

# Seeking God, Meditation and *Emunat HaLev*

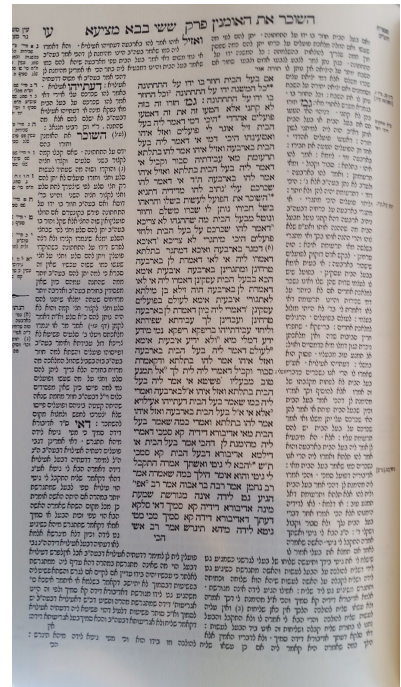
This is a night of – asking for forgiveness and that usually begins with confession. So, a confession: I was not always someone who cared much for spirituality, for the introspective, meditative side of religion. In fact, if you had known me in earlier decades, you would not have considered me a spiritual person at all.

It took me years to get into *davening*, into prayer. As a teen, I did not really care for *shul*. And as a young adult and in college, I was much more into the – how shall we call it – social elements of *shul* and services. There were lots of nice women to meet; it was convenient that so many of them came together each Friday night!

That all changed as my life took on deeper religious sensibilities. Studying in Israel after college, however, I was much more into the intellectual ideas within prayer: for me, namely, egalitarianism, than the actual religious, emotional, or spiritual dimensions.

Even as that changed somewhat and I considered rabbinical school, my spiritual life was centered on deepening my understanding of the liturgy.

That said, my primary religious focus in rabbinical school was not at all centered on cultivating a spiritual life, but on mastering traditional Jewish texts. I was blessed to be part



of a cohort of twelve students in an accelerated rabbinics track where we studied the more esoteric and complicated medieval Talmudic commentaries that our tradition has to offer. And while there certainly was a religious element to this study, it lacked a contemplative component, a mindfulness practice or meditation. I was primarily a Jew of the head, rooted in our intellectual side.

Fast forward a few years to my Chicago rabbinate when I learned about a new two-year spirituality program for rabbis sponsored by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality.

Given that I was already yearning to explore the



Institute for Jewish Spirituality  
Cultivating mindful leaders. Revitalizing Jewish life.

richness of *Hasidic* texts and the Kabbalah – aspects of our tradition that were not highlighted in my rabbinic school training (to say the least!) – I looked into the opportunity and applied.

It was a major commitment, including four one-week retreats, weekly study sessions with a *hevruta*, a study partner, along with monthly distance learning. At our first retreat we were introduced to Jewish meditation, half days in silence, mindful eating, yoga, creative *tefillah*, chanting *niggunim* (melodies without words), studying rich *Hasidic* texts and deep sharing.



meditation.

While there were some parts I loved right from the start – the sharing, the yoga and texts come to mind – I struggled with others, especially the

We spent two hours each morning practicing silent meditation, guided meditation, and walking meditation. Often, I would just fall asleep. And if I managed to stay up, my mind quickly wandered to my list of things to do, my anxieties, and almost anything else that simply popped into my mind.

I was not off to a great start with meditation. Coming home, I was discouraged. In fact, my roommate at the retreat – a fellow Conservative rabbi coming from a similar place – dropped out of the program entirely.

At first, these practices seemed strange, almost not Jewish. But then I was reminded that there has always been a Jewish mystical path. Years ago, I researched and wrote about the Merkavah Mystics who, 2100 years ago, meditated on God's Chariot to reach ecstatic heights. (See David Lerner, *Hekhalot Rabbati, The Mystical Text and its Liturgical Elements, Conservative Judaism*, Vol. 47, No. 1, Fall, 1994, pp. 74–83.)

And the Talmud states that *Hasidim Rishonim*, the early pious ones, would meditate for an hour before davening. While some of these practices faded, others did not. As the Kabbalists expanded parts of the tradition, they practiced meditation and chanted mantras, often a specific line from the *Tanakh* or *siddur*. The *Hasidic* tradition of the 18th-19th centuries opened up these ideas with *niggunim* (wordless melodies), *hitbodedut* (a self-seclusion meditation, sometimes speaking to God aloud usually outdoors in nature,) and *hitbonenut* – a more intellectual contemplation of God.



Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav would often engage in walking meditation, alone in nature and once wrote the following prayer: "How wonderful it would be if we were worthy of hearing the song of the grass! Every blade of grass sings a pure song to God, expecting nothing in return. It is wonderful to hear its song and to worship God in its midst!"

These practices, which we often associate with Eastern religions, also grew from the fertile soil of our spiritual tradition.

I knew that there were also benefits to meditation – health benefits – real, concrete ways that it can help our lives.

What are they?

Meditation helps with our emotional well-being: lessening worry, anxiety, impulsivity, stress, fear, loneliness and depression, while enhancing self-esteem, self-acceptance, optimism, and improving resilience. It also helps us develop positive social connections while improving our mood and emotional intelligence.

Meditation does wonders for our mind: increasing mental strength and focus, memory retention and recall, producing better cognitive skills, creative thinking, decision making, problem solving and information processing.

Meditation is great for your body, too: improving your immune system and energy level, your breathing and heart rates, reducing blood pressure, increasing longevity, lessening hearing and brain problems, inflammatory disorders and asthma.

So, I decided to proceed. I cannot say I was good at it, but I tried. The other aspects of my learning went better: the Kabbalistic and *Hasidic*

texts moved me and I started a spirituality group to explore these with others. And then, a yoga studio opened up literally right next door to our condo. I started to practice. Wow – body and mind – they are linked! Who knew? I was becoming a Jew of the heart, as well as of the mind.

That deepened my spiritual practice. Over the years, there have been ebbs and flows – when we moved to Emunah with a larger job as the senior rabbi and two children, the younger a newborn, some of these practices fell away; I was unable to bring them into my life or into my rabbinate as much as I might have hoped.

But over the years, I have returned. I try to attend a yearly retreat to continue to develop these practices and I meditate, take yoga when I can and incorporate other mindfulness techniques. Here, at Emunah we have been cultivating meditation programs. [Paul Neustadt and I started a Shabbat morning meditation group nine years ago](#) that he and others have continued. And [Barbara Neustadt and I hold a monthly spirituality group – often partnered with a Meditative Ma'ariv](#). We have held Yoga with a Jewish Twist classes on some Shabbat mornings as well. One of the gifts of the sabbatical you gave me has been the time to reconnect more fully with these practices and feel their benefits.

I am still learning as a meditator and one who tries to teach others, but even pausing now and then at my computer while writing this sermon, is a helpful reset.

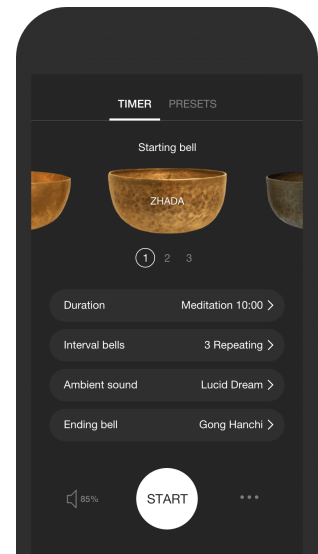
Meditation is the pause that deepens and holds an experience or feeling. It helps our body and soul feel the moment, allowing it to be felt and, if needed, let go so we can move on in a healthier manner.

How many of you have smart phones? Right – almost everyone –



which means almost all of us live a somewhat disjointed life as we are pulled in many directions constantly. We need a day without these devices – Shabbat and we need time each day for a break – that is *tefillah* and/or meditation.

Meditation and mindfulness practices can change lives – and work with people of all ages. My younger son, Matan and I often meditate at the end of the day, choosing a helpful, guided meditation from the app: Insight Timer. It's free! We lie down listen to the gentle instructions, calm our breaths and our bodies for about ten minutes while we gently let go of the stresses of the day. From that place of calm, we softly sing the *Sh'ma* and our bedtime prayers. It is the perfect way to end each day.



As we pray together this Yom Kippur, bear in mind that the high point of a traditional *davening* is the end of the *Amidah* when we are – ideally – standing in meditation – perhaps speaking to the Almighty the deepest feelings we have – or just communing with the Divine in silence.

Last week, I spoke about how meditation helped me during a most difficult time as well.

It has been a dream of mine to take the options we already offer and grow them into something larger and more extensive. Barbara Neustadt and I have been working to accomplish that – I want to thank Barbara for sharing her wisdom and experience as well as her time – as we shape this project. Tonight, we proudly announce the founding of *Emunat HaLev*: The



Meditation Institute of Temple Emunah.

Literally translated, it means the Faith of the Heart and we hope this new institute will touch everyone deeply in their hearts and souls, in the words of *Sh'ma*.

There is a rabbinic teaching – *rahmana liba ba'ei* – the Compassionate One desires our hearts – God hopes we will feel God's presence and God wants

our *lev* – our heart.

*Emunat HaLev*, a new component in our incredibly rich offerings, will continue our existing programs, while offering new ones including, [beginning in mid-November, a weekly meditation on Tuesday mornings](#) for us to develop our practice. Our offerings will be primarily for our membership, but we will reach out to others beyond as well.

We also hope to find funding to send all our Religious School and Preschool teachers to mindfulness teacher training so they can learn how to bring these practices to our students, help them



focus calmly on their learning and, perhaps, sharing them with them with their parents as well! I am quite excited for that!

Over time, I hope we will bring some of these ideas to our meetings, to other aspects of our prayer lives, our spiritual lives. It is my hope that over the next three to five years, this work will touch on many facets of *Emunah* and reach people of all ages from infants to our seniors – transforming and healing bodies and souls.

On Yom Kippur day, [Barbara will lead a service that blends elements of the traditional martyrology with meditation](#) right here at 2:00 PM.

Our Glatzer Scholar-in-Residence who will help us launch *Emunat HaLev* is Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Slater who will be coming the first Shabbat in March to present the intellectual foundations of these practices found within traditional Jewish sources and texts. He will both teach and help us experience Jewish mindfulness. He will help us bring together mind and heart.



Even if you are as uncomfortable with this as I was 15-20 years ago, all I ask is to give it a try!

So, let's give it a try!

Right now!

Get comfortable in your seat. Place your *Mahzor* on your lap or on an adjoining seat.

Try to have your feet touch the floor.

Try to sit upright imagining a string extending from the top of your head to the ceiling, helping your spine extend.

If you feel comfortable, try to close your eyes.



And breath – slowly, gently.

Pay attention to your breath.

Follow the inhalation in and the exhalation out.

Point your mind's eye to the breath and pay attention to it.

If other thoughts pop into your mind, gently let go of them. Don't worry – they will come back another time.

Gently come back to your breath.

Breathe in the calm and breathe out a sense of peace – *shalom*.

Let's continue that for another minute.

Now, take a few more breaths and then gently open your eyes.

That's the practice – deceptively simple, but the work of a lifetime. I hope you will join us at *Emunat HaLev* this year and breathe in God's presence more fully into your life and your soul.

As we fully enter into this day of intense introspection, may we find calm among the storms of our lives. May we strengthen each other in this amazing project of building a loving and strong Jewish community. May God bless the work of hands, as well as the stillness of our minds and gentle rhythms of our breaths.

May our breaths seal us for a year of calm blessing – *Gmar Tov!*