Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) through a Jewish Lens: Synthesizing Jewish Tradition and Behavioral Psychotherapy to Build Psychological and Spiritual Flexibility

A Masters Project by
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Chapter 1: Setting the Stage for Jewish ACT

The Case for Jewish ACT: Background

Increasingly, clergy are called upon to respond to the growing mental health crisis[1]. Rabbis and cantors desperately need effective and evidence-based psychotherapeutic tools to assist them in their pastoral roles. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT - pronounced like the word "act") may provide a useful addition to the Jewish spiritual care toolkit, with some necessary adaptation for a Jewish context. ACT is a behavioral psychotherapy that improves our ability to engage with language and thoughts, or cognitions, in order to address psychological suffering. The goal of ACT is to help people increase their psychological flexibility, and to live a life of committed action in line with their values. My aim in this Master's Project is to adapt ACT for Jewish settings by placing ACT in dialogue with Jewish texts and bringing a Jewish framing to ACT. This Masters Project will explain what ACT is, how it is in line with Jewish ideas and values, as well as explore where ACT may diverge from traditional Jewish beliefs and practices. Here you will find a practical guide that rabbis and cantors can use to apply ACT as a tool for healing and growth in communal and pastoral settings.

In the past few decades, research into the links between mental health and religion and spirituality has exploded, and interest has grown in integrating psychotherapy and spirituality[2]. Increasingly, clergy are in need of practical psychotherapeutic skills as they are called upon to help their people access the wealth of Jewish tradition in order to navigate stress, anxiety, and trauma. Historically, there has been a disconnect or mistrust between practitioners of spiritual care or pastoral counseling and those who research and

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[1] https://jewishstandard.timesofisrael.com/training-rabbis-as-counselors/, https://www.jpost.com/health-and-sci-tech/health/rabbis-who-give-counselling-must-to-be-trained-as-mediators, https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/the-church-and-the-response-to-the-mental-health-crisis/

[2] Some examples include:
R. Johnson. *Spirituality in Counseling and Psychotherapy: An Integrative Approach that Empowers Clients.* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2013).
K.I. Pargament. *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred*. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2007).
E. Frankel. *Sacred Therapy: Jewish Spiritual Teachings on Emotional Healing and Inner Wholeness.* (Boston: Shambala, 2005).

advance evidence-based approaches to psychotherapy.[3] Yet, as clergy find themselves on the front lines of mental health care, the need to ensure that the counseling services clergy provide lead to effective outcomes becomes increasingly urgent.[4] However, Jason Nieuwsma, one of the primary translators of ACT for clergy use, notes that:

> Spiritually-guided counselors and clergy need models that link to their traditions. The dynamic tension that comes from holding both empirical evidence and spiritual commitments can only lead to good outcomes if each aspect is open to the other. Psychotherapeutic traditions that do not make room for this dynamic tension, that minimize human complexity, or that undermine the importance of faith commitment are hard to integrate with spiritually-based care.[5]

Integrating evidence-based treatments into the clergy person's pastoral toolkit must be done with thoughtfulness. As an evidence-based therapy with a focus on values and meaningful action, ACT has been tapped for adaptation in religious settings.

However, the primary religious audience for which ACT has been adapted is Christian. Jewish clergy who want to provide evidence-based care in a manner sensitive to Jewish values are at a distinct disadvantage, as there is a dearth of research on integrating evidence-based psychological care with Jewish pastoral counseling. This project seeks to help address this gap. Practitioners have written about the use of ACT in pastoral care, but much of this work has been from a Christian perspective.[6] Books about ACT often use Christian references, for example the Serenity Prayer.[7] Many Jewish

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[3] J. A. Nieuwsma, R.D. Walser and S.C. Hayes, Eds. *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors: Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Bridge Psychological and Spiritual Care.* (Oakland, CA: Context Press, 2016).

[4] J.D. Terry, A. R. Smith, M.D. Weist, "Incorporating Evidence-Based Practices in Faith-Based Organization Service Programs," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*. 43, No 3, (2015).

[5] J.A. Nieuwsma, "Empirical Foundations for Integrating Religion and Spiritual Practices with Psychotherapy," in *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors: Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Bridge Psychological and Spiritual Care,* eds. J. A. Nieuwsma, R.D. Walser and S.C. Hayes. (Oakland, CA: Context Press, 2016).

[6] J. A. Nieuwsma, R.D. Walser and S.C. Hayes, Eds., 2016.

[7] J.A. Stoddard and N. Afari, *The Big Book of ACT Metaphors: A Practitioner's Guide to Experiential Exercises and Metaphors in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.* Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014, 33.

people, especially those who identify as religious, feel uncomfortable with the language of these prayers and metaphors, as they are rooted in a Christian ethos. Language and ideas congruent with Jewish clients will help Jewish participants to feel more at home and to more fully participate. Mental health practitioners who learn how to sensitively "engage their clients' faith perspective" better serve their clients.[8] For this reason, ACT practitioners who are not Jewish clergy, but are working with Jewish clients, may also find this project helpful in building a culturally sensitive counseling tool-kit.

In this project, I will explore how the ACT framework can be adapted to help people in a Jewish context and address Jewish clergy's need for tools to help people manage today's many spiritual and psychological challenges. Since I am a psychologist who has training in ACT and years of experience using ACT in psychotherapy with clients, as well as a candidate for rabbinic ordination, I believe I am well-suited to weave together the connections between Judaism and ACT psychotherapy as a means for healing, meaning-making, positive change and self-integration. It seems to me that ACT has important tools to offer Jewish clergy and practitioners providing spiritual care to Jewish people. In addition, Judaism has much to offer ACT: a Jewish framing of ACT will strengthen this psychotherapy's relevance and meaning. The ACT principles and metaphors described here may also be used more broadly by Jewish and non-Jewish people looking for self-help techniques in order to address problems in living from an approach that blends cutting edge evidence based psychological treatments with Jewish belief, practice and values.

ACT and Spirituality

ACT melds well with spiritual approaches to problems in living because it offers a critical re-framing of the medical model of psychological distress. The medical model of

[8] Kristen Weir, "Reaching out to the Faithful: How psychologists are joining forces with religious communities to improve mental health and reduce the stigma of seeking treatment," *APA Monitor on Psychology,* 51, no. 3. (2020): 30.

mental illness views sadness and anxiety and other internal experiences as symptoms to be managed and eliminated.[9] The medical model creates at least two problems: 1. It sets up unrealistic expectations that an optimal life is free of pain, and 2. It ignores the role that pain has in spiritual and/or psychological growth.[10] ACT begins to address problems in living by eliding the distinctions we make between different diagnoses or problems, such as anxiety, depression or loneliness. ACT tends to emphasize the "common threads that run through the whole cloth of human suffering."[11] This approach de-stigmatizes psychological suffering and offers a practical and compassionate roadmap for how (and why) to live a good and meaningful life even in the midst of pain.

ACT: A Primer for Jewish Clergy

Traditional cognitive behavioral psychotherapy addresses distorted thinking by asking clients to evaluate and modify their thoughts. ACT recognizes that these strategies often result in increased entanglement and fusion with thoughts, fostering the idea that thoughts and self are one. In ACT, clients are encouraged not to change thoughts, but to change their relationship to thinking. Being aware of thoughts and observing them rather than trying to change them; and focusing instead on acting in line with one's values, allows one to distance from thoughts and recognize that we are not our thoughts. ACT encourages people to treat thoughts and sensations *not* like math problem (something to be solved), rather as sunsets (something to observe). The purpose of ACT is not to free the individual from pain and discomfort; the purpose is to figure out what really matters and to do that.

ACT, one of the "third wave" behavioral therapies (along with DBT/Dialectical Behavior Therapy and MB-CBT/Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy), was

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[9] S.C. Hayes, K.D. Strosahl, & K.G. Wilson, *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: The Process and Practice of Mindful Change, 2nd Ed*. (New York: Guilford Press, 2012) 5.
[10] J. A. Nieuwsma, R.D. Walser and S.C. Hayes, Eds. *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors: Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Bridge Psychological and Spiritual Care.* Oakland, CA: Context Press, 2016, 31.
[11] Kelly Wilson and Troy Dufrene, *Things Might Go Terribly, Horribly Wrong: A Guide to Life Liberated from Anxiety*. (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2010), 8.

born in the 1980s out of the need to improve our understanding and ability to work with language and cognition. ACT views human language as both our greatest asset and worst trap. Humans suffer when we become fused with our thoughts and the language we use to express them, so that we come to accept thoughts as facts instead of the ephemeral mental events that they are. ACT uses mindfulness-based practices such as connecting with the present moment, accepting emotions, observing internal states, and defusing from one's thoughts.

ACT helps people to allow themselves to open to internal experiences, however painful these may be, not because ACT values pain, but because it recognizes that avoiding painful feelings often increases suffering. ACT strives to identify what gets in the way of living a life according to our values. Then, rather than wish away or avoid unpleasant thoughts and feelings, we work to change our relationship to these thoughts and feelings. ACT distinguishes between verbal knowledge and experiential knowledge. Experiential knowledge is the knowledge gained by our actions in the world. Our exceptional verbal capacities can sometimes inhibit our ability to be aware of our experience. ACT seeks to help people connect with experiential ways of knowing, mirroring values that Judaism holds dear.

ACT identifies psychological inflexibility as the core problem that contributes to human suffering, and describes six core processes (described below) of psychological functioning. Psychological flexibility allows us the freedom to choose from an array of possible actions in a given circumstance, and therefore make conscious and values-based choices about how to live. Psychological flexibility is similar to physical flexibility: when we stretch we increase our range of motion, which allows us to do more of the things we want to do. When we have good physical flexibility, we can more readily bounce back from injury or accommodate when we face physical obstacles.[12] Psychological flexibility works in much the same way: with increased psychological flexibility we become more

[12] Kelly Wilson and Troy Dufrene, 2010, 10.

limber; our repertoire of potential responses increases, we are able to pivot when needed, and we can fully participate with more ease in all areas of our lives.

"Flexigidity": A Jewish Model for Adaptability and Change

Judaism offers a thoughtful nuance to the concept of psychological flexibility in that our Jewish civilization has survived through a potent combination of flexibility matched with rigid adherence to tradition and values. Judaism presents a model approach to the paradox of staying flexible while maintaining a structure that allows for portability and survival. Gidi Grinstein has termed this Jewish approach "flexigidity": a system that "optimizes the pace of collective adaptation by balancing new and old, innovation and tradition, flexibility and rigidity.[13]" Whereas Grinstein's formulation explains Judaism's survival and flourishing through flexigidity on a societal level, ACT's concept of psychological flexibility works on the individual level. While this dichotomy between the collective and the individual introduces a tension, it also allows Jewish practitioners of ACT to feel more at home, since Judaism tends towards the collective; Jewish values necessarily take the needs and the perspectives of the larger group into account. Grinstein offers the story of the leadership of Yochanan Ben Zakai as the cornerstone of Jewish flexigidity. Ben Zakai, who legendarily spearheaded the birth of rabbinic Judaism in Yavneh from the ashes of the destruction of the 2nd temple, hewed to tradition at the same time that he and his followers massively re-formulated the entire system of Judaism to adapt to their new circumstances.[14] This project will utilize stories such as this in order to create a reservoir of metaphors for clergy practitioners to draw on when helping clients and/or congregants to navigate their own problems in living.

The Core Processes: Building Blocks for Psychological Flexibility

[13] Gidi Grinstein. *Flexigidity: The Secret of Jewish Adaptability*. (Self-published, 2013).
[14] See Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Gittin 56a-56b

The six core processes central to ACT can be described as "the building blocks of our problems (and our successes) in living."[15] Throughout subsequent chapters, connections between these core processes and pillars of Jewish thought and practice will be elucidated. The core processes of ACT are all harnessed in the service of the ultimate goal of psychological flexibility. These processes and their counterpoints are:

1. *Acceptance and Willingness* ***versus*** *Experiential Avoidance*

Acceptance (the first letter of the acronym ACT) is a key component to many third wave treatments, including DBT (Dialectical Behavioral Therapy) and ACT. Acceptance does NOT mean we like or want something, or that we condone that which is wrong. Rather, acceptance is a graceful way of being with reality, or the truth/*emet*. For ACT, acceptance is conceptualized as "making full contact with internal experiences without attempting to escape, change, or control those events."[16] The opposite of acceptance is experiential avoidance. To avoid painful internal experiences, we engage in behavior that might be harmful: many people drink alcohol, use drugs, binge eat, watch pornography or shop to numb unwanted negative emotions. Chapter 2, Acceptance and Willingness: Greeting Truth/*Emet* with Compassion/*Rachamim*, will further elucidate the process of acceptance and suggest some Jewish metaphors and exercises to help clients practice the skill of acceptance.

2. *Cognitive Defusion* ***versus*** *Cognitive Fusion*

ACT recognizes that, while thoughts are not inherently problematic, we suffer when we become rigidly fused with the content of our thoughts and react in response to those thoughts instead of acting in line with our values. For example, a person's actions might be guided by the thought, "I will never amount to anything" instead of being guided by values or goals. ACT techniques can help individuals who are preoccupied

[15] Kelly Wilson and Troy Dufrene, 2010, 8.
[16] J.A. Stoddard and N. Afari, 2014, 8.

with painful thoughts such as these expand their frame of experience in order to increase meaning, lessen suffering, and ultimately find greater freedom. Chapter 3, Cognitive Defusion: Finding Freedom from our Thoughts will suggest a Jewish approach to separating our selves from our thoughts.

3. *Present-moment Awareness **versus** Rumination about Past and Anxiety about Future*

For ACT, "present moment awareness" is one key aspect of mindfulness that helps people move towards acceptance and increased psychological flexibility. Mindfulness practice has become an important intervention for all of third-wave behavioral treatments such at ACT, and especially for anxiety and depression. It is impossible to be anxious or depressed when you are in the present moment, since anxiety constitutes worry about the future and depression involves ruminating about the past. Present moment awareness involves taking a non-judgmental and open stance and directing one's attention to the "now." In Chapter 4, Present-Moment Awareness: Working with Wholeness/*Shalem*, I will review select Jewish mindfulness practices that may be adapted to be in concert with ACT.

4. *Self-as-Context **versus** Attachment to Conceptualized Self*

ACT believes there is a "you" (in Judaism we might say a "*neshama*/soul") "that transcends the content of one's experiences" and "is distinct from your thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, and roles."[17] We are not our thoughts; we are "the content or arena in which they unfold."[18] When attached to our conceptualized selves, we tend to become attached to scripts, or old stories, about ourselves. Rather than act out of adherence to old or harmful scripts about who we are or the roles we should play, ACT encourages us to make choices about our actions based on values. In Chapter 5, Self-As-Context: Experiencing the World as a Soul/*Neshama*, I will bring Jewish ideas about the soul to

[17] J.A. Stoddard and N. Afari, 2014, 9.
[18] J.A. Stoddard and N. Afari,, 2014, 33.

bear on the discussion of self-as-context, and also discuss tensions that may arise between ACT and Judaism, which is a communal faith and thus less individually-focused. Together, ACT and Judaism teach that we are not our thoughts; we are souls.

*5. Values Clarification **versus** Lack of Clarity of Values*

Values give our life meaning and direction, and help us to answer the "Why? Questions": Why follow a certain life path? Why make changes in our lives? Why are we here? ACT helps people align their behavior with their values. Before changing behavior, one must work to discover one's hierarchy of values. Values are never "permanently achieved;" they are more like a north star towards which we navigate. In addition, values may change over the course of one's lifetime. Within ACT, values are personal; what is important differs from individual to individual. Sometimes we find that problems emerge when we act according to the "shoulds" - i.e., we act in line with other's values, or what we believe others think we should value. This emphasis on individual values presents a potentially thorny issue within a religious framework, in which we, as Jews, feel ourselves obligated to something larger than ourselves, such as God, *mitzvot* and/or *halacha*. For this reason, it is crucial that ACT be adapted for a socio-religious context in which Judaism frequently emphasizes shared values and subsuming one's own needs for that of the larger group. At the same time, Judaism also upholds the need to act authentically, and teaches the importance of attending to one's *middot*/character traits. Chapter 6, Values Clarification: Values/*Middot* at Work will address the various ways we may synthesize ACT principles and Jewish principles.

*6. Committed Action **versus** Lack of Action Towards Values*

Whereas values provide *a direction*, committed action represents *actual behavior,* or steps that one might take in line with those values. While you can never achieve a value, you may check a committed action off your to-do list. Committed action aligns ACT with behavior therapy, but in contrast with traditional behavior therapy, ACT gives people a philosophy, a "why," or a sense of meaning to their behavioral changes. In short,

ACT helps people figure out what matters to them, and then do what matters. Judaism also challenges us to do what matters, to live in an intentional manner. The Jewish system of *mitzvot* aligns with ACT's teachings about committed action. In Chapter 7, Committed Action: Walking the path of Commandments/*Mitzvot*, I will connect Jewish adherence to *mitzvot* with the ACT principle of committed action.

Translating ACT: Metaphor and Midrash/ Experience and Ritual

ACT uses metaphor and experiential exercises in order to help people increase their psychological flexibility[19]. Judaism is a great fit for ACT in part because Judaism's midrashic tradition elevates the healing power of stories, and Jewish ritual prioritizes the power of action over thought. One of the ways that midrash "works" is through the use of metaphor. midrash allows people to draw connections between a presented narrative and their own lived experience, thereby opening up new avenues for understanding. Ritual is a kind of play that works on a non-cognitive level; it can circumvent language in order to impart understanding or transformation on an emotional or spiritual level. ACT draws on the same mechanisms as midrash and ritual by use of experiential learning; an ACT therapist will often ask clients to DO something rather than THINK about something in order engage participants in new ways of learning. Jewish clergy use ritual as a vehicle to help people heal; an ACT framework will help Jewish clergy re-conceptualize how ritual works, and design more targeted and effective rituals for Jewish participants.

"Hold and Move": What does ACT look like?

We humans go to extraordinary lengths to avoid painful feelings such as anxiety. The catch is that all of our experiential avoidance of painful feelings grows rather than shrinks our discomfort. Paradoxically, when we can have all our feelings, and continue to live our life in the ways we want and need to, our suffering dissipates. The key

[19] J.A. Stoddard and N. Afari, 2014.

components of ACT can be summarized in the imperative: "Hold and move,"[20] in that people are encouraged to both "hold" all of their experiences and feelings - positive and negative - and also to "move" forward in the direction of their values, or what matters most to them. Containing and experiencing all of our feelings and experiences can be challenging; we are primed to deny or dissociate from the parts that are uncomfortable, messy, or do not align with our self-image. Holding it all is not easy, but denial and dissociation of our experiences bear a cost. ACT helps us learn strategies for how to enlarge our ability to gracefully make contact with all of our experiences. However, having all of our feelings is not enough. We also must discern the "why" of our lives, and live in accordance with the answer to our "why." Contained within the "hold and move" strategy is the sense that these two actions are not incompatible. Instead of waiting for our anxiety or depression or anger to go away, we commit to having all of our feelings and living our life in a way that matters. This way of approaching problems does not always make life easier, but it can free us from self-imposed limitations and allow us to live a life that matters.

As an example of how one might use a Jewishly-informed ACT intervention, a practitioner working with a client to increase their ability to "hold and move" might suggest a reading of Psalm 30 which helps the client to think anew about their capacity to "hold" emotional experience. The practitioner might read all or part of Psalm 30 with the client and focus on the *pasuk.* (verse): בָּעֶרֶב יָלִין בֶּכִי וְלַבֹּקֶר רִנָּה/Weeping may linger for the night, and at dawn there are shouts of joy.[21] After eliciting the client's thoughts about this *pasuk*, the practitioner can suggest that this *pasuk* alludes to the capaciousness that allows one to hold the complexity of human experience. We might read this Psalm as an invitation to hold and experience both the weeping and the joy, a reminder that it's hard to experience the fullness of the joy if we do not also allow space for the tears. We are big enough to contain both of these experiences, and much much more. If this concept

[20] J. A. Nieuwsma, R.D. Walser and S.C. Hayes, Eds., 2016, 4.
[21] JPS translation

resonates for the client, the practitioner might then suggest a variety of exercises to help build the clients capacity for acceptance and thereby decrease experiential avoidance. The client might write these five Hebrew words from Psalm 30 on a piece of paper and keep them in her wallet or pocket, or pin them to their mirror. The practitioner might help the client develop a meditation or chant using these Hebrew or English words. In the following chapters, I will share metaphors and exercises such as these that marry ACT's core principles with Jewish text and ideas.

Chapter 2: Acceptance: Greeting *Emet*/Truth with *Rachamim*/Compassion

Acceptance forms a cornerstone in many third wave psychotherapeutic approaches, including DBT (Dialectical Behavioral Therapy) and ACT. Many people balk at the idea of acceptance because they misunderstand what acceptance means or how it relates to healthy functioning. Acceptance does not mean we approve or endorse behaviors that are misguided or abusive; it does not mean we enjoy our suffering, or glorify out pain. Acceptance does not mean that we give up working for positive change in ourselves and in the world. Rather, acceptance means allowing and acknowledging *what is*. Acceptance is a way of gracefully being with the truth, of allowing ourselves to open up to reality as it exists both inside ourselves and in the outside world. Struggling against reality helps no one.

Acceptance may be particularly challenging as a therapeutic concept for Jews because of Judaism's optimistic stance on humanity's capacity to improve and change.

Rabbi Shai Held describes this as "Judaism's 'possiblism' about human nature."[22] Accordingly, humans are not inherently flawed; rather, we have the capacity to make good choices, even if in practice we often fail. In discussing Jewish views on acceptance Dr. Yakir Englander commented[23]: "Buddhists accept life as it is, but the Jewish narrative fights this: we should not accept life as it is; we should work to change it for the better." Judaism views humanity as God's partners in creation, and throughout the Bible we find examples (e.g. Abraham, Moses) of individuals who question God in their quest for justice, rather than just accepting God's world as it stands. On the surface it appears that Judaism is, at best, ambivalent about acceptance. So where and how does acceptance fit into a Jewish model of ACT - *Acceptance* and Commitment Therapy?

When we investigate how acceptance and change work, we find that rather than acting in opposition, these two imperatives are consonant. We do not need to choose between acceptance or change; we can accept *and* change. In fact, sometimes acceptance "is actually a prerequisite to change, rather than an alternative to it."[24] Often it is impossible to change until we first accept things the way they are. When we consider a more refined understanding of the concept of acceptance, it becomes clear that Judaism does indeed encourage acceptance. Judaism values truth/*emet;* in our central declaration of faith, the *Shema*, we declare that God IS truth. Acceptance is a way of being with the truth/*emet*.

What are the steps and tools required to practice acceptance? ACT focuses on helping individuals accept their private internal experiences such as sensations, thoughts and feelings. Acceptance, in ACT, is about "adopting, on purpose, an open and receptive attitude to the experiences we have as we live our lives."[25] For ACT, receptivity is a skill that must be honed. ACT asks us to first accept our own internal experiences - emotions

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[22] Shai Held, *Judaism is About Love*. (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2024), 14.
[23] In *Israel After October 7th,* AJR class, 6/18/24
[24] Hank Robb, "Opening Up: Acceptance and Defusion," in *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors*, Eds J. A. Nieuwsma, R.D. Walser, and S. C. Hayes, (Oakland: Context Press, 2016)
[25] Kelly G. Wilson and Troy Dufrene, 2010, 97.

and sensations, rather than external events - without trying to escape, control or change these experiences. When people experience painful and uncomfortable emotions and sensations, we generally try to avoid those internal events, and in order to avoid we engage in a variety of harmful behaviors to enable avoidance, including alcohol, gambling, binge eating or other compulsive behaviors. These behaviors serve to numb unwanted negative emotions. Thus, destructive behaviors such as these allow for *experiential avoidance*, which is the opposite of acceptance. Psychological suffering is often rooted in individual's well-meaning but harmful attempts to control or change internal experiences. Acceptance helps to increase our psychological flexibility; when we stop fighting against having our experiences, we become free to move in new ways.

It is important to note that avoidance is not always the wrong path; in fact, avoidance of pain and hardship may be a worthy decision. For example, taking nitrous oxide to numb the pain in the dentist's chair is a healthy form of avoidance, whereas skipping your dentist appointment is probably not healthy.[26] How can we tell the difference between healthy avoidance and unhealthy avoidance? We recognize unhealthy avoidance as that which impedes our life goals and values.

ACT helps people identify when they are attempting to assert control over experiences, or solve problems in a way that is maladaptive. Practicing acceptance and willingness allows us to loosen our control and soften our agenda. Many ACT experiential exercises help us to learn to accept internal experiences by paradoxically suggesting that we first attempt to refuse to have these experiences. For example, a meditation exercise might ask you to refuse to feel your back on your chair as you sit, or to try to suppress thoughts.[27] In ACT, we may experiment with trying not to have our feelings in order to teach how futile experiential avoidance can be. Other ACT

[26] Kelly G. Wilson and Troy Dufrene, 2010, 95.

[27] For example, Niloofar Afari suggests that you "try not to think about a puppy," (T*he Big Book of ACT Metaphors*, pg. 36) but you can try this type of thought suppression with any idea or image.

experiential exercises aimed at practicing acceptance focus on building compassion for oneself and for others, and on accepting discomfort and uncertainty.

In this chapter, I will begin to address how acceptance is meaningful in a Jewish context, through the lens of Jewish text, thought, and ritual. Following I will outline three ideas or metaphors that Jewish clergy may use in group and individual situations to facilitate an individual's turning towards acceptance. Each metaphor is accompanied by an exercise that may be used to further facilitate the practice of acceptance. However, the metaphors may also be shared without the exercises as a means of stimulating acceptance, in the service of greater psychological flexibility and freedom.

Compassion/Rachamim: A Jewish Path Towards Acceptance

Compassion/*rachamim*, a central theme in our liturgy and theology, serves as a bridge between ACT concepts and Jewish thought. ACT researchers have found that compassion, especially self-compassion, is tightly linked to the skill of acceptance.[28] In Hebrew, the word for compassion, *rachamim*, has its root in the word רחם womb. Compassion means, as Rabbi Jill Hammer recently taught,[29] being connected and separate at the same time, which allows for the possibility of witnessing the other. Hence the connection between רחם/womb and רחמים/ compassion. Part of giving birth, and of parenting, is mastering the art of holding on and letting go at the right times; of constricting oneself to allow room for the other. Parenting is naturally great practice for working on the skills of compassion and acceptance. But even those of us who are not parents can of course understand what it means to practice these skills. If compassion means being connected and separate at the same time, which allows for the possibility of witness, what does this mean for self-compassion? Self-compassion forms a cornerstone for self-acceptance. It means that when we want and need to change something about ourselves, we must start by treating ourselves with the same compassion that a parent has

[28] Jill Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, 2014, 50.
[29] AJR Lunchtime program, September 2023.

for their child. We must begin with acceptance, and practice gently turning our mind towards acceptance over and over. Most of us find it easy to accept and feel compassion for the needs of a child. We can utilize this natural tendency in order to build self-compassion using the following meditation exercise, which invites us to express compassion for ourselves by inviting in the image of our child self.

Exercise: Meeting your child self with compassion/*rachamim*

Take a comfortable seat and close your eyes. For a few moments concentrate on your breathing, noticing each inhale and exhale. Bring to mind a memory from your childhood of a time when you felt sad, lonely, or distressed. Imagine yourself as this child. How old are you? Try to picture what you look like, what clothes you are wearing. Look at your hands and notice how small they are. See if you can remember where you were at that time. Perhaps it is your childhood home. Look around the room or space and see what you can notice, as you look at everything from your perspective as a small child. What are you feeling? Give each emotion and sensation a label and just allow yourself to experience them.

Now imagine that you are your adult self and you have come to the door of the house or room where your child self is sitting and feeling sad or lonely. Imagine your adult hands turning the doorknob and entering the room. Look closely at the child in front of you. Lean down so that you can look into their eyes. Ask her what she needs. Listen closely to what she tells you. Spend some time giving her the attention she needs. Give her a hug or just put your arm around her shoulder. Let her know that you love her exactly as she is. When you are ready, take a few deep breathes and open your eyes.

The Flood and the Rainbow: God's Acceptance of Humanity

Perhaps the first character in the Bible to demonstrate psychological flexibility through acceptance is God. God changes God's perspective on humanity over the course of the flood narrative (Genesis 6:9-9:17). When God descries to destroy the world with the great flood, the justification given for the destruction is the evil of human kind:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים לְנֹחַ קֵץ כָּל־בָּשָׂר בָּא לְפָנַי כִּי־מָלְאָה הָאָרֶץ חָמָס מִפְּנֵיהֶם וְהִנְנִי מַשְׁחִיתָם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ׃
"God said to Noah, 'I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth.'" (Genesis 6:13) God seems to want a "do-over," a chance to destroy God's work and start again. However, after the flood, when God vows never to destroy the earth again, God says: אֶל־לִבּוֹ לֹא־אֹסִף לְקַלֵּל עוֹד אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה בַּעֲבוּר הָאָדָם כִּי יֵצֶר לֵב הָאָדָם רַע מִנְּעֻרָיו וְלֹא־אֹסִף עוֹד לְהַכּוֹת אֶת־כָּל־חַי כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי׃/" Never again will I doom the earth because of humankind, since the devisings of the human mind are evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done." (Genesis 8:21) Remarkably, God's explanation for never destroying the world again also appears to be about the evil of human kind! God destroys the world because of humanity's wickedness, and God vows never to destroy the world because of humanity's wickedness. How can we reconcile this apparent discrepancy? One explanation is that God changes God's mind. In other words, God turns God's mind toward acceptance of reality: humans have a capacity for wickedness. Despite this reality, God make a commitment to stick with us. In this, God shows an increased capacity of complex thoughts and emotions, the ability to contain a large messy truth: humans are flawed but beautiful.

God evolves, changes God's mind. God learns to accept. In short, God becomes more of a realist. This allows for God's *rachamim*/compassion to flow towards God's creations. We might imagine (in a midrashic sense) that Divine acceptance also allows God to feel Self-compassion: sometimes our creative work does not turn out as planned, but that must not stop us from continuing to create, and to nurture our creations. Thus, through the flood narrative, the evolution of God's personality - God's ability to grow and develop - gives us inspiration to do the same. God accepts that human beings have ugly, aggressive impulses and decides to love us anyhow. God marks God's commitment to accepting humanity by placing a rainbow in the sky (Genesis 9:12-17).

As clergy practitioners, we might use the rainbow, a symbol of acceptance, as an aid in pastoral counseling. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that the rainbow has become a

symbol of acceptance for the LGBTQ community. Rainbows are our reminder, an *ot*/sign, of our covenant with God, of God's commitment never to destroy God's creations, to accept humanity. Part of that covenant involves the capacity to make needed changes, to not remain static in the face of new information. The rainbow thus symbolizes not only God's compassion - but also God's flexibility, and the ability that each of us have to change our minds to accept difficult realities. It is the possibility of change that makes the rainbow a symbol of both hope and acceptance. The following exercise uses rainbow imagery as a means for practicing self-compassion and compassion towards others.

Exercise: Color Breathing: Rainbow Light Compassion Meditation

Take a comfortable seat and gently close your eyes. Begin by noticing where you find your breath in your body. Can you feel it in your belly, your chest, your nostrils? Take a few minutes just to get curious about your breath, noticing each inhale and exhale, and the space between inhale and exhale.

Now imagine yourself in a field. Lie down in the soft grass and look up. In the sky you see a rainbow. This vibrant rainbow begins to grow and expand and seems to pulse with energy and vitality. See if you can notice each color. Which color are you most drawn to? Take a moment to focus on one color; choose a color that feels most nurturing to you. For this exercise I will use the example of the color blue, but feel free to adapt this exercise for any color. Now imagine that you begin to breathe in blue light through your nostrils. Blue light emanates from the rainbow and enters your body through your breath. Breath in the calm, yet powerful blue light and feel its healing energy suffuse your entire body. Breathe out gray air. Breath in and feel the warm blue light bathing your insides. As you exhale, expel the gray air. Breathe in blue light. Feel that the blue light expands you like a balloon, and as it heals and energizes you it increases your capacity to feel everything, but especially to feel compassion for yourself. Now see if you feel ready to extend this compassion to others. Call someone to mind who you feel needs some compassion in this moment. Hold that person in mind and imagine the rainbow

light entering their body and bathing them in healing energy. When you are ready, gently open your eyes.

Teshuva, Forgiveness, and Acceptance

Acceptance is a key component of the work of repentance/*teshuva*, which we intensively focus on during the High Holiday season. However, *teshuva* is also a part of our daily liturgy[30], and therefore an ongoing spiritual practice throughout the year. *Teshuva* involves making changes in ourselves in order become who we are meant to me. Paradoxically, we must accept ourselves before we can change. If *teshuva*, which involves accepting and changing ourselves, is one side of a coin, forgiveness represents the other. We also need to accept others in order to forgive their mistakes. "Forgiveness is giving up the hope of a better past."[31] Indeed, forgiveness necessitates accepting the past. Forgiveness is a divine attribute, as described in Exodus 34 and echoed in our High Holiday liturgy: "God - compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin."[32] Our liturgy is replete with images of a God who forgives over and over again - unlike human beings, God does not hold a grudge. Our ancient sources suggest that we are perhaps most *B'tzelem Elohim*, made in the image of God, when we practice forgiveness.

In Genesis 45 Joseph forgives his brothers - but how does he do it? Everyone knows what it feels like to forgive, and what it feels like to be forgiven, but few of us can describe how we got there, what the internal, psycho-spiritual process is like. Can Joseph provide a model? Where do we even begin to figure out how to forgive when we need to - but feel we cannot?

[30] e.g, the daily *Amidah*
[31] Lily Tomlin, The Innerwork Center, July 1, 2024
[32] Mahzor Lev Shalem, 97.

Our Rabbis have taught: "A person should always be soft like a reed and not hard like a cedar."[33] Perhaps the quality that is most important in the process of forgiveness is that of flexibility - being able to change, looking at a situation from a different perspective. Joseph's flexibility allowed him to see the brothers in a new light, to admit to himself that they had changed, and to see the situation not as some sort of punishment or fluke but as God's plan.

Our liturgy provides a template for practicing the skill of forgiveness. In the following exercise, I have adapted the Bedtime *Shema* (found in most traditional weekday *siddurim*) the prayer before sleep, which includes a declaration of forgiveness. What is the significance of forgiving others before bed? Think of it like going to the gym - to tone our forgiveness muscle. Taking a moment each night before going to sleep to review the day, and let go of the hurts and resentments you are holding onto can be a powerful practice. It may be that practicing forgiving smaller hurts may help prepare us to forgive larger ones.

Exercise: Bedtime Shema with a focus on acceptance[34]

God, help me to accept the past actions of others. I have been hurt. Someone has harmed my body, or my spirit, or that which belongs to me. I have been disrespected, or made to feel smaller than I am. Perhaps the harm was intentional, maybe it was unintentional. I have been harmed by the actions of others, or I have been hurt by the words of others, or I have been hurt by silence, disregard and insensitivity. My pain is valid and real.

I want to forgive. I also notice there are parts of me that resist forgiving. I will not force myself to forgive before I am able. Yet, I also seek an invitation to melt those hardened part of myself. Help me to be soft like a reed. Help me to bend, help me to expand my vision to see that all humans are flawed, and that being in relationship means sometimes being hurt - and letting go of that hurt. God, You are the Great Forgiver, the

[33] Taanit 20a:20b, Koren- Steinsaltz Translation
[34] Adapted from *Siddur Sim Shalom for Weekdays* and *Kol HaNeshamah Daily Prayerbook*

Compassionate One. Help me follow your example. Allow me to forgive those who have hurt me. Soften my heart to allow me to accept the past and forgive.

God, help me to lie down and sleep in peace, and wake up in peace to a new morning, with forgiveness in my heart. In the morning, bring Your light of awareness and compassion to my eyes.

Blessed are You God, Bestower light and clarity to the world, Who allows for new perspectives and fresh starts.

(Continue with traditional words of *Shema* in a siddur of your choice)

Wilderness Journey: Accepting Uncertainty

The Israelites' journey into the wilderness provides several fertile metaphors for psychological growth and flexibility. In particular, the wilderness journey demands that the Israelites learn and practice the skill of acceptance of uncertainty. According to Sforno (16th Century) the Israelites only knew the points at which they began.[35] Sometimes the starting points were places of plentiful food and safety, and sometimes they were places of danger and scarcity. "In either case," according to Sforno, "the Israelites had no advanced knowledge of when and where they were to travel, which was very hard - yet they never refused to go."[36] So a defining characteristic of the wilderness journey, which distinguishes it from other types of travel, is that we do not know exactly where we will end up. Thus, the wilderness journey brings people to places of deep uncertainty. Managing uncertainty is an important skill which helps increase psychological flexibility.

The rabbis of the Talmud, in explicating a verse from Numbers 21:18, taught about the relationship between *midbar*/wildnerness and *mattana*/ the gift of Torah: "Once a person renders himself like a wilderness, deserted before all, the Torah is given to him as a gift."[37] Emptiness, openness, a sense of receptivity are all qualities necessary

[35] Sforno on Numbers 33:2, Eliyahu Munk, HaChut Hameshulash, Lambda Publishers
[36] Ibid.
[37] Nedarim 55a, Koren-Steinsaltz Translation

for your own wilderness journey to reveal its gifts. Eitan Fishbane teaches that "To receive the revelation of Torah—or perhaps a bit less grandly, to let Torah take root in one's heart—a person must first make themselves into a *midbar*, an inner empty wilderness that is cleared of all the weeds and brush that obstruct true perception and feeling."[38] Emptiness inspires openness and allows for possibilities, yet it can feel dangerous. Leaning into not-knowing is, for some of us, the most uncomfortable part of the wilderness journey.

When faced with a decision, or the next step in an uncertain journey, the following exercise helps us slow down and accept being in a place or stance of not-knowing. When we find ourselves in such a place, we often want to push the uncertainty away, but if we give up controlling the narrative or outcome we can sometimes reach a place of increased clarity, acceptance and peace. To do so, we must "surf the urge" to reach a premature conclusion. The wilderness, or *midbar*, has a sense of emptiness to it that allows for possibilities.

Exercise: Wilderness Journey: Accepting Uncertainty

Set a timer for five minutes and close your eyes. Start by settling into your seat, and notice the places where your body is making contact with your chair. Begin to scan your body starting from the top of your head working your way down to your toes. Notice any areas in your body where you are holding tension, or where you might feel pain or discomfort. Try to breathe into those areas, without needing to change anything about the way you are feeling right now. Now turn your attention to a decision that is before you. Notice the tendency of your mind to want to choose one fork in the road. Instead of making a choice, allow yourself to just be in a state of indecision and uncertainty. Notice what feelings come up. Let those feelings be without having to change them. Notice a tendency to want to weigh pros and cons, and turn your mind away from this type of problem solving. Instead, keep coming back to a place of

[38] https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/becoming-like-the-wilderness-2/

openness, a wild and empty place of uncertainty, a wilderness within you. "All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware."[39] Let your destination continue to be a secret. Resist the urge to come to a conclusion.

Conclusion:

ACT proposes that we practice acceptance and willingness as an antidote to experiential avoidance. Through practicing acceptance, we learn to let go of useless and harmful attempts to control that which we cannot control. Ultimately, acceptance helps us to increase our ability to become more psychologically limber and open. Jewish clergy will find that the Jewish value of *rachamim*/compassion forms the bedrock for helping clients build acceptance. Our sacred literature is full of examples of how compassion/*rachamim* can help us learn willingness and acceptance, and this chapter provides just a few. Jewish clergy will find that the High Holidays are a time ripe for using ACT exercises and metaphors in order to help clients deepen their practice of teshuva. Finally, the Biblical narrative of the wildness journey is a fertile metaphor for helping us manage uncertainty, and practice increasing our capacity to have all of our feelings and experiences, even those we want to push away or avoid.

Chapter 3: Cognitive Defusion: Finding Freedom from our Thoughts

[39] Martin Buber, *The Legend of the Baal Shem* (1955), (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1995 edition), 36.

Through our origin story, which begins not in triumph but in enslavement, we learn the centrality of the value of freedom to Judaism.[40] The Torah reminds us not to take our freedom for granted, but to remember that we were once slaves, and to use the power of this memory to ensure that we care for the vulnerable among us. The Torah does not end when the Israelites escape from Egypt. Rather, the Israelites continue to wander for forty years, bitterly complaining and wishing they could go back to being slaves in Egypt, as they realize that freedom conveys the burden of responsibility. Thus, we learn from the Torah that it is not only other people who enslave us; we also become enslaved to our own ideas and fantasies - our thoughts. As Jews, we are viscerally aware of the ongoing cycle of descent into slavery followed by liberation: "The Exodus from Egypt occurs in every human being, in every era, in every year, and in every day."[41] Freedom is not achieved and then sustained indefinitely; rather, we must constantly work to free ourselves from the lure to return to Egypt.

ACT's core processes represent a blueprint for psychological freedom - we might call it freedom from the Egypt of our own minds. ACT recognizes that one of the primary ways that humans lack freedom is in becoming enslaved to one's own thoughts. Because of its focus on thoughts, ACT attends to the power of language, and clarifies how language can be both our greatest tool and our worst enemy. To understand how ACT views the role of language in our psychological functioning, consider the following example: Say the word "apple." Notice how verbalizing this word conjures in your mind a small round red or green fruit. English speakers relate to the sound "apple" as if the sound and the object itself were the same thing. The word and the object it refers to are "fused" (to use ACT language) in our minds. This phenomenon makes so much sense we rarely question it, in fact, we have every reason to celebrate cognitive fusion: symbolic

[40] Michael Strassfeld, *Judaism Disrupted: A Spiritual Manifesto for the 21t Century*. (Teaneck, NJ: Ben Yehuda Press, 2023), 41.
[41] Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav, quoted in Michael Strassfeld, 2023, 45.

language forms a cornerstone of human functioning! Yet, cognitive fusion can also create immense problems when words like "useless," "damaged," "unlovable" become fused to our sense of self. ACT theory calls this "verbal dominance" because of the way that words dominate our experience.[42]

Judaism has a special relationship with words. In our morning prayers, as we begin to praise God we say: בָּרוּךְ שֶׁאָמַר וְהָיָה הָעוֹלָם/Blessed is the One whose word created the world." God spoke the world into being in the Book of Genesis (e.g. Genesis 1:3: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי־אוֹר: God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.) In Jewish tradition, words are powerful, and sometimes dangerous. God creates with words, and humans beings, created in the Divine image, also have the ability to create worlds with words. Judaism attests to the sacred power of words. We are "the people of the Book" because the words of our Torah are the sacred source of our life as a people. Our powerful connection to words, both written and spoken, may inspire us to be especially mindful about our relationship to language and our thoughts. When we become fused with the stories in our heads, this represents a kind of idolatry, a mis-characterizing of the sacred power of language.

Cognitive fusion causes us to react in response to our thoughts instead of acting in line with our values. For example, a person's actions might be guided by the thought, "I will never amount to anything" instead of by values or goals. "It is part of the human condition that we create stories about ourselves and about the world around us. Our stories are often filled with limitations, and we proceed to live our lives inside those limitations."[43] Once we start to live within the limitations of the stories in our minds, our behavioral choices are more limited our lives become small. Sometimes we "take our thoughts literally and allow them to steer us in directions we don't want to go."[44] For example, if I am fused to the thought: "I don't know how to say the right thing" I may

[42] Hayes, S.C., Stroasahl, K.D. & Wildon, K.G., *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: The Process and Practice of Mindful Change* (2nd ed) (New York: Guilford Press, 2012).
[43] Kelly G. Wilson and Troy Dufrene, 2010, 92.
[44] Ibid.

shy away from speaking in social situations; my world then grows smaller, my range of possibilities constricts. ACT's remedy for cognitive fusion is *cognitive defusion*. Defusion is NOT about changing our thoughts; rather, it is about changing our relationship to our thinking. Defusion means holding our thoughts lightly.

Cognitive defusion asks us to distinguish between a thought and what the thought is about, and notice these are not the same. Sometimes people get caught up in questions about whether or not thoughts are true or false. But cognitive delusion has nothing to do with veracity. For example, you think the thought: "I am now reading Rachel's Master's Thesis." That is true. But you could also think the thought: "I am now riding a unicycle on the back of an elephant." That is (in all likelihood) false. But both of these are just thoughts. Thinking "I am reading Rachel's Masters Thesis" is not the same thing as reading, as the event itself.

To understand what cognitive defusion and overcoming verbal dominance have to do with healing psychological pain, consider the example of David, who has a fear of flying in an airplane. When he considers buying an airplane ticket to attend his niece's college graduation, the image of being on an airplane plummeting to the ground enters his mind. When the image enters his mind, he feels his chest tightening as he imagines the sensation of airplane turbulence. He thinks: "I might die." Defusion will help David to separate images, sensations, and thoughts from actual events. An image of a plane crashing is not a plane crash. The sensation of one's chest tightening is just a bodily sensation. Thoughts about death are just thoughts and not the event itself. "Defusion describes a state in which we regard the content of our thoughts a just what they are: a collection of words that form in our minds."[45] Once these thoughts are just words, we can decide how to relate to them, and the next best action to take in the world outside of our mind.

ACT takes a playful approach to helping people defuse from their thoughts. Experiential exercises aimed at practicing cognitive defusion fall into two general types:

[45] Ibid.

1. Exercises for stepping back and observing, and 2. Exercises for deliteralizing language. One simple but powerful technique to help step back and observe your thinking is to say out loud "I am having the thought that…" For example, Nancy thinks "I will never succeed at my job." She might say out loud, "I am having the thought: I will never succeed at my job." This enables her to note the fact that her thought is merely that. Another classic meditation that helps with stepping back and observing thoughts is called "Floating Leaves on a Moving Stream." In this guided meditation, we imagine that our thoughts are leaves floating by on a stream, and we practice watching them float by without grasping them or trying to manipulate the thoughts.[46] Exercises for deliteralizing language tend to focus on the sounds of words in order to help detach the word from its literal meaning. One classic example involves asking a client to repeat a neutral word like "pickle" or "milk" until the word seems to lose its meaning, and then try the same exercise with a word that is laden with meaning for the client.[47]

ACT asserts that metaphors serve as a key to unlock the door to human liberation.[48] Our Jewish tradition is rich with metaphors that can help to "link the richness of what you already know to domains in which you are unsure what to do."[49] Following, I will suggest some metaphors and exercises grounded in Jewish values and texts that can help practice the skill of cognitive defusion, leading us to greater freedom and flexibility.

1. Panim el Panim/Face to Face

The Torah teaches us about the possibility for sacredness of relationship, and the implications that deep relationships hold for healing each other and the world. The Torah teaches that Moses was unique among prophets and leaders because he knew God in an

[46] Jill Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, 2014, 68.
[47] Ibid, 72.
[48] Stephen Hayes, "Metaphors and Human Liberation," Forward to Jill Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, 2014.
[49] Ibid.

especially intimate way :פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים/panim el panim/face to face.[50] "Panim el panim/face to face" represents a template for being in relationship that we find in the Bible, and in the work of Jewish philosophers Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas.[51] According to Levinas, the human face makes ethical demands upon each of us, calling us into service of the other.[52] For Levinas, our sense of responsibility grows from the fundamental experience of encountering the face of the other.

In Genesis, Jacob names the site of his sacred wrestling match פְּנִיאֵל/Penniel/Face of God because he has "כִּי־רָאִיתִי אֱלֹהִים פָּנִים אֶל־פָּנִים/seen a divine being face to face."[53] A few verses later, an anxious Jacob, wounded but rewarded with a new name, approaches his estranged brother Esau. Jacob is fearful that Esau will enact revenge on Jacob for his past betrayals. When Esau embraces Jacob instead of exacting revenge, Jacob, flooded with relief, amazement, and love, declares to Esau: "רָאִיתִי פָנֶיךָ כִּרְאֹת פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים/to see your face is like seeing the face of God."[54] Through intimate encounters with another, פָּנִים אֶל־ פָּנִים/ panim el panim, we can see the spark of the Divine within each other. Seeing each other face-to-face, as equals and intimates, is one of the ways we can make contact with God. Truly seeing the face of another in this way involves care and attention, openness, and a nonjudgemental attitude. When we allow ourselves to see and be seen in this way, we attune to the differences and needs of the other. Judaism asserts the importance of seeing others "panim el panim". But it's hard to see others that way when we cannot see beyond our thoughts. Often we get so mired down in our thoughts that we lost our ability to truly connect with those around us. The following exercise helps bring awareness to the ways our thoughts may cloud our ability to perceive the world and especially to look into the eyes of another person.

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[50] Deuteronomy 34:10, Exodus 33:11

[51] See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. (New York: Charle Scribner's Sons, 1970), and Emmanuel Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity*. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985).

[52] Emmanuel Lévinas, 1985, 95.

[53] Genesis 32:31, JPS translation

[54] Genesis 33:10, JPS Translation

Exercise: Hands as Thoughts/Panim el Panim (Face to Face)[55]

Hold your hands out in front of you and look at them. Imagine that your hands are thoughts. Now slowly raise your hands up to your face and place them so that they are covering your eyes. Look at the world around you from behind your hands. What is it like to peer out at the world from between your fingers? Imagine that you must walk through the world every day all day with your hands in front of your eyes. How does this affect your ability to see what is in your environment? To see the faces of others? How does it affect your ability to interact with others? This represents what cognitive fusion is like: our thoughts cloud our ability to see the world around us and make good decisions about our responses. Now slowly lower your hands from your face. Slowly take the time to look into the face of another person. This represents cognitive defusion. Notice how much easier it is to see and connect to others and with the world around you. Look at your hands (i.e. your thoughts) in your lap and notice that they are still there, but they are not getting in the way of your seeing or reacting.

2. Talmud Study for Cognitive Defusion

The Talmud has its roots in oral tradition; during the rabbinic period, the Talmud was exclusively orally transmitted. Even in the later Geonic period (6th -11th centuries) oral transmission was privileged by the rabbis. The oral history of the Talmud is one of the features that make its language and logic so unique and rich. Traditionally, the Talmud is not read like an ordinary book; it is studied out loud together in havruta pairs. Christina Hayes, a scholar of Talmud, has said that "the sacredness of the text lies in the conversation it begins."[56] For most of Jewish history and up into our present moment, the act of Talmud study in havruta has been a key spiritual practice within normative Judaism.

[55] Adapted from Jill Stoddard and Niloofar Afari, 2014, 80.
[56] Lecture by Christina Hayes and Yehoshua Pfeffer, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUvdQnNvCvc

Professor Sarra Lev suggests that we orient ourselves to Talmud study so that our reading and discussion draw a bridge between ourselves and the text. For Lev, it is important to create "disequalibrium" so that the text becomes neither too familiar nor too alien.[57] Within the Talmud, a given *sugya* may offer a drifting argument in which Tannaitic and Amoraic sources are analyzed in a dialectical chain of reasoning. Thus, the text of the Gemara is discursive; rather than a mere record of a debate between rabbis across and within generations, each *sugya* represents a literary creation which we "perform" when we study it together. The study of Talmud may be the perfect exercise to practice cognitive defusion because it requires us to hold our thoughts and judgements lightly, to enter into the world of the Rabbis and play by their rules of language and logic instead of staying stuck in our own native categories and assumptions.

For the Sages of the Talmud, language provided a canvass on which to create worlds of meaning, to build and to play. As in any good game, the rules the Rabbis abided by made their play even more vibrant. Talmudic reasoning colors the way that the rabbis use and interpret language. For example, the Talmudic Sages assume that the text of the Torah is not repetitive, therefore every word of the text must teach us something new. Every seemingly extraneous word is thus up for interpretation. Also, for the most part, the rabbis of the Talmud believe that any given interpreter can only have one interpretation for a part of Torah. That is to say that one rabbi cannot extract multiple meanings from one word or phrase. Another example of a literary convention of the Rabbis that may flummox the modern reader is the phrase: הכי קאמר "so he says/this is what he means to say." This Talmudic phrase precedes the resolution of a challenge that is achieved by rewording or reinterpreting an earlier statement to solve the problem. By using this literary convention, the rabbis effectively change the meaning of an earlier sage's words in order to fit their argument. When they needed to bend reality to conform to their internal logic, the Rabbis were not afraid to do so.

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[57] Sarra Lev, "Talmud that works your heart: New approaches for reading." In Eds Jane Kanarek and Marjorie Lehman, *Learning to Read Talmud: What It Looks Like and How It Happens,* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016).

Sarra Lev describes a method for learning Talmud that "not only 'works the brain,' but also 'works the heart.'" Her method requires a specific way of interacting with the text. In Lev's method of studying Talmud, the text itself is seen as an "other" with which the reader may have an "I-Thou" encounter. When we encounter the text (even or especially the parts of the text that offend us), we accept it as it is, and this process challenges us to grow. Some of the skills required for studying this way include: understanding and respecting other's differences, the ability to see things through the eyes of the "other," resisting the impulse to jump to conclusions, the ability "to go beyond my current possibilities as I perceive them," and the cultivation of uncertainty, which lays the groundwork for complex readings.[58] In the following exercise, I invite you to study Talmud in a way that "works your heart" and creates a sense of disequilibrium within you. The goal of this exercise is to practice noticing the assumptions and judgments that arise in your mind when you study a challenging piece of text, and holding these thoughts lightly.

Exercise: Talmud Study for Cognitive Defusion

Find a havruta partner to study the following text (or a different text of your choosing) with. Set aside 20-30 minutes. Read the passage from Tractate Temurah[59] in the Babylonian Talmud aloud in the original Aramaic (if you have the language facility to do so) and/or in English. See if you can interact with the text and your havruta partner by recognizing and honoring their "otherness." What questions do you have for the text? What background information do you think you need to understand the text? Are there parts of the text that seem alien or familiar? What possibilities are alive within this text? Try not to rush to understanding, or to give up on understanding because of frustration or

[58] Ibid, 182.

[59] From Sefaria: "Temurah ("Substitution") is a tractate within Seder Kodashim ("Order of Holy Things"). It mainly discusses the prohibition, based in Leviticus 27:10 and 27:33, against substituting a non-consecrated animal for an animal consecrated for sacrifice in the Temple, and the sacred status that both animals receive if this prohibition is violated."

confusion. Notice your thoughts and the tendency of your mind to draw conclusions and make connections. What connections can you draw between this text and your life?

ט״ז :י״ד ב-ס״ו:תמורה י״ד א

Temurah 14a-14b[60]

אמר אי אשכחיה דכתיב איגרתא שלחי ליה לרב יוסף

Rav Dimi **said** to Rav Yirmeya: **If I find** someone **who** can **write** this opinion in **a letter**, I will **send it to Rav Yosef** in Babylonia,

ולא קשיא כאן בנסכים הבאין עם הזבח כאן בנסכים הבאין בפני עצמן 'ולא תיסמי מנחת נסכים ממתני

and in light of this ruling **he will not delete** the phrase: **The meal offering** that accompanies **the libations, from the baraita**. **And** instead, the apparent contradiction between the baraitot can be explained as follows: It is **not difficult; here,** the baraita that states that meal offerings accompanying libations are sacrificed only in the day is referring t**o libations that come with** an animal **offering**, whereas **there**, the baraita that permits sacrificing a meal offering that accompanies the libations at night is referring **to libations that come to** be sacrificed by themselves, i.e., which do not accompany the sacrifice of an offering.

ר יוחנן כותבי"ואי הוה ליה איגרתא מי אפשר למישלחא והא אמר רבי אבא בריה דרבי חייא בר אבא א

הלכות כשורף התורה והלמד מהן אינו נוטל שכר

The Gemara raises a difficulty with regard to Rav Dimi's suggestion to write this opinion in a letter. **And** even **if he had** someone to write **a letter** for him, **would** it have been **possible to send it**? **But didn't Rabbi Abba, son of Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba, say** that **Rabbi Yoḥanan said:** Those **who write halakhot** are considered *like* those who **burn the Torah**, **and one who learns from** written halakhot **does not receive the reward** of studying Torah. Evidently, it is prohibited to send halakhot in letters.

[60] The William Davidson Talmud (Koren- Steinsaltz) from Sefaria. Text in bold type is translation and non-bold type is Steinsaltz commentary.

כתוב לך את הדברים האלה (כז ,שמות לד) ל כתוב אחד אומר"יהודה בר נחמני מתורגמניה דר 'דרש ר
כי על פי הדברים האלה לומר לך דברים שעל פה אי אתה רשאי לאומרן (כז ,שמות לד) וכתוב אחד אומר
בכתב ושבכתב אי אתה רשאי לאומרן על פה

Before resolving the difficulty, the Gemara further discusses the prohibition of writing down the Torah: **Rabbi Yehuda bar Naḥmani, the disseminator for Reish Lakish, expounded** as follows: **One verse says: "Write you these words,"** and one verse says, i.e., it states later in that same verse: **"For by the mouth of these words"** (Exodus 34:27). These phrases serve **to say to you: Words that were** taught **orally you may not recite in writing, and** words **that are written you may not recite orally,** i.e., by heart.

ותנא דבי רבי ישמעאל כתוב לך את הדברים האלה אלה אתה כותב אבל אין אתה כותב הלכות

And furthermore, **the school of Rabbi Yishmael taught**: The word "these" in the command **"write you these words"** serves to emphasize that **these** words, i.e., those recorded in the Written Law, **you may write, but you may not write halakhot,** i.e., the mishnayot and the rest of the Oral Law.

תהלים) ל מעייני בסיפרא דאגדתא בשבתא ודרשי הכי"אמרי דלמא מילתא חדתא שאני דהא רבי יוחנן ור
הפרו תורתך אמרי מוטב תיעקר תורה ואל תשתכח תורה מישראל 'עת לעשות לה (קכו ,קיט

They said in response to the question of how Rav Dimi could propose writing down the halakha in a letter: **Perhaps** with regard to **a new matte**r it **is different,** i.e., it might be permitted to write down new material so that it not be forgotten. One proof for this suggestion is **that Rabbi Yoḥanan and Reish Lakish** would **read from a scroll of aggada**, containing the words of the Sages, **on Shabbat. And** they did so because **they taught as follows**: Since one cannot remember the Oral Law without writing it down, it is permitted to violate the halakha, as derived from the verse: **"It is time to work for the Lord; they have made void your Torah"** (Psalms 119:126). **They said it is better to uproot** a single halakha of the **Torah**, i.e., the prohibition of writing down the Oral Torah, **and** thereby ensure **that the Torah is not forgotten from the Jewish people** entirely.

3. Letters for God

In Hebrew the word for wilderness, מדבר/*midbar* comes from the root דבר /*dvar*/word. The Hebrew points to a deep truth: words are wild with possibility. We create possibilities through our words. Mystical tradition suggests that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet "exist independently of ink and paper and even words."[61] In Hebrew, the letter "is the spiritual substance of the thing." (e.g. the letter ב /bet contains within it the essence of a house. The Hebrew word for house starts with this letter and is basically spelled the same way as the letter: בית)[62] We might use the spirituality of the Hebrew alphabet to loosen our connection to individual words, and thus to our thoughts.

Consider the following Hasidic tale:[63]

A villager knew it was a mitzvah to feast before Yom Kippur, but he overdid it and drank so much he fell asleep and missed the Kol Nidre service. When he awoke it was the middle of the night and he wanted to pray, but he did not have a siddur and he did know any of the words of the prayers by heart. He began to recite the alphabet over and over. He cried out: "God, here are all the letters! You arrange them in the right order!" The next day the villager showed up at synagogue, and when the Kotzker Rebbe asked him where he was the night before, the villager related the entire story to the Kotzker Rebbe and asked, "Rebbe, do you think my prayer was acceptable to God?" The Kotzker Rebbe answered with a gentle smile, "Yes, your prayer is more acceptable to God than mine because you spoke your prayer with your whole heart."

The following exercise asks you to deliteralize language and offer a prayer from your heart like the villager in this Hasidic tale.

<u>Exercise: Prayer Scramble</u>

Write a prayer out on a piece of paper. Take the time to write from your heart and allow yourself to be honest and creative. This prayer is a private communication to God

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[61] Lawrence Kushner, *The Book of Letters: A Mystical Hebrew Alphabet*. (Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1990).
[62] Joel Rosenberg, *The Jewish Catalog*, (NY: JPS, 1973).
[63] Ellen Frankel, *The Classic Tales: 4000 Years of Jewish Lore*, (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc. 1993), 547.

and no one else will read it. Now take a scissors and cut up the piece of paper into small pieces. Scramble the pieces of paper on a table. Randomly pick up pieces of paper and read the letters you see out loud, each one after the other.

4. God's Kol Nidre:

Our tradition advises us to be careful about making and keeping vows and promises.[64] However, we humans are inclined to promise, perhaps because we tend towards enthusiasm and hope. But sometimes situations change and the vows we made don't make sense anymore. How can we stay consistent yet not become rigid? Rabbi Josh Feigelson notes that "A vow, if held unswervingly and without attention to our lived experience, rather than bringing us closer to Divine service, can drive us further away from it."[65] On Erev Yom Kippur we pray Kol Nidre, and recite:

"All vows, renunciations, ban, oaths, formulas of obligation, pledges, and promises that we vow or promise to ourselves and to God from this Yom Kippur until next Yom Kippur— may it approach us for good— We hereby retract. May they all be undone, repealed, cancelled, voided, annulled and regarded as neither valid not binding. Our vows shall not be considered vows, and our renunciations shall no longer be renunciations, and our promises are no longer promises."[66]

What do we mean when we say this prayer? What does it mean to annul our words?

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[64] e.g. Numbers 30:3 "If a householder makes a vow to Adonai or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has crossed his lips." JPS Translation. See also: Maimonides Mishneh Torah, Vows 13:24 "Although [taking vows] is an element of the service of God, a person should not take many vows involving prohibitions and should not habituate himself to taking them. Instead, he should abstain from those things from which one should abstain without taking a vow."

[65] Josh Feigelson, *Eternal Questions: Reflections, Conversations and Jewish Mindfulness Practices for the Weekly Torah Portion.* (Teaneck: Ben Yehuda Press, 2022), 242.

[66] Mahzor Lev Shalem, 205.

In our earliest siddur, Seder Rav Amram (800s Babylonian) we find the text of Kol Nidre, with a note from Rav Amram: "And there are some who say: 'Kol Nidrei…' but this is a foolish practice and it is forbidden to practice it."[67] Rav Amram's disdain for Kol Nidre was shared by Jewish leaders over the years. Kol Nidre raises some questions: The Talmud describes a method for being released from vows - but it does not look like this. Yet, the Jewish people have long been attached to the practice of Kol Nidre. It was once popularly believed that Kol Nidre dated back to 15th century Spain, during the days of the Inquisition when Jews were forced to convert to Christianity on pain of death. In fact, the Kol Nidre may be one of among our most ancient liturgy. Scholars found evidence of its formula in Babylonian incantation bowls from 300-700 CE that have been excavated in present day Iraq.[68]

Midrash tells a tale of God annulling God's own vow[69], of God praying Kol Nidre. Erica Brown describes the Midrash as follows:

"God took an oath to destroy the children of Israel because of the Golden Calf. Moses told God that he could override the oath. Is God not bound by his own oath? God says: "I cannot retract an oath which has proceeded from My mouth." Moses then appealed to God's own laws: "Did You, God, not give me the power of annulment of oaths by saying, 'When a man vows a vow to the Lord or swears an oath to bind his soul, he himself cannot break his word '(Num. 30:3), yet a scholar may absolve his vows if he consults him?" (Referring to the Talmud's discussion of the formula for annulling oaths) Moses wrapped himself in his cloak in the manner of a sage, while God stood before him asking for an annulment of the divine vow. *God said God's own Kol Nidrei...* God created a way back, a way out of language."[70]

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[67] Seder Rav Amram

[68] Dalia Marx, "What's in a bowl? Babylonian Magic Spells and the Origin of Kol Nidre." In *All These Vows*, Ed. Lawrence Hoffman, (VT: Jewish Lights Press, 2011).

[69] Shemot Rabbah, 43:4

[70] Erica Brown, *Numbers: Leadership in the Wilderness; Authority and Anarchy in the Book of Numbers*, (New Milford, CT: Maggid, 2013), 20.

Can we "create a way out of language;" a way to release ourselves from our thoughts, as we release ourselves from our vows and promises?

Exercise: Create your own "Kol Nidre" releasing yourself from your thoughts

This spiritual practice may be done during the month of Elul in preparation for the High Holy days. Find a comfortable quiet place to sit and have a piece of paper and a pen or pencil available. Begin to think about some of the thoughts that have preoccupied your mind over this year: think about the "headliner" thoughts of the year. Begin with thoughts that are pleasant: perhaps love or desire for a beloved, or pride over your achievements. Write each thought down. Then move on to thoughts that you feel are negative; thoughts that may be trapping you, or holding you back from being your true, expansive self. Write down these thoughts as well. Now recite:

"All thoughts that have passed through my mind this year - whether they are delicious, pleasant, boring, fearful, disgusting, or weird - I hereby declare that they are just thoughts. I am not bound to the language of my mind. God, please let my actions and intentions speak for me, and not my thoughts. I hereby let these thoughts go, with all the thoughts of all my fellow human beings, into the ocean of the mind."

Summary:

When we become fused with a thought, it limits our potential actions; we feel a sense of urgency to act in a way consistent with that thought. Defusion does not mean proving your thoughts wrong, rather, defusion is about holding those thoughts gracefully so that you can choose from a variety of actions in order to live your life in a valued way. Defusion relies on acceptance (the skill discussed in Chapter 2) because when we defuse from our thoughts we accept them for what they are - just thoughts. "By noticing that thoughts and images about the world are not the world itself - by defusing - you can also accept those thoughts and images as simply thoughts and images."[71] Contact with present

[71] Hank Robb, "Opening Up: Acceptance and Defusion," in Eds J. A. Nieuwsma, R.D. Walser, and S. C. Hayes, 2016.

moment (a skill to be discussed in Chapter 4) also helps with defusion; when we are able to slow down to notice in a mindful way, we observe our constant flow of thoughts, and begin to see the potential to change our relationship to our thinking.

Chapter 4: Present-Moment Awareness in ACT and Judaism

Mindfulness practice serves as a foundation for ACT. In ACT, mindfulness means "present-moment awareness;" a flexible and yet focused approach to staying open to what is happening now, without judgement. When I am in a mindful state, I can more effectively manage painful feelings, thoughts, sensations or urges. Our minds can be compared to a lake: when the water is choppy and full of debris it is hard to clearly see the bottom of the lake, but when the water is calm, we see with greater accuracy. With clear vision we see where the rocks and fish are, and then make wise decisions about where to step or swim. Similarly, when our mind is calm and focused, we have more accurate information about the world around us, as well as our own needs and wants, and we can make better decisions about our next steps.

Mindfulness is a skill that can be practiced and honed. ACT teaches mindfulness as an antidote to anxiety because, as Wilson and DuFrene note, anxiety in the present moment is like a fish on dry land: it cannot breathe and will die quickly.[72] We may feel *fear* about something happening in the present moment, but *anxiety* feeds on rumination about the past or worry about the future. It is impossible to feel anxious about something that is happening right now. The ACT approach can be summarized in the invitation to "hold and move:" we hold all of our feelings *and simultaneously* move in the direction of what most matters to us. Mindfulness forms the basis of the direction to "hold," which ultimately facilitates our ability to "move" in the direction of that which we value.

Judaism, Buddhism and Mental Health: A Historical Cultural Perspective

The concept of mindful awareness is most closely associated with Buddhist tradition, although all religions emphasize various aspects of mindfulness. However, the terms used to describe mindfulness and the methods of practice differ across traditions and cultures. In the 1970s and beyond, psychologists became interested in de-coupling mindfulness practice from religious tradition in order to use it as a tool to improve mental

[72] Wilson and DuFrene, 56-57.

health and reduce human suffering. Early pioneers of non-religious mindfulness practice in psychotherapy include Jon Kabat Zinn, the originator of Mindfulness Based-Stress Reduction (MBSR), and Marcia Linehan, who developed Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Since that time, the popularity of mindfulness within psychotherapy practice and self-help literature has ballooned such that nearly every form of contemporary psychotherapy uses, or at least acknowledges, the power of mindfulness for positive change and healing.

Jews have played interesting and important roles in the worlds of both psychotherapy and American mindfulness practice. Although we are a minority, Jews are overrepresented in the field of psychotherapy, and overrepresented in the establishment of American Buddhism and American mindfulness practice. The phenomenon of "Jew-Bu's" has been well-documented by Roger Kamenetz,[73] Sylvia Boorstein[74], Rabbi Alan Lew,[75] and more recently in a sociological study by Emily Sigalow.[76] In particular, Jews played a large role in the psychologizing of Buddhist meditation practice. "The reconceptualization of Buddhism in psychological terms has long been a framework that westerners have used to interpret Buddhism."[77] Jews played a prominent role in this reconceptualization. For example, Jon Kabat Zinn, an American Jewish psychologist "reformulated the teachings of mindfulness and practice of meditation into medical terms" when he developed and popularized Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in the 1970s. MBSR surged in popularity over the subsequent decades, producing over

[73] Roger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus: A Poet's Rediscovery of Jewish Identity on Buddhist India*, (New York: Harper, 1994).
[74] Sylvia Boorstein, *That's Funny, You Don't Look Like a Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist*. (New York: HarperOne, 1997).
[75] Alan Lew, *One God Clapping: the Spiritual Path of a Zen Rabbi*, (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001).
[76] Emily Sigalow, *American JewBu: Jews, Buddhists, and Religious Change.* Princeton: (Princeton University Press, 2019).
[77] Sigalow, 77.

1000 instructors who teach in nearly every US state and many other countries. As of 2015, 80% of US medical schools offer training in mindfulness.[78]

Sigalow describes how early Jewish Buddhist leaders "advanced the idea that mindfulness and meditation are universal as well as nonsectarian practices in which all people can participate."[79] These pioneers of American Buddhism deemphasized or abandoned traditional elements of Theravada Buddhism such as rituals, robes, and chanting. According to Sigalow, their Jewish heritage probably influenced them to highlight four aspects of Buddhism over and above all others: mindfulness, loving-kindness, ethics, and generosity. Sigalow believes some of these areas of emphasis probably resulted from Judaism's emphasis on loving-kindness/gemilut hasidim, and ethics.

Jewish Mindfulness in Theory and Practice

While some Jews were active in adapting mindfulness practice for use in mental health treatment, others were creating (or perhaps reviving) the practice of contemplative Judaism. A meditative tradition can be found in our classic Jewish texts. For example, the Babylonian Talmud recounts how "the pious ones of early times would wait an hour and pray, in order to direct their heart to their Father in Heaven."[80] What were the ancient pious ones doing in that early hour preceding prayer? Perhaps they were engaged in a practice of focused awareness. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk elaborated on this aggadah: "Should it not have said they 'would wait an hour and afterward pray'? Rather, they would wait an hour, and during that hour itself they would pray that they would afterward direct their heart to their father in heaven."[81] The Kotzker seems to imply that, for the

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[78] Frewen, P. A., Evans, E.M., Maraj, N., Dozois, D. J., Partridge, K. (2008). "Letting go: Mindfulness and negative automatic thinking" . *Cognitive Therapy and Research*. **32** (6): 758–774

[79] Sigalow, 68.

[80] BT, Berakhot 30b, Koren Steinsaltz translation

[81] Simcha Raz, Trans. by Edward Levin. *The Sayings of Menachem Mendel of Kotsk*. (Northvale, NJ: 1995),197.

ancient pious ones, the hour preceding prayer involved a setting of intention through focused awareness.

Some Jewish meditation teachers have focused on discovering how "meditation could be taught and practiced through a Jewish lens."[82] Jewish meditation "integrates Jewish language, texts, and interpretations with sitting in silence, being mindful of the present moment, and engaging in concentration and awareness exercises."[83] Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg, for example, "translated" Buddhist teachings "into a Jewish spiritual language." Rabbi Weinberg thus "began to teach mindfulness to Jews using the language of Jewish story and symbol."[84] Jewish meditation teachers "felt little pressure to maintain or police firm religious boundaries between Judaism and Buddhism."[85] These practitioners of Jewish mindfulness practice felt free to borrow from other traditions, but they also mined the Jewish tradition for teachings on present-moment awareness.

Rabbi Jonathan Slater offers many examples of such teachings in his writings. Rabbi Slater defines mindfulness as "the capacity to see clearly, with calm and awakened mind and heart, the truth of each moment of our lives."[86] Accordingly, we don't practice mindfulness to get calm, or relax - although these benefits many accompany the practice. We practice mindfulness so we won't miss out on our lives. A breath lasts for only a breath, and all feelings, whether painful or pleasurable, are time-limited. Mindfulness helps to experience our feelings and sensations without clinging to them, or hiding from them. We realize that nothing lasts, an idea that, Rabbi Slater writes, can be sad but also liberating.

Rabbi Slater demonstrates that all of Jewish religious practice may be seen as a mindfulness practice. In Judaism, we are called to be aware and connected. Rabbi

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[82] Sigalow, 90.
[83] Sigalow, 93.
[84] Sheila Peltz Weinberg, *Surprisingly Happy: An Atypical Religion Memoir (*Amherst: White River Press, 2010), 85-87.
[85] Sigalow, 115.
[86] Slater xix.

Michael Strassfeld links *kavannah*/intention with awareness. Our ritual practices are tools for heightening awareness of what is important to us. "They are no different than paying attention to our breath during silent meditation. For example, when we pause before we eat to recite words of blessing, we remind ourselves that we should be grateful for food and for the gift of life."[87] But rituals are not automatically vehicles for awareness. Indeed, the rabbis debated about whether kavannah/intention is required for the performance of a mitzvah.[88]

We need to bring mindfulness and intention to the ritual in order to cultivate awareness. Otherwise, rituals can easily become rote and meaningless. As beings with free choice, we can choose to act mindlessly, or in a mindful manner that enhances awareness of the possibility in each moment. For example, I can bake challah while thinking about my to-do list, or ruminating about a sad news story, or worrying about an assignment I have to do - or I can focus my awareness on the physical sensations of kneading the dough, and allow my attention to rest in the present moment. Rabbi Slater suggests that mindfulness practice "leads to a life of constant teshuvah" - when we become aware, we "will always be turning towards the truth, and so towards God.[89] This awareness that leads to teshuvah is neither a given nor a demand; rather, it is an invitation that Jewish spiritual practice extends to us.

Jon Kabat Zinn defines mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally"[90] For ACT, mindfulness allows us to slow down and be present in the moment so that we can reach clarity in order to take the next right step according to our values. For Judaism, mindfulness allows us to enhance our awareness so that we awaken to the sacred potential available in every

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[87] Strassfeld, 69.

[88] See, for example, *Shulchan Arukh*, Orach Chayim 60, Sefaria Community Translation states: "There are those who hold that the commandments do not require intention, and there are those who hold that they do need intention in order to fulfill the doing of that commandment - and such [i.e. the latter] is the [correct] halacha."

[89] Slater, xxviii

[90] Jon Kabat Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness. (*New York: Delacorte, 1990).

moment. We do not need to sit on a meditation cushion and focus on our breath for an hour every day (although that certainly might be something we choose to do a part of a Jewish mindfulness practice); we can change the way we approach the ritual life that we already engage in by adding a kavannah of mindful awareness. Some mitzvot, such as wrapping tefillin, are accompanied by traditional kavanot that one might say prior to doing the mitzvah itself. Because the entirety of Judaism provides fertile soil in which one may grow a mindfulness practice, we might make any Jewish ritual into a mindful moment. Therefore, I have chosen a few examples to highlight how one might bring mindful awareness into Jewish life and practice in order to demonstrate how we may easily adapt nearly any Jewish ritual into a mindfulness practice.

Metaphors/Exercises:

1. Shabbat as Mindfulness Practice

Mindfulness and Shabbat seem organically intertwined. The practice of mindfulness demands that we release worries and plans for the *future* or regrets or nostalgia for the *past,* and attend only to this moment. Shabbat asks that we put aside our striving and creating and *just be.* A mindful Shabbat has the potential to disconnect us from the material world, and allow us to tap into what may experienced if and when we allow ourselves to pay attention. Even non-Jewish people have recently become attracted to the idea of Shabbat through their introduction to the secular practice of mindfulness. As an example, author Casper de Kuile suggests the practice of "Tech Shabbat": one day a week where we take a break from technology in order to connect to the present moment.[91]

Rabbi Alan Lew wrote that "Judaism came into the world to bring the news that the invisible is more important than the visible.[92]" Rabbi Lew was talking about God, but

[91] Casper de Kuile. T*he Power of Ritual: Turning Everyday Activities into Soulful Practices.* (New York: HarperOne, 2020), Kindle edition.
[92] Alan Lew. *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*. (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 2003, Kindle edition).

the point extends to Shabbat, and to Jewish time in general. Indeed, Rabbi A.J. Heschel wrote that "when we celebrate the Sabbath, we adore precisely something we do not see."[93] The practice of mindfulness is also a kind of a celebration of something invisible: the cultivation of awareness.

According to Rabbi Heschel, Judaism's greatest (and exceedingly countercultural) achievement is Shabbat, the celebration and sanctification of time over space. During the week, we labor; we create; we achieve. We build *things*: buildings, roads, bridges (in Heschel's time, and today we might add: websites, marketing tools, and social media followings). Rabbi Heschel notes that the concept of *menuha*/rest is much more than merely work stoppage. *Menucha* is the creation of peace and serenity; a special type of stillness. Our prayers, particularly those of Kabbalat Shabbat, are our reminders to be present to this day. There are several specific parts of the Shabbat liturgy that evoke present moment awareness. For example, near the beginning of Kabbalat Shabbat, in Psalm 95 implores: "If you would listen **today** to God's voice…" There are at least two ways of understanding the usage of the word "hayom/today"[94]: 1. The reality of God, or the realm of spirit, is accessible to *any of us on any day*, if only we attend to it, and/or 2. Shabbat is a special day, set aside for paying special attention to God's voice, or the spiritual dimension of reality.

Shabbat offers opportunities to nurture ourselves in deep ways, if only we give ourselves permission to pay attention and explore what those ways are. This can, in part, be achieved through mindful attention to the words of our liturgy, as well as our physical sensations as we sing or chant these holy words. But we can also experience a mindful Shabbat by continually bringing our attention back to the present moment no matter what we are doing, when we are eating or walking or sitting or reading. When thoughts or worries about the future or rumination about the past enter our minds, we may notice them and remind ourselves that we only have to pay attention to this moment, in this

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[93] Abraham Joshua Heschel. *The Sabbath.* (New York: The Noondday Press, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1951).
[94] As noted in *Siddur Lev Shalem,* 12.

Shabbat. Through consistently bringing our attention back to the present moment, we create the "sanctuary in time" that Rabbi Heschel dreamed Shabbat could be.

2. Shofar as Mindfulness Practice

The shofar is our spiritual alarm clock: waking us up, demanding our presence, our full attention to this moment. Hearing the call of shofar is the central mitzvah/commandment of Rosh Hashanah. In fact, the only instructions the Torah gives us about Rosh Hashanah are that we are to observe a day of complete rest, and hear shofar.[95] The practice of blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah probably derives from an ancient pagan practice of sounding a ram's horn "to proclaim the coronation of victorious gods,"[96] thus we sound shofar on the day when we declare God's sovereignty. The shofar holds special significance in the Jewish psyche. According to Isaiah, a "great shofar will be sounded" at the end of day when the exiles are gathered in.[97] The story of Don Fernando De Agullar, who composed a symphony including a shofar so that Converos in Medieval Spain could fulfill the commandment to hear the Shofar during Rosh Hashanah, attests to the sacred power of the ritual.

On Rosh Hashanah we pray "The great shofar will be sounded and the still small voice will be heard."[98] We need to slow down and be still ourselves in order to hear the still small voice within us that guides us. The shofar comes from outside of us and penetrates our souls, but the still small voice comes from within and emanates out into the world. The Torah tells us that at Sinai the people רֹאִים אֶת־הַקּוֹלֹת "saw the sounds" of the shofar.[99] Many commentators have parsed this verse in order to understand what exactly happened in this moment at Sinai. Midrash teaches that Rabbi Akiva interpreted

[95] Leviticus 23:24, Numbers 29:1, Revised JPS.
[96] Reuven Hammer, *Entering the High Holy Days: A Guide to the Origins, Themes, and Prayers.* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1988), 70.
[97] Isaiah 27:13, Revised JPS
[98] Mahzor Lev Shalem, 143.
[99] Exodus 20:15, Revised JPS

this to mean that "they saw what was audible and heard what was visible."[100] Thus, in the moment of revelation, we heard with our eyes and saw with our ears. Part of our task when we hear the shofar is to see the sounds that we cannot hear; we can approach this spiritual goal by being completely present in the moment. The Shofar's voice seems well-suited for mindful listening, as compared to other sounds, because the Shofar's call is so insistent, so urgent, that when we hear it we can barely do anything but slow down and just listen.

Try this: when the shofar sounds, attend completely to the bodily sensations that you feel. Notice the sound, but also the reverberation of the sound throughout your body, as the sound waves vibrate through you. Try to listen with your whole being to the waves of sound that permeate this moment. Then let them go and be present to the next sound, the next wave, the next moment.

The shofar wakes us up to the new year, reminding us of what is needed. But before we rush into our to do list, or our *heshbon hanefesh/*accounting of the soul - the holy and important work of acknowledging what we did wrong and where we went astray so that we can get back on the right path - we must stop and notice. We must awaken to reality, to see and feel with clarity in order to know what the next right step is. During the month of Elul and the High Holy Days, allow the shofar to help you dip into present moment awareness.

3. Hanukah Candle Meditation

Jewish law prohibits using the light of the Hanukah candles for anything except for "publicizing and revealing the miracle" of Hanukah.[101] Elaborating on this stipulation not to instrumentalize the Hanukah candles, Hasidic masters encouraged their adherents to meditate on the Hanukah candles.[102] The Zohar offers metaphors to deepen our

[100] Mekhilta DeRabbi Yishmael, translated by Rabbi Shraga Silverstein
[101] Maimonides Mishneh Torah Chapter 3, Translated by Eliyahu Touger, Miznaim Publishing.
[102] https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hanukkah-a-light-meditation/

understanding when we meditate on a candle flame. For example, the wick of the candle represents the human body, the flame represents God, and the oil represents the mitzvot, or good deeds, which enable us to ignite and feed our relationship to the Divine.[103] Although Kabbalistic insights may deepen our appreciation for the Hanukah candles, we can also turn the ritual of kindling the Hanukiah into a simple yet powerful practice of mindful awareness. Light your Hanukah candles and sit comfortably before them. Commit to observing your Hanukah candles burn from the moment they are kindled until they burn down and extinguish. Become curious about every aspect of the candles, noticing changes in color and movement, or any sounds or smells that accompany the candles burning. When your attention drifts, gently bring it back to the candles.

4. Blessing Our Food

Traditionally, Jew say one hundred blessings a day. Contemporary self-help teachers suggest the practice of gratitude journals as method for increasing mindfulness and happiness.[104] Jewish blessings are the original gratitude journal. In talking about blessings, Rabbi Steven Sager noted the shared root between the word for pool, *b'reikhah*, and blessing, *b'racha*. This philological relationship highlights how blessings recognize God as a source, or well-spring that sometimes overflows. Judaism offers blessings for many different phenomena large and small, from using the bathroom to seeing a rainbow, but blessings our food provides one practice that may be particularly useful for increasing mindfulness. Many Jewish people are already used to blessing food at the Shabbat or holiday table. In addition, since we eat at least three time a day, we have ample opportunities to offer blessings.

Most of us are fortunate to not know hunger in a real sense. Although this is an overwhelmingly positive feature of our modern lives, spiritual risk accompanies the state

[103] https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hanukkah-a-light-meditation/

[104] Examples include: https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/gratitude_journal, www.calm.com/blog/gratitude-journal, https://www.intelligentchange.com/blogs/read/ultimate-gratitude-journal-guide

of being consistently satisfied. The risk is that, when we have abundance (or even when we have just what we need) we tend to grow complacent. We forget to be thankful, we take what we have for granted. Or, worse, we attribute our satiation to our own successes and not to God.

Zen Master Bernie Glassman offers a beautiful *kavannah* that we might adapt as we bless our food:

> Because we eat two, three or four times every day, it's easy to forget how wondrous that is. It's like the sunrise or the sunset. The sun rises and sets every day. If it's an especially beautiful sunrise, we may notice it. But if it's not 'special' we may not even see it. But if we can see it as if for the first time, each sunrise becomes very special and very beautiful. And so with each meal we create.[105]

We can heighten our awareness of the "wondrous" nature of every meal by pausing to offer a blessing before we eat. This practice curbs our tendency to mindlessly eat while engaged mentally (or physically) in other things. As Rabbi Marcia Prager describes it, "a simple Hebrew blessing is a powerful thing - a one-minute deeply meditative exercise exploring the nature of the Creative Force we call God and the dynamic relationship between God, human consciousness, and the unfolding universe." If we integrate this practice into our daily lives, "the path of blessing can become a way of life" which allows us to become more receptive and awake to the goodness that is constantly flowing into our lives.[106] In our contemporary world, many of us feel as though we have lost awareness of the connection between the earth and our sustenance. Blessings over food help us to rewire this connection.

Although we can find appropriate blessings for every food in a traditional siddur, a beginner to this practice might start with practicing mindful awareness while blessing bread and wine, since these blessings are familiar to many Jews who have enjoyed a

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[105] Bernard Glassman and Rick Fields, *Instructions to the Cook: A Zen Masters Lessons in Living Life that Matters*. (Boston: Shambala, 2013)

[106] Rabbi Marcia Prager, *The Path of Blessing: Experiencing the Energy and Abundance of the Divine,* (Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003)

traditional Shabbat meal. Blessings over bread and wine have special significance within Judaism. Bread plays a unique role in most cultures, as it is considered an elemental and essential food. There is something magical in how yeast, a dormant but alive organism, can transform flour, water and salt into bread. Wine also relies on combining fermentation, time and temperature control to create the final product. Bread and wine are thus symbols of the ability of humans to transform the gifts we find in nature. Therefore, blessing these foods honors our partnership with God. Before enjoying bread or wine, take a moment to close your eyes and tune in to the moment, noticing what it feels like to anticipate the food or drink you are about to enjoy. Then, slowly say the appropriate blessing out loud in Hebrew and or English, noting what it feels like to pronounce each word. When you have completed the blessing, take a mindful breath, and then partake of the food or drink very slowly, noticing the sensations and tastes in your mouth, noticing what it feels like to chew and swallow, and how your bodily experiences of hunger and satiation shift as you eat.

5. Mezuzah Mindfulness Ritual:

Once a devoutly secular friend who recently began practicing mindfulness meditation said to me, "I wish we had a reminder to be mindful every time we enter a new room." I could not help smiling and telling her: "We already do!" The mezuzah can be a powerful reminder to stop and notice the quality of our mind and heart as we enter a room, or situation. This summer, my family and I traveled to Spain and I experienced the bittersweet feeling of finding doorposts with hollowed out remnants of the mezuzot of the expelled Jews of Medieval Spain. We heard stories about how the Conversos of Medieval Spain hid their mezuzot in figurines of the Virgin Mary, which they placed at the door front of their homes so that they could continue to secretly kiss the mezuzah upon entering their home. These artifacts and stories spoke to the determined and steadfast nature of our chain of tradition, and to the symbolic power of the mezuzah itself.

The mezuzah helps us to mark our entrances and exits. In a larger sense, life is all about entrances and exits, or transitions. The question is not whether we will enter or leave, but *how?* Can we do so with grace, courage, and equanimity? When we enter a room, a mezuzah is an invitation to pause, slow down, and ask ourselves: Who am I as I enter this room? What are my intentions here? With what posture or stance am I entering this space? What are my expectations? We might add: Can I, in this instance, renew my commitment to seeing any and every person I encounter in this room as possessing a Divine spark? Of course, we do not need to contemplate all, or any, of these questions upon kissing the mezuzah. Simply committing to taking a mindful breath and dropping into present moment awareness upon entering the room can be very powerful during this simple transition. Notice the sensation of your feet on the floor, or your breath flowing in and out of your body. Perhaps notice the sensations of your fingers on the mezuzah. Use the ritual of kissing the mezuzah to take a moment and just be present to whatever you find in this liminal moment.

Conclusion:

Rabbi A.J. Heschel warned that "indifference to the sublime wonders of living is the root of sin."[107] For Judaism, building a sense of awe, or *yirat HaShem* helps awaken us to our lives and set us on the path of *teshuvah*. For once we see clearly, we are bound to work to find our way back to our rightful selves, and thus to God. The first step in cultivating awe is pausing, slowing down, and making contact with the present moment. If our minds are "elsewhere," i.e. in the past or the future, we miss out on the *now*. Moses needed to "turn aside" and *notice* the burning bush, to really see what was unfolding inside and outside of him, in order to awaken to his calling.[108] We need to do the same, over and over again: to stop, and to notice.

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[107] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 1976)

[108] Exodus 3:3, Revised JPS Translation

ACT values mindful awareness as an antidote to anxiety since "flexible and focused contact with the present moment isn't compatible with anxiety, which arises only when we focus on a scary future or a corrupting past."[109] It is impossible to work on the skills of acceptance described earlier in Chapter 2 if we are mired down in the fog of unawareness. We can only accept reality when we are awake and aware to this reality as it unfolds inside and outside of ourselves. Mindfulness also plays a role in cognitive defusion (discussed in Chapter 3), since recognizing the transience of thoughts and feelings helps illuminate what is eternal. In Chapter 5 we will explore how the principles of mindful awareness, acceptance and cognitive defusion feed into and illuminate our understanding of the *self*, and how Jewish ideas about the self speak to and enhance ACT principles. How do we view and understand our selves in relation to our thoughts, our experiences, our actions… and how to we understand our selves in relation to God?

[109] Kelly G. Wilson and Troy Dufrene, 95.

Chapter 5: Self-As-Context: Experiencing the World as a Soul/Neshama

"Who are you?" I might answer this question in many different ways: I am a psychologist, a Jew, a 51 year old woman, a Taylor Swift fan. These answers each say something about me, about the content of my life; yet none of these labels fully captures the essence of me. After all, I was "me" when I was in 2nd grade, I was "me" before I ever heard a Taylor Swift song, I will be me if I change professions. I will continue to be "me" when (God-willing) I am 71 instead of 51. Even though I change over time, there remains a consistent "I" across time and setting; we each have a sense of self that transcends place and time. ACT refers to this as "self-as-context."

Self-as-context can be distinguished from self-as-*content,* which is comprised of the labels I ascribe to myself. Even as young children, we become programmed to think of ourselves as a construction of identities, or stories. We often ask children: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" A child's answer to this question might be "a firefighter" or "a teacher" or "an astronaut." Thus begins the process of constructing an identity based on content. "I am" statements help us to create stories about ourselves that may be positive (i.e. "I am a loyal friend"), neutral (i.e. "I am a truck driver") or negative (i.e "I am a loser who never manages to follow through with anything.") While labels such as these may be useful, they can also trap us, especially when we construct stories about our identities that are in conflict or are harmful. Attachment to "I am" statements, whether they seem positive, neutral or negative, can be detrimental because it limits our flexibility. For example, if I am overly wedded to the idea that "I am generous and kind" I may have difficulty saying no and setting boundaries when I need to in order to protect

myself from being taken advantage of. If I am overly attached to the idea that "I am a doctor" I may lose all sense of self and purpose when I retire from my job.

When all the content of our life washes away, self-as-context remains.[110] As such, self-as-context allows me to see myself as "a stage on which (my) life unfolds."[111] Self-as-context is the "I" that observes my life; the part of me who has experienced all of the thoughts, sensations, feelings, and external events that have occurred in my lifetime up to this point. For this reason, self-as-context may also be described as the "observing self." Self-as-context allows for perspective-taking through the process of observation. Conscious awareness facilitates the discovery and understanding of self-as-context. Conversely, awareness of self-as-context helps us to become increasingly conscious. The perspective of self-as-*content* limits us to identification with merely the *content* of our consciousness. Self-as-context, on the other hand, is necessarily broad and messy; when we identify with all aspects of experience rather than choosing some and discarding others we may relate to the poet Walt Whitman, who wrote: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. (I am large. I contain multitudes)."[112] Self-as-context facilitates the overall goal of increasing psychological flexibility by helping us to transcend narrow definitions of the self.

Self-as-context, an integral part of the self that transcends physicality, time, and space, sounds quite similar to the concept of the soul. Indeed, Dr. Robyn Walser notes this connection, and affirms that "ACT welcomes" the association between the concepts of self-as-context and the soul. As such, ACT "does not take a position one way or another on ontological issues such as the existence and nature of the soul, nor does ACT in any way intend to dismiss the soul as a phenomenon that can be reduced to explanation

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[110] Robyn Walser, "Developing Awareness: Being Present and Self as Context." In *ACT for Clergy and Pastoral Counselors*. (Oakland: Context Press, 2016), 74.
[111] Wilson and Dufrene, 145
[112] Wilson and Dufrene, 137-138.

by psychological concepts."[113] ACT principles are not religious, but psychological. However, the concepts of self-as-context and the soul have the potential to compliment and even illuminate each other. These concepts, one psychological and one spiritual, can play together like instruments in a band, each contributing its unique sound and combining to make a beautiful piece of music - the music of the self.

Religious life helps us to connect to something larger than ourselves, in part by accessing the part of ourselves that transcends the mere content of our lives. Judaism teaches that every human life is worthy not because of our accomplishments but by virtue of being ourselves, each of us a creation of God. According to Rabbi Elliot Dorf: "Jewish tradition places strong emphasis on the value of each and every human being. Human worth derives not from having inherent rights, as in American ideology, but from being created in God's image—a conception the Torah repeats three times in the opening chapters of Genesis to ensure we take note of it. (Gen.1:27, Gen. 5:1-2, Gen. 9:6)"[114] The The rabbis emphasized this the uniqueness and sanctity of each human life when they declared that anyone who destroys one person destroys an entire world, and anyone who saves a person saves an entire world.[115]

Shabbat helps to nurture the idea that we have worth beyond what we accomplish by insisting that, for 25 hours, we stop working and creating. In asking us to pause our productivity and *just be*, Shabbat reminds us that we are not machines, and we are worthy not because of what we produce, but simply by virtue of who we are. We, as humans, are inherently valuable. All religious traditions, Judaism included, seek to increase consciousness, to help individuals connect to an 'experiencing self'[116] that is more capacious than our small-minded self. Conscious awareness allows us to gain knowledge

[113] Robyn Walser, 2016, 75.
[114] Elliot Dorf, "How to Live a Morally Good Life," in *Not a Mahzor Exploring Judaism High Holiday Reader.* (United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 2024), 28.
[115] Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5
[116] Robyn Walser, 2016

from a more expansive place, which ultimately enables us to see the world more clearly and make wiser choices.

Metaphors may help elucidate the concept of self-as-context. One metaphor asks us to imagine a classroom full of students[117]: some pupils are unruly, some pay attention and excel, and others are average students. There is also a teacher whose job it is to assess the students' progress and monitor their behavior. In this metaphor, our thoughts, feelings and sensations are the students, and but the teacher also represents thoughts - in this case, judgmental thoughts. It is the classroom itself, the container for the students and the teacher, that represents self-as-context, or observing self. This metaphor helps us see how we are not our thoughts and feelings, but the context in which they unfold. Likewise, we might think of self-as-context as the sky, and our thoughts, sensations and experiences as the weather[118]. Even if the weather becomes tumultuous, it cannot hurt the sky. The weather frequently changes, but the sky remains constant.

Like present-moment-awareness (i.e. mindfulness) self-as-context is necessarily experiential, meaning that descriptions of self-as-context have limited utility; one must experience it in order to understand it. In order to understand self-as-context, take a minute to close your eyes and listen to your thoughts. There is a part of your mind that talks (i.e. your thoughts) and a part of your mind that listens (i.e. the observing self). Any exercise that allows us to "observe the observer" helps us tap into and enhance self-as-context. Following are a few metaphors and exercises we might use to illuminate self-as-context from a Jewish perspective.

Metaphors/Exercises:

1. <u>"Eheyeh asher eheyeh": God as Context</u>

[117] Stoddard, Afari & Hayes, 2014, 120.
[118] Stoddard, Afari & Hayes, 2014, 121.

Our identities are both fixed and ever-changing. Psychological and spiritual freedom comes from being able to grow and change, not from remaining static. In Exodus (Chapter 3) Moses encounters God at the burning bush, and God commands him to lead the people out of Egypt. Moses asks God, "When the people ask who sent me, what shall I tell them?" God answers (Exodus 3:14): "אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה/eheyeh asher eheyeh": "I will be what I will be." Rabbi Arthur Green teaches that this answer reveals the "deepest, most hidden name of God" and expresses the "truth that God is being itself." [119] We might say that this view positions God as the context in which the world is unfolding. Rabbi Michael Strassfeld writes about Exodus 3:14: "The God of Exodus tells Moses not to think that there is one fixed notion that describes God. The God of Exodus is the God of freedom, which by definition requires an understanding of God as ever-changing. Thus, God says; 'Don't think that someone whose parents are slaves will inevitably also be a slave.' God says: 'I will be what I will be - and so can you.'"[120] In other words, don't identify with the contents of your life. Freedom from a fixed identity does not mean that we lack a steady, core sense of self; rather, it implies that as we continue to evolve we become more of our true selves. As we grow, we expand the parameters of our self to include new dimensions. God's ability to change and be flexible means that we can be ever-changing and flexible, while remaining true to the core of who we are. As we are b'tzelim Elohim/made in the image of God, the idea of God as context helps us to cultivate a sense of self-in-context.

2. Avot - Ancestor Meditation

As we connect to our ancestors, we recognize that we contain their legacy, yet there is a part of us that transcends this legacy.

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[119] Arthur Green, *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011), 1-3.
[120] Michael Strassfeld, *Judaism Disrupted: A Spiritual Manifesto for the 21t Century (*Teaneck: BenYehuda Press, 2023) 42.

Please stand and close your eyes. Find your place, standing before the great Mystery. Feel your feet planted firmly. Bring your awareness to your thoughts. Now notice the "you" who is thinking these thoughts, the "you" who feels the sensation of your feet planted firmly on the ground.

Bring to mind Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah

As we stand here preparing to talk to God, we recognize that we stand in the same place, in the same posture as those who came before us.

We trace the thread that connects us back.

Bring to mind the people whose lives whispered your name into being.
We call to mind the families we were born to, the families who chose us, the families whom we choose.

The families who loved us and fed us and hurt us and misunderstood us and celebrated us and loved us some more.

And bring to mind the people who came before them…

The people who loved them, and taught them how to braid challah and balance a checkbook and drive a car and stayed up with them all night when they had a fever.

And bring to mind the people who came before them…

The people who boarded boats with their possessions and fears on their backs, the people whose spoken language we do not speak whose hands we never held, whose voices we never heard...yet these voices seem familiar.

And bring to mind the people who came before them …

Notice how each of these ancestors have a role in making you who you are. And yet, you are distinct and unique, more than the sum of your ancestors, and at the same time just a link in the ancestral chain.

Hold all of these ancestors in your heart and your mind as you take a few minutes for silent prayer….

3. Kol Dimama Yom Kippur Meditation

Sometimes, we let the liturgy, the oceans of words in the Mahzor (our High Holiday Prayer Book), float over us, moving quickly like a stream of water. It's harder to go slow, to really take it in the words. This is especially true with Ashamu and Al Het, our public confession. What can we say before You? God, You already know the deeper secrets of every human. This confession is not for God, but for us. This moment brings us face to face with our mistakes, our limitations, sometimes even our shame. We must turn inward in order to turn outward - we must look soberly and clearly inside ourselves so that we may then turn our attention to making changes in ourselves and in the world. Doing this type of work requires some preparation, like stretching before running a race.

We won't hear the shofar until the gates close at Neilah, the closing prayer service of Yom Kippur. But the memory of the shofar reverberates inside of us:

וּבְשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל יִתָּקַע וְקוֹל דְּמָמָה דַקָּה יִשָּׁמַע

The great shofar will be sounded and the still small voice will be heard.[121]

Today is the day for listening closely to the קוֹל דְּמָמָה /the still small voice

In order to effectively hear that voice we need to tune our instrument, the body.

The Haftarah for Yom Kippur (Isaiah 57:14) begins:

וְאָמַר סְלוּ־סְלוּ פַּנּוּ־דָרֶךְ הָרִימוּ מִכְשׁוֹל מִדֶּרֶךְ עַמִּי׃

[GOD] says: Build up, build up a highway! Clear a road! Remove all obstacles
From the road of My people![122]

The road we need to build is inside us….perhaps, it IS us, built from nothing other than our bodies. We compare ourselves to a shard of pottery, a piece of grass, dust - this not to demean ourselves, rather, it is another way of saying that *we are bodies*. As we fast, we become keenly aware of our bodies. Bodies are our primary vehicle for connection to God and to each other. We need to listen to our bodies as carefully as we listen to the words on the pages of our Mahzor.

Close your eyes (or if that is not comfortable soften your gaze towards the floor) and take a moment to settle into your chair. Take a few slow breathes through your nose. Notice points of connection between your body and the chair, between the soles of your feet and the ground. Notice any tension or pain you might be carrying in your body, and send a few healing breathes toward these points of tension, letting go of what you can, opening yourself up to this moment, giving yourself permission to *just be*...to be here now. Take three breathes, not breathing in any special way - rather, noticing each inhale and each exhale, noticing the space

[121] Mahzor Lev Shalem, 143.

[122] Revised JPS translation

between the inhale and the exhale. As you turn your awareness to your breath, begin to cultivate a sense of curiosity: where do you find your breath in your body: in your belly, your chest, the back of your throat, your nostrils? What is the temperature of your breath? When your mind wanders, gently bring it back to your breath. Notice how your breath is effortless, constant - it is here to support you. Notice how instead of you "breathing" you are *being breathed*.

Place your open palm upon your heart. See if you can notice what sensations appear: the warmth of your chest upon your hand, the pressure of your open hand on your chest. Even if you cannot feel your heart beat underneath your palm, silently acknowledge it is there, beating without any effort on your part.

וּבְשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל יִתָּקַע וְקוֹל דְּמָמָה דַקָּה יִשָּׁמַע

The great shofar will be sounded and the still small voice will be heard.
Now is the time for listening closely to the קוֹל דְּמָמָה
See if you can hear the kol dimama - the still small voice - the sound that is underneath sound. It is not your breath - it is breathing you. It is not your thoughts, or your sensations, or your pain. It is not the mistakes you made or the successes you had this year. The kol dimama is the voice that is calling you home, home to yourself, home to who you are meant to be.

If you feel comfortable, I invite you to bring your open palm to rest on your chest at any points throughout the next 24 hours - not only when we publicly confess our mistakes, but whenever you need a reminder to slow down and tune in to the kol dimama. It is always right there, underneath your breath, breathing you.

Take a few more breaths and when you feel ready, you can open your eyes.

Elohai Neshama Kavannah

My God, the soul you have given me is pure me. You breathed my soul alive, and when I die my soul will return to the stream of life.[123] As I begin a new day, I thank You God, for endowing me with a soul, an everlasting spark of Your divine creation. Thank you for creating and protecting my soul, which transcends all of my feelings and thoughts, all of my accomplishments and mistakes - a part of me that is both Yours and at the same time completely and uniquely me.[124]

Know Who You Are Before You Stand

The following spiritual practice was created by Rabbi Michael Strassfield.[125] I share it here because it connects the principle of self-as-context to the principles of values clarification and committed action, discussed in the next chapters.

A selection from B'rachot 28b, דע לפני מי אתה עומד "Da lifnei mi atah omed"/"Know before Whom you stand" frequently appears on synagogue arks and plaques. It is usually interpreted to mean that the worshipper should strive to cultivate a sense of awe of being in the Divine Presence. Rabbi Strassfeld suggests that if we parse the words differently, we can find an alternative meaning, equally enriching.

Rabbi Strassfeld (re)interprets the text from B'rachot 28b as follows:

דע לפני - **Before** anything else, you need to strive to really **know**

[123] The *Kol Haneshamah Daily Siddur* commentary notes that "The text in our siddur, rather than stressing the traditional notion of individual afterlife, or of personal resurrection in the Messianic end of days, reverses the emphasis: the soul, having sojourned in the physical life, is restored to the everlasting stream of life.." 23

[124] I created this Kavannah based on the traditional liturgy, see Siddur Sim Shalom for Weekdays, 4.

[125] Michael Strassfeld, 2023, 86.

מי אתה - **who you are** (in all your complexity) and then

עומד - you can **stand up** before the world and do what needs to be done

This re-interpretation points to the importance of conscious awareness in all spiritual practice. Before we rush to act, it is imperative that we understand ourselves and our motivations. From this place of soul-knowledge, we can begin to assess our values, and act in ways that illuminate and strengthen those values. The next two chapters will explore how the ACT principles of values clarification and committed action can align with Jewish belief and practice.

When Viktor Frankl arrived in Auschwitz, he had hidden the manuscript of his first book in his coat pocket. Frankl describes how he clung to his book, because the hope that he could share his ideas with the world gave his life meaning, and gave him a reason to keep living. And then, Frankl was stripped naked and forced to relinquish all of his belongings. Losing his book, more than anything else up to that point, created a profound spiritual crisis for Frankel. For Frankl, this book provided meaning for his existence, it was his "Why." Frankl was then compelled to find new reasons for hope, a different meaning for his life in the most grim and hopeless of circumstances.

In his analysis of how he made meaning out of the suffering he endured in a concentration camp, Victor Frankl quotes Nietzsche: "He who has a Why to live for can bear with almost any How."[126] Values clarification helps us to answer our "why" questions: Why get out of bed in the morning? Why continue walking on this life path? Why struggle to make changes in our behavior, or to accept difficult realities? Throughout this thesis, I have periodically touched on the way in which ACT strives to help people live a life in line with their values. If the other ACT processes indicate *how* to make meaningful changes, this chapter focuses on *why*. Values motivate us, point us in our life's direction, and illuminate what is most important to us. Values "dignify" the other core processes. It can be difficult to take steps forward when we experience anxiety or other painful feelings, and values incentivize us to meet the challenge.[127] Values drive us to persist towards goals even when obstacles emerge.

Values are distinct from goals; goals can be achieved, but values are never tasks that can be crossed off of a list, rather, values guide our behavior. Thus, "goals are set according to the values they serve."[128] For example, if I value learning, I might set a goal of taking a class or reading a book about a new subject matter. But once I have completed the class or finished the book, my goal might be met, but my value persists. Another example: my daughter recently got a job in her college's dining hall. On a short-term

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[126] Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning (*Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 76.
[127] Wilson and Dufrene, 106.
[128] Wilon and Dufrene, 112.

basis, her goals include being on time to work and responsibly completing work tasks such as making and prepping food. Her larger goal is making money. But the overall *value* driving her behavior is *independence*.

Values are also distinct from feelings. We do not choose our feelings, but we can, and must, choose our values. For ACT, values are always personal and chosen, even if we share them with our culture, religion, or family. We can choose to pursue a path congruent with our values regardless of how we feel; sometimes this path feels joyous, sometimes it is riddled with pain and heartache. When asked to identify values, people might say they value being loved or respected or included. However, actions that depend on other people cannot be considered our values, since they cannot be freely chosen by us. We may act in ways that encourage love, respect and inclusion, but ultimately we cannot control whether others love or respect or include us.

Early behaviorists like B.F. Skinner focused on changing behavior through a system of punishments and rewards: they noticed that if you give a rat a piece of cheese, the rat can be trained to push a lever. The rat can also be motivated to avoid by being given a shock, or punishment. Human beings too respond to rewards and punishments, but we are much more complicated. One of our more beautiful complications is that we may choose to act in line with our values, and feel a sense of reward for doing so, even if we also feel discomfort or pain. For example, a father who values being a loving and attentive parent will wake up to feed or comfort his baby at 4 am, even though his body is telling him he needs several more hours of sleep.

Sometimes our thoughts can create mental traps or obstacles that pull us away from leading a meaningful life in line with our values. For example, Lucy values connection, but her anxious thoughts get in the way of starting conversations and forging friendships. Sometimes people put off taking needed actions in valued directions because they want to wait until painful feelings subside. Ryan wants more responsibility at his job, but he is waiting until his fear of public speaking subsides before giving a presentation that is necessary for his career advancement. Charlie values being loving and sensual, but believes she needs to wait to pursue a romantic, sexual relationship until she

loses 15 pounds. ACT encourage us to move in valued directions despite uncomfortable thoughts and feelings.

ACT does not address moral or theological questions, but honors each individual's specific belief system and believes that each person must determine what a meaningful life means for them. In ACT, we try to help people clarify their values, which are necessarily *their* values and not values they believe they *should* have, not necessarily the values of their parents or their friends. Where ACT helps individuals describe their values, Judaism tends to be prescriptive about our most cherished values. When it comes to values, Jews do not see themselves as solo actors; we are embedded in a matrix of community and a sacred historical tradition. Thus, as Jews, we tend not to speak of our own values in a vacuum; our values are part of the larger value system of Judaism, values based in Torah. As Jews, we seek to ground our values in our texts, looking to the Torah, the Talmud, and Jewish legal codes in order to clarify what Jewish values are, and how to live by them. This difference does not necessarily create a conflict between Judaism and ACT; instead, the two may complement each other when it comes to the process of values clarification. Even if you subscribe to Jewish values, it will be enlightening to articulate what these values actually are, and then determine which values take precedence over others for you as a Jewish individual embedded in a larger Jewish culture. The process of clarifying values in a Jewish context can help the individual firm up their commitment to forge ahead in valued directions. The question of committed action, or living by our values, is the subject of our next chapter.

Following are some examples of how values clarification might be facilitated in a Jewish context:

<u>Life Compass Cards: Jewish Values Edition</u>

Life Compass Cards are a game, or therapeutic tool, designed to help people determine what their top values are. "Life Compass Cards are a simple and effective way to determine what matters to you. Not what should matter, not what other people have

told you matters, but what really matters to you. When you know what matters, then you can decide if what you spend your time doing is in service of things that are important to you."[129] Each set of Life Compass Cards includes 108 cards. Each card lists a value, such as happiness, integrity, gratitude, kindness, etc. A player sorts the deck based on the rules of the game, beginning by creating piles of "important to me" and "not important to me." Next the player sorts the "important" pile into three: "problems" (i.e. important because it would solve a problem the individual currently faces), "shoulds" (important only because the player think it *should be*) and "what's left." The player eventually whittles down the "what's left" pile to seven cards which represent his/her/their values. They can then choose three of those cards to represent their top values. This exercise is informative and helpful because it forces an individual to choose from many different values, and clarify what they really stand for. Life Compass Cards can be adapted for a Jewish context by adding cards that list values that are particularly Jewish. For example, Jewish Values Cards could contain: the sacred value of life, visiting the sick, loving your neighbor, welcoming guests, comforting mourners, being charitable, studying Torah, pursuing justice, lovingkindness, compassion for animals, respecting the dead, or awe of God. This process helps participant answer the following questions: Which of the many values available to choose from are most central to you? What are the underlying principles guiding your life?

Mussar

One Jewish tool that helps focus on developing values is the practice of Mussar. Mussar (which can translate to "correction," "instruction," or, in modern Hebrew, "ethics") is a Jewish spiritual practice that focuses on ethics by giving concrete instruction on developing traits that lead to moral behavior. In contrast to Halacha, laws which guide behavior, Mussar helps people to cultivate certain virtues which will ultimately result in personal transformation. The earliest Mussar writings were that of

[129] https://lifecompasscards.com/

Saadia Gaon in10th century Babylonia and Bachya Ibn Pekudah in 11th century Spain, who described Mussar as "the science of the inner life."[130] In the 19th century Lithuania Rabbi Yisroel Salanter spearheaded the Mussar movement, which grew the spiritual practice of Mussar from an individual pursuit into a communal one that asked adherents to take a deep accounting of their feelings and actions. Mussar became wide-spread in the yeshivas of Western Europe, but, tragically, most Mussar teachers were murdered in the Holocaust. As a result, the practice of Mussar was almost lost. Alan Moranis and others have revitalized Mussar for the contemporary Jewish seeker.[131] Moranis describes Mussar as more than ethics, as a "way of life."[132]

According to Moranis, Mussar strives to answer the critical Jewish question of how to be holy. "Musar helps you close the gap between your ideal and the life you actually lead."[133] This description of the Mussar process bears striking resemblance to the work of ACT. However, unlike ACT, Mussar does not ask the individual to clarify values, but suggests soul traits, or middot, for the individual to work on, such as humility, patience, compassion and faith. Mussar practices include text study, silence, meditation, journaling, chanting, contemplation and visualization. Mussar practices may inform the ACT process of values clarification, with the caveat that Mussar is a complex system that must be studied in its own right in order to fully understand and benefit from it. While a complete description of Mussar is outside of the scope of this thesis, illuminating some of the ways Mussar overlaps with ACT and the ways the two practices might complement each other will be useful.

The first stage of Mussar involves cultivating sensitivity to your individual soul traits. The Mussar practitioner uses different techniques in order to engage in cheshbon hanefesh/accounting of the soul. One of the primary tools for cheshbon hanefesh/accounting of the soul is daily journaling; a practitioner recounts any experience

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[130] Bachya Ibn Pekudah, *Duties of the Heart*, Trans. Yosef Sebag, Sefaria, 2017
[131] See, for example: https://mussarinstitute.org/, http://americanmussar.com/
[132] Alan Moranis, *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Practice of Mussar.* (Boston: Trumpeter, 2007), 8.
[133] Alan Moranis, 249.

in the past day that tells them something about one of their middot/soul traits. An ACT practitioner could adapt this journaling practice by recounting experiences which tell them something about values they have identified for themselves. One might also bring an ACT perspective to Mussar practice by taking time to clarify which middot/soul traits suggested by Mussar tradition represent top values for them, and then journaling about how their actions honor (or don't honor) those middot. One might also add middot to the traditional ones that are prescribed, based on one's own process of values clarification, achieved through a game like Life Compass Cards or other ACT resources.[134]

Ethical Wills

The practice of writing and bequeathing tzavaot, or ethical wills, dates back to ancient times. Rabbis Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer have preserved examples of Jewish ethical wills throughout the ages, written by people from all walks of Jewish life.[135] Through the creation of the ethical will, a person may bequeath to their children and grandchildren (or spiritual descendants) their most cherished values. Rabbi Jack Riemer notes in the introduction to their book that one learns a tremendous amount about oneself in the process of writing an ethical will.[136] Ethical wills "have the power to make people confront the ultimate choices that they must make in their lives."[137] Rabbis Riemer and Stampfer present many examples of ethical wills that may be used to inspire the reader to think about their own spiritual and ethical legacy and how to share it. Participants can be encouraged to study selections from *So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them,* then work on the creation of their own ethical will by reading the authors' guide in Chapter Six, and/or by answering the following additional questions:

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[134] See Stoddard and Afari, *The Big Book of ACT Metaphors* for worksheets and exercises for values clarification, such as "writing your autobiography."
[135] Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer, *So That Your Values Live On: Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them.* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 1991).
[136] Riemer and Stampfer, 1991. xvii.
[137] Riemer and Stampfer, 1991. xx.

1. What important family stories do you want your great great grandchildren to know?
2. What are the top values that you live your life by?
3. What is most precious to you?
4. What does Judaism mean to you?
5. What traditions have been important to you, and why?
6. What is the change you would most like to see in the world?
7. What books, people, and experiences have made you who you are?
8. What regrets do you have? What are your hopes for the future?
9. What makes you most proud?

Once a participant has crafted an ethical will, they can reflect on how these values are expressed in their lives, and whether or not their actions are generally in line with their values. The ethical will not only bequeaths a legacy to descendants; it can act as a blueprint for living a valued life with courage and integrity.

Developing Svara: Pirke Avot Text Study

Rabbi Benay Lappe, the founder of Svara, a "traditionally radical Yeshiva,"[138] argues that the ultimate purpose of Talmud study is to refine the student's svara, or "moral intuition." Rabbi Lappe describes this outlook on Talmud study: "To paraphrase the philosopher Moshe Halbertal, the Talmud is not a normative document, but a formative document. It is designed not to tell us what our behavioral norms should be, but rather to form us into a certain kind of human being."[139] The following exercise ignites this premise, encouraging participants to study Mishnah with an eye towards clarifying and developing their moral intuition.

Pirke Avot, the most beloved and popular tractate of the Mishnah, contains "a repository of our ancient sages' most basic moral principles."[140] Jews traditionally study

[138] https://svara.org/
[139] https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/how-to-read-the-talmud/
[140] Martin Cohen, *Pirke Avot Lev Shalem: The Wisdom of Our Sages* with commentaries by Tamar Elad-Appelbaum and Gordon Tucker. (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2018), xxiv.

Pirke Avot during the period between Passover and Shavuot, the time when we count the Omer. The "Omer" is the 49th day, or 7 week, period between the holiday of Passover, in which we re-enact our journey freedom, and the holiday of Shavuot, in which we re-enact receiving the Torah.[141] In Jewish tradition, freedom is linked to responsibility. Our ancestors went from being slaves to Pharaoh to using their new-found freedom to choose to serve God. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch notes that one might think that the time when we reap the bounty of our harvest, would be a time when we can relax and stop counting. However, Rabbi Hirsch notes that this is exactly the time when Jews begin counting the Omer. We count as a way to honor the connection between our freedom to produce what we need to survive (embodied in Passover) and our responsibility to give back by sacrificing some of the bounty that we have received (embodied in Shavuot).[142]

Find a havruta partner with whom you can study once a week during the seven weeks between Passover and Shavuot for a guided spiritual practice of studying Pirke Avot with an eye towards personal values clarification. Set aside time each day to study a selection from Pirke Avot on your own. Read each passage slowly, preferably out loud in English or Hebrew, or both. Make notes in a journal, responding to the following prompts:

1. What feelings come up when you read this text?
2. What questions do you have about this text?
3. What ways is this text relevant to your life?
4. If you find something troubling or offensive or difficult to understand, name it and describe your discomfort.
5. Describe any ways that this text speaks to your values.
6. Are there ways this text helps you shed light on the freedom of Pesach (i.e. "freedom from") or the freedom of Shavuot (i.e. "freedom to")?

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[141] The counting of the Omer ends on the 49th day, since Shavuot is the fiftieth day of the counting period.

[142] Rabbi Karyn D. Kedar, *Omer: A Counting.* (CCAR Press, 2014).

If you have a commentary on Pirke Avot,[143] you can also read the commentary after you have read and reacted to the text on your own. Bring your journal to your havruta study session. Read the text out loud with your study partner, and discuss your answers to the journal prompts and any other insights or questions that emerge as you study the text together.

Conclusion

Values help us make meaning out of our lives and point us in the directions which are most important to us. Values undergird the practice of Judaism, as they do in all religious practice. But as a "literary people," we Jews ground our values in our sacred texts. We study our traditional sources to understand how their wisdom can inform our own moral and ethical choices. In his introduction to Pirke Avot, Rabbi Gordon Tucker privileges the notion of being an "am sifruti"/"a literary people" over an "am ha-sefer"/"a people of the book." As an "am sifruti" we engage with both the world *and* with our ancient texts, making Torah come alive by applying the wisdom within the text to our present day lives, rather than living as a people "subordinate" to scripture, reading the text as merely a how-to guide. Thus, each generation receives tradition, but does so in a way that allows for the "on-going process of cultural renewal" and the "redefinition of its values" in light of changing circumstances.[144] Each generation is then also responsible for the transmission of tradition. The receipt and transmission of values works on a communal level, and also works, I believe, on an individual level. ACT helps us understand how to clarify our receipt of traditional values, and their meaning for our individual lives.

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[143] Examples include: Irving Greenberg, *Sage Advice: Pirke Avot Translation and Commentary*, (New Milford: Maggid Books, 2016); Martin Cohen, *Pirke Avot Lev Shalem: The Wisdom of Our Sages* with commentaries by Tamar Elad-Appelbaum and Gordon Tucker. (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2018).

[144] Martin Cohen, *Pirke Avot Lev Shalem: The Wisdom of Our Sages* with commentaries by Tamar Elad-Appelbaum and Gordon Tucker. (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2018).

Many contemporary sources provide information to guide people in learning about Jewish values. For example, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin provides a distillation of Jewish values in a two-volume set entitled *A Code of Jewish Ethics.*[145] ACT can contribute to the process of studying Jewish values by suggesting that part of receiving a shared tradition of values involves working to clarify our individual values. Individuals may respond differently to particular values, privileging some and not others. This process gives us insight and firmer grounding in what we stand for, our "Why." From this place of heightened knowledge and coherence, we have the strength and sense of purpose to act with integrity. Our next Chapter addresses the question of how we put our values into action, through the ACT process of Committed Action.

[145] Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *A Code of Jewish Ethics* Vols 1 & 2 (New York: Bell Tower, 2006).

Chapter 7: Committed Action: Walking the Path

In Genesis 12:1 God charges Abram: "לְךְ־לְךָ/*Lech Lecha*/Go forth," commanding Abram to leave the comfort of his home and walk towards the unknown, in the direction of a future built on hope and promises of a great legacy. These commanding words, translated hyper-literally, might be rendered in English as: "Go to you!" The Sfat Emet[146] said, with regard to *Parshat Lech Lecha*: "The angels above are beyond nature; they can be said to 'stand' (Isaiah 6:2) But the person has to keep walking."[147] Judaism provides a roadmap for how to walk through life as a *mensch*, how to be a human in the fullest sense. The traditional Jewish focus on commandments/*mitzvot*, and the system of *halacha*/Jewish law that developed to codify exactly how to follow the *mitzvot*, represents a Jewish answer to committed action. To be a Jew is, in some sense, to commit to acting in holy ways, thereby bringing holiness into the world. As we reach our final ACT process, *committed action*, the rubber hits the road. Clarifying values is critical, but without committed action we cannot consistently move in the right direction. If values provide a compass, then committed action represents specific steps on the journey. Through committed action, we live out our values in a way that makes our lives whole and meaningful.

"Commitment involves both persistence and change"[148] because we must continue to persevere in order to meet the challenges ahead of us, yet also have the flexibility to change course when something is not working. The concept of committed action mirrors *halacha* in this respect too, as Jewish law across the centuries has been characterized by

[146] Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger, Poland 1847-1905
[147] Arthur Green, Transl.: *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet*. (Philadelphia: JPS, 1998).
[148] Luoma, Hayes, and Walser, 2007, 158.

the dialectic of continuity and change. Commitment in ACT is not the same as simply promising to do something in the future. Rather, for ACT, commitment is less about declarations concerning actions to come, and more about committing to act on our values in the present moment. We commit to living our values moment by moment. This stance on commitment requires patience and forgiveness - of ourselves, and of circumstances outside of our control. As humans we will repeatedly fall short of our own expectations; we will repeatedly find ourselves out of alignment, and need to gently correct ourselves. In Judaism, we call this *teshuva*, the process of return.

The concept of commitment intimidates many people. However, ACT suggests a manageable way to approach commitment. We are often unwilling to make goals and commit to acting on them because we fear failure; we lack faith in our own capacity to change and grow. Additionally, we do not know what the future will hold. For example, Larry values being healthy and is making changes in his diet to reflect this. Will he choose salad over fried chicken tomorrow or next week? The future is uncertain. But Larry can commit to making a healthy choice right now, in the moment.

ACT therapists use the skills of defusion (discussed in Chapter 3) and acceptance (discussed in Chapter 2) to help clients "overcome verbal barriers to commitment."[149] Although there may be physical barriers to taking action, it is important to note when barriers to commitment are verbal and cognitive (i.e. self-defeating stories in our heads) rather than concrete (i.e. external environmental barriers). For example, Rose, who struggles with social anxiety, has identified a goal of going out with friends. Rose faces many barriers: it always seems too late or too early to text friends; she thinks she lacks the skill to ask them appropriate questions; she believes she needs to know more about their preferences before suggesting an activity. The truth is that all of these perceived barriers are a result of Rose's thoughts and emotions, rather than environmental constraints. It is important to distinguish between external barriers and internal feelings that create barriers resulting in experiential avoidance.

[149] Luoma, Hayes, and Walser, 2007, 162.

Committed action involves developing a plan that includes concrete goals and steps that are linked to the individual's values. Goals should be specific, attainable and measurable. For example, a goal of "investing more energy in relationships" is vague, whereas the goal of "asking Sally to go for a walk or coffee" is specific and attainable. While it possible to work on a larger goal, it can help to break it up into a series of smaller goals. Small goals are generally more manageable and when practiced repeatedly can add up to significant progress. Therapists may use a variety of standard behavioral techniques[150] when working with clients on the process of committed action. However, for ACT, commitment to the process of living a valued life is more important than commitment to complete particular action items on a list. Having said that, committed action can be facilitated by, for example, identifying goals with the use of worksheets. Such worksheets list values, goals, activities that support clients' goals, as well as potential barriers to completing the goals.

The following metaphors and exercises explore the ACT process of Committed Action through a Jewish lens:

Committed Action as Freedom of Choice

Committed action necessitates willingness. Willingness constitutes a leap of faith; we must be willing to face the challenges and risks of taking action. Committed action presumes that it is always possible for us to act in some way that is in line with our values, no matter how constricting our circumstances. Even when our choices are severely limited, we have the ability to take actions out of a sense of commitment to our values. In his commentary on the Passover Haggadah, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks provides an excellent example of willingness to commit to values even in the face of dire circumstances. Rabbi Sacks tells the story of Jews in the Kovno Ghetto during the

[150] Examples include: exposure, behavioral activation, setting goal, and skills acquisition.

Holocaust, who prayed daily in a makeshift synagogue. One morning, an elderly man serving as the prayer leader refused to say the morning blessing in *Birchot HaShachar* thanking God for not making us slaves. "How," he asked the rabbi, "can I say a blessing for freedom now, when I am a prisoner facing death?" He could not bring himself to thank God for his freedom when freedom was exactly what he and his community lacked. The rabbi answered that the Jews of the Kovno Ghetto must continue to say the blessing for freedom, saying: "Our enemies wish to make us their slaves. But though they control our bodies they do not own our souls. By saying this blessing we show that even here we still see ourselves as free men, temporarily in captivity, awaiting God's redemption."[151] Freedom is a state of mind. Regardless of our circumstances, we are free to make choices and act on those choices. In this example, praying *Birchot HaShachar* in its entirety represented committed action for the Jews of the Kovno Ghetto.

The Narrow Bridge Meditation[152]

"The whole world is a narrow bridge, and the important thing is not to be afraid." - Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav

This meditation uses the metaphor of the narrow bridge as a means to inspire courage to take steps in a valued direction even when the path is uncertain and feels risky. You can introduce the meditation to a group by teaching or sharing the well-known chant to Rebbe Nachman's saying: "כל העולם כולו גשר צר מאוד והעיקר לא לפחד כלל" (Kol ha'olam kulo gesher tzar me'od v'ha'ikar lo lifached klal/The whole world is a narrow bridge, and the important thing is not to be afraid.). After spending some time in chant together, bring the

[151] Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, *The Jonathan Sacks Haggada: The Applbaum Edition,* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013).
[152] Based in part on *The Rope Bridge* metaphor by David Gillanders (2013), in Stoddard and Afari, 2014, 163.

chant to a close and ask participants to close their eyes and take a few silent centering breaths. Then introduce the following meditation instructions:

Bring to mind one of your most important goals. This goal serves a value, something that is so precious to you that you are willing to take risks for this value. Silently name this value for yourself. Now imagine that you are standing on a cliff overlooking a canyon. Look across the canyon and imagine that on the other side of the canyon you can see the achievement of your goal, the goal that represents the value you stand for. There is one way to get the other side of the canyon: you must traverse a narrow and wobbly looking bridge that spans the canyon. As you inspect the bridge, you realize that it is impossible to tell if the narrow bridge is completely safe. The only way to test the bridge is to step on it and walk across. You have a decision to make; you can stay on the other side and avoid the risk. You can run across the bridge as fast as you can, hoping for the best. You can gingerly step on the bridge and test it out. The choice is yours to make. Notice the thoughts, feelings and sensations that arise as you look at your goal across the canyon and the narrow bridge that spans between you and your goal.

Give participants a few minutes of silence to contemplate this image. Close the meditation by reprising the chant, and then open a discussion so people can share what they noticed.

Ritual as Committed Action

As Rabbis and pastoral counselors, we facilitate moments of ritual transformation for people, allowing them to communicate feelings that are sometimes too large or deep for words. Ritual involves *doing* more than thinking, and acts on one or more of our senses. Ritual connects us to God, or something larger than ourselves, and to others around us, and tethers us to our ancestors and our tradition. Ritual may function in a repetitive, cyclical manner or occur only once; it can be both unexpected and familiar. It can feel transformative yet ordinary. Judaism is rich with rituals: some, like lighting

Shabbat candles, we have the opportunity to do every week. Some, like eating matzah, are yearly rituals. And some are life cycle rituals to mark steps on our developmental journey: from *brit milah* soon after birth to *tahara* right after death.

When we commit to engage in ritual observance with our mind, body, and spirit, we open ourselves up to the possibility of allowing ritual to transform us in some way. Sometimes this transformation occurs on a very real and practical level: one moment, we are not married and a moment later we are married. And sometimes ritual works on a subtle psychological level, and incrementally and slowly building change. Blessing your children on Friday evenings may not mean much, or may feel awkward, if you do it once. But blessings offered every week, over the course of years, help form the bedrock of a parent-child relationship, and build a child's sense of being cherished by parents, loved by God, and held in the embrace of the Jewish people. Mary Douglas notes that ritual "permits knowledge of what would otherwise not be known at all."[153] In this way, ritual speaks its own language. Yet, it is a language that each of us can participate in if we are invited in, and commit to engaging the ritual with our body and spirit.

As an example, consider the Jewish mourning ritual of *kri'ah*/tearing one's garment preceding a funeral, which helps normalize and process grief. As clergy, we ask the family to gather and huddle in close as we open the ritual *kri'ah*. We explain the Biblical origins of the ritual, and tell them that this ritual helped to make public the grief and pain they are feeling on the inside. We say the blessing together out loud and then instruct the family members to tear their garment or a black ribbon provided. *Kri'ah* helps the remaining members of the family of origin feel connected, and serves as a grounding ritual to help family members settle a bit into the beginning of the funeral.

When, as a facilitator of ritual, we *call attention to what is happening in the moment,* on a practical level, an emotional level, and a spiritual level, we help mourners or other

[153] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo.* (London: Routledge, 1966).

participants in rituals increase their awareness, simultaneously helping people take committed action, and helping them *notice* their own committed action.

Teshuva as Committed Action

Teshuva is also a form of committed action. During the month of Elul (or another appropriate time) invite small groups or havruta pairs to read the following poem by Portia Nelson as a jumping off point to talk about the process of teshuva:

AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN FIVE CHAPTERS by Portia Nelson

I

I walk down the street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I fall in.

I am lost ... I am hopeless.

It isn't my fault.

It takes forever to find a way out.

II

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I pretend I don't see it.

I fall in again.

I can't believe I'm in the same place. But it isn't my fault.

It still takes a long time to get out.

III

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I see it is there.

I still fall in ... it’s a habit.

My eyes are open.

I know where I am.

It is my fault.

I get out immediately.

IV

I walk down the same street.

There is a deep hole in the sidewalk. I walk around it.

V

I walk down another street.

In what ways is Portia Nelson's poem about falling in holes a poem about *teshuvah*, the process of turning toward the Holy, the process of returning home to our true selves? The poem feels familiar because we understand this pattern all too well: as humans we make a mistake over and over because we are blind to our part in it. But a critical question remains unanswered: How do we change the pattern, open our eyes to our mistakes? What is our internal mechanism for effecting *teshuvah*? What does it take to walk down a different street? It takes committed action. We cannot predict whether we will walk down the right streets next week or tomorrow. But we can commit to being mindful about our steps right now, in this moment. Invite participants to journal privately, answering the following question prompts: What are the holes you kept falling in this past year? What is the right "street" for you that you are looking forward to walking down this year? What specific actions and activities might you commit to this year to help you find your "street" and stick to it?

<u>Community as Committed Action</u>

> Rabbi Hayim of Zans was wont to tell the following parable:
>
> A sojourner had been wandering about in a forest for several days, not knowing which was the right way out. Suddenly he saw someone approaching him. His heart was filled with anticipation. "Now I will learn which is the right way," he thought. When they reached one another he asked, "Please tell me which I the right way out of this forest. I have been wandering about for several days."

> Said the other to him: "I do not know the way out either, for I too have been wandering about here for many, many days. But this I can tell you: do not take the way I have been going, for that will lead you astray. Now let us look for a new way together."
>
> - S.Y. Agnon [154]

Being in community means finding our way together. Rabbi Sharon Brous writes of "the power of saying 'Amen' to one another's grief and joy, sorrow and celebration *with our very presence*." [155] Showing up for one another is a profound act of commitment. The rabbinical invention of the minyan, the requirement of ten adults to constitute a quorum for prayer, fixes the importance of community. None of us can walk the path of committed action alone. We need a minyan, for example, to recite Mourner' Kaddish when grieving a lost loved one. When answering the question, "Can't I just grieve alone in my home?" Rabbi Brous replies: "Your couch can't say 'Amen' to your broken heart."[156] We need each other, in times of struggle and in times of joy.

Being part of a community offers countless opportunities to work on committed action. For any community to function, individual members must attend to the needs of the people within it, and its overall systems. Anyone who has been part of a synagogue knows the sacred to-do list is long and perennial:

- Make meals and deliver to congregants in need
- Mend prayer books
- Teach children the alef bet and beyond
- Cook food for Kiddush
- Visit ill congregants
- Leyn Torah
- Staff soup kitchens

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[154] Kol Haneshamah Mahzor, 11.
[155] Sharon Brous, *The Amen Effect: Ancient Wisdom to Mend Our Broken Heart and World*. (New York: Avery, 2024), xiii.
[156] Sharon Brous, 20.

- Welcome new folks
- Comfort mourners
- Public advocacy against antisemitism
- Rides for disabled congregants
- Provide community security

And the list goes on.

Being in a community offers the opportunity to learn how to stay present even when others offend or even disgust us, to learn how to listen and stay open even to those with whom we virulently disagree. Members of a community inevitably share certain values, and deeply disagree on others. Regardless of where values do or don't overlap, simply committing to being part of a community and showing up is meaningful - for the individual and for the community as a whole. As Reb Zalman used to said: "The only way to get it together is together!"[157]

Conclusion

While the other core processes of ACT remain essential in order to build insight and motivation for change, "the reason to see clearly is to know what to do."[158] Ultimately, our actions speak for who we are. Our actions represent our truest selves to the world, and it is through our actions that we bring holiness into the world, and work to fix what is broken. A person might approach committed action from a variety of ways, including: adherence to traditional *halacha*, practice of Jewish rituals, or community involvement. The dictate of "לֶךְ־לְךָ/Lech Lecha/Go forth" demands that we walk in the path of our values. God issued this charge to Abram, and it reverberates as a challenge to

[157] This is an often-cited saying. Here is one example: https://kolaleph.org/2014/08/20/the-emerging-cosmology/
[158] Jonathan Slater, 288.

each of us as we work to discern what the next right step is, and then muster the necessary courage to take that step.

Chapter 8: Conclusion: Take ACT into Your Jewish Pastoral Care setting

> "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."[159]

Almost 40 year ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner elucidated some of the differences between psychotherapy and religion as he sought to help disillusioned people find meaning in their lives.[160] In Rabbi Kushner's view, therapy helps us adjust to the realities of *what is*. Therapy can help us "remove obstacles" to happiness. But *religion* helps us to figure out how to live a life of meaning. "Psychology can teach us how to be normal, but we must look elsewhere for the help we need to become human."[161] Since Rabbi Kushner wrote this in 1986 the

[159] Viktor Frankl, 1946.
[160] Harold Kushner, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough: The Search for a Life that Matters*, (New York: Fireside, 1986).
[161] Harold Kushner, 22.

objectives of psychotherapy and religion have become more intertwined, and the bright line he traced has become blurred. Our country faces a mental health crisis,[162] and clergy are increasingly called upon to help shore up the need for mental health services. Additionally, psychotherapies such as ACT offer tools to explicitly aid in the pursuit of living a life that matters. Dr. Steven Hayes, one of originators of ACT, wrote that "good psychotherapists are good storytellers. They know how to open clients up to what is truly new by using knowledge that is old. They know how to create experiences that inform and heal."[163] Dr. Hayes could have been writing about "good" rabbis! When we become more explicit about our commonalities, as well our differences, we can harness the power of our traditions and our fresh perspectives to help people heal - which ultimately brings healing to the world at large.

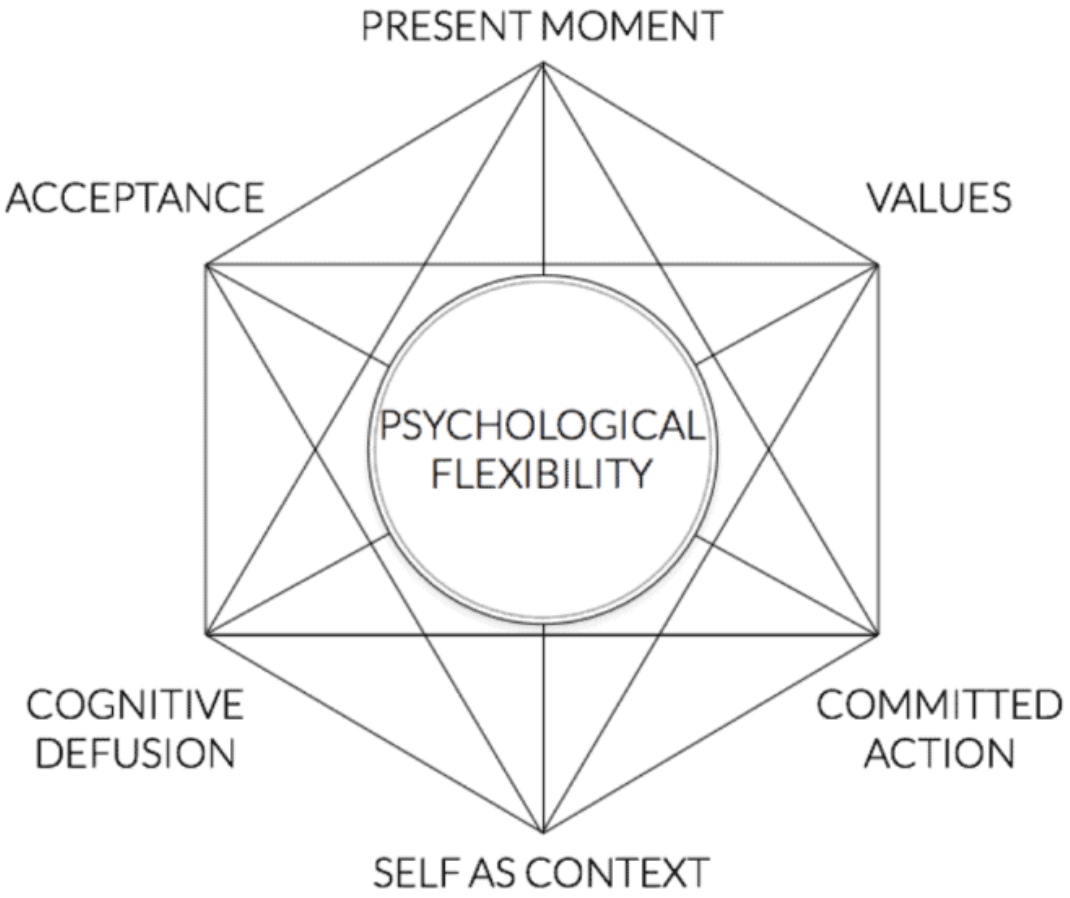
ACT and Judaism share the value of freedom: for ACT, working towards greater psychological freedom motivates all of the ACT interventions we have explored thus far. For Judaism, freedom frames the story of our peoplehood. As we cycle through our Jewish year and dip into our weekly Torah reading, we find ourselves always either descending into slavery or moving towards liberation. We experience this psycho-spiritual dance as a people, and on an individual level as well. ACT principles may enhance an individual's ability to live their values with greater freedom, to act with courage even when internal thoughts and sensations create barriers to living their values. My hope is that the ACT principles provided in this thesis will help Jewish clergy feel empowered to use ACT to help their constituents. Additionally, counselors who work with Jewish clients may find it helpful to use the culturally sensitive metaphors and exercises provided here in

[162] https://mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america

[163] Steven Hayes, "Metaphors and Human Liberation," Association for Contextual and Behavioral Science (ACBS) Website Archive

order to translate ACT for a Jewish audience. Clergy who want to use ACT in pastoral settings may use the concepts, exercises and metaphors contained in this thesis in a variety of ways: in individual counseling sessions, in groups or classes, or even as they speak from the pulpit.

Through the six core processes outlined in the preceding chapters, ACT helps people claim greater psychological freedom and flexibility. ACT uses metaphors and experimental exercises to allow clients to practice *holding* all of their thoughts, feelings, and sensations while *moving* in the direction of their values. Note how the six core processes are connected to each other in the following diagram:



At the heart of ACT, as depicted in the diagram, is psychological flexibility, or freedom. The Hebrew word for heart is לֵב*lev*. For the Bible, the "lev" or heart, was considered the seat of intelligence, of deep knowing. The heart, in this way of thinking, is an instrument for discernment.[164] As the seat of awareness, the heart helps us to achieve a state of deep knowing that leads to correct action, action that

[164] For example, in 1 Kings (3:9) a young, inexperienced Solomon asks of God:
וְנָתַתָּ לְעַבְדְּךָ לֵב שֹׁמֵעַ לִשְׁפֹּט אֶת־עַמְּךָ לְהָבִין בֵּין־טוֹב לְרָע/"Grant Your servant a lev shomeah – a heart that listens.

is in line with our values. So too, psychological flexibility, the heart of ACT, allows for this kind of deep knowing that leads to valued action.

Portia Nelson's poem about falling in holes (in Chapter 7) is a favorite among behavioral therapists as it describes the challenging and sometimes frustrating process of behavior change, as well as the possibility for seemingly simple behavior changes to drastically alter our lives. Clergy intuitively see what is missing from this poem: the knowledge that we don't have to do it alone. God has a role in helping us along our path. We are responsible for choosing the streets we walk down, but we need God's help to open our hearts, minds, and eyes so that we can see all the obstacles and opportunities in front of us. There is another piece missing from the poem about falling in holes: We need God, but we also need each other. The secret sauce of Judaism is that we get to do the work of becoming our truest selves together. When we walk together, in community, we still fall in some holes - but it's a lot less lonely, and we find moments of joy and even peace when we can share our journey with each other. Through the synthesis of Judaism and ACT, we can utilize the tools of contemporary psychology and the ancient wisdom of our Jewish tradition to help people figure out what matters most to them, and act on it.