

Document A: Buddhism as Destructive to Judaism

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Teacher Spotlight: Rabbi Avram Davis, PhD

Rabbi Avram Davis, Ph.D. is the founder of Chochmat HaLev, a Jewish Renewal community in Berkeley, CA that uses meditation as one of its core practices. He received his B.A. and M.A. in Jewish Studies and Ph.D. in comparative philosophy. He is the author of two books: *The Way of Flame*, *Judaic Mysticism*, and the editor of *Meditation From the Heart of Judaism*. Rabbi Davis currently identifies as an Orthodox Jew and lives in California with his family.

Overview

As you read and listen to the materials below, please pull out the arguments Rabbi Davis makes for or against the blending of Judaism with Buddhism. Please also consider these questions as you read:

- How does Rabbi Davis think about and understand Jewish meditation?
- What are the sources of his beliefs?
- What does he think about Judaism's relationship with Buddhism?
- Why do you suspect he feels the way that he does? What factors do you think shaped Rabbi Davis's perspectives?

Before coming to class you should have read:

- 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.

Please now skim:

- Davis, Avram. 1999. "Best Practices: A Distillation of Techniques and Outlook," In *Meditation from the Heart of Judaism*, Ed. Avram Davis. Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishers, p. 217-228

Video

This video below showcases Rabbi Avraham Arie Trugman, the Director of Ohr Chadash, discussing the history of Jewish meditation. He teaches and thinks about Jewish meditation similarly to Rabbi Davis.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WORwKc_IAQc (Watch from beginning to 2:25)

Interview Excerpts.

This interview with Rabbi Avram Davis was conducted by Emily Sigalow. Spring, 2012

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ES: I'd just like you to tell me a little bit about the story of your upbringing. I mostly just want to hear about your childhood, where you were living, what you were doing, who was important to you in that chapter of your life. I just want to have a little bit of a sense of where you came from.

AD: I grew up in Southern California. I was always pretty dreamy. I was a mix of a dreamy kid and a very physical kid. I came from just a very modern family. I started getting religious when I was 13. It's been getting more and more of a zigzag since then. I felt the presence of God very early, served in the IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] as a young man, traveled a lot, lived in India, traveled across Central Asia as a young man. The death of my father and grandfather within a very short period of time in my late teens affected me and made me even more spiritually minded than I had been previously. So I'm married and I have four kids, and there we are.

ES: Can you tell me a little bit about the Judaism that you grew up with, what your Jewish background was?

AD: Just kind of a mixed family, modern American, not very religious, celebrated basic holidays.

[break]

ES: Were there any key moments that marked important changes in your relationship with Judaism?

AD: Yeah, I've had many changes of Judaism. It's always, it's a dance... As long as you're engaged in the dance, you're still part of the thing. If you're not engaged in the dance, then it doesn't matter if you're a whole other person or not. You're not engaged. I mean I went deeply into orthodoxy and ultra-orthodoxy as a young man. And then with the idealism of a young man, seeing the flaws in that world, a middle-aged man, who knows, somewhere around there. In any case, I believed that liberal Judaism, coupled with a relatively strong praxis was really the way to go. And then went on and did my PhD and founded Chochmat HaLev, and did that for a good bit of time. And then came to the belief that a strong practice is good, but liberal Judaism was ineffective for me and for my family, and for Judaism, frankly. I'm kind of jumping decades, here, but then moved out to the country and did subsistence farming with my family for the last four years....

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So for about the last five years have been really re-entered into the world of my younger years, which is basically an orthodox Hasidic practice pretty straight through,

coupled with always the truth of the history of my life. I'm very familiar with the secular world, I'm very familiar with the academic world, I'm very familiar with a wide range of literature, both religious and literary, which much of the Haredim world is not. So I don't deny that aspect of my personal being. So I mean there's no one thing that pushed me in that direction. I can actually sum it up, and did while living in the country, if that's useful I can do that.

ES: Sure.

AD: Liberal Judaism is basically an event-driven religion. It's become an event-driven path that works by events. What is the next big event? Similar to much of American life, when is the next big thing? This is often the topic of conferences: What's the next big thing? But a true religion, especially a particularistic religion, and here we're getting into my dissertation work, can't live that way. It can't live by events any more than a married couple or a couple that is raising children can live by events. It's not an even you get up in the middle of the night to change diapers. It's not an event to take care of your sick child when you yourself need to pass out. It is something that you just have to do, and that is the way that, again, a particularistic or a tribal religion like Judaism or Navajo has to do. It cannot be driven by an event. At Chochmat we made the best event venue around. In its heyday, there was no better show in town. We'd have 350—we'd have the fire marshals come to clear us out because I deliberately sought to mix passionate, feeling Judaism with Black Baptist revival. So we had a very, very intense experience. People had a tremendous *zetsst*. But my hope had been that that would always move people toward a greater practice. But in fact, I was swimming upstream because it goes against the way American culture is going, which is, "That was a great event. Now it's time to go to Burning Man. Now it's time to go to Rainbow Festival. Now it's time to go get hamburgers." I mean whatever it is, what is the next event? What have you done for me lately? It was very, very, very hard for me to accept that because I had poured so much of my own energy into building the place...

ES: M-hm.

AD: Within the Buddhist community... cross-cultural borrowings is fundamentally flawed.

ES: How so?

AD: It depends which meditation tradition you want to choose from and which approach is being used. Let's say if you're doing Kabat-Zinn who has done his damndest to divorce "meditation" from a religious milieu. But the truth is you cannot take—and this is a fundamental belief in my own thinking, you cannot separate a strong spiritual practice from its roots because it is always drawing from that root. You cannot speak about the root, but it is always drawing from the root. In this case, what is the root that I mean? It

was called mindfulness. Mindfulness is another word for detachment, and detachment is another word for disassociation. Are all the Buddhists disassociated? No...But in the laity, it always is moving, now matter how much Zinn tries to remove it, toward a formation of the mind that is dissociative. And therefore, it is absolutely *avodah zarah* [idol worship] from my point of understanding of Torah. Because the point of Torah is always to associate you, is to make relationship, is what I mean. If we draw upon another path like Tibetan Buddhism, it's the same question, the same problem coupled with the fact that it also has the multi-layers of what a religion has in terms of where there's prostration and visualizations, prayer supplications, and so on and so forth.

ES: And so when you think about Jewish meditation, or perhaps Jewish meditation as it's practiced at Chochmat HaLev, what do you see as the antecedents of that or as the roots?

AD: We always drew, and in terms of the people that we taught or tried to teach, always drew from Jewish roots and Jewish texts, both fragmented and whole. We never drew from any Buddhist, Christian, or Hindu texts. Because this is a parallel kind of path between the—I understand the meditation is your primary focus—between the revivalist aspect of Chochmat and meditation teaching at Chochmat. There are parallel tracks, and there is some overlay, but they were really quite separate. I was always very clear, very firm, never to draw, and was quite hostile to drawing from any Buddhist source. That's why I never had Buddhist teachers come in to teach or speak, or Hindu teachers, or Christian teachers. Even when I was at my most liberal, I had most faith in aspect of the liberal agenda, religiously liberal.

ES: How did you find the sources within Jewish tradition to teach from?

AD: Oh, there's a lot of source material. Whether we go with Kaplan... for academic stuff, Kaplan for religious direction, Pinson, the Hebrew texts themselves. And not even getting into Kabbalistic—I was actually just speaking primarily of Hasidic custom. If we get into Kabbalistic practice, practically any text, it depends on which kind of Kabala, practical Kabala or philosophic Kabala. Practical Kabala is like making amulets and magic. Philosophic Kabala is more the why of things, which is primarily drawing on meditation...and permutation.

ES: There's a trajectory in which teachers ...have taken some of the Buddhist traditions and brought that into Judaism. And then there's another trajectory in which people—

AD: They've brought it into sectors of Judaism.

ES: Into sectors of Judaism. And then there's another trajectory in which Jewish people are actually going back to their roots....Do you have any sense of why these things were happening almost simultaneously?

[break]

AD: I think religion, in terms of, things don't work by fads, exactly, but they do sort of work by fads, a little bit by fashion. There are moments in time, you know? There are moments in time that everyone wore bell bottoms. It's hard to believe, but it's true. And there are moments in time, moments in history, where either all religion or some types of religion have...have an added push. Buddhism has been in this country a long time. About 20 years ago it got an extra big zest. Why? Why? They had good writers, people were doing a lot of acid, I mean whatever the reason. It had a big zest so that it pushed along rapidly, got into the public consciousness. I think that that moment is passing, both for it and for Judaism. There was a great flurry of interest in, for example, Hasidic Judaism, and Judaism in general, which I think is waning for many different reasons. I don't mean it in a pejorative sense, just kind of the moment passes. So I think that is part of what happened. There was a strong meditation puff that happened, a strong mystical bent among many, many people. Why? Because. ... The push right now for most people your age and younger is to make a living. It's not a bad thing. I'm not knocking it. I may sound like I'm pooh-poohing it, but I'm not. These things wax and wane, and that was a moment of waxing with some [teachers] who I actually, on a personal level, like, but whose work I believe is deeply destructive to Judaism.

ES: Do you feel like your work was in some ways a reaction to hers?

AD: No. No. But one, we all lived in the same town... And it took me a while to get my head straight about how, why I was feeling, on a visceral level, kind of hostile to this shotgun wedding between Buddhism and Judaism. I have academically the intellectual tools to be able to unpack it, but it took me a while.

ES: And what is your understanding?

AD: It's what I spoke about before, that ultimately you cannot divorce long-term spiritual practices from the root from which they derive their strength. They are always connected, whether they be invisible or not.... It is to chisel, to use a Kabbalistic term, to chisel your brain in a certain way so that it perceives in a certain kind of way. So if you chisel your brain in the way of being mindful, I am mindful of this orange. What does that mean? I am thinking about this orange. I am conscious of this orange before I eat it... But it is not the thrust of the religion, which is to be joined, to be unified, to be one with the orange. But the glue that holds that together in Jewish is-- a place of passion, of of heart, of fire. Totally, totally different root, and it keeps coming back to that. ...I've got them [the books of the teachers of Buddhism who are of Jewish background] here, ... Jewishly speaking, *avodah zara* [idol worship], ultimately, because it leads to the wrong place, Jewishly speaking.

ES: Where does that lead to?

AD: Partly what I just said, and partly it's impolite to say where their trip leads them. But you don't need to be a weather man to know which way the wind blows, as Bob would say, you know? It's clear it's not leaning toward Torah.

ES: Are there any similarities between the Jewish meditation practices and the Buddhist meditation practices, that you see?

AD: Yes. All meditators, to some degree, are brothers and sisters under the skin. Buddhist, Hindu, *avodah zara* people. But again, to quote the Yiddish, a fish can love a bird, but where do they make a home? You with me here? You follow my logic?

ES: If you had to think of more specific similarities—

AD: You sit quietly for certain kinds of meditation. That's a similarity. You bring focus to bear, and here it gets very loose what we mean by meditation. I mean you sit quietly and focus on your textbook. You sit quietly and focus on your baby nursing, or whatever.

ES: If you had to define meditation, how would you do that? I know that's hard.

AD: Right. It's impossible, really. I go back to the more classic understanding. It's like that Yates poem, "We must return now to where all beginnings start, that foul, ragged bone shop of the heart." A person has to go back to the very fundamental. Meditation is designed to bring you to unity with your soul...An inelegant definition.