

IS MEDITATION JEWISH?

The practice of mindfulness is training the mind to pay attention to what is happening in the here and now. It is not usually associated with Torah or Judaism. Most people link it to Far East, where Hinduism and Buddhism thrive. In the 1960's and 70's, Eastern gurus came to North America and Europe to teach western people how to meditate. Many unaffiliated Jews searching for truth and spirituality gravitated towards these teachers and many of them became gurus in their own right. Over the last 50 years, Western meditation practices have evolved, isolated from religious practice. CEO's, lawyers, policemen, moms, and students all turn to meditation as a way to relieve stress, and become happier, healthier, and more productive.

Contemporary Torah Judaism places the emphasis on Torah scholarship, prayer, and the performance of the commandments as instructed in detail in the Torah. It is very much a communal path in which personal meditation doesn't seem to play any part. But has that always been true?

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan writes in his book "*Jewish Meditation*" that meditation played a big part in Jewish life in the period before the diaspora. He writes:

"In any case, it appears from both biblical and postbiblical sources that meditation was central to the prophetic experience and that this experience was attained in the meditative state. The Bible states explicitly that the prophets used chants and music to attain higher states of consciousness." (*Jewish Meditation*, p. 41)

In reading the Bible, one might think that only the prophets mentioned in the *Tanach*, were the ones practicing meditative techniques to attain prophecy. But this is simply not true. Millions of people in the Land of Israel were occupied in this discipline. Rabbi Kaplan explains:

"There is also evidence that during the period when the Bible was written (until approximately 400 B.C.E.) meditation was practiced by a large proportion of the Israelite people. The Talmud and Midrash state explicitly that over a million people were involved in such disciplines. Regular schools of meditation existed, led by master prophets. The master prophets, in turn, were under the leadership of the primary prophets, the ones actually quoted in the Bible. In these schools, people were taught meditative methods in order to attain a closeness to G-d..." (*Jewish Meditation*, p. 42)

Today, we can reconnect with our ancient tradition by following the advice of the Rambam and the Piaseczna Rebbe, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapiro, to sit for a period of time before prayer in order to clear our mind and focus our attention on the words written in our prayer books. The practice of mindfulness is a way to do this without compromising our practice of Judaism.