

What is Jewish Meditation?

This question is similar to "What is Jewish Music?" Is it a special form or genre of music that is specifically Jewish, or is it the music that Jews make? The same question could be asked of Jewish Meditation: Is it a specific practice that is "Jewish" or is it any meditation that Jews practice?

Other religions also have meditative traditions but they differ from the Jewish way not so much in technique but in the goal to be attained. Christianity and Islam emphasize G-d's immanence, His presence in the world and prayer plays a central role in their rituals. In emphasizing G-d's immanence, they recognize the role Divine Providence plays in collective human history and the personal lives of every single person. But in so doing, they do not recognize G-d's utter transcendence and in a sense limit G-d to being the behind the scenes mover of the world. They limit understanding of G-d to the role of King of Kings but nothing more.

The religions of the east like Buddhism don't talk about God's immanence so much as His transcendence. In fact they don't really talk about G-d at all. Buddhist's talk about the causes of suffering and the truth (dharma) that will free you from suffering. Hinduism recognizes a supreme deity, Brahman, as being the genderless, creator of reality, but they also recognize lesser gods who have dominion over different realms of the world and human society much like the pantheon of Greek gods in the time of ancient Greece. The world is seen to be an illusion and only the unknowable spirit is real. So in the east meditation and spiritual practice leading to spiritual awakening take precedence.

Judaism's understanding of G-d is a joining of the transcendent and immanent. G-d is ultimately defined as beyond our understanding the *Ain Sof*, but at the same time is intimately involved with the world and all the creatures that inhabit it. So in Judaism, prayer is important, but so is Torah study and the fulfillment of mitzvot. The goal is bringing holiness into the world from above by means of prayer and Torah study and sanctifying the physical by fulfilling the mitzvot. General meditation is in my opinion a preparation for prayer because one who is focused and aware of the thoughts that distract him, is able to pray with *kavana*, intention. Meditation is what allows us to feel G-d's presence in our lives and at the same time know that He is ultimately unknowable.

The reason that meditation is not taught or given importance in Judaism today is that we as a nation are still in exile. Rabbinic authorities over the centuries felt that the esoteric teachings taught by the prophets and sages during the first and second Temples could be misused so that banned it from

being taught to the masses. The tradition was kept alive by select individuals who were trusted to protect the sanctity of the teachings.

In 1979, the Lubaitcher Rebbe observed that there were many Jews looking for spirituality in the form of meditation from alien sources, meaning the far east. He encouraged the development of kosher meditation that would give Jews thirsting for spirituality something not contaminated with Avoda Zara. On 28 Nisan 5751, three years before he passed on. When he said in a short discourse that he doesn't understand why Mashiach hasn't come yet. He said if only ten Jews would really want Mashiach, He would have come already. The Rebbe then said that he had done all he could and that now he was giving the job over to the Chassidim. The final line is the one I want to emphasize here. " **The main exile that exists is the inner exile in matters of service of G-d.**" (בעניני עבודת השם בגלות פנימי) meaning that the main work to bring the redemption is the inner work that each person must do.

Biblical Names For Meditation

There are several words in the Torah that appear to be instructing us to practice meditation. The first word in the Torah that seems to indicate a meditative state is the word *dom* (דום). The literal meaning of the word *dom* is silence as in the verse "...vedom Aharon" which literally means Aharon was silent (Vayikra 10:3). When Aharon was faced with the sudden death of his two sons during the inauguration of the *Mishkan*, his brother Moshe spoke to him, telling him words that helped him to accept their deaths with humility. "This is what G-d said to me, saying, with those close to me I will be sanctified and before all the people I will be honored" Then Aharon was silent.

When the sun stood still for Joshua giving his army time to defeat their enemy before darkness the Torah states: "...veyomer le-ainai Yisrael shemesh b'Givon dom"(yehoshua 10: 12) Here the word *dom* means stillness.

The word *dom* is mentioned several times in the Book of *Tehillim*. In chapter 37, verse 7 it states "*Dom le-Hashem veyitchllel lo...*" (*Be silent to G-d and wait for Him*). Rashi and other commentators say that this silence is a patient waiting and hoping for G-d justice and mercy to be expressed. Another amazing verse in *Tehillim* is "For You, silence is praise, G-d in Zion"(*Tehillim* 65:2). (לך דומיה תהילה אלוקים בציון). This verse is amazing because the entire Book of *Tehillim* is full of praises (the meaning of the word *Tehillim*). The commentator Rashi in the Talmud Megillah states that one should not be too verbose in praise of G-d, for too many words ultimately diminish G-d's Being into human terms. When we praise G-d we are not really praising Him, we are praising His attributes or His actions. Every name we give to G-d expresses a certain quality in His relation to creation. The name ל-א

indicates G-d's kindness, the name אלוקים indicates His strict judgment and so on. Therefore our praises to Him are really glorifications of how He relates to us. But G-d's Essence can never be praised for it is totally beyond our comprehension. That is why King David says, "For You, silence is praise". The word "You" points to our relationship to G-d who is beyond all the names we give to Him. When we stand before G-d Essence, silence is our best expression.

In meditation, we sit in silence and stillness, meaning we aim to quiet down the noise in our environment and inside our heads, and we sit still, not restlessly moving from place to place. It is not easy because we are used to being busy. We need a sense of patience to wait for the noise to calm down but if we do, the result can be a feeling of inner peace and serenity that rewards us with more than all the frenetic activity can.

The second word for meditation is hege (הגה) . The first chapter of *Tehillim* states, ..."ubetorato yehege yomam velayla" meaning "and in His Torah he will meditate day and night". (*Tehillim* 1:2) The commentator Metzudat Zion writes that the word *hege* means both speech and thought. The thought he refers to is called the thought of the heart (*hegion libi*) The dual meaning of the word indicates that not only is Torah meant to be what we talk about all day, but it should be in our minds as well and in the depths of the heart. This heart thought is very important to meditation. Most of us are used to mental thinking. It is rational and logical and leads us to intellectual knowledge. Thinking from the heart is a deep kind of knowing, more intuitive and essentially pre-rational. It is connected to our emotions but it is not as unstable. This intuitive knowledge is where we want to get to in meditation.

Another meaning of the word *hege* is to read, more specifically to proofread. A *ba'al magiah* is one who checks the letters of the *sefer* Torah to make sure all the letters are there. It is a visual sense. The second stage of meditation is to set up a visual screen in our minds and see in our minds eye the object of our meditation. The Hebrew letters themselves can be a powerful focus of our meditations. The power to visualize is an excellent way for the unconscious mind to communicate our heart-thoughts with our conscious awareness. The word *hege* also means to steer as in the verse, "*ka-asher hu haga mahamesila...*" (when he steers from the path...) (Shmuel 2, 20:13). In modern Hebrew a steering wheel is called a *hege*. After we set up a scene in our imagination, we need to steer our way through it to reach our goal. This power to move through our imagination is essential in Jewish meditation.

The third word for meditation is *siach* (שיח) . When Eliezer returned to Avraham bringing with him Rivka as a bride for Yitzchak, the verse states, "Veyatza Yitzchak lasuach besadeh" (And Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field). (Beraishit 24:63) The literal meaning of *siach* is to speak, but here

it means a deeper kind of speaking, a dialogue between the soul and G-d. In meditation, one reaches a state where he or she is able to communicate with one's unconscious mind where one can learn wondrous things about oneself and about the world. This inner dialogue with the archetypes of the unconscious mind is one of the goals of Jewish meditation.

Perhaps the most well-known word for meditation in Hebrew is Hebonenut which generally is translated as contemplation. In Chabad Chassidut it means going deep into a discourse about the dynamics of creation until the ideas and development become crystal clear and from the awe of understanding how G-d created the world, we are brought to a feeling of love and fear of the Creator.