Living with Kavannah:

Using Jewish Spiritual Disciplines to Live an Intentional, Meaningful, and Mindful Life

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Rabbinic Ordination

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Cincinnati, Ohio

May 2016 / Nissan, 5776

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Abstract

Human beings, due to their capacity for self-actualization, are predisposed to the spiritual quest and searching for the meaning of life and existence; this is regardless of an individual's belief or faith in God or the certainty that God does not exist. Many younger Jews—although Millennials are the most often discussed grouping—in the United States of America have continued to identify with Jewish culture and peoplehood, but have sought to explore existential questions and fulfill their spiritual needs outside of the traditionally organized religious life. Like their contemporaries, these younger adults have incorporated rituals and practices from other traditions and secular rituals; Mindfulness has provided a variety of worthwhile and accessible techniques, thus feeding its ever increasing popularity.

There are many parallels between Jewish practice and Mindfulness techniques, and there was never any need to leave Jewish tradition to discover fulfilling spiritual experiences. Especially for those who retain a strong Jewish identity, Judaism already provides readily available rituals and customs that can inspire a person to live a life filled with awareness and awe. Many spiritual practices that are a part of Jewish tradition can be employed to help a person develop and employ the skill that I call ***Kavannah***.

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Acknowledgements

For their support, advice, and guidance throughout this project:
Rabbi Samuel K. Joseph, PhD
Rabbi Jan Katzew, PhD

For their inspiration and assistance honing my thoughts:
Cyd Weissman, MAJLS
Rabbi Julie Schwartz, BCC
Rabbi Jordan Bendat Appell

For their assistance editing this work:
Rabbi Leah A. Citrin
Rabbi Rebecca R. Kamil
Robbi Weil

For being a true partner and a never ending support:
Rabbi Leah A. Citrin

Preface

I first discovered Mindfulness while working on a Master of Arts degree in Religious Education at the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institution New York School of Education in 2013. Mindfulness practices were a part of the most essential aspects of the design principles for my capstone curriculum project, *If I Am Not for Myself, How Can I Be for Others? An 8-Session Unit in Cultivating Self-Care Practices*. I was struck by the immense overlap between principles that underscore Mindfulness and the way that my own Jewish spiritual discipline was developing at the time.

I experimented with many Mindfulness techniques and brought them into my expression of Judaism, I developed a fulfilling prayer and meditation routine, and felt like I was on a positive trajectory. I also noticed that many Jews I met were developing their own spiritual practices, and when they would often preface the description of their practices and beliefs with the phrase, "I'm not sure if this is really Jewish, but…." With few exceptions, I could often name or describe an analogous Jewish philosopher or practice.

I was inspired to explore the intersection Mindfulness and Jewish practice as the topic of this thesis, and I found that ***Kavannah*** could be used to describe the authentic Jewish spiritual expression. I also found that ***Kavannah*** could be an umbrella term that brought many Jewish practices under it, and could be a way in which my contemporaries could strengthen their understanding of Judaism and deepen their Jewish practice. I was excited to explore the genuine benefits of spirituality and explore the links that might bridge the gaps that currently exist.

This project was an exciting way for me to expand my own knowledge and practice, but I also uncovered a challenging paradox: while studying spirituality from a more academic perspective, my personal practice suffered greatly. It was difficult to keep a fixed routine while working on such a large undertaking. However, this speaks directly to the vital importance of cultivating a spiritual discipline so that it is ready to be implemented when life becomes stressful and overwhelming. I have found genuine benefit only when I consistently practice any of these disciplines; in those instances, that payoff is massive!

It is important to recognize, however, that I too am only a beginner. I hopefully have a long life ahead of me during which I will strengthen my own skills and resiliency. Therefore, it is important to note that this work represents one amateur attempt at describing the vitality of Jewish spiritual practice. I am rapt with excitement and anticipation at the possibility of an extensive career in Jewish communities, and working alongside other spiritual seekers of other traditions, to become a more advanced practitioner. I would welcome any feedback from anyone who wishes to join me on my journey—let us walk our own spiritual paths together.

Brian T. Nelson

Cincinnati, OH, April, 2016

Introduction

It would be fair to characterize the contemporary culture as an increasingly secular world, especially in the "West." Surveys conducted by research organizations consistently report that the younger generations feel less connected to organized religions and their institutions. The permeability of boundaries in nearly all aspects of life and a "do it yourself/start up" mentality has encouraged many to seek out an individual path towards spiritual fulfillment.[1] General disengagement is no less of an issue within the Jewish community than it is in the rest of society.

For the last few centuries Judaism has dealt with a difficult change in reality; European countered lifted restrictions on Jews during the Enlightenment period but were not sure whether to classify Judaism as a religion, nationality, or both. It became apparent that there is no clear way to define Judaism. The modern world complicated matters further by bringing ethnicity into the world of social sciences. Today, in the midst of more secular cultures, the question remains, "What does it mean to be Jewish?" Is it a matter of religious practices or faith, ancestry or cultural identity, religion alone, or some conglomeration of all of the above? In some ways, Judaism is each of these things, and in many ways, it is even more. This murky definition of Judaism provides the cover for the results that the Pew Center's "Portrait of Jewish Americans" reported in 2013.

The authors of the report explained that for the younger generation of Jewish adults—Millennials in particular—Judaism is more cultural than religious. Contemporary research and anecdotal evidence both describe the growing phenomenon of people who

[1] Allison Hillhouse, "Religion 2.0… What Church Might Look Like with Millennials Behind the Pulpit," *MTV Insights*, undated 2013, http://mtvinsights.com/post/27497164782/millennials-and-religion (accessed August 31, 2015).

are "Spiritual, but Not Religious."[2] In other words, these young adults do not feel very connected to the religious and spiritual aspects of Judaism, and for many it is because they did not find a spiritual home in Judaism during their formative years. As participants in a diverse, open, and accepting society, increasingly more people are learning from the traditions of their friends and neighbors.

As a person who has committed to spending their life working in the world of organized religion, the outlook may look bleak. There is an increasingly worried conversation that eerily hovers like a gray cloud above many religious communities. The membership in these organizations is very top-heavy at this time. That is to say, the majority of people deeply engaged with established organizations are more advanced in years. The two youngest generations to reach adulthood en masse have come to believe that they do not have a place in congregational life, and they have elected to vote with their feet. One does not require an in-depth study to be conducted to see this in the faces of those regularly attending services, which is as true in the Jewish community as it is for other religions in the United States of America.

Many responsive and responsible leaders have attempted to reach this constituency with innovative programming, aesthetic changes to services/worship, and engaging these adults "where they are." Still others have tried to understand the root causes of this new reality and made efforts to adapt to the "newly presenting" needs of Generation-Xers and Millennials. The most recent research points to one common theme; younger adults—by this I mean the very broad range from 20–60 encompassing two generations—are not interested in the religion of the past. These younger adults want to

[2] Dr. Siobhan Chandler, "The Spiritual but Not Religious Millennial," *Spiritual But Not Religious Blog*, August 6, 2014, http://spiritualbutnotreligious.ca/millennials-spiritual-but-not-religious/ (accessed August 31, 2015).

develop their personal path to spiritual fulfillment, and increasingly do not profess a firmly held belief in God. Absent from the religious communities, they may obtain their spiritual fulfillment in places like meditation groups, concerts, in nature, with friends, through exercise, or through the visual or performing arts. Moreover, the adaptations that some leaders have attempted have not accomplished what they have set out to do but have exacerbated the issue. To make this challenge feel even more insurmountable, many younger adults have not only sought to create an individual spiritual path, but they have also begun to build their own communities that take the form of Independent Minyanim in the Jewish world.

These actions are often seen as an affront to the status quo and a threat to long-established institutions. In some ways and in some cases this is true, but it need not be the case. Instead of seeing the declining membership as the problem, one might observe it as the symptom. The true disease is dis-ease. These younger adults are not at ease in many congregational settings, having theological conversations, and may feel as though their own thoughts on sacred literature do not measure up to an imaginary standard.

The solution then takes on the form of a question, “How can we engage these younger adults?” If we are paying attention, they are giving us the answer. At the same time as the trend away from established organized religious involvement has gained momentum we have encountered several incredible developments in technology have put in our pockets tools that allow us to communicate across the world instantaneously. For all of the wonderful things we are able to accomplish with these world-changing technologies, they also have deleterious effects on our psyche. There are studies that report increased levels of stress that are due to the constant stimuli these devices provide.

To combat this, many people have been turning to a sort of secular spirituality that has gained immense popularity, Mindfulness.

Research has demonstrated that Mindfulness meditation has a positive effect on a person's health and wellbeing;[3] similar studies have demonstrated the same results from other religious and spiritual practices.[4] What is unique about Mindfulness is that it has broad appeal across religious boundaries. In contemporary times, it is attractive to those who have shunned traditional religious practices and continue to seek spiritual fulfillment without the typical baggage, fulfillment and meaning being a basic human need.

It is noteworthy that the fundamental principles in Mindfulness–principles, such as attention, intention, meditation, creating space for rejuvenation, and approaching the day with open eyes to new experiences–are also at the root of living an intentional and spiritually aware Jewish life. For the great many of Jews who have left behind Jewish practice in favor of a cultural identity and seek spiritual fulfillment elsewhere, this distinction is actually unnecessary; Judaism has been a system for living an intentional and aware life for millennia. The most striking distinctions between Mindfulness and Jewish practices arise from the cultural, philosophical, and religious tradition that has held Judaism together for the last, roughly, three-thousand years that Mindfulness does not have.

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[3] Jon Kabat-Zinn, et-al., "Influence of a Mindfulness Meditation-Based Stress Reduction Intervention on Rates of Skin Clearing in Patients with Moderate to Severe Psoriasis Undergoing Phototherapy (UVB) and Photochemotherapy (PUVA)," *Psychosomatic Medicine: Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, (September-October 1998), 625–632, Edited by Willem J. Kop, PhD. (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins), 625–626, 629–630.

[4] Harold Fallding. "Spiritual Well-Being as a Variety of Good Morale." In David Moberg, *Spiritual Well-Being: Sociological Perspectives* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1979), pp 23–40, 39–40.

Some Jews argue that Mindfulness is simply Buddhism without explicit theism.[5] Others claim that calling something Jewish Mindfulness or Jewish Meditation is appropriating another religion's ideas; doing so is equivalent to worshiping idols – ***avodah zarah***.[6] This is simply not the case. To address the former, we will come to see that there are important distinctions between Contemporary Mindfulness and the Buddhist concept of the same name. To address the latter concern, we will come to see that these practices are native to Judaism and that much of the confusion is derived from a confusion of terms and a specific Jewish philosophy.

In reality, many if not all of the world's religions express some notion that intention is vitally important to one's actions. What is unique is the way in which Judaism can inculcate Jews to live an aware, thoughtful, and intentional life that can engage the entirety of a Jew's bodily strength, heart, and spirit whether or not one believes in God. The Jewish approach to daily activities, engaging in learning, developing an upright moral character, and living a spiritually fulfilled life does not necessitate a belief in God, but it does require attention, intention, and ritualized or routinized practice. A slight shift in one's approach life, living with ***Kavannah,*** will open the door for some of those disaffected with the Jewish spirituality they have been taught to reclaim for themselves a truly Jewish Spirituality.

This understanding will be achieved by exploring the human need for spiritual fulfillment, the zeitgeist of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, a basic knowledge of Contemporary Mindfulness and some of the associated practices, and most critically, the

[5] Melanie McDonagh, "Mindfulness is Something Worse Than Just a Smug Middle-Class Trend," *The Spectator*, November 1, 2014, http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/9355692/whats-wrong-with-mindfulness-more-than-you-might-think/ (accessed September 17, 2015).
[6] Gal Einai Institute, "Is Alternative Healing Kosher?" *Gal Einai Institute*, March 31, 2014, http://www.inner.org/responsa/leter1/resp49.htm (accessed September 26, 2015).

place of ***Kavannah*** in Judaism and the basis on which traditional and contemporary practices may help one cultivate an intentional awareness of the world and his or her place in it. The outlined endeavor can be a meaningful experience for someone who is intellectually curious about the topic, seeking to engage a group with a new strategy, or attempting to develop their own spiritual life.

DEFINING SOME IMPORTANT TERMS

In order for this to be a productive endeavor, it is vital that anyone who reads this work can understand some of the fundamental terms that will be repeated often throughout this thesis. These definitions will become clearer as one reads on, but from the outset, we must be speaking the same language. "Mindfulness," when not accompanied by other descriptors refers to the practices that have radically increased in popularity in the last twenty years. This will help draw a clear line of distinction amongst "Buddhist Mindfulness"–as should be obvious by the name itself–and "mindfulness" which is an aware and intentional way to approach the world.

"***Kavannah***" is a useful concept that already has an established definition in Modern Hebrew meaning intention or direction. It also holds a place within Jewish thought and practice with respect to ritual. Contrasted to "***Keva***," which is the routinized behavior that is intended to come as an automatic response to a stimulus, at a specific time, or fulfilling a ***mitzvah*** – commandment, ***Kavannah***, in this comparison, is the fully aware, intentional, and meaningful performance of a routine practice, which is the purpose of this thesis.

Chapter 1: Spirituality and 21st Century Judaism

There are many people who believe that the United States are in the midst of a spiritual crisis. Each successive generation brings a reduction in the number of people participating in organized religious communities, and this decline transcends religious boundaries. Congregational leaders have attempted to address this issue, but among the younger generations, and especially Millennials, the response has not been positive.

> Americans' expression of an explicit religious identity in response to a survey interviewer's question is one of many measures of religiosity, although by no means a definitive measure of a person's religiousness or spirituality. The rise in "Nones" partly reflects changes in the general pattern of expression of religion in American society today -- particularly including trends towards more "unbranded," casual, informal religion.[7]

This trend, often referred to as "the Rise of the Nones," is an embrace of a universalistic and individualized spirituality. While it is true that there are segments in the religious world that are thriving and, there are those who reject religion outright as atheists, nearly all of humanity engages in a spiritual or religious practice. It is worthwhile to explore the underlying reasons why human beings engage in spiritual activity.

The human expression of spiritual needs is rooted in some of the most fundamental areas of the human psyche. This need arises from instinctual and psychological, and possibly even physiological forces that we are only beginning to comprehend. Sociologists and psychologists have arrived at a complete understanding of the benefits spiritual and ritual practices provide, and they can demonstrate the utility of

[7] Lydia Saad, "In U.S., Rise in Religious 'Nones' Slows in 2012," *Gallup*, January 10, 2013, http://www.gallup.com/poll/159785/rise-religious-nones-slows-2012.aspx%231 (accessed August 31, 2015).

such practices in the development of societies, and the distinctive features of spirituality and religions.

AN UNDERSTANDING OF SPIRITUALITY

The spirit and spirituality are somewhat vague terms that could be defined in ways as numerous as individuals that have walked this earth. Therefore, before it is possible to discuss why humans develop spiritual rituals, it is necessary to define the term in order to be, figuratively, on the same page. Spirituality is associated with the ultimate questions of life, a connection to some non-corporeal energy or essence that exists in the world, or in our minds. It is somewhat non-rational, is connected to emotional and mystical experiences,[8] involves an appeal to a holistic and relational perspective,[9] and a means through which one can access God[10] as they define it. The spirit is an essential aspect of human consciousness, or as Contemporary French philosopher André Comte-Sponville explained:

> [The spirit is] "a thing that thinks," said Descartes, "this is to say, that doubts affirms, denies, that knows a few things, that is ignorant of man, that wills, that desires, that also imagines and perceives." And I would add: a thing that loves, that does not love, that contemplates, that remembers, that mocks or jokes. …Little does it matter whether the thing in question is the brain, as I believe it to be, or an immaterial substance as was Descartes's conviction.[11]

That is to say, the spirit, and spirituality by extension, is an expression of human consciousness itself.

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[8] Ralph D. Mecklenburger, *Our Religious Brains: What Cognitive Science Reveals about Belief, Morality, Community, and Our Relationship with God* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012), 50–58.
[9] Ralph W. Hood, Jr., Bernard Spilka, Bruce Hunsberger, and Richard Gorsuch, *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach* (New York, NY: Guilford Press, 1996), 115.
[10] Lewis D. Solomon, *Jewish Spirituality: Revitalizing Judaism for the Twenty-First Century* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 2000), 6.
[11] André Comte-Sponville, *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality,* trans. Nancy Huston (London: Viking, 2007), 135.

There are some who would extend the domain of the spirit to the supernatural and metaphysical realms. I believe that the spirit is the link between humans and the Divine, the breath of life as described in either creation account in Genesis. Whether God created humanity in God's image,[12] or after forming man from the dust of the earth and then breathed a life-force into him,[13] I believe that the spirit is the small piece of the Divine that exists within each person. It is present in a person's reflective conscious thoughts. It is what connects individuals to one another, and allows people to appreciate the beauty of the natural world. Spirituality, then, should be understood as an amalgamation of practices and rituals that express the innate desire to interact in meaningful ways with oneself, the world, and all that is in it.

THE NEED FOR SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION

While the spirit may be a foundational part of human consciousness, that should not be sufficient explanation of why human beings have consistently developed spiritual practices. Dr. Max Weber, a man to whom many may point as the founder of the modern science of Sociology, explained that the human need for religion developed as a way to make sense of the world.[14] The desire to make sense of the world is something that is no less true today that it was thousands of years ago, but it is insufficient to answer with such a succinct definition, it does not address the complexity of religious expression of spiritual needs. There are psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers who have dedicated their careers to exploring the human psyche; this project cannot hope to address each theory. It is possible to sufficiently understand the psychological basis that

[12] Genesis 1:27
[13] Genesis 2:7
[14] Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephriam Fischoff (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), 1.

motivates the spiritual quest in three broad categories: dissonance/suffering, the quest for meaning, and gratitude/awe.

Suffering and Struggle

Researchers Ralph Hood Jr., Bernard Spilka, Bruce Hunsberger, and Richard Gorsuch categorize the basic psychological needs as facing fear, anxiety/guilt, and deprivations.[15] Facing fear was succinctly described as the human need to control their surroundings and rely on phenomena. Anxiety/Guilt was connected to morals and ethics that help us establish societies in which we can live in proximity to one another.[16] Hood et. al subdivided deprivations into more detailed categories based on the work of Charles Glock. Psychic Deprivation (a system in which a person analyzes their personal deficiencies), Economic Deprivation (seeing the imbalance of economic resources), Organismic Deprivation (the question of theodicy–why bad things happen to good people), Ethical Deprivation (dealing with the evil others commit against one another), and Social Deprivation (a scheme in which a person tries to raise their social standing through religious piety).[17]

Humans tend to want all things to be balanced. Therefore, these inequities, whether a person discovers them internally or in their surroundings, along with the human desire for control and consistency, sustain ritual practices. When expectations and desires do not align with reality, a person can struggle and become frustrated. This struggle leads to a suffering, which, according to several religious traditions, "is endemic

[15] Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch, *Psychology of Religion*, 1996. 17–21.
[16] Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch, *Psychology of Religion*, 1996. 17–21.
[17] Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch, *Psychology of Religion*, 1996. 20–21.

to our experience. Suffering is one of the deepwater (sic) mysteries of human existence. It can neither be explained nor controlled…."[18]

It would be logical to attribute this paradigm to Buddhist tradition as it is one of the primary tenets of Buddhism;[19] however, this philosophy is also found in Jewish tradition. Rabbi Alan Lew has explored meditation and intentional living through Jewish tradition and his own spiritual searching and practice. Suffering, according to Rabbi Lew, is something that is endemic to human existence.[20] This is not to say that no good can come from a miserable life, rather, life is full of suffering. Jewish tradition asks a person to embrace the suffering as a part of life, temporary as it is, and continue living life to the most sacred extent possible. Extended suffering, in Judaism, takes two forms perseverating on the unalterable past, and the dissonance between a person's expected result and reality.[21]

The example of a person who suffers as a result of dwelling on the past—and therefore not living in the present—was recorded in the Talmudic story. The Talmud states: It happened once when Rabbi Yochanan visited Rabbi Eleazar who had fallen ill; the men discussed why Eleazar was so distressed. It was not a fear of not having done enough in this world, nor earning enough, nor raising enough children. The cause of Eleazar's suffering and tears were attributed to his realization that the beauty of the world would wither and die.[22] The world is frail and temporary, and we have learned overlook a vast array of experiences in the name of productivity and advancement.

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[18] Alan Lew, *Be Still and Get Going: A Jewish Meditation Practice for Real Life* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 79.
[19] Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, 2011. 5.
[20] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 47–50.
[21] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 76–77.
[22] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachot: 5b.

There is another kind of suffering, one that people are more aware of on a daily basis that is based on the theology that if a one does the "right" thing, then a person ought to be rewarded. Theodicy (when bad things happen to those who do not appear to deserve them) is a genuine challenge to this theology or philosophy, as is and the converse—when people who do despicable things are rewarded. The entire book of Job wrestles with this question of theodicy and is the cause of a great amount of suffering for many. Religion and ritual develop out of a desire to be in control of uncontrollable events or to make sense out of tragedy. Suffering is one primal cause for people to develop a religious, ritual or spiritual practice. The psychological need to make sense of the world can be derived from the work of Hood et al. As they explained, it is a natural human desire to rationalize the discrepancies between the reality for which one wishes and the reality that exists. The result is often a collection of apotropaic rituals intended to control the cosmos; early expressions of religion and spirituality.

Human Quest for Meaning

The human quest for meaning is another critical progenitor of religious expression and is even more closely related to spiritual fulfillment than the suffering caused by daily life. If one were to rigidly adhere to the hierarchy of needs developed by Abraham Maslow, then the claim could be made that this the search for meaning is only the problem of the privileged because it means that the person's other, more basic needs, are already satisfied.[23] Rather than a rigid hierarchy of human needs, the systematic categorization of these needs should be through of as varied based on sentience.

[23] Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch, *Psychology of Religion*, 21.

Therefore, the need for self-actualization is not a problem of the privileged, but a problem of humanity.

It would be impossible to argue that those imprisoned in concentration camps during World War II were able to fulfill the physiological needs beyond the bare necessities to live. Neither could one argue effectively that these prisoners could be assured of their safety. Yet it is out of this experience that Dr. Viktor Frankl began his exploration of what drove those prisoners to survive wretched conditions. Dr. Frankl noted that some of the prisoners living in the camp deepened their spiritual life.[24] It was not that their religious expression helped the escape suffering, and neither did Frankl ascribe their survival as an act of Divine Beneficence. Instead, he argues, "Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives."[25]

In support of his claims Dr. Frankl cites two surveys, one from France and one completed at Johns Hopkins University. The results of these surveys confirmed that 61 percent of the French population polled, and 78 percent of the students at Johns Hopkins believed that meaning or purpose was not something simply to strive for, but was in and of itself a reason to live. A curious Dr. Frankl administered his own survey of patients in a Vienna hospital and found a similar result.[26] Writing from his own perspective Frankl stated, "I would not be willing to live merely for the sake of my 'defense mechanisms,' nor would I be ready to die merely for the sake of my 'reaction formations.' Man,

[24] Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1959), 47.
[25] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 1959. 105.
[26] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 1959. 105.

however, is able to live and even to die for the sake of his ideals and values."[27] These values are the sum of a person's search for meaning in life.

Dr. Erica Brown is an educator in Jewish interests, leadership, and contemporary issues. Recently she probed the world of Jewish education to uncover questions that would inspire students to find meaning in their Jewish heritage and in their own lives. Dr. Brown has highlighted Professor of Jewish Education at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Dr. Michael Rosenak as a prime example such a teacher. In order to be an inspiring teacher he challenges his students to think about the following questions over the course of their studies:

- Who am I, really?
- What is and what should be most important to me?
- How should I live my life, with myself and with others?
- What can I know?
- And what is most important to know?
- Where did it all start?
- Where is it all going?
- Where am I in my life?[28]

The answers to these questions can guide a person to uncover the forces that inspire them and give them purpose. In other words, these questions open a person's mind to search for their motivations, what gives her/his life meaning.

These questions can help a person sort out what gives their life meaning; they might also help cope with the suffering she/he will no doubt experience. It is almost as if making meaning out of one's experiences is a continual act of addressing reality as it comes, integrating the knowledge learned, and becoming wiser and spiritually aware. The breadth of human experience is vast. Religious and spiritual rituals are not only intended

[27] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 1959. 105.
[28] Dr. Erica Brown, *Spiritual Boredom: Rediscovering the Wonder of Judaism* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009), 105.

to cope with the pain of suffering. If one is to successfully make their life meaningful it also requires that he/she strives to intentionally celebrate and mark the awesome and holy moments as they experience. In this way, "meaning making" is a sort of bridge.

Awe

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel has explained that religion and religious belief begins from a feeling of Awe. Human beings have a unique ability to observe and contemplate the innumerable wonders of each day, wonders some may even call miracles. "Awe is an intuition for the creaturely dignity of all things and their preciousness to God; a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something absolute. Awe is a sense for the transcendence, for the reference to [God] who is beyond all things."[29] It is an overwhelming feeling that one can have when he/she comes upon something beautiful in the world, creates a deep connection with others, or has a splendid moment of insight.

A talented and well-known scholar, theologian, and rabbi might be expected to speak in terms of awe in connection to the Divine. It might be unexpected, and therefore even more pertinent, to explore the similar sentiment expressed by a scientist, especially one whose theories have been used to "discredit" creationism and God's role in the development of the world. In the foundational work, *Origin of the Species*, Charles Darwin simultaneously described the concept of evolution through natural selection and stood in awe at God's handiwork.

> It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a

[29] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955), 75.

> manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us… …Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.[30]

From different perspectives and in different eras both Heschel and Darwin described the awesome feeling of the wonder that is nature.

Darwin's time was one in which science was more closely with belief than it appears to be in the mainstream of society today. Prominent 21st-century genetic scientist, former leader of the Human Genome Project and current director of the United States National Institute of Health, Dr. Francis Collins has affirmed that there is no need to oppose the two disciplines. He delved into great detail explaining the synthesis of science and an intense and unwavering belief in God. He wrote:

> In this modern era of cosmology, evolution, and the human genome, is there still the possibility of a richly satisfying harmony between the scientific and spiritual worldviews? I answer with a resounding yes! In my view, there is no conflict in being a rigorous scientist and a person who believes in a God who takes personal interest in each one of us. Science's domain is to explore nature. God's domain is in the spiritual world, a realm not possible to explore with the tools and language of science. It must be examined with the heart, the mind, and the soul—and the mind must find a way to embrace both realms.[31]

It is not the case that one needs to put science at odds with religion. Both approach the very same phenomena but ask different questions. The sciences seek to demonstrate "How" and religions seek to understand "Why?" Judaism demands that we take notice of these questions and holy moments and acknowledge them. This is the very essence of Judaism according to Rabbi Alan Lew, who wrote, "The central imperative of Judaism, I

[30] Charles Darwin, *Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection: Or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London: John Murray, 1872), 429.
[31] Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006), 5–6.

believe, is to recognize and manifest the sacred in everything we do and encounter in the world."[32] This is the transition point between the experience of a phenomenon that inspires a feeling of wonder or awe and the stirring in the human heart for the need to act on that feeling.[33]

THE BENEFITS OF SPIRITUALITY

The human psychological need for spiritual expression and religious ritual has been demonstrated in a history and nearly contemporary context. Some may come to conclude that this was wonderful for the past, and challenge that it is no longer necessary. If one dismisses the feelings of fulfillment and peace that might come along with ritualized spiritual and religious practices, there are plenty of benefits that can be explored. By examining recent scientific research one can objectively observe the physical changes that are a result of a person's belief and practice, understand the benefits of a connection with the Divine a person chooses to define it, and we can see the ways in which a spiritual or religious practice can benefit an individual.

However, religions not only develop because they are a part of the psychological development process. Dr. David Elkind, professor emeritus of Child Development at Tufts University, explained, "…religion [is] a normal, natural outcome of mental development. The fundamentals of this process appear to be rooted in a biological substrate that manifests itself in physiological maturation with its various intellectual expressions."[34] This is built on the understanding that psychiatrist Mortimer Ostow and professor of philosophy Ben-Ami Scharfstein developed. Together they claimed that the

[32] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 50.
[33] Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 1955. 108.
[34] Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch, *Psychology of Religion*, 1996. 16–17.

need to believe is essential for our efficient functioning and that a deep and unconscious drive leads us to our religious expressions.[35] It is not enough to simply be connected to one another through common practices, belief and practice satisfy a primal need. This is without mentioning the benefits to society as a whole through the development of community connection, affiliation with tradition, and the development of morals and ethics.

Objective Evidence

In 2011, a group of researchers in the Clinical Psychology Program at Columbia University published their findings of a study assessing the benefits of a spiritual or religious practice. In the abstract of their report these researchers noted, "Previously the authors found that personal importance of religion or spirituality was associated with a lower risk for major depression in a study of adults with and without a history of depression."[36] The longitudinal study assessed the children of the original subjects to try and understand if the religiosity of these "at-risk" individuals also helped them cope with, or even stave off depression.

The study demonstrated a statistically significant benefit to spirituality or religious elements in the treatment of major depression.[37] In fact, they found a 90% reduction in the risk for major depressive episodes in this population.[38]While this news

[35] Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch, *Psychology of Religion*, 1996. 14.
[36] Lisa Miller, Ph.D; Priya Wickramaratne, Ph.D; Marc J. Gameroff, Ph.D; Mia Sage; Craig E. Tenke, Ph.D; and Myrna M. Weissman, Ph.D, "Religiosity and Major Depression in Adults at High Risk: A Ten-Year Prospective Study," American Journal of Psychiatry Volume 169 Issue 1. (January 2012), 89–94. 89.
[37] Miller, et al., "Religiosity and Major Depression in Adults at High Risk," *American Journal of Psychiatry,* (January 2012), 94.
[38] Lisa Miller, Ph.D; Ravi Bansal, Ph.D; Priya Wickramaratne, Ph.D; Xuejun Hao, Ph.D; Craig E. Tenke, Ph.D; Myrna M. Weissman, Ph.D., "Neuroanatomical Correlates of Religiosity and Spirituality: A Study in Adults at High and Low Familial Risk for Depression." Journal of the American Medical Association, Volume 71 Issue 2. (February 2014), 128–135. 128.

was promising, the lead researcher followed this paper with another study examining the physical structures of the brain and their response to spiritual practice. The researchers found neither attendance at services nor being a member of a specific denomination had a specific effect on the degree to which the risk for depression decreased. They did note that people who reported that religious belief was as important to them had a thicker section of a neural cortex; the same cortex that was found to be thinner for those suffering from depression.[39] The evidence confirmed the hypothesis raised by the results of the earlier study. This recent research supports the findings of two studies from the 1970s; separately, Doctors David Moberg and Harold Fallding (noted scholars of sociology and religion) found that spirituality had a distinct correlation with a person's experiencing a higher quality of life,[40] and other factors of a person's health including mental and physical fitness.[41] Furthermore, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania have also observed increased activity in brain scans conducted on spiritually engaged individuals, across religious boundaries.[42]

While spirituality and religious observance will not remove life's problems from our midst, these practices have an ability to help us cope with them. Integrating the difficult experiences in life are, as discussed earlier, one of the forces that have driven the development of religion. There are some who would even go as far as to say that human suffering that someone experiences in their life can be reduced as a result of spiritual

[39] Miller, et al., "Neuroanatomical Correlates of Religiosity and Spirituality," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, (February 2014), 128–129.
[40] David Moberg, "The Development of Social Indicators of Spiritual Well-Being for Quality of Life Research." In *Spiritual Well-Being: Sociological Perspectives*, edited by David Moberg, 1–14 (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1979), 1–2.
[41] Fallding, "Well-Being Variety of Good Morale," 23–40, in Moberg, *Spiritual Well-Being*, 1979. 39.
[42] Mecklenburger, *Our Religious Brains*, 2012. 45–47.

practice.[43] It is not the hypothesis under examination here to prove a reduction in stress as a result of ritualized practice, rather that engagement in regular spiritual activities can build resilience and that this is supported by objective evidence.

Societal Advantages–Community

Spiritual practices have a greater impact than on the individual, and they affect and even create societies and communities. While the need for ritual actions have been a part of the human consciousness because, as some psychoanalysts believe that ritualized behavior is connected to a "universal obsessional neurosis," that is an innate part of the human psyche.[44] Rabbi Ralph Mecklenburger explained the utility of rituals first as a part of normal social grouping.

> Rituals are repeated actions with commonly agreed-upon meanings… …routine and habitual behaviors save us from constantly renegotiating common situations in which we find ourselves… …You do not have to stop to think about what you ought to say to show your friendly intent or take the time to find out what sort of day a stranger, casual acquaintance, or even a friend is having when one or both of you is busily engaged in other business.[45]

This can be affirmed by Carroll Bourg in her analysis of Catholic Spiritual Well-Being focused on prayer and ritual, communal ties, religious legislation, sacramental or symbolic characteristics, and the relationship between a person's inward directed practices and their connection to the collective.[46]

It is not only in a religious context that ritual affirms a person's identity. In order to explain, I will write from personal experience as a member of a Greek Letter Fraternity at my undergraduate university. Before being officially recognized as a member of this

[43] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 61.
[44] Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch, *Psychology of Religion*, 1996. 393–394.
[45] Mecklenburger, *Our Religious Brains,* 2012. 144.
[46] Carroll J. Bourg, "Individuation, Interiority, and Spiritual Traditions." In *Spiritual Well-Being: Sociological Perspectives*, edited by David Moberg, 15–22 (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1979), 15–17.

community, a certain degree of knowledge was required and was passed down from initiated members and the *Candidate Handbook* which not only taught the history of the organization but also the ethical standards and rules that govern a member's conduct. The entire initiation process concluded with a ritual that occurred only on the occasion of the induction of new members into the community. There are, however, weekly rituals that were a part of the chapter meetings that were designed to evoke the memory of the ceremony. There are also other aspects of ritual that were developed in order to mark certain events throughout the college career of its members.

Community can help establish trust and love, a quest for meaning and connection to a tradition, a wealth of knowledge from which to draw the basics of a context for ritual practice–which we have already understood as to be intrinsically necessary for humanity.[47] A similar experience can be uncovered if one examines the person's affiliations with sporting clubs, allegiance to a nation, the Boy Scouts of America and the Girl Scouts of the USA, and many more models of affiliation, secular or religious in nature, which utilize the same components to fill certain needs. The reason that community is important is because it can provide context and convey vitally important information from one generation to the next.[48]

Context and framing are important components of many things from education to examination, from artistic expression to the offensive and obscene, or from the sacred to the profane. The children's story *The Ugly Duckling* is a beautiful illustration of this idea that has been used by Ellen Langer–we will encounter her and her work in the coming chapters. The essential lesson of *The Ugly Duckling* is that out of context the gosling's

[47] Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch, *Psychology of Religion*, 1996. 21–37.
[48] Mecklenburger, *Our Religious Brains*, 2012. 142–143.

beauty is unknown. It is the same with religious and spiritual traditions. Their efficacy is understood only when brought into a context, one that resonates with its adherents.

It is true that any person could develop an organization to pass along rituals, values, and traditions. These rituals are even more meaningful when they convey a centuries-old collection of wisdom. Blogger, Nina Badzin, reflected on her experience having grown up in a culturally Jewish home. She wrote,

> At the time, [of her upbringing] I felt as if nothing was missing from my Jewish upbringing. Why, then, did I nod so vigorously while reading Professor Roberta Rosenthal Kwall's, *The Myth of Cultural Judaism* Oxford University Press (sic)? The book is a well-researched analysis of the connection between Jewish law and culture suggesting that Jewish culture cannot thrive without some connection, even a loose one, to Jewish law.[49]

Ms. Badzin came to believe there was more to Judaism than simply culture, Judaism was connected to a Divine Revelation. While there is wild disagreement among Jews with varying practices on how much impact God and revelation should have on our practice today, the communal acceptance of this narrative forms a tradition in which spirituality can thrive. It is important to note that she concluded her editorial sharing that it has become her practice to include more Jewish ritual to her life and the way she is raising her children. Her experiences led her to understand that there is far more to being Jewish than culture.[50]

It is a popular belief that the primary difference between cultural ritual and a bonafide religion the dimension of the Divine. God. A word that terrifies many because of the many ways in which it has been invoked to cause harm to the world, and yet, the presence of God in our lives can give others the space to make meaning out of our

[49] Nina Badzin, "Can Jewish Culture Exist Without Religion?" *TCJewfolk*, June 2, 2015, http://tcjewfolk.com/influence-rabbis-cultural-jew/ (accessed July 27, 2015).
[50] Badzin, "Can Jewish Culture Exist Without Religion?" *TCJewfolk,* June 2, 2015.

suffering and sorrows, and our jubilations and joys. I operate under the belief that one of the most palpable aspects of God is the human soul, and "if we allow it to mean as much 'Soul' is the collective metaphor for the aspects of our consciousness that we subjectively feel are the essence of our humanity. 'Soul' is a convenient shorthand for our love, our creativity, our aesthetic capacity, [and] our apprehension of truth and justice."[51] The soul is what draws a person towards another, it connects one with the natural world, it provokes emotions, and is what inspires people to trust one another and develop community. It would be foolish to disregard the myriad benefits that spiritual and ritual practices can bring to the world and to an individual's life.

Atheists, "Nones," and "Spiritual, But Not Religious"

While ritual practices, religion, God, and soul have genuine power to affect people's lives, there are any number of people who dispute this belief. For some of these people, the reasoning comes from history. "…All too often [the Power beyond us has been used] to keep people terrified and in line and to justify intolerance and bloodshed."[52] In the course of human history, it is a somewhat recent phenomenon to reject religion and spiritual practice on these grounds. This is only possible because modern science can provide non-theistic explanations for accidents of the natural world.[53] Even though I believe that science is an attempt to explain how events occur whereas religions endeavor to engender meaning and provide context, increasingly people are willing to set aside religion altogether in favor of an atheistic, agnostic, or ambivalent attitude. What one will

[51] Mecklenburger, *Our Religious Brains*, 2012. 75.
[52] Mecklenburger, *Our Religious Brains*, 2012. 24.
[53] Mecklenburger, *Our Religious Brains*, 2012. 25.

find, though, is that as irreligious as a person may be in the traditional sense, rituals will still play an important role in their life.

Before exploring these ideologies, it is critical to understand that, as tempting as it may be, it is unfair to group atheists, agnostics, and others in broad and loosely-defined categories. There are degrees of nuance that must first be explained. In 2013 researchers at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga defined six typologies of non-believers, that is, those who do not subscribe to any religion, as Intellectual Atheist/Agnostic, Activist Atheist/Agnostic, Seeker-Agnostic, Anti-Theist, Non-Theist, and Ritual Atheist/Agnostic.[54] The researchers, Doctoral Candidate Christopher Silver and undergraduate Thomas Coleman, released an initial overview of their findings, in an online forum and explained their typologies.

Intellectual Atheists/Agnostics proactively seek to educate themselves through intellectual debate, discussion, and research. Activist Atheists/Agnostics tend to be vocal advocates for atheistic and agnostic viewpoints; they are often humanistic or naturalistic. Seeker-Agnostics are attuned to metaphysical possibilities, although are not willing to affirm an existence of God. Anti-Theists are vocally and diametrically opposed to any form of theism. A Non-Theist is one who is simply not interested in religion or theism. Finally, a Ritual Atheist/Agnostic will simultaneously hold no belief in a deity, but continue to attribute some utility to a religious tradition;[55] I would classify as "spiritual, but not religious."

[54] Dan Merica, "Behold, the Six Types of Atheists," *CNN,* July 15, 2013, http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/15/the-six-types-of-atheists/ (accessed November 6, 2015).
[55] Christopher F. Silver, "A Research Overview," *Non-Belief in America Research*, http://www.atheismresearch.com (accessed November 6, 2015).

Embedded in these typologies is something that is easily overlooked. Only one category expressly refutes the utility of ritual, but that is narrowly defined in the context of a study on religious expression. Admittedly it is weak to argue the point without conduction an extremely detailed sociological study; there is evidence that ritual and contemplative practices are not only viable but useful for these individuals.

Suzanne Moore, a writer for *The Guardian*, discussed the ways in which ritual continues to be important in the lives of those who claim a secular identity; specifically, she shared the need for some kind of ceremony to celebrate the birth of one of her children.[56] André Comte-Sponville explored this point further. First, with respect to the death, burial, and grief process he acknowledged that the various rituals that surround loss and mourning aid the process to accept the loss as reality.[57] Furthermore, Comte-Sponville explained that a civil wedding, while an acceptable substitute for a religious ceremony, pales in comparison to the emotional significance of a religious ceremony.[58]

The desire for the ceremonial demarcation of a liminal state is a human need and "is the recognition of common humanity,"[59] which is why secularists, humanists or atheists will often develop an equivalent ritual.[60] While it would be nearly impossible to deny the emotional significance of other life-cycle ceremonies (graduation from high school or college, birthdays, and anniversaries), there are holidays that mark critical events in secular society. Consider the significance of Independence Day, Memorial Day, or Veteran's Day in the United States. While in many cases these holidays are imbued

[56] Suzanne Moore, "Why Non-Believers Need Rituals Too," *The Guardian,* December 27, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/27/why-non-believers-need-rituals-atheists (accessed November 5, 2015).
[57] Comte-Sponville, *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, 2007. 8–9.
[58] Comte-Sponville, *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, 2007. 9–10.
[59] Moore, "Non-Believers Need Rituals Too," *The Guardian*, December 27, 2013.
[60] Comte-Sponville, *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, 2007. 9.

with remnants of religious ceremonies, their ritualization is noteworthy. This is even more apparent when one considers the secularization of Christmas to that point that people consider it an American holiday!

It is not only at moments of change when humans seek spiritual rituals. It was explained earlier in this chapter that rituals help order a day and a life. They provide comfort, predictability, and meaning whether they are connected to religion or not. This is no less true should a person not believe in God or distance themselves from religions. The expression of spirituality is a fundamental feature of human existence. Spirituality is necessary to fulfill certain psychological needs, especially self-actualization, love, and belonging, and it continues to be an important facet of people's lives.

While religions and spiritual rituals can be found in nearly every known culture the 21st century, one can observe a change in the nature of spiritual practices, especially in "Western" countries; affiliation with a specific religious organization has decreased in recent decades, and this has coincided with a rise in the number of people engaged in other spiritually fulfilling practices. Recent population studies have shed light on the demographics as they stand at this moment in time. It is beneficial to understand this milieu in order to clearly understand why so many contemporary Jews currently do not find their spiritual home in Judaism.

SPIRITUALITY IN 21ST CENTURY IN THE USA

It is commonly believed today that American Judaism is in crisis. In 2013 the Pew Center published the results of their new research entitled, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*. They found that more than one-fifth of Jewish adults in the USA did not

claim a religion.[61] Some of the public were shocked to see further confirmation of the dwindling involvement of Jewish Americans and proclaimed that this crisis was impossible to ignore.[62] This was not the universal reaction to the Pew's research, but this was a consistent one. Given the benefit of a few years to consider the implications further, I believe that it is safe to say that however worrisome the numbers might be, this is not a new phenomenon. Reflecting on mid-century America historian Jonathan Krasner wrote, "In America generally, by the late 1950's there was a restlessness in the air. The anomie of suburbia, exacerbated by the hollowness of the postwar religious revival and the culture of conformity, left many searching for meaning."[63]

The Jewish community of the 1950s faced additional crises. It had only begun to understand implications and the horror of the European Holocaust during World War II as well as the effect that the newly founded State of Israel would have on Jewish identity for the community and for individuals. Leaders in these decades were anxious at the increased Americanization and assimilation of the younger generations.[64] It was around this time that the Jewish Camping Movement gained momentum as it tried to inspire potentially drifting youths and link them to their Jewish peoplehood, raise a Jewish family, and continue their own Jewish education.[65] The community fell into a panic-induced survival-mode as many exasperated adults left the duty to educate their children to the community, a development that had grown from the centralized supplemental

[61] Sandra Stencel and Tracy Miller eds., *A Portrait of Jewish Americans: Findings from a Pew Research Center Survey of U.S. Jews* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2013), http://pewrsr.ch/16IN5U4 (accessed July 7, 2015), 8.
[62] Gary Rosenblatt, "What Pew Does and Doesn't Tell Us," *The Jewish Week*, October 9, 2013, http://www.thejewishweek.com/editorial-opinion/gary-rosenblatt/what-pew-does-and-doesnt-tell-us (accessed July 27, 2015).
[63] Jonathan B. Krasner, *The Benderly Boys & American Jewish Education* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 417.
[64] Krasner, *Benderly Boys*, 1992. 17.
[65] Jonathan Sarna, "Foreword." in Elie Kaunfer, *Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us About Building Vibrant Jewish Communities* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2012), x.

school model of education. Try as they might, they were not able to deeply inspire the hearts of this generation.[66] The difficulties have only grown in the ensuing decades.

Were it as simple of a task as adding another weight of responsibility on the shoulders of the Greatest Generation raising their children in the post-War United States. The cultural revolutions of the 1960s, New Age spirituality of the 1970s, and the selfishness of the1980s all created their own spiritual challenges. Each generation, in turn, has disengaged little by little. Therefore, it should have been no true surprise when the Pew Center published *the Portrait* in October 2013.

A Portrait of Jewish Americans

The Pew Center's researchers explained that the purpose of their study was to examine what it means to be Jewish in contemporary America according to self-identified Jewish Americans. Rather than settling on an absolute definition, they uncovered a greatly varied definition of identity. The respondents reported that ritual practice, affiliation with a congregation, and even religious belief were no longer deemed essential to a Jewish identity. The *Portrait* stated that on average "one-in-five Jews (22%) now describe themselves as having no religion."[67]

While it was to be anticipated, the percentage of those identifying as Jews of no religion is even higher when the numbers are grouped by generation. Here the Pew Center found that 32% of Jews in the Millennial Generation (born after 1980), identify themselves as having no religion compared to 7% of the Greatest Generation (born between 1914 and 1927), among those in the Silent Generation (born between 1928 and

[66] Krasner, *Benderly Boys*, 1992. 417.
[67] Stencel and Miller eds., *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, 2013. 8.

1945) 14% self-identify as having no religion, 19% of Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), and 26% of Gen X (born between 1965 and 1980).[68]

The authors of the *Portrait* drew a sharp and important distinction between two identities and it is necessary to define them before continuing. "Jews by religion [were defined as] people who say their religion is Jewish (and who do not profess any other religion)," and "Jews of no religion [were defined as] people who describe themselves (religiously) as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular, but who have a Jewish parent or were raised Jewish and who still consider themselves Jewish in some way."[69] The latter descriptor is often called "Cultural Judaism." It highlights the desire for one to be connected to and committed to the Jewish community although not participating in the religious aspects of a Jewish identity. Rather than only describing through negation one should examine what are the active attributes of this Jewish identity.

Determining which aspects of a person's identity defines them as Jewish is not something new for a Jew in the Modern world. Since the earliest days of Jewish Emancipation in Europe, there has been debate as to whether or not Jewishness is a matter or ethnicity, nationality, or religion. It will become clear from the reported findings that this debate has not been settled. For Jews by religion and Jews of no religion cultural identity, character traits, values, and personality traits that form the boundaries of what defines someone as a Jew. Those findings are presented in the table below

[68] Stencel and Miller eds., *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, 2013. 7.
[69] Stencel and Miller eds., *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, 2013. 18.

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Source: Pew Research Center 2013 Survey of U.S. Jews[70]	Jews by Religion	Jews of no Religion	NET Jewish Population
Remembering the Holocaust	76	60	73
Leading an ethical and moral life	73	55	69
Working for justice/equality	60	46	56
Being intellectually curious	51	42	49
Caring about Israel	49	23	43
Having a good sense of humor	43	40	42
Being part of a Jewish community	33	10	28
Observing Jewish law	23	7	19
Eating traditional Jewish foods	16	9	14

The above findings demonstrate the active aspects of a Jewish identity, but there are still other ways by which the respondents described their identity.

Collating the data gathered from respondents, the *Portrait* elaborated that among Jews-by-Religion 55% said that it is mainly a matter of ancestry and culture, 17% believed that it is largely a matter of religion, and 26% stated that it is primarily a matter of both categories. Among Jews-of-No-Religion 83% reported that it is mainly a matter of ancestry and culture, 6% stated that it is largely a matter of religion, and 11% stated that it is primarily a matter of both categories.[71] Based on these statistics it is clear Jewish identity is not as easily described, as it may have appeared to be in the past. This has been troubling for some.

Internationally and domestically reporters, bloggers, and community leaders rushed to analyze the findings of *The Portrait of Jewish Americans*. Some found hopeful notes in some of the data, and others lampooned the idea that pride, a love of humor, or a

[70] Stencel and Miller eds., *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, 2013. 55.
[71] Stencel and Miller eds., *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, 2013. 54.

sense of belonging could be enough to sustain the Jewish people into the future.[72] Another editorial commented with dismay on the detachment from Jewish religious practice, diminishing congregational affiliation, and distancing from a parochial identity among those who were raised in Jewishly progressive homes; a trend which was concurrent with a growing population of young adults who identified as orthodox. Furthermore, these two trends present a potentially problematic polarization of the community.[73]

Even those who found hope in the data acknowledged the potential danger. Rabbi Dan Moskovitz reflected, "'Cultural Jews raising their kids without religion' and 'the steady decline in Jewish practice from one generation to the next' [leads] to a disturbing conclusion. Once Jews no longer define themselves as Jewish through religion, it is highly unlikely that they or their children ever will again. In short, when Jews walk away from shul they don't come back."[74] Troubling as this may be, the Jews seem to have perpetually been on the edge of disappearing. Rabbi Moscovitz took solace by turning to Simon Rawidowicz's thesis of *Israel, the Ever-Dying People, and Other Essays.* In this work Rawidowicz posited that the Jewish people consistently face crises, and these crises are defining moments from which we can shape Jewish practice going forward.[75] October 2013 is not the first time the Jewish people have looked at the world around them and realized that something needed to change.

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[72] Jonathan S. Tobin, "American Jews: Laughing But Shrinking," *Commentary Magazine*, October 1, 2013, https://www.commentarymagazine.com/culture-civilization/religion/judaism/american-jews-laughing-but-shrinking-pew-study/ (accessed on September 9, 2015).
[73] Samuel Heilman, "Pew Report on U.S. Jews: A Case of Two Extremes," *Haaretz*, October 7, 2013, http://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-1.550893 (accessed September 29, 2015).
[74] Rabbi Dan Moskovitz, "Jews: The Ever-Dying People: A Reform Perspective on the Pew Survey on Jewish Americans," *The Jewish Journal*, October 9, 2013, http://www.jewishjournal.com/opinion/article/jews_the_ever_dying_people_a_reform_perspective_on_the_pew_survey_on_jewish (accessed September 30, 2015).
[75] Moskovitz, "Jews: The Ever-Dying People," *The Jewish Journal*, October 9, 2013.

The issue is not the shifting demographics, but that for the last several decades, if not a few generations, the spiritual needs of the Jewish people in the United States have not been met by the same methods as before. The Jewish people are not dying; they are quite simply no longer willing to live in a system that cannot stand up to the world in which they live. Rabbi Rami Shapiro expressed this view in his response to the Pew Report.

> The central message of the "Portrait of American Jews" is that the meaning at the heart of rabbinic Judaism—the idea that there is a benevolent Creator God in charge of the universe and covenanted with Jews in a quid pro quo system of "do good, get good" where "good" is defined as whatever rabbis value—is dead. Regardless of denominational emendation, despite the tweaking of philosophers and footnotes in our prayer books warning the reader not to take our prayers at their word, this is still the message imparted to our people through our liturgies, and it just doesn't fly.[76]

Or, as Shapiro flippantly wrote, "Tevya is dead. Long live Tevya."[77]And while it is important to notice and mourn the loss of Tevya and his Judaism, this is not the first time in our history when we have been forced to meet a new and challenging reality.

Evolutions of Judaism, A Very Brief Historical Survey

Our tradition teaches us that first we were a small tribe in the southern Levant. Then we were slaves to Pharaoh before we were a people, wandering the desert until reconquering the homeland of Israel/Yaakov our patriarch. Our ancestors built there a kingdom and then were banished by a conquering army. We were then allowed to return only to have a second great temple demolished and cast into exile again. None can claim that Judaism of today has carried on the same practices as they were used over two millennia ago. The Tannaitic Rabbis acknowledged their own distance from the recorded

[76] Rami Shapiro, "My Response to 'A Portrait of Jewish Americans,'" *Tikkun Magazine*, October 25, 2013, http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/rami-shapiro-responds-to-the-pew-report-on-american-jewry (accessed July 29, 2015).
[77] Shapiro, "My Response." *Tikkun Magazine*. October 25, 2013.

Revelation at Sinai. Our reality has changed so much more in the nearly two thousand years since then.

Before we even begin to consider the Rabbinic Judaism of the 2nd century CE it is possible to see that the Torah itself holds proof of adjustments over time. Biblical scholarship has helped us in this endeavor, and in a 1910 address to the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Rabbi Jacob Raisin asserted that Deuteronomy itself "was the first textbook of Reform Judaism."[78] What he meant by this statement was that the newly embraced ability to discern varied strata of biblical text one can see that Deuteronomy is a dramatically different text from the first four books of the Torah. By claiming that Deuteronomy was an effort of reform implies that at some point, probably during the reign of King Josiah, this work was added to the cannon to reshape the practice of Israelite ritual.

Another dramatic change was forced upon the Jewish people when the Romans demolished the Second Temple in 70 CE. The result was the development of rabbinic Judaism, which, most if not all, scholars agree that, "Jewish religion, in virtually every form we encounter it, is the product of a circle of thinkers and scholars called 'the Rabbis' or the 'Sages,' who flourished during the first five centuries of the Common Era, which we therefore designate as 'the Rabbinic Period.'"[79]

The Talmud preserves an anecdote for us. As Moshe went to receive the Torah from God, he found God drawing elaborate crowns on the tops of letters. Curious to their meaning Moshe asks for an explanation. God allows him to sit in the back of Rabbi

[78] Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 4.
[79] Mark Washofsky, *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice, Revised Edition* (New York, NY: URJ Press, 2010), xvii–xviii.

Akiva's class-centuries later. When Moshe was completely unable to follow the discourse of the class he was dejected until a student asked for an explanation of a certain principle. Akiva responded that it was a ***halacha*** from Moshe on Sinai.[80] If Moshe himself was unfamiliar with the teachings derived from the revelation he was receiving it is clear that there had been a dramatic difference between the Jewish practice of Moshe and that of Rabbi Akiva.

Beginning with the emendations to Jewish custom that we can find in ***Tanakh***– Jewish Bible itself and the later reaction of the ***Mishnah*** and the ***Talmudim*** of Jerusalem and Babylon, Jewish literature itself demonstrates a propensity for adapting to changing situations. We have the gift of access to the scholarly commentary and interpretation of these texts since their recension, and today some of these are included in a standard edition of the printed ***Talmud*** or ***Mishnah***. In addition, these rabbis often generated their own literature, which was then commented upon by successive generations. Each historical layer of literature attests to a further development of Jewish thought and how context was applied to the traditional texts, some gaining their own authority.

On specific genre of Jewish literature that was intended to have authority at the time of composition–and perhaps into the future– is actually the largest collection of rabbinic writing numbering over three thousand volumes of material. The Responsa literature was generated as authoritative rabbis were asked questions with regard to specific situations that, usually, another rabbi was unable to address. Over the centuries, the collections of responsa now number over three hundred thousand answers to individual questions. The decision – ***t'shuvah*** that the rabbi reached was, and still is,

[80] Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Menachot 29b.

accompanied by relevant sources, interpretations, and previous decisions but are the product of a specific place and time demonstrating again how Judaism has developed in response to changing realities.[81]

The evolution of Judaism in response to the environment as evidenced in these texts was justification enough for those who would later be considered the founders of Reform Judaism. These changes were a response to the modern world, as Dr. Michael A. Meyer has explained. "Because ***Sephardi*** Jewry was generally more open to its cultural environment, because its decisions in matters of ritual law were, for the most part, less rigorous than those of the ***Ashkenazim***, and because it was centered less upon the Talmud, the ***Sephardim*** frequently served the early Reform movement as a model."[82]

As Jews became more integrated into the western world in the 18th and 19th centuries, some believed that changes needed to be made to the observances that hindered some from participating as fully in society as they desired. Also inspired by the aesthetics of worship in nearby churches and contemporary music, early reforms many feel more comfortable bringing their non-Jewish acquaintances and business associates to their communities. This was not a break from tradition, but a renovation that brought Judaism up to the code by which their non-Jewish contemporaries assessed the validity of practice.

The evolution of Judaism did not stop in the 1800s. Technological innovations continue to be discussed and introduced in all of the "mainstream" denominations. Whether it is using a prepaid gift card so that one does not spend money on ***Shabbat***, building enormous parking lots to accommodate all of the cars on ***Yamim Norai'm***, or

[81] Washofsky, *Jewish Living*, 2010. xx.
[82] Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 1995. 7.

live-streaming services to allow the homebound to watch services Judaism has consistently faced challenges and embraced innovations. If one is to learn anything from the declining membership and the apparent disengagement as demonstrated by the Pew Center's *Portrait of Jewish Americans,* it is that the time is right for a slight shift in emphasis in the Jewish community.

It would be logical to describe what this shift is in detail at this moment. In the shortest terms possible it involves a decision to openly and honestly engage with the challenging aspects of our tradition, and to incorporate reflective practices that inspire a life lived with ***Kavannah*** – intentionality. This will be addressed in greater detail in the coming chapters. Instead of stating exactly why a renewed focus on ***Kavannah*** is a way for many to reclaim their Jewish spiritual inheritance it would be prudent to let the actions and voices of the Jews who are not in our pews explain why they leave and what it is they desire from a spiritual experience.

UNDERSTANDING THE PARADIGM

It is in human nature to see the world from one's own perspective; it is the only one from which we have to operate. For those who are working in an established institution, it boggles the mind why a person would not want to participate in something that is near and dear to the hearts of the leadership. One might have an exceedingly difficult time trying to understand why policies, practices, values, and programming may need to be altered in order to better engage those who have drifted. It is even more difficult if not nearly impossible to change an organization because human beings thrive on stasis and predictability. In order to address a problem, one must first step back from

the rigid categories that already define the world and then try to better understand the needs of a potential constituency. In fact, our tradition demands this of us.

One of the great sages from before the Tannaitic period, Hillel, advised that one should "not judge your fellow until you have stood in [their] place."[83] In order to accomplish this feat to the best possible degree, it is necessary to understand the paradigm through which younger adults–most often limited to Millennials, but this is not exclusive–view the world and analyze the barriers that they perceive.

The barriers to participation are logical when we see the world through the eyes of a younger adult. These are the generations that grew up with access to a wealth of information at increasing speeds. It is true that the older of the two generations may have learned how to do research out of a card catalog. However, technological advancements saturated consumers as they entered the workforce. This is even more the case for Millennials who have grown up immersed in technology, some even learning how to type on a keyboard before learning to write in cursive. Information has always been at the tips of their fingers, and social interaction moved quickly from the landline and instant message applications to texts and Instagram.

There is a seemingly infinite wealth of information available in the world. Recall the thousands of ***t'shuvot*** the rabbis issued during the Medieval Renaissance world, and that was at a time when it was still expensive to create a written document that could withstand the ravages of time, and this does not even begin to consider what has been written in the last few hundred years that is readily available around the world! Sociologist Max Weber commented that Jewish tradition has a rather steep learning curve

[83] Mishnah, Avot, 2:5.

with much material to master in order to be considered a literate Jewish Adult.[84] Even with a high bar of education, one must reach in order to fully take part in the Jewish community the organizations of today are faced with the added challenge, and opportunity, of trying to reach out to the most highly educated generation in the history of the United States.[85]

This can inspire the leaders of tomorrow, as Rabbi Richard Sarason, Dean the Graduate School of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion spoke to this during his Convocation Address to the College-Institute's Cincinnati campus in the fall of 2015. Discussing a study completed by the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University (a study which was commissioned HUC–JIR), Dr. Sarason concluded that the Reform Rabbis of tomorrow must have a deep knowledge of Jewish theological, textual and historical traditions in order to the essential questions of life through a Jewish lens.[86]The training is necessary because there is a thirst for knowledge among those actively taking part in the Jewish community. Just as important as the access to knowledge and information is that the learning must be authentic.

One rabbi shared his thoughts on this topic, writing, "Being a liberal rabbi today is like being a baker in a community that's gluten intolerant. You kill yourself coming up with new versions of old favorites, but it just doesn't taste right, and nobody will eat it."[87] Setting aside the premise that gluten-free food cannot be flavorful; Rabbi Shapiro made an acutely accurate observation when a product—I hesitate to compare religion and spiritual to a commodity—masquerades as something it is not, we know it. Consider the

[84] Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 1969. 154.
[85] Chandler, "The Spiritual but Not Religious Millennial," *Spiritual But Not Religious Blog*, August 6, 2014.
[86] Rabbi Richard Sarason, PhD., "Untitled Convocation Address," (convocation address, Scheuer Chapel on the Cincinnati Campus of the Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, OH, August 27, 2015).
[87] Shapiro, "My Response," *Tikkun Magazine,* October 25, 2013.

difficulty one has in preparing a ***parve***–neutral chocolate dish compared with a milk-based one. The example holds up. It is not enough to change the superficial elements; the changes must be authentic and simultaneously pluck the heartstrings of a generation starving for meaning.

It would be such a wonderful place for a leader to utter the words Rabbi Shapiro wrote that he could say,

> If I were honest, I'd admit to my congregation that I don't believe a word of what I read in the siddur. If I did that a third of my people would cheer because they don't believe it either. Another third would walk out because they do believe it. And the final third would seek to fire me not because they give a damn about beliefs, but because they've been trying to fire me from the day they hired me—on principle![88]

As flippant as Rabbi Shapiro may have been in this statement he acknowledges that he too struggles with some parts of the tradition he is challenged with upholding. This is the authenticity that people are demanding and are willing to leave if he or she sense that the wool is being pulled over his or her eyes. This is true not only in learning but also in the changes that some institutions have made to their ***t'filah***.

Consider the following example, although out respect for confidentiality it cannot be attributed: I was working with a group of senior high-school students and underclass-college students who were discussing their desire for more meaningful prayer services. They wanted melodies with which they could sing along; they wanted authentic Hebrew, and they wanted it to be beautiful. According to their description, the services that were presented one Friday night during a regional convention of High School students was a dated musical style which—as they described—felt more appropriate on Broadway than in the synagogue.

[88] Shapiro, "My Response," *Tikkun Magazine,* October 25, 2013.

This is not to berate those who have worked tirelessly to reinvigorate their communities and organizations. It is intended as a reminder for those demanding change that change is astoundingly challenging to affect because homeostasis is an incredibly powerful force that is difficult to overcome. Researchers Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey explore many of these issues in their work *Immunity to Change*. The book opens with a shocking example; among individuals with life-threatening health conditions that learned from their doctors that without making the necessary changes lest they die, only one-in-seven were able to change their habits.[89]

It is easy for an organization to fear change because it might not work. Not only that, but change is challenging because it requires a true change in behavior, thought, and emotion surrounding the behavior or trait. Real change takes real effort, not only sincerity.[90] It is also challenging for an organization to change course because there are several other activities in which they are engaged, and there does not appear to be the requisite resources of time and money to effectively introduce the appropriate elements.[91]

A third aspect of the "Millennial Paradigm" has grown out of their increasing access to information; they have been taught to challenge the status quo. [92] In an article for *The Jewish Daily Forward* Juliana Schnur wrote,

> One of my peers on the GA [Jewish Federations of North America's annual General Assembly in Jerusalem] made a compelling statement yesterday when he compared Jewish institutions to platypuses. "We know what they are," he asserted, "but we don't quite understand them." The framework of American Jewish life is an "alphabet soup" of membership-based organizations that have little or no connection with the rising generation.[93]

[89] Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey, *Immunity to Change* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press, 2009), 1.
[90] Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 2009. 39.
[91] Mark Williams and Danny Penman, *Mindfulness: An Eight-Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World* (New York, NY: Rodale Press, 2011), 224.
[92] Chandler, "The Spiritual but Not Religious Millennial." *Spiritual But Not Religious Blog*. August 6, 2014.
[93] Juliana Schnur, "Millennials Must Grab Keys to Jewish 'Car,'" *The Jewish Daily Forward*, November 20, 2013, http://forward.com/opinion/188034/millennials-must-grab-keys-to-jewish-car/ (accessed September 7, 2015).

For many, it feels as though there is no place for them to help lead, and it can be even more maddening for those who feel that they do not even have a place to be involved in the organization or community because it does not reflect their needs, values, or practices. [94]In the absence of a comfortable home in a community and stymied when attempting to make changes, some seize on the "entrepreneurial spirit that has long defined America."[95] The reaction typically takes on three forms, disaffiliation completely, creating a new community, or defining one's own spiritual path.

The communal route is a fascinating one as these younger adults establish their own versions of something that already existed. These Independent Minyanim have been growing in communities that are densely populated. In cities like New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco there is often a collection of newly affluent and highly energized young Jews.[96] And in the footsteps of Second Wave Feminism and the Gay Rights Movements, these aspiring organizers have seen ways to understand who they are, what they want, and not be afraid to create it or advocate for it.[97]

The individual route, one that has long been endorsed by the Reform Movement, has encouraged people to choose which ***mitzvot*** they would like to observe; as barriers between religions become more transparent, and the barriers between denominations are blurred, it makes less sense for a person to subscribe to a specific organization, often at great cost,[98] especially if they feel unwelcome. This also leaves a wonderful opening for

[94] Sonja Sharp, "40 Percent of Jewish Millennials Are Unaffiliated. That Doesn't Mean They're Giving Up On Judaism," *The Week*, November 21, 2014, http://theweek.com/articles/441987/40-percent-jewish-millennials-are-unaffiliated-that-doesnt-mean-theyre-giving-judaism (accessed September 7, 2015).
[95] Eric Weiner, "Americans: Undecided About God?" *The New York Times*, December 10, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/opinion/sunday/americans-and-god.html?_r=0 (accessed September 6, 2015).
[96] Sarna, "Foreword," in Kaunfer, *Empowered Judaism*, 2012. xiii.
[97] Sarna, "Foreword," in Kaunfer, *Empowered Judaism*, 2012. xi–xii.
[98] Schnur, "Keys to Jewish Car," *The Jewish Daily Forward*, November 20, 2013.

the growth of people who label themselves as Spiritual, But Not Religious. It is empowering for these individuals to stake their own claim on their spiritual path,[99] and is encouraging for the roughly 60% of Jews who choose to not join a congregation.[100]

In our increasingly open and pluralistic society people turn to practices of their friends and neighbors that seem to be fulfilling in other ways. This is actually the case for some of the early "Jubus"–Jews with a proclivity for Buddhist practices and meditation,[101] and the barriers between traditions have become even more permeable as a result of increased connectivity and awareness of others. In a survey conducted by a popular youth-focused business, "One Latina woman who was raised Catholic noted, 'My research into it seems to indicate that Jesus would make a good Buddhist and Shakyamuni a good Christian.'"[102] The result is a sort of Do-It-Yourself spirituality that may or not be closely affiliated with a religious tradition.

Mindfulness, one such spiritual path, has experienced a boom in recent years. The talk of Mindfulness has begun to permeate almost all sectors of the Western world. TIME Magazine explored "the Mindful Revolution" as its cover story in January 2014,[103] and a contributor to the Huffington Post proclaimed that same year as the "Year of Mindful Living,"[104] In the next chapter we will explore in greater detail what exactly Mindfulness is and how it relates to Jewish spiritual practice and ***Kavannah***. In short, Mindfulness is a

[99] John Blake, "Are There Dangers in Being 'Spiritual but not Religious?'" *CNN*, June 9, 2010, http://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/personal/06/03/spiritual.but.not.religious/index.html?hpt=C1 (accessed August 15, 2015).
[100] Stencel and Miller eds., *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, 2013. 15.
[101] Michelle Goldberg, "The Roots of Mindfulness," *Tablet Magazine,* October 8, 2015, http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/193989/the-roots-of-mindfulness (accessed October 13, 2015).
[102] Hillhouse, "Religion 2.0," *MTV Insights*, undated 2013.
[103] Staff, "The Mindful Revolution," *Mindfulness.org,* January 23, 2014, http://www.mindful.org/the-mindful-revolution/ (accessed October 4, 2015).
[104] Carolyn Gregoire, "Why 2014 Will Be the Year of Mindful Living," *The Huffington Post*, January 1, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/01/02/will-2014-be-the-year-of-_0_n_4523975.html?ncid=edlinkusaolp00000003 (accessed October 4, 2015).

term that encompasses several strategies and practices that are intended to ground a person in the reality of the moment and live more presently. Tim Ryan, a congressman from Ohio and strong proponent of incorporating Mindfulness into a person's practice wrote the following in his book, *A Mindful Nation*,

> Lots of activities can spark our mindfulness–whatever gives us periods of space and peace and solitude or takes us from distraction into fully focusing on what we're doing: taking a moment to pause and reflect rather than barging ahead. Listening instead of speaking. Contemplative prayer. Spending time in our garden. Doing yoga. Martial arts. Swimming some laps. Pausing for a shared family moment of silence before we start our meal.[105]

Congressman Ryan effectively explained the range of practices in which a person might engage to cultivate Mindfulness, and this demonstrates precisely why it is attractive to those who have felt left out or locked out of the religious communities of their childhood. This is precisely what is happening for many younger adults. Some seek out spiritual expression through Yoga,[106] a martial art,[107] or art.[108] Others turn towards practices of meditation[109] or branch out from meditation into Mindfulness and seek ways to find meaning in our daily life.[110] One young man who had grown up at camp reconnected with his spiritual side while hiking the Appalachian Trail![111]

These examples clarify that the spiritual searching, while potentially outside the confines of a religious tradition, is still critically important because these younger adults

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[105] Tim Ryan, *A Mindful Nation: How a Simple Practice Can Help Us Reduce Stress, Improve Performance, and Recapture the American Spirit* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2012), 17–18.
[106] Taffy Brodesser-Akner, "Is Yoga Kosher?" *Tablet Magazine*, January 5, 2010, http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/23099/is-yoga-kosher (accessed September 6, 2015).
[107] Ryan, *A Mindful Nation,* 2012. 17–18.
[108] Z.K. Lowenfels, "A Generation Without Religion: How Millennials Identify with Spirituality," *Elite Daily*, April 29, 2014, http://elitedaily.com/life/a-generation-without-religion-how-millennials-identify-with-spirituality/ (accessed August 31, 2015).
[109] Sylvia Boorstein, PhD., Interview with Krista Tippett, On Being: What We Nurture. FM 91.7, WVXU, May 9, 2013, http://www.onbeing.org/program/what-we-nurture/transcript/333 (accessed July 27, 2015).
[110] Lowenfels. "A Generation Without Religion," *Elite Daily*, April 29, 2014.
[111] Jonathan Zimmerman, "Finding God in the Wilderness," *Tablet Magazine*, July 26, 2012, http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/107346/finding-god-in-the-wilderness (accessed September 7, 2015).

continue to seek ways to connect with one another and with the world. Instead of affiliating with a specific dogma or religious practice some identify themselves by a relatively new phrase, "Spiritual, But Not Religious." Already by 2009, one poll found that 72% of the Millennials they surveyed found themselves identifying as more spiritual than religious.[112] Only a few years later, Rabbi Ralph Mecklenburger commented in his book *Our Religious Brains* that 24% of respondents in a recent poll claimed the category "Spiritual but Not Religious" as a unique identity. It is even more noteworthy that this is beyond the traditional terms for "atheist" and "agnostic" which used to serve as an umbrella to capture this demographic group.[113] While it is abundantly evident that there is still an intense desire for spiritual fulfillment, there is also a paradox of identities at work, especially in the Jewish community.

Given the obstacles that younger adults perceive it is little wonder that they are disaffected. It is not obvious to them how Judaism can speak to their spiritual needs, they cynical about the apparent inauthenticity, and feel blocked from leadership roles that would allow them to help move in a direction that would be appealing to them. As a result, they seek other ways to have their spiritual needs met, but it is important to note that the *Portrait* also found that there is still a strong tendency towards identifying as a Jew. This presents an interesting paradox. Many of these younger adults who are leaving the organized religious world still feel a strong kinship towards Judaism. 70% of Jews surveyed by the Pew Research Center said that they attended a Passover Seder in the last year, and that includes 42% of Jews of no religion who did so.[114] Of the Jews of no

[112] Blake, "Dangers in 'SBNR?'" *CNN*, June 9, 2010.
[113] Mecklenburger, *Our Religious Brains*, 2012. 40.
[114] Stencel and Miller eds., *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, 2013. 77.

religion surveyed in 2013, half had still attended services,[115] not to mention the reality that each of these respondents identified themselves as Jewish!

Jewish identity remains an important aspect of younger adults in the 21st century, which means it is the religious aspects that are the source of frustration. As one editorialist phrased it, they are not running away from God but running away from religion. [116] As absurd as it may sound, this reality actually provides some hope. There are two treasures buried by the contemporary state of spirituality. One is the latent Jewish identity that hides beneath the secularized or searching spirituality of younger adults, and the other is the vibrant Jewish paths to spirituality that are hidden in our tradition. Both lay in wait to be discovered.

Therefore, the course of action one can uncover from the contemporary "crisis" of dwindling Jewish participation is to change what that means. Perhaps the days of sanctuary pews being filled on a Friday night are behind us. If we look at our history, we can see that there has never been one single way to be a Jew over the last several millennia. The Jewish community is no stranger to shifting the spiritual practice to fit the needs of the time. Historian Jonathan Sarna noted a unique feature in the contemporary world; there has been a "renewal of [the] spiritual across the spectrum of American Jewish religious life. Like Americans generally, many Jews during these years shifted the emphasis of their faith from moralism to devotion and the aesthetics of worship. They sought to complement social justice and rational teachings that appealed to the mind with spiritual and emotive religious experience that appealed to the heart and the soul."[117]

[115] Stencel and Miller eds., *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, 2013. 75.
[116] Weiner, "Americans: Undecided About God?" *The New York Times*, December 10, 2011.
[117] Sarna, "Foreword," in Kaunfer, *Empowered Judaism*, 2012. xi.

Many 21st century Jews have shifted their spiritual ritual activities away from Judaism and towards a trans-religious or even secular practice, while maintaining a connection to the culture, the community, or continuing to identify as Jewish. The fragmentation of identity is, in this case, unnecessary. While Mindfulness and other contemplative and spiritual disciplines have genuine benefits, there is no special need for the drift as Judaism includes a diverse range of spiritual practices. This is true not only within liberal or progressive iterations of Judaism because, despite their claim of singular authentic practice even in Orthodoxy there is no "one way to Jew."[118]

Even more important than the simple multiplicity of Jewish spiritual rituals is the similarity between the Jewish routines and the activities and intentions that are Mindfulness. As will be discussed later in this work, the concept of ***Kavannah***—intentionality in Judaism is surprisingly similar to Mindfulness. So similar, in fact, that I believe this is the very spirituality that is missing from the lives of the "Spiritual but not Religious" Jew.

[118] Badzin, "Can Jewish Culture Exist Without Religion?" *TCJewfolk,* June 2, 2015.

Chapter 2: Mindfulness, A Secular Spirituality

Whether driven by the desire for understanding the world[119] or a subconscious psychological motivation,[120] it should be understood that spiritual expression is an innate desire of human consciousness. It is this part of a self-aware mind that not only makes us human seems, leads people to build meaningful rituals, communities, theologies, and narratives that help make sense out of a confusing and terrifying world. While it is readily apparent that a variety of traditions, religions, and cultures offer untold multitudes of practices to find that meaning and purpose, it is also the case that many secularists or atheists create rituals to order their lives outside the boundaries of established religions.

People ritualize their actions or engage in spiritual exercises because those engaged in an intentional discipline have reported a greater sense of wellbeing. More important, though, is that these benefits have been scientifically demonstrated.[121] Furthermore, researchers have supported the conclusion that these perceived benefits, including resiliency and resistance to depression, are reflected in the psychological and neurological construction of an engaged spiritual individual. As one study concluded, the neural cortex that is activated during meditative or contemplative practices is the very same one that shrinks in subjects experiencing a depression.[122]

While some conclude that these experiences are more meaningful when contextualized within a culture or tradition,[123] a group of practices has become

[119] Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 1969. 1.
[120] Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch, *Psychology of Religion*, 1996. 17–21.
[121] Bourg, "Individuation, Interiority, and Spiritual Traditions," in Moberg, *Spiritual Wellbeing*, 15–22, 1979. 15–17.
[122] Miller, et al., "Neuroanatomical Correlates of Religiosity and Spirituality," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, (February 2014). 128–129.
[123] Comte-Sponville, *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, 2007. 135.

dramatically more popular in recent decades as young adults have created their own spiritual paths. The concept of "mindfulness" or intentionality has existed for centuries within religious traditions, and is most often associated with Buddhism: "Mindfulness" was brought into the American new–age and counter–cultural settings in the 1960s and 1970s; in the early 21st century it has become increasingly popular as a secular spirituality.[124] The Huffington Post acknowledged this trend and proclaimed 2014 the "Year of Mindful Living,"[125] and TIME Magazine explored "the Mindful Revolution" as its cover story early that same year.[126] National leaders,[127] educators,[128] and medical professionals[129] have endorsed, adopted, or adapted some Mindfulness exercises.

Because my hypothesis that, should we reclaim ***Kavannah*** as authentic Jewish spiritual expression it will engage younger Jewish adults is based on the overlap between ***Kavannah*** and Mindfulness, it is absolutely essential to explore the practices that fall under the umbrella of Mindfulness. It is necessary to first distinguish between the Buddhist concept and the contemporary phenomenon, and then explore Mindlessness and how developments of the 20th and 21st centuries have exacerbated it. This project will then explore Mindfulness and introduce some of the practices that accomplished practitioners recommend. The last endeavor of this chapter will be to address some of the critiques that people have levied against Mindfulness.

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[124] Carolyn Gregoire, "Actually TIME, This is What the 'Mindful Revolution' Really Looks Like," *The Huffington Post*, February 11, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/04/this-is-proof-that-mindfu_n_4697734.html (accessed September 6, 2015).
[125] Carolyn Gregoire, "Why 2014 Will Be the Year of Mindful Living," *The Huffington Post*, January 1, 2014.
[126] Staff, "The Mindful Revolution," *Mindfulness.org*, January 23, 2014.
[127] Ryan, *A Mindful Nation*, 2012. xvii–xviii.
[128] Gregoire, "What the 'Mindful Revolution' Really Looks Like," *The Huffington Post*, February 11, 2014.
[129] Gregoire, "What the 'Mindful Revolution' Really Looks Like," *The Huffington Post*, February 11, 2014.

BUDDHIST MINDFULNESS

The word Mindfulness often evokes thoughts of Buddhist practice. While the two practices share a similar point of origin, albeit at different points in human history, the distinctions are important. The fist distinction is that Buddhism is a religious philosophy, and at times includes a defined theology. Buddhism begins with two assumptions: all experiences in life are unsatisfying and lead to suffering, and everything in life is temporary. Suffering should be understood as deeper than pain or loss. In Buddhism suffering is an intensely felt dissonance between an ideal state and reality; it is endemic to human existence due to an instinctive human need to resist entropy and change, the driving forces of nature.[130]

Furthermore, Buddhism understands the compulsion to resist the forces of nature is actually a quest for peace and happiness. Since this is the genuine human desire, there must be a way to achieve peace and happiness and escape suffering. This can be accomplished by one who is able to transcend the minutia of daily life and be at peace with what comes one's way.[131] In order to develop this ability, a Buddhist needs to regularly practice a ritualized meditation.

> Meditation sharpens your concentration and your thinking power. Then, piece by piece, your own subconscious notices and mechanics become clear to you. Your intuition sharpens. The precision of your thought increase, and gradually you come to a direct knowledge of things as they really are, without prejudice and without illusion.[132]

Vipassana, this specific meditation technique, is intended to help the meditator achieve an awareness of what is going on in the body, mind, and world.[133] In becoming aware of the

[130] Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, 2011. 1–5.
[131] Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, 2011. 6–8.
[132] Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, 2011. 10.
[133] Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, 2011. 12–13.

sensations and events of the world, a person is able to transcend the struggles of life's events and be in a state of peace and happiness.

One does not transcend suffering because he or she becomes resistant to the suffering in the world, but because they are able to grasp the second assumption mentioned earlier; everything is temporary. The ultimate end of all human life, all life really, is death. If all life ends, then it should follow that all experiences come to an end, and nothing lasts forever. Everything is temporary,[134] and this includes transcending awareness of the temporary nature of the world. In sum, mindfulness in Buddhism is the realization that the current situation cannot last, and relishing the moments that a person has.

MINDLESSNESS AND ITS CAUSES

Dr. Ellen Langer, styled by some as the 'Mother of Mindfulness,'[135] first became interested in Mindfulness and Mindlessness in the 1970s. While working in a nursing home, she observed that residents were happier and healthier when empowered to make more decisions in their daily lives.[136] Dr. Langer observed that one of the major forces driving unhappiness was rooted in the mindless completion of daily tasks. In other words, one source of suffering is a lack of agency. Without choice or intention, a person's actions become devoid of meaning—their actions, as a result, become mindless.

An inability to make meaningful decisions in one's life is not the only cause of Mindlessness. In some instances, the thoughtless action is more efficient. The ability to

[134] Gunaratana, *Mindfulness in Plain English*, 2011. 1–5.
[135] Krista Tippett, Ellen Langer Interview with Krista Tippett, On Being: Science of Mindlessness and Mindfulness. FM 91.7, WVXU, September 13, 2015, http://www.onbeing.org/program/ellen-langer-science-of-mindlessness-and-mindfulness/transcript/6335 (accessed September 17, 2015).
[136] Ellen J. Langer, *Mindfulness* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1989), 1.

act without focused thought frees the mind and allows a person to perform intricate and complicated tasks. Consider how many muscles must be activated in a specific order to walk or speak, not to mention sing and play an instrument or run while throwing a football to an open receiver. The mind's ability to develop habits is to humanity's advantage. They for quick reaction and seamless interaction with the world, and efficiency and productivity are the benefits.

The ability to automate several behaviors has been an important adaptive feature of our species. It has not only allowed us to develop complicated skills, but it has helped our ancestors survive. Early humans survived the dangerous conditions of the wild, the frontiers, the deserts, and jungles. They ran from the rustling in the bushes and slew their prey with a quick and accurate throw of their spear. We have inherited, in the very fiber of our being, the ability to learn how to quickly react to the world around us in order to stay safe and pass on our predisposed instincts to the next generation.

As beneficial as these this skill has been for humanity, there are significant drawbacks, especially now that most of us are not being haunted by dangers lurking around every corner. The human mind continues to develop habits in order to respond to stimuli quickly, however, this instinct "sees the world indirectly, through a veil of concepts that short-circuit your senses so that you no longer directly experience yourself and the world,"[137] Without careful thought, a person's life can easily be reduced to the routine of sleep, eat, work, eat, and repeat. Consider the consequences of spending one's entire life in this haze of automatic action. This is a life devoid of meaning, a complete blur.

[137] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 105.

Mark Williams and Danny Penman—two experts and authors of a book intended to help a person cultivate Mindfulness practices over the course of two months—have coined the term "Doing Mode" to describe a mindless life. They have wonderfully articulated both the benefits and drawbacks of the turning too many of life's choices over to habitual autopilot.

> Doing Mode is truly brilliant at automating our life using habits, and yet it's the feature that we notice the least. Without the mind's ability to learn from repetition, we'd still be trying to remember how to tie our shoelaces, but the downside comes when you cede too much control to the autopilot. You can easily end up thinking, working, eating, walking or driving without clear awareness of what you are doing. The danger is that you miss much of your life this way.[138]

This could be something as simple as walking into a room and forgetting the reason for entering, responding mindlessly and immediately to the beep or buzz of a cell phone or pager, or carelessly driving home even though you intended to go elsewhere. I am certainly not the only person who has experienced these minor inconveniences.

These unconscious choices could have detrimental consequences; spending hours on surfing the Internet, eating out of habit regardless of the degree of hunger, or thoughtlessly channel surfing are not indicators of a vibrant and engaged lifestyle. Even though a person may want to participate wholly in life, it is a part of human nature to create habits and let Mindlessness creep in.

In order to find the solution, one must first understand the problem. One could organize the traits of mindlessness in several different ways; I have found that they can most often be grouped into two overarching classifications: Conditioned Responses and Inflexible Paradigms. These two categories describe the instinctual ways in which we naturally develop efficient habits.

[138] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 37–38.

Conditioned Responses

Conditioned Responses are the automatic behaviors that are developed over time, and through repetition. It is wonderfully illustrated by Pavlov's well-known experiment that demonstrated classical conditioning, which was based on the hypothesis that a stimulus accompanied by a reward leads to a conditioned habit. In the same way that Pavlov's dogs learned to subconsciously anticipate food when the bell was sounded, humans develop conditioned responses to stimuli, obstacles, challenges, and dangers when they are rewarded for their response. One example is the toddler who is rewarded with their parents' doting affection when they throw a tantrum; the extreme result of rewarding this behavior too old in life—no reasonable person should fault a parent for responding to the cries of an infant—is a person like Veruca Salt in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

While a conditioned response may be helpful, they have surely helped humans survive and become more efficient, they also create rigidity. This is especially disadvantageous when responding to novel challenges. Psychologists Abraham Luchins and Edith Hirsch Luchins demonstrated this in the results of an experiment on mental set–*Einstellung*.[139] Luchins and Luchins asked their subjects to answer a mathematical problem involving drawing different volumes of water with jars of various sizes. After the subjects had solved different iterations of the same that only had one solution, only one combination of jars that would yield the fewest number of trips, they were presented with a different problem with several additional steps. Even though a simpler and more

[139] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 52.

cunning answer was possible, the participants failed to identify it because they had been conditioned to respond quickly.[140]

While one solution might yield a correct result, often other options exist. Consider regularly driving from one place to another at a specific time of day. During lightly traveled hours, a left turn out of the parking lot leads quickly to a major road or highway, which in turn connects to the destination. Should a person need to leave at a more heavily trafficked time, the congestion ensures that it is impossible to make an efficient left turn. The result of habituated conditioned response is that it may never occur to the driver to turn right. Even though it might be a longer distance, she/he could avoid the bottleneck and arrive even earlier to their destination.

One can find many more examples of Mindlessness out of conditioned responses throughout the day: A person who says, "Excuse me," after bumping into a store mannequin;[141] or someone responding, "Thanks! You too!" when a cashier says, "We hope you come back soon." Another example would be turning lights on in a room even though it is flooded with natural light or forgetting on which side of the door a light switch may be, pouring orange juice in one's cereal, or opening a Hebrew book from the wrong side are all examples of conditioned behaviors. Many of these examples are somewhat inconsequential, but they are emblematic of a state of mind, a mindless state of living.

[140] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 52–53.
[141] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 12–16.

Inflexible Paradigms

The second category of mindless behaviors is connected to the human instinct to quickly assess situations as either dangerous or safe and respond accordingly. We accept stimulus as an input, place it in a category, and react accordingly, very quickly these categories solidify and become the way in which we see the world; especially as we age it becomes more and more difficult to reconsider or redefine categories.[142] As with Conditioned Responses, the instinctual categorization of stimuli has been helpful in the survival of humankind, however, if we remain inflexible and unwilling to create new categories or reconsider the categorization one can get trapped into potentially deficient paradigms and miss opportunities for alternative and more beneficial solutions.[143]

Langer explained the insufficiency of rigid categorization through a brief anecdote. A stranger well-dressed stranger climbs out of a very nice car that he parked in front of the house. He knocks on a neighbor's door in the middle of the night. The man is in the middle of a contest, the prize for which is one million dollars, and is looking for a piece of wood roughly 7 feet long and 3 feet wide. If the homeowner is able to help him win, the man will reward him with $10,000. Yet, the homeowner is unable to think of where he could find such a piece of wood in the middle of the night. The homeowner apologizes and sends the man on his way. It is not until the next morning when he walks past a construction site and sees a door yet to be installed in the building that it occurred to him that his own front door perfectly suited the man's needs.[144]

[142] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 19.
[143] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 11.
[144] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 9–10.

Mindlessly the man in the story failed to re-categorize his front door as a piece of wood since it fell, already, into the classification of "doors." These premature cognitive commitments trap people in traditional ways of understanding what we encounter. It can be very difficult to alter them.[145] Problem-solving is complicated when a person is unable to think beyond the categories that are firmly established in his/her mind. Lest one think that it takes years of conditioning to form these unbreakable classifications, another study has demonstrated how quickly people can classify something and be unable to reconsider the decision.

Dr. Langer instructed her research assistant to stop strangers on the street complaining of a sprained ankle. The unsuspecting subjects were asked specifically an "Ace Bandage," which they were unable to cross the street to purchase for themselves. Dr. Langer had also asked the pharmacist across the street to respond that he was sold-out of those bandages. Of the twenty-five subjects who were stopped, not a single one of them considered asking for a different kind of help and returned empty handed.[146] It can take only seconds to inflexibly classify a situation or an object and rigidly adhere to this category.

Assumptions

Mindlessness is the unintended consequence of an innate skill of the human consciousness. Conditioned responses and instinctual classification have helped keep people alive as they react to danger. They have helped people increase efficiency and productivity. There is another danger embedded in this efficiency: assumptions.

[145] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 22.
[146] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 16–17.

> For example, if a familiar quotation is altered so that it is made nonsensical (but retains sufficient structural familiarity), someone reading it out loud is likely to read the original quote. Even through what she was reading was not on the page in front of her, she is likely to express great confidence that the the quote was indeed read accurately. Reread the last sentence, and note the double 'the.'[147]

Mindlessness encourages a person to jump to conclusions because it is efficient. There is no need to process any additional information, which saves time and energy.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with making assumptions as an immediate and mindless reaction, the challenge we have is that too much mindless interaction can lead one to live a disengaged life. A meaningless and disengaged life does not allow space to appreciate the aesthetics of the world. A person living on autopilot does not approach new challenges with novel solutions, and this person can easily be replaced by automation. When overused, classification and conditioning create societies in which rigid ideology is a source of conflict. It is all too easy and appealing to live in this mindless state rather than experience the fullness of life that may be before us.

A Stressful World

Theories of evolution explain that the human capacity to automate behaviors is biologically beneficial. Humans are a relatively small, weak, and vulnerable species. Our ancestors responded to the dangers of the wild world around them by learning to quickly react. They learned how to simultaneously run, calculate approximate distance and speed, and hurl a rock or spear to capture an animal or defend their kinsmen. Fortunately, many of us live in a relatively peaceful and safe world. But our minds still possess these innate mental pathways, and unnecessarily expending too much energy on survival prevents us from pausing to add meaning to our lives. Our powerful survival instincts have the

[147] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 67.

potential to take over our lives keep us in a stressed state.[148] We are no longer required to live on the edge of fighting for our lives. Despite this, our instincts have not changed, and the modern world is one in which we are consistently besieged by information rather than life threatening dangers.

Advertisements along the roadside can flash and change, hoping to catch our eye. The sounds of traffic, conversations, TV, and radio saturate the air. The portable computer that many of us carry in our pockets that simultaneously provides immediate access to the digital world, and that barrage us with stimuli. Reminders of tasks we need to accomplish, meetings to keep, and people to call act activate the same instinct that the howl of a wolf does. All of these constant stressors throw us into a stressful state of being that, if unchecked, can only lead to physical and mental issues.

Tim Ryan (a member of the United States House of Representatives and an advocate of Mindfulness) relayed the following anecdote, "Jon [Kabat-Zinn] explained that stress is dealt with in the two parts of our autonomic nervous system, along with various regions of the brain. Our innate stress response ramps up our fight-or-flight-or-freeze response–fight it out with the predator, get out of there fast, or freeze in a state of indecision between the two."[149] The stressors that surround us at all times in our modern life have the potential to keep us in a constant state of panic, a permanently stressful situation which cannot produce a happy and healthy life.

Intensifying the problem, the ever-present stress can actually shut down our creative capacity. A research study undertaken in 2001 at the University of Maryland highlighted this relationship. Randomly assigned human subjects were asked to complete

[148] Ryan, *A Mindful Nation*, 2012. 45.
[149] Ryan, *A Mindful Nation*, 2012. 47.

one of two mazes. In the first maze contained a mouse trying to reach a reward of cheese, the second had the same mouse but no cheese; instead it had an owl that was poised to capture the mouse. While the initial data showed no difference between the times both groups required to complete the maze, the secondary test challenged them to tackle a task that measured creativity. The researchers found:

> When they did these [second tasks], those who'd avoided the owl did 50 percent *worse* than those who'd helped the mouse find the cheese. It turned out that avoidance 'closed down' options in the students' minds. It triggered in their minds' "aversion" pathways, leaving them with a lingering sense of fear and an enhanced sense of vigilance and caution. This state of mind both weakened their creativity and reduced their flexibility. This outlook couldn't have been more different from that of those students who'd helped the mouse find the cheese. They became open to new experiences, were more playful and carefree, less cautious and were happy to experiment.[150]

That is to stay, the students who finished the maze in a stressed and fearful state we unable to think as creatively as their counterparts. Recall that our minds have instinctually become somewhat resistant to creativity,[151] how much worse might this be in our stress-filled, highly connected, and demanding electronic world?

The simple choice to use a cell phone as an alarm can set off a potentially debilitating cycle from the very beginning of the day. An electronic alarm abruptly wakes a person from sleep. If he/she has a cell phone as an alarm it would be tempting to check the notifications that have built up overnight and send her/him into a spiral of worry and concern for the tasks he/she must complete.[152] Beginning the day in a stressed state of mind can easily spiral out of control because when a person feels panicked, it would be logical to decide to focus more on the seemingly most urgent stressors.

[150] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 112–114.
[151] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 11.
[152] Ryan, *A Mindful Nation*, 2012. 43–45.

If the decision to focus on the presenting problems is at the expense of the activities that sustain and refresh our bodies and minds is a critical mistake: it compounds the stress. Professor Marie Åsberg of the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm demonstrated how this happens by turning to a funnel. A balanced life is the top of the funnel. As a person becomes busier and busier her/she narrows her/his focus in an attempt to be more productive. The stress is rarely alleviated at that point, and he/she tightens her/his focus again, and again until he/she gives up more and more of the meaningful activities of her/his life.[153] Intensifying one's focus can be helpful. If a person is unable to rest after the immediate threat is gone, it is impossible to escape the cycle.

Mindlessness can easily ensnare us. The very instincts that have ensured humanity's survival to this moment in time can conspire against us. The pull that comfortable habits exert on each of us is strong. Often times we have been conditioned to respond to stimuli in with a specific strategy because we have been rewarded for it in the past. It is difficult to change a habit; often they are so deeply engrained in us that we miss opportunities to find better solutions. Another aspect of the challenge to change our habits is the instinct to quickly categorize something we encounter. These categories can easily become fixed, and it is difficult to change our perspective.

It is not enough, though, that we have these inborn skills. We have created an environment that is, for the most part, unthreatening. Our instincts have not left us, though, and on a subconscious level, we do realize that many of the dangers we perceive are not genuine threats to our lives. Anxiety can build to a point where, try as we might, it

[153] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 213.

is beyond our ability to climb out of the spiraling funnel. Mindfulness is intended to combat this reality.

Dr. Langer has taught that Mindfulness is one way to break out of a hazy world of meaningless existence. Her specific strategy for cultivating this perspective is simple; one wills themselves to keep an open mind. This allows her/him to welcome new information about a given experience and generates new categories into which he/she can sort old information as well as integrate the new. At times, a person must also be willing to consider a variety of perspectives to make an intentional and appropriate response.[154] Living a Mindful life means being able to step out of the spiral that the human consciousness

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is a painfully broad term that can describe a wide variety of practices. A definition from which we can begin is that Mindfulness is, "a state of increased awareness of the present and the self. It is the elimination of external distractions and experience of life as it is in front of you."[155] It is an attempt to refocus one's attention in order to live intentionally and as fully in the surrounding moments to be the most effective, engaged, aware, and increasingly happy and less-stressed version of ourselves. The conditioned responses and efficient categorization, while helpful to human development, work against one's ability to live an intentional life. Today, it is even easier for a person to slip into a Mindless life because of the stressors that have been integrated into our everyday life and encourage productivity over presence.

[154] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 63–71.
[155] Cato, "Mindfulness and Why it is the Key to Your Success," *Elite Daily,* March 24, 2014, http://elitedaily.com/life/what-mindfulness-is-and-why-its-the-key-to-your-success/ (accessed September 6, 2015).

The creative human imagination also encourages people to expend energy worrying about what lies ahead or perseverating on the past. While this imagination is what sets us apart of from the rest of the animal kingdom,[156] it is an additional force pulling us out of the present moment. Mindfulness is "about having the time and space to attend to what's right in front of us, even though many other forces are trying to keep us stuck in the past or are inviting us to fantasize or worry about the future."[157] Mindfulness is a conscious decision to be aware and present; to be open to new information, be creative, be and flexible in approaching obstacles; be measured and allow space, and act with intention.

Awareness and Presence

Mindfulness is awakening our senses and being willing to acknowledge that a response to the current situation can be informed by events in the past, but not governed by them; it is being attentive to the possibility of new stimuli and fighting some of our instincts to let stimuli become background noise. A study conducted in the 1960s explored differences in awareness between people trained in meditation and those with less experience. A combination advanced practitioners and neophytes sat in a meditative state. A bell sounded at regular intervals while researchers recorded the neurological responses to the stimulus.

The researchers discovered a drastic difference in the responses. The subjects who were less experienced at maintaining awareness registered the new stimulus less intensely as the study went on. They eventually became so habituated to the sounds that they no

[156] Thomas Suddendorf, "What Separates Us from the Animals?" *Slate*, March 3, 2014, http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2014/03/the_science_of_what_separates_us_from_other_animals_human_imagination_and.single.html (accessed October 17, 2015).
[157] Ryan, *A Mindful Nation*, 2012. xvii.

longer registered the stimulus. Those who were considered well-practiced in Mindfulness Meditation continued to register the sounds as entirely novel throughout the duration of the experiment.[158] It is important to acknowledge the difference between Mindfulness Meditation and trance-inducing techniques. This study included masters of a trance meditation technique. These practitioners did not register the sounds of the bell at all.[159] The researchers determined that an intentional state of awareness exhibited different neurological activity.

Instead of allowing the mind to drift into a mindless state—allowing sounds and sights to slip into the background or believing that one can anticipate what is coming next—those who are Mindful "…will actively attend to changed signals. Behavior generated from mindful listening or watching, from an expanding, increasingly differentiated information base, is, of course, likely to be more effective."[160]

Rabbi Jonathan Slater reported that through his practices he is able to, at times, slow down the thinking processes and consider how his actions or statements may affect those around him.[161] That can apply to our relationships with other people, as in Slater's case, or the natural world itself. Rabbi Rachel Maimin reported,

> This heightened awareness is something that I strive to have in every moment, but which of course at times remains elusive. I have found, though, that the moments of noticing have increased for me the more I have engaged in this meditation practice. I have observed this most frequently with relation to the natural world around me.[162]

As these two examples illustrate, an increased awareness can help a person more clearly relate to the world around.

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[158] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 16.
[159] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going*, 2005. 16.
[160] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 67.
[161] Jonathan Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living: Compassionate Practice* (New York, NY: Aviv Press, 2004), 265.
[162] Rachel Maimin, *In All Your Ways Be Mindful: A Thesis Project in Mindfulness Meditation*, Rabbinic Thesis, (Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion. New York, NY, 2013), 3.

Openness, Creativity, and Flexibility

Mindfulness is also characterized by an ability to see situations from different perspectives.[163] A Mindful person can at look at a problem and resources in a novel way. Dr. Langer explained that she has introduced this concept, especially to people in the business world, with an interesting challenge. She has asked, 'How much is one and one?' The obvious response is that one plus one equals two. Creativity and flexibility can be demonstrated by approaching problem from a different perspective. One might find that one and one is only sometimes two; if you add one wad of chewing gum to a second wad of chewing gum, you actually end up with one wad of gum, and thus one and one equals one. The solution depends on the perspective from which one views the question.[164]

It may feel like a trick question, but the truth is that by drawing the boundaries of the problem, or redefining the results, one can come to a very different conclusion. Another example is as follows. Imagine sitting in a hotel room and hearing shouting coming from the couple in the neighboring room. The angry voices and sounds of objects slamming on tables could be incredibly troublesome. It would be sensible to call for assistance in a potentially violent situation. If, however, upon calling the manager of the hotel, you learn that an acting troupe is staying in the hotel, and the sounds coming from the neighboring room are the actors rehearsing a scene, the situation is drastically different.[165]

[163] Langer, Mindfulness, 1989. 68.
[164] Langer, Interview with Krista Tippett, On Being: Science of Mindlessness and Mindfulness, September 13, 2015.
[165] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 64.

In other contexts, Mindfulness has been demonstrated to aid the healing process and reduce the pain patients feel. In a 1975 study, Drs. Ellen Langer, Irving Janis, and John Wolfer tested pain and healing in hospital patients about to undergo surgery. One group of patients experienced an intervention in which they were conditioned to re-contextualize their time in the hospital as one in which the pain was not inevitable and actually non-threatening. This group spent less time in the hospital. Furthermore, hospital staff reported that these patients consumed fewer sedatives and pain relievers during their stay.[166]

Allowing for Space

Stress can shut down a person's capacity to think creatively, and the world in which we currently live includes far too many stressors. Cultivating a mindful awareness of the world around us necessitates an ability to remain calm and measured in order to make well-informed decisions and appreciate the beauty of the world. That is to say, being measured means being willing to create space. Imagine for a moment how challenging it is to read a book, a news article, or even a paragraph that has no punctuation, or even worse, no spaces between the letters. Reading becomes more enjoyable and easier when a person slows down to allow space.

One can experience the same phenomenon in daily life. It is all too easy to let the business of the world take over, and yet life is more pleasurable when we can experience it.

[166] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 72–73.

> When the car, the television, the phone, correspondence and business/busyness are put aside, we can find that we are not bored, but stunned. When meals can be eaten at leisure, we find that food tastes better, conversation expands, our hearts open to others. We discover that there is time to read, to reflect, to observe. There is silence. There is stillness. There is beauty to be found in every moment, in all that merely exists without our additional comment.[167]

The ability to slow the world around us can increase attention and lead to making better decisions. One practitioner explicitly reported that his Mindfulness practices helped him better focus his mind and be calmer.[168] After instituting several practices, the Cleveland Clinic has found that the space created by Mindfulness has combatted burnout among physicians and nurses.[169]

Acting with Intention

One of the ultimate goals of Mindfulness is to be intentional with regard to not only decision making, but to many aspects of a person's life. This requires that a person is deliberate in her or his approach to the world. One example is the way in which intention. Jon Kabat-Zinn demonstrated the benefits of intention with respect to healing. He and his team published some remarkable findings in the *Journal of Psychosomatic Medicine* in 1998.

Participants were asked to use guided meditative techniques during the treatment of Psoriasis Vulgaris. The meditations focused on non-judgmental awareness, breathing exercises, attentiveness to bodily sensations, and visualization the healing process.[170] The researchers found, "A brief mindfulness meditation-based stress reduction intervention delivered by audiotape during ultraviolet light therapy can increase the rate of resolution

[167] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 212.
[168] Ryan, *A Mindful Nation*, 2012. xvii–xviii.
[169] Gregoire, "What the 'Mindful Revolution' Really Looks Like," *The Huffington Post*, February 11, 2014.
[170] Kabat-Zinn, et-al., "MMBSRI and Skin Clearing," *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 1998. 625–626.

of psoriatic lesions in patients with psoriasis."[171] Even more remarkable is the detail that this study confirmed work Kabat-Zinn had completed a decade earlier.[172]

I have found that intention build on Mindfulness meditation can help students be ready to participate in class. When the class begins with a few moments of thought to focus on the task at hand, I am able to hold the students' attention for longer periods of time. Other educators have discovered similar results. After practicing Mindfulness techniques with students, educators found that they "can boost focus, attention and memory, lower stress and improve sleep quality, and some studies have even found mindfulness (sic) training to improve test scores."[173]

The characteristics of Mindfulness are extremely beneficial. The periods of awareness and 'being in the moment' can increase over time and can help us be happier, healthier and better-adjusted people.[174] The result of Mindfulness is a person who seizes control over his/her life by awakening themselves to the world around them. There are some who believe that by acknowledging the need for this change is enough to inspire it.[175] I disagree.

In the same way, that a person cannot become an all-star basketball player because they decided it should be so, Mindfulness requires training. Analogy: If Mindfulness is an ability to ride a bicycle, then there are skills that must be mastered before one can join an elite race. What is missing are the practices, the steps in between

[171] Kabat-Zinn, et-al., "MMBSRI and Skin Clearing," *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 1998. 625.
[172] Kabat-Zinn, et-al., "MMBSRI and Skin Clearing," *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 1998. 630.
[173] Gregoire, "What the 'Mindful Revolution' Really Looks Like," *The Huffington Post*, February 11, 2014.
[174] Frumma Rosenberg-Gottlieb, "On Mindfulness and Jewish Meditation, Part II," *Chabad.org*, March, 2011, http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1447725/jewish/On-Mindfulness-and-Jewish-Meditation-Part-II.htm (accessed September 17, 2015).
[175] Langer, Interview with Krista Tippett, On Being: Science of Mindlessness and Mindfulness, September 13, 2015.

Mindlessness and Mindfulness. There are techniques that can help a person learn to cultivate Mindfulness.

It may be helpful to visualize Mindfulness practices as the training wheels some children use when they learn to ride a bike. They are there to catch the child when their weight off balance and help them continue on their way. The training wheels are there when they are needed, and most children benefit from this kind of help. The difference is that we cannot simply attach training wheels to our lives and have the skills to correct when our minds drift. For many people, the cultivation of Mindfulness practices takes time and must be revisited consistently in order to have them accessible when they are needed.

CULTIVATING MINDFULNESS

Rabbi Jonathan Slater reflected on the basic principles of Mindfulness as he had learned them: "My teacher Sylvia Boorstein once encapsulated mindfulness practice with these three instructions: 'Pay attention. Tell the truth. Don't duck.'"[176] Dr. Langer offered similar advice on the subject explaining that Mindfulness can be achieved simply by becoming aware of one's paradigms and shifting them. In order to do this one must understand the paradigm through which they analyze the problem in front of them. This necessitates becoming aware of a person's thought processes and biases, and then intentionally decide one's next action.[177] These instructions might work for some, like Dr. Langer, but most people need assistance breaking old habits.

[176] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 140.
[177] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 77–79.

It takes a long time for a person to develop a repeatable habit. Regularized practice to help guide them through the process of change. There is some debate over how long it takes to cultivate a new habit. Some experts say that 21 days are enough to affect change. Others argue 66 days. And still others say that it can take even longer. The debate is far from settled, but it is not the project of this work to address this specific issue in detail. Stasis is a powerful force to overcome, and it is beneficial to have assistance when we may falter.[178]

An organized system is often beneficial to changing habits because even in life threatening situations adults demonstrate a high degree of resistance.

> Not long ago a medical study showed that if heart doctors tell their seriously at-risk heart patients they will literally die if they do not make changes to their personal lives–diet, exercise, smoking–still only one in seven is actually able to make the changes. One in seven! And we can safely assume that the other six wanted to live, see more sunsets, watch their grandchildren grow up. They didn't lack a sense of urgency. The incentives for change could not be greater. The doctors made sure they knew just what they needed to do. Still, they couldn't do it. If people cannot make the changes they dearly want to when their very lives are on the line, then how can leaders at any level, in any kind of organization, expect to successfully support processes of change–even those their subordinates may passionately believe in–when the stakes and the payoff are not nearly as high?[179]

With their lives on the line, heart patients struggled to make the necessary changes to become healthier. While there are a few exceptional individuals who are able to take a short cut through the learning process, most people require some assistance.

As Mindfulness has grown in popularity in recent years, hundreds of books outlining programs to help people cultivate Mindfulness through various techniques and practices have been published.[180] It would be impossible to describe all of these

[178] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 164.
[179] Kegan and Lahey. *Immunity to Change*, 2009. 1.
[180] Seth Zuiho Segall, "In Defense of Mindfulness," *The Existential Buddhist*, December 19, 2013, http://www.existentialbuddhist.com/2013/12/in-defense-of-mindfulness/ (accessed September 26, 2015).

techniques in sufficient detail in this work. If it is going to be possible to understand the way in which the techniques that help cultivate Mindfulness and Jewish practices that lead to a life lived with ***Kavannah*** it is necessary to examine some of the Mindfulness techniques. These techniques include focusing on the body and breath, meditation techniques, and introspection.

The Body

One basic form of Mindfulness meditation is based on drawing attention to the way a person moves. Mindful Movement Meditation asks the practitioner to focus his/her attention on the sensations of their muscles and tendons stretching as she/he moves through a series of stretches and poses.[181] A practitioner may also choose to engage in a mindful walking meditation which could take the form of deliberately and slowly walk a very short distance over a long period of time focusing on both the breath and the sensations felt in the body. It could also be a practice of walking in a familiar place at a different time of day, or when out for a walk paying attention to the way the different terrain feels underneath one's feet or the contours of the landscape. These slow and deliberate motions are intended to pair with a concentration on one's breathing to help demonstrate for the meditator the connection between mind, body, and breath.

Meditations that focus on the body are helpful in cultivating Mindfulness because they train a person to focus on the sensations that he/she feels. The mind is designed to automatically drift to other considerations, and the body does not have a consciousness of its own. Toe body is stable and consistent but can experience different sensations. A

[181] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 120–123.

person who can train their mind to return her/his attention to a stable body and notice the changing sensations she/he can experience the body as it moves through the world.

The body-focused meditations have a latent danger into which even the most practiced meditator may fall. There is no obtainable objective in these movement meditations. They are not supposed to increase strength or flexibility; it may be tempting, but a person must strive to stay away from a goal-oriented thought process. If one is able to focus only on the sensations themselves, one can learn how to understand the reactions of the body as a signal a person's emotional or mental state.[182] His/her eyes or arms may be jumpy; it could be difficult to sit still. One might notice a headache or her/his body may slouch. A person's posture, nature, and pace of movements, can be a barometer for a different kind of feedback.

The body can be a diagnostic tool, and it is very helpful as a person become more aware of the world around them. A person's movements can affect his or her mood. Which is to say, when a body has been at rest, the motion can lead to and improved emotional state and better mental health. This fact has been demonstrated scientifically.

> In 1980, psychologists Gary Wells and Richard Petty conducted a groundbreaking (and oft repeated) experiment to show the impact of the body on the mind. Participants were asked to test some stereo headphones by rating the sound quality after they had listened to some music and a speech played over them. To simulate running, they were asked to move their heads from side to side, almost as if they were shaking their heads, some moved their heads up and down in a nodding sort of way and others were told not to move at all. You can probably guess which group rated the headphones most highly: the nodders, whose head movements suggested "yes," rated them higher than the group whose shaking heads suggested "no."[183]

Because the participants in the survey associated their head shaking with a negative response, they associated the quality of the headphones with the movements they made

[182] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 170–171.
[183] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 91.

The connection between movement and mood, movement and focus, will also be an important aspect of sitting in meditation.

The Breath

In addition to the body, the breath is an incredibly helpful tool when one wants to cultivate Mindfulness. If we are living, we are breathing. It is always with us. There is even more to the brilliance of using our breath than the basic biological fact that a person who is living is breathing, and that is, "Breathing usually occurs automatically and is therefore normally under the control of the unconscious mind."[184] Because we are often unaware of the breath's presence, it can be a very useful tool for consciously returning our attention to the present moment.

Another use for Mindfulness meditations is to help us better recognize which emotions we are experiencing at a specific moment. Not only does a person's ability to focus depend on the ability to center oneself, a person's breath is also incredibly adept at helping identify a current emotional state because it is an unconscious action regulated by our brains to respond to stimuli in the world. When our minds, consciously or unconsciously, perceive danger our sympathetic nervous system jumps into action preparing us to either combat the danger or retreat to safety. Either of these options requires increased blood flow to critical musculature and increase oxygen to power our bodies.[185] In this way, the breath can help a person discern which emotional state she/he is in at the moment.

[184] Aryeh Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide* (New York, NY: Shocken Books, 1985), 5.
[185] Ryan, *A Mindful Nation*, 2012. 47–48.

Breath can help a person meditate and become more mindful, but as he/she strives to become more aware of the world. It is something that is always present, but often overlooked. By turning one's attention to this unconscious process he/she can discern the present emotional state and pause. This pause to breathe may have a calming effect, but most importantly it gives a person the time to be in the moment and ponder reality before making a thoughtful decision.

Meditation Techniques

Breath and body are both tools that can help re-center a person because they can sound an alarm that one is getting off of center. They are effectively useless without being able to access the thought processes that can spiral out of control. A foundational technique that can help a person develop a Mindfulness practice is meditation. There are several styles of meditation that one can employ: guided imagery, contemplation, the use of a mantra, mindfulness, walking, and many more. Each variety can help train one's mind focus on a concentration point and re-center a person's thoughts and awaken to the present moment. This becomes easier the more one is able to practice as a person learns to notice when he/she has drifted, and then set aside the thoughts that have flooded the mind.[186] One proponent of meditation described the effects of the practices as treating our thoughts like the flakes in a snow globe; when the globe is shaken, and the thoughts scatter, one's meditation practice can help gently guide the flakes back down to the floor.[187]

[186] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 38.
[187] Rabbi Jeff Roth, *Jewish Meditation Practices for Everyday Life: Awakening Your Heart, Connecting with God* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2009), 23.

While it does take consistent training to readily invoke the skills that meditation can teach, and the benefits can be greater over time, one does not need to sit in meditation for hours at a time to feel the effects.[188] Meditations lasting only minutes can be surprisingly beneficial for re-centering, and can have an exponential impact on a person's life. The techniques can range in complexity from a deeply structured guided meditation to simply pausing for sixty seconds to focus on one's breath. One common aspect of nearly every meditative technique is an intentional focus, either focusing on breath, sensations, sounds, or some other object. The objective is to build the ability to acknowledge the thoughts that creep into the mind, and then to set them aside and return to the present moment.

There are untold numbers of varieties of meditations, and many Mindfulness practitioners develop their own unique ways of integrating a meditative practice as a part of a Mindfulness regimen because meditation is foundational. For a beginner, the easiest entry points to meditation are through contemplation of an object, of a phrase or mantra, or a flame. It might be helpful to have something in front of you toward which you can draw your focus when your mind begins to wander. While these are very helpful aids to which one might return throughout their practice, if one wishes to have something practical that they do not need to carry with them it an even more useful tool can be one's own breath.

Beyond focusing on breath meditation can help a person awaken to the sights, sounds and scents can help cultivate a deeper awareness of the present. There are many ways in which a person can do this, one group of techniques comes from another often-

[188] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 7.

overlooked vital aspect of our lives: consumption of food and drink. We must eat and drink in order to stay alive, but if we draw our attention to the foods themselves, it can radiate into a stronger awareness of our senses throughout our lives.

These sensation-based techniques challenge the practitioner or meditator to turn their focus from other stimuli such as the television, radio, or newspaper and deeply consider the act of eating or drinking. Initially, it might be beneficial to pick a food or drink that has a strong and complicated taste and varying texture because the aim is to eat or drink slowly and while eating or drinking take special note of the sensations, and sense how they change over the course of time. One could take note of how it feels to swallow after chewing, or notice any aromas that permeate the air—similar to the way in which a connoisseur of wine, tea, beer, or coffee savors her/his favorite beverage.

In only a matter of minutes, one could even begin to notice her/his body's reaction to the food or drink. It might be the slight buzzing in the mind of the caffeine or alcohol, a warmth growing as a hot meal fills the belly or even a sense of satiation or satisfaction as the body is filled with life-sustaining foods. An even more accomplished practitioner might notice the way that the balance of proteins, carbohydrates, and fats affects their body throughout the rest of the day.

Reflection and Questioning

A technique that can help extend practice beyond sitting in meditation is to use the Mindfulness developed by learning how to focus and center oneself is to then explore the internal motivations behind a person's reaction. It would be impossible to know how one's experience was affected without pausing for a moment to reflect on what just transpired. Taking stock of the way one spends their time, in the long-term or in the

immediate past, can help a person become more mindful of the way they use it. One might choose to keep a log of their daily activities for a week or two to see where they are mindlessly spending time and seek to repurpose some of that time for more nourishing activities.

It can be helpful to find some guiding questions that one can ask themselves. This is what Tim Ryan did, after reflecting on how he developed his Mindfulness practices. Intending to help a person understand their personal values, Ryan posed a series of questions in *A Mindful Nation*.

- Am I in touch with the values in my heart that make it worth getting up in the morning?
- Am I paying attention to what is truly important to me in life?
- Am I stressed out? Is it affecting how I get along with my loved ones and perform at my Job?
- Could I be helped by regular sessions of quiet, still, reflective, focused time?
- When do I find time for moments of quiet and reflection? Can I find them more often?[189]

These questions are intended to help us find what motivates us to live our life and how we might make better use of our time each day. Alternatively, one could meditate on similar questions such as: "How can I nourish myself? How can I slow myself down in the midst of my rushing? How can I stand back? How can I make choices? How can I be kind to myself?"[190]

The goal each of these three activities is to challenge us to become aware of the time in our day that we spend mindlessly and wastefully because it is often the case that our stress is because we do not remember to care for ourselves in ways that are helpful

[189] Ryan, *A Mindful Nation*, 2012. 23.
[190] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 201–202.

for living a life that is present to the every-day-moments. A similar exercise can also help a person uncover which activities in their daily life either nourish oneself or deplete his or her energy. This is accomplished by taking stock of how a person feels at the conclusion of the activity.[191]

When one is comfortable with their ability to sit in meditation and set the stray thoughts aside when they arise, it is possible to "steer into the skid." That is to say, there is a reason that our mind went in that direction, and if we follow the stray thought, we might uncover its root cause as long as we keep in mind one of the important first steps in this process, be careful to not judge them when they first arise.[192] This will prevent us from adding a layer of meaning that could be detrimental to the entire project if we judge too quickly. Recall that one of Dr. Langer's crucial characteristics of Mindfulness was retaining an ability to re-categorize, and she also cautioned that the way in which we initially encounter new information or a data point often determines the way in which we can use it later.[193]

As one approaches a thought that has arisen in our minds, we must then explore it slowly and gently.[194] We might ask ourselves questions about the thought; we might try to understand whence it originates. If it is a question itself that arises in our mind one might ask, "What is the reason I am asking this question?" Is there something in my life that I am supposed to be doing at this moment instead? Often our thoughts and questions are built on multiple layers of personality traits, recent and "ancient" experiences, fears, or doubts. If one wants to explore this challenge further, they might ask several layers of

[191] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 218–220.
[192] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going*, 2005. 44–45.
[193] Langer, *Mindfulness*, 1989. 25.
[194] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 174–176.

"why?" Not just question the idea a single time, but repeatedly try and get below the surface. It might lead to an eye-opening discovery of your own motivations behind actions in any given situation.[195] The wonderful benefit of being able to accomplish such a challenging task is that you can then bring what you learned into the actionable world, especially if one has truly cultivated a Mindfulness practice that allows them to sense a pattern of behavior or a thought process that can typically send them into a downward spiral.

It is most critical, though if one tries to delve into this level of self-exploration to remember that there is no such thing as success here. The ultimate goal is being present. If the work is too challenging at that specific moment, it is more than acceptable to set the thought down and return your focus to the breath that is always with you.

Activities such as the ones described above not only help us uncover what it is that we do with our day, but it also can challenge a person to examine the reality of what is before them. I wrote earlier of Rabbi Slater, who cited his teacher Dr. Boorstein, who explained that one critical step is to be honest and truthful. We cannot know how to best alter our habits if we do not see what it is that we are doing that is so damaging to us. Unless one is able to honestly reflect on their time spent it is impossible to become completely aware and thus impossible to become fully mindful. This honest accounting is connected to another characteristic of a mindful person: acceptance.

Acceptance

Acceptance comes along with many of the other practices of Mindfulness. It is something that is worked on and developed over time, but it is also something that is easy

[195] Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, 2009. 34–35.

to start working on from the beginning. One must first be willing and able to acknowledge their emotions, thoughts and judgments as they arise and coinciding with that acknowledgment they must also be willing to notice the desire to suppress anything that is unsettling, uncomfortable, or unpleasant. [196] Once a person has resolved to do this, they must also actively meet these thoughts and accept them as a legitimate and honest reaction to the current situation. This can help a person survive the stressful situation and move through the unpleasantness.[197]

Acceptance is not a person throwing his/her hands in the air resigned to a terrible fate. Instead, acceptance is embracing the reality of the moment. Many of us intrinsically know that it is not helpful to ruminate on the past or perseverate on potential futures. While each "present" moment is incredibly fleeting, an accepting approach allows a person to be fully there. It opens the moment to examination from a variety of perspectives. An example: in the aftermath of a car accident it does a person no good to immediately regret not hitting their breaks, not honking their horn, taking this specific route, or leaving the house at all. In the moments before speaking to the other driver it only increases anxiety and frustration to worry whether or not the other driver is going to get out of the car and combatively scream at you. One must accept that the accident has happened and take the next steps necessary in order to resolve the current issue at hand. In the days or weeks later there could be opportunities for them to consider the actions they could have taken to avoid the accident. But the immediate regret or anxiety about the future only adds stress to an already stressful situation.

[196] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 169.
[197] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 81.

Acceptance is an especially challenging aspect to accomplish without other skills. It requires an ability to both be present and also detach ever so slightly from the current state in order to prevent sliding down a funnel of despair. Other practices in Mindfulness are designed to help a practitioner be readily able to stay focused in the present, especially practices like meditation.

BRINGING THEORY TO LIFE

The most important aspect of cultivating Mindfulness is that a person is able to utilize it in a person's daily life. One can accomplish this by trying to integrate practices into her/his life on their own. There are several small steps that a person can take to begin to assimilate Mindfulness techniques from the outset. Williams and Penman describe these initial practices as "Habit Releasers." Throughout their Mindfulness program, Williams and Penman introduce approximately one each week. They "are based on beautifully simple practices that, as their name suggests, break down the habits that can trap you in negative ways of thinking. They snap you out of your old careworn ruts and give you exciting new avenues to explore."[198] The "Habit Releasers" are just some of the small steps that a person can take towards a mindful life. Beyond these initial steps, a person can use his or her growing meditation skills to explore challenging issues in their life, setting reminders, and being able to take space to breathe.

Small Steps Toward Mindfulness

Like any skill Mindfulness requires the consistent practice of the techniques, many of them are based on meditations intended to call one's awareness to the present

[198] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 61.

moment, but meditation is not the only basis for Mindfulness. Because Meditation can be beneficial, and is a part of many practices, we will address it shortly, however, first we will uncover some of the non-meditative techniques that can help create Mindfulness. Once might then develop the ability to be in the present and ask oneself tough questions, she/he can learn to become flexible and re-conceptualize, accept the truth of the moment, consider multiple perspectives, or reserve judgment. Often, as cultivated through meditation, a person learns how to seek out the truth of the moment.[199]

An easy way to begin this process is to embrace some of Williams's and Penman's "Habit Releasers." Williams and Penman outline six such practices in their book. The Habit Releasers start with actions as simple as changing the kind of chair one sits in, or how she sits in it.[200] Other suggestions are to take an intentional walk and focus on the inputs from all five senses,[201] instead of just having the television on one should pick a single program and only watch that single program,[202] instead of picking a movie to watch one can pick a time and decide which possibility to see once you arrive,[203] purchase and take care of a plant for a week,[204] or perform a random act of kindness for another person.[205] Each of these actions is intended to shake a person's habits and the authors believe are especially beneficial when paired with the meditations Williams and Penman describe in their course.

Setting Reminders

[199] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 80–84.
[200] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 88.
[201] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 106.
[202] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 134–135.
[203] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 159–160.
[204] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 183–184.
[205] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 208–209.

In all of these Mindfulness exercises that we have discussed one common denominator is that we hope to develop a practice that can be called u on in times of need. It has been said about spring training for the NFL that it is one thing to look good in shorts and a t-shirt. It is a completely different reality when you have a 300lb man running after you! By that I mean to say that it is all well and good to practice all of these techniques when you can set aside the time to practice them in a safe environment. The tricky part is when you need to interact with the world and remember to call upon our mindfulness training when we get into a stressful situation.

Recall an earlier example of how many of us react in situations of stress as discussed by Professor Marie Åsberg. Often in the moments that we need our best faculties the most is precisely the time when we give up on the nourishing activities we normally employ to keep us whole. Therefore, as we cultivate these Mindfulness practices we need to be able to find our center, refocus on the present, and sit in this incredibly beneficial concentration center we have spent time building up.[206]

The last technique we will discuss with regard to Mindfulness is the way that one might accomplish this feat. Like developing muscles need regular practice, mindfulness needs regular practice. Without the routine access to these skills, they can slip away. It is all too easy for one to fall back into her/his old patterns of mindless-automatic-doing mode. The first iteration of this checkpoint technique is what Williams and Penman call "Mindfulness Bells." These are the daily activities which we decide will be our reminders to reenter a Mindful state.[207]

[206] Cato, "Mindfulness and Why it is the Key to Your Success," *Elite Daily, March 24, 2014*.
[207] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 235–236.

For some this might be the morning cup of tea that is consumed in silent meditation. For others brushing one's teeth, putting on clothes, or a commute to work whether on foot or in a car. These touch-points are helpful for us to periodically recalibrate ourselves in a routine way, and remember to add in these practices on a daily basis.

Creating A Space to Breathe

Another iteration of these practices could be a very brief meditation that has been practiced well enough to be effective, and easy enough to use in stressful situations. In the same way, that some parents tell their children that when they feel themselves getting mad to take ten deep breaths, having a "go-to" meditation can accomplish the same thing for someone developing an intentional Mindfulness practice. This itself could be a ten-second or maybe only ten-breath exercise that can help you regain composure in an incredibly stressful moment, or the seconds before entering a meeting or a client joining you in your office. These breathing spaces can be like finding the refuge from a rainstorm.

Imagine walking home in the middle of a rainstorm. There is now way to avoid it, and one could either carry on until she/he arrives home grumpy and soaked to the bone, or he/she could take a moment under an awning to collect oneself and then go back and face the storm. Either way the person is soaking wet, but taking a few moments to collect the breath might bring a smile to one's face for a few moments if she/he stop and listens to the downpour.[208] What's more, one might even get lucky enough that in the few

[208] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 157.

moments she/he takes to collect himself/herself, a friend could pass by and join in on the walk, or the storm might pass, and one could begin to dry before arriving home.

One thing that is not an option: hiding out under an awning for the rest of your life. These momentary meditations cannot become an excuse to not face the world, and that is not their purpose. In the end, though, the choice is really up to each of us to decide how we want to live our lives. It might be perfectly acceptable for someone to walk home in the rain every day and never stop to catch their breath. But think about all of the opportunities they could be missing. Think of all of the stress and frustration that can build up.

In order to effectively cultivate Mindfulness, a person must be willing to commit time and energy to the project. The process only works if a person is able to commit to a consistent practice, revisited on a regular basis. Mindfulness necessitates focus and intentionality. It requires that a person is able to notice when he/she is feeling tensions or is losing their presence in the present. When a person slips off the path, they must be able to gently guide themselves back. It is a lifelong exercise that many have taken to.

ADDRESSING CRITICS

Due to the myriad benefits of Mindfulness that its practitioners feel it has grown in popularity since the 1960s and 1970s. Although Dr. Ellen Langer is sometimes cited as the Mother of Mindfulness, Dr. Kabat-Zinn's work brought it into the mainstream consciousness. Most notably his 1994 work, *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Every Day Life*, brought his research and personal practices to

a much larger audience.[209] Its popularity continued to grow through the end of the 20th and into the 21st century. One can observe a steady increase in the number of Mindfulness related publications between the year 2000 and 2012 (from 21 to 477 publications).[210] This increase represents a greater awareness of Mindfulness and its benefits, and its popularity grew to the point that Time Magazine proclaimed 2014 as the Year of Mindfulness.[211] As practitioners have evangelized about the benefits they experienced in their lives, there has been, as could be predicted, some serious pushback. Those detractors level several critiques against the expanding exercise and burgeoning business of Mindfulness. I will address each of these critiques in turn.

Some argue that it is too selfish and inward focused. "Sitting and concentrating on our breathing is a good way to chill out and distress, but it's not a particularly good end in itself. Radiating compassion is fine, but it doesn't obviously translate into action," wrote one columnist.[212] Beyond the complaints that it is pure selfishness, others argue that it is simply a reaction to an over-connected world filled with technology,[213] or that instead of addressing the real problems underlying our over-taxed workforce, Mindfulness is a temporary bandage at best.[214] And this is from the critics who do not shrug the entire endeavor off as 'new-age crap,' as one supporter described the critiques he has heard.[215]

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[209] Virginia Heffernan, "The Muddied Meaning of 'Mindfulness,'" *The New York Times*, April 14, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/magazine/the-muddied-meaning-of-mindfulness.html?_r=0 (accessed September 6, 2015).
[210] Seth Zuiho Segall, "In Defense of Mindfulness," *The Existential Buddhist*, December 19, 2013, http://www.existentialbuddhist.com/2013/12/in-defense-of-mindfulness/ (accessed September 26, 2015).
[211] Gregoire, "What the 'Mindful Revolution' Really Looks Like," *The Huffington Post*, February 11, 2014.
[212] McDonagh, "Mindfulness is Something Worse," *The Spectator*. November 1, 2014.
[213] Moore, "Mindfulness Does Nothing to Change an Unjust World," *The Guardian*, August 6, 2014.
[214] Ron Purser and David Loy, "Beyond McMindfulness," *The Huffington Post*, July 1, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ron-purser/beyond-mcmindfulness_b_3519289.html (accessed September 26, 2015).
[215] Cato, "Mindfulness and Why it is the Key to Your Success," *Elite Daily, March 24, 2014*.

Other critiques dismiss the trend as a smug trend of the middle-class "like the Prius emblem, a badge of enlightened and self-satisfied consumerism and of success and achievement."[216] Even more severe is the critique, due to its success there are now Mindfulness teachers who are undertrained and unqualified to be teaching it, and without proper training a person is at risk of harming themselves more than helping.[217]

Because Mindfulness shares many similar aspects of Buddhist practice, some argue that it is a sort of 'Buddhism Lite.'[218] In an article for The Huffington Post, social observers Ron Purser and David Loy commented,

> But mindfulness, as understood and practiced within the Buddhist tradition, is not merely an ethically-neutral technique for reducing stress and improving concentration. Rather, mindfulness is a distinct quality of attention that is dependent upon and influenced by many other factors: the nature of our thoughts, speech and actions; our way of making a living; and our efforts to avoid unwholesome and unskillful behaviors, while developing those that are conducive to wise action, social harmony, and compassion.[219]

While Purser and Loy explained that it is wrong to divorce Mindfulness from its Buddhist roots, they also expressed the worry that by decontextualizing and secularizing the practice it can become another commodity on the market and used for greed,[220] with it being touted to cure "depression, stress, anxiety and chronic pain to eczema…."[221] There are those who even argue that the proofs offered over the last several decades do not go far enough to demonstrate a real benefit of the practices.[222]

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[216] Heffernan, "Muddied Meaning of Mindfulness," *The New York Times*, April 14, 2015.
[217] Booth, "Mindfulness Therapy Comes at a High Price," *The Guardian*, August 25, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/aug/25/mental-health-meditation (September 17, 2015).
[218] Justin Whitaker, "Mindfulness: Critiques and Defenders," *Patheos.com*, December 21, 2013, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/americanbuddhist/2013/12/2013-as-the-year-of-mindfulness-critics-and-defenders.html (accessed September 17, 2015).
[219] Purser and Loy, "Beyond McMindfulness," *The Huffington Post*, July 1, 2013.
[220] Purser and Loy, "Beyond McMindfulness," *The Huffington Post*, July 1, 2013.
[221] McDonagh, "Mindfulness is Something Worse," *The Spectator*. November 1, 2014.
[222] McDonagh, "Mindfulness is Something Worse," *The Spectator*. November 1, 2014.

I will concede that many of these critiques have some validity. Not that they disprove the usefulness of Mindfulness, but that there are flaws in the discipline. It is only fair to acknowledge that it is not a perfect practice. But what really is perfect? If anyone knew for certain would we not have already solved all of the world's problems? It is important to acknowledge that some of these assessments come to a genuine place and have validity as an argument. However, we must also allow some experts in the area of Mindfulness to respond.

When addressing the criticism that Mindfulness is overly individual focused and a purely selfish practice Doctors Williams and Penman had already explained this in their work, *Mindfulness*.

> Some people think that it's a little selfish to start by focusing on themselves during the meditation rather than trying to cultivate kindness to others, but this is to misunderstand the long-term intentions of the practice. By spending a little time cultivating friendship toward yourself, you are gradually dissolving the negative forces of fear and guilt within. This reduces your adhesive preoccupation with your own mental landscape, which, in turn, releases a wellspring of happiness, compassion, and creativity that benefits everyone.[223]

Williams and Penman acknowledge that there are somewhat self-centered aspects that one can find in Mindfulness because the practices are focused on the self. But without ensuring that our own priorities are met and that our own physical health and well-being is looked after, there are limits to what we are capable of doing in the world.

Dr. Adam Grant summarized this key point from his book *Give and Take* explaining that based on more than thirty years of research the people who give all of themselves end up giving less than those who balance their concern for others with their

[223] Williams and Penman. *Mindfulness*. 2011. 204.

own wellbeing.[224] A Mindful practice is not intended to fix all of the problems in the world; it is intended to help a person be more capable of interacting with the world because they are more grounded and settled. This is something that is even inherent in Buddhist conceptions of Mindfulness. It is not the practice itself, but the work that a person does beyond the self.[225]

Responding the critique that Mindfulness is a feigned enlightenment response to a technological world one must acknowledge that this is, in part, true. It is not, however, a new asceticism, but a response to the permeation of technology into our lives in a stressful and damaging way. As we demonstrated earlier in this chapter, the omnipresent stimuli and stressors have created a need for an organized practice of intentionality. We must consider this critique more as a comment on the way in which Mindfulness is presented than a devaluation of its purpose and efficacy. If we consider the world of even twenty years ago before we carried the world in our pockets, we were comfortable with the reality that one could reach out to a person and it may take hours or even days before a response arrived. While the development of more rapid communication has been helpful for many things, the speed at which we can now connect with people in and beyond our locale has changed the way in which we need to take the time to notice things around us.

Each one of us no longer needs to be aware of changing temperatures, or pay close attention to the sounds around us because that information is now available through an online search carried instantaneously. There is less of a need to pay attention to the

[224] Adam Grant, PhD., Interview with Krista Tippett. On Being: Successful Givers, Toxic Takers, and The Life We Spend at Work. FM 91.7, WVXU, October 25, 2015. http://www.onbeing.org/program/adam-grant-successful-givers-toxic-takers-and-the-life-we-spend-at-work/transcript/8064 (accessed November 1, 2015).
[225] Purser and Loy. "Beyond McMindfulness." *The Huffington Post*. 2013.

traffic patterns or the even the streets on which we drive because we have devices that can track traffic in real time and suggest alternative routes to avoid blockages. In fact, one can live in a city for years without having to fully understand the layout of the streets. The availability of all of this information has given us the freedom to be more mindless, and Mindfulness can help reground us in reality.

This is also a response to the detractors that claim that Mindfulness in and of itself is not a long-term solution. It is not intended to fix our deep-seated psychological issues or resolve an incorrect way of thinking. The cultivation of Mindfulness practices is intended to give us a set of tools which can help us notice when we feel stressed, give structure to our day, and see the patterns in our behavior and thinking which lead us to a spiral of reactivity.[226] Where some critiques are worried people might use Mindfulness as a way to avoid seeking help from professionals, or from getting ourselves into a deeper pit of despair by exposing ourselves to dangerous and uncharted areas of our psyche, this is not what it is supposed to be used for either. No responsible instructor would ask someone to explore those realms of our minds without help from a highly trained professional. Mindfulness, instead, tries to give a person the ability to pause in the midst of an anxiety-filled moment and refocus on what is in front of them. It does not solve the problem but gives us the ability to resolve it on our own.

The complaint that Mindfulness is nothing more than a trendy response to stress, again we can respond acknowledging that perhaps the rate at which Mindfulness has caught on in recent years demonstrates a real need. True there are those that are seeking to capitalize on a market that is open to it, but perhaps that only confirms that people are

[226] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 242–243.

starving for an ability to turn back from the overly stressful and hyper–connected world. Mindfulness is nothing new. It is only that the packaging is new.

Some have claimed that its popularity is due to the outrageous claims that Mindfulness can solve physical ailments. However, we must note that the reputable research by those like Langer and Kabat-Zinn have tested Mindfulness in conjunction with other medical practices. They have, instead, demonstrated, that when we harness the power of our mind, it is possible to aid these medical techniques. Dr. Langer has pointed out that a simple shift in language from the question "Can one…?" to "How can one…?" fundamentally changes the nature of solutions proposed because a reformulation of our thought process can open a world of possibilities.[227]

The final criticism that I will address is the idea that Mindfulness is Buddhism without its Buddhist roots. We have already discussed earlier in this chapter the reality the contemporary Mindfulness, in some circumstances, developed out of Buddhist spiritual practices. That assumes, then, that Buddhism has an exclusive claim on Mindfulness. This is simply not the case. Contemplative and mindful spiritual practices designed to bring awareness are present in most religions. They are often varied and can even appear to be a secular or cultural practice.[228]

Consider the implications carried in the words of the "Pledge of Allegiance." Even with the words "under God," the ritual recitation of such a pledge asks us to be aware of the benefits of being a citizen of the United States and to not take them for granted throughout the world. One can also consider the various mottos, creeds, or tenets of civic organizations and fraternities that inculcate certain values among members of the

[227] Langer, Interview with Krista Tippett, On Being: Science of Mindlessness and Mindfulness, September 13, 2015.
[228] Bourg, "Individuation, Interiority, and Spiritual Traditions," in Moberg, *Spiritual Wellbeing*, 15–22, 1979. 15.

organization. The ritualized recitation of these mottos is, in many ways, a spiritual practice of their own and should help a person remain grounded in the world in which they live.

Additionally, if one looks at Western religious traditions, Christianity has a variety of spiritual and contemplative practices which focus adherents on what lies in front of them and frees them from perseverating on non-critical critical concerns.[229] It is possible to also draw similar and legitimate connections between Mindfulness and other religious traditions. Later in this work we will analyze the relationship between Mindfulness and Judaism; there are many hooks on which we can hang this relationship.

Addressing the concern that this contemporary Mindfulness delegitimizes its Buddhist roots–which we have already dispelled the notion that Buddhism has an exclusive claim on Mindfulness–one Buddhist and Zen meditator posed the following:

> Is mindfulness guilty of making people happier without making them Enlightened? You bet. Guilty as charged. There's an awful lot of suffering in the world, and if we care deeply about our Bodhisattva vows, we want to see others suffer less. We really do. Buddhism isn't just about Enlightenment. It's about suffering and the end of suffering. Buddhism has always had an assortment of goals for people with different needs, in different sets of circumstances, or with different levels of aspiration.[230]

In addition to this sort of response, one may also note that Buddhism itself is not monolithic, and there are varieties that approach spirituality in different ways and have developed varied theologies, and one need not necessarily be a theistic Buddhist.[231]

> Contemporary Zen is, after all, as syncretic as a religion can get — a tasty and at times confusing mélange of Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and modern Western influences. So if Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition of mindfulness — paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally — doesn't entirely map onto the ancient Pali word

[229] Bourg, "Individuation, Interiority, and Spiritual Traditions," in Moberg, *Spiritual Wellbeing*, 15–22, 1979. 16–17.
[230] Segall, "In Defense of Mindfulness," *The Existential Buddhist*, December 19, 2013.
[231] Responsa Committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, *Practicing Judaism and Buddhism*, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 5752.3, https://ccarnet.org/responsa/tfn-no-5752-3-123-126/ (accessed September 6, 2015).

> "sati," but betrays other influences — some based on misinterpretation, some imported from Buddhist modernist or non-Buddhist sources — so be it.[232]

There may be some basis to the criticism that Mindfulness is an adapted Buddhism, but does that really matter? Cultures and individuals have borrowed from one another since they have interacted with one another. This does not diminish the utility and benefits that these practices can have for a person's life.

There will always be detractors who try to poke holes in just about any theory or idea. No strategy for a less stressed life is perfect. No strategy at all is perfect. The techniques and exercises that Mindfulness teaches are a means to an end: less stress and a more present and fulfilled life. This is only an introduction to some of the strategies of Mindfulness. If one wishes to work further to cultivate their practice, there is no shortage of materials in the world for study and no shortage of groups with which you can practice. While there are some who believe that this is a passing fad, they fail to understand that Mindfulness is a centuries old habit that has found a home in a wide variety of spiritual traditions. While it seems to be a cure for those who are spiritually seeking, we will examine in the next chapter the specific ways in which Judaism and Mindfulness overlap, and come to understand that living a spiritually Jewish life is a Mindful life. It does not necessitate strict adherence to ***halacha***. Nor does this demand a strong belief in God. It does provide an opportunity for those young Jews who identify with Judaism to generate their spiritual practices from the culture to which they are attached.

[232] Segall, "In Defense of Mindfulness," *The Existential Buddhist*, December 19, 2013.

Chapter 3: Kavannah, the Basis of Jewish Awareness

Religious life in the United States of America has consistently developed over the course of the last half-century. A striking development is the growing number of individuals who profess themselves to be "Spiritual but Not Religious" and maintain a strong cultural identity with the Jewish community. The Pew Center's *Portrait of Jewish Americans* demonstrated that this is especially common among Millennials. These, roughly, eighteen to thirty-five year olds proclaim a Jewish Identity, Jewish ethnicity, or Jewish cultural background and simultaneously seek out spiritual practices beyond what they understand as Jewish tradition. They find spirituality at music concerts and festivals, in nature, at the gym, and even in yoga class and meditation groups. For those who are "Spiritual but Not Religious," Mindfulness has become an increasingly popular option to fulfill their spiritual needs.

I am certainly not the first person to employ the term ***kavannah*** as an important aspect of a Jewish spiritual life; the debate over whether ***kavannah*** or ***keva*** is the most important to fulfilling Jewish duties is not definitively decided. My purpose is not to ascertain which is the truly authentic way to live a Jewish life. I contend that in a contemporary world in which a person has many ways to find spiritual fulfillment, ***kavannah*** can seize upon the spiritual zeitgeist: younger adults seeking to find meaningful ways of living that may or may not be a part of the religious customs with which he/she grew up. For the growing category of adults who identify with the Jewish community, ***kavannah***—as I have defined it in this work—can be a guiding spiritual practice that flows forth from Jewish tradition.

Mindfulness was discussed in the previous chapter because it has become popular in the Jewish community due to the many ways in which Jewish practice overlaps with Mindfulness techniques. There are practitioners who have identified their familiarity with Judaism's spiritual practices one reason that Mindfulness has captured their attention. In this way, living an intentional Jewish life, a life lived with ***Kavannah***, can help them fulfill their spiritual needs.

The emotional and psychological forces that drive humanity encourage us to develop rituals and seek out spiritual expressions. Naturally, it is not surprising that those who find Judaism lacking in effective spiritual practices search for other ways express spiritual need. However, there is no real need for these seekers to do this outside of Jewish tradition as Judaism offers a plethora of techniques, rituals, and practices that can guide a person's development of a mindful life. Judaism has a foothold in the hearts and minds as a part of the identity of Millennials and other younger adults. This sense of belonging should serve as the entryway into a deeply involved Jewish spiritual life.

There is a popular Jewish story which Rabbi Alan Lew includes in his book *Be Still and Get Going*. In the story, a man, Azyk, has a dream of a treasure buried under a bridge near Warsaw. Azyk goes visits the bridge only to be impeded by a guard. The guard halts Azyk's progress. When the guard questions him, Azyk tells him of his dream. The guard tells our protagonist of his own dream in which he sees a treasure in the oven of a man named Azyk. The protagonist immediately returns home to find this treasure. Rabbi Lew remarked that in his version of the story it is critical to note that the treasure is hiding in the most used room in the home, just out of sight.[233] It is the same issue that

[233] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 3–5.

many Millennials have in finding spirituality in Judaism; they may have not yet looked in the right place.

Millennials have many reasons for which they disengage from the Jewish tradition in which they were raised. We covered several of these reasons in Chapter 1. Millennials and other younger adults have found that the Jewish practices they have learned are not fulfilling enough. As a result, they turn elsewhere. Yet there are countless spiritual practices and mindfulness-developing rituals that saturate Judaism. The remainder of this chapter will be dedicated to exploring how mindfulness practices and spiritual practices already exist within Judaism, and that the innovation–***chiddush*** is that we have an opportunity today to use the popularity of Mindfulness and other spiritual practices as a link to inspire more people to engage in Jewish spiritual practices.

REFUTING THE ARGUMENTS AGAINST MINDFULNESS

Some people may reject developing ***kavannah*** with the excuse of an inadequate understanding of Judaism. However, a Jewish life takes an entire life to learn. Other critiques exist and they will be addressed here. Judaism has taught spiritual practices for centuries that can help a person develop awareness of the mind, the body, and the surrounding world. In certain communities and some contexts, these practices had been readily accepted. Other, more intense, mystical practices were declared unacceptable and withheld from the majority of the Jewish community. The Jewish people have become increasingly integrated into contemporary society. As a result, many Jews have been exposed to the practices, rituals, and norms of other cultures.

One justification for prohibiting certain spiritual practices is the belief that they are alien to Judaism. Some specific techniques *have* entered Judaism from other cultures.

One extreme example is yoga. Some argue that participation in yoga is idol worship – ***avodah zarah***. One writer explored this question in an article for *Tablet Magazine* that illustrated this tension beautifully.

Many people around Taffy Brodesser-Akner were practicing yoga when she moved to Los Angeles. She quickly took it up in response to the stresses of her life. It turned out to be exactly what she was looking for: a physical practice that gave her space to breathe. She was, however, uncomfortable with things she encountered in the class.

> There is a statue of Ganesh, the Hindu deity, in the yoga studio I attend. At the end of the class, my instructor says, "Namaste," and bows toward the class. In turn, we bow back. I am bowing toward the teacher, but also toward the statue. Namaste means, "The Divine in me salutes the Divine in you." During many of the meditation sessions, we are asked to put our hands in "prayer position," which is what it sounds like: hands joined together at the heart.[234]

It was a nagging concern for her because idol worship is a sin whether it is done accidentally or not. The spiritual elements of Hinduism that lie underneath the practice of yoga, especially in the presence of the statue of Ganesh, might be problematic.

A Rabbi of the Gal Einai Institute–an orthodox organization focused on learning through the teachings of Kabbalah and Chasidut, led by Rabbi Yitzchak Ginsburgh–certainly believes this is the case. The Gal Einai Responsum on the subject states, "Yoga has a negative energy which is connected to ***avodah zarah***, idol worship, and is thus unacceptable, even if the person practicing does not have these negative thoughts."[235] They argue further that the wisdom of yoga instructors does not come from Torah and is therefore not acceptable because "all wisdom must derive from the Torah."[236] Furthermore, meditation might fall into the same problematic category of non-Toraitic

[234] Brodesser-Akner, "Is Yoga Kosher?" *Tablet Magazine*, January 5, 2010.
[235] Gal Einai Institute, "Is Alternative Healing Kosher?" *Gal Einai Institute*, March 31, 2014.
[236] Gal Einai Institute, "Is Alternative Healing Kosher?" *Gal Einai Institute*, March 31, 2014.

wisdom. The Lubavitcher Rebbe was concerned about the origins of meditation but valued the practice. He sought, but was unable to find, a form of meditation he believed to be '***kosher***.'[237]

Because many of these practices, as they have been popularized in the United States, seem to have an origin in eastern spiritual traditions, it is reasonable for one to determine that yoga and meditation, and by extension mindfulness, are not allowed. A more lenient yet concurrent opinion would challenge one who participates in a group to evaluate whether or not a specific practice can be classified as a religion. As Rabbi Mark Washofsky wrote in *Jewish Living*, there is nothing in meditation that is inherently in conflict with Judaism.[238] Washofsky would seem to agree that it depends on the intentions of the individual. There are others, though, who maintain the Judaism is most concerned with one's actions, end even more-so on how one's actions appear to others.[239] Despite these objections, there are many who participate.

Srinivasan, the senior teacher at the worldwide Shivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers, reported that Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach attended Ashrams in his centers. "He [Rabbi Carlebach] understood we were talking about the same thing. Hasidic mysticism and Kabbalah are very much in line with yogic thought."[240] This is an important anecdote to those who want to refute the objections of those who strictly interpret Torah to bar participation in yoga or meditation. Furthermore, there are Orthodox rabbis who

[237] Frumma Rosenberg-Gottlieb, "On Mindfulness and Jewish Meditation, Part I," *Chabad.org*, March, 2011, http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1442811/jewish/On-Mindfulness-and-Jewish-Meditation-Part-I.htm (accessed on September 17, 2015).
[238] Washofsky, *Jewish Living*, 2010. 269–270.
[239] Brodesser-Akner, "Is Yoga Kosher?" *Tablet Magazine*, January 5, 2010.
[240] Brodesser-Akner, "Is Yoga Kosher?" *Tablet Magazine*, January 5, 2010.

understand that the yoga practiced today is often not the intensely spiritual or religious practice that it may be for some.

Rabbis of Bais Horaah, an organization of twenty rabbis based in Lakewood, New Jersey developed a mechanism to address halachic questions through a 24-hour hotline. They determined that there is no reason to prohibit the practice of yoga.

> Many observant people are part of a Yoga group, and it is see (sic) that it is generally fine to use Yoga as a tool for general wellbeing. It is true that there is an ideology and deep theoretical structure behind Yoga exercises, and some of them draw from ancient Hindu ideas that might be related to idolatry. However, to my knowledge in a Yoga class setting these ideas are translated into everyday (Eastern) terms such as feeling an energy in you, and one isn't exposed to actual ***avodah zarah***.[241]

In these terms, it is entirely appropriate to participate spiritual practices such as yoga and meditation when it is in a secular or fitness setting. The Responsa Committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis extended this permissive stance even further in their 1991 responsum.

The Responsa Committee was approached with the question as to whether or not a congregation could welcome a complicated family as members. The family consisted of a born-Jewish woman who was ordained as a Buddhist priest, and her husband who converted to Judaism and maintained that his spiritual life was enhanced by adding Tibetan Buddhist practices to his rituals.[242] Through their discussion of the involved issues, the Responsa Committee stated,

> If we were to deal solely with the husband we might be inclined to interpret his statement as meaning that he is engaging in meditative practices which enhance his spiritual awareness. The fact that he learned them from Buddhist teachers would seem

[241] International Beis Horaah, "Yoga in Halacha," *Din Online, The International Beis Horaah*, May 14, 2013, http://dinonline.org/2013/05/14/yoga-in-halachah/ (accessed September 26, 2015).
[242] Responsa Committee of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, *Practicing Judaism and Buddhism*, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 5752.3, https://ccarnet.org/responsa/tfn-no-5752-3-123-126/ (accessed September 6, 2015).

> indeed not be in competition with his Jewish identity and practice. Many Jews experiment in this fashion, which would not expose them to the charge of apostasy.[243]

At the same time, the Responsa Committee seemed conflicted on the status of the mother who was an "ordained" Zen priest. But this was considered as a part of the discussion only as a part of deciding to admit the family as congregants. The committee held that "there is no conflict between Judaism and meditative practices — after all, Jewish tradition itself is familiar with it."[244]

The final clause of that statement comes from a very tenuous connection that refers to a story that Abraham sent some of his sons to the east, and they brought with them these "spiritual" practices. This is an attempt to link Jewish tradition to yoga and meditation through ***Midrash*** and alleviate the discomfort. While I appreciate this intellectual exercise, it is unnecessary and does not convince those who wish to retain a strict interpretation. In fact, this approach is even more detestable to them as they say that these children of Abraham were sent away because they were idolatrous, therefore, these practices are known to be impure.[245]

While it is nice to have a midrashic explanation for how these practices are Jewish, it is unnecessary. There is a much better argument to be made which allows Jews to incorporate other spiritual practices into their lives. Many, if not all, are actually found in Judaism! The essential kernel at the center of the opposition to these "new" spiritual practices is that they have come into contemporary Jewish life through external paths. The objection comes from a fear innovation that is not indigenous to Judaism. Therefore, these innovations are sometimes incorporated slowly.

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[243] Responsa Committee of CCAR, *Judaism and Buddhism*, CCAR, 5752.3
[244] Responsa Committee of CCAR, *Judaism and Buddhism*, CCAR, 5752.3
[245] Gal Einai Institute, "Is Alternative Healing Kosher?" *Gal Einai Institute*, March 31, 2014.

KAVANNAH, MINDFULNESS IN JUDAISM

The place of ***Kavannah*** and how it relates to Jewish spirituality has been a subject of debate for centuries. Some would argue that it is a religion based entirely on deed—the things one does in service to God—rather than based on creed—the beliefs that one possesses. This is, in fact, the very argument that Judah Halevi, a 12th-century Jewish poet, physician, and philosopher, made in the introduction to ***Sefer Hakuzari*** – *the Book of the Kuzari.* Using the Khazar King as a device, Halevi claims that it is only actions that truly matter. The King sought advice from sages and eventually a rabbi in order to understand a recurring dream.

> To him [The Khazar King] came a dream, and it appeared as if an angel addressed him, saying: "Thy way of thinking is indeed pleasing to the Creator, but not thy way of acting." Yet he was so zealous in the performance of the Khazar religion that he devoted himself with a perfect heart to the services of the temple and sacrifices. Notwithstanding this devotion, the angel came again at night and repeated: "Thy way of thinking is pleasing to God, but not thy way of acting." This caused him to ponder over the different beliefs and religions, and finally became a convert to Judaism together with many other Khazars.[246]

According to Halevi's work, it did not matter that the Khazar King had appropriate thoughts if his actions were flawed. The only thing in one's life that truly matters to God is the fulfillment of commandments – ***mitzvot***.

Some have accepted the paradigm that actions are the only issue of consequence in Judaism. I will yield to the idea that actions are most important to Judaism. For example, it does not matter whether or not a person believes in God, only that they do not blaspheme and continue to fulfill the ritual obligation. Jewish tradition necessitates that a person has the proper intention in order to fulfill the commandment – ***mitzvah***.

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[246] Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari (Kitab al Khazari): An Argument for the Faith of Israel*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1964. Translation by Hartwig Hirschfeld, London: George Routlede and Sons, Ltd., 1905. 35.

> A person who eats matzah without the intention [to fulfill the mitzvah] - e.g., gentiles or thieves force him to eat - fulfills his obligation.
> A person who ate a ***kazayit*** (a weight equivalent to an olive which is required to fulfill the ***mitzvah***) matzah in delirium, while possessed by an epileptic fit, and afterward recovered, is obligated to eat another [***kazayit***]. The consumption of [the first ***kazayit***] took place while he was free from the obligation to perform any mitzvot.[247]

The initial decision presented here suggests that the person who was coerced into eating fulfilled the mitzvah; the second half concludes that if a person is, quite literally, out of their mind, they cannot fulfill the obligation. The answer is more complicated than that, and one can turn to other ***halachot*** – laws where Maimonides, a 12th-century Spanish physician, rabbi, astronomer, and philosopher, explained the answer is more complicated than that.

According to Maimonides—also known as Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon or the Rambam—unless both the one sounding the shofar and the one hearing the blasts are doing so with the intention of fulfilling the commandment, they have not completed their task.[248] Furthermore, commentators have explained that Maimonides accepted the coerced consumption of matzah is only accepted if the person was aware that it was ***Pesach*** at that time.[249] What one should understand, then, is that although traditional Judaism's first concern is the proper performance of a ***mitzvah***, intention is a critical aspect of the proper action.

As Maimonides explained, one must have the proper intention if they are to fulfill ***mitzvot***. At the same time, one might argue that without repetition, one cannot generate authentic ***kavannah***. One of my teachers demonstrated this with a sliding scale. She

[247] Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Chametz u'Matzah 6:3.
[248] Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Shofar 2:4.
[249] Eliyahu Touger, "Chametz U'Matzah – Chapter 6," *Chabad.org*. http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/937305/jewish/Chametz-UMatzah-Chapter-Six.htm (accessed February 6, 2016).

explained that a person may be a complete novice when it comes to listening to classical music. She/he can attend a symphony and genuinely enjoy their time. A more advanced student (perhaps at a 3 on a 1–10 scale) knows more of the details to which they can intone their ear and have a more meaningful. The more time and effort a student has dedicated to understanding the art with which the student engages, the more enjoyment the student can glean. It is the same with Jewish spiritual techniques: repeated performance of a ***mitzvah*** is necessary before one can perform the same ***mitzvah*** with ***kavannah***.

Contemporaneous with the research conducted for this work, *Tablet Magazine* published an editorial called "The Roots of Mindfulness." In this article, Michelle Goldberg outlined the stories of four early adopters of a meditation practice that is closely linked with the Mindfulness of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Goldberg described the affinity these Jews had with Buddhist teachings, and she acknowledged that this affinity between Jews and Buddhism has been present since the 1890s.[250]

In her article, Ms. Goldberg made the claim that if not for Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, and Jacqueline Schwartz—the founders of the Insight Meditation Society—it is possible that Mindfulness may not have become as popular today as it is.[251] This institution was critical to sowing the seeds of renewal of Jewish spirituality, along with other early pioneers like Sylvia Boorstein, who paved the way for Mindfulness to explode in popularity within the Jewish community. Ms. Goldberg has missed something crucial; something that the second generation of leaders of "Jewish Mindfulness" institutions have discovered and reclaimed: there was no explicit need to

[250] Goldberg, "The Roots of Mindfulness," *Tablet Magazine,* 2015.
[251] Goldberg, "The Roots of Mindfulness," *Tablet Magazine,* 2015.

leave Judaism to find Mindfulness practices. Like the treasure in Ayzek's oven, these spiritual techniques have long been a part of Jewish tradition and are a part of living an intentional Jewish life, a life lived with ***kavannah***.

It is acceptable to argue that yoga is a discipline that is not a Jewish practice; we have already discussed the ways in which one could participate in yoga, gain from the practice, and stay a part of the Jewish community. The discussion is different if one wishes to argue that meditation, contemplation, introspection, reflection, and self-improvement are not Jewish practices. This position is inaccurate. We will see in the remainder of this chapter the Jewish rituals and practices that, of their own right, are a "Mindfulness Practice." This will be demonstrated through a brief discussion of Jewish concepts of awareness, ***keva –*** fixed routine, ***kavannah*** – intention/direction, reflection, and action.

Kavannah – intention is indigenous Judaism and essential to living an intentional Jewish life. Many Jewish rituals and practices are intended to help bring our attention back to proper conduct as we drift off into a mindless existence.[252] Recall that it is a basic part of human nature for our minds to become more efficient and accomplish certain tasks through autopilot [253] and that the autopilot can also be a way for us to manage the stress of the world that bombards us incessantly.[254] "Judaism as a spiritual practice provides us with a framework, a discipline of practice that helps lead us to an awareness of God, and in turn, to respond to that experience in action."[255] It is our responsibility to

[252] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 25–26.
[253] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 37–40.
[254] Ryan, *A Mindful Nation*, 2012. 47.
[255] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 28.

take the traditions and stories that are our heritage and transform them into action so that we can live a better, happier, more balanced, and more peaceful life.

Kavannah: Intention/Direction

In its most technical sense, ***kavannah*** translates into English as "direction." In a spiritual context it takes on a deeper significance, "…not only concentration but meaning and intention in expressing ourselves before God."[256] It is no leap at all to connect "intention in prayer" and extend that same intention to all we do. Therefore, ***kavannah*** is truly about completely dedicating one's whole self to a particular task at a particular moment. Rabbi Moshe Chayim of Sudylkow taught in the name of his grandfather, the great Chassidic master, the Baal Shem Tov:

> Anyone who serves God in all his ways, seeking to fulfill the injunction "know Him in all your ways" (Proverbs 3:6), will do everything mindfully. Eating, drinking, sleeping, engaging in conversation in order to bring others closer to God, or to help dispel their sadness, or to help them in their business to sustain them so that they may devote more time to serving God–if even these (worldly) activities are done mindfully, then they also constitute divine service, ***avodah***.[257]

Everything we do throughout the day can be undertaken with ***kavannah***.

Intentional action is not only recommended but is commanded for one who wishes to live a Jewish life. Consider a selection from the Torah that is included in the daily prayer service: "You shall love ADONAI your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."[258] Today we understand "heart," "soul," and "might" differently as "mind," "spirit," and "body." There is little more to us than mind, body, and spirit. The Torah commands us to put everything that we have within us into our

[256] Reuven Hammer, *Entering Jewish Prayer: A Guide to Personal Devotion and the Worship Service* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1994), 13.
[257] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 119–120.
[258] Deuteronomy 6:5.

deeds. When paired with the teaching of the Baal Shem Tov, we should put this intention into all that we do in order to make it sacred to make it Jewish.

The Talmud also expands the requirement to focus one's attention and intention to all acts of daily life, "R. Huna said: He who only occupies himself with the study of the Torah is as if he had no God, for it is said: Now for long seasons Israel was without the true God. What is meant by, 'without the true God'? — It means that he who only occupies himself with the study of the Torah is as if he had no God."[259] In the greater context of the conversation in this Talmudic passage – ***sugya***, it becomes evident that doing good deeds and studying add up to the whole of a person's merit. In other words, a person who unintentionally does the right thing is not held in as high esteem as one who intentionally acts correctly—and for the right reasons. This is also a feature in the discipline of ***Mussar***.

> Rabbi Yisrael Salanter said: "One can possess broad Talmudic knowledge and be a fountain of deep penetrating analysis and yet he does not deserve to be considered a true ***talmid chacham***, Torah scholar. If he has not allowed his Torah knowledge to refine his character and restructure his personality, he is an ***am haaretz***, common person, who happens to know how to learn."[260]

Jewish tradition generally holds that the study of Torah is paramount, but only if the study is accompanied by a person's actions.

A person has numerous opportunities throughout the day to fulfill ***mitzvot***. The proper performance of these commandments may actually be a way to develop ***kavannah***. According to Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, "Many Jews and non-Jews think of the precepts as routine, ritualistic actions. Many Jewish sources, however, speak of the commandments as meditative devices, which can bring a person to a high level of God

[259] Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zara 17b.
[260] Moshe Lieber, *Pirkei Avos Treasury* (New York, NY: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 1995), 51.

consciousness. When the commandments are seen in this light, they assume great spiritual significance."[261]

Keva: Fixed Routine

In the same way that one cannot will Mindfulness practices into effectiveness, as was explained in the previous chapter, Jewish spiritual techniques are not effective simply because a person desires it to be so. It may take weeks, months, or even years for their benefit to become evident. As a part of her thesis for the completion of rabbinical school, Rabbi Rachel Maimin undertook a consistent meditation practice. She reflected, "This heightened awareness is something that I strive to have in every moment, but which of course at times remains elusive. I have found, though, that the moments of noticing have increased for me the more I have engaged in this meditation practice."[262] This is true of any introspective practice in Judaism. Whether it is the consistent revisiting of our habits, repeating prayers, or even for learning, the lesson only becomes firm in our minds through repetition. "The Talmud speaks of reviewing a ***mishnah*** and says, 'repeating one's ***mishnah*** one hundred times is not the same as repeating it one hundred and one.'"[263] Efficacy builds up over time.

Ritual implies an action that happens repeatedly. Judaism has developed regulated times and intervals for the majority of its rituals. The well-structured calendar of holidays developed because they are so closely bound to the agricultural cycle of the Levant and the lunar calendar. The timing of structured prayer services was established in relation to the historical times of offerings in the Temple in Jerusalem. ***Shabbat*** and the sabbatical

[261] Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*, 1985. 23.
[262] Maimin, *In All Your Ways Be Mindful*, 2013. 5.
[263] Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*, 1985. 57.

year regulate rest, refreshment, and rejuvenation. There are codified prayers and blessings that are to be offered before or after specific occasions, whether they are for lamentation, are emotionally neutral, or celebratory.

Some may assert that a tension undeniably exists between routine and intention. Routine may sometimes breed mindlessness or thoughtlessness. \ The same issue exists within Judaism. Frumma Rosenberg-Gottlieb wrote on this tension based on her experience in the Jewish and secular world in a two-part editorial for Chabad.org. She reported that she had initially lived a life that was full of New-Age spirituality that felt as though something was missing. In her case Judaism was missing.[264] However, Ms. Rosenberg-Gottlieb found that while a new part of her soul was being nurtured living a halachic life, she was still missing something that was not spoken about directly by her teachers of Torah. She was missing the ***kavannah***. During Rosenberg-Gottlieb's continuing study of traditional Jewish texts and living a traditionally observant life she found that embedded within the routine observance is the requirement to consciously direct our thoughts.[265] This is the very same conclusion to which Judah Halevi arrived in the Book of the Kuzari.[266]

God's Immanence: A Basis for Kavannah

The starting point of ***kavannah*** is key to discussing the distinctions between kavannah and mindfulness. Until the 1800s, nearly all Jewish writing was laden with theistic language and imagery. For those who are uncertain of the existence or role of God in the world, this language may be limiting or discomforting. It is important to state

[264] Rosenberg-Gottlieb, "On Mindfulness and Jewish Meditation, Part I." *Chabad.org*. March, 2011.
[265] Rosenberg-Gottlieb, "On Mindfulness and Jewish Meditation, Part I." *Chabad.org*. March, 2011.
[266] Halevi, *The Kuzari,* 1964. Hartwig Hirschfeld, trans., 1905. 295.

that I am writing from my perspective, which presumes that God does, indeed, exist. I understand God to be an ethereal essence that is present in all living and natural things, and that a person can interact with that essence. Furthermore, I believe that much of the God language could be replaced with less theologically loaded language and retain its Jewishness.

Kavannah, as I use it in this context, begins with an understanding of God's presence in the world. This is the sense that a Divine force fills all living and things and the natural world. This is founded on the creation narrative according to Lurianic ***Kabbalah***, the Jewish Mysticism as developed by Rabbi Isaac Luria:

> God originally existed as the ***Ain Sof*** [sic], literally, the s – God's essential, undiluted nature, a vast and limitless emptiness so powerful, so charged with supernal energy, that nothing could coexist with it. So when God wished to bring creation into existence, it was first necessary for God to remove him/herself from a tiny dot at the center of the ***Ain Sof*** [sic]. This tiny dot became creation, the entire universe as we know it. The process of self-removal was called ***tzim-tzum***, or contraction. It is accomplished by means of ***Kelim***, vessels that carried the Divine Light out of this tiny speck at the center of ***Ain Sof***. But as ***tzim-tzum*** unfolded, a cosmic catastrophe occurred. The Divine Light proved to be too strong for the vessels, and the vessels broke open, filling the universe with dangerous shards of devouring light, with failure, suffering, and death. The Task of humanity – of all being – from the moment of that catastrophe forward became ***tikun olam***, the repair of the universe, the mending of the broken vessels, and the restoration of the Divine Light to its rightful place.[267]

This story, as explained by Rabbi Lew, teaches us that all of creation is filled with these piece of Divine Light, parts of the Divine Presence. It is our job to seek out these Divine Sparks, to become aware of God's presence. Rabbi Luria further taught that if we liken the presence of God to an apple field, it is not the apple field we need to seek or even discuss. Rather, we must focus our attention on finding entrances to the apple field. We must find ways to engage with the Divine Presence that fills the world.[268] In addition to

[267] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 50–51.
[268] Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, *The Language of Truth*, trans. Arthur Green (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 67.

its development in mystical traditions, this engagement with the Divine is also in our sacred scriptures.

One of the more famous passages from the book of Prophets refers back to this same idea. Isaiah's vision describes God seated on a throne in the Temple, flanked by unnumbered Angelic Beings – ***Seraphim*** who shouted back and forth to each other saying, "Holy, Holy, Holy is *ADONAI TZ'VAOT*! [God's] presence fills all the earth."[269] This passage describes a reality in which the Glory or Presence of god imbues all of the earth. This is not the only time one of the prophets proclaims that God fills the earth with God's presence. Jeremiah states, "'Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?' declares ADONAI."[270] The prophets described one aspect of God as a presence that permeates all that exists.

Understanding God to be a presence has survived in our ancient texts and works of mysticism. The idea has also been explained by several theologians and is referenced in poems such as Judah Halevi's "Lord, Where Shall I Find You?"

> Lord, where will I find You?
> Your place is remote and concealed.
> And where will I not find You? Your being fills the world.
> Creator of All, You are in all that is small.
> To the far You are near, to the near You are here.[271]

Once again we find an author describing God's omnipresence, but the continuation of the poem is also an instruction to actively seek out God's presence in the world.

[269] Isaiah 6:1–3.
[270] Jeremiah 23:24.
[271] Judah Halevi, "Lord, Where Will I Find You?" in *Yehuda Halevi,* trans. Hillel Halkin (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2010), 92–93.

> I have longed for Your presence,
> I have called You in Your absence,
> As I set out to greet You
> I have found You come to meet me:
> In Your holiness I saw You,
> in the wonder of Your glory.[272]

In other words, there are times when we forget to be aware of the majesty of the world, but should we choose to seek it out, it is already there waiting for us.

Kavannah rooted in a belief in God becomes a means by which a person actively begins the search for God's presence as God's presence is waiting and searching for us. God can only be noticed and acknowledged when a person stops to take note of God. The experience might be awe at an inspirational moment of beauty, or it could be love felt for friends or family. God may be experienced as insight into a person's past, or ideas of how to better the community. In any case, God can be experienced when a person is willing to notice God. ***Kavannah*** trains one to halt the running thoughts as that carry us out of the moment. ***Kavannah*** draws on the ***keva*** of ritual and prepares a person to be ready to acknowledge the sacred as it manifests itself in front of them.

God's Nature

Another critical aspect of ***kavannah*** has been developed on the basis of God's nature. The nature of God has been a question that philosophers have addressed for centuries; it is truly impossible to definitively state what God is. One reasonable tactic was undertaken by the Rambam. He wrote that God could only be understood by defining what God is not.[273] Another means of describing God's nature was codified in the Bible in words attributed directly to God.

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[272] Halevi, "Lord, Where Will I Find You?" in Halkin, *Yehudah Halevi*, 2010. 92–93.
[273] Gil Mann, *How to Get More Out of Being Jewish Even If* (Minneapolis, MN: Leo & Sons Publishing, 1996), 41–54.

> "Ehiyeh asher ehiyeh – I will be as I will be," God replies. But the verb ehiyeh is a very strange verb in Hebrew, a rendering of the verb 'to be' in a flowing tense partaking of past, present, and future, so that God's reply might just as easily be rendered "I was as I was" or "I am as I am." What God seems to be saying to Moses here is, "My name – my essential nature – is absolute and unconditioned being in the present moment; absolute and unconditioned becoming past, present, and future' absolute existence in the great, eternal moment."[274]

God's nature, according to God, is an existence that persists simultaneously in the past present and the future.

What if I Don't Believe in God?

There are a growing number of Jews who identify themselves as atheists. For some people, there is so much unexplained suffering and evil in the world that they are unable to believe in the existence of God. For others, scientific inquiry has done enough to satisfy their curiosity and they are happy to say that we no longer need God to understand how the universe works.[275] It might be easy to reject the entire concept of ***kavannah*** if it is based solely on God's immanence in the world. However, not professing a belief in God does not exclude a person from participating in Jewish life. Neither does atheism bar a person from cultivating ***kavannah***.

The *Portrait of Jewish Americans* report that was published by the Pew center identified a variety of ways in which people link themselves to the Jewish community. When identifying aspects of a Jewish identity, the majority of respondents said that they thought it was largely a matter of culture and ancestry rather than religious expression.[276] While I hold that the religious aspects of Jewish culture and theology are vitally important, I cannot negate that many Jews think that there are cultural aspects that hold a

[274] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 37.
[275] Mecklenburger, *Our Religious Brains*, 2012. 24–25.
[276]Stencel and Miller eds., *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, 2013. 54.

strong bond. To that effect, if a person is willing to throw their identity in with the Jewish people I would be happy to have them. There are some communities that require a person to demonstrate their lineage. Others might say that there is a certain knowledge base that is a part of being a Jewishly literate adult. There is no litmus test to ascertain whether or not someone is a believer. Aside from being an outcast if one proclaims outright heresy, even the most secular person can live a Jewish life.

> At many turns in the process of working with couples and individuals who are interested in affiliating with and living among the Jewish people, I have encountered virtually every degree of expression between faith and faithlessness and have never seen someone walk away from their connection to Jewish peoplehood by virtue of "having to believe in God," or be required to demonstrate anything other than a commitment to learning, observance of rituals they find meaningful and fealty to the values and traditions of Judaism as well as to the Jewish people. And most, in fact, explicitly state that what they love about becoming Jewish is that there isn't one definition of Jewishness; that Jewish discourse requires critical thinking and dissent; and that one's faith (or lack thereof) is as much a source of self-examination as any other aspect of one's identity.[277]

According to Rabbi Andi Bachman, it is absolutely possible for a person to participate in and be a part of the Jewish community to be a part of the Jewish community without believing in God. By the same token, it is possible to access Jewish spirituality and ***kavannah*** while still doubting God's existence.

As was addressed in the first chapter, spirituality is associated with the ultimate questions of life; a connection to some non-corporeal energy or essence that exists in the world, or in our minds. It is somewhat non-rational, is connected to emotional and mystical experiences,[278] and involves an appeal to a holistic and relational perspective.[279] In most contexts spirituality is connected to God, and yet none of the above necessitate a

[277] Andy Bachman, "Don't Believe in God? Come Aboard!" *The Jewish Daily Forward*. December 9, 2013, http://forward.com/opinion/188802/dont-believe-in-god-come-aboard/ (accessed December 20, 2015).
[278] Mecklenburger, *Our Religious Brains*, 2012. 50–58.
[279] Hood, Spilka, Hunsberger, and Gorsuch, *Psychology of Religion*, 1996. 115.

belief. But it is possible that a person can connect with Jewish peoplehood, Jewish rituals, and Jewish customs that can guide a person towards a meaningful and engaged life.[280]

True, God has been an important part of Jewish tradition. God is a challenging concept for some people to talk about. Whether they consider it The language used in Jewish tradition can be challenging for some,[281] and it is reasonable to expect that it could push some people away from the conversation. It is important to help keep these people involved as there are a wide variety of Jewish conceptions of God. [282] If one takes into consideration the ways in which contemporary culture has provided openings for people to connect with a sense of spirit or goodness in the world, I see no reason that a person cannot be a part of the conversation and use the Jewish traditions and rituals that have been passed to us today. The struggle that some have with God is not a problem.

CORE ASPECTS OF KAVANNAH

In a progressive movement that believes that Jewish practice can and should adapt over the course of history as new realities emerge, it follows that one's intentions and actions must be informed by Jewish tradition. A person should look to our texts and try to understand what Jewish communities have understood to be the appropriate, ethical, and spiritually fulfilling action and pursue it with focused attention. This is not a simple platitude, but is the ultimate answer that the King of the Khazars learns from the rabbi in Halevi's discourse.

The rabbi, speaking of human free will, explained that although God knows everything, a person must act in accordance with God's revealed desires for perfect

[280] Mann, *Get More Out of Being Jewish,* 1996. 28–31.
[281] Mann, *Get More Out of Being Jewish,* 1996. 50–52.
[282] Mann, *Get More Out of Being Jewish,* 1996. 44–47.

action.[283] That is to say: all is foreseen, and freedom of choice is given. It follows that humans, Jews specifically, must make the right choices. This affirms Halevi's assertion at the beginning of the work. However, he added another dimension at the end of the book:

> …but the actions must be perfect to claim reward. Likewise (sic) must the ideas of the prayers be pronounced in the most perfect way to be considered as prayer and supplication. Now if thou bringest intention and action to perfection thou mayest expect reward. …If the action is minus the intention, or the intention minus the action, the expectation [for reward] is lost.[284]

Halevi means that, according to his theology, a person should expect a divine reward if he/she fulfills God's ***mitzvot*** with the proper intention. Implied here is the view that a person may receive a reward if acting with the proper action or the proper intention. If both are not present, one should expect nothing. In plain English, Halevi argued that intention is a vitally important part of Jewish spiritual practice: ***kavannah*** matters.

As a contemporary progressive religion, Judaism must be understood as a way in which a person can learn to make sense of the world, find comfort in moments of stress and pain, and celebrate and acknowledge moments of gratitude. Furthermore, Judaism must also be imbued with spiritual fulfillment. Several different practices have been developed to cultivate ***kavannah***. They are useless if one is not able to implement them. "The reminder that prayer or meditation is not an isolated event in human life, but one that needs to be nurtured by one's thoughts and deeds throughout the day, is also a bit of counsel offered by teachers of many traditions."[285] In order to act with ***kavannah***, one needs to understand that there are three core aspects: Awareness and Reminders, Reflection, and ***Tzim-Tzum***.

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[283] Halevi, *The Kuzari,* 1964. Hartwig Hirschfeld, trans., 1905. 294.
[284] Halevi, *The Kuzari,* 1964. Hartwig Hirschfeld, trans., 1905. 295.
[285] Arthur Green, "Commentary," in Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, *The Language of Truth*, trans. Arthur Green (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 48.

Ar'ani – Awareness

Everything begins with first becoming aware. The sound of the ***shofar*** around the High Holy Days is intended to wake us from the slumber of our daily lives. The blast challenges us to contemplate who we have been in the past year. This is not, however, the only time we ought to be shaken awake from the grind of life.

> When all we are able to see is our own suffering or need, we actually leave no room for the Holy One to enter and help us. Raising our consciousness to see that our suffering is like that of others—and particularly, to understand that God is in need as well, to be united with the ***Shekhinah*** and for all of Creation to be made whole—we open ourselves to God's help.[286]

Recall the kabbalistic story of creation and we remember that in order for God to create the world God withdrew. While it might be easy to let our own needs take control of what we do throughout our day, Judaism offers several ways for people to remind themselves that it is time to become more aware. One of the most noticeable reminders can be found as a part of Jewish clothing.

While fringes – ***tzitzit*** or head covering – ***kippah*** are not items one will find many liberal Jews wearing on a daily basis, both of these garments can serve as a reminder to reawaken oneself throughout the day. The instruction for ***tzitzit*** points precisely to the need for ***kavannah***.

> ADONAI said to Moses as follows: Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages; let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner. That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of ADONAI and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge. Thus you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God.[287]

[286] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 136.
[287] Numbers 15:37–40.

This passage is not only an important part of the story of the Jewish people, but it has been codified as a part of the daily liturgy. According to Rabbi Jonathan Slater, it is noteworthy that we observe this commandment as a kind of alarm that can remind a person to refocus his/her attention.[288]

Another ritual within Judaism that helps bring awareness to the routine actions of our daily life concerns food. Not only do the demands of ***kashrut*** – dietary laws call one's attention to be mindful of the food about to be eaten, it is also customary for a person to recite a blessing before eating. The Rabbis of the Talmud explained this, citing Psalms 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness there of."[289] By pausing to acknowledge the processes through which food is available to be consumed, one is able to turn eating into a spiritual and intentional act. A great amount of intention and attention is required to examine packaging for a certification – ***heksher*** for those who observe ***kashrut***.

Jewish tradition offers many other opportunities for a greater awareness of the world around us. Whether it is reminding oneself to not rush to judge our neighbors harshly and instead give them ***chaf zachut*** – the benefit of the doubt,[290] or even something as inconsequential as putting one's shoes on, as discussed in the Talmud,[291] our tradition describes the ways in which a person is to act and consequently have an increased awareness.

One final area in which Jewish tradition can help structure one's life and provide moments of increased awareness is connected to the calendar. Not only are there

[288] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 194.
[289] Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 35a–b.
[290] Mishnah, Avot 6:5.
[291] Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 61a.

descriptions for times when a person is supposed to offer prayers, but also the entire Jewish calendar can serve as an alarm clock. The ***shofar*** wakes us from our slumber at the New Year – ***Rosh HaShanah***. The ***shofar*** is also used to announce a new month: another signal marking the passage of time and a reminder to be aware of upcoming holidays or the mood of the new month.

Jewish time is about more than sounding a ***shofar*** at the appropriate times. The entire calendar provides moments for resetting oneself and strive for greater awareness.[292] Each week affords an opportunity to step outside the hustle and bustle of daily life to make time for true rest. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel commented that one of the beautiful consequences of Shabbat is that we can set aside a day on which we take ourselves outside the tyranny of the machinery of society. The gift of Shabbat allows a person the opportunity to regain independence from the demands of society.[293] Additionally, Shabbat is an opportunity to take time for reflection and rejuvenation. Not only is the weekly Shabbat an opportunity for increased awareness, but each holiday has a specific theme that captures our attention throughout the yearly cycle. The pilgrimage festivals required ancient Israelites to bring produce from their fields that were harvested at that specific time of year. Pesach reminds Jews of the rebirth of the world in the spring; Sukkot demonstrates the fragility of life as summer turns to fall.

Judaism is filled with rituals and observances that are intended to cultivate an increased awareness of the world and our place in it. But this increased awareness might be for naught if a person does not allow it to shape one's actions. The first step is to

[292] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 207–208.
[293] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: It's Meaning for Modern Man* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 28.

cultivate habits that increase our awareness,[294] but we cannot stop there. The next step is to turn our attention inward in order to transform ourselves.

Hitbonenut – Introspection

Kavannah is also about creating opportunities to cultivate an increased awareness of ourselves, our thoughts, and our actions. The most prominent opportunities for introspection are on ***Rosh Hashanah, Aseret Yamei T'shuvah*** – the Ten Days of Repentance, and ***Yom Kippur***. These High Holy Days have been developed to be intentionally introspective and reflective. Jews are commanded to take stock of their lives and how they have either hit or missed the mark in the past year and commit or recommit to a better life.[295]

At these holy days, we are reminded of our uniqueness and value while simultaneously acknowledging our meekness and impermanence in the grand scheme of the world. We are taught that we can choose to make an impact. The High Holy Days remind Jews that our lives are frail, and we cannot know how much longer we have on the earth. Therefore, we must repent today for the transgressions of the past, and seek to live in the moment. On ***Yom Kippur***, our thoughts turn from reflection to actively seeking penitence from God. Having used the preceding days and weeks to seek forgiveness from those in our community the predominant task of the day is to face our pending mortality and strive to become the best version of ourselves that we can be.[296]

The High Holy Days have been the focus of this initial discussion as the most obvious example of a reflective practice associated with the Jewish calendar. Considering

[294] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 81.
[295] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 219–222.
[296] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 231–232.

the meanings and purposes of Sukkot—the fragility of our shelters and the celebration of a successful harvest—open us up to reflections on gratitude. On Pesach, Jews are reminded of what it means to have been liberated from slavery. By extension, Pesach is also a time to ponder how we might liberate ourselves today from the tyranny of a clouded or confused mind[297] Each of the Jewish holidays has a specific meaning and connection that can lead to an intentionally-lived life.

Reflection, attention, and intention are Jewish skills that can be extended into a person's daily life. A turning point was the destruction of the Second Temple when the ancient rabbis were forced to adapt the worship services—which had been primarily accomplished through ritual sacrifices. After the destruction, the offerings became ones of prayer. The schedule of prayer retained the strict schedule of the morning, afternoon, and evening sacrifices and charged the members of the community with directing their thoughts and hearts toward God in prayer. There are many Jews who make this a central component of their life, and there are others who pray on a more sporadic basis. Regardless of the specific routine, prayer is another opportunity for introspection and reflection.

The verb "to pray" in Modern Hebrew is להתפלל – ***l'hitpalel***. The root פלל – pey-lamed-lamed can be understood as a sense of investigation or close examination. In the form of ***l'hitpalel***, this verb is reflexive. That is to say, the verb is directed back to the speaker in this form. One can thus conclude that the grammar of the Hebrew verb "to pray" identifies the act of prayer as an introspective process.

[297] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 210–211.

In moments of prayer, our aim is not to change God, "rather it is to change us… When we list what we truly need, we declare the truth of our lives — where we stand today, how we perceive our lives, our fortunes, the unfolding of our relationships."[298] When we pray, whether reciting spontaneous words of one's heart or reciting the codified prayers, the words that resonate with us can provide insight into our thoughts and feelings of a given moment. The thoughts that arise in this reflective period are symptoms of the aspects of our personality with which we are not satisfied. The human mind is designed to wander, and it will often turn to the very things that are troublesome for us.[299] It is up to us to make the improvements in ourselves. Rabbi Heschel instructed that we cannot rely on God to bring to us the skills we need, but rather, we can rely on God to inspire us to develop these skills within ourselves. In these moments of intense introspection, one can search his/her thoughts to see how she/he measures up to the best version of one's self.

Thinking of prayer as an inward-focused activity allows us to see it as a meditative practice. "In fact, the prayerbook (sic), the ***siddur***, can be seen as a highly sophisticated, structured guide to cultivating our awareness of the presence and the power of G-d (sic)."[300] Consider the development of a normative ***Shacharit*** – Morning Prayer service. One first begins expressing thanks for the presence of a soul and a functioning body. The service continues with more praise and gratitude through psalms. Following these initial "warm-up" prayers is the first obligatory section of the service: the recitation

[298] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 154–155.
[299] Williams and Penman, *Mindfulness*, 2011. 151–152.
[300] Rosenberg-Gottlieb, "On Mindfulness and Jewish Meditation, Part I." *Chabad.org*. March, 2011.

of ***sh'ma*** and its blessings. This rubric is then followed by ***HaT'filah*** – the nineteen prayers that are the worship service proper.

If one tightens their focus on the ***Amidah***, another name for ***HaT'filah***, it is possible to understand this series of prayers as a curriculum for inculcating awareness or mindfulness. The prayers flow from establishing our relationship to our ancestors who closely interacted with God, to praising God's strength and protection, to acknowledging God's holiness. In liberal congregations, these first three prayers are recited as a community, and then the service continues individually and silently with the intermediary petitionary prayers. These prayers are akin to a guided meditation, which, as mentioned previously, is our opportunity to search ourselves and uncover our needs.[301] Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan wrote that this was exactly the intent of the Rabbis of the Great Assembly when they replaced the animal sacrifices with the prayer service.[302]

Tzim-Tzum – Withdrawal

In order to avail oneself of meditative practices and live with ***kavannah***, one must be able to take a step back from the tumult of the current moment. Jewish tradition has an ultimate example from which we can learn to take a step back. According to Lurianic Kabbalah, the world could not be created until God withdrew and created space for the universe to come to be.[303] ***Tzim-Tzum*** is another means by which a person can practice cultivating intentionality. This can be done as an act of sacred study, a practice of meditation, or prayer. This idea is also reflected in the famous passage attributed to Rabbi Hillel, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I?

[301] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 198–205.
[302] Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*, 1985. 44–45.
[303] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 50–51.

And if not now, when?"[304] Rabbi Jonathan Slater explained that "what am I?" is a reminder that in order for us to act constructively in the world we must be able to recognize where other people come into play in the world and that others have a right to be a part of it too.[305]

This act of withdrawal, self-negation, or diminishing is so central to Judaism that Jewish men carry a mark with them their entire lives, circumcision, which is the sign of the covenant – ***brit*** between Abraham and God. This act links us infinitely to our ancient tradition. This act removes a part of the naturally formed human body, and according to the Sefat Emet—a Chasidic master of the 19th century—it is noteworthy that this ritual is performed on the very body part that is used in procreation. In order for us to ensure the next generation, we must remove a small part of ourselves.[306]

This act of self-negation, a step back, ***tzim-tzum,*** is the second action that one seeking to develop an intentional spiritual practice must undertake. The first is awareness. We must first become aware. Then, we must take a step back. This is not a withdrawal as in becoming a hermit or taking on a monastic life. Instead, it is the step back that each of us can take throughout our lives in order to cultivate a prominent awareness of all of the good that is in the world.

Developing ***kavannah*** is a vitally important aspect of Jewish life regardless of whether a person believes in God or not. There are many ways in which ***kavannah*** can be manifested in a person's life: by cultivating awareness, a reflective process, and the ability to temporarily remove one's ego from the chaos of the present, one can live even

[304] Mishnah, Avot 1:14.
[305] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 140.
[306] Alter of Ger, *The Language of Truth*, 1998. 24–25.

more in the present. If a person is able to accomplish this, it is possible for them to be more present. For those who believe, presence is a way to emulate God. For a person who does not believe, ***kavannah*** can help a person develop an ability to live in the moment. Furthermore, using Jewish tradition as the basis for developing these techniques connects a person to the Jewish people, to Jewish history, and increases Jewish literacy.

Chapter 4: Cultivating Kavannah

Jewish traditions have evolved consistently over the long course of history: In new locations, customs have been interpreted and adapted. Following catastrophes, Jewish leaders have reformed the way communities observe rites and rituals with an eye towards helping people fulfill their spiritual needs. Dropped into a new era or new location, Judaism has been chameleon-like; the colors of its skin may have adapted, but the essential character of Judaism has remained unaltered. As was discussed in Chapter 1, Judaism has been able to settle into the mold of a new context, and if one understands the societal changes of the 21st century, then Jewish leaders and members of communities are sitting on the cusp of an opportunity for adaptation. Now is the time to refocus authentic Jewish spirituality in a way that ensures the continuity of Jewish values and Jewish community and can lead a person to live a more balanced and spiritually fulfilled life.

Several people and organizations have been working to actualize this reality. For example, the Institute for Jewish Spirituality and the Center for Jewish Mindfulness are among those who have captured the popularity of Mindfulness and used its language to move the souls of many have found ways to remain within the Jewish community to find spiritual fulfillment. In order to accept this premise, one must then turn to Jewish tradition to find specific rituals and practices that encourage a person to live an intentional, meaningful life; a life that exists in the present moment and allows a person to forge profound relationships with nature and with the people in front of them, and to improve their own life through intentional decision-making.

Being present, relational, reflective: these are characteristics of a life lived with

kavannah. Jewish tradition offers several practices that can be adapted to help cultivate a life of ***kavannah***. The practices include observing Jewish time, study – ***talmud torah***, ***Mussar***, prayer, meditation, and observing ***mitzvot*** or ***halachot***; and each category of practices helps train a person to become more aware, introspectively reflect, and withdraw. The integration of these practices will vary from person to person; therefore, the following is not a prescription, but a description of ways in which Jewish tradition has implemented myriad rituals and practices in the past and today.

KEVA IS CRUCIAL

Before entering the conversation about ***Kavannah*** and the ways in which a person can develop her/his ability to utilize it in a daily life, it is absolutely essential to remember ***keva*** – making one's practice fixed and regular**.** For the vast majority of people, none of the techniques that will be discussed will be life-changing after the first experience. It is easy for people to seek immediate change, but developing these skills is no different from a person who is trying to build muscular strength or learn to read. Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzzatto wrote in *Messilat Yesharim*—one of the three foundational writs that Yisrael Salanter used in developing ***Mussar***— on the importance of regularized practice.

Luzzatto wrote that the purpose of his book was not to teach his reader something that was unknown. "Rather, [this book's] benefit is a function of a continuous review. In this manner, one is reminded of those things which, by nature, people are prone to forget, and he will take to heart the duty that he tends to overlook."[307] One edition of *Messilat Yesharim* includes a calendar for daily study in order to encourage the reader to take up a

[307] Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Mesillas Yesharim*, trans. Yosef Leibler (New York, NY: Feldheim Publishers, 2005), 1.

daily practice. Especially when one is working on tasks that take intense mental focus, a detailed outline for a practice schedule is the best way to ensure that the learning takes hold.[308]

JEWISH TIME

Jewish time is a foundational aspect of a Jewish life that can help cultivate awareness and reflection. This notion is even more pronounced when living as a minority culture or religion. Whether it is the calendar itself, the starting point for a day, or the day of rest, Judaism is a religion focused on time, specifically holiness in time. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel commented that this was the case from the very beginning of creation.

> It is, indeed, a unique occasion at which the distinguished word *qadosh* (sic) is used for the first time: in the Book of Genesis at the end of the story of creation. How extremely significant is the fact that it is applied to time: "And God blessed the seventh *day* and made it *holy*." There is no reference in the record of creation to any object in space that would be endowed with the quality of holiness.[309]

When one examines to the typical mythology of ancient religions which were contemporary with the ancient Israelites, one would expect a specific place to be the center of God's creation as a holy place. However, as Heschel noted, the Jewish sanctification of time marks Jewish observance and spirituality as unique.

The significance of time is not limited to the sacred day, Shabbat. Most Jewish rituals revolve around acknowledging the passage of time. Consider the way in which a Jewish day is calculated: the new day in Jewish tradition begins not at dawn, but at sunset. The day begins at the conclusion of light, rather than at the first appearance of its

[308] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going*, 2004. 38–39.
[309] Heschel, *The Sabbath,* 1951. 9.

first rays. This is how God measured time according to the story of creation: "There was evening, there was morning; one day."[310] Each new day begins with the shade of darkness falling over the world, and we are thankful for the rising of the sun every morning. This is a unique spiritual way of understanding time: chaos preceding order. This understanding speaks to the human desire for an orderly world: something must end before it is possible to begin again. Awareness of this notion is the beginning of establishing a "mindful" Jewish life founded on Jewish time. Becoming aware of Jewish time creates a spiritual calendar by which one can keep himself/herself accountable to her/his spiritual needs, set aside time for intentional ***Tzim-Tzum*** of Shabbat, and use the holiday calendar as a curriculum for cultivating ***Kavannah***.

Whether it is the passing of a day, week, month, year, (or marking one of the several new years in Jewish tradition), or the Sabbatical cycle, Judaism is intensely focused on marking time and using it for its appointed purpose.[311] The regulation and seclusion of specific times for certain purposes not only provides a person with reminders for awareness but also establishes the regulated fixedness–***keva*** of repeated ritual. One should recall how a repeated practice is the best way to overcome the inertia of homeostasis. It is beneficial that ***Keva*** is built into the very essence of the practice of marking time as sacred.

Shabbat

As Rabbi Heschel wrote, Judaism places significant importance on Shabbat, the day of rest. This sacred day is traditionally dedicated to a day of refreshment of the soul

[310] Genesis 1:5
[311] Heschel, *The Sabbath,* 1951. 8.

as a way to emulate how God sanctified the seventh day in the creation story by resting on Shabbat. A significant amount of wisdom exists in our tradition that asks each person set aside a day of rest in order to rejuvenate her/his body and soul.[312] This practice can take on many forms depending on a person's observance.

In traditionally observant communities, where ***halacha*** is observed rigidly, Shabbat observance would involve abstaining from the thirty-nine categories of work which are prohibited, celebrating with festive meals and visiting with friends and family, resting, attending services, and engaging in sacred study. In these instances, a person must be prepared in advance so that he/she does not perform one of the prohibited activities. The strict ***halachic*** observance of Shabbat obligates the observer to engage in a consistent practice of Shabbat activates, two of the core aspects of living with ***kavannah***: awareness and ***tzim-tzum***.

Kavannah developed through observant-***halachic*** practices comes through the intention one must have to move through the day on Shabbat. There are small ways to prepare to work through the restrictions: turning on and protecting certain lights and unscrewing others, preparing the food that will need to be served hot the next day, preparing tissues or paper towels, and setting automatic switches. Each of these small can help an observant Jew intentionally focus on Shabbat.

The day itself, in an observant-***halachic*** setting, is an act of ***tzim-tzum***, especially in a modern world. The modern world that provides us with so many ways to engage with the world quickly and immediately, but on Shabbat these conveniences are turned off to

[312] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 211–218.

be present and aware. Certain things that may come to mind need to be set aside because work is not the purpose of Shabbat; it is for making life sacred, it is for being present.

The Maggid of Mezritch—an eastern European Chasidic rebbe from the 18th century—taught that in order for a person to let God and holiness into their life they must sublimate their own needs. By putting our needs and desires aside we understand the needs of others, the needs of the world, and the holiness of God.[313] Shabbat is a time for a person to pull himself/herself out of the day to day world and mark it as a sacred day. It is a day to be present, to be with family, to rejoice, and to simply be. This day of rest is a day to actively rejuvenate.

Liberal and progressive Judaism maintains that a person is not bound by the ***halacha*** itself. As a part of Jewish observance, Shabbat can have deep meaning without all of the restrictions and commandments of observant-***halachic*** Judaism. Understanding the modern world to be a hectic and chaotic place, there are hundreds of ways that Shabbat can be a holy and sacred moment to step back from the rest of the week. It can serve as a reminder–a bell–to call a person's attention to the need to slow down. Some may celebrate Shabbat by attending services, choosing this as a day for sacred study, or doing something to take care of oneself. Shabbat can be the time when a person cooks her/his favorite dishes, chooses it as the night to not cook or the one day where dessert is served. During my childhood, Shabbat morning was the only time that we were allowed to enjoy heavily sugared cereals and watch cartoons. As a teen, it was simply understood that I would be home to recite the table blessings—candles, wine, and challah—and stay through dessert before I could go out with friends.

[313] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 135–137.

Concerning Shabbat, Rabbi Arthur Green commented on the writings of the Sefat Emet, "Shabbat is a magical time, a moment when the world that often seems a barren 'wilderness' is transformed into a 'field,' waiting to be planted. The well is open. But that magic is only potential, waiting for us to plant the seed and nurture it to grow. Only we can do that. The true miracle is that of our ability to open in response."[314] Shabbat, as it occurs in the calendar, is an obvious moment for Jews to remember sacred time, a day to prepare one's soul to take on the challenges of the week and set problems down.

Where Shabbat provides a weekly reminder for a person to observe sacred time, the Jewish month provides another cycle on which one can create a predictable practice. Looking up at the night sky, the natural progression of the moon can mark off the weeks as it waxes and wanes. It is another way to connect to nature. Given the reality that these calendars function differently than the rest of the world, a person can use it establish it as a spiritual observance, an entirely separate aspect of their life that, because of the tension that results, can encourage a person to wake up, to be aware.

Calendar as Curriculum

The weekly and monthly rhythm of the Jewish calendar can help create a spiritual life lived in Jewish time. Whether a person is strictly traditionally observant or not, the weekly and monthly rituals may be used to establish a fixed practice, to develop awareness. These small additions to a person's awareness can be a helpful first step towards a Jewishly mindful life, but the Jewish calendar can call attention to an even broader awareness, provide moments for ***tzim-tzum***, and guide personal introspection. The Jewish calendar might even be looked at as a curriculum guide for a person trying to

[314] Green, "Commentary" in Alter, *The Language of Truth*, 1998. 46.

add meaning to their life.[315]

The spiritual year begins with ***Rosh Hashanah*** – the New Year, also called ***Yom T'ruah*** – The Day of Sounding the Shofar. As it is with beginning a practice a person must become aware, and ***Rosh Hashanah*** is the perfect time to begin this process. The sound of the shofar can awaken the parts within us that need to be roused in order to make ourselves into a better iteration of who we can be. Our personal slate is clean and ready for a person to try again to be the person she/he intends to be.

The High Holy Days, beginning with ***Rosh Hashanah*** and continuing for ten days to ***Yom Kippur*** – the Day of Atonement, bring us into direct confrontation with our lives and our actions. On these days "we pay attention to the truth of our lives, we face our mortality as well, and we begin the process of opening ourselves to others."[316] We observe these days as an even larger scale opportunity for renewal and refreshment of our being with the idea that we have a clean slate with which we can begin the new year and strive. This yearly reminder of our human failings and our desire to improve our behavior is a beautiful way that the Jewish calendar reminds us of our limitations and asks us to be aware of who we are and what we do.

There are many other observances that take place throughout the year that can help turn a Jew's attention to a more mindful life. ***Purim***, sitting opposite the solemnity of ***Yom Kippur***, is an intentional celebration of joy and levity. It is a reminder to take our lives less seriously and let happiness fill the world. ***Hanukkah***, in the midst of the deepest and darkest days of winter, reminds us to have hope and bring light to the world. ***Tu b'Shvat*** marks that the majority of the winter's rains have fallen in Israel. While we

[315] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 207–208.
[316] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 231.

might not live in Israel, , we can still attribute importance to this holiday.

> [Tu b'Shvat] establishes the separating point between generations of fruits. That is, fruits that flowered and budded previous to this date constituted one cohort, and those that flower and bud after it constitutes another... What we have in hand at that moment is the fruit of the year that has passed. ... But it also marks the future. The classical commentator Rashi explains why this time is appropriate as a turning point. "Most of the rains of the year have passed. This time is the season of mating. The sap has begun to rise in the trees, and they will start to blossom from this point on" (Rosh Hashanah 15a). From this perspective, Tu b'Shvat marks the beginning of something, the start of the process of blossoming and producing fruit.[317]

Each holiday draws attention to the natural world. Established in the climate of the land of Israel, the timing can be confusing for those living elsewhere. However, their observance can have great importance for us today if we are willing to reinterpret them ever so slightly. Their occurrence at somewhat regular intervals provides the framework from which we can hang our lessons. It is up to us to take the traditional meanings of these holidays and make them applicable to us today.

The holidays, High Holy Days, ***Rashei Chodesh***, and ***Shabatot*** are impeccable reminders of time and the necessity to be aware of the world. They affix moments to the calendar that are intended for refreshment, introspection, or celebration. There are three major festivals, formerly used as pilgrimage festivals, that can also help us be attuned to the natural world as the seasons change. Their regularized occurrence and seasonal importance are the ***keva*** through which one can derive ***kavannah***. ***Sukkot*** was once the celebration of the fall harvest's yields, ***Pesach*** marked the first trimmings of the spring, and ***Shavuot*** the produce of the early summer ingathering. While these holidays still fall in the appropriate seasons, we are less aware of the work required to produce the food that gives us sustenance. Each of these holidays certainly gives us the opportunity to

[317] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 255.

refocus our attention on the way our food is produced, but we must make them more meaningful for the contemporary Jew.

Our attention on the feeble ***sukkah*** in the fall as a reminder of the blessing of shelter than many of us have without difficulty. With an eye directed toward social justice, this can be an intentional moment to focus on the homelessness and food insecurity issues that are inescapable today. One can remember the plight of our ancestors as they wandered the desert searching for their freedom. Becoming aware of this can lead one to offer help to those who need that aid today. The same can be said of ***Pesach*** when we mark the release from bondage in Egypt. But this is also a time to think about the changing seasons and the rebirth of the world. A new life can be felt in the air, and as we clean the ***chametz*** (the leavened products are forbidden during the week-long holiday) from our homes we can reflect on how well we have cleaned the ***chametz*** from our lives that we began to do during the High Holy Days. This "spring cleaning" can be another moment to take a step back before re-engaging with the world.[318]

The last of the three major festivals of ancient Israel is ***Shavuot***. Not only was this once a celebration of the summer harvest, but the traditional observance of receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. For some, this act of revelation is difficult to be taken as an historical occurrence. This does not negate the importance of the Torah that Judaism holds to be sacred. Through Torah, our tradition transmits and retains numerous ideas of how we encounter God in the world, and how we should interact with our neighbors, friends, family, and enemies. This collection of wisdom is no minor miracle. This can still be a moment of stepping back and celebrating the incredible minds of Jews

[318] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 18–19.

throughout history.[319]

Each of the aforementioned holidays offers moments for us to recalibrate our lives. Not only that, but each holiday teaches a different message while still revolving around central tenets of Judaism, personal and communal freedom from oppression, gratitude, reflection and introspection, self-improvement, and spiritual awareness. The calendar itself can be a curriculum guide to help develop a practice of ***kavannah***.

A final profound aspect of Jewish time as a means for cultivating and living with ***kavannah*** is in the tension, already alluded to earlier, that develops when a person follows two calendars: one secular solar calendar and a spiritual lunar calendar. The solar calendar—with roughly 365 days—and the Jewish calendar—with 354 days on average—means that the 11-day difference will cause the holidays to drift over time. Many Jewish holidays are connected to nature and the seasons, this poses many complications. This "drift" is symbolic of the drift that can occur in each person's life that can easily happen without careful. Just as the leap year is added when the drift gets too great, the various holidays in the Jewish calendar can draw a person's attention before they drift too out of place.

LIMUD–STUDY

The Reform Movement's prayer book, *Gates of Prayer*, reminds the people in the pews that Torah study is equal to all of the ***mitzvot*** because it can lead a person to perform all of them.[320] This essential Jewish principle encourages the study of sacred texts and is recorded in some of our earliest manuscripts. The Torah commands that a

[319] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 18.
[320] Chaim Stern, ed., *Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayerbook*, (New York, NY: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1975), 52–53.

parent makes efforts to ensure that their children learn the words and values of our people.[321] In the early days after the destruction of the Temple, studying sacred texts became a way to fulfill sacred obligations to God, and study is included as a one of the greatest commandments.[322] For many, the study of sacred writings is spiritually fulfilling.

Studying Jewish teachings and sacred texts can bring deeper meaning to a person's life. Reflecting on the question, "What is the Torah about?" Rabbi Lew remarked: "I would say that the Torah is the record of the human encounter with God — the transcendent, the absolute."[323] This concept is a beautiful way of understanding the ***Tanakh***, but should be extended beyond the Five books of Moses, the Prophets, and the Writings; one can consider the entirety of Jewish wisdom as a record of the Jewish quest to understand the nature of the world and explain human encounter with the Divine. Viewed in this way, ***talmud torah*** is both a spiritual and an intellectual exercise that can deepen one's understanding of the world in which he/she encounters innumerable wonders.

The wealth of knowledge found within our Jewish texts is vast. These texts contain deeply spiritual messages and spiritual guidance for those ready to uncover it.

> There is an open secret embedded in the sacred literature of Judaism. This literature — the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, Midrash, Kabala (sic), and the Teachings of the Hasidic Masters — is generally read as the wellspring of Jewish communal values and religious observance. But there is a much deeper and more universal message sitting right in plain view, on the surface of these text — a message largely unseen for the three thousand years of their existence. If one knows what to look for, the classical sources of Judaism offer a trenchant guide to spiritual practice.[324]

We can turn to these texts to be our guide. We can also use the study of these texts as a

[321] Deuteronomy 6:7.
[322] Mishnah, Pe'ah 1:1.
[323] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 12.
[324] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 5.

spiritual practice in and of themselves. The act of studying torah (understood in the most expansive definition—including the whole of Jewish wisdom, commentary, mysticism, and midrash into contemporary times) is a spiritual practice when it is undertaken with intention. A person who is willing to be honest and face their genuine person and personality, studying can help a person understand and improve oneself.

There is an apocryphal anecdote I have heard too many times to dismiss completely. In it, a student questions his rabbi seeking to know why she continues to return to the same texts each year. He asked, "Why is it so important to explain this verse?" The rabbi responded, "I do not study in order to explain the verses. I study to explain myself." It is an incredible challenge for a person to experience something and not filter the experience through their biases. An introspective person will understand this reality which allows them to analyze her/his response to the matter being studied.

According to some experts, our ability to be self-critical and self-aware is a unique ability of humankind. It is a gift from the Divine.

> That is why God gave humans wisdom and intellect, to enable them to bear this witness. Intellect itself depends upon this act of testifying. The more a person directs the mind and uses intelligence only to know God and bear testimony, the more intellect and wisdom are given to that person. Of this the psalm goes on to say: "The testimony of [God] is faithful, making wise the fool," (vs 8). For it is by bearing such witness that a person comes to comprehend even more, and to testify to that as well.[325]

These two principles highlight the way in which the study of Torah can lead a person to use introspection – ***hitbonenut***, one of the core aspects of ***Kavannah***.

When a person turns their learning into an introspective practice—she/he takes pains to consider the underlying thought processes that lead to a certain outlook—the learning can deeply improve their character. This is accomplished not only by

[325] Alter of Ger, *The Language of Truth*, 1998. 9–10.

challenging or affirming beliefs or thought processes, but also by expanding the wealth of knowledge this person may draw on as they interact with others. When one learns to consider alternative perspectives he/she hones the ability to take a step back and make space for others.

There are many ways in which a person can engage in this sacred learning. It is a rare congregation that does not have some sort of opportunity for Torah study, often on Shabbat. Classes are offered at other times as well in many communities. This, however, may not be the most inspiring way for some to engage because they might not feel it a safe place to ask difficult questions of the teacher, lest the instructor challenge their ideas as not Jewish. To that end, one might be comforted by Rabbi Rami Shapiro's expressed desire to share with his congregation that many of the words of our prayer book do not resonate with him.[326] A person might be comforted to know that the challenges and questions that face them have been posed by others.

Regardless of the care with which one approaches her/his study, large groups can be intimidating. In smaller groups, then, it is more empowering to engage in the texts. The available of electronic information has enabled many more people to have access to our tradition's treasure trove of knowledge. And with the help of a knowledgeable scholar, there is no reason people cannot find ways to engage in sacred study. Depending on where in the United States one lives there are other opportunities through JCC's, the Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning, Conventions, and Me'ah through Hebrew College for those living in the Boston area. Speaking for myself, I would be excited to know that congregations or individuals want to engage in sacred study whether it is in a

[326] Shapiro, "My Response," *Tikkun Magazine,* October 25, 2013.

group or as an autodidact.

Make Your Study Fixed

One critical component of making this study meaningful is to help make it applicable to the individual. This can be a challenge because the language and/or paradigm of the work may be archaic for people, but beneath this initial layer there are important values buried beneath the text. A regularized regimen of study is necessary for improvement, like any sort of learning. It is not enough to pick up a guitar once a month, play golf a few times a year, or speak a new language 90 minutes a week. It requires commitment.

The sages in the Mishnah and Talmud understood the need for regular study. Shammai advised that a person should establish a fixed schedule for their learning,[327] and his intellectual rival, Hillel, explained this even further: And do not say "When I free myself of my concerns, I will study, for perhaps you will never free yourself."[328] These wise axioms reinforce the importance of fixing a study practice. Without designating a time to work, it may be far too easy to let other concerns take control.

Maimonides elucidated precisely what he believed the appropriate way to divide one's time. In the *Mishneh Torah: Laws on the Study of Torah* the Rambam explained that one should devote a third of his [or her] time studying to learning the Written Torah, a third to the Oral Torah—***Mishnah***—and the final third to the Talmud—also known as Gemara.[329] It is noteworthy that Rambam designated space for a person to have a career, to engage in the work necessary to provide for one's family—compared to contemporary

[327] Mishnah, Avot 1:15.
[328] Mishnah, Avot 2:4.
[329] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*: Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:11.

standards, there is not much time allotted for the work day.[330] It is abundantly clear from Maimonides's writings that adherence to a regulated schedule is a most important feature of lifelong Torah learning.

Lifelong learning is to be stressed. Another one of the Rambam's rules governing Torah study was as follows: "Until when is a person obligated to study Torah? Until the day he dies, as Scripture states: 'Lest you remove it from your heart, all the days of your life.' (Deuteronomy 4:9) Whenever a person is not involved with study, he forgets."[331] A regular practice of study is the only way to ensure that a person continues to retain the knowledge one develops over a lifetime.

A Broad Base of Knowledge

It is critical to note that even in the medieval period a person was not restricted to only studying Judaism, other disciplines are encouraged to be learned as well, especially if this knowledge can help advance a person's life or understanding of the world. Maimonides explains the value of a well-rounded education in his introduction to *The Guide for the Perplexed*. The Rambam glowingly references the talents of his—presumed to be favorite—student.

> My honored pupil Rabbi Joseph, may the Rock guard you, son of Rabbi Judah, may his repose be in Paradise. When you came to me, having conceived the intention of journeying from the country farthest away in order to red texts under my guidance, I had a high opinion of you because of what I had observed in your poems of your powerful longing for speculative matters. This was the case since your letters and compositions in rhymed prose came to me from Alexandria, before your grasp was put to the test. I said however: perhaps his longing is stronger than his grasp. When thereupon you read under my guidance texts dealing with the science of astronomy, and prior to that texts dealing with mathematics, which is necessary as an introduction to astronomy, my joy in you increased because of the excellence of your mind and the quickness of your grasp. I saw that your longing for mathematics was great, and hence I let you train yourself in that science, knowing where you would end. When thereupon you read under my guidance

[330] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*: Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:12.
[331] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*: Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:10.

> texts dealing with the art of logic, my hopes fastened upon you, and I saw that you are one worthy to have the secrets of the prophetic books revealed to you so that you would consider them that which perfect men ought to consider. Thereupon I began to let you see certain flashes and to give you certain indications. Then I saw that you demanded of me additional knowledge and asked me to make clear to you certain things pertaining to divine matters, to inform you of the intentions of the Mutakallimun in this respect, and let you know whether their methods were demonstrative and, if not, to what art they belong.[332]

The opening lines of Maimonides's letter to his pupil demonstrate the high regard with which he held the students desire and aptitude to understand a wide variety of disciplines.

Rambam himself is an example of a person who possessed a broad range of knowledge. In response to a request from Samuel ibn Tibbon—a colleague in France who was translating the *Guide for the Perplexed* from Arabic into Hebrew—to come visit Maimonides in Fustat; Maimonides sent a response explaining that he did not have time due to his responsibilities to the Sultan and his household, his own study, medical practice, rabbinic advice, and his own religious obligations.[333] It is clear from the many ways in which Maimonides is engaged that he is conversant in several disciplines and topic.

A person who is knowledgeable about a variety of subjects can bring innovative insights to sacred learning. This is demonstrated in the Talmud when Rabbi and Reish Lakish were debating the point at which in its construction, a weapon has been finished. Yochanan accedes to Reish Lakish because Reish Lakish was experienced with weapons from his days as a robber.[334] In other instances, we find Rashi—Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki a noteworthy 11th-century French commentator—would rely on his knowledge of Old

[332] Moses Maimonides, "Epistle Dedicatory," Isadore Twersky, trans., in Isadore Twersky, ed., *A Maimonides Reader*," 235–235 (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, Inc., 1973), 234–236.
[333] Moses Maimonides, "Maimonides' Letter to Samuel ibn Tibbon, 1199," in Jacob Rader Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World: A Sourcebook: 315–1791*, 348–352 (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1999), 349–351.
[334] Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metziah 84a.

French to make sense of the words of Torah and Talmud.

A person who studies disciplines outside the realm of traditional Jewish texts can bring new insights which only further the benefits that learning Torah, in its broadest understanding, can provide. Engaging in several subjects helps create a well-rounded individual, and this is cherished in the Jewish community. Augmenting one's non-Jewish studies with Jewish learning can cross pollinate the disciplines. One's work can be imbued with their character, ethics, and values, and his/her secular and scientific learning can deepen the understanding of Judaism as well.

The symbiotic relationship between Jewish and secular/scientific can add to the spiritual fulfillment of Jewish learning. An important distinction is that Torah study is the epitome of spiritual experience,[335] because it speaks directly to a person's spirit. The combination of the two disciplines is the development of an entire person, one able to work and provide for themselves and family, and a person who continues to grow spiritually and ethically.

THE KAVANNAH OF HALACHA

Halacha can be translated literally as, "the way," as in, the appropriate way of behaving Jewishly. The term also has taken on the technical meaning, "law," a teaching in Judaism that holds a similar weight as a legal decision. Jewish tradition has held that Jewish life is based on the belief that when God revealed the Written and Oral Torah at Mount Sinai, the words presented therein were to serve as guides to Jewish practice for all time. By digging through the several layers of text, a knowledgeable person could discern God's will and the ways by which a Jew should conduct her/his life. It would be

[335] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 60–61.

expected for a person's actions with respect to ritual to be of God's concern. Jewish tradition holds that there is an appropriate, Jewish way to act in all aspects of life.

One Jewish theology explains that God is like a King who reigns over the entire earth. This omniscient and omnipresent God knows all that each person does. Therefore, a person must dress, act, and speak as he/she would in the presence of a King.[336] Since God, the King of Kings, is Omnipresent and Omniscient, then every aspect of a person's life has the potential to become a spiritual, religious, or ritual act; every action has a Jewishly-appropriate process by which it is to be accomplished.

There are thousands of examples of these regulations that guide an observant life. A few examples include the proper way of getting dressed[337] and what clothes one should wear,[338] even the way in which a person puts on or ties their shoes.[339] There are volumes of ***halachot*** that define appropriate business practices—versions of "Choshen Mishpat" by Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (in *Arbah Turim*) and Rabbi Yosef Caro (in *Shulchan Aruch)*, commentaries on these works—such as Rabbi Moshe Isserles's *Mapah*, and several sections of the Rambam's *Mishneh Torah*.

If a person decides to take upon themselves the obligations of following these mitzvot throughout the day, they must live with ***Kavannah***. Embedded in the intense practice of observation is the necessity to sublimate one's will, emotions, or desires should her/his actions be counter to what ***halacha*** requires. In addition to this ***tzim-tzum***, strictly adhering to ***halacha*** cultivates an intense awareness of the world so this person can act in accordance with what they believe God's will to be; and while it could be easy

[336] Kitzur Shulchan Aruch, Laws Concerning Conduct Upon Rising in the Morning 1:1.
[337] Mishnah Berurah 2:1
[338] Deuteronomy 22:11.
[339] Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 61a.

to fall into a life of rote action without thinking, a Mindless or Doing way of living, this is combated with regular study so as to refresh one's knowledge of appropriate action.

Most Jews would acknowledge that the implementation of ***halacha*** has developed with Jewish history and varied cultural contexts, there are three, broadly defined, ways that Jews in the 21st-century work with these rules: Traditional-***Halachic*** (often called "Orthodox"), the Reform Movement, and the Conservative Movement. The Traditional-***Halachic*** approach is to observe them as one's rabbi or family has instructed. The Reform Movement declared its first official position in 1885, saying,

> We recognize in the Mosaic legislation a system of training the Jewish people for its mission during its national life in Palestine, and today we accept as binding only its moral laws, and maintain only such ceremonies as elevate and sanctify our lives, but reject all such as are not adapted to the views and habits of modern civilization.[340]

While the language has developed over the roughly 150 years since then, the general principle has remained intact; the Reform movement encourages each person to understand and follow the commandments that lead to a holy life. The Conservative Movement has claimed a moderate position on this topic. As a movement, it stresses the importance of ***halacha*** as a body of literature, and simultaneously dismisses a rigid adherence to tradition, and encourages development within the ***halachic*** system.[341]

For the average cultural Jew, there are many ways in which one could incorporate ***halacha*** as a part of her/his decision-making process. There are hundreds of works that explain the traditional practices themselves. If one should choose to engage in more Jewish study, a developing knowledge of the underlying justification for certain practices may come to the foreground of the decision-making process.

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[340] Central Conference of American Rabbis, *Declaration of Principles* (New York, NY, 1885), https://ccarnet.org/rabbis-speak/platforms/declaration-principles/ (accessed February 10, 2016).
[341] Rabbinical Assembly and United Synagogue of America, *Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism, 2nd printing* (New York, NY: The Jewish Theological Seminary Press), 1990, 20–22.

Rabbi Goldie Milgram encourages readers of her book *Meaning & Mitzvah* to carefully examine her or his life and work through a short list of ***mitzvot*** that one may already perform as an active component of her/his life, and others that may be intriguing or fulfilling to add.[342] It may be the case that interpreting and integrating ***halacha*** into one's life may be a later step in the process of developing ***kavannah***. It could also be to a person's benefit to select a few Jewish practices—washing one's hands before eating a meal, coordinating clothing or adding Jewish elements like ***tzitzit*** or a ***kippah***, or adopting a way of observing Shabbat.

In any case, it is important for a person to learn about the intention-building practices that saturate a Jewish life. They may be uncovered through study, or through asking questions of others. Learning for the sake of developing one's practice is held in high regard in Jewish tradition, as the Mishnah states: "Rabbi Yishmael bar (son of) Rabbi Yossi said, one who studies Torah in order to teach is granted the ability to study and to teach. One who studies in order to 'do' is granted the ability to study, to teach, to observe, and to do."[343] There is plenty of room for creativity in developing one's Jewish, as long as it is informed by Jewish values and teachings. In this way one is able to be, exist, experience the world, rather than mindlessly drift through life.

Kashrut

Nothing in life is more essential than eating and drinking. This coincides with one of the most well-known observances in Jewish tradition: ***Kashrut*** – Jewish dietary laws. The traditional observance of these dietary restrictions are sometimes complicated, and

[342] Rabbi Goldie Milgram, *Meaning & Mitzvah: Daily Practices for Reclaiming Judaism through Prayer, God, Torah, Hebrew, Mitzvot, and Peoplehood* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005), 169–170.
[343] Mishnah, Avot 4:6.

for those who are not accustomed to them might find the observance onerous and the laws themselves arbitrary. If one takes a moment to consider how central eating and drinking is to a person's life, developing a system to observe ***kashrut*** might be a wonderful basis on which one can build attention, mindful eating can help lead to mindful living.

While the laws are complex, an elementary explanation of these restrictions is that a person cannot prepare or consume milk and meat products in the same meal, or even eat milk within six hours of eating something meat. There are lists animals that are permitted or not permitted to be consumed in any way; and lastly, there are symbols printed on packages that certify that the food has been prepared in a setting that meets the standards of a specific organization. These basic rules alone are a start through which a person can bring ***Kavannah*** to an essential aspect of life. It is critical to note that this is an entirely spiritual practice: traditionally, it has absolutely nothing to do with "healthy diet." Although some may choose to develop healthy eating habits as a mindful eating practice.

The ways in which people have observed dietary restrictions have varied from place to place, and recently people have been creating and searching for different ways to elevate their eating practices. A rabbinical school colleague of mine shared one adaptation he made to his ***kashrut*** observance. Whenever he is a position to do so, he eats only ***kosher*** – ritually fit meat, will avoid non-***kosher*** animals, and will abstain from mixing milk and meat. The exception to his rule is to eat local delicacies when traveling, and not let his typical observance limit his ability to experience the world.

This concept has been attacked as an easy way to sidestep the restrictions of Jewish law. However, it is a way in which this young rabbi is able to meld modernity with

spiritual practice. The decision to temporarily and actively disregard ***kashrut*** practices demonstrates an intentional choice; the foods he is consuming are considered before he eats them. In this way, his consumption is not mindless but imbued with ***kavannah***.

Another variant of this practice was framed in this way:

> People often laugh at our kosher practice.
> "It's so hypocritical to only keep kosher at home!"
> "What's the point of having plates for take-out treif [non-kosher food]?"
> But this is what has worked for us. This is, for us, what distinguishes our home as Jewish. This is our way of being conscious of our history, heritage culture and community as we make our way through what is otherwise the banality of everyday events. So, no. it's not halachic. No it's not accessible to the broadest populations of Jews. But it is a daily reminder that we are committed to a specific community.
> - Jenni Person, Miami, FL[344]

Observing some form of ***kashrut*** can be a powerful way for a person to turn eating into a Jewish practice, and it need not set one apart completely from his/her friends.

Today we find people with all varieties of eating habits and customs. Whether it is people who have diabetes or celiac disease; are gluten-intolerant, gluten-sensitive, or are lactose-intolerant; vegan, vegetarian, or pescatarian; or are following a restrictive diet for weight loss reasons, our Western culture has developed to allow them to function normally. While some of these diets are taken on for ideological reasons, and others for health considerations, each one can help a person be more intentional about their eating habits. The decision about what a person eats can become an intensely spiritual action, and there is no reason to not turn to Jewish sources to help guide practices, as the following anecdote can demonstrate.

In the summer of 2015, Dr. Leibovitz's article, "Is Going Off Seamless the 21st-Century Version of Keeping Kosher?" spurred further investigation. After a brief email

[344] Mary. L. Zamore, "Introduction," in Mary L. Zamore, ed., *The Sacred Table: Creating a Jewish Food Ethic* (New York, NY: CCAR Press, 2011), xxxvii.

exchange, Dr. Leibovitz shared that when he wanted to make his eating habits more spiritual and Jewishly influenced, he turned to the Jewish sources he knew to understand them better. Reading Nechama Leibowitz's lessons, Dr. Leibovitz came to believe that the laws of *kashrut* were about being knowledgeable about the food we consume. Living in New York it had become too easy to simply order food through his phone on Seamless–an app that enables a person to order food from several restaurants and for a small fee have it delivered to one's door with almost no interaction with another human—and Mr. Leibovitz decided that calling or walking to the restaurant was a way of becoming more mindful of the food he eats. This was based on his understanding of the laws of ***kashrut*** as explained in Leviticus.

I will promote one resource that a person can turn to for guidance on developing a contemporary Jewish eating practice as a part of living with ***Kavannah***: *The Sacred Table*, edited by Mary Zamore, contains several essays on Jewish eating habits. These essays discuss ethical concerns on the treatment of workers and the treatment of animals; they also cover environmental ethics, personal health, using food as a way to work for justice, or contextualizing meals with blessings before and afterward.

The time at which a person sits down to eat is intensely personal. The decision about what things to make a part of us; nothing is more essential in life. Jewish tradition is built on many different values, and a person may choose to pick one, or combine several. It is important to pay homage to Jewish tradition; thus, the decision is made in a way that facilitates ***Kavannah***.[345] Zamore suggests that in order to make a well-informed decision of this magnitude one should write lists of her/his present and past dietary

[345] Mary L. Zamore, "Personal Kashrut: Shleimut and Sh'lom Bayit," in Mary L. Zamore, ed., *The Sacred Table: Creating a Jewish Food Ethic*, 463-471 (New York, NY: CCAR Press, 2011), 466.

restrictions, choices, and practices. He/she should focus on the underlying justifications and any tensions one has with regard to his/her past or present.[346] Eating habits are just one additional way in which a person can integrate their own version of ***halacha***.

MUSSAR

Mussar is a strategy for developing ***kavannah*** within Jewish tradition. In the same way that Mindfulness has been dismissed as selfish sitting in contemplation, some believe that ***Mussar*** is of the same ilk at worst, and simply not worthy of time in comparison "more useful" subjects.[347] The strategy involves combining several aspects of Jewish tradition, ***hitbonenut*** – introspection, ***limud*** – study, and action. Initially developed with people already actively practicing ***mitzvot*** in mind; the course of study and introspection that is ***Mussar*** can be a guide for spiritual development for exactly the people who are searching for spirituality outside of Judaism.

As a guide for moral improvement, ***Mussar*** steers a person on a slightly different tack. Based on the belief that a person is bombarded with opportunities to pull themselves away from proper conduct. Rabbi Yisrael Lipkin Salanter—considered the founder of the ***Mussar*** movement in the 19th century—believed that consistent study, attention upright behavior, and personal reflection and ***t'shuvah*** – repentance make up the disciplines to steel oneself against the challenges of the world.[348] The goal is that as one works

[346] Zamore, "Personal Kashrut," in Mary L. Zamore, ed., *The Sacred Table*, 2011, 464.
[347] Rabbi Yosef Leibler, "Translator's Introduction," in Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, *Mesillas Yesharim*, trans. Yosef Leibler, xiii–xvi (New York, NY: Feldheim Publishers, 2005), xiii.
[348] Rabbi Israel Lipkin Salanter, "Igeret Hamussar,"in *Ohr Yisrael*, Zvi Miller, trans., 391–409 (Southfield, MI: Feldheim Publishers, 2004), 399–403.

constantly to accomplish this feat, she/he will be able to "release the light of holiness that lives within the soul."[349]

Salanter's Mussar Movement did not occur independently; it was developed on collected wisdom of other spiritual thinkers and mystics. One of the most fundamental works of Mussar was Moshe Chaim Luzzatto's *Messilat Yesharim*. In this work, Luzzatto outlines the character traits he believed were necessary to fulfill humanity's purpose in the world, "to do [mitzvot], to serve the Eternal, and to overcome tribulations."[350] Luzzatto described the traits of vigilance, alacrity, cleanliness, abstinence, purity, piety, humility, fear of sin, and holiness, and most importantly explains what he believed to be ways to avoid falling into the traps of errant behavior.

There are techniques that are required that go beyond introspection and study themselves. Recall that these early masters were living lives already filled with the strictly observant execution of ***halacha***. Instruction in ***Mussar***, for them, was a way to remember the lost ***kavannah***, the teachers served to call their mind to pay attention to the ways they lived their lives, not simply the details learned in study, ***Mussar*** in specific, and Jewish practice in general only work to benefit a person when actions are accompanied by appropriate attention and ***kavannah***.[351] For a person seeking to use ***Mussar*** as a strategy for tuning their intention and attention, the subjects, the character traits, can become the focal point on which a person directs their attention when sitting in prayer, meditation, study, or contemplation.

[349] Alan Morinis, "Goals of Mussar Practice," *The Mussar Institute*, 2007, http://mussarinstitute.org/wisdom-way.htm (accessed February 10, 2016).
[350] Luzzatto, *Mesillas Yesharim*, trans. Yosef Leibler, 2005. 12.
[351] Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna, *Iggeres HaGra*, Pirchei Shoshanim, trans., 1995, http://www.pirchei.co.il/specials/gra/graprn.htm (accessed February 14, 2016).

Techniques such as this have been used recently in American prisons to help inmates reform their character. [352] In these instances, a spiritual teacher works with the individuals to help see their character flaws and, using Jewish texts, begin to understand more culturally normative behavior. A more autodidactic approach to learning *Mussar* might involve working through book or program such as *Every Day, Holy Day* by Alan Morinis. This book asks the reader to set aside time each day for a year to reflect on how they have acted throughout the day with special attention paid to a certain ***middah*** – value/trait. Through introspective thought a person should be able to make subtle changes in their life based on the practices that Morinis provides that are connected to each ***middah***.

Another example, the way I was exposed to this practice in the course of my rabbinical studies, involved reading some of the seminal texts on ***Mussar***, combined with a large group discussion and working with a trusted study partner – ***chevrutah*** to reflect on a given ***middah***, our past week, and may other subjects. Like all of the other examples of work that we might do over the course of our lives, this practice too needs repetition, ***keva***. To be successful, one must be able to practice this introspection and discussion every week, if not every day or even a few times each day. This practice also takes the ability for introspective thought for granted. It can be a painful process to delve deep into one's inmost soul and try to alter their behavior. A meditation practice can be helpful in calming one's thoughts and directing their intention toward their heart.

PRAYER

[352] Leonard Felson, "Spiritual Healing Behind Bars: A Jewish Spiritual Practice Called Mussar Offers Hope and Inner Peace for Women in an Unlikely Place, Prison," *Tablet Magazine*, February 8, 2013, http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/123676/spiritual-healing-behind-bars (accessed September 6, 2015).

One aspect of Jewish tradition that has been consistent for the last two-thousand years or so has been the use of prayer as a means to offer the desires of our hearts to God. This may be an especially challenging practice for those who are unsure about whether or not God exists. However, one might take solace in the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel as they have been paraphrased in *Gates of Prayer*, "Prayer invites the Eternal Presence to suffuse our spirits and let God's will prevail in our lives. Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city. But prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will."[353] When we pray, we are not asking God to intervene in this world or to change God. In truth, prayer is more about the pray-er than about the Divine. Prayer expresses a desire to experience God and is a way for us to acknowledge what is missing in our lives.[354] This especially true of spontaneous prayer, but it is also the case when we consider how we might interact with the codified prayer book used every day.

Prayer might be another word for the inwardly directed wishes of our hearts. For those who believe in God, it may be easier to offer prayers, believing that there is an essence in the world that is listening to our needs. For my own practice, when I find myself drifting, or at certain points in the service, I begin to skim through various prayers. Certain words and phrases may jump to my attention. I will try to follow that train of thought and see why those words are specifically meaningful to me that day. In that way, I bring ***kavannah*** to my experience and my prayers, recited with concentration, can be an inspiring way to bring us into the moment, and in the same way that meditation

[353] Eugene Borowitz and Frances Weinman Schwartz, *The Jewish Moral Virtues* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 277.
[354] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 154–155.

can provide space for a person to come to realize their truth, prayer can also provide these moments.[355] In order to accomplish this, though, one must be willing to remove their own ego,[356] to step back and let uncertainty sink in and be ready to experience God, be ready to simply be.

It can be a challenge to keep one's attention focused during prayers, especially if the words have been codified in a prayer book. Before one prays, it can be an immensely helpful practice to spend a few moments to make sure that she/he is ready, with the mind's clutter set aside momentarily. Rabbi Heschel explained the necessity of this preparation with a parable.

> There was once a king who commanded his servants to make him savory food such as he loved. So they brought him the dish and he ate. And even though the preparation of the dish required many different kinds of work such as cutting wood, drawing water, slaughtering animals, kindling fire, cleaning pots and pans, and cooking, nevertheless the king only commanded them concerning the savory food. And if it would have been possible to have produced the morsel without these steps, his commandment would still have been considered fulfilled. For the king was not interested in the wood or the water and he was not concerned with the way the food is made.
> Now imagine what would happen if, when the time to eat arrived, the servants were to come in carrying pots and pans. And when the king asked, "What are these?" they were to say to him: "You have told us to make savory food for you. Here, sir, is the equipment with which they are made." Indeed would not the King burn with anger and would he not rightly say to them: "I commanded you only to bring the savory food. Did I ask you for pots and pans?"
> And so it is with words of prayer when the heart is absent.[357]

Heschel is not unique in believing that preparation for prayer is necessary.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi explained that the ancient rabbis, and the pious men of years gone by, would prepare for an hour before and after the service proper in order to properly address God.[358] It is no different from a musician warming and

[355] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 150–151.
[356] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 137.
[357] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 67–68.
[358] Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 32b.

tuning their instrument, a gymnast or figure skater mentally processing their routine, or a baseball player taking batting practice. Preparation can put a person in the proper mindset to perform the task at hand. Spending short amounts of time ensuring that one is ready to engage is the epitome of ***Ar'ani*** and ***Tzim-Tzum***, and it is especially important when one is approaching one of the prayer services that is ***kivua*** – fixed. That is not to say that the fixed services are dull or can only be performed by rote, but that it may take an extra effort to ensure that one is in the right mindset.

It is important to acknowledge that the codified service is actually the exact opposite of something to be performed by mindless, ingrained recitation. The formal structure of an ordered service serves a meaningful purpose if one is willing to look beyond it as a mandate from authorities. Consider the morning service. The service begins in gratitude for the simple pleasure of our waking up in the morning. After moments of gratitude, we then turn our attention to ***birkot hashachar*** – the morning blessings. These blessings help a person do a sort of body scan as she or he observes and thanks God for the world, our ability to stand, to perform ***mitzvot***, and many more aspects of our identity. If we think about these gifts in an intentional way, we can truly feel grateful for all that that we have.

The ***sh'ma*** portion of the service speaks to our Jewish identity retelling the story of our people. We acknowledge the wonder of creation, the gift of revelation, the unity of God and or obligations to God, and we celebrate redemption from Egypt. All of these are preparatory for the central part of our service, the Amidah, which has lessons of its own to teach us. We consider our identity and history, our connection to God and God's holiness. Then, and only then, are we in a headspace to do the thinking and work that we

can do in this most important part of our worship.

We are only thinking about the morning service. The evening service parallels the development of our identity and our history as well as letting us reflect upon our lives. Instead of reconstructing ourselves, we acknowledge the dangers of the unknown that lies ahead of us overnight. In the last waking moments of the day one might offer prayers that we will soon fall asleep, and none of this is to mention the afternoon services, the Torah service, or the changes included in the liturgy for holidays.

The specified times and clearly designed service provide the structure on which we can develop our own intention. "Prayer, then, is ultimately a mindfulness practice. Although we may start out with a particular concern in mind, a need that we wish to be veiled, through kavannah [sic] we come to see it, and ourselves, differently."[359] In fact, these structures are necessary for opening up worlds of possibilities for individual creativity! Therefore, using these structures can be to our advantage; they help bring intention to the prayers so a person can understand oneself.

MEDITATION

Some say that prayer is an advanced form of meditation.[360] While there are many ways in which they overlap, meditation is its own authentic Jewish spiritual practice. It is a concrete way in which we can purposefully step outside the current moment, and can let a person settle their thoughts, bring out attention to the moment at hand, to be present, and escape our typical mode of existence.[361] The practice can open our minds to the sacred that we were not yet aware of before us. One of the most basic meditation

[359] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 150.
[360] Frumma Rosenberg-Gottlieb, "On Mindfulness and Jewish Meditation, Part I," *Chabad.org*, March, 2011.
[361] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 38–40.

techniques one can learn, and is a great point for beginners, is to focus on one's breath. This is significant because our breath is always with us at every moment of the day whether we notice it or not, and is, therefore, an apt analogy for our awareness of the Divine.[362] It is also the basis on which humankind receives God's spirit according to the creation story.[363] When focusing on one's breath, it is important to not force the breathing. If a person pays close attention to the rate of aspiration or any abnormalities, it can provide enormous amounts of data about the current state of mind or being.[364] As a monitor of our mood from moment to moment, focusing on one's breathing is one of the ultimate experiences of simply "being."[365]

Another important feature of meditation is the routine that is necessary for it to be effective. This ***keva*** can come in many forms such as finding a different position in which to sit. Sitting is a normal activity, but done in an intentional way and returned to each time can help form a helpful routine.[366] Rabbi Lew shared that holding a certain posture, rooting your core to the ground and extending your head and intention skyward; one might find a connection to the Divine. In this way, the ***keva*** begins to affect one's ***kavannah***.

There is an immeasurable number of varieties of Meditation within Jewish tradition. This subject has filled several books as practitioners have developed and promulgated their own specific style informed by their own needs and experiences. For much more information, please see one of the volumes noted in the bibliography. With that disclaimer, we can continue our project and see how these varieties of Jewish

[362] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 184.
[363] Maimin, *In All Your Ways Be Mindful*, 2013. 2.
[364] Slater, *Mindful Jewish Living*, 2004. 184.
[365] Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*, 1985. 5.
[366] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 40.

meditation may help cultivate a spiritual presence.

One technique that is very helpful for those beginning a practice and also for those hoping to achieve a certain objective like that described in the previous section is a visualization technique. What is visualized is completely at the discretion of the meditator or the instructor. In some instances, a word or phrase may be used, or the name of God, yud-hey-vav-hey, along with some guided instruction that can help focus the attention. While using this style of meditation, the object you are trying to keep in your mind is the source to which you return when you find your thoughts wandering elsewhere, as they will undoubtedly do.[367]

The visualization technique is an adaptation of a broader category of Contemplation Meditation. This is the practice that is often invoked in the *Zohar*, the text of the Jewish mystics. In a mystical sense, one might contemplate the link between the meditator and God, stare into a flame, consider the ***sfirot*** – emanations, that in ***Kabbalah*** are the ways in which God exists in the world.[368] It may be easier for one to begin contemplative meditations with an object that is in their view before moving to an advanced center of focus such as the self. It is through contemplative meditation that one is encouraged to look into their own psyche by reflecting themselves in their own mind.[369] This practice is referred to as ***Hitbonenut***. "Translated literally ***Hitbonenut*** means self-understanding."[370] and is a This is a difficult practice to cultivate, however, with many opportunities to sit in meditation this can also be a most productive endeavor. It could be that this was the same sort of practice that could be used to help cultivate intention through ***Mussar***.

[367] Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*, 1985. 77–81.
[368] Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*, 1985. 67–69.
[369] Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*, 1985. 51–52.
[370] Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*, 1985. 50.

"Meditation with an agenda is a practice favored by the *Musar* (sic) schools in Judaism,"[371] because it takes the practiced ability to sit focused on a single topic or idea and directs it toward a specific action or refinement of our character. We most know, though, that Meditation need not have a specific agenda beyond centering one's mind. This can have many benefits for a person's spiritual growth. It might help them master an impulsive inclination; it could help settle thoughts and enable a person to accomplish a deeper level of study, or even to explore the troubling thoughts which we might encounter throughout the day.

There are some who would teach the goal of meditation is to obliterate all other thoughts from one's mind and, therefore, be at peace with the world. It is not my recommendation to undertake such a task because, not only is it not possible to remove all thoughts from one's mind, it can only become frustrating as other things continue to appear in the mind. Even the most practiced meditators drift off in thought. The difference is that they have cultivated an ability to bring themselves back to center more readily than one who is less experienced. Instead of fighting one's thoughts it might be even better to examine where they are headed. In this sense, our thoughts, much like our breath, can be an indicator of how we are feeling or what exactly it is that we are concerned with at the moment. If one is trying to experiment with this sort of practice, remember that it is important to not judge the thoughts as they arise.[372] Instead, acknowledge them and either move on or follow them to their destination.

Another variety of meditation, similar to the contemplative practices we have been discussing, may go hand in hand with Torah study or ***Mussar***, and this is the idea of

[371] Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*, 1985. 19.
[372] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 44–45.

selecting a specific passage from our sacred texts on which to meditate. In order to do this one should sit for an extended period of time and let the text or its meaning resonate throughout our thoughts and try to almost embody the verses or the concepts at hand.[373] This practice is similar to one that many associate with eastern traditions. It is not the case that these traditions have an exclusive claim on mantras. There is evidence in that Kabbalists repeated biblical verses to attain a higher state of consciousness; a mantra-like practice.[374]

The use of mantras is not limited to biblical references. The Talmud references the idea that one might repeat a phrase that is for their benefit, and Kabbalistic schools had been known to use verses from the Bible, Zohar, and even selections from the Talmud. Rabbi Joseph Caro was said to have the practice of reciting a ***mishnah***, and there is, of course, Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav.[375] It has been said of Rebbe Nachman that he would repeat the phrase, "***Ribono Shel Olam***, Master of the Universe," in order to draw himself into a higher state of consciousness.

As one can plainly see, there are a wide variety of meditations in which a person can engage that have come from Jewish tradition. Whether it is the intentional use of prayer as a meditation technique, using prayers or verses of scripture as the focus of one's meditation, or using meditation to introspectively reflect on a person's character. These have all been a part of Jewish tradition for centuries and millennia.[376]

[373] Rosenberg-Gottlieb, "On Mindfulness and Jewish Meditation, Part II," *Chabad.org*, March, 2011.
[374] Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*, 1985. 56.
[375] Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation*, 1985. 56–58.
[376] Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible* (New York, NY: Samuel Weiser Inc., 1978), 9–15.

Conclusion

Generally, it is impossible for a group of Jews to agree on whether Judaism is a culture, ethnicity, or religion. I believe that it is all of the above and more. Judaism is a strategy by which a person can live a rich and fulfilling life. In a time and age during which many people are turning to secular iterations of spirituality for fulfillment, Judaism can be a vital and relevant practice. This is especially the case for those who connect themselves to the Jewish people either by heritage, culture, or religious belief.

The Pew Center's *Profile of Jewish Americans,* released in 2013, confirmed concretely what the organized Jewish community had suspected for the last twenty years: formal engagement with traditional Jewish community structures is on the decline, especially among younger adults. Some congregations and organizations have tried to respond to this perceived crisis by becoming more "hip" or culturally relevant, but this solution is inadequate. Rachel Held Evans reflected on congregations that have tried to increase the "cool" factor. These younger adults are not looking for a watered-down experience that replicates contemporary cultural norms. She complained that simply adding guitars and turning the service into a concert "smacks of inauthenticity."[377] Millennials see this rebranding and repackaging and reject it if it feels phony.[378] These younger adults are not asking for organizations to pandered to them; they are searching for an authentic expression of their spiritual selves.

[377] Rachel Held Evans, "Want Millennials Back in the Pews? Stop Trying to Make Church 'Cool,'" *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/jesus-doesnt-tweet/2015/04/30/fb07ef1a-ed01-11e4-8666-a1d756d0218e_story.html (accessed August 31, 2015).
[378] Marian Liautaud, "5 Things Millennials Wish the Church Would Be," *Exponential*, November 3, 2013, https://www.exponential.org/5-things-millennials-wish-the-church-would-be/ (accessed August 31, 2015).

As was discussed in Chapter 1, spirituality is an expression of the human desire to understand the existence of suffering and struggle, the quest for meaning, and giving thanks for awe-filled experiences. Humans suffer most when their struggle to succeed feels fruitless, or when good works are not met with rewards or when expectations do not match reality.[379] People want agency, to feel in control of their lives, and so the ancients turned to rituals directed to their gods in an attempt to control nature.

The physical sciences have explained the mechanics of many natural phenomena that ancient humans believed their rituals could control,[380] but that has not negated the awesome feeling that people can experience in nature. While understanding nature continues to be one force behind a person's spiritual expression, the quest for meaning has also proven to be intensely powerful. In some cases, a search for meaning is enough to generate sufficient resiliency to survive some of the most devastating situations imaginable, as Dr. Viktor Frankl witnessed during the Holocaust.[381] Understanding one's purpose is a vital force in a person's life. Furthermore, spiritual expression is a display of an individual's wonder at the impressive aesthetic beauty of the world, the feeling of love among living things, and the unbelievable way in which the natural world functions seamlessly.[382] Finding and appreciating the beauty of the world is an elementary step in a meaningful life. Appreciation may lead to awe, which should lead to action and living in the present.[383]

[379] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 79.
[380] Mecklenburger, *Our Religious Brains*, 2012. 25.
[381] Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 1959. 105.
[382] Charles Darwin, *Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection: Or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London: John Murray, 1872), 429.
[383] Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 1955. 45–50, 106, 108–109, 315, 358.

Rabbi Heschel noted that appreciation itself is not sufficient, but a deep appreciation that touches the very essence of a person. "The music in a score is open only to him who can make music in his soul. It is not enough to play the notes; one must *be* what he *plays*."[384] A person must integrate the things they appreciate in the world in a way that focuses on the mind and heart on all that matters, presence, existence, and expressing gratitude for the awesome elements of the world.[385]

The innate psychological draw of a person to express his or her spiritual essence is what drives so many who have rejected the established organized religious institutions in favor of creating their own paths. When people are left to their own devices, they will continue to ask questions and search for answers about the meaning and purpose of their lives.[386] The 20th and 21st centuries have seen extraordinary advancements that have made many things easier and more efficient. The internet and mobile technologies have brought limitless information to our fingertips, and social media have helped lower barriers between people; individuals are empowered to experiment and develop their own spiritual practices.[387] The "start-up culture" in which these younger adults have come of age has emboldened them to stake their own claim in the spiritual marketplace.[388] This is fueled by an inclination of individuals to turn to their friends' and neighbors' cultures and learn from them. Many people believe that the lessons taught by all sages and prophets transfer across religious lines.[389] This phenomenon is explained, in part, by a willingness

[384] Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 1955. 315.
[385] Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 1955. 317.
[386] Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1990), 279.
[387] Hillhouse, "Religion 2.0," *MTV Insights*, undated 2013.
[388] Sarna, "Foreword" in Kaunfer, *Empowered Judaism*, 2012. xi–xiii.
[389] Hillhouse, "Religion 2.0," *MTV Insights*, undated 2013.

to simultaneously hold multiple and "hyphenated" identities without the notion that they negate each other or are self-contradictory.

Another feature of the younger adult paradigm is a shift toward other spiritual expressions. They have found ways to fulfill their instinctual spiritual needs by immersing themselves in other activities. Some have focused their spiritual energy on music or visual arts; others have sought training in physical disciplines such as a martial art, yoga, or other forms of exercise; in some instances, people spend time in nature, traveling, and in large gatherings like festivals; others have participated in meditation groups.[390]

One secular spiritual practice that has gained popularity in recent years is Mindfulness, an overarching term that gathers a variety of meditation, attention, resilience, and concentration developing techniques. Mindfulness has gained many practitioners and advocates because the skills are developed divorced from any specific culture or religion. Sylvia Boorstein—one of the members of the first generation of Mindfulness adopters in the Jewish community—stated that these techniques are a strategy for learning how to process the inevitable suffering in life.[391] Dr. Boorstein did not see a conflict between her Jewish identity and these practices that she used to add to her life. Some of those who are "Spiritual but Not Religious" have found that Mindfulness can easily satisfy their spiritual needs.[392] Those who have undertaken

[390] Ryan, *A Mindful Nation*, 2012. 17–18.
[391] Sylvia Boorstein, PhD, Interview with Krista Tippett, On Being: What We Nurture, FM 91.7, WVXU, May 9, 2013, http://www.onbeing.org/program/what-we-nurture/transcript/333 (accessed 2015)
[392] Ellen Langer, PhD., Interview with Krista Tippett, On Being: Science of Mindlessness and Mindfulness. FM 91.7, WVXU, September 13, 2015, http://www.onbeing.org/program/ellen-langer-science-of-mindlessness-and-mindfulness/transcript/6335 (accessed September 17, 2015).

Mindfulness practices have found that their thought processes are more deliberate, and they feel more at peace with the world.[393]

Aside from the many benefits that a spiritual practice can have in a person's life– which were detailed in Chapter 1—Mindfulness's popularity is also a response to the stressors of the 21st century. The miniature computers that we carry in our pockets are partly responsible for the accessibility of information and the ease at which we can connect with others. They are also responsible the nearly continuous bombardment of stimuli,[394] and the increasing speed at which people expect to have their desires met. When a person's phone vibrates in their pocket, she/he responds in the same way that the ancient mind learned to react to a twig snapping—a person enters a stressed state of mind,[395] clouding judgment and slowing creativity.[396] The impatience of the contemporary world has only compounded the effects. The response of may has been to turn to Mindfulness in order to regain control.

Younger Jewish adults have also found ways to integrate Mindfulness skills into their lives and expressions of Judaism; this is an easy task because Jewish spiritual practices bear many similarities. There have been Jews engaging in meditative practices and using Mindfulness explicitly since the 1970s; some have used the exercises to enhance his/her awareness while others have retained their Jewish cultural identity while finding a spiritual home elsewhere. As Jonathan Slater explained, there is no need for

[393] Ryan, *A Mindful Nation*, 2012. xvii–xviii.
[394] Ryan, *A Mindful Nation*, 2012. 43–45.
[395] Ryan, *A Mindful Nation*, 2012. 47.
[396] Mark Williams and Danny Penman, *Mindfulness: An Eight-Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World* (New York, NY: Rodale Press, 2011), 112–114.

anyone to look beyond Judaism for intention-building spiritual practices.[397] This point has been made more explicit in recent years.

The second generation of "Jewish Mindfulness" practitioners—leaders in the Jewish community, many of whom were students of the first generation—have dug deeper into Jewish tradition. Hidden in plain sight they discovered a plethora of explicitly Jewish practices, exercises, and rituals, they have explained these practices in accessible ways. The popularity of Mindfulness has widened a door, making Jewish spirituality even more readily available. These practices cultivate ***Kavannah***—the Jewish concept of awareness, intention, and attention.

Kavannah is more than just a word that some use as a Hebrew equivalent for Mindfulness. It is the sum of Jewish practices, rituals, and techniques that can help build a person's ability to withdraw from a moment (***tzim-tzum***), be attentive and fully aware of the world (***ar'ani***), and introspection (***hitbonenut***). Judaism, when approached as a guide for intentional living, provides numerous techniques through which a person can become more creative, resilient, settled, productive, and aware.

One of the most fundamental means by which a person can utilize Jewish rituals that inculcate ***Kavannah*** are the several rituals and ceremonies that mark the passage of time. Marking significant moments, and even sanctifying holy moments, through observing Jewish Time can call a person's attention to the natural world as one takes note of the changing seasons and celebrating holidays. A weekly period of rest, ***Shabbat***, is a vital practice by which a person marks a day as separate, as holy, as special. In either

[397] Lew, *Be Still and Get Going,* 2005. 5–7.

case, a practicing Jew can find in our tradition texts, rituals, meditations, poems, music, ethical practices and much more toward which one can direct their attention.

The study of texts, both sacred and secular, is another prominent feature of Jewish life, and it can help develop a person's ability to act with intention. In order to improve one must set a regular practice, fix it in his/her life. A fixed routine – ***keva*** is essential to ensure that the time is available for its purpose. The established time also creates the routine that is required when developing any skill. By engaging in consistent learning, a person should use the information to affect her/his actions. ***Mussar*** is emblematic of this hope.

Mussar, the study is focused on ***middot*** – character traits/values that are developed through introspection, study, and practice. Sacred study may also guide a person to develop habits that are informed by Jewish law – ***halacha***. While the Reform movement has maintained, since the 19th century, that modern Jews are not obligated to adhere to the ***halacha*** as written. However, the focused and intentional study of the Jewish legal tradition, as well as the surrounding argumentation which can elucidate the values, methodology, and reasoning that inform the decision, should provide a person with some guidance. One can learn the significance and symbolism of every action, but only if this study is approached with ***kavannah***. The vigorous debates demand mindful attention in order to come to a personal decision.

Other strategies that permeate Jewish life are prayer and meditation. In some ways these two practices are closely related, as prayer is an intentional and contemplative act. Meditation and prayer might be strictly regimented and regulated; they may also be used to search out a present state of mind, or express thanks. In fact, the ***keva*** of the

codified prayer book is actually an important feature. The regularity/rhythm that is developed builds on the mind's natural desire to find patterns; a person must respond to this innate consistency by preparing for both prayer and meditation with ***kavannah***. Some authorities have stressed the importance of intention in prayer, noting that it is truly the heart of one's prayer![398] The rituals and practices that create ***kavannah*** are best developed through establishing a fixed routine – ***keva***. Repetition is an important part of developing any skill.

One can find in Judaism several techniques, practices, and rituals that can help a person live an intentional life. I have demonstrated that these practices are similar to the ones that are described in Mindfulness, and for those younger adults who identify with Judaism, there is no need to search elsewhere for their spirituality. This is not to say that people who find spiritual fulfillment in others places are doing something wrong; one can benefit from exploring others cultures and learning new techniques and incorporating them. The difficulty is that some younger Jews have determined that the rituals they had inherited have no value to them; but with a slight paradigm shift, Judaism offers spiritual techniques and practices that can offer a rich spiritual life. Not only that, but we have also seen that Judaism allows space for adaptation over time, thus allowing a person to stay engaged with the rest of the world.

Kavannah can help a Jew stay connected to her/his traditions and community. For those who continue to identify with Jewish culture and the Jewish people, there is ample room for her/him to find a Jewish spirituality that can reverberate throughout one's life.

[398] Joseph Tabory, "The Conflict of Halakhah and Prayer," *Tradition Magazine*, Vol. 25 No.1, 1989, 17–30, (New York, NY: Rabbinical Council of America, 1989), http://www.lookstein.org/articles/prayer_conflict.htm (accessed February 27, 2016).

Kavannah can bring a person's awareness to the foreground; it can create space in his/her life for others, for awe, for self-improvement, for a wholly intentional life. One must simply pick up the techniques and practices that belong to him/her and carry ***kavannah*** to live life to its fullest. In the spirit of Rabbi David Hartman's entitled *A Heart of Many Rooms*, it is both possible and desirable for another generation of Jews to look within the chambers of their hearts and the rooms that comprise a Jewish life and find their own room in order to make it their spiritual home.[399]

[399] David Hartman, *A Heart of Many Rooms* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999), xxvii–xxx.

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