

## A Judaic Introduction to Mindfulness: The Value of Being Present

Jonathan Feiner, Ph.D.

Please pause. As you read these words, notice the temperature of the air entering your nose, pay attention to the sensations of your feet touching the ground, and listen to the panoply of noises in the room. Upon giving yourself a few moments to pay attention, try to also notice the stream of thoughts flowing through your mind. In a world with constant emails, beeping cell-phones and incessant to-do lists, it is difficult and maybe even shameful to pause. Ironically, the very desire to accomplish, can hinder success. Slowing down can actually help us move farther.

To better manage the challenges of being present, there has been a surge of popular and academic interest in the psychological benefits of mindfulness. A popular operational definition for mindfulness is the process of attending to present-moment experience in a nonjudgmental way.<sup>1</sup> However, mindfulness can best be relayed with an experiential exercise. Therefore, if you are willing, try to set aside 3-5 minutes for the following exercise:

*Try to observe your breath. Notice how it goes in and out. Bring your attention to your diaphragm while you breathe in and out. Notice the way the air feels entering and leaving your body. After several seconds, try to pay attention to other areas of your body. Slowly scan your body from head to toe noticing any specific areas of discomfort. The goal of this exercise is not to get rid of any discomfort – it is merely to notice what is occurring. Upon finishing scanning your body, see if you can shift your attention to noticing your thoughts. Try to imagine that there is a cloud above your head containing your thoughts. Try to let yourself observe your thoughts without getting rid of them so fast. There is no correct way to do this exercise. This exercise is about sitting and noticing – if your mind wanders and you stop noticing –that is okay; gently and compassionately bring your attention back.*

Assuming that you actually practiced the above exercise, the question may arise - What is the point of this? The simple answer is that there is a plethora of research demonstrating benefits including the reduction of depression and anxiety, greater cognitive flexibility, enhanced relationship satisfaction, and increased control of emotional reactivity.<sup>2</sup> Yet, why is it helpful –

---

<sup>1</sup> Bishop, Scott R., et al. "Mindfulness: A proposed operational definition." *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 11.3 (2004) pp. 230-241.

<sup>2</sup> Davis, D. M., & Hayes, J. A. (2011). What are the benefits of mindfulness? A practice review of psychotherapy-related research. *Psychotherapy*, 48(2), 198.

Although there is no conclusive answer, I would like to propose three possible mechanisms of how mindfulness improves psychological wellbeing.

Being mindful assists in not taking thoughts too literally. When I can notice my thought or emotion, I am less controlled by it. Holding thoughts and feelings in awareness with compassion will prevent them from controlling us. For example, person A may report “I am such a failure and I therefore cannot succeed at anything. In contrast, Person B may say “Right now I am having the thought – I am a failure – this thought shows up every now and then, however, I don’t need to listen to it”. Person B is able to notice his thought without being consumed by it.



As R. Soloveitchik, states: “When emotion is raised to the level of experience, we gain the upper hand or control over own emotions. We acquire the freedom to integrate feelings or to disown them, putting them at a distance from us”.<sup>3</sup> In effect, enhanced awareness of thoughts and emotions creates a distance between us and our thoughts. This leads to decreased emotional reactivity and improved regulation of our behaviors<sup>4</sup>.

A second possible mechanism of how mindfulness improves regulation is that it increases tolerance of uncomfortable emotions. When I was in graduate school, a specific professor would encourage us to practice mindfulness. Initially, I was resistant - it was very uncomfortable doing the exercises. One day he asked us to sit and be mindful of something painful in our lives. When I began to pay attention to a specific struggle in my life, many unpleasant thoughts and sensations showed up. My initial reaction was to stop the exercise or to think of something else; I did not

---

<sup>3</sup> Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind* p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> See *Chovas HaTalmidim*, Chapter 13.

want to stay with the pain. Nevertheless, I decided to stay with the exercise and after a few minutes, I was still noticing the painful thoughts and the accompanying uncomfortable sensations; however, it became more manageable. The pain was still there, yet, it didn't hurt as much. Since we don't like pain, our immediate response is to try to get rid of it. Yet, if we can allow ourselves to stay with it, we can learn that it may be more manageable than how it initially appears. Based on this idea, some refer to mindfulness as a form of emotional exposure – teaching people to make more space for discomfort.

For the third mechanism of change, let us begin with a brief exercise. Try to look at the palm of your hand for a minute. See if you can notice the different shades of colors, the lines in your hand, the lines within the lines, and any other interesting features. Now, let me ask, as you were doing this, were you in pain? During the past minute were you thinking about your life struggles? While I cannot predict your response, most people will report that during this exercise they are not absorbed in their painful thoughts and feelings; they are absorbed in their hand. Although mindfulness of the present moment is not meant to be a distraction, it is a way to raise the volume on the present. When the present moment is amplified, the other noises in one's life do not take up as much space; they may still be there, yet, they are not as consuming. Being mindful of the present moment enables one to live more in what is currently in front of us - the only moment we truly have- and less in the noise of the future and past. More in the now and less in the mind.

## **Mindfulness and Judaism**

For some religious Jews, the term “mindfulness meditation” may be met with reluctance. In popular culture, mindfulness meditation is often attributed to having origins in Eastern religions. Yet, similar to prayer, mindfulness is a construct that no specific religion or culture can fully lay claim to.<sup>5</sup> In a previous article, I discussed in length how Judaism may converge and conflict with the secular understanding of mindfulness. At the risk of redundancy, I will try to highlight some of the main points that can be helpful in explaining mindfulness from a Judaic perspective.

### *Balancing the Present and Future*

One of the challenges with the mind is its wandering to other places; it is often difficult to stay in the present moment because we are obsessing about our past and worrying about our future.

---

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that after clarifying differences of a construct between two cultures, one may even question whether we are discussing the same construct. For example, after recognizing the numerous differences between Jewish prayer and other forms, one may question whether both should be referred to by the same word, prayer. Nevertheless, for the sake of parsimony, I use the word mindfulness to describe the Jewish value of being aware in the present moment.

How does Judaism approach this tension of dividing our limited resources between the past, present and future? To assist with this, let us examine the following passage from *Avot* (2:13):

אמר להם : צאו וראו איזוהי דרך ישרה שידבק בה האדם...  
רבי שמעון אומר הרואה את הנולד

[R. Yochanan] said to them: “Which is the proper path to which man should cling...

Rabbi Shimon says: *Ha'roeh et ha'nolad*.

In examining the language of the *mishna*, it is important to notice the sage's choice of the word *Nolad* as opposed to *He'atid*, the future. *Nolad*, in contrast to *He'atid*, denotes something which is being born; that which is currently in existence. We should focus our resources on the present moment. There is no value in focusing on a future beyond our control. We should think about the future regarding that which is within our control; for that which is out of our control, we should place our confidence in God and accept.<sup>13</sup> This is similar to the serenity prayer (attributed to American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr) which is recited at the conclusion of AA meetings:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;  
courage to change the things I can;  
and the wisdom to know the difference.

We are to be fully present while assessing whether we can impact the future in this moment. For example, if you have financial difficulties, there is no activity you can engage in to increase your income on the *Shabbat*. Upon concluding that you cannot change your situation in this very moment, you can subsequently learn to manage the unpleasant emotions that arise with your worrisome thoughts. This can be accomplished through a variety of psychotherapeutic techniques, including mindfulness. With practice, we can learn to be present while simultaneously being conscious of the *Nolad* - how I can impact the future in this very moment.<sup>15</sup>

### *Viewing Thoughts and Feelings Nonjudgmentally*

An important component in mindfulness protocols is to be mindful of thoughts and feelings in addition to the five senses.<sup>26</sup> However, mindfulness is not only about attending to the present; it

---

<sup>13</sup> This idea can also be understood from the commentary of the Rambam on *Avot* where he states:  
ואומרו כאן רואה את הנולד - אשר עניינו ללמוד ממה שעתה על מה שיתחדש  
be.

<sup>15</sup> Two excellent books with mindfulness exercises are: *The Mindful Way Through Depression* by Mark Williams et al. and *The Dialectical Behavioral Skills Workbook* by Matthew McKay et al.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. Williams, Mark G., John D. Teasdale, and Zindel V. Segal. *The Mindful Way Through Depression*. The Guilford Press, 2007.

involves an orientation of “attending to one’s present in a nonjudgmental way”. It involves a conscious decision to abandon one’s agenda to have a different experience and an active process of “allowing” current thoughts, feelings, and sensations.<sup>27</sup> This aspect of mindfulness may raise some difficulties. Does Judaism approach viewing thoughts and feelings in a nonjudgmental manner? Judaism has an ethic of thoughts and feelings. For example, from a secular mindfulness perspective, if you notice a thought of being jealous of your friend, you should attempt to develop an orientation of acceptance to your thoughts and feelings. Nonetheless, there is a clear prohibition “Thou shall not covet” (*Shemot* 20:13). To intensify the issue, scientific findings demonstrate that both cognitive and emotional suppression have rebound effects.<sup>28</sup> If in the moment, you try to suppress a thought and feeling of jealousy, it is bound to return with greater strength. Therefore, I would like to suggest three, yet not mutually exclusive approaches to this difficulty.

The first approach is differentiating active vs. passive thinking. Active thinking can be understood as a conscious effort to think of specific thoughts. As I write this, I am actively thinking about what I want to write. In solving a math problem, I am purposely calculating specific numbers. Similarly, if I am interested in my friend’s car, I can actively think of different ways to obtain his car. In contrast, passive thinking occurs when thoughts enter my consciousness without my willing them. They are like noises in the background. I don’t want them there, yet, they show up anyways. While we are in control of active thinking, we have very little power on the passive thought processes. Therefore, perhaps we can better understand the prohibition of jealousy and similar commandments related to thoughts and feelings as a mandate to refrain from actively thinking forbidden thoughts.

A second way to explain how from a Jewish perspective we can be nonjudgmental towards our thoughts is to differentiate instantaneous *mitsvot* and lifelong objectives. R. Abraham Ibn Ezra explains the prohibition “Thou shall not covet” (*Shemot* 20:13) by stating that a person does not covet that which he has no access to<sup>29</sup>. In essence, he explains, jealousy stems from a flawed world view. Therefore, recognizing the supremacy of God and his halakhic principles should lead to a mindset of not being jealous of others. This is different from most other *mitsvot* where the results of one’s actions have an immediate impact since they are short term and time bound. For example, before eating, we have a *mitsva* to say a blessing and within a few seconds we have either fulfilled

---

<sup>27</sup> Bishop et al. 233.

<sup>28</sup> Abramowitz, J. S., Tolin, D. F., & Street, G. P. (2001). Paradoxical effects of thought suppression: A meta-analysis of controlled studies. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 21(5), 683-703.

<sup>29</sup> He describes this using a parable of a peasant that will not desire the daughter of the king, because he recognizes that it is beyond his reach.

a *mitsva* or not. Conversely, the *mitsva* related to jealousy is a lifelong mission to establish a personality of not being jealous of others.<sup>31</sup> The mandate to regulate our thoughts and feelings is not just instantaneous. If upon seeing my friend's possession, I experience a feeling of jealousy, I can think of all the reasons why I should not be jealous, yet in the moment, this may not change the feeling. A change in cognition does not automatically lead to a change in emotional reactions; it takes time.<sup>32</sup> However, although we may not be in control of our immediate thoughts and feelings, we are in control of how we choose to respond to them.<sup>33</sup> We are also in control of engaging in studies and behaviors that may influence future experiences of thoughts and feelings.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, if we are to experience ego dystonic and unpleasant thoughts and feelings in the moment, there is no need for dejection. We can simultaneously be judgmental and compassionate. Judgmental in using thoughts and feelings as a guide for self-examination; compassionate in being able to recognize that unpleasant thoughts and feelings are part of the human condition and it is okay to experience these at times.<sup>35</sup>

To clarify further, when jealousy or a different unpleasant emotion arises there are three possible orientations. A judgmental and non-compassionate attitude is "I am feeling jealous; I must rid myself of that feeling immediately". As stated before, this may be counterproductive and may lead to dejection. A nonjudgmental attitude may be "I am having a thought and feeling of jealousy. Though unpleasant, that is okay, since a thought is just a thought and a feeling is just a feeling". This is consistent with current mindfulness practices. Though it may be beneficial for psychological well-being in the present moment, it is not consistent with halakha. A judgmental and compassionate orientation is "I am having an unpleasant thought and feeling of jealousy. I

---

<sup>31</sup> See also a Shiur by R. Meir Twersky for further elaboration of this idea at <[http://torahweb.org/audioFrameset.html#audio=rtwe\\_12072003](http://torahweb.org/audioFrameset.html#audio=rtwe_12072003)>.

<sup>32</sup> A metaphor I use with clients do demonstrate this concept is that if green lights and red lights were switched so that you are to go on red and stop by a green light, your reactions may not change immediately. It may take a few days before you will develop the automatic reaction of stopping by a green light.

<sup>33</sup> This is beautifully elaborated by the Ramchal in the *Messilat Yesharim*

כי התנועה החיצונה מעוררת הפנימית, ובודאי שיותר מסורה בידו היא החיצונה מהפנימית. אך אם ישתמש ממה שבידו, יקנה גם מה שאינו בידו בהמשך, כי תולד בו השמחה הפנימית והחפץ והחמדה מכח מה שהוא מתלהט בתנועתו ברצון.

For the external movement rouses the inner ones **and certainly the external movement is more in his power than the inner ones. Thus, if he exercises what is in his power to do, this will lead him to also attain what is not in his power.** For an inner joy will awaken within him and a desire and longing through the power of acting fiery, externally, by the force of will.

<sup>34</sup> See Rambam at the end of *Hil. Issurei Biah*

<sup>35</sup> This is manifest in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 88b-89a), where Moshe uses the struggle with the evil inclination as a response to why the Torah should be given to people as opposed to angels.

wish I were already on a level where I did not have such thoughts and feelings, yet I am clearly not there yet. That is okay, since serving God is a lifelong mission. Perhaps I should place more emphasis on studying materials and engaging in behaviors that may decrease these intrusions. However, in this very moment, there may not be much I can do about that thought or feeling.”<sup>36</sup>

If you have hesitations about either of the first two approaches and you are unable to push away your unpleasant intrusive thoughts, you may want to rely on what I refer to as the “*Heter* approach”. This can best be explained using the example of a man struggling with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder that could not stop thinking about Avodah Zara during davening. For years he tried multiple methods to “control his mind” and “push away these thoughts”, yet, they only returned in greater intensity. Upon seeing a psychologist, the psychologist explained that the therapeutic method of managing these thoughts is to stop trying to suppress the thoughts; in contrast, he should learn to get used to them and even welcome them. It was explained that with time, this should lead to a reduction in the intensity of the thoughts. Upon consulting his Rav, the Rav stated that he can be considered a *choleh* and therefore, for treatment, he should be told that it is okay to have these thoughts and there is no need to suppress them.<sup>38</sup> Extending this approach to mindfulness would mean that, ideally, we should be judgmental towards specific thoughts and feelings; however, if in specific cases, developing a nonjudgmental stance will improve one’s functioning, it may be permitted. There is much more to be discussed about this approach both from a halachic and clinical perspective, yet, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

### **Cultivating Mindfulness**

Upon recognizing a Judaic value of being present, we must ask, how do we cultivate mindfulness? How do we develop a greater awareness for the present moment without being lost in thought? In secular culture and other religions, this has primarily been cultivated through a formal mindfulness practice. In *Berachot 30b* it states:

חסידים הראשונים היו שוהים שעה אחת ומתפללים, כדי שיכוונו את ליבם למקום

*The early pious ones would tarry for an hour and then pray in order that they might  
direct their hearts to Hashem*

---

<sup>36</sup> For some, redirecting the mind away from unpleasant thoughts and feelings may be effective. This is part of a larger topic which I decided not to address because it will divert attention away from the focus of this paper.

<sup>38</sup> It should be noted that within one week, this man experienced a significant reduction in his obsessions.

Although I do not venture to compare current mindfulness practices with the practice of the *Chasidim Harishonim*, the idea of setting aside an hour before prayer provides a paradigm for setting aside time to be mindful. Furthermore, perhaps prayer itself can be understood as a formal mindfulness practice. It is a time to attend to the present moment, the words we are saying, and to whom we are saying them. It is a time to focus on your life, your world, and your obligations.

In the secular understanding of mindfulness, formal meditation practices are often framed as being as a training to being more mindful in daily living. Similarly, I would contend that any formal mindfulness in Judaism can be framed as a tool to be a more mindful Jew because mindfulness in daily living is at the heart of much of the spirit and practice of Judaism. One of our primary objectives is to keep G-d at the forefront of our mind, to constantly be mindful of God.<sup>39</sup> We are charged with being mindful of our actions.<sup>40</sup> We can be a better friend, parent, and spouse if we can learn to be more present to those in front of us. This is more than just paying full attention to them – it is about being mindful of what they need in that moment and being aware of what they may trigger in you. Mindfulness can be much more than an external technique used to enhance emotional well-being. It can improve one's ability to serve *Hashem*, moment by moment.

### **Postscript:**

For those who are interested in learning more about mindfulness, the best advice is to practice it. It is not merely a concept to be understood cognitively, it needs to be experienced. If you are interested in specific books that explain it more in depth I would recommend *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn. This book describes the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction used in medical centers worldwide. However, it should be read with some caution, for I believe that some of the ideas may not be consistent with Jewish Hashkafa. For a more Jewish source, there is the *Sifsei Chaim (Middos and Avodas Hashem, Vol. 2)* by Rav Chaim Friedlander; he has a section on *Menuchas Hanefesh* that beautifully illustrates the importance of being present and mindful. I have also written an extended version of this article which can be found at RocklandCBT.com. If you have any questions or feedback, please feel free to email me at RocklandCBT@gmail.com. I would love to hear from you.

---

<sup>39</sup> Tehillim 16:8; Avot 2:1, 3:1.

<sup>40</sup> Avot 2:10; וכל מעשיך יהיו לשם שמים.