiar in the synagogue. Some congregations were more rigid in their culture and style than others, but

⁶⁶ Anonymous, Personal Interview. June 27th, 2018.

⁶⁷ Anonymous, Personal Interview. September 4th, 2018

one rabbi posed the question, “does the rabbi feel the authority to bring in this the same way he feels authority to bring in more Hebrew or different melodies?”⁶⁸ It is impossible to say if this is definitively the case, but it does seem that there are particular concerns and questions of communal comfort rabbis consider in this case.

For some rabbis, the discomfort came from within. One rabbi, who had no prior experience with mindfulness meditation, was asked by an Alcoholics Anonymous group to lead meditation for 30 minutes prior to their meeting on a monthly basis. He initially tried to refuse, remarking, “I knew little about being still and silent, especially as a rabbi.”⁶⁹ However, he gave it a try and reflects back on the experience from a different perspective, “at first I could barely sit still for 10 minutes. However, after 4 years the half hour goes by at what feels like a blink of an eye.”⁷⁰ This rabbi’s story encapsulates a general discomfort and re-orientation that occurs for both rabbis and congregants. In some cases, the initial discomfort expressed by congregants leads to a drawing back of efforts completely, while in others it leads to deeper conversation and a new strategy.

One rabbi, who uses mindfulness language to frame prayer at most services says that this topic reliably comes up at his annual performance review. “Some people really love it and others hate it. I tell them that I understand it is uncomfortable and remind them that discomfort is part of prayer too.”⁷¹ Many rabbis who had initial challenges or pushback found that eventually their congregants grew to appreciate the mindfulness framework and now integrate it fully into their

⁶⁸ Anonymous, Personal Interview. July 19th, 2018.

⁶⁹ Anonymous, Personal Email. July 17th, 2018.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Anonymous, Personal Interview. July 19th, 2018.

culture. The next chapter will detail these successful efforts to integrate and transform congregational culture towards mindfulness. However most had to contend with personal and congregational stereotypes about mindfulness meditation at varying points along their path.

Avodah Zara: Too ‘hippy dippy’? Or cultural appropriation?

Avodah Zara is sometimes translated as ‘strange worship.’ Mindfulness meditation falls into this category for some because of the contemporary awareness of Buddhism, and for others because of religious stereotypes about mindfulness meditation altogether. One associate rabbi of a large congregation remarked, “my own perception and a real perception of my congregants is that it (meditation and mindfulness) is not serious and is hippy dippy. I struggled with how to make it feel mainstream and relevant to people who don’t see themselves as meditators.”⁷²

For these groups, mindfulness meditation is ‘other’ *not* because of its connection to another religion, but because of its cultural associations. This leads rabbis to choose language carefully when framing mindfulness in their congregations, sometimes not even using the term ‘mindfulness’ or ‘meditation’ itself. They aim to differentiate between the stereotypes held by congregants, and the serious, deeply transformational work that they advocate. However, many say that their congregants are increasingly exposed to mindfulness meditation in secular public life, and therefore more open to experimentation. Many interviewees say that scientific research proving mindfulness’ benefits is a tremendous asset in addressing these challenges as well. As one put it, “the science about mindfulness, community connection, and longevity help to deal

⁷² Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 3rd, 2018.

with and respond to people's stereotypes.⁷³ There is universal relevance in the framing of mindfulness meditation as a source of physical and mental wellness. If this is what people need in this age, then these rabbis are continuing in the tradition of the reformers of the 1800s in attempting to make Judaism relevant, meaningful and stylistically appropriate to the contemporary moment.

My interviewees project that over time mindfulness meditation's 'strangeness', where it still exists, will diminish even more. If anything, many describe congregants who say, "Oh, I do meditation at Yoga, this is the same thing," presenting an opportunity to show how Jewish mindfulness has deep implications for patterns of behavior beyond the yoga study and even beyond the sanctuary. In these moments, rabbis are making fortunate connections between secular life and Jewish living, creating a meaningful bridge and enhancing Jewish identity at the same time.

However, in some cases *avodah zara* has different implications. *Avodah zara* as it is understood in Jewish law (*halacha*) implies idolatry, or practices that betray Judaism because they are associated with another faith. Historically this meant any practices associated with non-monotheistic religions, but evolved to include Christian practices and symbols once Christianity emerged as a potent force. In the case of mindfulness meditation, the issue is less about Christianity, and more about the other religions that practice meditation (Buddhism and Hinduism being most influential in the United States). This is what one rabbinical student

⁷³ Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 3rd, 2018.

experienced when his professor heard about his meditation practice and said aghast, “is that really something for a Jew to do?”⁷⁴ One rabbi reported hearing from congregants, “preconceived notions about mindfulness meditation that it is eastern, hippie and not a Jewish thing.” However, when asked specifically about balancing the non-Jewish connections to mindfulness meditation in the United States, few of the rabbis interviewed actually expressed any challenges grappling with the non-Jewish roots, influences, or perceived ‘idolatrous’ connections of meditative practice. Some allay congregants concerns with regard to this, but they themselves feel no such tension. For the sole rabbi who was challenged by a professor regarding his meditative practice, the scholarship of Aryeh Kaplan that detailed and illuminated the Jewish tradition of meditation provided a firm connection between this spiritual practice and the rabbi’s identity as a rabbi and Jew.

Chapter one explored the history of mindfulness meditation in America and pointed out the distinct role that Eastern culture and religions played in the introduction of meditation practice including its contemporary introduction to Jews in America. Yet, few of the rabbis interviewed bring this history or inheritance into their teaching. If anything, they experience their practice as distinctly Jewish, and rooted in Jewish historical practice. For some contemporary scholars this is an issue of cultural appropriation, adapting the cultural practices or concepts of another religion without attribution and more so, labeling them as Jewish. It is very difficult to decide when something ‘becomes’ Jewish or when it is rooted in another culture. One rabbi who hears the appropriation critique responds by saying, “it is not appropriation because you can learn

⁷⁴ Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 20th, 2018.

something from one place and realize how it connects to *your* place and *your* stuff.⁷⁵” In fact, one rabbi makes sense of this in terms of Jewish history, “so much of our practice doesn’t come from Jewish sources, so this isn’t any different.⁷⁶” In this framing, the global, pluralistic culture of today provides multiple frames through which to view one’s own tradition and religion, leading to new understandings of self.

Still other rabbis show how mindfulness has been secularized. As one states, “I teach mindfulness practice through the lens of Judaism and I teach Judaism through the lens of mindfulness.” In this framing, Judaism and mindfulness are distinct lenses, used to understand one another. Mindfulness in this paradigm is a secular approach and practice. Another rabbi frames it even more pointedly, “even though our teachers learned these practices from *vipassana*⁷⁷ teachers, these tools are so bare and universal, they are really there in every religious movement.”

For scholars of contemporary mindfulness the very fact of mindfulness’ secularization or ‘universalization’ loses the sacred roots of the practice in Buddhism, and in turn, its moral teachings. In his book *Mindful America*, Jeff Wilson calls this process the ‘mystification of mindfulness.’ In this process of ‘mystification’ mindfulness meditation was disconnected from an ethical framework and reframed as a path to personal happiness and satisfaction. Wilson writes, there is no longer any implication that this path of spiritual practice has an impact on the

⁷⁵ Anonymous. Personal Interview, September 4th, 2018.

⁷⁶ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 25th, 2018.

⁷⁷ *Vipassana* means ‘insight into the true nature of reality’ and is a Buddhist meditation technique that originates in India but gained popularity because of 20th Century Jewish American Buddhist teachers. More information in Chapter 1.

broader world and the suffering of others, as is core to Buddhist practice, “no implication that such behavior leads to good karma, better rebirth, social improvement or has anything to do with ethics per se.”⁷⁸ In some ways, his critique is not so different from the internal critiques of contemplative Jewish practice explored earlier in this chapter. These critics decried the ‘narcissism’ of contemporary Jewish spirituality, asserting that it loses the prophetic, moral purpose of Jewish practice.

However, the rabbis interviewed for this thesis prove that a moral and ethical imperative is critical to their practice of mindfulness meditation. One senior rabbi honed in on this point. For him the issue of cultural appropriation has never been prominent, “because I was introduced to it in a Jewish context and its real purpose is Jewish - *tikkun olam*.⁷⁹” They see this ethical and moral imperative as rooted firmly in Jewish sources. A senior rabbi said, “I use loving kindness (*metta*⁸⁰) meditation, but I don’t talk about Buddhism because it is really so similar to Hasidic texts, and I view it in a Jewish lens.”⁸¹ The themes found in Buddhism are co-present in Judaism, and both agree that mindfulness meditation is directly connected to morality and making the world a better place. For all of the rabbis, the trade-off and possible outside influences are worth the tension, if it exists at all. It helps them sustain themselves as rabbis, but by this they mean that they are kinder, able to serve more fully their communities and make better decisions as they witness and respond to suffering around them.

⁷⁸ Wilson, Jeff. p.55

⁷⁹ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 10th, 2018.

⁸⁰ *Metta*, which means lovingkindness in Pali, is a foundational pillar of Buddhism and meditations on benevolence and lovingkindness are popular in Buddhism.

⁸¹ Anonymous. Personal Interview, June 27th, 2018.

Most, if not all, of the rabbis interviewed experienced one or many of these challenges as they started introducing a culture of spiritual inquiry and transformation through mindfulness meditation in their congregations. For some, the challenges were imagined, and others more real, such as the rabbi whose use of mindfulness language in services is raised in every annual professional evaluation. Their response was mindful in itself. Engaging with these challenges prompted moments of personal reflection, awareness and responsiveness to the other. For some, it was an opportunity to clarify and reaffirm priorities and goals as spiritual leaders. As one put it, she used these challenges as an “opportunity for personal and communal growth.”⁸².

Opportunities

Despite all these challenges (both imagined and real) rabbis describe an ever widening opening towards this practice and approach to Jewish life. For those capitalizing on this opportunity, they see it as an intersection of the cultural trends in the wider world and what the world needs of Judaism in this moment.

For these rabbis, Judaism is in need of new meanings and openings. Others understand this as the renewal of ideas and practices that were latent for various reasons in many corners of the Jewish world. One rabbi traces this to the Holocaust, arguing that she believes these practices and concepts would have gained prominence much earlier had “so much and so many teachers,” not been lost in the Holocaust. Instead, shifts in the secular world have hastened their return and reinvigoration.

⁸² Anonymous. Personal Interview, September 4th, 2018.

Many describe congregants who are “passionate about meditation and want to understand it from a Jewish lens, the language is so prevalent everywhere and they want to connect it Jewishly.”⁸³

For one rabbi, this was her own experience, “I’ve been into contemplative practice since I was a teenager. I was equal parts yoga and meditation AND I was president of my temple youth group. I never thought that the two could mesh until exposure to the Hasidic world, when I saw that these things could integrate.”⁸⁴

Mindfulness meditation in a Jewish context allows those who meditate in non-Jewish settings to integrate this aspect of themselves into their Jewish identity. This rabbi wants to offer that same level of integration of Jewish and contemplative worlds to her congregants. Rabbis are aware that congregants are practicing these spiritual tools in other venues. Further, as explored in Chapter 1, many Jews were original followers and creators of Insight Meditation in the moment when meditation first gained popularity in this country. One of the rabbis interviewed was spiritual leader to some of these pioneers and recalls learning from them about their practice and teaching them about similar Jewish practices. At the time of this exchange of ideas, meditation was not associated with mainstream America. That has changed, and these rabbis are responding to that transformation.

⁸³ Anonymous. Personal Interview, August 3rd, 2018.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Mindfulness meditation is literally en vogue. The popular magazine *Vogue* has featured countless articles touching mindfulness meditation in recent years.⁸⁵ Health and fitness applications and news sites alike have featured articles on mindfulness meditation. It is integrated into activities in public elementary schools and other secular public venues. Rabbis are fully aware of this trend and one states, “it is just in the water these days.”⁸⁶ In this way, Rabbis are adapting Judaism to the context and world in which they and their congregants live. The language of mindfulness meditation is culturally prevalent. Mindfulness meditation can be found everywhere from the fitness center to the App Store on the iPhone. This world is literally at a person’s fingertips, and by connecting it to ritual and spirituality, Judaism can be just as accessible argue these rabbis.

“What is powerful about this is that it is accessible, but also has depth, meaning and can be transformative,” says one rabbi. Rabbis who started this practice to nourish their own spirituality and grow themselves as leaders, see that they have an opportunity to share that practice with the world. This is an accessible entry point to Judaism but not one that is watered down or Judaism ‘lite’. One rabbi believes that mindfulness meditation will eventually, “just be a part of the spiritual life of non-orthodox Judaism. It is making inroads into every nook and cranny of North American Judaism.”⁸⁷ Another rabbi sees the process of incorporating it into Jewish life as a particularly Reform endeavor, “it is in the general culture, so we bring it in just like we brought

⁸⁵ Adams Achara, E. (2017). *This Victoria’s Secret Model Has a Simple (and Stylish!) Trick for Staying Calm*. [online] *Vogue*. Available at: <https://www.vogue.com/article/district-vision-meditation-blanket-elsa-hosk-victorias-secret-new-york-city-marathon> [Accessed 23 Jan. 2019].

⁸⁶ Anonymous. Personal Interview, July 17th, 2018.

⁸⁷ Ibid

in the organ in Hamburg.⁸⁸ Others point out that this is nothing new, and merely an uncovering of something that was always there,

Meditative repetition is a mode of Jewish spirituality. We are bringing to life and back to life. We are reclaiming an ancient past. Just because we left the Land [of Israel] and turned right or left and became obsessed with our European roots, why is what was sequestered and brought back in by the Beatles, the eastern world, why is that really separate from our own ancient tradition?⁸⁹

However, with this enhanced accessibility and prevalence, one rabbi raises the question of whether this ancient tradition will lose its depth and meaning. His concern is clear, “the risk is that mindfulness will become a byword rather than a natural experience and meditation will be breathing we do rather than a practice for transformation.⁹⁰” However, many rabbis interviewed see this as precisely their role. They are responding to the secularization and commodification of mindfulness by reclaiming it as something holy. As one states, “we are *m’kadeshing* [making holy] this trend. Judaism makes it holy and sacred.”⁹¹ There are a variety of ways in which rabbis are preserving and adding to this holiness, and making it distinctly Jewish in the process.

It is a mutual transformation of sacred and secular. Rabbis see themselves connecting Judaism to their cultural context, but they also see ways in which these cultural changes have lifted up more diverse understandings of Judaism itself, and God in particular. One rabbi states, “In mindfulness there’s a new understanding of God, God is not a man on a high cloud, but *havaya*, the unfolding of being.”⁹² This idea of unfolding of people and the world is possibly more of a compelling

⁸⁸ Anonymous. Personal Interview, September 27th, 2018.

⁸⁹ Ibid

⁹⁰ Anonymous. Personal Interview, August 31st, 2018.

⁹¹ Anonymous. Personal Interview, September 27th, 2018.

⁹² Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 3rd, 2018.

God concept for people who understand science and evolution. In this way, mindfulness meditation is not only a set of practices or tools to incorporate into existing worship to transform it stylistically. Instead, rooting Judaism in mindfulness meditation is a turn towards religion as search for personal and communal transformation, making it intrinsically relevant and adding meaning to modern life on the deepest of levels.

In this way, the rabbis interviewed unanimously see the “practice of Judaism as more than tradition.”⁹³ For many, this type of deeply meaningful, transformative and culturally relevant practice will ensure a future for Judaism. They see this as necessary not for the sake of preservation of Judaism for the sake of it, but for the sake of *tikkun olam* and to address the brokenness and suffering of life holistically, with heart, soul and mind.

Reform rabbis are a locus for this response to modernity. They constitute the majority of participants in the programs of the Institute of Jewish Spirituality, the leading training center for Jewish mindfulness meditation. The Reform rabbinic organization, the Central Conference of American Rabbis conducts a number of mindfulness meditation and spiritual practice training sessions as well. Practically speaking, what are these rabbis doing with their training? What are best practices for mindfulness meditation in congregational life? The next chapter will summarize these lessons learned.

⁹³ Anonymous, Personal Interview. July 17th, 2018.

Chapter 4: Integration and Best Practices

I have discussed the professional, personal and socio-cultural reasons rabbis explore and experiment with mindfulness meditation. In previous chapters, I have described the challenges and tensions that these rabbis experience in adopting the use of mindfulness. Now I shift my focus to view their understanding of mindfulness best practices. Who is most successful integrating mindfulness meditation and how are they doing it? What best practices do their experiences teach? For many of those interviewed, they would pose the question this way: What helps them create a Jewish culture of making the world a better place through personal transformation and awareness? I received answers that included a range of perspectives; some advocate broad cultural change that impacts the entire community, while others encourage small, compartmentalized initiatives. All along this spectrum, they propose a range of tools such as the intentional use of language and framing shifts. They offer new approaches to silence and prayer, to creative models of programming, and to lay engagement and funding.

Language

Spiritual Practice

For many rabbis implementing mindfulness meditation into their congregations, the first changes stem from the organic influence of their own personal practice. They begin thinking and talking about prayer, God or Jewish practice differently when they participated in their own study retreats and in personal meditation time. These new experiences influenced the way that they engaged with their

congregants and the language they used in their conversations with their people.. Some rabbis did this more intentionally, seeking to create a new language of spiritual practice. The seemingly small act of using different terms is a tool that doesn't require new programs, staff or funding. As one rabbi explained it, "even if we are doing the exact same thing, we are using a different language, a language of spiritual practice."⁹⁴

There is a significance in referring to Jewish rites and traditions as 'practices' This word choice marks the influence of mindfulness meditation and yoga, which are often referred to as 'practices.' In this way, Judaism can exist in the burgeoning marketplace of spiritual and emotional 'practices,' and avoid that which might feel old or out of fashion. A practice also implies something habitual. A person engages in a 'practice' as a regular activity with the aim of growth and personal progress. A practice is a means to an end, and not an end unto itself.

Rabbis who report success in bringing about cultural change in their congregations use the language of 'practice' regularly. They also focus on the goals of the practice in their framing or descriptions of mindfulness.. In the same way that a personal trainer might refer to exercises as building muscles to have more energy, these rabbis guide participants to "use the practice to open your heart,"⁹⁵ They use these phrases as their invitation to begin worship or to introduce the Amidah. During shacharit services, one rabbi introduces the morning prayers as an opportunity, "to breath into your body, discern for yourself what you need this morning to open your heart."⁹⁶ Others use this framing or description to explain the use of silence during communal prayer.. One rabbi asks service participants

⁹⁴ Anonymous, Personal Interview. July 10th, 2018

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

to “come out of silence prepared to open our hearts.”⁹⁷ Others refer to teshuva and prayer as a “mindful reawakening.”⁹⁸ Many use this language of awakening, or becoming ‘woke’ as a desired outcome of prayer or ‘spiritual practice.’

Rabbis have also found success in using language and framing to “draw attention to the physical nature of prayer.”⁹⁹ These rabbis call attention to feelings in the body, even facilitating a scan of the body prior to rising for the Amidah or Barechu. They don’t make other liturgical changes, but instead bring a new perspective to the existing words and so invite participants into a different level of awareness.

Mindfulness Meditation

Despite this obvious incorporation of the concept of ‘mindfulness’ and even direct application of meditative tools, such as the body scan, many find it more productive to avoid naming this or any other innovation as ‘meditation.’ One rabbi refers to prayer in general as a ‘contemplative practice’ and others hold specifically ‘contemplative services’ that are indeed rooted in mindfulness meditation. As one rabbi says, “I actively avoid the language of meditation or mindfulness even though I incorporate silence and mindfulness into every Shabbat service.”¹⁰⁰ However, those who are most successful creating a culture of spiritual practice and personal transformation congregationally, do not avoid using these terms and instead embrace them.

⁹⁷ Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 3rd, 2018

⁹⁸ Ibid

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ Anonymous, July 19th, 2018

Silence

Silence is an elusive commodity in most modern environments. As people experience fewer and fewer experiences of silence in daily life, the general comfort with silence decreases. Rabbis in the field who have incorporated mindfulness into their congregations have experienced their participants' discomfort with silence. As shared previously, one rabbi heard from her congregants that they found silence 'depressing.' Many rabbis do overcome this obstacle and consider this creation of a synagogue culture that is comfortable with silence to be critical to their mission as spiritual leaders. One rabbi has facilitated this change by describing silence as a "giving of space." He explains that it is his goal "to give more space in a service and to make a connection between that and how we behave and give or *don't give* space in the rest of the world."¹⁰¹ Numerous rabbis interviewed agree with this sentiment, that giving 'space' and increasing comfort with silence is a practice that nurtures personal and communal growth. Key to this effort is framing the silence in a particular way and making the connection to silence - or lack thereof - in everyday life.

One rabbi maintains that in order for people to become more comfortable with silence, the leadership needs to build it into a variety of moments in the life of the community, and not only at services. She does this by holding 2 minute silent meditations at the beginning of *every* board meeting and *every* adult education session. Silence in itself is a best practice for the rabbis interviewed. This connection is strengthened when silence is integrated into more mundane moments in the congregation, bringing enhanced awareness and sanctity to more corners of life.

¹⁰¹ Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 3rd, 2018.

Invitational

Whether the mindfulness practice is the use of silence, contemplative services or Shabbat meditation sessions, one rabbi makes the point to always use invitational language. She states, “people respond well when something is an invitation into a space and isn’t forced upon them, people don’t like when you are telling them you’ve had an amazing experience and you are going to make them have it too.

¹⁰²” Simply stating, ‘When/if you feel comfortable’ or ‘I invite you to...’ gives the individual independence and the choice to participate and at what level. Allowing individuals to opt out of parts of a meditation or prayer experience, even if they remain present physically, is another aspect of this. Lastly, validating a variety of reactions and feelings, comfort or discomfort, familiarity or strangeness, can go along way to creating an invitational, non-evangelizing approach.

Transformation

Finally, those rabbis who are most successful at integrating mindfulness meditation into their congregations use language of personal transformation, *tikkun olam* and *teshuva* to ground their work. They don’t refer to mindfulness meditation as a tool for staying calm or relaxing. Rather they emphasize that it is a practice to repair oneself and the world and ultimately to become a better person. They tie ‘*teshuva*’ to current phrases like ‘getting woke’ and connect it with mindful awareness, or awakening. Prayer is a time to reflect on gratitude, purpose, the strength of one’s character, and behavior in the world, not only to find ‘relief’ from the rest of the world although that has its place as well.

¹⁰² Anonymous, Personal interview. June 24th, 2018

Whether a rabbi is creating holistic change or hosting a meditation class on Shabbat mornings, many use this language to bring new meaning to their activities and goals. Such shifts of language were normative among these rabbis. However, when rabbis seek an overarching, broad cultural change intended to transform their entire congregation, they make distinct choices that deepen and broaden their efforts.

The Holistic Approach

Those rabbis creating such holistic change speak about transformation in two senses: the entire congregation and the entire person. They intend to create a culture of personal and communal *tikkun*, or repair and create an environment in which congregants are reflective, spiritually enriched and seeking growth in their lives and behaviors. These rabbis see a variety of ways to influence change, beyond outside traditional programming, tefilot or sermons. This is holistic change, the goal of which is for mindfulness to permeate the culture of the organization. They move far beyond the use of mindfulness as a discrete, contained program offered a few times a year. Many of those reaching for such holistic change are trained at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. These are their best practices.

Start Small but Dream Big

One rabbi seeks or creates outlets for mindfulness in every facet of the congregation and actively builds this culture outside the bima. As she states, “talking about Israel or spirituality doesn’t mean you get up on the bimah and preach about it. We talk in classes, bulletins, and I bring it up in one to

one meetings.¹⁰³ Yet in some cases, big goals begin with small steps. As one rabbi stated explicitly, “don’t do it for the whole congregation at once.”¹⁰⁴

Other rabbis make sure to keep their focus on reaching the whole congregation, even though they may start small. One rabbi began with a Monday night meditation “sit”, but knew that her goal and the mandate from her board was to make mindfulness meditation more than “just an offering for certain people at a certain date or time and instead make it part of the culture,” of the congregation.¹⁰⁵ From the Monday night sit, she expanded her program to offer a months-long cohort based ‘*Tikkun Middot*’ (repair of character) program. From those humble beginnings, she now has an entire city-wide meditation center housed within her synagogue. The center features programs for mindful Jewish parenting, aging, holiday practice series, yoga and introductory programs in Jewish meditation practice. Just as educators engage with different modalities, rabbis integrating this fully into their congregations engage with a variety of modalities including discussion, meditation sits, movement classes, long-term program commitments and stand alone opportunities. The goal of these rabbis is to reach the entire congregation and the entire person. For one rabbi, starting *Tikkun Middot* as an annual cohort with trained lay leaders engaged a small group of influencers within the congregation but also sent a message to the entire community that mindfulness meditation impacts ‘the whole person,’ as a Jew, as a professional, as a friend and a family member.

Collaboration with Other Synagogues

¹⁰³ Anonymous, Personal Interview. September 4, 2018

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 20th, 2018

Some rabbis make significant investments of social and economic capital to integrate mindfulness meditation into their congregations. Multiple rabbis set aside turf or power struggles with area congregations in order to collaborate on community wide mindfulness meditation initiatives. This is demonstrated by the previous example of the rabbi who developed the city-wide meditation center. Other rabbis utilize the center as a resource for their congregants as well. The center offers more diverse programs because of the larger pool of participants and lay leaders. Programs that would otherwise be sparsely attended, or not sustainable, are now possible because of partnership across synagogue lines.

This was the case for another rabbi in a large metropolitan area who wanted to plan a weekend intensive for her congregation. She realized she could collaborate with other area congregations and thus offer a richer experience that would attract national speakers and inspiring teachers. With eight area congregations working together, the synagogues offered an entire Shabbat intensive on Jewish spiritual practice with multiple tracks in text, movement and meditation. The partnership made this depth and program variety possible. The intensive and its planning were a boon for spiritual engagement community wide, but especially at the anchor synagogue. The lay leaders involved were energized and invigorated by the process. For many rabbis, engaged lay leaders are key to holistic integration.

Investing in Relationships and Cultivating Leaders

One rabbi wanted to avoid what she calls the “guru effect” or having “fans” who tied their spiritual practice to her. To achieve this and to build a sustainable spiritual program, she invested in

participants with leadership potential. She raised money to send them to Jewish meditation teacher trainings and other programs. Once she trained other people to do the work, the synagogue could offer more programs that did not depend upon her expertise. Now, these lay leaders lead weekly meditation sessions and longer term mindfulness meditation programs and groups. One rabbi suggests hand picking and personally recruiting participants who are influencers in the congregation, “It was a game-changer to hand pick groups of lay people and lay leaders for our first cohort based experience.”¹⁰⁶ Now those initial participants are leaders of the meditation center and advocates for change in general. In one case, board members who participated in an initial *Tikkun Middot* group now invite a rabbi to do *tikkun middot*/mindfulness work for 25 minutes at the beginning of *every* board meeting.

There are other best practices to counter the ‘guru effect.’ During classes or group sessions, rabbis intentionally invite sharing in chevruta and not just with the teacher or the larger group, so that relationships are formed amongst participants and catalyze peer-led learning. At the same time, rabbinic leaders balance this distributive leadership with open and honest relationships with participants. They work hard to establish trust built on being non-judgmental and creating space for vulnerability. Multiple rabbis interviewed state that establishing trust with participants is just as important as imparting content.¹⁰⁷ Those who experienced the most success growing their programs expressed that *longevity* was key to building trust, leadership and meaningful relationships that lead to cultural change and personal transformation.

¹⁰⁶ Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 20th, 2018.

¹⁰⁷ Anonymous, Personal Interview. July 13th, 2018.

Those seeking to create more ‘mindful’ communities also initiate non-programmatic changes in the culture of the organization. These are changes that spark reflection and intentionality.

Becoming More Human: Non Programmatic Changes

Some of these approaches are not difficult to imagine or to implement. However such small steps are increasingly rare and even counter-cultural in a high speed world where phones are glued to hands and instant gratification is a given. One rabbi teaches his board, staff and committees to practice contemplative listening in meetings. He says, “change doesn’t have to be big and showy, small changes introduced slowly over time” at key moments can change the behavior of an organization and the individuals within it, creating more space for compassion, justice and the creative thinking the world needs. He shares the following ideas:

- During board meetings, each person who wishes to speak is acknowledged by the vice president, or a rotating facilitator. Embrace the silence and ritual of this.
- Whenever a person is called on to speak, acknowledge what someone else said
- Prayer before meetings, specific to the work of the team
- In longer meetings, take a break every 10-15 minutes to allow participants to feel what they are feeling and take it in
- Encourage staff not to eat at their desks, but to take time to connect with other staff and enjoy the act of nourishing their bodies

- A handful of rabbis hold silence or conduct meditation for a period of time at the beginning of *every* adult education class (not only mindfulness or spirituality focused ones). One rabbi frames it as “helping people show up and be present.”
- Multiple rabbis ask participants to individually or communally to set intentions before starting classes, committee meetings or prayer. In some cases rabbis ask participants to share those intentions with the group, a chevruta, or to write them down.

Rabbis shared many best practices like these that inform their leadership and help them bring mindfulness into their organizations. One rabbi describes these as “small ways to help people be more human,” and I would add, the best versions of humanity they can be.

Pastoral Care

Rabbis also catalyze small but powerful mindful moments as they provide pastoral care and officiate at life cycle rituals. One describes taking a general stance of ‘responding’ rather than reacting in counseling situations; giving herself space and permission to be aware of how she’s being impacted by a situation but not needing to show that emotional response or propose a solution right away. Another describes incorporating silence into b’nai mitzvah rehearsals, and weddings. One rabbi explained the way that she incorporated her practice into wedding

ceremonies. “The charge is a mindful moment, you’re trying to understand how two people’s relationship works and help them understand that.”¹⁰⁸

For some of the rabbis interviewed, cultivating mindfulness is the next revolution in Reform Jewish life - a dramatic change that focuses on justice, ritual practice and community life. Part of the revolution means that sometimes gatherings will be small, and some individuals will dabble. Those leading the change attempt to offer diverse opportunities for spiritual practice, layered experiences and mindful moments that are incorporated into all levels of organizational life.

Many rabbis, however, see mindfulness meditation as but one facet of their leadership and the work of their communities. Their approach to integrating mindfulness is more compartmentalized. Their best practices and successes differ from those creating cultural change.

The Compartmentalized Approach

Some rabbis found that they were only able use mindfulness in their congregations in this compartmentalized or programmatic fashion. They found themselves unable to bring about more substantive change. These rabbis note that they have tried to lead regular meditation groups, provide ongoing contemplative services or Saturday morning mindfulness sessions between Torah study and services. However they found that interest waned after a few weeks or months and regular engagement was not sustainable.

¹⁰⁸ Anonymous, Personal Interview. July 17th, 2018

There have been rabbis who successfully offer various stand alone or consistent opportunities for those who are interested. Some hold mussar (Jewish ethical consciousness) practice groups or adult learning sessions every few years. Others have taught adult learning series' or single programs that offer an introduction to Jewish meditation. In some cases these adult learning series are then followed by additional programs. In one case, the congregation conducts meditation on any Shabbat morning when there is not a B'nai Mitzvah. In another, the rabbi leads "sporadic but timely" meditation sits at significant times on the Jewish calendar, such as before Passover or at the start of the month of Elul, or during Selichot.¹⁰⁹ Uniquely, one rabbi hosts a pre-Shabbat 45 meditation on Thursday evenings, to transition *into* Shabbat. The format is simple, starting with attendees who rotate offering a reading of their choice. That is followed by a few niggunim, and then 30 minutes of silence. The silence is closed with a chanting of the first line of the Shema with a deep breath between each word. The group is going on their fifth year of gathering weekly and the group gathers together Jews and non-Jews who seek a contemplative space, many of whom met in Alcoholics Anonymous meetings around town.¹¹⁰

Many rabbis have conducted successful 'mindful parenting' workshops and adult learning series, sometimes in conjunction with trained facilitators or in partnership with social workers. Rabbis who have utilized this 'a la carte' approach shared the frustration that that Saturday morning meditation before or after services or Torah study, received an initial burst of interest and then didn't last a year, or interest waned within weeks. This lack of success caused some of the interview subjects to stop the work of integrating mindfulness meditation into the congregation,

¹⁰⁹ Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 20th, 2018.

¹¹⁰ Anonymous, Personal email. June 2018.

although they maintained a personal practice. However, other rabbis created different opportunities for more episodic mindfulness programs.. One rabbi said that he now holds a contemplative service two times a year. It is announced ahead of time so that people can opt-in and don't feel blindsided at services. As he says, "people always ask him to do it again but the appetite is actually only for one or two times a year."¹¹¹

Two other rabbis took prayers spaces that had low attendance or lackluster participation, and made it into a play or experimental space. For them this was their attempt to, "move beyond offering adult education in meditation and bring it into the prayer life of the congregation."¹¹² In the case of one rabbi whose congregation holds a daily minyan, he took the day with the most lackluster attendance and made it his mindfulness meditation space. It has now become one of the more dynamic prayer opportunities at the synagogue and attracts a diverse group.

Another rabbi took this same approach with second day Rosh Hashanah services. Upon seeing that there wasn't appetite for consistent engagement, this same rabbi decided to meet his own spiritual needs by holding a second day Rosh Hashanah mindfulness meditation service. He took a moment with sacred potential but low engagement and made it his own. It is now one of his "favorite things all year."¹¹³ Ten to fifteen people attend the service, a marked contrast to other high holiday services where hundreds gather. The rabbi's appreciation for this service, is proof of another best practice: that of embracing small groups.

¹¹¹ Anonymous, Personal Interview. July 19th, 2018.

¹¹² Anonymous, Personal Interview. July 9th, 2018

¹¹³ Ibid.

‘Small groups’ are currently a popular way to connect people who might feel disengaged within larger congregations and it can nurture deeper relationships between members. Rabbis who lead mindfully also realize that small groups are sometimes an ideal space for the soulful work of meditation. Too large a group and the depth or vulnerability is lost; yet a small group of influencers participating on a regular basis led by their rabbi sends a serious message about the rabbi’s values and the identity of the congregation. Even if not everyone is involved in a small group it sends the message that the synagogue is a space to foster more intimate relationships in a world that feels disconnected, and that the rabbi and the congregation want to make large places feel smaller. Rabbis that I interviewed consider such small groups to be a mindfulness tool.

These rabbis have a number of reasons to find small group work to be supportive of mindfulness practice. Some see it as good training for the rabbi, “Small groups over surface interactions with large groups is important for the rabbi.”¹¹⁴ Sometimes meditation classes, programs don’t attract the 100+ people that a rabbi might expect at their services or large scale programs. In supporting small groups they show that this level of connection and relationship is an important Jewish practice and can ground Jewish lives more deeply.” Even if gatherings are small, “people know that the rabbi is invested in it, and the ripples and the spiritual experience of those involved begins to impact the wider congregation.”¹¹⁵ Another points out that it is precisely these smaller groups that foster commitment, “people commit to each other *and* the practice, but in different orders.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 30th, 2018.

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 20th, 2018.

Some rabbis specifically want to make sure that this ‘small group’ trend is approached with depth and meaning, and that they harness the opportunity for spiritual growth that small groups can create. In this way, they want to actually transform the culture of small groups and ensure that these small group experiences are more than an interesting meeting. They want these small groups to provide an opportunity for *tikkun middot*, or refinement of character. As one rabbi asks, a person in a small group might ask, ”How do I see myself in certain situations? How do I want to engage in a group and with whatever truth I am revealing and learning and telling myself?” This raises a question about whether participants and congregations are ready for personal growth and learning of this kind. Do small group participants seek fun and interest, or personal change? How can those spiritual leaders who organize them, create invitations for learning about self and others? There is room for further study and analysis of the small group trend and its potential for transformation. For rabbis, sustaining and integrating mindfulness meditation into their lives consistently comes back to personal growth.

Personal Growth

Rabbis with the most success integrating mindfulness meditation see it as integral to their own development as leaders and humans, although they reflect that it is hard to keep up with their own personal practice. One rabbi uses the language of “mitzvah, obligation” telling himself, “I have to do it because it is a mitzvah, an obligation I promised myself. I have to conceptualize it as something I do to take care of myself to continue working at the break neck speed that I

usually work.”¹¹⁷ As a best practice, these rabbis integrate mindfulness meditation into their work by maintaining an active awareness of their own growing edges and capacities. One rabbi states that she lives in a cycle of “push-relax-fall, apologize, or get picked up, back to pushing myself again. If you push yourself too hard you hurt yourself, if you relax too much you get lazy.”¹¹⁸

Rabbis who were interviewed have a variety of tools for maintaining the health of this cycle.

They give themselves small opportunities to be more human just as they create these for others.

This doesn’t always mean sitting in meditation on a regular basis but might include:

- Regular spiritual chevruta with whom they meet regularly for study and reflection.
- Meeting with a trained spiritual director
- Weekly meetings with clergy or staff partners that are not only work or task focused.

These meetings might include mindfulness, meditation, and study, in addition to space to debrief about the work in general.

- Mindfulness or meditation focused retreats, some Jewish, some not. Some attend silent retreats on an annual basis.
- Many maintain additional self care practices of therapy and exercise

The Rabbis interviewed encounter challenges maintaining these best practices but insist that they are important to integrating mindfulness meditation into the culture of their organizations, whether they are making wholesale change or offering episodic programs. Rabbis across the spectrum also suggest various logistical best practices and create other structures to successfully integrate mindfulness into their congregations.

¹¹⁷ Anonymous, Personal Interview, July 19th, 2018

¹¹⁸ Anonymous, Personal Interview. September 4th, 2018.

Miscellaneous Structural Supports That Contribute to Success

Money

Despite the sacred nature of the work, some elements that help with integration come down to money and power. For multiple rabbis, outside funding helped them build momentum and jump start initiatives. Some applied for national and city-wide grants, while others sought significant funding (with lay leadership support) from members and auxiliary groups within their synagogues. These monetary investments had a ripple effect, inviting board and staff to take initiatives seriously and then invest in their success in other ways.

Other rabbis also commented on this connection between commitment and money. Some rabbis recommend charging money for certain programs. Despite grappling with the downside of this approach, they feel that charging money shows a value proposition and commands the commitment of participants.¹¹⁹ One rabbi who hesitated but eventually decided to charge money was surprised to find that it increased the success of one of her signature programs - 40 people signed up for a cohort based, months-long experience despite, or perhaps because of, a \$100 fee.

120

¹¹⁹ Anonymous, Personal Interview. August 20th, 2018

¹²⁰ Ibid

Wider Organizational Culture and Structure

Senior rabbis expressed that their seniority was the key to truly integrating mindfulness meditation into the culture of their organizations. However, associate and assistant rabbis also found ways to meet the challenge. The length of a rabbi's tenure in the congregation and the relationships that their ability to engage influential lay leaders and board members did correlate with the success of their programs. A number of rabbis also believed that the overall openness of their congregations to innovation and experimentation contributed to their success at integration..

Professional Development

Some congregations proved this commitment to innovation by providing funding for new projects of their associate/assistant rabbis. Others did so by giving them significant professional development time to attend trainings and retreats. One rabbi stated that her congregation's generosity with professional development time contributed to her longevity with the congregation, and thus her success at implementing new projects and sustaining them. It is a thriving cycle of investment and growth that benefits all.

For some rabbis, this professional development time led them to mindfulness meditation in the first place and exposed them to different practices and ideas, beyond the Reform movement. In particular, one rabbi stated that putting himself in "interdenominational pluralistic settings exposed him to different ideas about spirituality and practice."¹²¹ Rabbis find this exposure at the Shalom Hartman Institute, the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, the Mussar Institute and other

¹²¹ Anonymous, Personal Interview. July 25th, 2018

pluralistic gatherings of rabbis. Those who maintain relationships with peers from these programs also learn from their best practices for integrating new ideas..

Rabbis integrate mindfulness meditation into their congregations in different ways, based on their roles in their communities, the culture of their congregations and their visions for Jewish life. They identify various best practices and practical steps for doing this effectively.

Having explored all these different ways Reform rabbis are incorporating mindfulness meditation into Jewish life, in what ways are their experiences illustrative of a distinctly *Reform* approach to mindfulness meditation? One way to explore this is through an engagement with *halacha*, putting current Reform practice into conversation with centuries of debate about how precisely to walk the path of Judaism in the world. This will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 5: A Reform Halachic Approach to Mindfulness Meditation

“Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently he who molds public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.”¹²²

Why approach this halachicly?

Mindful Magazine defines mindfulness as “the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we’re doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what’s going on around us.”¹²³ *Halacha* is in its own way a mindfulness practice.

Halacha means, ‘the path,’ and articulates a way of being in the world that is ‘fully present, aware of where we are and what we’re doing’ while not being ‘overly reactive or overwhelmed by what’s going on around us.’ *Halacha*, like mindfulness, prompts us to be fully present in our social and historical context.

Halacha does this through the framework of Jewish law and texts. Over history, Jewish leaders have considered Jewish law and text on a particular subject, to ask, ‘how is this situation different from or similar to my own?’ Through the halachic process leaders increase their awareness of the enduring values that animate Jewish life. Liberal Jews can use the process to consider how to animate those values in a way that takes into account modernity and the

¹²² Abraham Lincoln. *The Complete Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858*, ed. Paul M. Angle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991)

¹²³ What is Mindfulness? October 8th, 2014. <https://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/> [accessed December 28th, 2018]

progression of society over time, allowing for change. In this liberal approach to *halacha*, the individual living in the present modern moment retains significant authority for personal decision making. The individual can draw on the *halachic* process to be fully mindful of Jewish values, history and forms of expression. In conversation with rabbis over time, one can ask deep questions that bring one into greater awareness of one's own motivations, beliefs and place in society, as well as the symbolic implications of those choices.

Regarding mindfulness meditation, what guidance is available from Jewish wisdom? I ask, what can I bring into awareness from Jewish historical wisdom, about how to walk 'the path'? And what from the present context of liberal Jews living in a pluralistic society should influence decision making on this issue? What cultural and social trends are influencing society in this moment?

The Halachic Issue

Halachically, the question of mindfulness meditation is framed as an issue of *avodah zarah* or *hukkat hagoyim*, pagan worship and following the statutes of non-Jews in order to maintain Israel as a distinct nation or community with a unique purpose and destiny. Is mindfulness meditation one of these foreign practices that would be forbidden to Jews under the rubric of *hukkat hagoyim*? Various Reform responsa point out that mindfulness meditation is practiced by non-Jewish religious groups, begging the question of whether or not this is a non-Jewish practice that is unacceptable for Jews to practice, and all the more so in a Jewish sacred space. However, Jewish leaders debated this question long before Reform rabbis began generating responsa.

Pre-Modern Sources

In terms of historical Jewish wisdom, the Torah itself states specifically in Leviticus 18:3, “do not follow their laws and statutes,” referring specifically to the Egyptians and the Canaanites. Later rabbinic commentary¹²⁴ expands this prohibition to include ‘not following the practices of all goyim’ or non-Jews. The Sifra¹²⁵, a collection of *halachic midrashim* (legal extrapolations) on the book of Leviticus from the rabbinic period, questions the extent of this prohibition in a *midrash* on *Parashat Acharei Mot*, the section of Torah containing Leviticus 18:3. Here, the rabbis ask the question, does this mean one shouldn’t build buildings like the non-Jews or grow crops in the earth as they do? Of course not! The *midrash* in Sifra answers its own rhetorical question by pointing out that there are various behaviors and practices that non-Jews do that do not distinguish them as a specific social or religious group. The Sifra points out that there isn’t a blanket prohibition on doing *anything* that non-Jews, such as sleeping at night, or constructing homes or sowing seeds, yet Jews should have an awareness of what ways of the non-Jews they follow, and most importantly, their reasons or ‘*ta’am*’ for doing so. The religious and cultural norms of non-Jews that do not have any practical rationale other than as expressions of an alien culture, are prohibited.

¹²⁴ Sifra Acharei Mot, Parashah 9, chapter 12

¹²⁵ Ibid

The sages who composed the Tosefta (0-200AD), record some of the earliest of these debates about what is prohibited, what is allowed and why. In Shabbat Chapter 7¹²⁶, the rabbis discuss various practices and try to decipher whether or not they are prohibited, because they are the ‘ways of the Amorites,’ another way of referring to the practices of non-Jews’. They distinguish between behaviors that are cultural practices of the ‘Amorites,’ and things prohibited because they are practices of divination or illusion; both are prohibited. However, they point out certain practices that may seem to fall into those categories, but are permitted because they are done for the purpose of showing respect or honor, such as showing honor to a bride and a groom, or a king. In their own way, those debating in the Tosefta recognize the nuance of the issue.

To summarize, there are some practices that are cultural “ways of the Amorites” that should be avoided because they have no purpose but are also particular to the Amorites as a group. In addition, any practices that are related to magic or Amorite religious beliefs are prohibited. However, practices that might seem particular to the Amorites, but have a purpose or a rationale, discoverable through reasoned argument are permitted. The Rabbis are quoted in the Talmud clarifying this point, and provide specific examples of this category.

In tractate Shabbat 67a in the Babylonian Talmud, the rabbis take up the question again, “exactly what practices should we avoid because they are the ‘way of the Amorites?’ The sages clarify, drawing from the same rationale as the rabbis of the Tosefta, that the prohibition applies

¹²⁶ Neusner, Jacob. Translation of the Tosefta, Seder Moed, Tractate Shabbat Chapter 7. Ktav Publishing. 1979.

to cultural practices that have no rational purpose and to practices of divination or illusion (which the rabbis refer to as superstitions).

However, behaviors of the Amorites that *have* a purpose, even if that purpose does not seem obvious at first, are allowed. What are some examples of this? The rabbis discuss the Amorite practice of painting a tree red. At first thought one might consider this is an absurd act! Perhaps they do it for divination or as a cultural, stylistic practice that distinguishes the amorites' landscaping from other groups. Yet, upon reflection and seeing the way the practice functions in society, the rabbis point out that even this outlandish practice has a purpose. A person who paints a tree red might be experiencing pain, trauma or illness and, by painting a tree red, that person calls attention to him/herself. By painting the tree red, a person in need announces their needs to the world and receives help, the rabbis explain. Even if the Amorites were the only people to do this, by the rabbis' reasoning, it would be allowed for the Jews to do this as well, in order to get the help that they need. Additionally, the rabbis refer to the Amorite or non-Jewish practice of putting an item in a pot of soup to help it cook faster; this has a rational purpose or *ta'am*, is unrelated to divination, and thus is allowed.

In his commentary on the Torah, the medieval authority Rashi (d.1150) carries forward this explanation, and supports it with a *p'shat* or plain interpretation of the text itself. He points out that Leviticus 18:3 prohibits following the Egyptian and Canaanite *maasim* and *hukkim*; their laws *and* their statutes.¹²⁷ By stating 'statutes' (*hukkim*) in addition to just their 'laws,' Rashi

¹²⁷ Leviticus 18:3

points out that the prohibition applies to certain cultural practices, such as “going to plays and bullfights,” which have no rational purpose, referring back to Sifra Acharei Mot.¹²⁸ Rashi makes this same point about the definition of *hukkim* in his comment on Leviticus 19:19, which states, “You shall observe my statutes (*hukkotai*).”¹²⁹ He points out once again that *hukkim* are those laws given by a king which have no reason or purpose, no ‘ta’am;’ Jews are only to follow those statutes given by the Torah and not by other groups. Nachmanides grapples with this distinction as well. It isn’t that a person should question the reason for every *huk*; but only those practices of other nations, peoples, or cultures to which they are exposed and considering adopting. From the rabbinic period to middle ages, rabbinic sages are mindful of their behaviors, their purpose and their identities as Jews.

Codes and Pre-Modern Responsa

These rabbinic debates and halachic interpretations are codified in books of Jewish law, first by Rambam in the Mishneh Torah (12 century) and later by Joseph Karo in the the Shulchan Aruch (16th century). In the Mishneh Torah in Hilchot avodah zarah¹³⁰, Rambam derives the following law, “We may not follow the statutes of the idolators or resemble them in their style of dress, coiffure or the like,” quoting Leviticus 18:3 as one of his prooftexts. He states that the purpose of this is to maintain Jews as physically distinct from other nations, just as they are distinct in their

¹²⁸ Rashi on Leviticus 18:3

¹²⁹ Rash on Leviticus 19:19

¹³⁰ Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Avodah Zarah #36 Lo Taaseh. Jerusalem ; New York : Moznayim, 1988-2009 v.1.4 p.196-200

“ideals and character trains.”¹³¹ However, he allows someone who is in the court of the secular king to imitate the dress of those around him.

Joseph Karo was troubled by this allowance and felt the need to provide reasoning for it in his index of Jewish law, Beit Yosef, Yoreh Deah 178. He explains that in the court of the king or queen, the person who is allowed to imitate non-Jewish dress and hairstyle is only allowed to do so for the sake of the Jewish people. This person, in giving honor to the king and participating in his court, is representing Jewish livelihood and the Jewish people is dependent on their status and influence. This person is not seeking to conceal his or her Jewish identity, or to imitate the non-Jews for vain concerns. Instead, this person’s concern is to help the Jews. The issue is one of intent and personal *ta’am* (reason), which requires great self awareness and sense of purpose, or what one might term ‘mindfulness.’

Karo codified this approach in the Shulchan Aruch, repeating the halacha of Maimonides and adding, “one who is close with the [non-Jewish] authorities and is required to dress in their clothing and to be similar to them, is permitted in all respects.”¹³² Moses Isserles in his Mapah, a gloss on the Shulchan Aruch, expands on this allowance. He states that the restriction on imitating the ways of non-Jews is to avoid idol worship and licentiousness. However, if they have practices that are *useful* or done out of respect or for another practical reason (*ta’am*), these are allowed. He refers to an argument made by the Maharik¹³³ in a 15th century responsum. The

¹³¹ *ibid*

¹³² Karo, Joseph. Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 178 1-2

¹³³ Joseph Colon ben Solomon Trabotto (c. 1420-1480), an Italian Rabbi and halachist, known for his highly influential responsa.

Maharik's responsum is critical because it clarified what practices or behaviors of non-Jews are allowed, provided criteria for making these permissions and was incorporated into *halacha* by influential legalists, like Isserles.

Specifically, the Maharik received a question regarding whether or not a Jewish doctor could wear physician's robes. Physicians were required to wear these robes, but doing so was officially a practice of non-Jewish society and some physicians robes were marked with non-Jewish symbols. If it was prohibited to imitate "their dress," then could Jewish doctors wear their robes? If it was prohibited, Jews would not be able to practice medicine. The Maharik responded by pointing out the two categories of non-Jewish behaviors or practices: those with no practical rational, and practices that are licentious or immodest. He also pointed out that Jews are not allowed 'to follow their ways' in order to simply resemble non-Jews. He quotes various prooftexts from *Tanach* and legal Codes including those already explored here. The Maharik adds his own *chidush* or innovation that creates an opening for a less restrictive interpretation of the prohibition against adoption of non-Jews practices. He points out that some practices, including manners of dress, are a matter of style and are not *avodah zara* (idol worship). If a practice is just a matter of style and if it has a practical reason, or a utility, it is allowed. It is reminiscent of the argument made by the rabbis in the Bavlia in Shabbat 67a regarding the red tree. Based on this reasoning, the Maharik stated that it was permissible for physicians to wear the robes stipulated by non-Jews, so that they could practice medicine which both helps them earn a living and contributes to the health of the society and their standing in it.

An additional responsum demonstrates an understanding that it is inevitable, even for a distinct tribe of Jews to adopt the ways of those around them. In the 14th century, the Rabbi Yitzhak bar Sheshet (Rivash) received a question about whether or not Jews may visit the cemetery each morning during shiva, as was the custom in a particular community. The problem: the Jews of the area learned this custom from their Muslim peers in the town. Rivash permits this on the basis it is not a matter of *avodah zara*, and it is a general human practice to honor the dead. He wrote that if we prohibit these daily visits to the cemetery, “we might as well prohibit the eulogy since the Gentiles, too, eulogize their dead.”¹³⁴ He uses the logic of the midrash from Sifra and the Maharik that if the cultural practice has an acceptable practical rationale, it is permissible.

Modern Progressive Halahic Sources

Since the medieval period, Jews have continued to actively engage with this issue and decipher what is permissible from non-Jewish culture and what is not. Major changes in society have impacted this conversation. In antiquity and the middle ages, any non-Jewish practice or any practice not specifically Jewish could be interpreted as ‘the ways of the Amorites’ or practices of non-Jews, because anything not Jewish was the domain of the religious majority whose power was almost synonymous with political, social and cultural hegemony. However, in the modern period, one could make the argument that this is no longer the case.

With the Enlightenment, the rise of national identities and secularism, liberal Jews inherited the idea of universalism, the idea that there are behaviors, attitudes and values that can be shared

¹³⁴ Rivash #158, as described in Reform Responsa 5775.2 (“St. Valentine’s Day and Other ‘Secular’ Holidays”)

across humankind. It seems that the earlier rabbis had an intuitive sense of this universalism, even if they did not label it as such. As the rabbis ask in the Sifra, “are we not to build buildings or grow food as they do?!” Jews, and progressive and Reform Jews in particular, have embraced this concept of universalism while continuing to attempt a definition of what makes them distinct as Jews, in deed or creed. While Reform Jews no longer hold Jewish law as binding, they use the halachic process as a vehicle for this debate.

Various Reform responsa touch on this question about the boundaries between Jewish, non-Jewish and secular or general practice. Particular to our question regarding meditation and mindfulness, what Reform responsa comment on practices that are rooted in a non-Jewish *religion*¹³⁵, but are also now a part of public life in America? Are these prohibited because of the restriction on imitating the ‘ways of the amorites’? Or are they allowed because they serve a practical function? Or because they are so universal as to be considered a matter of style? And what have the authors of Reform responsa said about mindfulness meditation in particular to date?

A Red Line

In 2004, the Reform CCAR Responsa committee received a question from a rabbi about a congregant participating in the Society of Friends, a Quaker gathering. The congregant asked if it is permissible to participating in Quaker gatherings, considering, the gathering “is not a church service and Quakers do not have clergy. We simply sit in silent prayer for an hour and give

¹³⁵ As discussed in Chapter 1, various religions practice mindfulness meditation. However, its roots in American society are very much connected to eastern religions, including Buddhism and Hindu yogic practice.

ministry when we feel moved to speak.”¹³⁶ The Responsa committee’s response makes two points. One is that the Quakers are indeed a religious group and their meetings are framed as such, even if the content seems a-religious. It is one thing to sit in silence and speak when inspired, it is another thing to do so in a public Christian gathering. The responsa committee adds that, “one need not look outside Judaism, as we have plenty of outlets for contemplative practice within our religion.”¹³⁷ In making this statement, the rabbis who created this statement acknowledge a tradition of Jewish contemplative practice. They also establish that the red line is turning to non-Jewish gatherings and spaces for these practices, and adopting non-Jewish liturgical rituals. This is a somewhat different concern than that expressed by the pre-modern rabbis. This responsum encourages Jews to turn to Jewish sources, practices and gatherings, rather than Gentile ones even if the latter are not strictly speaking prohibited. One could conclude from this that if universal practices like silence or spontaneous reflection are practiced Jewishly, in a Jewish space, they are allowed, though the responsum itself does not go this far.

Purposeful Gathering

An earlier responsum on mindfulness meditation in particular reflects similar thinking. In 1983, a rabbi asked the CCAR Responsa committee whether or not there was a conflict between meditation groups, which were trending at the time, and Judaism. The rabbi observes that many meditation groups have formed in the community and the participants claim they are not

¹³⁶ CCAR Responsa Committee. “May a Jew Join the Society of Friends?” No. 5764.3 Accessed online: <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/nyp-no-5764-3/>

¹³⁷ Ibid

religious in content, “but simply a way of relaxing tensions and learning to cope with personal problems.”¹³⁸

In the preceding decades returning tourists and refugees from the East changed the discourse around meditation, making it a known but still marginalized practice in the United States. Yet, it had not reached the mainstream and meditation had become stereotypically associated with cult groups. Cults were a major source of fear¹³⁹, concern and even litigation in the 1960s and ‘70s.¹⁴⁰ The responsum of the CCAR reflects this concern. The committee acknowledges the utilitarian function of meditation groups, likening them to group psychology. However, the committee’s *teshuva*, discourages any theological content that “might be in conflict with Judaism,” and cautions that sometimes meditation groups begin as benign “and then lead down the path of cults.”¹⁴¹ Their concerns reflect more of their unique historical context and less of the eternal halachic discourse around practices of non-Jews outlined thus far in this chapter. Yet, in connecting the practice of meditation to secular psychology, the authors of the responsum also illustrate the growing acceptance of meditation as a purposeful practice of gathering. Their concerns of cults were likely somewhat related to Jewish continuity and losing members to other

¹³⁸ CCAR Responsa Committee. “Meditation Groups and Judaism.” Contemporary American Reform Responsa (CARR, New York, CCAR 1987). Accessed online: <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/carr-254-255/>

¹³⁹ Yuko, E. (2017). *American Cult: 5 Spiritual Groups That Went Too Far – Rolling Stone*. [online] Rollingstone.com. Available at: <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-lists/american-cult-5-spiritual-groups-that-went-too-far-202224/> [Accessed 24 Jan. 2019].

¹⁴⁰ Zauzmer, J. (2017). *After 50 years, Hare Krishnas are no longer white hippies who proselytize in airports*. [online] Washington Post. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/10/27/after-50-years-hare-krishna-believers-are-no-longer-berobed-white-hippies-who-drum-up-donations-in-airports/> [Accessed 24 Jan. 2019].

¹⁴¹ Ibid, Responsa Committee, “Meditation Groups and Judaism”

religious groups, however there was also much *tsuris* at the time about egregious, violent crimes committed by cult leaders.

What they do not yet address is the Jewish history of mindfulness meditation or the *halacha* around adopting practices that are a part of the broader culture. In the time since this singular responsum on mindfulness meditation, the Jewish community's engagement with meditation has shifted radically and cults are no longer the concern they once were. Since the committee has not engaged with the question of mindfulness meditation since 1983, what other questions *have* they received that touch on our issue? What Jewish wisdom and law have they engaged with that might offer *halachicly* mindful guidance for Reform rabbis?

Non-Jewish Rites and Rituals That Become Secular

In 2015, the committee responded to a question about the observance of Valentine's Day. In it, the authors outlined the *halacha* regarding "the ways of the amorites," and provided guidance for someone deciding whether or not to observe Valentine's Day. They framed the question this way: what does Judaism have to say about participating in activities rooted in another religion? And additionally, how does one relate to those activities that become 'secular' or adopted by the general culture? In their answer to the question, the committee refers to much of the halachic material outlined earlier in this chapter about what conditions can guide a person to follow 'the ways of the amorites' and what conditions (or motivations) prohibit adopting non-Jewish practices. The most important aspect of this *teshuva* is that it acknowledges the category of

secular culture, or norms that are non-Jewish but are not necessarily associated with an alien culture.

Orthodox halakhic treatments of *hukkat hagoyim* assume a binary world where things are either "Jewish" or "goyish." The world we live in today, and the halacha presented by Reform Jewish authorities here acknowledges a middle ground called "secular," in which we participate as equals with our non-Jewish fellow citizens. Thus, it's improper to brand such secular *hukkim* or norms as *hukkat hagoyim*. This middle ground creates an opening for someone to observe Valentine's Day. Though it has religious roots, it has become a secularized activity, and one might say a matter of respect and social style, especially for school children faced with boxes of cartoon valentines and candy hearts.

The responsum points out that while it might be acceptable for a child to exchange valentines at school, or participate in other cultural customs with non-Jewish religious roots, halacha (and even liberal halacha via Reform responsa) maintains that, "in public worship we don't borrow from other religions."¹⁴² This means that one wouldn't borrow the practice of exchanging Valentines and use it in a Shabbat service, for instance. The authors of the responsum provide one additional piece of guidance for determining what non-Jewish religious practices one may adopt.

The question of adopting another group's practices and traditions is not only a matter of *avodah zarah*, or idol worship or even assimilation, but also of cultural appropriation and respect for the

¹⁴² CCAR Responsa Committee. "The Lord's Prayer," Contemporary American Reform Responsa (CARR; New York, CCAR, 1987), no. 171, pp. 256-257, <http://ccarnet.org/responsa/carr-256-257>, and "Amazing Grace," Teshuvot for the Nineties (TFN; New York, CCAR, 1997), no. 5752.11, pp. 21-22

dignity and depth of others' practices. For example, were Jews to borrow parts of Christmas and Easter and justify it on the basis that they have been secularized, "our Christian neighbors [would be] rightly insulted were we to declare those days - wrongly - to be secular observances."¹⁴³

When another group declare that practices rooted in another religion have become secularized and ignore their theological meaning or spiritual importance in that religion in order to justify their own practice of them, they insult those who still consider those practices sacred. It is a fine line to walk to determine whether or not someone is borrowing something sacred without giving due credit, and whether or not a practice is suitably secular and adoptable by Jews.

A much earlier 1969 responsum by Solomon Freehof regarding Halloween provides additional guidance. In this responsum, Freehof points out that the origins of Halloween in Christianity are dubious, given that the Christians originally borrowed it from the pagans. In fact, Christians were practicing Halloween anyway and church leaders wanted to co-opt the practice.¹⁴⁴ Freehof concludes that, "broader society now practices it disconnected from its religious framing."¹⁴⁵ It is not up to the individual to determine if something is secular, one must look to clues from broader society.

From antiquity to contemporary Reform responsa, these are the ways in which Jewish tradition guides the adoption of practices with non-Jewish roots. What guidance does this provide to Jewish leaders seeking to be mindful - even about their very adoption of mindfulness meditation?

¹⁴³ CCAR Responsa Committee, Responsum 5775.2 "St. Valentine's Day and Other Secular Holidays," 2015. Accessed online: <https://www.ccarnet.org/responsa-topics/non-jewish-holidays/>

¹⁴⁴ CCAR Responsa Committee. "Halloween Masks," Current Reform Responsa (CuRR, New York, CCAR, 1969). Accessed online: <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/curr-93-96/>

¹⁴⁵ Ibid

Categories and Criteria for Today

Jewish Roots of Meditation and Mindfulness

Chapter One of this thesis outlined the history of Jewish meditation and the history of mindfulness in America. There is a history of Jewish meditation. In terms of mindfulness specifically, the halachic process *is* a mindful one. It demands self-awareness and also awareness of the impact of one's actions, asking the individual to be "aware of where we are and what we're doing."¹⁴⁶ The halachic process also demands that the rabbi is aware of and situated in their present moment - what are the prevailing practices in her own time? What are people actually doing on the ground? How should Jewish practice adapt to that reality both to sustain itself and learn from the practices of surrounding society? In this way, halacha is in its own way a mindfulness practice. If this is true, one could therefore argue that the laws governing *non-Jewish* practice are irrelevant. Jews have continually practiced diverse modes of mindfulness and meditation for hundreds of years.

However, the non-Jewish roots of some of the current modes of mindfulness meditation are well known, as explored in Chapter 1. Lovingkindness, or *metta* meditation, Insight Meditation, and other tools from the Buddhist Eightfold path are actively cited by Jewish mindfulness meditation proponents and even training programs on their retreats. The halachic material reviewed here creates an opening for this and provides a few basic criteria to consider:

¹⁴⁶ Mindful Staff Writers. "What is Mindfulness?" (2014) <https://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/> [online] Mindful Magazine. Available at: <https://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/> accessed December 28th, 2018

Utility or 'Ta'am': Is there a rational reason for the practice? The rabbis argue that non-Jewish practices can be adopted if they have a practical purpose. Mindfulness meditation's *ta'am* or practical reason is cited in numerous scientific studies; it can be effective in combating depression, stress and correlates with improved physical well-being and cognitive function.¹⁴⁷

Secularization of religious practice: What mindfulness meditation practices are now considered mainstream and are no longer associated with another religion? To what extent does this diminish the sanctity of those practices for those who still consider them holy and particular to their religion? How would we feel if Jewish practices were transmitted into the public domain - in what context would we be comfortable with that appropriation? It is possible that there are certain values and practices, for example the idea of a universal day of rest, that have a certain social function and if adopted by the rest of society we would celebrate rather than mourn. This is a question to consider and is clearly part of the inevitable evolution of culture - what role do we want to play in that? What role have Jews played in that evolution historically?

Humility: The halacha cites modesty and decorum as Jewish values, and reasons for avoiding non-Jewish practices that are licentious. Is mindfulness meditation a matter of *tzniyut* (modesty) or *anavah* (humility)? Not really, in fact many claim to practice it for *tikkun middot* and to become more compassionate, humble people. Nonetheless, how do we maintain the sanctity of our holy spaces when we adopt these practices and how do we ensure that they are practiced for the common good?

¹⁴⁷ Reynolds, G. (2016). *How Meditation Changes the Brain and Body*. [online] The New York Times. Available at: <https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/02/18/contemplation-therapy/> [Accessed 24 Jan. 2019].

Adopting non-Jewish practices for the sake of the community: The rabbis allow Jews to adopt the style of non-Jews for the sake of the Jewish community. In what contexts and ways can mindfulness meditation be practiced to serve the Jewish community *and* further particularly Jewish goals?

Idolatry: If the practice has no *ta'am*, or practical purpose, and is particular to a certain religious group, the *halacha* discourages adopting the practice, considering it a practice of divination, or a magical superstition. Are there ways of practicing mindfulness meditation or practices that fall into this category?

These are some of the many questions the *halacha* asks of non-Jewish practices, and thus of the contemporary practice of mindfulness meditation. What is customary behavior in Jewish communities across the United States? As the previous 4 chapters of this thesis outline, it is increasingly customary for synagogues to incorporate mindfulness meditation, some modes sourced directly from historic Jewish practice, some from explicitly non-Jewish sources (i.e., yoga) and some influenced by prevailing cultural ideas. Given that many of these practices are not without reason (*'bli ta'am*) and are tools to reach a certain state of consciousness that can improve physical, spiritual and communal well-being, they are worthy of consideration, and given the right intentions, may be permissible in Jewish contexts.

A rabbi should ask him or herself: am I sufficiently convinced of the practical reason for adopting this practice? Or am I adopting this practice to compete in the marketplace, or to be

more like other religions in a way that diminishes the integrity of Judaism? Am I co-opting practices considered sacred to other religions?

Or is the flow of cultural practice introducing me to new tools for being human that resonate deeply with Jewish values and even Jewish rituals or traditions that were previously unknown to me?

If one is practicing mindfulness meditation in a way that does not diminish or hide the particularity of Jewish identity or diminish the sanctity of others' religious practices, there is a space for mindfulness meditation in Jewish life. If one is practicing mindfulness meditation to enhance the Jewish community, to improve the humility and health of individual members of the community and heal society as a whole, there is space for mindfulness meditation in Jewish life.

Conclusion

Judaism as a religion has evolved over time. Despite this adaptivity, which some would say is the nature of being human, rabbis across time have also had an awareness of their responsibility to figure out what is eternal, and to preserve it. Sometimes, counterintuitively, it is those very innovations that preserve an immutable value, concept or purpose. The rabbis interviewed for this thesis are illustrative of this process, on three different levels.

First, the rabbis interviewed realize the need to adapt in their role as rabbis in order to serve their communities effectively. They turn to mindfulness to both preserve their own heart and soul, and improve their character. By incorporating mindfulness practice into their personal and professional lives, they strive for *tikkun* and transformation while also shoring up their foundation of self.

Secondly, the rabbis interviewed see themselves as adapting Judaism, and Reform Judaism in particular, in order to preserve it. The original founders of Reform Judaism understood themselves in this way as well. They had only love of Judaism and a belief in its essential purpose in mind when they introduced family pews and mixed seating, preaching in German, and instruments on Shabbat.

Finally, many of the rabbis interviewed state their intention of transforming humanity, beginning in their small corner of the world. This transformation is simultaneously an evolution and a return. They see that modern life impacts the way that humans relate to one another, sometimes in damaging ways. Yet, they also see the potential for humanity to work together to solve big problems. For them, mindfulness is an important part of this process, both of noticing

the problems and conceiving of solutions to them, and having the strength and patience to see them through. They catalyze this process locally, for individual congregants to notice their own behaviors, those of their broader community and humanity as a whole.

The very process the rabbis employ to accomplish these intentions is paradoxical. They try new things and they seek evidence for their effectiveness, in their own experience and the scholarly research of others. They look outside their own culture, but also within and to the past. They are both flexible and open, and purposeful and driven. Theirs is a process of change and preservation, of seeking *new* tools and perspectives to preserve the purpose of humanity and Judaism.

Sh'ma Yisrael, notice, listen, bring into awareness. These rabbis look to outside culture - or stare it in the eye when it grabs them by the shoulders - in a way that also invites them into the depth of their own experience and rich tradition of spiritual practice. Rabbis advocating and practicing mindfulness seek transformation of self, community and society. They do so for the sake of preserving but also transforming humanity, starting with themselves and with Judaism.

Acknowledgements/*HaKarat HaTov*

Thank you to the many people who introduced me to the practice of mindfulness, who nurtured my own spirituality and who contributed directly to this thesis.

Thank you to Or Mars, Tuvia Brander, Michael Friedman and Rebecca Stone with whom I spent an entire year of life in weekly discussion about spirituality and changes to practice in the Jewish world. Thank you in particular to Or for teaching me initially about Jewish mindfulness, to Michael for sharing your research on this very topic and to Rebecca for walking me along the bridges between spirituality and psychotherapy.

My enduring gratitude to Barbara Dragul for modeling mindfulness in your life, professionally and personally.

Thank you to Dr. Mark Washofsky for advising me on the halachic pieces of this thesis and thank you to Rabbi Jonathan Cohen for teaching me about the potential role of halacha and responsa in Reform Judaism.

Thank you to Rabbi Julie Schwartz for giving me structure, boundaries, sarcasm, support and perspective, and generally being my chaperone in this process. You are a devoted teacher and have taught me how to both serve and lead.

In a category all its own, I thank my family, Alan, Linda, Hannah, Tyler, Debbie, Mark, Sara, Avigail, GG, Grandpa and my children Ami, Pele, Lior and Ziv, who endure my many mindfulness experiments at home. And of course Noam, who makes me a better person.

Lastly, the many individuals who shared their stories or otherwise consulted on the content of this thesis, all Rabbis: Lisa Bellows, Dan Liben, Jenny Solomon, Jean Eglinton, Jeffrey Goldwasser, Lydia Medwin, Paul Cohen, Ted Riter, Mark Mahler, Marc Margolius, Andrea Goldstein, Andrea London, Jonathan Slater, Daniel Gropper, Elaine Zecher, Shirley Idelson. Our phone calls together were sacred, holy and so instructive for me. Thank you for being my teachers.

Works Cited

- Babylonian Talmud*: Seder Nezikin, Tractate Sanhedrin 10b & Seder Zeraim and Tractate Berachot v.1
- Bellows, Lisa, Personal Interview. June 27th, 2018.
- Boorstein, Sylvia. *Don't Just Do Something, Sit There*. San Francisco, Harper San Francisco, 1996.
- Boorstein, Sylvia, *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist*. San Francisco, Harper One, 1998.
- Campbell, David & Putnam, Robert. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. Simon and Schuster. 2012
- Carasik, Michael. *The Commentators' Bible: Leviticus The JPS Rubin Miqra'ot Gedolot*. The Jewish Publication Society: Bilingual Edition, 2009.
- CCAR Responsa Committee. "The Lord's Prayer," *Contemporary American Reform Responsa* (CARR; New York, CCAR, 1987), no. 171, pp. 256-257, <http://ccarnet.org/responsa/carr-256-257>, and "Amazing Grace," *Teshuvot for the Nineties* (TFN; New York, CCAR, 1997), no. 5752.11, pp. 21-22
- CCAR Responsa Committee, Responsum 5775.2 "St. Valentine's Day and Other Secular Holidays," 2015. Accessed online: <https://www.ccarnet.org/responsa-topics/non-jewish-holidays/>
- CCAR Responsa Committee. "Halloween Masks," *Current Reform Responsa* (CuRR, New York, CCAR, 1969). Accessed online: <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/curr-93-96/>

Cohen, Paul, Personal Interview. July 25th, 2018.

Cohen, Steven and Hoffman, Lawrence. "[How Spiritual Are America's Jews?](#)." Synagogue 3000, 2009.

Cohen, Steven and Hoffman, Lawrence. "[Spirituality at B'nai Jeshurun: Reflections of 2 Scholars and 3 Rabbis](#)." Synagogue 3000, 2009.

Eglinton, Jean, Personal Interview. July 17th, 2018.

Friedman, Joan. "*Guidance Not Governance*," *Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof and Reform Responsa*. Hebrew Union College Press, 2013.

Friedman, Michael. "From Burma to Brooklyn and Back Again: How Mindfulness Captivated Jewish Spirituality" Ed. by Leonard Levin. *Studies in Judaism and Pluralism*. Teaneck New Jersey, Ben Yehuda Press, 2016.

Fuller, Robert. *Spiritual But Not Religious*. Oxford University Press, 2001.

Goldstein, Andrea, Personal Interview. August 20th, 2018.

Goldwasser, Jeffrey, Personal Interview. July 19th, 2018.

Gropper, Daniel, Personal Interview. August 20th, 2018

Hanh, Thich Nhat. *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*. Beacon Press, 1999.

Hoffman, Lawrence. *The Journey Home: Discovering the Deep Spiritual Wisdom of the Jewish Tradition*. Beacon Press, 2002.

Hoffman, Lawrence. "[From Ethnic to Spiritual: A Tale of Four Generations](#)." Berman Jewish Policy Archive, 1995.

ibn Ezra, Rabbi Abraham. *Commentary on Parashat Vayera*, Chapter 18, The Hebrew Bible
(12th century)

Idelson, Shirley, Personal Interview. October 12th, 2018.

Jacobs, Louis. *The Schocken Book of Jewish Mystical Testimonies*. Schocken, 1997.

Jaffe, David. *Changing the World from the Inside Out*. Trumpeter, 2016.

Kabat-Zinn, Jon. *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*.

Kabat-Zinn, Jon. "Introduction" in McCown, D., Micozzi, M. and Reibel, D. *Teaching Mindfulness*. New York, Springer, 2011

Kaplan, Aryeh. *Jewish Meditation : A Practical Guide*. Schocken Books, 1985.

Kaplan, Aryeh. *Meditation and the Bible*. S. Weiser, 1978

Kamenetz, Rodger. *The Jew in the Lotus*. HarperOne, 2007.

Karo, Joseph. *Shulchan Aruch*

Lew, Alan. *Be Still and Get Going : A Jewish Meditation Practice for Real Life*. 1st ed. ed.,
Little, Brown, 2005.

Liben, Dan, Personal Interview. July 10th, 2018.

Lincoln, Abraham. *The Complete Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858*, ed. Paul M. Angle.
Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991

London, Andrea, Personal Interview. September 4th, 2018.

Mahler, Mark, Personal Interview. August 20th, 2018.

Maimonides, M. in M.Friedlander. (1903). *The Guide for the perplexed*.

Maimonides, M. (1470). *Mishneh Torah*. Roma. Yesodei HaTorah, 7:4

Margolius, Marc, Personal Interview. July 20th, 2018.

McCown, D., Micozzi, M. and Reibel, D. *Teaching Mindfulness*. New York, Springer, 2011

Medwin, Lydia, Personal Interview. August 3rd, 2018.

Michaelson, Jay. *God in Your Body : Kabbalah, Mindfulness and Embodied Spiritual Practice*.
Jewish Lights Pub, 2007.

“Moses Maimonides and Abulafia.” Ww2.trincoll.edu. (n.d.). [online] Available at:
http://www2.trincoll.edu/~kiener/RELG208_Rmbm_Abulafia.htm [Accessed Jul. 2018].

Neusner, Jacob. *Translation of the Tosefta*, Seder Moed, Tractate Shabbat Chapter 7. Ktav
Publishing, 1979.

Neusner, Jacob. *Sifra: The Rabbinic Commentary on Leviticus: An American Translation*.
Atlanta, Georgia. 1985.

Peale, N. (1952). *The Power of Positive Thinking*. 1st ed. New York: Prentice Hall Inc.

Portrait of Jewish Americans. Pew Foundation, 2013.

Reynolds, G. (2016). *How Meditation Changes the Brain and Body*. [online] The New York
Times. Available at: <https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/02/18/contemplation-therapy/>
[Accessed 24 Jan. 2019].

Riter, Ted, Personal Interview. July 19, 2018.

Scholem, G. (1975). *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah 1626-1676*. 2nd ed. Princeton, NJ:
Princeton.

Slater, Jonathan, Personal Interview. August 31st, 2018.

Solomon, Jenny, Personal Interview. July 13th, 2018.

Twersky, Isadore & Maimonides, Moses. *Translation of Mishneh Torah. Hilchot Avodah Zarah* #36 Lo Taaseh. Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1976

Verman, Mark. *The History and Varieties of Jewish Meditation*. Jason Aronson Publishing, 1996.

“What is Mindfulness?” (2014) <https://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/> [online] Mindful Magazine. Available at: <https://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/> accessed December 28th, 2018

Wilson, J. (2014). *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*. 1st ed. Oxford University Press.

Yuko, E. (2017). *American Cult: 5 Spiritual Groups That Went Too Far – Rolling Stone*. [online] Rollingstone.com. Available at: <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-lists/american-cult-5-spiritual-groups-that-went-too-far-202224/> [Accessed 24 Jan. 2019].

Zauzmer, J. (2017). *After 50 years, Hare Krishnas are no longer white hippies who proselytize in airports*. [online] Washington Post. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/10/27/after-50-years-hare-krishna-believers-are-no-longer-berobed-white-hippies-who-drum-up-donations-in-airports/> [Accessed 24 Jan. 2019]

Zecher, Elaine, Personal Interview. September 27th, 2018