A Dose of Judaism for Stress Reduction?

by Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

When I was younger, being Jewish had mostly to do with membership in a community with a shared history, set of traditions and challenges. I'm not sure I ever truly believed past childhood that there was a god in heaven pulling strings or angels bent on smiting me if I transgressed.

It was more about being part of an intrepid and generally obsessive band of fellow travelers eager to achieve, raise a tightly-bound family and deal kindly with others, if at all possible. I appreciated the holidays, not so much for their theological import but because it meant being with people I loved, or at least enjoyed. They marked the passage of time, reminded me about those things that were most important in my life, and kept me busy cooking food that was certain to be familiar and comforting. And I appreciated that the music was always evocative and soothing.

Not having much of a philosophical bent, that's about as far as I took my Jewishness: I was a proud member of a tribe with an admirable if not perilous history who liked to get together weekly and, every few months, enjoy a party with good eats.

Now in my seventies, I've come to broaden how I regard our religion, and religions more generally. It started when I began to write a book about my younger brother. David is limited in his understanding of most things, and certainly the theological underpinnings of Judaism. But he is the most devout Jew I know, hardly ever missing a *minyan*, a Shabbat service or a Jewish holiday, no matter how minor (last spring he called to wish me a happy *Lag BaOmer*). He helps along with services at the two synagogues he belongs to and volunteers daily at the Jewish nursing home. He is an ever-present participant in all things Jewish.

Given his intellectual limitations, it's obvious to me why being observant has been so important to him. Above all, it serves as a ready-made and well-defined infrastructure for his life. He's all about having a schedule, keeping busy and being around others. What better way for someone like him to achieve those ends than by heartily engaging in religious practice? For someone who might be otherwise daunted by filling his time and organizing his life, being a practicing Jew provides him a beacon of direction and a consistent source of activity, comfort and joy.

An inveterate reductionist, I began to wonder whether religion doesn't serve that

same purpose for most of us, regardless of our abilities (or lack thereof). Sure, we can debate the meaning of prayers, the lessons of a *parsha* and distinctions amongst traditions. But isn't a hearty dose of stress relief what most of us achieve when we pray or even when we surround ourselves with birds of our feather? To what extent is religion what humans practice, at least in part, to keep our anxiety in check and our mood above water?

The unmistakable trend in evidence-based mental health treatment nowadays is to include Eastern-style components of the sort usually associated with Buddhist practices. The field is moving on from just offering medications and/or talk therapies to now incorporating "mindfulness" exercises (that is, meditation, yoga, and breathing techniques). The idea is that we can promote a sense of well-being if we learn ways to "stay in the moment" rather than allow regrets about the past or worries about the future to intrude.

Incidentally, one method for keeping in the moment is to keep busy. The idea is that you can distract yourself from negative thoughts by engaging in activities that are productive and engrossing. It has long been a staple in the pantry of therapist suggestions for treating mood problems.

Organized religions, by their nature, certainly incorporate these Buddhist-style elements. What is prayer if not a carefully engineered opportunity for meditation and spirituality? Don't our rabbis strive to offer a setting where congregants can regularly and easily step back from the stresses of their daily lives? By instituting mantra-like repetitions of prayers, by chanting soulful and ancient melodies, by organizing people's lives around shared religious events, by promoting daily ritual observance ripe for engendering mindfulness -- aren't our clergy construing an environment that a Buddhist might recognize?

The other day I was surprised when I came across the term "JewBu" (for Jewish Buddhist). I learned that others were way ahead of me when it came to seeing a nexus between the two traditions. I mentioned the expression to a learned friend who warned me against pursuing that connection for fear of it being considered provocative and heretical.

But another wise friend explained why "JewBu" should not be considered blasphemous: followers of Buddhism don't acknowledge a supreme god or deity. They instead focus on achieving enlightenment and a state of inner peace and wisdom. It seems you can strive for nirvana and still adhere fully to our faith. As you will read in Rabbi Steinitz's article below, those two goals might be one and the same.

My intent here is not to pitch participation in organized religion or even private prayer as a surefire cure for anxiety and depression. But, for some of us, acknowledging the Zen-like aspects of our traditions might offer an accessible and well-established platform for reducing stress in our lives.

Jewish Mindfulness

by Rabbi Oren Steinitz

Michael Gordon's wise words reveal an unfortunate truth: many of us grew up with the axiom that Judaism has very little to offer us when it comes to spirituality. The aftermath of the Holocaust made our parents and grandparents determined to follow what Rabbi Dr. Emil Ludwig Fackenheim famously called "The 614th Commandment": "Thou shalt not hand Hitler posthumous victories." If Jewish people give up on their heritage, their religion, their identity—he claimed—we are essentially doing Hitler's work for him. Thus, so many of us grew up with the thought that one must remain Jewishly involved because we owe this to our ancestors. In fact, the vast majority of Jewish Americans claim that the most central component of their Jewish identity involves remembering the Holocaust.

While this is obviously an admirable and important cause, I would argue that our focus on survival is a double-edged sword. We may have convinced ourselves and our children that Judaism is important, but if it is only important to us because it *was* important to our ancestors, Judaism risks becoming a museum rather than a living tradition. If we focus too much on memory, are we forgetting the richness and the beauty of Judaism itself? This is especially true for the spiritual aspect of our tradition. Just notice the language that we use for our observance. We talk about "attending services" rather than "participating in" or—Heaven forbid—"praying." We have gotten used to religion being something that we do by rote (if we do it at all), because "that's what Jews do." Not because it is meaningful, not because it has any real value, but because we do not want to be the last link in the chain of tradition.

With this reality in mind, are we really surprised at the number of spiritually minded Jews who decided to look for a spiritual path not in the synagogue, but in Zen Buddhist gatherings and Hindu temples? Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi z"l, the founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, recalls that when he worked as a professor at Naropa University, his father passed away and he needed to say Kaddish daily. He knew that the best way to gather enough Jews for a minyan was to go to the university's department of Buddhist Studies, where he would sure find "all the Rosenbergs and Finkelsteins." The sad part of this funny anecdote is that if "the Rosenbergs and Finkelsteins" would have looked more carefully within our Jewish texts and tradition, they would have been able to find the same spirituality that they felt they could only find in Eastern traditions.