

## **Jewish Meditation: A New Religious Hybrid or Ancient Jewish Form? (and why all the fuss?)**

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September 2012

### **Objectives**

These materials are designed to help students consider how religious traditions change and adapt in the face of other religious traditions and practices. We focus on the case of Jewish meditation, a contemporary form of meditation that incorporates Jewish language, texts, and interpretations. Observers and practitioners of Jewish meditation have strongly – differing – perspectives about what it is and what impact it has (and should have) on Judaism. Less has been written about its impact on Buddhism. By the end of this session students will be able to a.) describe some of ways that Jewish meditation is practiced b.) say a bit about its history c.) outline the arguments Jewish observers make about its value and d.) discuss several reasons the practice has become as contentious.

We suggest students read at least some of the background materials below before coming to class. In class, we suggest that you watch / listen to the videos / audios in the documents that we prepared that provide context about the debate around the “authenticity” of Jewish meditation. Questions for further discussion can be used either for class discussion or future assignments.

### **Background to Jewish Meditation**

Beginning in the 1950s, eastern religions including Buddhism and Hinduism became more accessible to non-Asians in America, leading Jews (and non-Jews alike) to study their teachings and practices, especially Buddhist meditation. In the early 1990s, Jewish practitioners of Buddhist meditation began to incorporate Buddhist techniques and practices into Judaism. The blending of Judaism with these Buddhist practices, particularly sitting in silence, being mindful of the present moment, and engaging in concentration and awareness exercises, has come to be known as Jewish meditation. Typically, Jewish meditation takes place in a Jewish context (be that a synagogue or Jewish retreat center) and is lead by a Jewish teacher.

The growth of Jewish meditation has led a number of Jewish teachers, some of whom feel that this marriage of the traditions was dangerous to Judaism, to re-examine ancient Jewish texts in search of Jewish-rooted meditative practices. These teachers argue that Judaism has its own long history of contemplative and meditative practices, and they

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<sup>1</sup> The research on which these materials are based was made possible by a generous grant from the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation. Sara Shostak, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Brandeis University, assisted with that research. Philip Gallagher assisted with these teaching guides.

have worked to uncover, translate, and pass on ancient Jewish meditation techniques to contemporary Jews. These teachers feel that Jews should study and practice “Jewish” meditation rather than turn to Buddhism or other eastern religions for meditative practices. Other teachers of Jewish meditation contend that the history of Judaism contains many instances of “borrowing” from other religious traditions, and view the adoption – and adaptation – of Buddhist meditation as just another of these instances.

There is much debate among Jews today about Jewish meditation. One group - mostly Jewish meditation teachers who incorporate Buddhist practices into Judaism - argue that Buddhist practices serve to enhance Judaism. Another group of teachers feel that Buddhism is a threat to Judaism and that Jews should be practicing “Jewish” meditation techniques rather than adopting Buddhist practices.

### **Background Reading**

- Davis, Avram. 1999. “Getting our Bearings,” *The Way of the Flame: A Guide to the Forgotten Mystical Tradition of Jewish Meditation* Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishers, p. 15-37.
- Lew, Alan. 1999. “It Doesn’t Matter What You Call It: If It Works, It Works,” In *Meditation from the Heart of Judaism*, Ed. Avram Davis. Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishers, p. 43-52.
- Cooper, David. A. 2000. “Introduction,” In *The Handbook of Jewish Meditation Practices*, Ed. Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishers.
- Ellertson, Kristin 2009. “Is Meditation a Mitzvah.” *Schmooze Online*. October 7: <http://www.schmoozemag.com/?p=1167>

### **Class Exercises and Discussion**

#### *Overview*

We suggest you start by outlining the objectives for the session, listed above, and by brainstorming with students what – if anything – they knew about Jewish meditation before doing the readings for today.

To help students get a sense of what Jewish meditation is and how it is taught we provide some in-class materials for students to read and listen to that will help them better understand how two groups of people think about Jewish meditation.

Please start by dividing students into small groups of 3-5 students. Ask each group to spend between fifteen and twenty-five minutes (depending on the length of the class) reading the documents attached. If time is short, have some groups read document A and others read document B. Alternately, you could set up the questions and have students review either Document A or B in one class session and have the group discussion in a second class session. Each document contains biographical material about a teacher who represents one side of the debate, an audio/video clip of the teacher discussing Jewish meditation, some interview material in which the teacher talks about his or her relationship to meditation. We also include a number of discussion questions.

Bring the class back together for a full class discussion. Some approaches that might be helpful for discussion are:

- Ask the students to make a list of the arguments that teachers in each group make
- Ask the students to describe how the teachers they read about think about and practice meditation differently
- Explain that Rabbis Davis and Weinberg understand Jewish meditation- its history, practice, and value- very differently. What are some of the things that are at stake in their approaches?
- Ask students if they can think of ways and/or places that these teachers' disagreements might come to a head

### **Questions for Further Discussion**

1. Do you see Jewish meditation as an example of religious hybridity (i.e. the blending of two unrelated traditions) or as a modern interpretation of an ancient Jewish form?
2. Rabbi Davis argues that you “cannot separate a strong spiritual practice from its roots because it is always drawing from that root.” Do you agree or disagree with this view?
3. Rabbi Weinberg argues that "mindfulness" or "sitting" or "paying attention" from Buddhism only enhances Judaism. To what extent do you agree that religious borrowing and exchange serves to strengthen Judaism?
4. What does this case study suggest about inter-religious mixing and exchange that can help teachers and religious leaders respond to the demands of balancing openness and acceptance with religious integrity and faithfulness to a tradition?