Contemplative Practice in Jewish Community

Lisa Sacks

Senior Project, Academy for Jewish Religion

Advisor: Rabbi Jill Hammer

December, 2019

"The ultimate searches of meaning in life cannot be done alone; they need to be done with others." – Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD[1]

[1] Comins, Mike. *Making Prayer Real*: *Leading Spiritual Voices on Why Prayer is Difficult and What to Do about It*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010. p 96

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION

When most people think about contemplative practice, they think about an individual sitting in quite solitude. And a look at the bookshelf of contemporary books on Jewish contemplative practice would endorse this view; they are primarily focused on an individual seeking to develop a contemplative practice on their own. While many of these books make mention of practice in community – whether that is to suggest that solo practitioners find a group in order to supplement their individual practice or to discuss how an individual practice can be applied to Torah study, Shabbat observance or prayer – contemporary books and resources emphasize the individual and generally provide suggestions for tools and activities to be done by oneself.

Though there is an absence of written works on the subject, the fact is that contemplative practice has found a significant place within the modern Jewish community. There are numerous organizations that provide trainings, classes and retreats such as The Institute for Jewish Spirituality (IJS), Or HaLev: Center for Jewish Spirituality and Meditation, the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center (through the Elat Hayim program area, which used to be an independent retreat center) and The Awakened Heart Project for Contemplative Judaism. The Mussar Institute and the Center for Contemporary Mussar have introduced the contemplative spiritual practice of Mussar[2] into the non-Orthodox Jewish world. Jewish meditation groups have long existed in synagogues and JCCs and embodied practices such as yoga have long been adapted into a Jewish framework.

[2] Mussar is a 1000-year-old Jewish tradition that focuses on the development of character traits as a spiritual practice.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that as widespread as these practices seem to be, they have not yet penetrated most mainstream Jewish communities. However, because no in-depth studies have been done on the subject[3], we do not know for sure. So we do not know how many communities have incorporated contemplative practice or how many spiritual leaders themselves are engaged in contemplative practice. We do not know what is the most common practice that communities are offering for their members or what the fruits of any such practices have been, be that on the individual or communal level.

The goal of this project is to examine how contemplative practice has found a place in Jewish communities as well as to demonstrate that it is something from which more congregations could benefit. I will discuss why this topic is important to me personally, explore the long history of contemplative practice within Jewish tradition, and present how communal-based contemplative practice has been previously treated in the literature. Then I will discuss the heart of this project: the collection of information from a sample of congregations that have introduced contemplative practice into the rhythm of their communal life and the analysis of their experiences – what were the obstacles, the challenges, the successes, the impacts – in order to learn lessons and identify opportunities for other communities.

This project is important to me both personally and communally. Over the past 15 years, contemplative practice has become a critical component of my spiritual life through Mussar,

[3] To ascertain the existence of any available data, I spoke with Rabbi Lisa Goldstein, then the Executive Director of The Institute for Jewish Spirituality, as well as Dr. Alan Morinis, the Founder and Dean of The Mussar Institute. Neither organization has collected data or undertaken studies about the pervasiveness of contemplative practice within mainstream Jewish synagogues. Searches of JStor, EBSCO/ATLAS, RAMBI, Berman Jewish Policy Archive, Academia.edu, Google Scholar, as well as the catalogs of the Hebrew Union College and Jewish Theological Seminary revealed some sources that were tangentially related but nothing directly addressing the topic. There is one book, written as a senior project by AJR alumnus Rabbi Dr. Leslie Schotz called *Shalom: A Congregational Guide to Jewish Meditation*. She collected a few examples of how meditation has been incorporated into communal life but the book is presented as suggestions of how to do it rather than a study of how it has been done.

meditation and chanting, yet I struggled to find a significant local Jewish community to support my practice (which is why, as a layperson, I established a Mussar group at my own synagogue and now regularly attend a Buddhist sangha[4]). While contemplative practice can be a solitary pursuit, I have found for myself that it became truly sustainable and more deeply meaningful when rooted in community.

My Personal Theory of Contemplative Practice

Contemplative practice can be an integral component of the spiritual life. So much of Jewish tradition is centered on the intellect and on overcoming or suppressing the body's natural instincts. The focus in contemplative practice on both the body and on quieting the mind helps us connect to self and others in a different way than traditional prayer and study. Rabbi Jeff Roth thinks of contemplative techniques "as an inclusive set of practices that have a meditative approach at their core. By 'meditative approach,' I mean the techniques we can use to develop calmness, clarity, and awareness in the normally scattered mind."[5] These techniques could include Mussar, breath meditation and chant, or yoga, ecstatic visualization and eating.

One of the core techniques that I practice is sitting or walking meditation. The act of focusing on the breath or on bodily sensations and noticing what arises non-judgmentally serves many purposes. One, meditation cultivates self-compassion, which can then be extended to those around us. When we see ourselves as worthy of compassion and of love, we can more easily see others in that light as well. Two, it helps us distinguish amongst the various thoughts in our head so that we might be more selective when directing those thoughts

[4] In Buddhism, a *sangha* is a community of practitioners.

[5] Roth, Jeff. *Jewish Meditation Practices for Everyday Life*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012. p 19

towards self and others. Three, the focus on the present moment builds trust (an antidote to worry), gratitude (as opposed to "comparing mind"), and contentment with one's portion (rather than the "trance of scarcity" in which we will never be or have enough).

Rabbi Alan Lew beautifully defines meditation and how it works:

> "'What is meditation?' I often ask this question at the beginning of a workshop just to get a sense of where everyone is coming from. The answers are usually quite various. Meditation is becoming still. Meditation is becoming more focused and concentrated. Meditation is becoming more aware of yourself. Meditation is becoming relaxed. Meditation is becoming more aware of God, becoming centered, becoming deeper, becoming awake. Clearly meditation is many things to people, but it is also always one thing. Meditation is always *becoming*. Meditation is always transformation. Meditation always moves us from one place to another; from unconsciousness to awareness, from tension to relaxation, from being scattered to being centered, from a shallow relationship with our environment and ourselves to a deeper one, from sleep to wakefulness, from a sense of God's absence to the sense that God was in this place all along and I didn't know it!"[6]

The purpose of this increase in wakefulness, self-awareness and compassion is to live a life of holiness. My teacher, Dr. Alan Morinis, often says that we should work on ourselves but not for the sake of ourselves. As he writes in *Everyday Holiness*: "By refining and elevating your inner life and nourishing the soul, you clarify your inner light and thus become a lamp shedding light into the world."[7] The work we do on ourselves through contemplative practice can make us feel better and be better people. But this is not solely or primarily a self-improvement activity. The practice, especially in a Jewish context, is connected to a divine purpose. Yet there can be extraordinary benefits for oneself as meditation teacher Rabbi David Cooper writes: "Modern civilization suffers from a chronic condition of anemic, starving souls. The sages teach us that if we feed our souls, we will experience a new kind of happiness and more meaning in

---

[6] Lew, Alan. *Be Still and Get Going*: *A Jewish Meditation Practice for Real Life*, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005. pp 11-12

[7] Morinis, Alan. *Everyday Holiness*, Boston: Trumpeter Books, 2007. p 15.

life. They say we will see nature more clearly, and a new world of inner peace will open. Renew the soul and one's perspective of daily life will completely change. It is simply a matter of taking time, slowing down, shifting mundane consciousness into realms of higher insight, and giving oneself the gift of reflection and contemplation."[8]

Like with many things, it may be simple, but this does not make it easy. Beginning and sustaining such a practice, especially in contemporary American society, can feel like a radical, counter-cultural and thoroughly bizarre move. Though it is so much of what our civilization needs – the self-renewal one can experience through contemplative spiritual practice necessarily extends outward to both personal and communal relationships – pursuing it on one's own is a tall order in our secular, "meritocratic", achievement-oriented society.

In addition to the focus on self-awareness and how that can then extend outwards towards others, many teachings regarding contemplative practice are centered on an experience of God-encounter, or *devekut*, which means "cleaving" to God. This would be as opposed to (or in addition to) an exercise to ready oneself for a God encounter through prayer or some other activity. For example, in his history of Jewish meditation Mark Verman discusses both approaches: "Meditation is a path to God, entailing deep reflection and concentration. It is both a preparation for further spiritual activity, by promoting a proper mind-set, and in itself a medium for encountering God. Meditation inhibits the constant flow of everyday thoughts by replacing random, mundane musings with focused contemplation of the Infinite. Through meditation we can become attentive to the Divine imprint upon our lives."[9]

---

[8] Cooper, David A. *The Handbook of Jewish Meditation Practices*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000. P 11.

[9] Verman, Mark. *The History and Varieties of Jewish Mediation*, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1996. P 2

While I experience more of a God encounter with chanting, I find meditation to be a clarifying and cleansing practice to prepare for a God encounter and/or bring myself back to my essential purpose, which is to be holy, to see others as holy, and to treat them accordingly. As Rabbi David Cooper writes: "One of the goals of spiritual practice is to integrate the inner with the outer. At first we may need to withdraw from our busy lives in order to nourish the soul, but the aim of almost all inner work is to find a way to maintain our spiritual balance in every situation we encounter."[10] When my meditation practice wanes, I find that it becomes more difficult to maintain that balance, to find my center, and to remember my purpose in every situation. Meditation re-orients me and that re-orientation is accelerated when I sit in community.

Experiencing contemplative practice in community is important for a variety of reasons. First, there is accountability and support to continue with a daily practice that can be difficult to sustain on one's own. It can be difficult due to lack of motivation, inability to see the cause and effect, or issues like sleepiness or pain during sitting meditation. Knowing that others struggle with similar challenges in their practice or that others are engaged in the practice at the same time can help motivate individuals to keep at it. Second, we can develop connections with others in modalities other than words or the intellect. So much of Jewish life is based in the intellectual realm yet the felt sense of contemplative practice also teaches us in powerful ways. In Jewish life the traditional way to learn is in *<u>h</u>avruta*, or pairs. The idea is that the learning of two students together exceeds the sum of what each individual could do on her own. The same can be true in other modalities and the resulting connections bind people together, and can

[10] Cooper, David. *The Handbook of Jewish Meditation Practices*. Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000. p 44

bind communities together. Third, engaging in communal contemplative practice can then deepen and strengthen communal prayer because we are "setting the stage" together. For example, if we have sat together in pre-prayer meditation, we enter the prayer experience together in a different state than if we walk into a prayer space off the street, each on our own. This can result in less distraction, more intention, and more connection both horizontally among the community and vertically between the community and the divine.

Lastly, since meditation can develop a greater open-heartedness and increased vulnerability, we can then translate that lack of inhibition into deeper and more honest connections with other people. There is a separation that dissolves through contemplative practice, an enhanced understanding of the oneness of all beings. Because of this possibility of piercing through the pretense of separation, Rabbi Rami Shapiro sees meditation as an antidote to evil. And, he asks, how is this antidote manifested? He writes, "On a political level, it is justice; on a social level, it is compassion; on a personal level, it is meditation. Unless and until our sense of separateness is opened to our sense of unity, there is no hope for true compassion, justice, or love."[11] Rabbi Jeff Roth agrees and writes that "the wisdom and openheartedness acquired by following these practices naturally leads us to act in the world in helpful and compassionate ways."[12] It does this because of the way in which meditation raises our awareness about the interconnected nature of all life. And when we more clearly see this connection, we see others' experience as our own, both their suffering and their joy.

---

[11] Shapiro, Rami. "The Teaching and Practice of Reb Yerachmiel ben Yisrael" in *Meditation from the Heart of Judaism*, Avram Davis, Ed. Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999. P 23

[12] Roth, Jeff. *Jewish Meditation Practices for Everyday Life*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012. Pp 201-202

Contemplative practice can be a pathway to greater love of self, of others, of the natural world, and of God. Traditional Judaism often downplays feelings and beliefs in favor of behavior but I have found that cultivating a different way of seeing and being in the world has had a dramatic effect on my behavior. In our contemporary society, religion is far from obligatory for most people and, therefore, we need to offer alternative pathways, ones that are accessible and relevant and effective. It is part of the larger picture - I would actually say it is the foundation - of building a society of compassion and righteousness.

II. HISTORY OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE IN JUDAISM

Meditation and other contemplative practices have a long history within Jewish tradition. The identification of Jewish contemplative practice as something separate feels new because it was previously quite integrated into other aspects of traditional Jewish life. It is only in the modern era, when most Jews do not live an all-encompassing Jewish life, that spiritual practices need to be re-introduced in a somewhat piece-meal fashion.[13] As Rabbi David Cooper writes: "[M]any who have been discontented with Judaism have been drawn to simple practices of sitting quietly, chanting a few words in repetition, or singing to God while focused on basic thoughts of loving-kindness, forgiveness, gratitude, generosity, and so forth. The plain truth of the matter, of course, is that all these basic practices are within the repertoire of Judaism, but are often hidden, obscured by layers of a tradition originally designed for another way of life."[14]

Meditation goes back to the Torah itself[15]. We read in Genesis that "Isaac went out walking in the field toward evening" (Genesis 24:63) and that "Jacob was left alone" (Genesis 32:25), verses that, in their context, may not obviously connote meditation or prayer but which have been treated by tradition as biblical support for these activities. On Genesis 24:63, Rashi[16]

---

[13] Cooper, David. *The Handbook of Jewish Meditation Practices*. Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000. p 5

[14] *Ibid*., p 6

[15] In addition to the passages cited here, Rabbi Alan Lew, in the first chapter of his book *Be Still and Get Going*, argues that three other Torah texts also describe transformative experiences that are suggestive of meditation. These include Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28:10-19), Jacob wrestling with the "angel" (Genesis 32:25-33), and Moses' encounter with the burning bush (Exodus 3:1-16).

[16] Following Bereishit Rabbah 60:14 - "*And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide*. By meditation, prayer is meant, as it says, *A Prayer of the afflicted when he faints, and pours out his meditation [i.e., prayer] before the Lord* (Psalm 102:1); and it also says, *Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray and moan*, etc. (Psalms 55:18) (Soncino translation) - and BT Berakhot 26b - "Isaac instituted the afternoon prayer, as it is stated: 'And Isaac went out to converse [*la'suah]* in the field toward evening' (Genesis 24:63), and conversation means nothing other than prayer, as it is stated: 'A prayer of the afflicted when he is faint

interprets the word *la-suah* to be prayer as do Targum Onkelos and Saadiah[17]. Sforno also interprets this verse to mean that Isaac went into the field to pour out his heart to God so as not to be interrupted by travelers on the main road[18]. Regarding Genesis 32:25, R. Avraham ben Maimonides asserts that this means that "Jacob isolated himself (*hitbodedut*) physically . . . ascend[ing] from physical self-isolation into a spiritual self-isolation."[19]

Judaism's oral tradition as well includes references to meditation. Pirkei Avot 1:17 teaches: "Shimon his son said: All my days I have grown up among the Sages, and I have found nothing better for the body than silence; rather than study, practice is the main teacher." Commenting on this *mishnah*, Irving Bunim writes: "Every person should be aware of those conditions which enable the soul to expand and to thrive. Silence is such a condition. When the body is quiescent, when your ears get a vacation and your eyes relax and your tongue lies still, then can your soul speak up."[20] And Mishnah Berakhot 5:1 says "The pious men of earlier times would first wait an hour and then recite the *tefillah*, so as to direct their minds to the Allpresent." Commenting on this, Pinhas Kehati writes: "When coming to pray, **the pious men of earlier times would first wait an hour**, so as to settle their thoughts, take their minds off their personal affairs, **and then** stand up and **recite the tefillah, so as to direct their minds to the Allpresent**, as so to pray to the Holy One, blessed be He, with perfect heart, with the

---

and pours out his complaint [*siho]* before the Lord (Psalms 102:1). Obviously, Isaac was the first to pray as evening approached, at the time of the afternoon prayer." (Steinsaltz translation and commentary)

[17] Drazin, Israel and Stanley Wagner, *Onkelos on the Torah: Genesis*. New York: Gefen Publishing House, 2011. p 156

[18] Artscroll's Sforno Commentary on the Torah, New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1987. pp 126-127

[19] As cited in Mark Verman's *The History and Varieties of Jewish Meditation*. New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1996. p 7

[20] Bunim, Irving. *Ethics From Sinai, Volume I*. New York: Philipp Feldheim, Inc., 1964. p 104

consciousness of His exaltation, and in awe of His glory."[21] (emphasis in the original) The Talmud expands on this in Berakhot 32b to say that these pious ones would also wait an hour *after* prayer before returning to their more mundane activities.

There were many different schools of meditation throughout Jewish history, which Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan details in his book, *Meditation and Kabbalah*. These kabbalistic schools of meditation started with the activities of early sages engaged in what Kaplan calls "the mystical arts" as recorded in the *Hekhalot* literature, as well as the *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Formation), the *Bahir* and the *Zohar* (which Kaplan includes as early works that were "revealed" in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries even though most academic scholars agree that the *Zohar* was in fact written in the Middle Ages). In addition to these early works, he also delves into three periods of major activity, exploring them through the lives of Rabbi Abraham Abulafia (1240-1295), who he credits with being the first to put these kabbalistic works in writing, Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572) of "the Safed School," and the Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), the founder of the Hasidic movement in Eastern Europe.[22] He concurs that the word most often used to denote meditation is *hitbodedut*, which is derived from the root *badad* meaning "to be secluded." He writes: "Literally, then, *Hitbodedut* means self-isolation, and in some cases, actually refers to nothing more than physical seclusion and isolation. In many other places, however, it is used to denote a state of consciousness involving the isolation of the self, that is, the isolation of the individual's most basic essence"[23] from his thoughts.

---

[21] Kehati, Pinhas on Berakhot, Jerusalem: Department for Torah Education and Culture, 1994, p 54.
[22] Kaplan, Aryeh. *Meditation and Kabbalah,* Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1982. P 15
[23] *Ibid.*

There is also evidence that meditation in early Jewish history was not solely done by mystics. According to Mark Verman in *The History and Varieties of Jewish Meditation*, Philo of Alexandria provided historical reports of another group of contemplatives who he termed Therapeutae, meaning "therapists of the spirit" or healers. "For six days of the week the Therapeutae would reside separately, each in his or her own dwelling. Their days were devoted entirely to spiritual pursuits, in fulfillment of the biblical directives to be continuously mindful of God. Then, on Shabbat they would gather together for communal prayer, study, and meals."[24]

Like in early history, it appears that Jewish meditation over the centuries was largely confined to elite or specific groups until the 18th century Hasidic movement of Eastern Europe. Of this phenomenon Nan Fink Gefen writes: "Once Hasidism became established in Eastern Europe, however, meditation became more accessible. Rabbis in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought it into widespread use by teaching that prayer could be done as a mantra. Anyone could climb the spiritual ladder through all the states of being and experience the opening of the heavens by praying in this meditative way. These rabbis also developed contemplative forms of meditation aimed at helping people increase their awareness of God's presence and refine their character traits."[25]

Tragically, much of this tradition was lost during the Holocaust, an experience that robbed the Jewish people not just of individual lives but also of so much of its precious culture. A revival and reclaiming of these practices began in the later part of the twentieth century, thanks both to the Renewal movement founded by Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and the

---

[24] Verman, Mark, *The History and Varieties of Jewish Meditation*. New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1996. p 9
[25] Gefen, Nan Fink. *Discovering Jewish Meditation*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011. pp 11-12

discovery by many Jewish seekers of contemplative practices within Eastern traditions. Demographer Jack Wertheimer describes this phenomenon in his article "The American Synagogue: Recent Issues and Trends": "Jewish Renewal groups involve themselves with Jewish mysticism, neo-Hasidism, and meditation. Convinced that only a paradigm shift will develop a spirituality through which Judaism can transform itself, they incorporate aspects of Eastern religions into the prayers, proudly borrowing openly and liberally from other faith traditions and speaking of [themselves] as JuBus, Jufis, and Hinjews."[26]

While it is more visible within the Renewal movement, the influence of Eastern practice is not limited to Renewal-identified communities. In fact, there has been a pronounced phenomenon of American Jews searching for spirituality within Buddhism, evidenced, among other ways, by the large number of prominent American Buddhist teachers who have Jewish roots (e.g., Ram Dass, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg). In his article, "J's, B's, and Jubu's: The Jewish-Buddhist Connection," Dustin Klass cites a prior study that offered three reasons for the noticeable trend of Jews moving towards Buddhism: "the general American movement toward Eastern religions during the 1960's and 1970's, the failure of JudeoChristian traditions to respond to social and ideological change, and the rejection of institutional and traditional forms of the JudeoChristian faith."[27]

In his article, Klass reviews the academic and narrative literature on the topic, which includes Rodger Kamenetz's book documenting an inter-cultural dialogue between Jews and

---

[26] Wertheimer, Jack. "The American Synagogue: Recent Issues and Trends" in *The American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 105 (2005), pp 59-60. Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23605576

[27] Klass, Dustin. ""J's, B's, and Jubu's: The Jewish-Buddhist Connection" in *The Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa*, 33 no 2 Fall 2009, p 56-59 http://www.thetaalphakappa.tcu.edu/jtak/journal.html

Tibetan Buddhists, *The Jew in the Lotus*; Sylvia Boorstein's book *That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist*; and Rabbi Alan Lew's account of his journey from Judaism to Buddhism and back again, *One God Clapping*. Klass then attempts to answer for himself the question as to the motivation behind the movement of American Jews toward Buddhism. He writes: "There are three main responses to this question. First of all, when Judaism is the 'problem,' Buddhism becomes the 'solution.' Second, there is an idea of secular Judaism as a purely cultural identity combined with a perception of Buddhism as 'Instant Spirituality—Just Add Water.' Lastly, the myth of universality allows for a view of both Buddhism and Judaism as all-accepting religions with very hazy boundaries." Klass penetrates beneath the surface of these responses to reveal that the truth for both Judaism and Buddhism is much more complex than Jubu's may have realized at first. Regardless, what is clear is that without this Eastern influence and exposure to Eastern approaches to spirituality, the Jewish roots of meditation might not have been rediscovered at all.

III. TO THE QUESTION OF CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE IN JEWISH COMMUNITY – GUIDANCE FROM THE LITERATURE

Why is community so important for contemplative practice? Since so much of contemporary literature addresses personal practice, it is necessary to state explicitly why it is important that contemplative practice happen in community. And many sources provide strong rationales, which will be reviewed in this section. Judaism has a long history of encouraging prayer to happen in community. Many prayers cannot be said unless there is a gathering of at least ten adults, a *minyan*. The major 16th-century code of Jewish law, the *Shulhan Arukh*, encourages prayer to happen in the synagogue with the congregation and, if that is not possible, at least at the times while the congregation is praying[28], so as to be in sync with the community.

Why is the community so important for prayer? Dr. Elie Munk has written: "The idea is frequently encountered in Biblical and Rabbinical literature, that the Divine Presence dwells in the midst of the community, and that the larger the congregation the more resplendent the revelation of the *Shekhina*[29] will be . . . . It [the community] does not suffer deficiencies. What is lacking in one individual is made up by the other. The individual, then, can only discharge his duties completely when he collaborates with the community. The rabbis, therefore, placed the strongest emphasis on *tefilah betsibur*, prayer in the midst of the community" (*World of Prayer*, 1:89).[30]

---

[28] Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayim 90:9

[29] *Shekhina* is the feminine emanation of God, the most prevalent manifestation of the divine in the mystical tradition.

[30] Klein, Isaac. *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1979. p 14

We know that our tradition prefers prayer to take place in community. Yet the conventional notion of a spiritual seeker is the solitary mystic. And, as referenced above, the word so often used in Hebrew to describe meditation, *hitbodedut*, is related to the word for alone, *l'vad*, implying that contemplative practice is an individual act. While it may be a private experience going on within the mind, body and soul of the individual practitioner, Judaism is first and foremost a communal tradition, not just in prayer but in all respects. As Mark Verman notes: [T]here is a dialectical tension that exists between an individual who wishes to achieve spiritual elevation in isolation and the centripetal force of Judaism, which requires Jews to function as members of a national community."[31] When Verman was working on his book on the history of Jewish meditation, a teacher of his, Rabbi Nahum Schulman, cautioned that "even when an individual is engaged in private spiritual pursuits, he or she must be aware of, and connected to, the larger community."[32] This reinforces the teaching of the *Shulhan Arukh* that even if a person is not with the community, that person should keep the community in mind.

The need for a community in which to pursue spiritual heights is also one of the key messages of the *Zohar*, the mystical work that centers on Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai's *hevraya*, his group of companions. And this emphasis on the *hevraya* is not just limited to the *Zohar*. As Rabbi Arthur Green points out, this group is "one of a series of such circles of Jewish mystics, stretching back in time to Qumran, Jerusalem, Provence, and Gerona, and forward in history to

[31] Verman, Mark, *The History and Varieties of Jewish Meditation*. New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1996. p 21
[32] *Ibid.*, *p* 3

Safed, Padua, Miedzybozh, Bratslav, and again to Jerusalem."[33] For our tradition has long known that we discover ourselves – and the holiest part of ourselves – in relationship to others.

Many within the world of Hasidism focused on this theme. On the tension between individual practice and communal connectedness, Verman notes a paradoxical Hasidic teaching by R. Moshe Leib of Sassov (1745-1807) "It is good to practice separation (*prishut*) in the company of others" (*Tzevvaot Ve-Hanhagot*, 101) which echoes an earlier kabbalistic teaching of Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas (1518-1587): "[I]t is good to practice *hitbodedut* by acquiring a partner" (*Reshit Hochmah ha-Shalem, Shaar ha-Kedushah*, 6:19). While it is the case that friends, partners, and groups can help us achieve our spiritual goals, it is also the case that we are not to let the pursuit of our spiritual goals separate us from the community.

This idea is explicated by the Hasidic master, R. Kalonymus Kalman Epstein (1753-1823) as cited in Verman's book. "[Epstein] commented on the pivotal biblical verse, "Speak to the entire Israelite community and say to them: 'You shall be holy, for I, *Ha-Shem*, your God, am holy'" (Leviticus 19:2). He began his discourse by mentioning that Rashi, the medieval biblical commentator … noted that the ethical directive of imitating *Ha-Shem* was conveyed in a national assembly." Epstein continued:

> "A person might mistakenly think that the interpretation of 'you shall be holy' is achieved by isolating oneself (*yitboded atzmo*) and separating oneself from the community and in that way he will achieve holiness. It is for this reason that Rashi informed us that [these instructions] were proclaimed during a national gathering. That is to say that a person cannot achieve holiness unless he joins the community of seekers of *Ha-Shem* . . . .
>
> Behold, there are people who think that the path to service of *Ha-Shem*, may He

[33] Fine, Lawrence in Fine, Lawrence, Eitan Fishbane and Or N. Rose, Editors. *Jewish Mysticism and the Spiritual Life*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011, p 113

be blessed, and to achieve *devekut* (attachment) is through *hitbodedut* – that a person would isolate himself within a room and study there and not speak to or be seen by anyone else and still not arrive at the truth.

I once heard from my master and teacher, the famous Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, may the memory of the righteous and saintly be for a blessing, the explanation of "Can a person hide in a hiding-place and I shall not see him, says *Ha-Shem*?" (Jeremiah 23:24) A person may isolate himself in a special, private room and think that this is the essential service [of God], but the Holy One, blessed be He said, "and I shall not see him" – that is to say that even I [i.e., God], as it were, will not see him.

Rather, the essential service is when a person joins with righteous and proper Jews and in this way he can come to serving *Ha-Shem* in truth through studying their good deeds – for the quintessence is to isolate thought by constantly thinking about the exaltedness of his God, may He be blessed, even when he is in the midst of a large crowd, he should attach his thought constantly to the Creator, may He be blessed." (Kalonymous Kalman Epstein, *Meor va-Shemesh* 1:360)[34]

We can understand Epstein to be conveying here the Torah's teaching that true holiness, true service to God, comes from meditating ("isolating thought") in the midst of community. God does not look as favorably upon a person who sits alone but rather prefers such pursuits to happen together with other like-minded people.

The importance of community for contemplative practitioners was taught within the Hasidic community up until the twentieth century. One book in particular is devoted to the topic.[35] It was written by Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (and translated by Andrea Cohen-Kiener), "a teacher in the rich tradition of Polish Hasidism,"[36] who died during the Shoah. Before the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto, he managed to bury whole manuscripts, including many sections of the book now called *Conscious Community*, which were found and published after the war. The goal of the book is to advocate for and provide guidance to groups who are focused on contemplative spiritual goals.

---

[34] Verman, Mark, *The History and Varieties of Jewish Meditation*. New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1996. p 22

[35] Thanks to Dr. Jay Michaelson for pointing out this book to me.

[36] Cohen-Kiener, Andrea. in Shapira, Kalonymus Kalman. *Conscious Community: A Guide to Inner Work* (translated by Andrea Cohen Kiener), New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1999. p xiii

Cohen-Kiener writes in her introduction, "Reb Kalonymus's great gift to Jewish pedagogy is the insight that we need to be in an emotional and personal relationship with Torah insight in order to learn it properly. Religious instruction has nothing to do with commanding and pretending. It is about looking inward and identifying, and then expanding, the streams of holiness within each of us." This looking inward is meditation and contemplation, which impacts oneself and then can "expand" and be shared with the concentric circles of people around us. Shapira's book, which in Hebrew is called *Bnai Machshavah Tovah*, outlines the goals and methods that his group will pursue in order to raise the level of holiness for individuals, communities and the world. He called this type of group the "Community of Good Consciousness."[37] Here he describes the purpose of this group:

> "We can feel ourselves growing closer to God – enjoying His radiance, sending His presence – but not only when we pray and do mitzvoth. If we focus on holiness and clarity and strength for each and every moment, we can gradually take control of our sense perceptions. Commonly, our perceptions distract us: 'You see the world, you observe materiality.' Not only do we want to resist distraction; we want our sensual perceptions to come around to the perspective of the heart. We can actually see the presence of God, which infuses all creation. Each of us can see with our own eyes that we stand in paradise, in the palpable presence of God. This is the goal of our group."

Shapira describes his motivation in wanting to come together with others: "The techniques available to a group are qualitatively different than what an individual can hope to attain."[38] Whereas an individual can easily fall into a state of separation, of withdrawal from the presence of God, a group can pool its spiritual resources. As an individual, Shapira writes that "I am constantly preoccupied with meaningless illusions." As individuals, "We are distraught, but we do not know how to help ourselves. This is why we have banded together.

---

[37] Shapira, Kalonymus Kalman. *Conscious Community: A Guide to Inner Work* (translated by Andrea Cohen Kiener), New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1999. P 91

[38] *Ibid*., P 4

We want to find out how to improve our desperate condition. If all of us work together and use these strategies to unite our hearts in the service of God, perhaps, with His help, we will not live in total waste and despair."[39]

Though Shapira was writing during a truly terrible chapter in our people's history, we know today how isolation can lead to despair, can turn our minds in on themselves, can separate us from what is holy. For Shapira, the work of the group was to "fortify and expand our powers of concentration so that we can sense our connection to God more consistently . . . We have to begin by using the tool we have, namely, awareness."[40] Shapira's book contains suggestions for meditative techniques, visualization, concentration, singing, directions for prayer and for group gatherings, as well as exegesis on the Torah. It is a work designed to be read and re-read, to be used as much for inspiration as for instruction. And the audience is not the individual but the group.

One last source from the Hasidic tradition makes clear that the spiritual practitioner needs other people, even just one *havruta*. Professor Lawrence Fine in his essay entitled "Spiritual Friendship" quotes a teaching from Rabbi Aaron Roth (1894-1947), a Hasidic master from Hungary who later settled in pre-state Israel. He wrote:

> "I have seen among the writings of the holy Rabbi Shalom Dov Ber of Lubavitch, the memory of the righteous is a blessing, that there are many categories of sleep. There is a sleep that is no more than a light nodding, when the sleeper is half-awake. There is the category of real sleep. There is the category of slumber. And there is the category of fainting, far worse, God forbid, where it is necessary to … revive him with every kind of medicine in order to restore his soul …. And there is a category of still deeper unconsciousness that is known as a coma where, God forbid, only a tiny degree of life still remains in deep concealment …. In this age we are in this deepest state of

[39] Shapira, Kalonymus Kalman. *Conscious Community: A Guide to Inner Work* (translated by Andrea Cohen Kiener), New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1999. P 5
[40] *Ibid.*, Pp 10-11

> unconsciousness. To be sure, there are still holy individuals among us who are still alert …. Now, when a person becomes aware that he is falling asleep and begins to nod and he is afraid that a strong, heavy sleep may overcome him, the best advice for him is to request his friend to wake him … or that he should go among people who are awake and where a light shines brightly. But when he is on his own who can wake him? My meaning is that he should obtain a mentor, a friend who will converse with him from time to time on matters having to do with the fear of God. These words are in the category of a seed, the holy words they speak being sown in the heart. Even though he may not be aware of it at the time, yet later he will become conscious of it … This was the way of the disciples of the holy Baal Shem Tov, that each encouraged the others and that is why they attained to such lofty spiritual stages. – Rabbi Aaron Roth, *Hitragshut Ha-nefesh*.[41]

If the goal is to be awake to our lives, to see clearly the everyday miracles amidst which we live, we will need the help of others to keep our eyes open. We must, as Professor Fine put it, "seek out companions who are themselves spiritually vibrant"[42] and not rely on just those we happen upon. Since we are influenced by those with whom we surround ourselves, we should "go among people who are awake" to bring us out of our deep disconnection with the divine.

In addition to the sources within Hasidism that make the case for contemplative practice in community, there are many rationales presented within contemporary literature, albeit somewhat buried within the emphasis on individual practice. As was explored above in my personal theory, contemporary writers validate that a community can help individuals to re-energize one's personal practice, introduce new techniques, hold us accountable, provide us with support and encouragement, and help us reach a place we may not be able to access on our own.

Many people find that is challenging to develop and maintain a regular individual discipline. The difficulty of practicing on one's own makes a communal practice that much more

---

[41] Fine, Lawrence. "Spiritual Friendship" in Fine, Lawrence, Eitan Fishbane and Or N. Rose, Editors. *Jewish Mysticism and the Spiritual Life*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011. pp 112-113

[42] *Ibid*., p 113

important. One of my meditation teachers, Jonathan Faust, writes: "I spent a few decades living in a monastic setting. We had a phrase that I found to be quite true: 'Company is stronger than will-power.'"[43] And Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man writes: "For a small percentage of people, meditating is the most natural thing in the world. They move directly into it. For most of us, it's a struggle. This is why the group is important: it reinforces our desire to meditate. In many ways, learning to meditate is changing the way we use our minds."[44]

Community also helps us reach a place that we many not be able to access on our own. Dr. Barry Holtz writes: ""The world of spirituality … is not at odds with the world of community. They are bound up with one another. Judaism is not about the individual mystic alone in his or her contemplative meditation. We build community by creating contexts for prayer with others. We care about community, true, but community also allows us to encounter the Divine in ways that may not be possible if we were only on our own. The matter is simple after all: if we are to rise up the ladder of connection to God … we are going to need one another."[45]

Another rationale for practicing in community is that one sees that the challenges one encounters in practice are shared by many others, as well as the benefits. Rabbi Omer-Man writes: "For many people, the main difficulty of meditating is that it's scary to open the closets of the mind. You don't know exactly where you're going and you don't know whether it is worthwhile. But if you belong to a meditation group, you can discover these difficulties with others and realize that they are remarkably banal and ordinary and that everybody has them.. .

---

[43] https://www.jonathanfoust.com/ylm2019

[44] Omer-Man, Jonathan. "Noble Boredom: How to View Meditation" in *Meditation From the Heart of Judaism.* Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997. p 78

[45] Holtz, Barry. "The Splendid Bird: Reflections on Prayer and Community" in Fine, Lawrence, Eitan Fishbane and Or N. Rose, Editors. *Jewish Mysticism and the Spiritual Life*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011. p 133

. Another common obstacle to practice is how to carry on in a dry period. How do you have the momentum to carry through when nothing happens? Then one must seek external reinforcements, such as group practice."[46] Nan Fink Gefen makes a similar point: "We learn from each other. I've always found it useful to hear from group members about the self-refinement they are doing through meditation, and the highs and lows of their practices. If I am isolated, I too easily slip into grandiosity, considering myself to be more enlightened than I actually am. Or I think I am the only one struggling with restlessness, or inattention, or sleepiness, or physical pain."[47]

It especially important for beginners to practice with others, as Rabbi Alan Lew discusses in his article "It Doesn't Matter What You Call It: If it Works, It Works."[48] He writes: "How does one start a Jewish meditation practice? First, it's important to sit with other people. There are many strictures against doing too much meditation by yourself. If you meditate by yourself, you can fall prone to the delusion of Self and become focused on your own personal relationship with God. When you *daven* [pray] with a *kehilla* [a group of like-minded people], you are part of a communal address to God. That's really the only way to meditate because, spiritually speaking, being an "individual" is to me a materialist myth."

Yet contemplative practice in community is not just to enhance our own individual experience or to ward off the impulse towards the self. It can also connect us more deeply to others and to the larger community. In another piece of writing by Rabbi Alan Lew, *This is Real*

---

[46] Omer-Man, Jonathan "Noble Boredom: How to View Meditation" in *Meditation From the Heart of Judaism.* Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997. P 79

[47] Gefen, Nan Fink. *Discovering Jewish Meditation*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011. p 59

[48] Lew, Alan. "It Doesn't Matter What You Call It: If It Works, It Works." In *Meditation From the Heart of Judaism.* Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997, pp 50-51

and You are Completely Unprepared, he talks about the importance of meditation in community to build community: "When we sit in meditation with other people, breathing the same air, hearing the same sounds, thinking thoughts in the same rhythms and patterns, we experience our connection to each other in a very immediate way. This connection is not merely an idea; it is our heartfelt, visceral reality. This is an important part of the process of seeing ourselves. Meditation helps us inhabit ourselves more deeply, and it constantly throws us up against the very things about ourselves we are trying not to see. But it carries the process of insight one step further; it helps us to see that we are not merely our individual selves, but part of something much more vast as well."[49]

My teacher, Tracy Cochran, the editorial director of Parabola magazine and long-time Buddhist practitioner and meditation teacher, often speaks and writes about the power of sitting in meditation in a group. One such example:

> "Last Sunday, we spoke of letting ourselves be just as we are. This is particularly challenging even to reflect on when we are in pain or fear, derailed, it seems. We feel a powerful need to think of a solution, to pull ourselves together, get back on track. And yet when we sit together, at moments we can feel seen and held by a greater presence, even in pieces (especially then). This is not a fantasy. Forests are interconnected communities, nourishing and communicating wordlessly. And when we sit down together, we support each other with our presence. A sangha is not a class but a container, a forest that can help us grow. True, it can be good to learn about the dharma[50] and I try to share a basic concept now and again. But it is also a living thing made of the intention and attention of the people present. The wish is that it be a safe space for knowing ourselves, bearing ourselves with kind, non-judging attention. At moments, vanishing into something larger."[51]

---

[49] Lew Alan. *This is Real and You are Completely Unprepared*, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2003. pp 71-72

[50] *Dharma* is "the teaching" in Buddhism, or the nature of reality.

[51] Tracy Cochran email to her personal list, July 30, 2019; included with her permission

Lastly, Mindy Ribner in "Keeping God Before Me Always" points out one other very significant benefit of meditation in community. She writes: "Meditation can promote unity among the Jewish people, that Jews who cannot pray together because of ideology can still sit in meditation together."[52] In a time of increasing polarization in our country and in our communities, simply sitting together in silence is an incredibly powerful act. We now turn to the substance of this project to see how contemporary Jewish congregations have introduced contemplative practice into their communities.

[52] Ribner, Mindy. "Keeping God Before Me Always" in *Meditation From the Heart of Judaism.* Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997. pp 66-67: "

IV. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

To understand how contemplative practice is being integrated into contemporary Jewish communities, I interviewed ten clergy who have incorporated a variety of activities into their synagogues. I sought to include a variety of perspectives, practices, and denominational affiliations. Interviewees were identified either through personal experience or through references from teachers or professional colleagues. Together with my advisor, Rabbi Jill Hammer, I developed and used the following interview questions[53]:

1. Describe what happens in your community/congregation related to contemplative practice. What are the current and the past "worship" landscapes in your community?
2. Which practices have you brought in and why are you focusing on those practices? (Mussar, yoga, meditation, chanting, other)
3. What was the identified need and/or motivation for introducing contemplative practice?
4. What were your experiences that led you to be interested in this practice and to make this change in your community?
5. How do you define contemplative practice?
6. Where or from whom did you learn this practice? If from another tradition, which tradition did you learn it from? How are you sourcing what you teach? (Buddhist, Jewish, Quaker, etc)

[53] Because of limited time, I was unable to ask each interviewee all of the questions and typically skipped the questions about defining and sourcing contemplative practice.

7. Did/do you have a theory of change (meaning a description of how and why a particular change is expected to happen)? If so, what was/is your "theory of change"?
8. What planning or research did you undertake before introducing the practice or making a change?
9. How did you introduce this as a practice to your community? How did you prepare congregants? What was your process for getting buy-in?
10. How did you articulate the change to the larger community? How do you describe the practice when you talk about it to your community? As a Jewish practice, general practice or some type of hybrid?
11. What's your "elevator pitch" about the practice(s), especially to people who are not familiar or inexperienced with it?
12. What obstacles, if any, did you face/are you facing?
13. Have you refined your offerings at all? If so, how?
14. Has there been a cost associated with the change(s)? If so, how did you pay for it?
15. If contemplative practice is not integrated into the "main" sanctuary, what is the relationship between the separate groups and the main community? How are the alternatives influencing the main?
16. Has the contemplative practice offering yielded what you thought it would? What have been the "fruits" of the practice communally, if any? (Is the community more resilient? More respectful? More curious? Operating more from a place of abundance rather than scarcity?) What is the transformation you were looking for and do you see that it has happened or is happening?

17. How has the contemplative practice offerings impacted your personal leadership (ability/sustainability)?
18. Is there anything else you think I should know or ask?
19. Who else should I talk to about this topic?

Interviewees

Interviewees come from a spectrum of non-Orthodox congregations in the United States representing Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative and Renewal identities. On the one hand, Romemu in New York City was founded deliberately as a community with contemplative practice at its core, and Adat Shalom in Bethesda, MD was founded by people who already had experience with contemplative practice. Others were more conventional/traditional such as Beth El Synagogue Center in New Rochelle, which is on the more traditional side of the Conservative movement and only became egalitarian ten years ago, and the Community Synagogue of Rye, which is more of a classical Reform community.

Findings are based on interviews with the following people:

1. Rabbi Benjamin Barnett, Havurah Shalom (Reconstructionist), Portland, OR (previously at Beit Am in Corvallis, OR); August 15, 2019
2. Rabbi Daniel Gropper, Community Synagogue of Rye (Reform), Rye, NY; August 14, 2019
3. Rabbi Salomon Gruenwald and Rabbinic Intern Kolby Morris-Dahary, Hebrew Educational Alliance (Conservative), Denver, CO; May 30, 2019
4. Rabbi Hazzan Rachel Hersch, Adat Shalom (Reconstructionist), Bethesda, MD; June 5, 2019

5. Rabbi David Ingber, Romemu (Renewal), New York, NY; October 30, 2019
6. Rabbi Chai Levy, Congregation Netivot Shalom (Conservative), Berkeley, CA (previously at Kol Shofar in Marin County, CA); May 23, 2019
7. Rabbi Shuli Passow, B'nai Jeshurun (Conservative), New York, NY; July 14, 2019
8. Rabbi Benjamin Ross, Leo Baeck Temple (Reform), Los Angeles, CA; July 18, 2019
9. Rabbi David Schuck, Beth El Synagogue Center (Conservative), New Rochelle, NY; May 16, 2019
10. Rabbi Gordon Tucker, Temple Israel Center (Conservative), White Plains, NY; May 28, 2019

V. FINDINGS

1. *Contemplative practice is happening in communities in a variety of modalities.*

Contemplative practice offerings differ according to the community, each place imprinting its own cultural feel into activities. Some places long offered just one activity like the alternative contemplative service at Temple Israel Center in White Plains, NY and Shir Hadash at Hebrew Educational Alliance in Denver, CO (though HEA has started introducing other practices over the past couple of years). Others have collected a number of different activities into a branded program area as is the case for Makom at Adat Shalom in Bethesda, MD and The Center for Jewish Spirituality (CJS) at Kol Shofar in Marin County, CA. In general, activities can be grouped within six broad areas – meditation and silence, chanting or singing, yoga or other movement-based practices, teaching and learning, alternative contemplative services, and retreats.

Meditation and Silence

Just like the sages who would meditate for an hour before prayer, meditation before prayer is a well-established practice in contemporary Jewish communities. In 1997 Rabbi Alan Lew wrote in "It Doesn't Matter What You Call It: If it Works, It Works" that "seven of the eight largest Conservative synagogues in northern California have regular meditation groups"[54] and that he was leading meditation groups four times a week before the prayer service in his

[54] Lew, Alan. "It Doesn't Matter What You Call It: If it Works, It Works" in *Meditation From the Heart of Judaism*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997. P 51

congregation.[55] That trend was apparent among the congregations represented by the interviewees; for example, at Romemu in New York City there is a weekly "pre-prayer" sit before Friday night services as well as before Shabbat morning services.

Meditation is also happening in communities as an alternative to prayer, as a stand-alone offering, and even at committee meetings. For example, at Kol Shofar, after the *d'var Torah*[56] in the main sanctuary, people are invited to stay there for *Mussaf*[57] or go to the Shabbat sit led by an experienced lay leader. Rabbi Benjamin Barnett's congregation in Oregon supports a weekly mindfulness group, as does Romemu, and regular meditation classes are also offered at most of the other represented congregations.

Meditation has also seeped into other areas of congregational life. At Community Synagogue of Rye, the president started a recent executive committee meeting with a three-minute sit. And at Adat Shalom where there is no daily *minyan*, board meetings are often begun with a *Ma'ariv*[58] intention, drawing on major themes of the evening prayers in a contemplative way. Rabbi Rachel Hersch described it as "meditation with Jewish imagery."

Interviewees reported a number of ways that meditation is being introduced during prayer. Rabbi Benjamin Barnett described an approach that incorporates a number of elements. First, he pays attention to pacing, which, as he says "can be really subtle." Instead of finishing a melody and going right into the next page, he takes 3-5 seconds in between so as to "slow down a bit, to open that window for people to have their own contemplation, or a little

---

[55] Lew, Alan. "It Doesn't Matter What You Call It: If it Works, It Works" in *Meditation From the Heart of Judaism*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997. P 48

[56] The *d'var Torah* is typically a sermon or a teaching related to the weekly Torah portion. It literally means "a word of Torah. The plural is *divrei Torah.*

[57] *Mussaf* is an additional service that is recited on Shabbat as well as festivals and *Rosh Hodesh*, the holiday marking the new moon.

[58] *Ma'ariv* is the evening service.

resonance for what we just did." Second, he incorporates a lot of silence right into the structure of the services. And third, he weaves into the service moments of guided contemplation. For example, after *Ahavah Rabbah*[59], he'll invite people to call to mind a moment that someone was kind or warm to them and give people a few seconds to connect to that. He reports that he doesn't necessarily plan those out but rather leaves himself open to what is happening in that moment.

Likewise Rabbi Daniel Gropper introduced five minutes of silence during the *Amidah*[60] as an experiment. After a few weeks he asked the community what they thought about during those five minutes, what happens to them on the inside. And congregants started sharing: "I think about my kids who are in college, I talk to my mother who died a few years ago…." It gives people time for self-directed reflection in a space that is being gently held.

At Romemu, Rabbi David Ingber said that as they were building the culture of this new community, they made sure that the approach to prayer incorporated contemplative practice. So the prayer leader included more pauses in between prayers so people could "catch your breath, to watch your prayer and feel your way into the prayer. We included more *kavannot*[61] in the style of Reb Zalman and Renewal so that prayer could be led as an affirmation. We extended pre-existing silent sections of the service like the *Shema* and *Amidah*. And when we made our own *siddur* (prayer-book) for Friday night we included more – visualizations, guided meditations, mandalas and other visual cues for contemplative practice."

---

[59] In the morning service, *Ahavah Rabbah* is the second blessing before the *Shema*, which is the essential statement of faith in the Jewish tradition.

[60] The *Amidah* is the central prayer in Jewish liturgy, said at each of the three daily services.

[61] *Kavannot* is the plural of *kavannah*, the literal translation of which is "intention"; it implies directing one's focus in a sincere way.

Writers on prayer also have much to say about incorporating meditative practices into prayer. Mindy Ribner wrote in "Keeping God Before Me Always": "I have seen that adding even a little meditation to a traditional synagogue service is very potent. The most dramatic example of this occurred several years ago. I was contacted by a rabbi from Maryland who wanted to learn meditation. He traveled a great distance to see me and, after a few individual sessions with me, invited me to lead a weekend workshop at his synagogue. When I led a guided meditation during his traditional Saturday morning service, the entire prayer service was quickly transformed. I felt that the early sages who wrote the prayer service would have been pleased to see such concentration, such silence, such heartfelt prayers. The rabbi was also amazed and later discovered that seventy-five percent of his congregation was practicing transcendental meditation. These people knew how to meditate but not how to connect meditation with Judaism. Once this connection was made, their Jewish lives were transformed."[62]

And Rabbi Myriam Klotz in *Making Prayer Real* describes a way in which the entire *Amidah* becomes an embodied meditative experience: "When I come to the Standing Prayer, the *Amidah*, I am quite conscious that my stance, my posture, is very intimately a part of the prayer I offer to God, and of the prayerful state that I seek to dwell in for a time. I take care to bring my feet together with great intention as I softly chant *Adonai sefatai tiftach* [O God, open my lips]. This gesture of opening my mind, my lips, and my heart to stand in the presence of God is completed when I bring my feet to a conscious stance, grounding my sometimes fidgety body. I stand with my two legs as one. From this silent and still place, the words of the *Amidah*

[62] Ribner, Mindy. "Keeping God Before Me Always" in *Meditation From the Heart of Judaism,* Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing*, 1997.* p 66

arise from somewhere very deep inside of me. Many times, at some point during this prayer, I stop. The words drop away, and I am still, breathing, being with my God. Anchored in a body that is "gaiting" my awareness, I truly do find greater intimacy with my soul, with God."[63]

Chanting and Singing

At Beth El Synagogue Center in New Rochelle, NY, Rabbi David Schuck started a group called "Singing as a Spiritual Practice" together with the part-time music director. As he began to move the congregation from a very straight prayer style to a more participatory one, he noticed that people were not comfortable in their bodies and did not know how to use them in services, did not really know how to sing as part of the service. So he introduced a stand-alone gathering focused on singing in order to get people more comfortable with that aspect of spiritual practice, and to use their voice and singing as a mindfulness practice. The group, which meets once per month, begins with some listening exercises, a little bit of centering and meditation, and then singing, which is supported by the use of instruments. This has led to another activity, a musical *Melavah Malkah*[64] that is offered two or three times per year in people's homes.

Rabbi Benjamin Barnett introduced a monthly chanting session in which he leads four or five chants with silence in between. Rabbi Rachel Hersch has offered a similar gathering at Adat Shalom. And Rabbi Chai Levy said that her services were structured as "*kavannah*-chant". Her goal was to make prayer accessible to those who are less familiar with Jewish liturgy. So taking

---

[63] Comins, Mike. *Making Prayer Real: Leading Spiritual Voices on Why Prayer is Difficult and What to Do about It*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010. Pp 182-183

[64] *Melavah Malkah* is an informal ceremony that happens after the conclusion of Shabbat. It literally means escorting the queen, i.e., accompanying Shabbat, the queen, as "she" leaves.

love from *Ahavah Rabbah*, for example, she would present three words, also in transliteration, and then go very deeply into those three words, accompanied by music, which for her is "my natural place that I go to in terms of connecting to God. With music, I feel like prayer feels real. Music is what takes me there."

Yoga and Movement-Based Practices

As previously stated, one limitation of much of Jewish life is that it is centered on the intellectual and in the mind. Yet spirituality can be a whole-body experience, can help us transcend the confines of the mind to have a richer and deeper connection with others and with the divine. Dr. Jay Michaelson writes in *God in Your Body,* "[T]he experience of spirituality is nothing more or less than a deep, rich experience of ordinary reality. Realization is simply waking up. And the body, because it is always present here and now, is both the best vehicle for doing so, on the one hand, and, on the other, how holiness expresses itself in the world."[65]

Many congregations offer yoga and other movement-based practices. Cantor Melanie Cooperman at Rye Community Synagogue has been offering a monthly yoga class incorporating Jewish themes for the past eight years. Rabbi Rachel Hersch led a yoga series during the period of the counting of the *omer*[66] in which she looked at the *sefirot*[67] and how they inform the yoga practice and reports having done something similar with Mussar. And at Kol Shofar, Rabbi Chai Levy reports that there were a number of embodied practices offered through their Center for

---

[65] Michaelson, Jay. *God In Your Body,* Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010. P ix

[66] This is the 49-day period between Passover and Shavuot during which the "omer", a measure of barley, is symbolically counted. It often serves as a time of intensified spiritual practice.

[67] Within Kabbalah, the *sefirot* are the ten emanations of God.

Jewish Spirituality including Torah yoga, Jewish tai chi that they termed "*sulam* (ladder) chi", *otiyot chayot*[68], as well as dance *midrash*[69] and "dance your prayers".

Rabbi Shuli Passow, a long-time yoga practitioner and teacher, teaches yoga through a Jewish lens rather than "Jewish yoga"; she understands yoga as coming out of a deep wisdom tradition that has a lot of parallels to teach our own wisdom tradition but is not of our own tradition. At B'nai Jeshurun in New York City, Rabbis Roly Matalon and Shuli Passow invented a monthly "*piyyut*-yoga mash-up." Rabbi Matalon would teach a *piyyut* (a liturgical poem), where it came from, the themes, the motivation of the *paytan* (the poet), and would identify in advance a couple of lines that would lend themselves to repeated chanting. After they learned it and sang it a few times, Rabbi Passow would teach a yoga class on that theme and how to work on that theme through the body. At certain points during the class they would pause and chant (chant cards would be distributed in advance). At the close they would sing the *piyyut*.

Teaching and Learning

One way of introducing contemplative practice into a community is to teach about it or to offer experiential learning experiences. For example, communities often bring in scholars-in-residence to talk about contemplative practice and/or to kick-off introducing it into the congregation. Two speakers mentioned multiple times were Rabbis Jonathan Slater and Sheila Peltz-Weinberg, both affiliated with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. And Rabbi David Schuck brought in an "artist-in-residence", Deborah Sacks Mintz, to introduce a more musical mode of

[68] "Living signs", an adaptation of qui gong based on the Hebrew letters.

[69] *Midrash* is a category of rabbinic literature that provides an interpretive commentary on the biblical text.

services. Outside presenters can serve to bring in expertise lacking within the congregational leadership or their presentations can spark interest in spiritual practice in an objective way.

Experiential learning experiences are something that Rabbi Benjamin Ross has offered or facilitated at Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles. One example is an art class where a project is completed in silence, making participants aware of words of criticism from their internal voice. Another example is a 10-12 week cycle of five-minute on-line *Parashat HaShavua* (weekly Torah portion) lectures with an intention offered at the end for participants to sit with for a few minutes. A final example is that Rabbi Ross invited a group of people to participate together in the Institute for Jewish Spirituality's one-month classes. People watched the on-line videos and did the practices on their own and then the group gathered in person once per week to reflect on the questions posed. Rabbi Ross reported that a number of really important pastoral things emerged out of those courses; that people approached him afterwards and it was formative in terms of them getting the care they needed and for building a relationship between congregants and clergy. Doing the course allowed people to "dial in" to where their suffering was, developing more comfort being in proximity with it, and therefore more comfortable sharing it with their rabbi.

Alternative Contemplative Services

The most prominent example of an alternative contemplative service is "Shir Hadash" (which means "new song") at Hebrew Educational Alliance. This service came about because, as the synagogue adapted to changes within the Conservative movement such as egalitarianism and the ordination of openly gay clergy, Rabbi Bruce Dollin began to think about making

another shift to speak to the current times. During his sabbatical he visited a number of communities such a Romemu, Ikar and some Christian communities as well to see what could be adopted at HEA. He was particularly inspired by Joey Weisenberg's book, *Building Singing Communities*, and thought he could do that in his home congregation, could access this new spirituality that he thought would speak to his community, especially because it is a community that always loved to sing.

In his living room, Rabbi Dollin pulled together a group of people who liked to sing to get together to sing and pray. Anything went during that time. They brought in all sorts of music in all sorts of languages – Hebrew, English, Ladino, Ugandan - and built the community from the ground up. No one knew what would come of it including Rabbi Dollin.

What did emerge was Shir Hadash, an alternative weekly Shabbat morning service that engages in participatory prayer and is led by a multi-generational team rather than by clergy. Their goal is to be accessible to every level of worshipper – the most experienced worshipper will feel comfortable as well as the most inexperienced. It includes, chant, call and response, *kavannot*, and a torah service with "renewal style" *aliyot.*[70]

Many other communities offer a monthly or periodic contemplative service. Rabbis Marcelo Bronstein and Rachel Cowan began one at B'nai Jeshurun in New York City that is now continued by Rabbi Shuli Passow. Rabbi Gordon Tucker also introduced a monthly contemplative service at Temple Israel Center, described in more detail below. Leo Baeck Temple offers a contemplative Shabbat service on the 5th Friday of a month, which includes

[70] An *aliyah* is the honor of being called up to bless or read from the Torah. The renewal style is to relate the Torah reading to a particular spiritual theme and to invite up people who feel a connection with that theme.

four or five prayers chanted with silence in between as well as a ten-minute guided meditation instead of a sermon, and Adat Shalom experimented with a similar service last winter when they had an opportune Shabbat morning with no bar or bat mitzvah celebration.

Other communities offer alternative contemplative services on the High Holy Days including B'nai Jeshurun, Kol Shofar as well as Rye Community Synagogue, which organized "a different kind of service" in which they went down to the marshlands in Rye, did some chanting, *hitbodedut*, a Torah service and some clean-up of the environment.

Rabbi Chai Levy describes the contemplative service that she led at Kol Shofar as "a musical meditation." One year she brought in Rabbi Andrew Hahn (known as the "Kirtan Rabbi") and then followed that up with a full band. The service included a lot of chanting and it was designed to be accessible to people who do not have a lot of background in liturgy but also spiritually deep. In designing it Rabbi Levy asked, "How do you take someone who only comes once per year and give them a very deep spiritual experience?" For her, the answer was "this model of *kavannah*/teaching, followed by a chant with beautiful music available in transliteration" and through that, "people were able to have a deep prayerful experience without knowing about prayer." Though this service was intended to be the alternative, it grew so popular that it eventually attracted 600 people and moved to the main sanctuary whereas the traditional service had 400 people and was set in the original alternative space. The success of that service prompted more people to come to the weekly Shabbat sit and the monthly "Kol Neshama" minyan.

Retreats

Many communities have chosen to offer retreats, some for a few hours, some for a few days. At Leo Baeck Temple, Rabbi Sheila Peltz Weinberg came and led a two-day silent retreat incorporating sitting, walking and Shabbat services. Rabbi Ross also offers four-hour-long retreats timed to the Jewish calendar in order to help congregants prepare for the holidays. Their Elul retreat was focused on boundless compassion and they also did one before Passover. And Adat Shalom held a day-long contemplative retreat and also offers half-day "quiet" retreats led by a woman in the community who has done month-long retreats; they tune many of these offerings to the rhythm of the Jewish calendar as well.

A few years ago, Rabbi Benjamin Barnett put together a four-day retreat with another community. He said, "Once you've been on retreat you see how much you need that." Congregants who want to attend something like that "really want that" as Rabbi Barnett said. With only six participants from his congregation and a huge investment in terms of preparation time, Rabbi Barnett reported that it is "an interesting thing to navigate" with his lay leadership – he's reflecting on, in the context of the congregation, how much to push for something that he really believes in but that is only serving a small group of people.

2. ***Contemplative practice is introduced into Jewish communal settings because spiritual leaders have experienced it for themselves*.**

For the most part, interviewees have brought contemplative practice to their communities because they have seen the impact of the practice in their own lives. Some were introduced to it through the Institute for Jewish Spirituality training programs and others came

to the rabbinate with already developed practices in meditation, chanting or yoga. Though in some cases leaders could articulate a need in their specific community, the larger need was for spiritual leaders to integrate something so important to them into their communities. They feel that being able to engage in contemplative practice in their communities means they bring their whole authentic selves to their rabbinates.

For example, Rabbi David Schuck went through the IJS training at his last pulpit and did not introduce any of those practices into his rabbinate even though he was meditating every day and personally studying Hasidic literature. Once he began his new post, he saw the opportunity for a fresh start and decided to try to integrate what he was doing personally with his professional approach.

Rabbi Gordon Tucker knew from his experience as a congregant that "one size does not fit all" so early in his tenure as a congregational rabbi he introduced a more informal alternative where congregants could develop their prayer skills. About ten years into that position, he went to IJS as part of their third rabbinic cohort. Of that experience he said, "As a result of that I thought that if what IJS was doing could penetrate someone with as strong a Lithuanian background as myself, it could probably do some good for congregation as a whole." Rabbi Tucker also said that he would not have started the contemplative service at all "unless I had some intuition that this was going to answer some need and scratch some itch."

And for Rabbi Benjamin Barnett, he says that he focuses on what works for him and that it is a very simple equation. These practices "help me to open my heart and live in a more open-hearted fashion and to be more aware and available to the people in my life and to meet the challenges that I face. So for me, when I did my first silent retreat, that was a huge discovery,

like 'Wow, these practices really work.'" And he thinks "that I can be the best rabbi I can be if I teach and lead things that I love to teach and lead – what I'm passionate about makes me a better teacher and leader. I've loved starting to lead retreats over the past four-to-five years. It's a skill set that I have and am building and want to offer that to the communities that I'm serving. I do it because I love doing it and I think it's good for the community."

Hebrew Educational Alliance Rabbinic Intern Kolby Morris-Dahary noted that we often want to teach or start things that we personally are yearning for in our own spirituality. For her, being a part of Shir Hadash from the very beginning, after a few years of this amazing idea of bringing a new way of spirituality, it also became a bit traditional. And so she found herself yearning for the next step, for something new, which has led her to start working with interested congregants to introduce other practices into the community such as yoga and Feldenkreis.

Lastly, for Rabbi David Ingber, he founded Romemu because, having experienced the power of contemplative practice in his own life in a variety of modalities, he "decidedly wanted there to be more space in a Jewish context for all of these practices." As he was getting Romemu started, one of the things he felt was that "In Kabbalah there are five worlds and I wanted a shul that was all of them – for the body, emotionally rich, intellectually challenging, in a community that honored the power of *atzilut*[71], and silence."

A corollary to this finding is that, since it is largely determined by the spiritual leader's interest and experience, practices that the spiritual leader is not skilled at or do not like are not being introduced. Rabbi David Schuck focuses on meditation and singing "just because that's

[71] Kabbalah contains a system of four worlds, the highest of which is *atzilut*, a realm that is purely divine.

what I like." On the other hand, Rabbi Benjamin Ross does not lead chanting because, while he enjoys it, he does not consider himself to be a singer. Likewise Rabbi Benjamin Barnett enjoys doing yoga, but since he is not a yoga teacher he does not feel that it is within his capacity to introduce that practice into the community.

3. ***Contemplative practice is also being introduced into communities because traditional services are not meeting the spiritual needs of all congregants.***

In discussing the offerings at Adat Shalom, Rabbi Rachel Hersch said: "We have this moment now where we have people who are 'spiritual but not religious' who might come for something like this rather than a service." She went on to note that "We had a day-long contemplative retreat, and a woman came who had never been before, who said 'if I knew this was going on I would have been here all the time.'"

During his first year at Beth El Synagogue Center, Rabbi David Schuck convened a number of parlor meetings and "heard from a large population of people that they did not come to shul because they were looking for something spiritual and they weren't finding it at Beth El." In addition, there was a sense among the leadership that the congregation had to take a new approach because of the steady membership decline of about 30 families per year over the past fifteen years.

Once he began offering a contemplative program that overlapped with the traditional service, Rabbi Schuck estimated that approximately one-third of those attending the traditional service would leave that service in order to attend the contemplative program. During his first year he heard from a lot of people, especially those in their 30s and 40s who did not go to shul,

that they wanted something more spiritual, yet about half of the people who participate in the contemplative activities were "regulars" who are mostly older congregants. So this was unexpectedly meeting the needs of two different groups.

Rabbi Gordon Tucker noticed a similar phenomenon, that the contemplative service attracted more regulars than newcomers, something that he had underestimated. He said, "These regulars, who believe in shul and come to shul, they were not being moved as much as they would have liked by what goes on in the main service. I don't mean this as a denigration. Shabbat morning typically is a combination of *davening* and town meeting. The drive to be welcoming and the drive to be spiritual are often at odds with each other. Announcements, ushers, moving around, stopping in the middle of the Torah reading to acknowledge the wedding anniversaries – it all breaks up a spiritual flow. Regulars were affected by that and were looking for something, not so much as an alternative, but sort of as seasoning." Rabbi Tucker originally thought that contemplative programming would get people into the shul for whom the main service did not do much, but that really was not the case.

Rabbi Benjamin Ross heard something similar from his congregants who reported that contemplative practice is where they would be most nourished and they wanted it at their temple, which otherwise was not meeting their needs. Even though it was outside of Rabbi Ross' core job responsibilities, there was not anyone else in the congregation that had any expertise in teaching meditation, a practice that Rabbi Ross had previously incorporated into his personal life. So he committed to bring it into his professional sphere as well.

And for Kol Shofar, Rabbi Chai Levy learned that their congregants were looking for alternatives to traditional conservative observance through a strategic planning process. They

wanted “ritual inclusiveness”, a variety of choices, especially because there are not so many synagogues in Marin County and it is an area with a “spiritual seeker nature.”

4. ***Another motivation for introducing contemplative practice is to mitigate the stress caused by the current political climate and larger societal pressures.***

To the question of the identified communal need that motivated clergy to introduce this practice into their communities, Rabbi Rachel Hersch responded: “The identified need is the Trump administration. How are we supposed to live in this period of time and not lose our minds? In a moment of our social history where we’re a) constantly being stimulated and b) add on the level of political pain that we’re now in, one response is to go protest . . . For me, having some time to be quiet together in community that is intentional and in search of spiritual connection is an important tonic to the moment of history that we’re in and an important companion to the protest activity. The protest activity has a shrill quality to it, to maintain our humanity, and our relationships with each other, these opportunities to be quiet, to just feel what we’re feeling, to watch our mind, notice the movement from one thought to another. . . . Rabbi James Maisels said[72] . . . that he started meditating as a way to deal with the pain in his life. To be a human being is to live with suffering. Contemplative practice is a way to hold that suffering. It doesn’t neutralize it or take it away but allows us to be with it.”

Likewise Rabbi Salomon Gruenwald said that the status of our country and our world has caused people to feel a sense of hopelessness and that people are wanting something to stir them spiritually. He continued: “Action feels futile at the moment so people are turning

[72] Rabbi Hersch is referencing a teaching that she and I heard together at the Or HaLev Pardes Spirituality Retreat, December 2018.

inward to address their feelings. So I hear from a lot of people that engaging in politics or dialogue, it's so painful and so not worth it. Historically, people turn inward in times like these. Religious revival movements often come in these moments in history." He added that in Colorado there are all sorts of organizations involved in contemplative practice and there is a specific Jewish Renewal influence being so close to Boulder, which provides a huge opportunity in Denver to approach this issue of spirituality.

Moving beyond the political, Rabbi Daniel Gropper mentioned that in his affluent Westchester community there is so much stress and pressure. Parents are working all the time in order to afford to live there and part of the reason he brought contemplative practice to his community is to help address the overstressed nature of life. Rabbi Gropper added that it is also quite trendy.

5. ***Spiritual leaders are introduced to these practices in a variety of ways, some through a Jewish lens, some through an eastern or secular one, some before they became clergy, some long afterwards.***

Many interviewees were introduced to contemplative practice by a colleague or congregant. Rabbi David Schuck had been working as a congregational rabbi for about ten years when a lay leader suggested he participate in an Institute for Jewish Spirituality training for clergy. In retrospect, he said that he can see that he felt a bit "stale" which prompted him to act on that suggestion.

Similarly, Rabbi Gordon Tucker was recruited to participate in the Institute for Jewish Spirituality training by a colleague, Rabbi Shira Milgrom, and went together with another

colleague, Rabbi Les Bronstein. He said he was willing to give it a try because he felt that there could be something more to worship life. He was also open to it because he remembered being introduced to contemplative practice years earlier by Sylvia Boorstein who presented at a Rabbinical Assembly training institute. Rabbi Tucker remarked that the IJS experience had a transformative effect on him; his rabbinate afterwards was not the same as his rabbinate before. He understands that "we are recovering Jewish practices that weren't entirely self-contained and that 'we let slip away'. There's overlap with Sufi in certain periods, Buddhism in the contemporary world, and there are Talmudic roots as well. Now we are reclaiming them."

Rabbi Daniel Gropper also participated in the Institute for Jewish Spirituality rabbinic training but that was after he had already begun a personal practice. He was first introduced to meditation and contemplation at a retreat run by Dr. Alan Morinis and then began a daily meditation practice after a series of challenging personal events. For Rabbi Benjamin Barnett, his first experience of contemplative prayer was at a yeshiva in Israel. And then, during his first year of rabbinical school at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, a fellow student suggested he attend a silent retreat at Elat Hayyim with Rabbi David and Shoshana Cooper. That retreat changed his life and he started doing retreats every year after that.

Similarly Rabbi Chai Levy already had a well-developed practice by the time she participated in the IJS program. During rabbinical school at the Jewish Theological Seminary, she had spent time at Elat Hayyim, participated in Renewal kallahs and retreats with Sylvia Boorstein. But she reported that "IJS gave me a structure for learning meditation and how Hassidic thought and meditation come together. IJS brought it all together as a holistic approach to Jewish practice."

For both Rabbis Rachel Hersch and Shuli Passow, the pathway into contemplative practice was through yoga. Here is Rabbi Shuli Passow on her path: “My first introduction to yoga was as a very young child. My father had gotten into yoga not as a spiritual practice, more because it was good exercise to stay limber. He had this great teacher and had a class in our house. My father did not approach it as a spiritual practice but the teacher, who happened to be Jewish, for him it was his spiritual life. Even as a child I could sense that from him and felt a great sense of peace at the end of each class. He didn’t bring in Hindu philosophy or Sanskrit chanting but he did convey the wisdom. So that was my introduction to yoga as a spiritual practice.

“Then I had a friend in college who introduced me to Zazen practice and I started reading more about it and practicing on my own and with him, not in a Jewish context at all. The reading I was doing was largely people who were Jewish but not doing it from a Jewish perspective. I wasn’t interested in pursuing it Jewishly; I didn’t know it was such a rich Jewish world. When I went to do my yoga teacher training, I learned more about the yogic philosophy and recognized that this is a wisdom tradition and I can see the parallels in my wisdom tradition. That was the moment when I thought it would be interesting to put these things together. And it all happened in a very serendipitous way – I saw (Rabbi) Rachel Cowan at a wedding after my teacher training and then one thing led to another. Met Yael Shay at NYU, met (Rav) James (Maisels). And discovered this world. So many of the IJS people have deeply studied the Buddhist tradition and then also deeply and authentically studied how these ideas come out in Jewish practice.”

And here is Rabbi Rachel Hersch: “For me personally a big shift happened after the birth of my third son; I started practicing yoga every day. My interest in yoga was purely practical. Someone gave me a post-natal yoga video so I thought I’d give this a try. What I found really quickly was that I could use the kid’s 20-minute nap to stretch and that felt as good as sleeping. After six weeks I was able to do it every day and kept it up for the past 17 years.

“For a while it was just my own personal thing. If it infiltrated my work at the synagogue it was not explicit. When you start incorporating some of these contemplative practices in your life, they’re going to impact everything else that you do. So a big piece of my life and job is *tefillah* (prayer services) and leading services and helping people figure out how to be in *tefillah* in Jewish community. The phrase that kept going through my mind was ‘the lights in the *siddur* are now on’. It raised questions for me in terms of what *tefillah* should look like.

“I started to teach yoga in the synagogue in a yoga class. And at other times, I would be saying let’s rise for *Barechu*[73] and would think ‘What does it mean to stand up upright? What’s the spiritual intent for standing?’ So I started playing around with ‘As we rise for the *Barechu* . . using some of the cues for going into tandassana.’

“So I was utilizing what I’ve learned in yoga in moments of prayer . . . . Taking a moment to be mindful of standing up straight and aligning my joints. Ankles, knees, hips all in one plane and then the spine and head can be lifted and then just noticing that the knee can bend. I started exploring my own imagination, reflecting on who was the first person who came to this, where does standing come from and bending our knee? It must have been someone who saw an incredible sunrise and had to bend her knees in awe.” Hersch now uses yoga and chant and

[73] This is the opening welcoming prayer for the morning and evening services.

other forms of contemplative practice as "activators, lubricants, to help the traditional Jewish prayer be more accessible and powerful."

Rabbi Benjamin Ross was working as a social justice organizer, and he said "there were things that kept happening and I would run into a wall in terms of my work capacity. I saw around me that the people who were excelling all had a practice, a jogging, yoga, spiritual, journaling practice, that it was grounding, stabilizing and increased their equanimity. I had friends who had done mindfulness retreats. So I went to check out a silent retreat, the one at Elat Hayyim. I did retreats but then never had a daily practice. And one day I just started. Within 4-6 months I really felt some significant shifts in how I was showing up and saw an exponential growth in my capacity to hold things at work, to open up in therapy, to fall in love with my life. Made me a much stronger human and leader. So it felt very connected, not some loosey-goosey thing. I found it to be true experientially."

For others, their introduction and attraction to contemplative practice is intertwined with their personal and professional journeys. Rabbi Salomon Gruenwald had been interested in re-inventing the b'nai mitzvah experience for the kids in his congregation, which had led him to read about positive psychology, how people can flourish in their lives. Then, four years ago his wife was diagnosed with cancer, and a few months after that his son was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor and he died about a year ago. Rabbi Gruenwald said, "Through that experience, I became more concerned with helping people flourish in their lives, to be more resilient, to live through the challenges of life with joy. When I started Ziegler, (Rabbi) Brad Artson said you serve God and the Jewish people, the synagogue just pays your salary. I've changed my mind on that one. I still think that I serve God but I'm more interested in people.

My work is human souls, access to God through the spark of the divine that is in people, which is more important to me than God. I want to help people flourish and thrive in their lives, whether that's through *tikkun ha-middot*[74] or through contemplative practice.

"I went on a meditation retreat last year through Or HaLev . . . [which was] my first exposure to anything extended. I had done some one-offs – went to one with Rabbi Alan Lew . . . And I've been reading more stuff, Daniel Siegel stuff (the psychiatrist) about meditation. And all the research says that meditation is as good as Prozac in terms of outcomes. Regular meditation practice, it can be really effective in mental health and in making you a better person. To summarize, I'm really interested in ministering to people's souls."

Rabbi David Ingber's introduction to contemplative practice happened largely once he moved away from Judaism in his 20s, though he had experienced Jewish silence through Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's book on meditation and through doing the *Amidah* in silence. In his 20s, Rabbi Ingber was "exposed to meditation and contemplation as therapeutic, as the effect that it had on my own emotional regulation and relationship to my body. My first entrée into meditation was to come not from the head but from the body – in healing circles. One of the ways to come back to lived direct experience was through meditation. The kind of meditation that I was invited into was mindfulness, of thoughts, body, feelings. That was my first real exposure to silence that silenced. Not to repress but just to notice, to access direct experience somatically. From there I moved into meditative movement like tai chi and yoga and then more visualization, to be in mindfulness and to use silence to not silence, but to access states or more active engagement in meditation."

---

[74] *Tikkun ha-middot* translates into repairing, or improving, one's character traits.

And for Rabbinic Intern Kolby Morris-Dahary, her journey really began when she was tapped to help create Shir Hadash, which happened because Tammy (Dollin, the rabbi's wife)[75] recognized that she had spiritual leadership potential. "The chanting and the music – that approach to prayer was my entrance point to the actual prayer itself. The first year I was leading Shir Hadash I didn't even know what I was praying. I didn't have the burden of knowing what I was saying and the complication of that, which was highlighted when I moved to Israel . . . In recent times, I've been super influenced and moved by the work in Aleph. Through Aleph retreats, I've experienced this idea of ecstatic prayer for the first time in my life. Now that I understand what I'm saying and am fluent in Hebrew, it's really allowed me to have this very transformative communal prayer experience. [And I'm very influenced] by the idea from Reb Zalman [Schachter-Shalomi] of deep ecumenism, of really understanding other traditions' ideas of spiritual practice, not appropriating, but taking the values from that practice and incorporating it."

6. ***Spiritual leaders feel that contemplative practice has deeply affected their own leadership quality and character.***

Rabbi Daniel Gropper said that he has only had a daily practice for a couple of years but that it's "allowed me to, in a difficult political environment and hard times for synagogues, find my own voice again." He discussed how contemplative practice has made him more mindful and sensitive to how he can navigate wanting to speak out about the current presidential administration while having Trump supporters among his congregants. He also discussed how it

[75] Tammy Dollin is also my beloved cousin.

has caused him to be less reactive, less angry, more understanding, and more compassionate. "I sat with people whose children just got married (I couldn't participate in the wedding because they wanted me to co-officiate with a non-Jewish clergy person), and I was able to sit with her and to be compassionate and, at the same time, be able to say here's where I'm coming from. In the past I might have gotten defensive or argumentative."

Others describe similar effects. Rabbi Shuli Passow said that through contemplative practice she has developed emotional resilience in dealing with challenges at work, challenging people and challenging situations. Rabbi Gordon Tucker said that the impact on him is "summed up by words like patience and compassion and understanding, going more slowly on judgments." Rabbi Salomon Gruenwald reports that it feeds him personally, keeps him going as a rabbi, stimulates creativity, and opens his heart more. He also said, "The way that we do Shir Hadash services allows me some space for personal *kavannot* and connection."

And Rabbi Benjamin Barnett said that it has impacted every realm of his rabbinate. He especially thinks about it in a pastoral context: "Meeting with people who are going through crisis and just struggling and suffering or experiencing loss, for me, this foundational insight of what it means to be with another person, to be present for another person rather than feeling like I have to have the answer or solve something; it's a vital insight for me, in some sense forms the foundation of my pastoral work, and of the basis of what I do as a rabbi. Being able to cultivate presence and silence and that the other person can feel my presence even if I'm not saying anything or saying much. I don't grapple in the same way with what I'm going to say. Instead, I start from this place of 'can I just be in this place with this person', and explicitly inviting them into what their deepest intention is or what strength they can derive, inviting

them into quiet. I feel it so profoundly when I'm with people who are dying, because there is literally nothing else to do, nothing for me to do except to be with this person. So I'm chanting and praying. It's just presence. So how do we bring that into everything."

Rabbi Barnett added that in the day-to-day business of being in a congregation, with all the meetings and committees, that he uses contemplative practice all the time – mindfulness, blessing practice, loving-kindness practice - to deal with the inevitable tensions that emerge between people and to "help me to show up in a way that I need to show up."

Rabbi Chai Levy reports that contemplative practice has had a huge impact on her, that it has, in the words of Parker Palmer, aligned her soul with her role. She said, "There was another quote by a Christian clergy – the place where God calls to you is the place where your greatest happiness and the world's greatest need meet. For me I felt like doing these kinds of services and creating the CJS to me felt like aligning my soul with my role and meeting with my greatest happiness and the world I was working in . . . finally came together after working there for 8-10 years. And so yes, it deeply fed me. It allowed me to focus on the kind of Judaism I want for myself, that my soul needs. And I felt a lot of creativity and personal spiritual expression in creating these services, in creating the music, in creating the teachings, envisioning the whole thing was a profoundly rewarding expression of my soul in the world. So yes, very much, it served my community but also served my own needs in a way that the traditional services didn't."

And, for Rabbi David Ingber, meditation and mindfulness is the most important thing he does as a rabbi and a leader. He says that's it "attunement – attuning ourselves to what is. In relationship, in community, attuning ourselves to what's in the room, spoken and outspoken."

He believes that the most important religious practice we can develop to help combat the corrosive pressures and stresses of parenthood, of the rabbinate, of being a New Yorker, is mindfully re-attuning ourselves and, when that does not happen, we become sick and our communities become sick. "Contemplative practice does not make anything go away. It brings us back from being away and that's the way in. When I'm not attuning and being mindful, even more important than exercising and eating well . . . . when I'm there I can come back quicker, that's *teshuvah*[76]. It's my core self-care practice."

7. ***Many spiritual leaders introduced contemplative practice into their communities without a specific idea of what they were hoping it would achieve while others had more specific goals.***

Rabbi Gordon Tucker said that it was "like throwing the dice," though he had hopes that, knowing how his own experiences had "made me somewhat calmer, somewhat more optimistic, somewhat more compassionate, somewhat more open to ways of expressing piety, I had hopes that it would have that effect on the congregation." Likewise Rabbi Daniel Gropper "just wanted to introduce this stuff", Rabbi Benjamin Ross wanted "to create opportunities and see what arises," and Rabbi Benjamin Barnett didn't have a systematic sense of the impact he wanted to have on the community though he did have a sense of questioning "How do we shape our work to be aligned with our deepest values; what's going to have positive impact here, how do we operate from a place of seeing an inherent connection to others and to life."

[76] *Teshuvah* literally means "return" but has far more profound connotations, especially as connected to the work of atonement and repair during the High Holy Days.

For Rabbi Rachel Hersch, her experience has been "that when you start practicing or learning something that is so life-giving and energizing and spiritually satisfying, you can't help but want to share it with people." She thought that maybe some people might be able to have the same experience with the *siddur* that she had, that there was "so much more going on here than we had first noticed." And Rabbi David Schuck found that in traditional Conservative Judaism, "we have not worked very hard to help people understand and connect to their spiritual selves." And that has resulted in people not finding synagogue as meaningful as it could be. So contemplative practice is an opportunity for people to feel enriched by experiences in their synagogues that he hopes will also transcend the walls of the building.

Rabbi Shuli Passow was hoping to see two changes in her community. The first was attracting people who do yoga but are not necessarily Shabbat morning service-goers; she was hoping that they would see the synagogue as a space for their spiritual practice. And, second, by exploring yoga in tandem with Judaism, people would find their own bodies to be sources of wisdom and spirituality. She noted that Jews are so intellectualized and, therefore, disconnected from their bodies. So she hopes that people can develop "a sense of deeper connectedness to their own body and the wisdom that lies within. So that they can be more trusting of self, more knowledgeable of self and living in ways that are more aligned with their own selves."

For Rabbi Solomon Gruenwald and Rabbinic Intern Kolby Morris-Dahary at Hebrew Educational Alliance, the shift to innovation is a central and intentional part of their strategic plan and the vision that the clergy have for the community. Referring to the theories of adaptive leadership, Rabbi Gruenwald said that he would like "to cultivate a culture of

experimentation and help people to feel comfortable with and adapt to change . . . to push on boundaries and see what happens and help people adapt." Morris-Dahary's new job within the community is specifically focused on innovation and they've embraced the "concept of failing forward", of creating a culture of innovation, of taking risks, and of intentionally identifying the right people who will take them to the next stage.

8. ***The most cited element in introducing contemplative practice is to just start doing it.***

Though most interviewees did something formal or "official" to introduce contemplative practice, whether that be a guest speaker, a newsletter article, or a sermon, many of them cited advice from Rabbi Jonathan Slater to "show don't tell."

Rabbi Daniel Gropper did not go through a big process to get buy-in; he did not get approval from a committee or have a long conversation with lay leaders. He just said, "I want to try an experiment" with an attitude of "ready, fire, aim". Rabbi Rachel Hersch described a combination of a slow evolution of momentum that spread by word-of-mouth once the programming began and other moments of more intentional pivot. And Rabbi Shuli Passow reported that relationship-building was the key component for attracting people to contemplative activities.

Because of Rabbi Gordon Tucker's seniority at his congregation at the time of his increasing interest in contemplative practice and the trust of the community in him, he also reported that there wasn't as much need to create buy-in. He recalled that he must have said to his community, "This is something I've been doing for a number of years and I want to share it with you so I'm going to do this and everyone is welcome." He structured the service keeping

in mind that most people did not have prior meditative experience; he couldn't do a 20-minute meditation with people who had no practice with it. Therefore, he began the service with a 1- or 2-minute meditation and then led a gratitude practice. He introduced a longer period of meditation (6-7 minutes at first, and then 12-13 minutes) right before the *Amidah*. His concept was that "between the *Shema* and the *Amidah*, which is classically called the *ge'ulah*, this means repatriation, coming home. So the concept was that we have to find our way home before we do the *Amidah*, a way to come home to ourselves. And the meditation was directed by the text we had looked at before *Barechu*. Because I didn't want there to be such an interruption before the *Amidah*. The motivation was already in place and then I reminded them of it in a lightly guided way."

Other communities experienced more of an intentional roll-out. Rabbi Benjamin Ross said that he had to plan long in advance because of the complexity of the calendar at Leo Baeck Temple. That gave him the opportunity to preach about it and send emails in order to "plant seeds." He also deliberately reached out to all the people who had done other kinds of classes in order to build a constituency. Rabbi Chai Levy also had a more deliberate launch for the Center for Jewish Spirituality: in addition to a process of board buy-in, she wrote regular articles in the newsletter, developed a logo, put flyers on every seat at the musical meditation High Holy Day service, and explained what they were doing and why in multiple venues. They ended up creating a sub-community within the larger Conservative synagogue. She reported that some people only went to CJS programming and other people were synagogue members who went back and forth. And Rabbi David Schuck said that he introduced contemplative practice through a mix of methods: he "just did it" but then also had to be on the defensive because

many in his community weren't ready for it. He also wrote about it in the bulletin, pursued promotion through word-of-mouth, and then gave a sermon about judgment in an effort to defend the new range of contemplative activities.

And for Shir Hadash at Hebrew Educational Alliance, there was a very long process of development and buy-in, which included sending out CDs to the entire community with the music that would form the backbone of the service. Part of Rabbi Dollin's theory of change was that they made a commitment not to take anything away from what was going on but rather to become a "Big Tent" synagogue, offering a variety of experiences for different sensibilities. Though there was some concern within the congregation about the potential for splitting the community, Rabbi Salomon Gruenwald said that "a year or two into the project, a lot of people who were anxious about it calmed down. Some people who didn't like it could see that it brought people to shul. A lot of older congregants say I don't like it but my kids will come to it. A lot more people crossing over from the services. What we're offering is choice, not a binary either/or." He also reported that the volunteer leadership team, which includes children, became ambassadors of creativity and volunteerism, which bolstered the energy and participation in the service. To publicize the service, the *davening* team sang at various events, Jewish and otherwise (including the governor's inauguration), they posted on Facebook, and introduced the music in the religious school.

9. ***Contemplative practice has had multiple effects on congregational life including the deepening of communal bonds, the infusion of spirituality into the prayer life of the***

community, and normalizing contemplative practice as a mainstream part of Jewish life.

The "fruits" of contemplative practice in community can be identified in some tangible ways and also in ways that are more difficult to measure. But what we know for certain is that it is making a difference. Rabbi Gordon Tucker said, "What people often said when we finished these contemplative services, 'you have no idea how much I needed this in my life right now.' And sometimes it was because of personal things that I knew or didn't know about and sometimes it was because of the state of the world." And Rabbi David Schuck, whose alternative musical service is now the main sanctuary service, said of his community: "There is much more of a positive and 'open energy' vibe, a sense of optimism that didn't exist before and people are being nourished in a way that they weren't before. They're more connected."

Even when contemplative practice is an "alternative", it has influenced the wider community. Rabbi Gordon Tucker spoke about bringing the contemplative service into the social hall during the summer, which helped to demonstrate to people that this "was not some loony-tunes thing but actually a very mainstream kind of way of Jewish worship and Jewish spirituality." And though he said he can't "draw the causal line here", he believes that the presence of contemplative practice in his community has led to more people being involved in various types of compassion work such as settling refugees from Afghanistan, more people working on homelessness and hunger in the county, and other kinds of *hesed* (loving-kindness) work.

Rabbi Salomon Gruenwald and Rabbinic Intern Kolby Dahari-Morris reported that the impact of the contemplative service had been mixed and, in some ways, they were

disappointed that there had been less influence than they had hoped for, largely because the separate service had remained so separate. However, for the people who do attend Shir Hadash regularly, what has developed is a deep sense of care and camaraderie. What they did say strongly is that "Shir Hadash has definitely invigorated our two rabbis. I see some of the greatest wisdom come from rabbis in moments of spontaneous *kavannot* and the *divrei Torah* that take place that can be more experimental and discussion-based."

Other interviewees also spoke about the power of a community sitting in silence. Rabbi Benjamin Ross talked of how relationships have emerged from it, how a lot of pastoral work has come out of it. He said: "People feel it so intensely; they just feel more deeply connected to the moment and what is true in their life, and more gratitude. It is a gift, an incredible opportunity to have their phones off, to be connected to themselves, to be healed." Rabbi Benjamin Barnett echoed this sentiment, speaking of the really strong relationships that have developed especially within the small meditation and chanting groups, that a great number of people have said that they appreciate the power of the heart-opening and the energy that is generated.

And Rabbi Chai Levy discussed how, over a number of years, the culture at Kol Shofar shifted so that now there is a culture of experiencing Judaism as a spiritual practice. She said: "Not just we *daven* because we're obligated to or because our grandparents did or because this is the way to do it but to really approach the tradition with the mindset that this is going to bring me closer to God, that I'm going to be transformed through these practices and experiences that's going to make me more compassionate and open-hearted, that I'm going to work on my *middot* (character traits), that this is a path. This is a spiritual practice in way that a

lot of American Jews didn't grow up with – being forced to do bar/bat mitzvah and then wanting to get away from it."

Finally, the feedback that Rabbi David Ingber receives from having created a spiritual product that has contemplation "baked into it" is generally the following: "I've never been to a service like that before. I can catch my breath and get energized all at once." Rabbi Ingber sees the effects in the Romemu community on a number of levels:

a. "Jews for whom the East has been their spiritual home now feel that there is a Jewish home for their Eastern self. This approach to prayer signals that this is a home for you.
b. This service calms me, calms my anxiety. The yoga that we do, the practices of asking people to go inside and check-in, makes Judaism feel real, more meaningful. I can access it now, it was too much in my head but now it's in my body.
c. Pre-prayer: Including a structure of silence before prayer means that prayer can land on soil that has already been irrigated. It makes prayer more meaningful.
d. The visualizations and meditations are things that people take home with them and they can then do them again at home.
e. Rabbinical students say when we open up the liturgy with a meditation or invitation, it then changes the way they read the prayer.
f. Meditations that we do on food at the Kiddush improves people's experience; they eat more mindfully, eat less, feel it more in their body. This is a core piece of tasting life, not just food.
g. Judaism becomes an approach to human flourishing and congregants see how all of Judaism is intending to invite them into deeper living."

In addition to the effects being felt in the synagogue community, the success of the Romemu Yeshiva, which launched last summer, proved that this type of approach to rabbinical education was meeting a significant need. Rabbi Ingber described it this way: The impetus for the Romemu Yeshiva was that . . . I saw a significant niche to create a yeshiva that put spiritual practice at the center and then build a program around it. My own life has been so informed by mindfulness and meditation and *devekut*. I fundamentally believe in integral wisdom/ philosophy, that the purpose of spiritual practice is to alter a state so that it becomes a stage in awareness. Spiritual practice is the means to the end – empirical and spiritually time-tested means for the continual evolution of human consciousness. What would it mean to put that at the center of a yeshiva? . . . It puts the neo-Hasidic view at the center – ecstatic practice, embodied practice, laboratory of practice – where students can read about something and then put it into practice. So we created a yeshiva that married [the learning and the practice] and interwove it with a living community, essentially presenting a model like a culinary institute and restaurant or like a medical school and hospital. Trying out things and bringing it back." The effects on the wider community are largely yet to be felt but the vision is that the students will pray together with the community and lead services once per month (much like doing rounds at a medical school) and that the interaction will increase once there is daily programming beyond this initial six-week program.

VI. OBSTACLES TO COMMUNAL PRACTICE

1. Some resistance to contemplative practice arises because it's not seen as the "right" brand of Judaism for that particular community.

For Rabbi David Schuck, the "traditionalists" in his congregation were concerned that a more contemplative and musical approach to services would dilute Judaism, that "if you give people the option to do a shorter service with closing your eyes and humming, they're never going to pick the traditional approach." He noted that the pushback has largely died down over the past couple of years as the community becomes more experienced with contemplative practice. Likewise for Rabbi Chai Levy, who recently began a new position at Netivot Shalom in Berkeley, the sensibility is that contemplative practice happens in the "other" synagogue in town but not here. She said, "My current community wants their Judaism traditional so the only thing I've been able to do was around *Hoshana Rabbah*[77]. In Berkeley there are so many funky synagogues so the people here just want it traditional."

Rabbi Levy also noted that at Kol Shofar, the alternative service became so popular that the senior rabbi started introducing elements of it into the main sanctuary service and that this, in turn, alienated people who had deliberately opted for the traditional service and who were disgruntled at how much had changed. So, when introducing alternatives, there is a need to maintain and validate the traditional. The clergy at Hebrew Educational Alliance reinforced this idea: "At a suburban legacy synagogue, we have to be everything to everybody and there's an

[77] The seventh day of the holiday of Sukkot, which contains a unique liturgy.

audience that's not going to be receptive to contemplative practices . . . The people who attend our traditional services don't want it to change at all." And that sentiment needs to be honored.

It is not just traditional environments that encounter cultural resistance. Rabbi Rachel Hersch reported that Adat Shalom "is a community that has a number of people who are classical Reconstructionists, Kaplanian Reconstructionists. They are really drawn to what they experience as uber-intellectual, uber-rational approaches to Torah and spiritual life. That has meant there has been some resistance to some of the language that we have used in framing contemplative practice. People would say quiet your mind, empty your mind, and some of these people would get irritated by that. 'Why not fill your mind with important thoughts?' Having that resistance is good because it helps you clarify what you want to do and what you're saying and not saying. I would still say to those people who are irritated by meditation that they're the ones who need it the most."

Also in a Reconstructionist environment, Rabbi Benjamin Barnett has encountered some resistance in his community, but because it is heavily devoted to social justice issues. He said, "There are people in the activist world who feel like this is navel-gazing. And it can be, thinking about inner peace without engaging in the rest of the world. So folks in my community who see this as fluffy, 'we should be out there on the street', whatever the narrative is. So how do I present this in a way that feels grounded and connected to our action as individuals and community. We need to be clear about what our intentions are and why we want to teach it and experience it. If people have an experience themselves it can feel foreign and vague. So [it's important to be clear with] the language we use to explain what we're doing."

The criticism about which Benjamin Barnett speaks is echoed by Rabbi Jeff Roth in his writing: "The critique most commonly heard about meditation is that it is self-involved and distances the practitioner from the world. But the practices . . . are meant to be taken into the world of our everyday existence, so that the wisdom, kindness, and compassion we have been cultivating can become interwoven into all aspects of our lives."[78]

2. ***There is a desire for the senior clergy to be in the "main sanctuary" or to avoid feeling that there is a split in the community or clergy's attention.***

Rabbi Gordon Tucker talked about the general resistance to anything happening outside of the main sanctuary, a sentiment that was also prevalent at Beth El Synagogue Center in New Rochelle and at Hebrew Educational Alliance in Denver. This is especially the case when it is the senior rabbi leading the contemplative activity. Rabbi David Schuck noted that when the senior clergy is leading the contemplative program, it can only happen when there's not a bar/bat mitzvah, which makes it difficult to achieve consistency and build a substantive core group.

Rabbi Benjamin Barnett also remarked that, because a rabbi's time is limited, people for whom the contemplative approach does not work often feel that he is spending too much time on it, investing too much of the rabbi's resources on something that is not important. So he grapples with how much to mold what he is doing to meet the various needs of the community and how much he should be open and honest about what he is drawn to do.

[78] Roth, Jeff. *Jewish Meditation Practices for Everyday Life*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012. p 185

3. ***A variety of other obstacles were mentioned including institutional inertia, lack of organizational capacity, and culture.***

Rabbi David Shuck remarked that communal expectations around dress code prevented some congregants from taking advantage of contemplative offerings, that congregants aren't going to come to synagogue dressed down for meditation or yoga when everyone else around them is dressed formally. At Hebrew Educational Alliance there is a lot of cultural resistance due to the long history of this legacy synagogue. Rabbi Salomon Gruenwald said that, because there is a mindset of "this is the way we've always done it, this is what we're used to, this is the cycle of our year," it's been a bit challenging to have to decide what is not going to happen in order to make room for this new type of activity.

Rabbi Benjamin Ross noted that if he had a program coordinator to support his work logistically, for example setting up evaluations, preparing intake forms, and doing publicity, he would be able to offer more opportunities. And Rabbis Shuli Passow and David Ingber both mentioned issues around finding the right time or the right space for various activities, especially given the space challenges of New York City-based synagogues.

Lastly, there is the issue of continuity. Because contemplative practices are often tied to a particular spiritual leader, they can be hard (though not impossible) to sustain if that leader leaves. So much work goes into building trust between a clergy person and the community, especially around a new model of spiritual practice, and it is not always easy to pass those activities off from one leader to the next.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Recommendations

1. **For contemplative practice to "stick", it needs to be introduced repeatedly.**

One thread that was common to all of the interviewees' stories was that they were repeatedly exposed to contemplative practice before really starting a regular practice on their own. The Rule of Seven in advertising holds that prospects need to come across an offer or product seven times before they notice it and start to take action. For many in mainstream congregations, contemplative practice is outside of their experience. Repeated exposures in a variety of modalities can break down resistance and "normalize" it.

2. **Clergy should be introduced to contemplative practice during their training.**

Rabbi Daniel Gropper especially emphasized this point saying that he wished rabbinical schools would spend more time helping students develop their own inner practice, that it provides resilience, meaning and grounding for what can, at times, be a very challenging profession. He said, "Synagogue life can get very caught up in the day-to-day stuff. For me, [contemplative practice has] rekindled why I became a rabbi in the first place, to connect people to this incredibly rich tradition of ours, in ways that meet them where they are." One way that clergy will be able to be introduced to contemplative practice in the future is the Romemu Yeshiva, a program dedicated to neo-Hasidism and contemplative practice mentioned above. As Rabbi David Ingber said, it was a "wildly successful foray into . . . answering the question 'is Jewish meditative and contemplative practice something that is wanted and

needed in training people and clergy? Would people be interested in coming and studying for six weeks?' And the answer is overwhelmingly yes."

3. **Congregational leaders may want to communicate that practicing in community is meant to complement and enhance one's personal practice rather than be the only mode.**

Mindy Ribner writes about the importance of a personal daily practice in "Keeping God Before Me Always": "Though meditation is most powerful in a group, meditators need to develop a daily practice. Meditation must be integrated into a person's being and life, or it is simply a fleeting intoxication with no lasting value. The purpose of Jewish meditation is not just to produce glorious spiritual experiences, but also to help us discover who we really are and fulfill our life purpose: to be more truly ourselves, to express our divine potential, and to contribute to bringing and revealing godliness in this world in the unique ways that each of us can."[79] This sentiment was shared by Rabbi Shuli Passow who suspects that while "People really enjoy and get a lot out of the mindfulness services, there hasn't been a push for people to develop their own practice and the community hasn't been able to sustain a weekly sit. That's a question in my mind, what does it take to build more of a commitment to the practice as opposed to "oh, this is a really nice service that I like but it's [only] a once-a-month" thing."

[79] Ribner, Mindy. "Keeping God Before Me Always" in *Meditation From the Heart of Judaism,* Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing*, 1997.* p 69

Areas for Further Study

Contemplative practice is well enmeshed in many congregations, far beyond what I was able to survey for this project. Further areas for research might include talking specifically with lay leaders, surveying all congregations to determine the extent to which these practices have penetrated the North American Jewish world, identifying and mapping these communities,[80] and talking with congregants about the impact these experiences have had on their lives. In addition, comparisons could be made between Orthodox and non-Orthodox communities (I only spoke to clergy in non-Orthodox congregations) and educational institutions – day schools, supplemental schools, and camps - could be included as well. Finally, many names of people and institutions involved with contemplative practice surfaced during my interviews and due to time constraints I was not able to contact them. These include:

- Rabbi Dana Saroken, Beth El Congregation, Baltimore
- Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt, Adas Israel in Washington, DC
- Temple Beth Am, Los Angeles
- Shabbaton in Los Angeles called Kol Tefillah
- Rabbi Alfredo Borodovsky, Sulam Yaakov in Larchmont, NY
- Rabbi Joanna Samuels who is now at the Educational Alliance but was at Congregation HaBonim, New York
- Rabbi Les Bronstein, Bet Am Shalom, White Plains, NY
- Cantor Kerith Spencer-Shapiro, University Synagogue, Los Angeles, CA

[80] A mapping of "emerging" Jewish organizations was recently undertaken by Rabbi Sid Schwarz through his Kenissa network and many of those identified are engaged in contemplative or other spiritual practices. However, this networking effort did not include most mainstream congregations.

- Rabbi Mark Novack who leads a Havurah in Washington, DC that has a monthly Shabbat morning meditation.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The stories told by the ten clergy featured in this study have clearly demonstrated the potential that contemplative practice has to positively impact communities in which it is introduced. In addition to providing support for individuals' personal practices, introducing contemplative practice into Jewish communities strengthens bonds among congregants and between congregants and clergy, enhances and deepens the prayer experience, meets a wider variety of spiritual needs, and mitigates the stresses both of everyday life and of this extraordinarily challenging moment in American history. What is also significant is that engaging in contemplative practice within their own communities provides clergy with a spiritual environment that meets their own needs and positively affects their capacity to open-heartedly and effectively perform in their roles.

For those clergy who are considering adding contemplative practice to the range of activities being offered in their communities, this study shows that the most important element is for spiritual leaders to first develop their own practice. Not only will this serve to help them lead others, it will increase their ability to be present for self and others, to tap into compassion and the interconnectedness of all beings, and to be more resilient in the face of inevitable challenges. If and when it becomes personally resonant, being able to lead communal activities can help clergy reach people through multiple modalities, can expand the potential for pastoral care, and can enliven and enrich the communal prayer experience for both the community and the clergy.

As was said in the introduction, contemplative practice is relatively simple but that does not make it easy. What this study has shown is that the enormous potential benefits of

contemplative practice, both for the individual practitioner and for the Jewish community, make the investment well worthwhile. Over the centuries our tradition has taught that practicing together with others facilitates and augments our experience, that group practice, as Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira asserted, helps us develop our sensual perceptions, opens our hearts, and enables us to experience the palpable presence of God. On our spiritual paths companions can provide the container for us to fully awaken to our own lives, to see clearly the everyday miracles amidst which we live, to actualize our holy purpose. And Jewish communities, in playing the vitally important role of fostering accompaniment for spiritual journeys, will both strengthen others and be strengthened themselves.

IX. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Artscroll's Sforno Commentary on the Torah, New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1987.
- Bunim, Irving. *Ethics From Sinai*, New York: Philipp Feldheim, Inc., 1964
- Comins, Mike. *Making Prayer Real: Leading Spiritual Voices on Why Prayer is Difficult and What to Do about It*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010.
- Cooper, David. *God is a Verb: Kabbalah and the Practice of Mystical Judaism*, New York: Riverhead Books, 1997.
- Cooper, David A. *The Handbook of Jewish Meditation Practices*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000.
- Davis, Avram, Editor. *Meditation: From the Heart of Judaism*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1999.
- Drazin, Israel and Stanley Wagner, *Onkelos on the Torah: Genesis*. New York: Gefen Publishing House, 2011.
- Fine, Lawrence, Eitan Fishbane and Or N. Rose, Editors. *Jewish Mysticism and the Spiritual Life*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011.
- Freedman, H., and Maurice Simon. *Midrash Rabbah*. London: Soncino Press, 1951.
- Gefen, Nan Fink. *Discovering Jewish Meditation*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2011.
- Gold, Shefa. *The Magic of Hebrew Chant*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013
- Kaplan, Aryeh. *Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide*, New York: Schocken Books, 1985
- Kaplan, Aryeh. *Meditation and Kabbalah*, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1982.

- Kaunfer, Elie. *Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us About Building Vibrant Jewish Communities*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010.
- Kehati, Pinhas on Berakhot, Jerusalem: Department for Torah Education and Culture, 1994.
- Klein, Isaac. *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1979.
- Klass, Dustin. "J's, B's, and Jubu's: The Jewish-Buddhist Connection" in the *Journal of Theta Alpha Kappa*, 33 no 2 Fall 2009, p 56-69.
- Lew, Alan. *Be Still and Get Going*: *A Jewish Meditation Practice for Real Life*, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005.
- Lew, Alan. *This is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2003.
- Michaelson, Jay. *God in Your Body*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2010.
- Morinis, Alan. *Everyday Holiness*, Boston: Trumpeter Books, 2007.
- Roth, Jeff. *Jewish Meditation Practices for Everyday Life*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012.
- Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman. *Davening: A Guide to Meaningful Jewish Prayer*, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2014
- Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman. *Gate to the Heart: A Manual of Contemplative Jewish Practice*, Colorado: Albion-Andalus, Inc, 2013.
- Schotz, Leslie. "A Congregational Guide to Jewish Meditation", Senior Project for the Academy for Jewish Religion, 2002.

- Shapira, Kalonymus Kalman. *Conscious Community: A Guide to Inner Work* (translated by Andrea Cohen Kiener), New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1999.
- Siegel, Richard, Michael Strassfeld and Sharon Strassfeld. *The Jewish Catalog*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973
- Verman, Mark. *The History and Varieties of Jewish Mediation*, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1996.
- Weisenberg, Joey. *Building Singing Communities*, New York: Mechon Hadar, 2011.
- Wertheimer, Jack. "The American Synagogue: Recent Issues and Trends" in *The American Jewish Year Book*, Vol. 105 (2005).