

Jewish Mindfulness Meditation

What Is It? How to Do It? And Why?

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Prepared by: Adam Fogel

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What Is It? How to Do It? And Why?

Life is not always easy. In fact, it rarely is! Truth can feel like the hardest thing to accept, but to realize that things are the way they are does not mean that they will always be so.

If you ever feel like things aren't quite going the way you want, you are not alone!

Everyone at some point experiences anxiety, upset, overwhelm, and feelings of being alone and disconnected from what is most important to them or even knowing what this is for them. This is expected. It is part of being alive. If you've experienced this, you are not alone! Welcome to humanity!

As a Psychologist and Marriage and Family Therapist, I know of no better practice to experience exactly who we are, as we are, and ought to be, than the practice of meditation. In meditation, we realize that there is nothing to do, nowhere to go, and no one special to be!

What is Jewish Mindfulness Meditation?

The practice of meditation is the practice of noticing and experiencing the Divine in all places and experience, no matter how strange, unexpected, or unwelcome. Experiencing Just What Is can be both terribly challenging and wonderfully mysterious and inspiring.

If you are interested in exploring and discovering an authentic and profound relationship with the Divine and your greatest potential, you are not alone!

Know that you are never alone!

The practice of meditation is thousands of years old and is found across the globe in all major religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and in Judaism, too! Though, we do not always understand what it is, what to do, and how to actually practice it.

After practicing meditation for over twenty years now, I've come to appreciate how easily I still want and expect some things to be different, or for that matter, many or most things. This too is normal. And very human!

I trust that if you are reading this, you are curious and interested in learning about meditation and how it can help you and others in your life. If you are reading this, I also trust that you are interested in learning and experimenting with how Jewish meditation can support you in your life and relationship with something greater.

When you meditate, you may notice a feeling of greater calm and relaxation. This may be a new feeling! It is a good thing, but as good and refreshing as it feels, feeling calm and relaxed are more like positive side effects than the goal of meditation.

Jewish meditation is about tuning in, not tuning out. Life is all too often complex and complicated. There can be what feels like millions of things to do, places to go, and people to be.

One of the natural gifts of meditation is that things do begin to slow down. What felt like shame or overwhelm in time often softens. This may take many months, years, or what feels like many lifetimes. It is possible, and it does happen!

It is important to remember that the true gift of meditation is not an escape from life, but realizing that true respite comes from acknowledging and accepting life as it is and yourself as you are.

Acknowledgment and acceptance does not mean staying static, unmoved, or acquiescing to painful or unhealthy situations. True acceptance is found in at least acknowledging how things are, that it is so, and knowing how to respond appropriately with compassion for yourself and others.

Jewish mindfulness meditation can help you develop and enhance your love and compassion for yourself and others, and perhaps even God. With patience and practice, it can also create and facilitate a deep, personal spirituality and create a contemplative, meaningful Judaism and a nourishing spiritual life!

Okay, I can hear you now, “This is interesting, but how do I start? And what do I do now?” This e-booklet will teach you when to start a meditation practice, what actually to do during meditation, and how to create a meaningful and thriving Jewish mindfulness meditation practice.

When Should I Start?

There is no right or wrong time to start a meditation practice. If you are interested in learning how to meditate, go ahead and start now! Literally! I know, you didn't read ahead and learn actually how to meditate, though it is fine. There is no problem. Just take five breaths now. Go ahead! Just breathe five times. It is that simple! You will learn more soon.

If now is a bad time to start, that is fine. There is no perfect time to learn how to meditate or begin a meditation practice. If you want to start now, the perfect time is now. If you want to start today, the perfect time is today. If today isn't good for you, then consider tomorrow, the day after, or the day after that. There is no rush! Your breath will always be there!

I trust that if you are interested in learning about Jewish meditation, you will start when you are ready. Meditation is a practice of acknowledgment and gentle acceptance, moment by moment, breath by breath.

Life can feel hard enough! Why add one more task or chore to do? Meditation isn't and shouldn't feel like one more thing you need to do or fit in your already very busy schedule. It doesn't have to be that way. Trust you will start when you are ready and able!

How Do I Start?

When you are ready to start, there are two styles of approach to beginning a meditation practice.

For some of you, you will decide that Jewish meditation is something you want to try and will do whatever it takes to meditate as much as possible starting right now. Maybe you'll even schedule it on your calendar. Even every day! This is an okay option.

For others of you, you will decide that Jewish meditation is something you want to try but will put it off until tomorrow, the next day, or the day after that. This is also an okay option.

My experience has taught me that what is most important is not the number of minutes, hours, or days that you meditate. What is most important is consistency!

If you decide to practice Jewish mindfulness meditation once a day, wonderful! Do it once a day! If you decide to practice Jewish mindfulness meditation once a week, wonderful! Do it once a week!

You are making a commitment to yourself. Just remember to be kind to yourself and to treat yourself the best way you know how.

What Do I do with my Body?

Meditation is a whole-body experience. It involves the entire body, heart, and mind. Each one of these, when attended to, becomes a gate of compassion and understanding.

For some people, the physicality and body mechanics of meditation comes very easily. But for many people, meditation can be hard work!

Rest assured, the goal of meditation is not to endure pain. As my Zen teacher taught me, “The number one rule of meditation is, ‘Do no harm!’”

The “Right” Posture

What is important to know as you learn how to practice Jewish meditation is that no matter what physical posture you use in meditation, maintaining a stable and grounded posture is vital.

Think about a tripod. How many legs must a tripod have to be stable? Three, of course! If a tripod had only two legs, or just one leg, it would fall over. We are the same way. When we meditate, our bodies create a tripod with our two legs and our bottom.

If you can, try to sit in a position where both of your knees are resting directly on the floor or [zabuton mat](#). This may require some hip flexibility and time, though maintaining a stable seated position is important.

Some people choose to meditate on the floor. Others prefer to sit in a chair. Feel free to experiment with different positions, chairs, and cushions. Allow yourself to play around with what feels right and best for your body.

I generally meditate on the floor with cushions and sometimes alternate by using a chair. For me, I feel much more stable and grounded when I sit on the floor, but you might very well be different.

As you sit down to meditate, you may either sit facing the wall or face into the room or environment where you are. Both are okay. Feel free to try both!

No matter what someone tells you or what you hear, there is no absolutely right way to meditate. Please remember that there is no such thing as a meditation police!

How to Meditate in a Chair

If you sit in a chair, don't sit leaning back in the chair. Sit upright and allow a gentle, natural arc in your back. Plant both of your feet on the floor in a natural position in front of you.

How to Meditate on the Floor

There are several options for sitting meditation on the floor. You can use a [circular round cushion \(called a zafu\)](#), stack [more than one zafu](#) at a time, or use a [crescent shaped zafu](#) on top of a [zabuton mat](#) and any number of supportive [pillows and supports](#) for your knees, hands, and back.

If you use a crescent shaped zafu, sit on it using your entire bum. It is designed that way. If you use a zafu, or two stacked together, try to sit on the front third or half of the cushion(s). This will help you with your posture and concentration.

While you are sitting on the first half or third of your zafu, bring in one of your feet close in against your inner thigh and your other leg in front of the other as if making parallel lines. This is called the Burmese position.

If you are able to place one of your feet on top of the opposite side knee, this is called the half lotus position. If you are able to bring both of your feet on top of the opposite side knee, this is called the full lotus position.

Another alternative is to sit on the back of your heels by using a [seiza bench](#), a zafu placed vertically under your rear, or on two zafus stacked together. This is called the seiza position.

Again, play around with what works best for your body and individual needs.

How to Choose a Meditation Posture

Traditionally, the full and half lotus positions are considered to be the most stable, but it is not required. Any one of these positions will do just fine. It is not a contest! The time you allow yourself to meditate is gift enough!

Personally, I prefer to meditate either in a chair or on the floor in the Burmese or seiza positions using two zafus on top of a zabuton mat.

No matter what position you take, please try to make sure that your hips are raised higher than your knees. This will help you sit in a more stable posture and reduce the amount of natural discomfort that will arise.

Whatever meditation position you choose and works best for you, if possible, please just make sure to sit upright. This is a valuable life lesson! Maintain an upright position at all times!

How to Settle In

Once you find your position and seat, gently rock from one side to the next and from front to back. Find your center of gravity! This is another important life lesson!

During the meditation, try your best to remain still and quiet. Our minds and lives are loud enough! Give your body this break!

When our bodies are still, it helps our mind to become still and open. When our mind becomes still, it helps our heart to remain still and spacious. When our heart and emotions are even keeled, our bodies will naturally settle down.

Here are some other ways to settle in during a meditation period. Rest your tongue on the bridge of your mouth. This will help prevent excessive saliva.

Also, rest your hands naturally on your knees. If you are accustomed to placing your hands in another position, that is fine. If you practice yoga and learned a different hand position and are comfortable with it, perfect! If you have tried Zen meditation before and learned a different hand position and are comfortable with it, perfect!

Using a correct hand position for your body can help prevent tension in your shoulders and back. Feel free to experiment with different hand positions and use what feels best.

You may feel like keeping your eyes closed during your meditation, but keep them open. Allow your eyes to rest naturally and comfortably at a downward 45-degree angle. If you are sitting in a chair, this may be about six feet in front of you. If you are sitting on the floor, this might be closer to three or four feet.

Think about when you first began to learn how to drive. Did someone teach you to close your eyes when you drove? Of course not! When driving a car, is it safer to keep your eyes open or closed? Open of course! The same is true for meditation. This practice is about tuning in, not tuning out.

Life is often hectic. Allow your body to rest! How you sit and carry your body in meditation can invite the sabbath peace enjoined on us all. Each and every day can be a sabbath! Each and every breath can be a sabbath!

How to Practice with Bodily Sensations

When you meditate, you may notice different bodily sensations come up. Your nose may itch. Maybe your knee will ache. You may notice all sorts of body parts that you never noticed or even knew existed. This is normal and expected! It is just a sign that your body is working!

If you notice something in your body, acknowledge it, accept it, and let the sensation pass as if they are clouds on a sunny day. The same is true of tolerable and mild (non-injurious) physical aches and pains.

If you notice an itch, acknowledge it, accept, remain still, and let it pass. If you notice an ache in your knees, acknowledge it, accept it, remain still, and let it pass. Do the same with all bodily sensations.

It might be tempting to let the sensation go without acknowledging it, but don't skip this step. We need to acknowledge the condition of our life no matter what!

When bodily sensations come, similarly acknowledge them, accept them, and let them pass as if they are clouds on a sunny day. Again, they are just signs that you are alive and have a working body!

Additional Considerations

Of course, please do consider these instructions with great care for your body. If you are ill or have an injury to your back, knees, or some other part of your body, please be kind to your body. Compassion goes a long way!

Also, please feel free to adjust these instructions and speak with a more experienced meditator to suit your particular body and situation.

After sharing of all these instructions, I would like to share a secret with you. You will feel some discomfort! Why? Because we often want things to be different than they are. We often want things to be what we think of as better, nicer, shinier, or newer.

Our bodies are the same way! This is not innately bad. It is natural to avoid discomfort. Recall that meditation is a practice of compassionate acknowledgment and acceptance, moment by moment, breath by breath.

If you need encouragement, when you need encouragement, remember this. When you sit in meditation, you are embodying a living and breathing relationship with the Divine just as you and the Divine are.

What Do I do with my Emotions?

You might be wondering why I wanted to share so much with you about what to do with your body in meditation? It is in no way because this is more important than your emotions or thoughts. They are all equally vital and equally a fact of your life.

In modern Hebrew, the word for heart is *lev*. But in classical Hebrew, the word *lev* meant more than the heart. It meant both heart and mind and referred to the heart-mind we all naturally have and share.

Likewise, this is also true in classical Japanese. They also used the same word for heart and mind and similarly see our interdependent relationship between what we feel and how we think.

It is only recently that we separate what we call our minds from our hearts. In Jewish meditation, we pay attention to all of our experience, to our body, heart and mind. Everything is welcome! Nothing is excluded!

It is natural to feel! Some emotions may feel good to you, and others may feel bad to you. Some emotions may feel better for you, and others may feel worse. This is normal!

The Hebrew Bible is chock-full of characters who experience a full range of emotions. We are absolutely no different! When you sit in meditation, you may experience the courage of Deborah, the fear of Isaac, the joy of Miriam, or the pride of David. Or all of them in a single meditation session! At the same time! This is normal and a rich part of who we are.

How to Practice with Emotions

Our hearts will naturally feel. It is natural for emotions to come up during meditation. This is completely normal and expected. We are heartfelt creatures!

Too often, we ignore our feelings or shut them down. During meditation, when our body settles down, emotions will bubble up.

It is not that emotions come out from nowhere. We are often more sensitive during meditation and will be more open to emotions that are already there.

Some feelings feel good to us, for example, happiness, joy, and excitement. Some feelings feel bad to us, for example sadness, boredom, and anxiety. Feelings are not innately good or bad. Happiness is just happiness. Excitement is just excitement. Sadness is just sadness. Anxiety is just anxiety.

Just as bodily sensations and thoughts, feelings and emotions will naturally arise during meditation.

If an emotion comes up, when it comes up, notice it, acknowledge it, and let the emotion pass as the clouds naturally do in the empty sky.

When we practice Jewish mindfulness meditation, we do as the prophet Isaiah did. We turn our perspective, face the wall, and lay our life before the Divine with a whole and complete heart. One sensation at a time, one emotion at a time, one thought at a time, with each and every experience, we sit with the Divine whole and complete.

With each inhalation we take, we return to our life, this very life! With each exhalation, we quiet that much more and face our barriers. In so doing, we experience what it is like to always sit before the Divine.

What Do I do with my Thoughts?

Our minds will naturally think. That is okay. In fact, it is a good thing! It is about mindfulness, not mindlessness!

The mind is like an organ in the body. Just like the heart, lungs, skin, and all of the other organs in our bodies, each organ has a job. The same is true of the mind.

The heart's job is to pump blood. The lung's job is to breathe. The skin's job is to protect us.

What is the mind's job? To think! It is not a bad thing in and of itself. It means we're alive, right!? What a gift our mind is!

How to Practice with Thoughts

Like bodily sensations, thoughts will naturally come and go during meditation. The goal is not to get rid of thoughts, but to acknowledge and accept them with compassion!

If a thought comes up, when it comes up, notice it, acknowledge it, and let the thought pass as the clouds naturally do on a clear summer's day.

If you notice thinking, "I like this," "This is boring," or any other thought, notice it, gently acknowledge it, accept it, and let the thought pass.

Even thinking that you should have no thoughts is in fact a thought.

The Zen tradition teaches a particularly helpful way to focus the mind during meditation. After each breath, count your exhalations. When you reach ten breaths and the count of ten, start back over. Just return to one!

This is an important life lesson. Always allow yourself to return to the beginning! We are never an expert. Always return to one!

If you forget your count, when you forget your count, that is okay. Simply start over and return to one. This is just like life! If we make a mistake, when we make a mistake, we just simply start over!

Think about a small child learning to walk. Maybe your child is an absolute genius or marathon runner straight from the womb. For most children, it is quite natural for a young child to try to walk and naturally fall down. Over and over and over again! This is normal!

The child does not naturally say to himself, “I failed! And I will never try again!” No, she just brushes off the dust from her clothes and tries over and over and over again.

We can learn from this child. We can learn that when we miss the mark, the very next step is important. We just get back up and take another risk. We just start over and again, again, and again!

This is the practice of meditation. Starting over, moment by moment, breath by breath, sensation after sensation, and thought by thought.

As we practice meditation, we realize the true gift of life – to be alive! To be able to start over! How precious is that!

Why Practice?

Now that you’ve learned what Jewish mindfulness meditation is and how to do it, you might be wondering why you should try and practice it? That is a wonderful and challenging question! And each person has their own answer!

Each of us brings an important question to meditation practice and spiritual life. This question is unique and different for everyone. The most important question is not why someone out there should practice Jewish meditation. The most important question is what urges you to meditation and spiritual practice?

There are many benefits to starting a medication practice and practicing Mindful Judaism, though I urge you to practice meditation not for some expected outcome, though this will

often come naturally. I urge you to practice meditation by practicing with the truth of your life, as it is, as you are, as you hope it to be.

With each inhalation and exhalation of your breath, you practice extending love and compassion to yourself. Over time, don't be too surprised. You just may find yourself with greater love and compassion for others, too!

Meditation is a practice of prayer. It is not as much a prayer to someone or something as a prayer with everyone and all things.

There is nothing to do, no place to go, and no one special to be! This is it! When we sit, we sit. When our knee hurts, "Ouch!" When we think, we think. When we feel sad, we cry.

Meditation is not about striving for control or being in and maintaining control! This practice is about gently acknowledging, accepting, and embracing reality as it is with fearless compassion and love.

Jewish meditation begs us to pay attention to our lives just as it is! How easy it is to forget this! This is our life! Do not turn your face away from everything that makes up your life! This is it! This! Is! It!

It is so easy to chase after this or run after that, whatever they are. In Jewish meditation, we practice coming back, experiencing our life, one breath at a time. We practice *teshuvah* [atonement and return]. As we return to our breath, return our attention, return to one, we return into relationship with the Divine!

In meditation, we learn to be who we are, where we are, as we are. This is the gift of meditation! This is the gift of Divine love and compassion!

Next Steps

Taking the time and effort to learn about Jewish mindfulness meditation is a wonderful and kind gift to yourself and those in your life.

[Mindful Judaism](#) is here to assist you nurture and experience a deep, personal spirituality and create a contemplative, meaningful Judaism!

It has been my experience that Jewish meditation can support you in building, maintaining, and growing your relationship with something greater and more meaningful.

I am dedicated to assist you embrace your spiritual life and create a relevant and innovative Judaism and Jewish life using contemplative practices.

If you are interested in learning more about Jewish meditation and Jewish mindfulness meditation practices, please take a look at the MindfulJudaism.com website and follow my [blog](#) there.

You will find information on Jewish mindfulness meditation, contemplative prayer and study, Jewish spirituality, innovative and meaningful holiday and lifecycle rituals, spiritual direction, opportunities for further meditation practice, and lessons learned from my own spiritual practice and experience.

I would like to offer you my strongest personal encouragement to you as you learn and practice Jewish mindfulness meditation. It is a wonderful and rewarding practice. Please take it one breath at a time!

About Mindful Judaism

The mission of [Mindful Judaism](#) is to help you explore and discover an authentic, meaningful relationship with the Divine through engaging and cultivating a contemplative, experiential Judaism and enhancing your love and compassion for yourself and others. [Mindful Judaism](#) was founded and is directed by Adam Fogel PhD.

Dr. Adam Fogel is a Rabbinical student under the guidance and mentorship of Rabbi Jeff Roth D.Min. in the Jewish Renewal and Jewish Mindfulness traditions. Adam has practiced Zen meditation since 1996 and is a Zen student of Father Greg Meyers Roshi in the Sanbo Zen tradition. Adam completed training as a Jewish Mindfulness Meditation Teacher through the Institute for Jewish Spirituality in 2017.

In his other professional world, Adam is a Psychologist and Marriage and Family Therapist practicing in correctional and community settings.

Adam greatly respects the unique path that each person must take to nurture their spiritual life and connection with something meaningful and profound and is especially interested in the interface of Zen wisdom, meditation, and contemplative Judaism.

[Mindful Judaism](#) is dedicated to helping you nurture and experience a deep, personal spirituality and create a contemplative, meaningful Judaism!

If there is any way [Mindful Judaism](#) can be of support to you, please [let us know](#) and subscribe to the [MindfulJudaism.com](#) website.

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