

Neo-Hasidic Meditation:

Mindfulness as a Neo-Hasidic Practice

Every day I sit down and pay attention. I simply try to notice what is actually arising at this moment. This practice has no particular identity. It isn't especially Jewish in any way, nor is it especially not-Jewish. It is profoundly influenced by western mindfulness teaching, arising out of the southeast Asian Theravadan Buddhist tradition. Yet, if asked to define it, I would call my own practice Neo-Hasidic mindfulness, a mindfulness practice that is both rooted in, and reinterpreting the Hasidic tradition. My own practice takes place within a broader Jewish life that is committed to mitzvot and Torah, though this technique is shared by many with different approaches to Jewish life and practice more broadly. Here I want to describe how I currently think about and understand this specific practice, its goals and its place in my Jewish life.

Neo Hasidic Mindfulness

Why do I do sit silently and pay attention every day? What does it do for me and to me? The goals of my practice are fundamentally the goals of the early (and some later) Hasidic masters in their own spiritual practice. I aim to give up the illusion of dualism and see that I, the divine, other humans, animals, plants and the inanimate world are truly not separate, that "there is no separation" (*ein perud bikhlal*), that we are all interpenetrated with each other.¹ I aim to realize self-annihilation (*bitul hayesh*), relinquishing my illusory sense of self that is grounded in my mistaken belief in separateness. I aim to touch the divine nothingness and radical openness (*ayin*) which is my true nature. I aim to wake up to the divinity of everything I encounter (*ein od*

¹ Esh Kodesh. "Massay, 5741, July 26, 1941." Jerusalem: Va'ad Haside Piaseczno (Committee of Piaseczno Hasidim), 5720 (1960), pp. 105-108.

milvado). I aim to be present in every moment, recognizing, that I am where my mind is and holiness requires a mind which is present and stable rather than lost in the storms of the world.² I aim to see myself clearly, to understand the nature of my heart, mind, body and soul, to achieve insight (*hasaga*) and understanding. I aim to free myself from pain (*tsara*) and suffering, anxiety and depression (*atzvut*) and experience joy (*simḥa*) and open hearted sorrow (*shevirat halev*), the fullness of my emotions (*hitragshut* as the Piaseczner understands it).³ I hope that, in the Besht's language, "all workers of iniquity will scatter" (Ps. 92:10) and my suffering will be transformed into willed presence (*tsarah* to *ratsah*). I practice to transform myself, to free myself, to see and become these more expansive ways of being and living articulated here.

The next category of goals my practice pursues is the cultivation of a host of dispositions and states of heart, mind and soul taught by the Hasidic tradition and the Jewish tradition more broadly. I practice to be more virtuous, to more fully realize my human self. These include the important Hasidic trio of joy, love and awe, but also compassion, gratitude, courage/daring, wonder, humility, trust/faith, equanimity, honesty, forgiveness, sensitivity, vulnerability, wisdom, understanding and insight. I so deeply want these qualities in my life, both for my own benefit and the benefit of others and I have found that my meditation practice is what allows me to cultivate them. On the one hand, they arise from mindfulness itself, simply committing myself to paying attention, which requires for instance love, courage and equanimity. On the other hand, they also arise from specific meditative practices that aim to cultivate these various dispositions

² Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, *Pesah, BeKhol Dor VaDor, Derekh HaMelekh*. Jerusalem: Va'ad Ḥaside Piaseczno (Committee of Piaseczno Hasidim), 5755 (1995), 357-358.

³ R. Shneur Zalman of Liyady. *Tanya: Likutei Amarim*, Bi-Lingual Edition. London: Kehot, 1998, Chpt. 26. *Bnei Maḥshavah Tovah* (BMT). *Seder Emtzaei VeYesod HaHevra*, §3, Jerusalem: Va'ad Ḥaside Piaseczno (Committee of Piaseczno Hasidim), 5749 (1989), 12. Shohet, Azriel. "On Joy in Hasidism." *Zion* 16 (1951): 30-43. [H]. Schatz-Uffenheimer, Rivka. *Hasidism as Mysticism: Quietistic Elements in Eighteenth Century Hasidic Thought*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993, 93-95.

by, for instance, repeating phrases that express or request the particular disposition.⁴ Indeed, herein lies a crucial role for the meditative power of prayer to foster specific states of heart, mind, body and soul. Classical Jewish prayer, as a practice of repeating phrases that express certain themes and emotional states (love, awe, gratitude) can be pursued as a meditative cultivation practice that nurtures these states of being. Though the previous goals (non-dualism, no-self, presence, the divinity of all, no-suffering, etc.) may be in some way more foundational or inclusive, it is the flourishing of these particular qualities that I most often notice in my practice and which help me become the kind of person I want to be.

There is a fundamental texture to the way these goals are pursued which is also a part of the goals themselves. The medium is the message. This constitutes the third category of what the practice aims to develop in ourselves. Indeed, one of the greatest innovations of the Besht and his students was their teaching of the radical acceptance of everything that arises, the relinquishing of guilt and judgment, the refusal to be trapped in negative mind states, and equanimity and acceptance. They advocated softness rather than rigidity, creativity, openhearted passion, resiliency, the embrace of the body and opposition to asceticism. Above all, they championed an approach of joy and the celebration of life.⁵ This soft opening to suffering and the safety and joy which arises from it, is what struck me most strongly as I began my practice years ago.

The fourth category and perhaps ultimate goal of all of this practice and the achievement of these dispositions, as grounded in the Kabbalistic origins of Hasidism, is tikkun (healing, transformation) on multiple levels. That tikkun includes my own healing, the healing of my communities and nation, the healing of all human beings, the healing of all creatures, and the

⁴ Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira. "The Subject of Quietening." *Derekh HaMelekh*. Jerusalem: Va'ad Haside Piaseczno (Committee of Piaseczno Hasidim), 5755 (1995),. 450-1. .

⁵ Jacobson-Maisels, James. "Inviting the Demons In: A Hasidic Approach to Suffering, Conflict and Human Failings." *Kerem*, 11, 5768 (2007-2008).

healing of the Divine-World-All. It aims to bring the redemption, to bring the messiah. Just as the Besht not only taught inner work but travelled the countryside healing those in distress and aiding those in need, so too our practice is not only incomplete, but flawed, if these qualities are not expressed in our actual behavior in the world— in family, community, politics, work, and every other aspect of our lives.

It is these goals which are primary, not my meditation practice. Yet my neo-Hasidic mindfulness practice, and the accompanying cultivation practices, are the anchor or pillar of my attempts to realize these goals. I have seen it transform me. Indeed, it has been the most powerful tool I have discovered to enable me to move closer to these goals. If not for this practice, not only would many of these goals be unapproachable for me, but it has only been through this practice that I have been able to truly understand so many of the core Hasidic claims and beliefs, not as intellectual concepts, but as felt embodied insights into the nature of how things are. Through my meditation practice I have seen that I am not separate; I have seen the illusion of the self. That doesn't mean that insight is always present in me or dominant, but it means that these Hasidic claims can be realized in me as part of my felt experience. They can be tasted and recalled, and not simply considered as intellectual or theological claims. Hasidic texts are not meant to be read as ideas but as generators of felt insights, and it is my mediation practice which has enabled me to access that level of the text.⁶ Though there may be infinite work before me, and yet a great many failings, I can see where I have travelled and how different it is to be where I am now than where I once was.

My Neo-Hasidic mindfulness practice has been particularly impacted by R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, the Piaseczner Rebbe, who is the most significant native teacher of

⁶ See the discussion of embodied knowing below.

mindfulness in the Jewish tradition. R. Shapira (whom I will also refer to as the Piaseczner Rebbe or the Piaseczner), my rebbe though I never had the *zekhut* to meet him, presents a systematic and powerful path of Jewish mindfulness (*mahshavah hazakah*). His teachings form the core of my own understanding and practice. My own personal practice and teaching of his spiritual path is one attempt to reclaim meditative elements of the Hasidic and broader Jewish mystical tradition. These elements were lost or discarded due to modernity and its antipathy to the mystical (especially for Jews trying to fit into and be accepted in a newly open western world), the Holocaust and the destruction of the Eastern European Jewish community, the greatest center of the bearers of these traditions such as R. Shapira, and the transformation of the Hasidic world from a more open, experimental milieu to a more routinized, dynastic context. Indeed, in R. Shapira's case, for instance, though he mentions and discusses his mindfulness meditation practice at multiple places in his works, our only step-by-step guide to at least one way in which the practice was actually performed, is from a letter from one student of his who, having fled the Nazi's to Kobe Japan, wrote down his recollections of the oral teaching he received from his rebbe.⁷ That oral teaching itself, direct from the master of the practice, is lost to us as a living tradition. We are lucky to have the remnant recorded by one of his students.⁸ The task I am engaged in, which I often term spiritual archeology, is an unearthing of these practices and an attempt to give them new life in our contemporary context. For me, R. Shapira's teachings are the key to such an endeavor because he teaches a robust, effective, and relevant path of spiritual practice and transformation.

⁷ Polen, Nehemia. *The Holy Fire: The Teachings of Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Rebbes of the Warsaw Ghetto*. New York: Jason Aronson, 1999, footnote 14, 159-60.

⁸ The Subject of Quieting." *Derekh HaMelekh*, 450-451.

R. Shapira teaches mindfulness as the intentional, non-judgmental, observation of one's experience.⁹ He describes how we flee our own experience due to our discomfort and fear, or our desire and craving, and how by doing so we numb ourselves, repress our emotions, stultify our experience and miss hearing the cries of our soul, telling us,

There are many emotions whose opening is like a drip, weak and slight. But if one were to expand one of them and actualize it, it would become a great river and stream of water which would never dry up. And if one does not expand it, it will be lost without ever seeing the light of day. Sometimes, for example, a person feels some discomfort within and he doesn't know if he needs to eat, sleep or drink alcohol, and the feeling disappears just as it came. And in truth it was a kind of extension outward of one of the limbs of the soul which desired to be actualized and to be aware with pure consciousness. So too [is this the case] sometimes with a feeling of joy or something similar. Because this emotion was not grasped in its corporeal garment, for a limb of the pure soul was extended, a person therefore doesn't know what it is and what he feels inside himself. It was a kind of rattling and convulsion of the soul. And he drinks alcohol, eats or does some other worldly thing. It is not that through this he quiets the soul convulsions. It is only that he enflames and incites his bodily feelings to roar and thunder, and the voice of the soul is not heard.

He then tells us how conscious attention and radical openness to everything that arises can allow those natural emotions and experiences, which themselves are divinity, to come forth and enable us to live our lives fully and discover the presence of God.¹⁰

Concerning this our fellowship adjures and declares to each one of our fellows: Know how to look (*lehistakel*). Concerning everything which occurs within you and without know how to look... We bring forth and birth the form of the thing until there will be a form which we can gaze upon... Perhaps you will find the hidden God and the holiness of His glory, and when you seek Him out you will find Him. Where will you find Him? In you and in all your surroundings.

Just by paying attention closely, that which is hidden is released and we become whole. He describes how awareness frees us from both aversion and harmful desire and allows beneficial passion and a full range of emotional states to come forth.¹¹ This emotional intensity, and the ecstasy it produces, is crucial for him to the practice of overcoming the false sense of self.¹² In

⁹ R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, "Chapt. 9, Part 4." Hakhsharat HaAvrekhim (HA). Hakhsharat HaAvrekhim, Mevo HaShearim (L'Hovat HaAvrekhim), Tzav VeZeruz. Jerusalem: Va'ad Haside Piaseczno (Committee of Piaseczno Hasidim), 5761 (2001). R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, Derekh HaMelekh (DHM), *ibid*.

¹⁰ R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, Bnei Maḥshavah Tovah (BMT). Jerusalem: Va'ad Haside Piaseczno (Committee of Piaseczno Hasidim), 5749 (1989). Chpt. 11, 27-30

¹¹ HA, Chapt. 9, Part 4, pp. 122-3. DHM, Sukkot 5690, Ushpizat Isaac, 282.

¹² This can be a contrast with Buddhist approaches as I will note below.

general, he sees emotion as crucial to and supportive of mindfulness and awareness, rather than as a hindrance.¹³ Indeed, there is a kind of insight and knowledge only accessible through heightened emotional states which are a vital part of the practice for “through his happiness and joy, which widens his soul, he sees with his entire soul.”¹⁴ At the same time, he teaches how our balanced mindful attention can prevent us from being swamped by our emotions and desires, how it can prevent us from being “an entrance way trampled by the events and ideas of the world” and enable us to develop equanimity, and emotional and psychological autonomy, often by dropping the surface story of the emotion and touching the felt-sense of it directly instead.¹⁵

The body, and awareness of the body, are equally central to his practice in his teaching a mindfulness practice of direct awareness of the body and its sensation. Like many early Hasidic masters, he teaches the divinity of the body and corporeality, and that “the body itself is divine light.”¹⁶ Moreover, he believes that there are forms and levels of insight and holiness which are only achievable through precisely the conjuncture of body and soul, that “the knowledge of holiness happens through being and vitality, and not with the intellect alone, but rather with the whole body as well” and this is the profound gift of being human.¹⁷ But his particular emphasis, for our purposes, is the way in which he presents the early Hasidic practice of worship in corporeality (*avodah begashmiyut*) as a mindfulness practice of direct awareness of the body and its sensations. Through investigating such sensations, there arises a non-dual awareness, which is in fact our natural mode of seeing, impeded only by the various barriers, fears and desires we

¹³ DHM, Maamar Hinukhi, 458

¹⁴ DHM, Rosh HaShana Second Night 5690,. 217.

¹⁵ DHM, Pesah, BeKhol Dor VaDor, pp. 357-358. , R. Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, Mevo HaShearim (MSH) (L’Hovot HaAvrekhim). Hakhsharat HaAvrekhim, Mevo HaShearim (L’Hovot HaAvrekhim), Tzav VeZeruz. Jerusalem: Va’ad Haside Piaseczno (Committee of Piaseczno Hasidim), 5761 (2001). 23

¹⁶ HA, Chpt. 10, 136-138.

¹⁷ DHM, Toldot 5690, 24-25, DHM, What is the Special Way of Investigation of Israel and Its Torah, 440.

have created or succumbed to.¹⁸ This awareness, revealed through body, then allows a perception of holiness and insight which would otherwise not be possible, an embodied knowing through meditative practice.¹⁹

These approaches to the heart and body, and the championing of direct perception rather than mere analysis, also present a critique of the intellect and judgment as the primary and most significant aspect of the human being. Rather, the intellect is considered a helpful but insufficient aspect of ourselves, which must be utilized carefully to be beneficial.²⁰ Hence, he advocates a practice that focuses on dropping analysis, observing thought rather than producing thought (and especially disengaging from harmful thoughts), and quieting the mind.²¹ Altogether, this mindfulness practice allows the practitioner to reach the state of no-self (*bitul hayesh*) and nothingness (*ayin*) we have described above. Through that state of non-identification, a profound love—the purpose of being human for the Piaseczner—flows into the world.²² For, “what is true lovingkindness (*hesed*) that we grasp? It is the purpose for which God created the entire human being, the purpose which was in God’s mind according to which He created the human being. If a person grasps this purpose then he grasps his soul and grasps the loving-kindness. And if not, he does not grasp his soul.” Here we see how this practice ends in tikkun, in making ourselves more loving beings and in bringing the healing of love to the world,

Neo-Hasidic Mindfulness and Buddhism

¹⁸ MSH, Chpt. 3, p. 224. DHM, *Simḥat Torah* 5690, 304-305, BMT, *Seder Emtzaei VeYesod HaHevra*, §12, 30-31. BMT, *Seder Emtzaei VeYesod HaHevra*, §14, 34.

¹⁹ DHM, *What is the Special Way of Investigation of Israel and Its Torah*, 440.

²⁰ DHM, *VaEra* 5689, 94.

²¹ DHM, *Subject of Quieting*, pp. 450-451. *Hovot HaTalmidim*. Tel Aviv: Va’ad Ḥaside Piaseczno (Committee of Piaseczno Hasidim), undated. *Instructions and Admonishments*, 155-157

²² DHM, *Motzei Yom Kippur, S.V. ki b’yom hazeh yikhaper...*, 276-277

Those familiar with Buddhist-based mindfulness teaching as transmitted in the west and its practice will notice that there are very few gaps between western mindfulness teachings and the Hasidic goals, and the Piaseczner's particular practice, as I have presented it above. Perhaps this is why my mindfulness practice has always felt so fully integrated with and supportive of my broader Jewish practice.

Yet, my practice is also profoundly influenced by and based on western Buddhist mindfulness practice and theory. It is perhaps the explicit acknowledgment of these outside sources and its import and impact that makes my practice *Neo-Hasidic*, recognizing with gratitude wisdom from other spiritual traditions that enriches our own spiritual practice.²³ And it is through the eyes of that training that I was able to understand, adopt and deepen into the contemplative practices taught, in our Jewish texts, by R. Shapira and others. My secular mindfulness training allowed me an insight into the texts and an ability to take on the practices in these texts that might otherwise have been impossible for me. My work of spiritual archeology, of uncovering and reclaiming Jewish spiritual practice, has been grounded in my contemplative training in the mindfulness tradition and it has combined the embodied teaching of mindfulness meditation received from living teachers with the textual teaching of Jewish spiritual practices from masters who are no longer with us.

This living tradition of mindfulness practice, as transported to the west, has been crucial because it has provided me with an unprecedented level of technical expertise, acumen, and understanding of the nature of mindfulness, from a tradition that has spent thousands of years

²³ Though, as I mentioned above, I am profoundly influenced by the Piaseczner Rebbe and consider him my rebbe, it is of course complicated and profoundly sad that I was not able to learn this material from a living rebbe. Indeed, in developing my path and practice I did not even have the opportunity to learn directly from Neo-Hasidic teachers, such as Reb Zalman, who were reintroducing spiritual practices to Judaism. In fact, it is from western mindfulness teachers, rather than my Jewish teachers (though no particular western mindfulness teacher has ever become my rebbe) that I learned meditation as a living tradition and as part of an unbroken lineage.

refining its understanding. These include, on a technical level, such aspects as the five hindrances (sensory desire, ill-will, sloth-torpor, restlessness-worry, doubt) and how to work with them, and a host of other similar insights and instructions. Its western guise has also incorporated western psychology and cultural understandings in a way that allows mindfulness to speak to my psychological situation differently than the core Buddhist sources do.

In addition, Buddhist psychology has profoundly influenced my understanding of myself, the world and Judaism, and is another deep underlying structure to my practice. Buddhist insights, such as the three feeling tones (pleasant, unpleasant and neutral) which characterize all experience, and our three instinctive responses to them (craving, aversion and ignorance), and the suffering they produce, have transformed how I understand my mind, emotions and behavior. They have also transformed how I understand the mind, emotions and behavior of others. The particularly Buddhist critique of the self and the importance of the truth of impermanence shape the way I think about existence in general and its nature in particular. These insights structure my life and practice, not only of mindfulness but more generally. Like my unconscious exposure to and absorption of popularized western psychology which leads me, for instance, to speak about the unconscious and repression as part of my religious life, understanding and reading of texts, so too core Buddhist insights have become part of how I see the world, myself and Torah.

Yet, my Jewish mindfulness is not merely Buddhist mindfulness in a tallit. Rather, Jewish, and particularly Hasidic, teachings shape my practice and its understanding sometimes in ways different from or in tension with Buddhist approaches. The Piaseczner Rebbe, for instance, has been profoundly influential in challenging me to open fully to my emotions, to use my mindfulness as a techniques to hold my emotions with compassion, to allow emotional release, and to see my emotions as divine expressions of my soul, in contrast to some Buddhist

approaches which focus more on equanimity in the face of emotion. Moreover, the Hasidic and Jewish tradition, and the Piasezner in his mindfulness practice, celebrate the importance and centrality of desire (while recognizing its danger), rather than its expungement, as a healthy and crucial part of the spiritual life. They warn of the dangers of guilt, depression and self-hatred, a concept, Sharon Salzberg famously reports, the Dalai Lama was not familiar with and had trouble understanding.²⁴ They champion awe, wonder and the continual amazement at the divine grandeur of our experience. They teach that our practice must be part of the broader project of *tikkun*, which stretches from ourselves through the world and to God, teaching us to see the inseparable connection between contemplative practice, compassionate behavior, justice and social action.²⁵

In this way, in the interplay between core Hasidic teachings, Buddhist-rooted western mindfulness practice, and the Piaseczner's teachings, a Neo-Hasidic meditation practice and theory has emerged. Classic Hasidic concepts have been transformed, expanded or more deeply understood in light of both Buddhist ideas and the Piaseczner's practice-rooted understandings of earlier conceptions. For example, consider the concept of *bitul hayesh* (self-annihilation) or, in its personal psychological meaning, *ayin* (nothingness). These two concepts are central to early Hasidic thought, especially for the Maggid of Mezherich and his students. It is clear that they describe a relinquishing of the sense of self, an awareness of one's divinity, a merging with divine presence, a letting go of self-importance and pride, a release of ego-based desire, which are replaced by a radical openness and flexibility beyond our habits, qualities or personal dispositions. Both Buddhist teachings and the Piaseczner, however, stress, in addition, the non-

²⁴ Schat, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, Chpt. 4, 91-110. Sharon Salzberg <http://www.sharonsalzberg.com/sit/>.

²⁵ Western mindfulness teachers (many of the Jewish) have applied mindfulness to emotion and the other issues mentioned in similar ways. It is an interesting question as to what extent the Jewishness of many of these teachers played a role in that process.

identification with any particular aspect of yourself. For instance, the Piaseczner teaches that, “For the body is called by the name of the person, and soul is also called the soul of so-and-so. Therefore the person must be found/really existent (*lehimatza*) outside/beyond his soul.”²⁶ Similarly, my mindfulness teachers, such as Michelle McDonald, Amita Schmidt, Sylbia Boorstein, Pema Chodron, Tara Brach, and others, stressed again and again that one of the foundational mistakes of what they called self-ing was our mistaken identification with our body, emotions, thoughts or some sense of solid identity or permanence, such as a soul. Here, the Piaseczner instructs us to drop any identification with any of those aspects of our self as none of them are ultimate.

In particular, the Piaseczner and my mindfulness teachers emphasize that letting go of the self has to do with detaching and untangling oneself from the thorn bush of the mind, “For, it is the way of thoughts to become entangled, one in the next, and so it is difficult for a person to separate himself from them” But to do so is crucial for it is “the sense of self (*yeshut*) that constitutes a barrier to the heavenly influx.” Which is to say, “If one’s thoughts and intellects are awake, it is difficult for the heavenly flow to penetrate.” Therefore, the practice, as my mindfulness teachers taught, is to “watch his thoughts... He will slowly feel that the mind is emptying; his thoughts are slowing a bit from their habitual flow.”²⁷ One must observe one’s thoughts, not identify or get lost in them, nor analyze them. In such a way one is no longer trapped in and identified with them and one can release the false sense of self they produce.

Similarly we might turn to one of the true Hasidic conceptual and practical revolutions which is their approach to *mahshavot zarot*, the distracting thoughts and feelings that arise when one is engaged in spiritual practice, most classically in prayer. Here my own understanding has been

²⁶ DHM, Motzei Yom Kippur, S.V. ki b’yom hazeh yikhaper..., 277

²⁷ Subject of Quietening, 450-451

due to a synthesis of Hasidic texts, which were powerful but not sufficiently clear as to how I could accomplish what they described, and the oral Torah of western mindfulness teachings. The distracting thoughts in question are often described as thoughts or feelings of improper desire, fear, anger or pride but can be one of an almost infinite variety of mental and emotional disturbances. The Hasidic revolution, taught by the Besht, was that instead of pushing such “distractions” aside, one must instead welcome them in and elevate them, for “through accepting [the pain] with joy, pain [*ts.r.h*] is transformed into willed acceptance [*r.ts.h*].”²⁸ For if one does not welcome these distractions in, if instead the practitioner “rejects them”, then “more haters are made through thickness and corporeality.”²⁹ The Besht tells us that our very resistance to these distractions or psychic assaults strengthens and increases them. Many texts describe this alternate approach, but what does it really mean to “accept with joy” or to not reject the distractions that arise? What is the Maggid precisely instructing us to do when he tells us that:

The principle is that all that a person sees and hears and all the occurrences which happens to him, they all come to awaken him. Whether it is a something concerning love, fear, Tiferet, Nezah, Hod, connection (Yesod), or governance (Malkhut) their principle is in two ways. Either there comes to him during prayer a bad deed which he did which comes before him in his thought in order to be healed and elevated. And this is like a parable of one who looks into a mirror who sees his visage reflected back, thus his deeds come to him in thought.. Or letters from the shattering (shevirah) come. And [he] needs to discern whether they are letters from love, fear or the other attributes. This [occurs] both during prayer and at any time. Sometimes a person is scared of some thing or creature. Everything comes to him to be raised...³⁰

How do we welcome in and elevate these distracting thoughts? How do we return them to their root? What does that mean precisely? How is one to accept, heal and elevate these qualities?

In these original texts it is not precisely clear to me what the details of the practice are and how to do them. But, through the experience of my own meditation practice, it is abundantly

²⁸ Besht, Keter Shem Tov HaShalem. Ed. J. Immanuel Schochet. Brooklyn: Kehot, 2004, §87c

²⁹ Besht, Keter Shem Tov, §75.

³⁰ R. Dov Baer the Maggid of Mezhirech, Maggid Devarav Le-Ya’akov. Critical edition with commentary, Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990, §161, 258-9.

clear what is required. First, instead of responding with aversion to these distracting thoughts, one turns to them with love. One literally welcomes them into your consciousness, observing them, loving them (with their discomfort and pain), and softening ones mind, heart and body in response to them. The softening is the dropping of resistance and the love is the welcoming with joy (if we understand joy as an openhearted embrace).³¹ This already, much of the time, provides a healing and elevation as one is no longer trapped in the emotional or mental state, but rather relating to it wisely and lovingly, like a mother holding a fussing child. Second, as we have mentioned in relation to the Piaseczner, one responds and relates to the root itself, the underlying feeling or texture, rather than the particular story of whatever thought pattern or emotion is arising. One doesn't get trapped in the story, and one's justification for one's anger, but rather touches the actual felt experience of anger itself. By simply turning one's acceptance and love towards the felt-sensation, it releases often, like a small child who only needed our attention. Third, when one has truly released the unhelpful experience that is arising, when one is no longer caught in it, there can be yet an aspect to the experience that is wise and helpful, something left over to elevate to the divine. Anger can become discerning wisdom, desire can become wise passion and caring, fear can become the sage recognition of our smallness and vulnerability and the experience of awe. Here is another example of how a Neo-Hasidic meditative approach understands core Hasidic concepts and utilizes them as part of contemplative practice. Here is the emergence of a Neo-Hasidic theory and practice from the dialogue between classical Hasidic teachings, western mindfulness, the Piaseczner Rebbe's contemplative approach and our own experience.

³¹ See this description of joy, which also includes broken-heartedness in Tanya, Likutei Amarim, Chpt. 26.

Neo-Hasidism, Mindfulness, Buddhism and Theology

Yet in our exploration of the dialogue and synthesis of Hasidism and Buddhist influenced mindfulness there is still to discuss, of course, God. We are monotheists; Buddhist are atheists. My practice, as I have described it, brings me into more intimate relationship with the divine, allowing me to see the divinity of all. Is this not a profound abyss between the two traditions? I'm not sure it is. In fact, in the context of my pragmatic, Hasidic-panentheistic, Maimonidean-apophatic approach to theology, I'm not sure whether the distinction, in at least some cases, is more than semantic. This is especially true when we start to think about notions like "Buddha nature" and more metaphysical conceptions of emptiness in Buddhism.

Yet even if there is some kind of philosophical tension, that is not my experience when actively engaging with the two traditions. In fact, in completely unexpected ways, mindfulness practice and three connected aspects of Jewish theology have resulted in my being opened personal theistic imaginings of God in a way I never thought possible. The elements which brought this change have been the critique of language and reification in both mindfulness and Maimonidean-apophatic theology, the pragmatic unsystematic nature of both midrashic and Hasidic descriptions of God and Kabbalistic theological pluralism (the many faces of divinity).

The critique of reification is the resistance, in mindfulness, to turning experience into something conceptual by filtering it through language, rather than relating to the bare nature of the experience itself. The critique of language in Maimonidean-apophatic theology is the claim that no language can ever capture the divine and that, if we must use language we should use negative language, describing only what God is not. Together, these critiques have, by challenging the very nature of language and theology, freed me to utilize images of the divine which were previously unacceptable to me because of their philosophical untenability. This

happened because these critiques allowed me to see theological statements and images simply as language which helps me point to and cultivate a certain types of experience rather than some kind of scientific metaphysical statement about the nature of God.

The pragmatic unsystematic nature of midrashic and Hasidic theology, the tendency in both midrash and Hasidism to work with multiple and even contradictory images of God without problematizing or being concerned with any tensions, has similarly freed me to play with images of God. This unsystematic nature of rabbinic and Hasidic theology arises, in my view, from the pragmatic nature of the teachings which seeks to form a certain kind of person and a certain kind of relationship with the divine, rather than actually trying to, in any scientific or philosophical sense, describe God. Here again, the tradition gives me permission to play with theological language and images to cultivate particular experiences and to shape the kind of person I want to be.

Finally, Kabbalistic theological pluralism, the way in which kabbalah presents many different faces and aspects of divinity as coexisting in both harmony and tension with each other, again enables a pluralistic theology which welcomes many images and moments without having to commit to any particular one. In this way, I have found both my mindfulness practice and Buddhist based insights conducive to a deepening and broadening of my theology. If anything, it has enabled faith rather than the other way around. This, for me, is the real test, for genuine tension is the tension of life and practice, not the tension of theory.

Integration and the Way Forward

What then does this integration of Hasidic theology, psychology and practice with Buddhist practice and psychology look like? In other words, what is Neo-Hasidic mindfulness meditation

and what are its conceptual underpinnings? In this article we have attempted to trace out the beginning of an answer to those questions, demonstrating how early Hasidic concepts are understood and realized through this practice and the Jewish mindfulness teaching of the Piaseczner. But we can't fully know yet. Yet I think our tradition has an important model in Maimonides' relationship to Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition. Maimonides makes no bones about his respect for and indebtedness to Aristotle (really a combination of Aristotle and Plotinus), and the Aristotelean philosophical tradition as transmitted and developed in the Arab world. He unabashedly incorporates Aristotelianism into his understanding of Judaism. In doing so, both Aristotelianism and Judaism are changed. With time, parts of Maimonides' legacy have faded, but parts became so centrally integrated into Judaism that they help to define our very understanding of it (such as the incorporeal nature of God). This is not dissimilar to Kabbalah's incorporation of Neoplatonism and its profound impact on subsequent Jewish thought, theology and practice. It is also parallel to contemporary Judaism's incorporation of western psychology into the way we think about ourselves, our texts and our practice in a radically different, yet largely unacknowledged way, due to western psychology's cultural dominance and hence assumptive-ness.

Maimonides is uniquely and profoundly modern in his explicit recognition of his indebtedness to non-Jewish sources and his claim that these sources help us see the true deep nature of Judaism and Torah. If we do this right, we will do the same. Like Maimonides, we can acknowledge our profound influence and indebtedness to a non-native tradition, in terms of both ideas (the doctrine of the mean) and practice (the practice of philosophy), while integrating it into native aspects of the tradition (which themselves are never "pure"), inevitably molding and transforming both. We can ground ourselves in our texts and the teachers of our lineage,

pursuing the goals of spiritual practice they have set for us, while incorporating truth and wisdom from wherever we can find it, particularly when it helps us to better achieve those goals. There are no a priori guidelines for this. There is only the step by step attempt to live in accordance with divine will. In doing so, we will reveal a deeper dimension of Torah, part of the ongoing process of revelation— recognizing the white fire which surrounds the black fire. In doing so, we will create and receive a practice which allows Torah to respond to our most pressing needs, as it always has, and describe a path of healing, repair and redemption. That is my hope and that is my practice.

For Further Reading

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