

A Judaic Exploration of Mindfulness: The Value of Being Present

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As you read these words, take a moment to notice what is taking place in the present moment. Be aware of the sounds in the room, your physical sensations, and your stream of thoughts. In a world with constant noise, distractions, and obligations, it is often difficult to be aware of what is taking place right now. 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.¹ Mindfulness training has been incorporated into cognitive and behavioral therapies of managing psychological distress and has been found to have many benefits including the reduction of depression and anxiety, greater cognitive flexibility, enhanced relationship satisfaction, and increased control of emotional reactivity.² While some writers acknowledge that mindfulness practices can be found in Judaism, most popular writings report Buddhism as the primary source for mindfulness practice. Due to the burgeoning interest in mindfulness and its proposed psychological benefits, I will attempt to clarify where Judaism converges and conflicts with mindfulness practices.³

Value of Attention

The value of attention is found in the basic tenets of Judaism. The primal example is the notion of *Kavannah*, which can simply be defined as intention. According to R. Soloveitchik, even the opinions that state *mitsvot* do not need *kavannah* would agree “*Kavannah*, related to prayer, is, unlike the *kavannah* concerning other mitzvah performances, not an extraneous addendum but the

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

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

³ 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 will be using the word mindfulness to describe the Jewish value of being aware in the present moment. Additionally, this is not meant to be the final word on a Judaic understanding of mindfulness; rather, I hope this article will be a step to further discussion, inquiry, and clarity.

very core of prayer.”⁴ This is illustrated in the following Rambam from *Hilkhot Tefillah* (4:15-16):

טו כוונת הלב כיצד : **כל תפילה שאינה בכוונה, אינה תפילה** ; ואם התפלל בלא כוונה, חוזר ומתפלל בכוונה. מצא דעתו משובשת וליבו טרוד--אסור לו להתפלל, עד שתתיישב דעתו. לפיכך הבא מן הדרך, והוא עייף או מצר--אסור לו להתפלל, עד שתתיישב דעתו : אמרו חכמים, ישהה שלושה ימים, עד שינוח ותתקרב דעתו, ואחר כך יתפלל.

טז כיצד היא הכוונה--שיפנה ליבו מכל המחשבות, ויראה עצמו כאילו הוא עומד לפני השכינה ; לפיכך צריך לישב מעט קודם התפילה, כדי לכוון את ליבו, ואחר כך יתפלל, בנחת ובתחנונים. ולא יעשה תפילתו כמי שהיה נושא משאוי, משליכו והולך לו ; לפיכך צריך לישב חסידים הראשונים היו שוהין שעה קודם התפילה, מעט אחר התפילה, ואחר כך ייפטר ושעה אחר התפילה, ומאריכין בתפילה שעה.

[15] Proper intention: What is implied?

Any prayer that is not [recited] with proper intention is not prayer. If one prays without proper intention, he must repeat his prayers with proper intention. One who is in a confused or troubled state may not pray until he composes himself. Therefore, one who comes in from a journey and is tired or irritated is forbidden to pray until he composes himself. Our Sages taught that one should wait three days until he is rested and his mind is settled, and then he may pray.

[16] What is meant by [proper] intention?

One should clear his mind from all thoughts and envision himself as standing before the Divine Presence. Therefore, one must sit a short while before praying in order to focus his attention and then pray in a pleasant and supplicatory fashion. One should not pray as one carrying a burden who throws it off and walks away. Therefore, one must sit a short while after praying, and then withdraw. The pious ones of the previous generations would wait an hour before praying and an hour after praying. They would [also] extend their prayers for an hour.⁵

According to the Rambam, *kavannah* entails ridding oneself of extraneous thoughts to attend to something specific, in this case, God.⁶

⁴ Soloveitchik, Joseph B. "The Lonely Man of Faith." *Tradition* 7.2. (Summer,1965), p. 35. Additionally, R. Soloveitchik's grandfather, R. Hayyim expounds on the different aspects of *kavannah* in prayer in his commentary on the Rambam (*Hiddushei Rabbenu Hayyim ha-Levi, Hilkhot Tefillah 4:1*).

⁵ Translations of the Rambam have been adapted from: Touger, Eliyahu. *Mishneh Torah. Hilchot Tefilah and Birkat Kohanim*. Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1989.

⁶ The difficult task of attention espoused by the Rambam complements R. Soloveitchik's explanation of why *kavannah* is only indispensable for the first *berakha* of the *Shemoneh Esreh*. He states, "The Halakha simply took into consideration human weakness and inability to immerse in the covenantal awareness for a long time and, in sympathy

In a different context, the Rambam extends the importance of attention beyond the realm of prayer. The Rambam in *Hilkhot Yesodei Torah* (2:1-2) indicates there is a value to being mindful to one's environment for the sake of increasing one's love and fear of God.

א האל הנכבד והנורא הזה--מצוה לאוהבו וליראה ממנו, שנאמר "ואהבת, את ה' אלוהיך" (דברים ו,ה; דברים יא,א) ונאמר "את ה' אלוהיך תירא" (דברים ו,יג; דברים י,כ).

ב והיאך היא הדרך לאהבתו, ויראתו: בשעה שיתבונן האדם במעשיו וברואיו הנפלאים הגדולים, ויראה מהם חכמתו שאין לה ערך ולא קץ--מיד הוא אוהב ומשבח ומפאר ומתאוה תאוה גדולה לידע השם הגדול, כמו שאמר דויד "צמאה נפשי, לאלוהים--לא אל חיי" (תהילים מב,ג). וכשמחשב בדברים האלו עצמן, מיד הוא נרתע לאחוריו, וירא ויפחד וידע שהוא בריה קטנה שפלה אפלה, עומד בדעת קלה מעוטה לפני תמים דעות, כמו שאמר דויד "כי אראה שמיך . . . מה אנוש, כי תזכרנו" (תהילים ח,ד-ה). ולפי הדברים האלו אני מבאר כללים גדולים ממעשה ריבון העולמים כדי שיהיו פתח למבין לאהוב את השם, כמו שאמרו חכמים בעניין אהבה, שמתוך כך אתה מכיר את מי שאמר והיה העולם

[1] It is a *mitsva* to love and fear this glorious and awesome God, as [*Devarim* 6:5] states: "And you shall love God, your Lord" and, as [*Devarim* 6:13] states: "Fear God, your Lord."

[2] What is the path [to attain] love and fear of Him? When a person contemplates His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison, he will immediately love, praise, and glorify [Him], yearning with tremendous desire to know [God's] great name, as David stated: "My soul thirsts for the Lord, for the living God" [*Tehillim* 42:3]. When he [continues] to reflect on these same matters, he will immediately recoil in awe and fear, appreciating how he is a tiny, lowly, and dark creature, standing with his flimsy, limited, wisdom before He who is of perfect knowledge, as David stated: "When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers... [I wonder] what is man that You should recall Him" [*Tehillim* 8:4-5]. Based on these concepts, I will explain important principles regarding the deeds of the Master of the worlds to provide a foothold for a person of understanding to [develop] love for God, as our Sages said regarding love: "In this manner, you will recognize He who spoke and [thus,] brought the world into being."

with the worshipper who is incapable of sustaining a continuous contemplative mood, related the initial *kavannah* to the entire Tefillah". An interesting illustration of the challenge of *kavannah* is also described in the *Yerushalmi* in *Berachot* (Vilna Edition, 2:4)

א"ר חייא רבא אנא מן יומי לא כוונית אלא חד זמן בעי מכוונה והרהרית בלבי ואמרית מאן עליל קומי מלכא קדמי ארקבסה אי ריש גלותא. שמואל אמר אנא מנית אפרוחיא. רבי בון בר חייא אמר אנא מנית דימוסיא. א"ר מתניה אנא מחזק טיבו לראשי דכד הוה מטי מודים הוא כרע מגרמיה

"Rabbi Hiyya said, "I have never concentrated on prayer all of my days. Once I tried to concentrate, but all I could think about was politics." Shmuel said, "During prayer, I count the clouds." Rabbi Bun Bar Hiyya said, "I count the stones in the wall when I should be praying." Rabbi Matnaya said, "I am grateful to my head, because it knows to bow automatically when we reach the Modim prayer."

According to the Rambam, the very act of being aware and paying attention to one's surroundings will lead to a heightened love and fear of God.⁷ Being mindful, paying attention, is not merely a tool to enhance specific *mitsvot*; mindfulness in itself can be a path of connecting to the divine. Furthermore, according to the Rambam, merely seeing nature does not suffice; there must be a purposeful attention; a contemplation of the divine within nature. However, this is often difficult due to the unbridled nature of the mind.

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. 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 *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. This point is clarified in the commentary of R. Shimon Bar Tzemaḥ Doron, the *Rashbetz*, on this *mishna*:

וצווי זה אינו סותר מה שכתוב בספר בן סירא ונזכר בפרק חלק [סנהדרין ק ב] ובפרק הבא על יבמות [יבמות סג ב], והוא אמרו 'אל תצר על צרת מחר כי לא תדע מה ילד יום'. וכן מה שאמרו באחרון מסוטה [מח ב], כל מי שיש לו פת בסלו ואומר מה אוכל מחר הרי זה מקטני אמנה כי יש לו לאדם לחשוב על העתיד ויקח תחבולה להציל לו מרעתו, ומה שאינו בידו יבטח באל ואל ידאג עליו.

And this commandment [to see the results of one's actions] does not contradict that which is written in *Ben Sirah* and *Perek Chelek* (100b) "Do not worry about the pain of the morrow for one does not know what the day will bring" and similarly that which states in *Sotah* (48b) "Whoever has bread in his basket and says what will I eat tomorrow is of those who have little faith". [This is no contradiction] because a person should think about the future and do that which he can to save himself from evil; and that which is not within his control - he should have confidence in God and not worry about it.

⁷ R. Tzadok ha-Kohen writes (*Tzidkat HaTzaddik*, 2-3) that the purpose of *berakhot* is to imbue the awareness of God into our different actions. He explains this is also the essence of the *mitsva* of *Keriat Shema* – to think about God in the morning and at night.

According to the *Rashbetz*, R. Shimon's message is that 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.⁸ 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.⁹

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 and if we can impact the future in this very moment.¹⁰

Beginner's Mind

The word *Nolad* contains within it another mindful insight which relates to the past rather than the future. In the *Tanya* by R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi he refers to the *Gemara* in *Tamid* (32a):

אלכסנדרוס מוקדון שאל זקני הנגב אי דין חכם ואמרו לו, הרואה את הנולד

Aleksander Mokdon (Alexander the Great) asked: Who is wise? He who sees the *Nolad*.

The *Baal HaTanya* writes: (Chapter 43):

ואיזהו חכם, הרואה את הנולד. פירוש: שרואה כל דבר איך נולד ונתהוה מאין ליש, בדבר
ה' ורוח פיו יתברך, כמו שכתוב: וברוח פיו כל צבאם

⁸ 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

One should see from what is now to what will be.

⁹ There is also a mother goose rhyme with a similar message:

For every ailment under the sun
There is a remedy, or there is none;
If there be one, try to find it;
If there be none, never mind it.

¹⁰ 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.

Who is wise? He who sees that which is born [and created].” That [is to say, the wise person is] he who sees how everything is born and created from non-being to being by means of the Word of God and the breath of His mouth, as it is written, “...and by the breath of His mouth all their hosts [were created].”¹¹

The *Baal HaTanya* understands *Nolad* as alluding to God’s creating the world anew every moment. This concept of seeing each moment as a new creation parallels what is referred to in mindfulness texts as “beginner’s mind”. To have a beginner’s mind is to observe your experience without the filter of your beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and desires.¹² It is the ability to observe each moment as if it were your first – without the bias of your history. One ramification of this is being able to fulfill *mitsvot* each time with a renewed vigor as if it were the first time. This teaching is manifest in the verse, “And these words that I command you **today** shall be upon your heart” (*Devarim* 6:6) in which the *Sifrei* comments “They should not be to you as an antiquated edict, which no one takes to heart, but like a new one, which all run to read”.¹³ We are beholden to serve God with the vigor and excitement of the beginner’s mind.

Another important aspect of developing a beginner’s mind is not letting your previous sins hinder your present and future service of God. Rabbeinu Yonah writes in his *Yesod HaTeshuvah*:

ביום ההוא ישליך כל פשעיו אשר עשה, ויעשה עצמו כאלו בו ביום נולד ואין בידו לא זכות ולא חובה, וזה היום תחלת מעשיו

On the day (the person repents) he should cast away all of his sins and consider himself as if he is born that day – having neither merit nor sin; and this day is the beginning of his deeds.¹⁶

Unfortunately, there are many whose distress about past misdeeds hinders their ability to move forward in an effective manner. Upon doing proper repentance for sins, we are considered new creations that should put our thoughts about past misdeeds aside.¹⁷

¹¹ Wineberg, Yosef, Sholom Wineberg, and Levi Wineberg. *Lessons in Tanya: Volume 2*. Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication 1982, p. 640.

¹² Bishop et al. "Mindfulness: A proposed operational definition", 233.

¹³ Similar comments are found are made on the verses in *Devarim* 11:13 and 27:9.

¹⁶This concept is found in the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Rosh Ha-Shanah*, 21a):
אמר להן הקב"ה מכיון שנכנסתם לדין לפני בראש השנה ויצאתם בשלום מעלה אני עליכם כאילו נבראתם בריאה חדשה
“God said to them: Since you went before me in judgment on Rosh Hashanah and you left in peace, I consider you as if you are a new creation.”

¹⁷ Interestingly, R. Kook in his *Orot HaTeshuvah* (13:9) implies that even during the process of repentance, one should not overemphasize the past. . He writes:

Time Consciousness

Until now, I have tried to convey that Judaism, similar to other conceptualizations of mindfulness, values being present. Nevertheless, there may be differences between Judaism and other understandings of mindfulness in how to relate to the past and future. Most mindfulness texts place a great emphasis on living in the present moment. For example, in a text written by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the developer of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, he writes “Now is always the right time because it is the only time.”¹⁸ I am not sure that R. Soloveitchik would be comfortable with this statement. In his address on Historical and Individual Mourning, he states:

“We all know the aphorism, ‘*He-avar ayin* (the past is no more), *ve-he-atid adayyin* (the future has not yet come), *ve-hahoveh ke-heref ayin* (the present is fleeting).’ However, in my opinion this is wrong. The past is not gone; it is still here. The future is not only anticipated, it is already here, and the present connects the future and the past. That is what I mean by a unitive time consciousness.”¹⁹

The importance of viewing the past and future in the present is not purely academic. It can influence our approach towards repentance and preparing for the future.²⁰ To clarify, let us read a selection from R. Soloveitchik’s Halakhic Man:

Halakhic man is concerned with the image of the past that is alive and active in the center of his present tempestuous and clamorous life and with a pulsating throbbing future that

יסוד התשובה צריך לעולם להיות מונח על התיקון של להבא. ובתחלה לא ישים כל כך לעיקר מעכב על דבר העבר, כי אם יבא מיד לעסוק בתיקון העבר ימצא מניעות רבות ויהיו דרכי התשובה וקרבת ד' קשים לפניו: אבל בהיותו עסוק באמת לתקן את מעשיו, הדבר מובטח שאז יעזרוהו מן השמים גם כן על תקנת העבר.

“The foundation of repentance is to focus on fixing the future. In the beginning, one should not place too much of an emphasis on the past, for if he will try to repair it he will find many obstacles and it will be difficult to become closer with God. However, if a person focuses on fixing his actions he will also be given assistance from above in rectifying the past.”

¹⁸ Kabat-Zinn, J. (2011). *Mindfulness for beginners: reclaiming the present moment--and your life*. Sounds True.

¹⁹ Soloveitchik, Joseph Dov, *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition*. eds. David Shatz, Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler: Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 2003, p. 17. R. Soloveitchik has a similar comment in reference to this saying in his essay “The Community” (*Tradition* 17:2, 1978), “Contrary to the popular medieval adage, our story tells of a glorious past that is still real, because it has not vanished, a future which is already here, and a creative present replete with opportunity and challenge. It is a privilege and a pleasure to belong to such a prayerful, charitable, teaching community which feels the breath of eternity”.

²⁰ This does not contradict what was said earlier about the importance of a beginner’s mind in not thinking about one’s past sins. The beginner’s mind is important after one engages in proper repentance. It is also important in using one’s past in a functional manner. Similar to what was said earlier about thinking about the future – if you are able to do something constructive in this moment, do it; if not, put it aside.

has already been “created”. There is a living past and there is a dead past. There is a future which has not yet been “created,” and there is a future already in existence. There is a past and there is a future that are connected with one another and with the present only through the law of causality- the cause found at moment a links up with the effect taking place at moment b, and so on. However, time itself as past appears only as “no more” and as future appears as “not yet.” From this perspective repentance is an empty and hollow concept. It is impossible to regret a past that is already dead, lost in the abyss of oblivion. Similarly, one cannot make a decision concerning a future that is as yet “unborn.” Therefore, Spinoza [Ethics IV, 54] and Nietzsche [in Genealogy of Morals]- from this perspective- did well to deride the idea of repentance. However, there is a past that persists in its existence that does not vanish and disappear but remains firm in its place. Such a past enters into the domain of the present and links up with the future. Similarly, there is a future that is not hidden behind a thick cloud but reveals itself now in all its beauty and majesty. Such a future, drawing upon its own hidden roots, infuses that past with strength and might, vigor and vitality. Both – past and future are alive; both act and create in the heart of the present shape the very image of reality. From this perspective we neither perceive the past as “no more” nor the future as “not yet” nor the present as “a fleeting moment.” Rather past, present, future merge and blend together and this new three-fold time structure arises before us adorned with a splendid unity. The past is joined to the future, and both are reflected in the present.²¹

From a Judaic perspective, we do not merely live in the present; we live in what I would refer to as an expanded present – a present where we are to be conscious of our past and our future. The purpose of thinking about the past and future is not to obsess meaninglessly; rather, it is to influence our actions for the purpose of serving God. This does not mean to imply that other conceptualizations of mindfulness disregard the past and the future, yet; there appears to be less of an emphasis on the past and future than is found in Judaism.

Viewing Thoughts and Feelings Nonjudgmentally

An important component in mindfulness protocols is to be mindful of your thoughts and feelings in addition to your five senses.²² However, as noted earlier, mindfulness is not only about attending to one’s present; it also 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

²¹ Soloveitchik, Joseph Dov. *Halakhic Man*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983. pp. 113-114.

²² E.g. Williams, Mark G., John D. Teasdale, and Zindel V. Segal. *The Mindful Way Through Depression*. The Guilford Press, 2007.

experience and an active process of “allowing” current thoughts, feelings, and sensations.²³ 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 the thoughts and feelings – without judgment. 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.²⁴ If in the moment, you try to suppress a thought and feeling of jealousy, it is bound to return with greater strength. To clarify this issue, let us examine the R. Abraham Ibn Ezra’s commentary on this commandment:

לא תחמוד : אנשים רבים יתמהו על זאת המצוה, איך יהיה אדם שלא יחמוד דבר יפה בלבו כל מה שהוא נחמד למראה עיניו. ועתה אתן לך משל. דע, כי איש כפרי שיש לו דעת נכונה, והוא ראה בת מלך שהיא יפה, לא יחמוד אותה בלבו שישכב עמה, כי ידע כי זה לא יתכן. ואל תחשוב זה הכפרי שהוא כאחד מן המשוגעים, שיתאוה שיהיה לו כנפים לעוף השמים, ולא יתכן להיות, כאשר אין אדם מתאוה לשכב עם אמו, אעפ”י שהיא יפה, כי הרגילוהו מנעוריו לדעת שהיא אסורה לו. ככה כל משכיל צריך שידע, כי אשה יפה או ממון לא ימצאנו אדם בעבור חכמתו ודעתו, רק כאשר חלק לו ה'... ובעבור זה המשכיל לא יתאוה ולא יחמוד. ואחר שידע שאשת רעהו אסרה השם לו, יותר היא נשגבה בעיניו מבת מלך בלב הכפרי, על כן הוא ישמח בחלקו ואל ישים אל לבו לחמוד ולהתאוות דבר שאינו שלו, כי ידע שהשם לא רצה לתת לו, לא יוכל לקחתו בכחו ובמחשבותיו ותחבלותיו, ע”כ יבטח בבוראו שיכלכלנו ויעשה הטוב בעיניו

Regarding the prohibition of “thou shall not covet” there are many who query, “How can a person not desire that which is pleasant to the eyes? Now I shall present a parable: Know that a peasant who is of sound mind, and who sees a princess who is beautiful, will not covet her in his heart, to lie with her, for he knows it is impossible. Do not consider this peasant to be like a madman, who would desire wings to fly to heaven, even though it is impossible. Likewise, a person does not desire to lie with his mother, although she may be beautiful, for he has been accustomed since his youth to know she is forbidden to him... and therefore, an intelligent person does not desire it or covet it. When he knows God has forbidden his neighbor's wife to him, then she is more elevated in his eyes than the princess in the eyes of the peasant. And so he is satisfied with his portion and does not allow his heart to covet and desire something that is not his, for he knows that God does not wish to give it to him; he cannot take it by force or by his thoughts or schemes. He has faith in his Creator, that He will provide for him and do what is good in His eyes.”

²³ Bishop et al. 233.

²⁴ 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.

R. Abraham Ibn Ezra contends one can condition his thoughts by modifying his underlying schemas.²⁵ He claims recognizing the supremacy of God and 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 a *mitsva* or not. Conversely, the *mitsva* related to jealousy is a lifelong mission to establish a personality of not being jealous of others.²⁶ This is implied in R. Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary in *Devarim* (5:18):

ורבים אמרו, כי אין עון במחשבת בלב, ואין עליהם שכר ועונש. ויש ראיות רבות להשיב עליהן ולא אאריך, רק אראה להם לב חורש מחשבות און (משלי ו, יח), והטיבות כי היה עם לבבך (דה"ב ו, ח), ולישרים בלבותם (תהי קכה, ד). ומשה אמר בסוף בפיך ובלבבך לעשותו (דברים ל, יד). **ועיקר כל המצות ליישר בלב, ורובם זכר. והמזיד והשוגג יוכיחום**

"Many argue that reward and punishment do not apply to thoughts, yet there are many proofs to refute this and I shall not elaborate, but only refer them: (*Mishlei* 6:18) 'A heart that invents wicked thoughts...'; (*Divrei Ha-Yamim* II 6:8) 'You have performed good, for it was in your heart;'; (*Tehillim* 125:4) 'Perform good, O Lord, to those who are good and to those who are upright in their hearts.' And Moshe states at the end (of the Torah, *Devarim* 30:14): '...in your mouth and in your heart, to perform it.' **The main purpose of all the commandments is to straighten the heart.** This is evident from the fact that we distinguish between one who sinned intentionally and one who sinned in error."

The mandate to regulate our thoughts and feelings is not 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.²⁷ However, though we may not be in control of our immediate thoughts and feelings, we are in control of how we choose to respond to them. We are also in control of engaging in studies and behaviors that may influence future experiences of thoughts and feelings. 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

²⁵ Schema is a psychological term introduced by Jean Piaget. It refers to an organized pattern of thought.

²⁶ See also a Shiur by R. Meir Twersky for further elaboration of this idea at <http://torahweb.org/audioFrameset.html#audio=rtwe_12072003>.

²⁷ A metaphor I use with clients to 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.

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.²⁸ Holding our thoughts and feelings in awareness with compassion will prevent them from controlling us. 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”.²⁹ In effect, enhanced awareness of thoughts and emotions creates a distance between us and our thoughts. This will lead to decreased emotional reactivity and improved regulation of our behaviors.

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 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 feelings.” Once again, the Judaic approach places less of an emphasis on acceptance in the present moment and a greater emphasis on change for the future.

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 reading the Rambam earlier, it appears that as Jews, we have a formal mindfulness practice – it is called prayer. 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 our life, our world, and our obligations. Unfortunately, for many of us, this has lost its meditative component.

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ Soloveitchik, *Out of the Whirlwind* p. 168.

Unfortunately, we often find ourselves at the end of prayer without knowing how we arrived there. Nevertheless, there are methods to assist in attending to the present. For example, as you are reading this, take a moment to notice what is taking place within you. Notice your breath and pause for a moment. Notice any sounds you are hearing and pause. Notice the different physical sensations in your body. There is a lot taking place within you that you may have missed as you were reading this. Practicing being mindful to our surroundings and direct experience can assist in becoming more mindful during prayer.

Aside from prayer, there are other ways to cultivate mindfulness. Pausing and contemplating before engaging in specific actions is a manner of being mindful. This parallels that which R. Elimelekh of Lizhensk advised: “Whenever you perform any deed, whether Torah study, or prayer, or positive commandments, you should familiarize yourself with the following words and make it a habit to recite them: I am hereby doing this in order to unify the Holy One blessed be He and the Divine Presence, to give delight to the blessed Creator.”³⁰ Additionally, for some, a formal mindfulness meditation practice can be helpful. This can be compared to how taking a nature stroll can be used in our service of God. There is no specific *mitsva* to take a nature stroll, yet it can be a means to serving God in one of two ways. It can be viewed as a form of relaxation to reenergize oneself or it can be used to appreciate the wonders of God and be a service in itself. Mindfulness meditation can be viewed in a similar manner. It can be viewed as a method to improve one’s well-being thereby enabling one to serve God more effectively; or, it can be perceived as a service in itself, where one is guiding their attention towards God.

Conclusion

In the world of psychotherapy and in society at large there is a mindfulness revolution; a popularization of the process and practice of being present. This article has attempted to establish that being mindful, being present, is an important element in Judaism with a range of applications from *kavannah* to one’s relationship with thoughts. This article has also attempted to clarify where a Jewish understanding of mindfulness may differ with other definitions. Let us conclude with an analysis of the popular axiom attributed to Alice Morse Earle: “Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That’s why it is called the present”.³¹ “Yesterday is history” – From a Judaic viewpoint, the past is not history in the sense of no longer being in existence; rather, it is part of our history; an important element in our current existence. Tomorrow is a mystery – the future

³⁰ *Tzettel Katan* 4.

³¹ Found at: <<http://quotationsbook.com/quote/45958/#sthash.LmOOJm8r.dpbs>>

is a mystery we have some control over and must do our utmost to influence while recognizing the rest is up to God. In other words, we must try our best and God will do the rest. Today is a gift – Yes; every breath is a gift to appreciate. Every second is a gift to become closer to those around us. Every moment is a gift to be mindful of ourselves, our families, and of God.

Postscript:

For those who are interested in learning more about mindfulness, aside from the books mentioned above, I would highly recommend *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn. This book describes the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction used in medical centers worldwide. Additionally, in 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. If you have any questions or feedback, please feel free to email me at RocklandCBT@gmail.com. I would love to hear from you.