

From Surviving to Thriving: Cultivating Self-Awareness, Resilience, Empathy, and Wholeness through Jewish Mindfulness Practice

The Jewish Education Project; The Why and How of Thriving in Jewish Education – May 30, 2019

Rabbi Sam Feinsmith – sam@jewishspirituality.org

What is Mindfulness?

I. John Kabat-Zinn on Secular Mindfulness

Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.

II. Mindfulness in a Jewish Framework

Exodus Chapter 3

- 1 Now Moses was herding the sheep of Jethro his father-in-law, priest of Midian, and he drove the sheep beyond the wilderness, and came to the mountain of God, to Chorev.
- 2 Then an angel of YHVH appeared to him in a flame of fire from within the bush, and he saw it, and lo and behold, the bush was ablaze with fire, but the bush was not consumed.
- 3 Now Moses said [to himself], 'I should turn aside here, and see this great sight. Why is the bush not burning?'
- 4 When the YHVH saw that he had turned to look, Elohim called out to him from the bush, and said, "Moses, Moses!"— and he responded, "Here I am."

שמות פרק ג
א וּמֹשֶׁה, הָיָה רֹעֵה אֶת-צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵנוֹ--כִּהְיוּ מִדְיָן; וַיִּנְהַג אֶת-הַצֹּאן אַחַר הַמִּדְבָּר, וַיָּבֹא אֶל-הַר הָאֱלֹהִים חֹרֵב.
ב וַיֵּרָא מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה אֵלָיו, בְּלִבַּת-אֵשׁ--מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה;
וַיֵּרָא, וְהִנֵּה הַסִּנֵּה בֹעֵר בְּאֵשׁ, וְהַסִּנֵּה, אֵינֶנּוּ אֶכָּל.
ג וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה--אֶסְרֶה-נָּא וַאֲרָאָה, אֶת-הַמַּרְאֵה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה: מַדּוּעַ, לֹא-יִבְעַר הַסִּנֵּה.
ד וַיֵּרָא יְהוָה, כִּי סָר לִרְאוֹת; וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו אֱלֹהִים מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּה, וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה מֹשֶׁה--וַיֹּאמֶר הַיְנֹנִי.

Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezeritch, *Likkutim Yekarim 15c*

We must study pride yet not become prideful, anger but not get angry, and so too with all *middot* (habits of heart and mind). For we must be whole, embodying all the *middot* that are found within the Blessed One.



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Why is Mindfulness Essential for Today's Youth?

I. 2015 Pew Study

- Just 25% of teens spend time with friends on a daily basis outside of school
- 49% of teens say text messaging is their preferred way to communicate with their best friends. The average teen today checks their phone more than 80x/day
- 57% of teens ages 13-17 have made a new friend online. Only 20% of teens have met an online friend in person
- Teens are now lonelier than any time since 1991
- 50% more teens in 2015 demonstrated clinically diagnosable depression as compared with 2011
- The teen suicide rate tripled amongst girls 12-14 since the 1950s
- The number of children and teens hospitalized for suicidal thoughts or self-harm doubled between 2008 and 2015
- Emotional maturity has declined - 18-year-olds act like they're 15; 13-year-olds act like they're 10

II. Letter from a Principal to His Teachers (from the *Facing History and Ourselves* curriculum)

Dear Teacher:

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:

Gas chambers built by learned engineers.

Children poisoned by educated physicians.

Infants killed by trained nurses.

Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.

So I am suspicious of education.

2



Institute for Jewish Spirituality

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

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My request is: Help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmans.

Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make our children more human.

Benefits of Mindfulness Practice

I. Walking the Mindful Walk: We are the Lessons

Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*

Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror, and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge—and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject.

Daniel Rechtschaffen, *The Mindful Education Workbook*, p. 45

If we tell our students to pay attention but then distractedly check our phone throughout the day, the students will take in a lesson of distraction. If we yell at our students to be relaxed, they will learn aggression rather than regulation. We are the teachers, but we are also the lessons.



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II. Metacognition, Cognitive Flexibility, Impulse Control, Responsible Decision Making

The Structures and Functions of the Triune Brain

1. **Reptilian brain (brain stem and cerebellum):** Controls flight, fight, freeze response, seeks to keep us from danger; tends to be rigid and compulsive
2. **Mammalian brain (limbic system; amygdala and hippocampus):** Records memories, responsible for emotions and snap judgments
3. **Human brain (frontal cortex):** Responsible for metacognition, impulse control, self-regulation, weighing consequences, responsible decision making, cognitive flexibility

III. Self-Awareness, Attention Regulation, Self-Regulation, Resilience

Zoogman et al., 2014

[M]indfulness teaches less pathological uses of attention...Once an individual's attention is focused on present moment experience, the next step in mindfulness practice is to hold that experience with a stance of curiosity and openness. Thoughts, feelings, and body sensations are noticed and understood to be "just" thoughts, feelings, or body sensations rather than a stable reflection of the self (Coffman, Dimidjian & Baer, 2006). This process of "decentering" allows for an individual to take a self-reflective stance towards their experience, observing rather than judging that experience, [which] teaches engagement with rather than avoidance of experience. Mindfulness interventions therefore also decrease rumination, by stopping cycles of either depressive (e.g. "I'm worthless," "I can't do anything") or anxious (e.g. "I'll never do it right," "Everything is going to fall apart") cognitions (Coffman et al., 2006; Teasdale, Segal & Williams, 1995). Being able to notice one's emotions without reacting ("decentering") allows for improvements in emotion regulation (Bishop et al., 2004; Coffey et al., 2010). Choices can be made about the best way to act, rather than reacting instinctively in the moment, and to employ strategies to modulate overwhelming emotions.

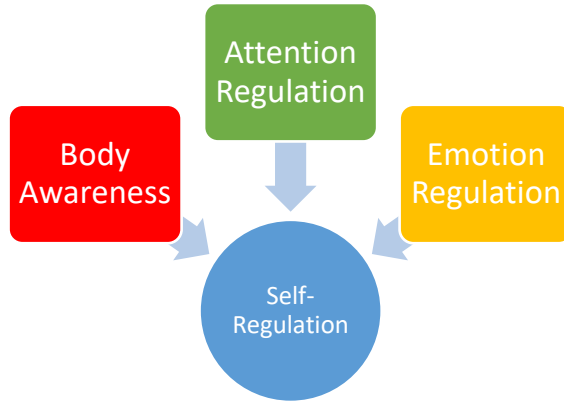


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Fig. 1: The Components of Self-Regulation, David Treleaven, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness*



IV. A Sense of Transcendence

IJS Educating for a Jewish Spiritual Life Curriculum by Rabbi Sam Feinsmith

Lisa Miller, Ph.D.’s cutting edge scientific work on child spirituality reveals the power of the transcendent relationship, that is “a sense of a close personal relationship to God (or nature or the universe or whatever term each person used for higher power) and a vital source of daily guidance,” as an indispensable foundation for emotion regulation and wellbeing in children and adolescents (as well as adults!). Along with the developmental surge of puberty and sexual maturation, adolescents, especially, innately hunger for the transcendent relationship, meaningful relationships with others, and a sense of being part of the universe. **Research shows that teens who have developed this kind of spirituality experienced “a 30 to 40 percent reduced risk for substance abuse and depression, two times greater benefits than for adults.”**¹ Without the tools to satisfy their hunger for intense connection and transcendence, kids often turn to “quick-fix” alternatives such as drugs, alcohol, pornography, or sex. These mimic the intensity and

¹ Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child*, pp. 71-72.



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connection of the transcendent relationship, at least for a time. Yet they ultimately leave kids feeling more isolated, disconnected, and dejected, placing them at much higher risk than they would be if they were able to generate a healthy dose of spirituality from within. **In other words, if we don't provide kids with the tools for self-regulation and transcendence, they will find unhealthy alternatives that undermine their wellbeing.**



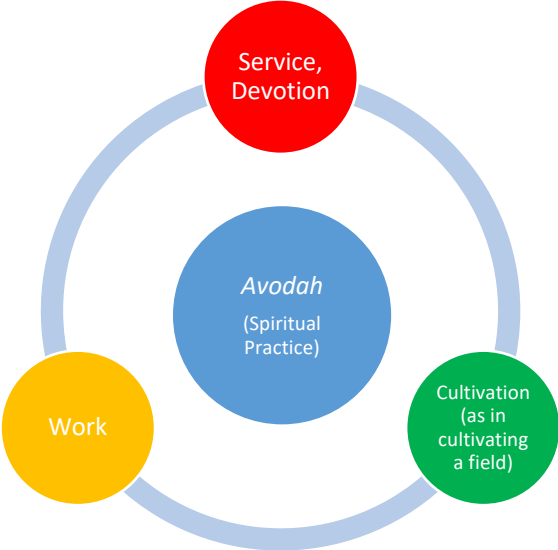
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How can Mindfulness Practice be Done Jewishly?

I. Fig, 2: The Wheel of Jewish Spiritual Practice, *Avodah*

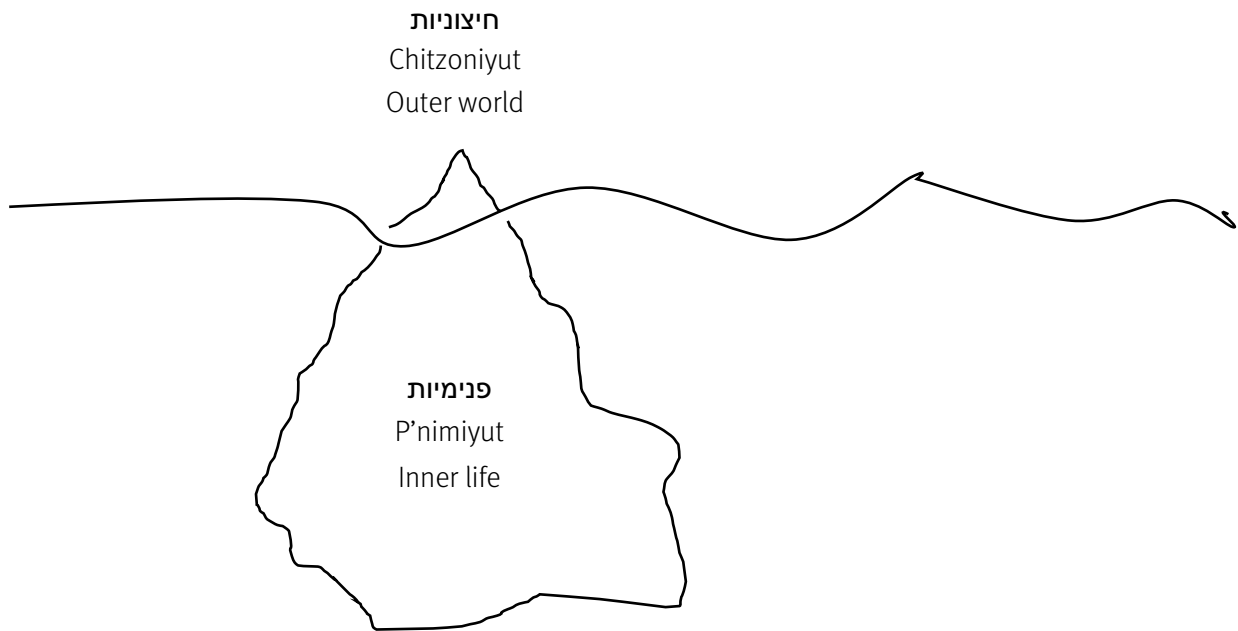


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II. Fig. 3: Attention Regulation: from *Chitzoniyut* to *P'nimiyut*



Rabbi Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir (trans. by Lawrence Kushner and Nehemia Polen)

There once was a pious Jew who prayed that he be saved from *pizzur ha-nefesh* (literally “scattering of the soul”), becoming unfocused, fragmented, not being centered, being “all over the place.” Such is the inescapable outcome of trying to own too many things in too many places all at the same time. Since God’s oneness is the root of all being, then to join oneself with God is to unify oneself...Consider that the source of our alienation from God’s commandments and even from God lies in our personal disintegration, our fragmentation. Our brokenness is overcome by saying *echad*, “One.” By reflecting on God’s unity, we begin to recover our own.”

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III. Jewish Mindfulness Meditation Practice: *Shabbod*

Sfat Emet, Noach (1872), Rosh Chodesh Marcheshvan

The holy Sabbath is like Noah's ark. For during the week each of us is burdened with worldly business. But on the holy Sabbath, there is enough spaciousness for us to retreat and let go of all of our busy-ness in order to take refuge under the shade of the wings of the *Shekhinah* (divine Presence). And this is [the meaning of] spreading a *sukkat shalom* (shelter of peace), just as Noah was hidden away in the Ark, which represents surrendering into the root of our vital life force (*chayut*). For the whole world was being destroyed, and needed to receive new vital life force from the Source of life. And so too every holy Sabbath, as we mentioned above.

שפת אמת פרשת נח תרל"ג ר"ה
מרחשוון
ושבת קודש כמו תיבת נח. שבימות
החול טרוד כל אחד בעסקי עולם
הזה, ובשבת קודש יש מקום לבני
ישראל לברוח ולהניח כל זאת
להסתופף תחת צל כנפי השכינה.
והיא פריסת סוכת שלום (תפילת
ערבית של שבת), כמו שהיה נסתר
נח בתיבה, והוא הביטול לשורש
החיות. שכל העולם חרב
והיה צריך לקבל חיות חדש משורש
החיים וכן בכל שבת קודש כנ"ל
(כנזכר לעיל).

Text-to-life questions:

1. What are the emotional, mental or physical storms in your/your students' life?
2. Where do you go to find a refuge in the storm?
3. Do you feel that your school or learning community provides such a refuge for your students? How so?



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IV. *Tikkun Middot* Practice: *Cultivating Savlanut* (Forbearance)

Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezeritch, *Likkutim Yekarim*, 15c

We must study pride yet not become prideful, anger but not get angry, and so too with all *middot*. For we must be whole, [embodying] all the *middot* that are found within the Blessed One. And the Blessed One contains both severity (*din*) and compassion (*rachamim*).²

Text-to-life questions:

1. How might you go about studying pride, anger, or any other potentially harmful *middah*?
2. Which of your own or your students' *middot* do you tend to meet with severity? What does that look and feel like? At what cost?

² The seven lower *sephirot* are also known as *middot*. The Tree of Life transcends and embraces all of them, creating integral harmony between all of the *middot*. It is only within such an integral whole that transcends each of its component parts that polar opposites like severity (*din*, also known as *gevurah*) and compassion (*rachamim*, also known as *chesed*) can work in tandem to contribute to the health of the entire divine Organism.



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V. Mindful Tefillah Practice: Shema Ears

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד

Text-to-life questions:

1. What does it mean to witness something?
2. What does it mean to really listen to someone or something?
3. What's the relationship between being present and bearing witness to our own thoughts without getting swept into them?

Gleanings: Insights, Observations, Questions, Takeaways

