

# **Jewish Yoga**

**Final Assignment  
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by Wendy Schneider

## Introduction

During the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and up to the present, thousands of Western spiritual seekers have looked to Eastern religions and disciplines to satisfy their thirst for a more accessible and gratifying form of spirituality. Included in their ranks has been a disproportionately large number of Jews, many of whom were among the founders of Buddhist meditation and yoga centres throughout the west.<sup>1</sup>

For an entire generation of Jewish seekers, Judaism was perceived as a religion “preoccupied with social and political issues”, whose adherents were “embarrassed by expressions of spirituality”<sup>2</sup>. Eastern religious practices, on the other hand, were seen to offer opportunities to experience union with God through direct experience. Uninspired by an institutionalized Judaism and unfamiliar with Jewish ritual life, many were drawn to meditation practice, including Joseph Goldstein, one of the four Jewish Buddhist founders of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. Goldstein’s reflections on his alienation from Judaism are revealing:

“A year or two into my [meditation] practice I came back to the States and met with the rabbi who had bar mitzvahed me. He was very upset that I was leaving the Jewish fold, which is how he saw it. For me the real difference was that insofar as I understood it, the path of Judaism involved following the vision, the law, of someone else’s experience. I used the Old Testament prophets as an example. I told him I was interested in having that experience. I wasn’t interested in taking it on faith and trying to live up to it.”<sup>3</sup>

The majority of these “wandering Jews” would most likely have been astonished to learn that Jewish history is filled with examples of movements that have taken a more spiritual and mystical approach to Judaism. Among them: Kabbalah (a Jewish mystical movement dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century); Hassidism (a movement founded in early 18<sup>th</sup> century Russia); Musar (founded in 19<sup>th</sup> century Lithuania) and the modern Jewish renewal movement. To a great degree this is due to the fact that until recently, much of the Kabbalah and Chassidic literature was inaccessible to ordinary Jews and the study of Kabbalah was traditionally considered to be forbidden to any male under the age of 40 and out of the question for women.

The dawning of the late 1960s’ “Age of Aquarius” ushered in a new era as religious leaders slowly awoke to the fact that institutionalized religion was sorely deficient in responding to the needs of an entire generation. In the early 1980’s, the publication of Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan’s groundbreaking book, *Jewish Meditation* responded to a longing by many Jewish seekers for a Jewish context in which to frame their evolving spirituality. Among its revelations were a host of ancient Jewish meditation techniques on the names

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Kornfield, Sylvia Boorstein, Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, Ram Das, Allan Ginsberg, to name a few.

<sup>2</sup> Kamenetz, Rodger, *The Jew In The Lotus, A Poet’s Rediscovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India*. 1994, HarperSanFrancisco p. 152

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p150.

of God and evidence that the Amidah, a famous prayer recited three times a day, was designed as a standing meditation.

A dramatic increase of Jewish renewal congregations and communities throughout North America, as well as a proliferation of classes in Kabbalah, Chassidism and other topics of a spiritual nature in mainstream synagogues, educational institutions and Jewish Community Centres throughout the world are sure signs that, over the last twenty years, a huge transformation has occurred in the world of Jewish worship.

### **Jews and Yoga**

Yoga, promoted as a practical, spiritual discipline that does not require its practitioners to accept a prescribed set of beliefs, has had widespread appeal to Jews in the West. Evidence does suggest, however, that many secular Jewish yoga students feel unsettled in settings where Sanskrit chanting, altars, and pictures of gurus and Hindu gods are present. As for Orthodox Jews, for whom the prohibition against idolatry is taken with great seriousness, they have, for the most part, kept their distance from any spiritual practice that may bring them into contact with forbidden subjects.

In recent years, however, many Jewish yoga students have been asking the question, “What are our equivalents?” “What does Judaism have to offer that parallels the experiences and teachings I am finding in my yoga classes?” And in many cases, they are rediscovering Judaism by finding parallel beliefs to those learned in their yoga and meditation practices within the Jewish mystical tradition. The search to find a Jewish context for one’s yoga practice has created a new phenomenon: Jewish yoga teachers beginning to explore and experiment with “Judaizing” their yoga classes by substituting Hebrew words and phrases for Sanskrit chants and Torah study for Patanjali’s yoga sutras.

### **Jewish Yoga**

Hanna Sara Zeller was raised in a non-religious, secular-Zionist Jewish family in New York City. She discovered yoga in the 70s, to seek relief from long hours of sitting studying calligraphy with Suzuki Roshi in California. Yoga not only provided relief from physical discomfort, it answered a deep yearning she had carried throughout her life for peace and spirituality. Eventually her journey brought her to study with world-renowned teacher, Sri Swami Satchidananda, founder of Integral Yoga, best known for his teaching “Many Paths – One Truth”.

Satchidananda, Zeller recalls, would often hold huge ecumenical gatherings attended by leaders from all the world’s major religions.

“His whole thing was that, if it’s true, it’s true for everybody...and that God wants diversity in the world...He was all about trying to bring the consciousness of unity in diversity to the world, and he did it through having people share their

culture, their music, their dance, their rituals, and their teachings in an atmosphere that was tolerant.”<sup>4</sup>

Satchidananda consistently encouraged his students, many of whom were Jews, to find their own authentic paths.

“He used to say, wherever you’re going to be, dig a well and if you can’t dig it deeply in yoga, then go be a Jew because that’s how you were born. He sent a lot of people home.”<sup>5</sup>

Zeller, herself, became one of those who were “sent home”, by becoming a “ba’al tshuvah”, the term used to denote those who “return” to Orthodox Judaism. But she never abandoned her yoga practice, which had become an essential part of her life. Still deeply attracted to spiritual realms, she immersed herself in the study of Kabbalah. Inevitably, as the parallels began to emerge, her personal yoga practice became quintessentially Jewish.

Today Zeller lives in a religious settlement in Israel with her husband and children, where she is bringing the world of yoga to an Orthodox clientele. She teaches in religious high schools, seniors’ centres and at Yakar, a study and meditation center in Jerusalem, where her husband is resident rabbi. Deeply grounded in both Jewish tradition and yoga she has found that integrating the two has been almost effortless.

“The more I live it [Judaism], the more I practice it and make shabbes and do the holidays and learn and read the parsha, it integrates [with yoga] naturally... It’s like if you had a beautiful tree and a beautiful vine that were planted next to each other and they just happened to grow up together, growing into each other and all around each other.”<sup>6</sup>

In Zeller’s yoga classes she may choose a theme from the weekly Torah portion, a particular Jewish holiday or a lifecycle event with which the class coincides. More often than not, however, her themes are derived from Kabbalah. One teaching she often presents is called “Chashmal” which is intriguingly similar to the Anusara approach to yoga.

“Chashmal [translated in modern Hebrew as ‘electricity’] is basically a teaching that says for a current to flow, there has to be a positive and a negative. There’s also a spiritual law in relationship to Hashem [God]. God gives me the mitzvos. I do them with all my will and effort in order to come close to Hashem – that’s the ‘chash’, the positive effort in the pose, when you’re checking everything out. Making sure you’re in the right form, going to your maximum. You’re focused, you’re going where you can. And then there’s the ‘mal’. That’s the place where you completely let go and say, I’m trying my best, but I’m in God’s hands. You soften and let go completely and you allow yourself to make no effort at all...it’s

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<sup>4</sup> Telephone interview with Hanna Sara Zeller, July 2003

<sup>5</sup> ibid

<sup>6</sup> ibid

only through the ‘chash’ and the ‘mal’, the ability to move through from positive to negative, from effort to effortlessness that you find that opening. It’s like a gate opening in the middle.”<sup>7</sup>

In recent years, Zeller has noticed a shift in Orthodox Jewish attitudes towards yoga. Israel’s ultra-Orthodox community, she says, has had to come to terms with the fact that a life based on strict observance of the commandments does not necessarily immunize their members from issues found in society at large such as addiction. As a result many have become more open to exploring disciplines like yoga, which they are recognizing can help people deal with stress and the harsh realities of life. Her students have told her that her classes have not only helped them find the tools to cope with stress, but have served to elevate their observance of the mitzvot to higher levels of consciousness.

Diane Bloomfield is somewhat of an anomaly among teachers of Jewish Yoga, in that she had attained a thorough grounding in Jewish study before coming to yoga. Bloomfield, who lived in Israel for 20 years, spent much of that time studying and teaching Torah at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem. But, she had always felt a need to pray and understand Torah with her body. And so, when she began taking yoga classes at the Kripalu Centre in Massachusetts, during a hiatus from her studies, she felt an immediate resonance and connection. She also sensed that, on a very deep level, the yoga she was doing was an experience of Torah.

“When I would learn teachings from the different yoga teachers, I would always know where they were in the Torah... and when they would quote text or talk about some yoga philosophy and I would absolutely translate it in my head into Hebrew and into Torah.”<sup>8</sup>

Intrigued by the high number of Jews in her yoga classes Bloomfield began to share her insights with other Jewish students who, she noted, were “thrilled to have any idea that this yoga path had anything to do with their Jewish roots.”<sup>9</sup>

As the connections between Judaism and yoga became more and more obvious to her, Bloomfield realized that she was ideally placed to integrate the two and before long, she was teaching classes, which she called “Torah Yoga” .

“There’s a lot of ways to say what it is that I do but I often say, really, I’m teaching Torah. People will say I’m a yoga teacher and I say, ‘I’m teaching Torah but I’m using the body as a way to learn Torah.’”<sup>10</sup>

Bloomfield’s approach to teaching is theme-directed. Her classes begin with a ten-minute warm up, a 15-minute lesson from a Jewish text, a meditation based on a theme chosen from the Kabbalah or a Chassidic teaching, and an hour-long series of yoga poses. The

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<sup>7</sup> ibid

<sup>8</sup> Bloomfield, Diane; Telephone interview, August 2003

<sup>9</sup> ibid

<sup>10</sup> ibid

primary sources she uses in her teaching are Sfat Emet, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Chassidic master and Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, the State of Israel's first chief rabbi, whose teachings were grounded in a Jewish mysticism and who was known for his open-minded and inclusive views.

Bloomfield will also use themes associated with Jewish holidays. During Torah Yoga classes that take place in the weeks leading up to Passover, for instance, she will explore the concept of “Yetziat Mitzrayim”, the departure from Egypt:

“When I look at ‘ye’tziat mitzrayim’ one of the main ways I look at it is to say that inside the word ‘mitzrayim’ you have the word ‘tsar’, which is narrowness. It also contains a contraction of the word ‘tzarot’, meaning ‘troubles’. So ‘mitzrayim’ is a word that within it has this concept of narrowness. Surrounding the ‘tzar’, you have the letters ‘mem, yud, mem’.[Hebrew letters spelling the word ‘water’.] So you have ‘mayim’. So you have this expansion – you have water, which is the opposite of contraction. The chassidim say that when you’re contracted in your consciousness you’re in Egypt. So when you’re seeing things too small, that’s your tight place, that’s your Egypt, and when you’re in expanded consciousness, that’s leaving Egypt...The understanding of both yoga and Torah is that your consciousness is not just somewhere in your brain. Your whole body is a field of consciousness.”<sup>11</sup>

Bloomfield’s seamless blending of ideas from Jewish mysticism with yoga asanas is reminiscent of the approach taken by Hanna Sara Zeller. Her methods and philosophy are outlined in detail in the recently published book, *Torah Yoga, Experiencing Jewish Wisdom through classic Postures*, a book Bloomfield said she wrote in response to “an incredible thirst, need and desire in the Jewish community to access Jewish wisdom through the body.”<sup>12</sup>

Another form of Jewish yoga currently being taught in Israel, with adherents in communities around the world, is Ophanim. The Ophanim website describes the practice as a “kind of ‘Jewish’ yoga...which unifies and heals the spiritual, mental, emotional and physical sides of man.”<sup>13</sup>

Ophanim uses breathing, meditation and specific physical postures that resemble certain Hebrew letters, which its adherents say will result in a “revitalization of both the body and the spirit, as the Divine energy permeates and awakens the physical organs and the soul itself.”<sup>14</sup>

The daily practice includes the physical stance of five constant postures, referred to as the mother letters, and two others selected according to the month and day of the week. One can choose to supplement this basic practice by other letters if desired. While the postures

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<sup>11</sup> ibid

<sup>12</sup> ibid

<sup>13</sup> [www.angelfire.org](http://www.angelfire.org)

<sup>14</sup> ibid

are integral to the practice, Ophanim places greater emphasis on the meditative practice than on the postures themselves.

Laurie Wolko, a New York City based yoga teacher whose training, like Hanna Sara Zeller's, is in the Integral Yoga tradition, came across Ophanim during a visit to Israel and has incorporated some of its elements into her Jewish yoga classes. Having felt a considerable degree of discomfort with the chanting, altars and imagery that she had encountered during her early training Wolko was seeking ways to integrate her yoga practice with her Judaism, which, in recent years, had taken on greater importance to her.

Wolko now leads workshops in Jewish yoga in the New York area, that include elements from the Chassidic tradition, Kabbalah and traditional yoga. She will often begin her sessions by leading her students in the chanting of a niggun, (a wordless Jewish melody), or a Hebrew verse. She finds that repetitive chanting has a similar effect to the repetition of a mantra in the way that it takes students beyond their thinking minds. Following this mood-setting exercise, she will give a lesson in Torah, teach a selection of yoga poses, and end with savasana and meditation.

Since integrating Judaism and yoga, both Wolko's personal practice and teaching have changed considerably.

“As I deepen my practice, it's so not about the poses for me...I just need something very different now and that's what I feel that I'm here to share with people. Ten, fifteen years ago, 75% of cults were Jews. Jews were always searching for things and many of the yoga teachers are Jewish. And they have no idea that Jewish meditation dates back to biblical times. There are even stories that Avraham actually brought meditation to the east. Whether it's true or not, meditation was happening in biblical Palestine.”<sup>15</sup>

While there is evidence of individuals around the world teaching a form of Jewish yoga, a group of Jewish yoga teachers in the United Kingdom has gone one step further by starting their own association. Typing the words “Jewish Yoga” in any search engine will quickly lead one to Yoga Mosaic, an association of Jewish yoga teachers in the U.K. Describing the organizations's origins, founder, Estelle Eugene, says they came about quite unintentionally.

“Back in 1992 one of the Jewish publications requested an article about Yoga and Judaism. This was rather startling, as it had never occurred to me to link Yoga and Judaism together. However, during the course of my study to become qualified as a Yoga teacher, I recalled that I invariably related to Jewish sources when answering the questions posed on the philosophy of Yoga. I recalled discussing this aspect with one of my former students who did exactly the same when she studied to become a teacher.”

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<sup>15</sup> Wolko, Laurie; Telephone interview, July 2003

Eugene's search for like-minded Jewish yoga teachers led to the birth of an association whose goal is "exploring our roots and seeing where Yoga and Judaism strengthen each discipline."<sup>16</sup> Today Yoga Mosaic has a membership of 40, and its website attracts visitors from across the world, some of whom express their desire to establish a similar association in their own country.

### **Conclusion**

Today, Jewish yoga classes are appearing in communities throughout Israel, North America and Europe. While these classes are as diverse as the individuals leading them, they share one essential quality: the intention to use the spiritual practice of yoga as a gateway towards a deeper understanding of and appreciation for Judaism.

Laurie Wolko, perhaps, said it best:

"I put it [my practice] in a Jewish context in the sense that I see my physical practice as a prayer to God. And a prayer to myself and to the world. Some people would say that sun salutations are *avodah zarah*, and I understand where they're coming from. But I believe it's the intention that you put into it. What I do is to frame it in a Jewish way... So no matter what I'm doing in my practice, it becomes Jewish because I have couched it in a Jewish way."<sup>17</sup>

The facts speak for themselves. Thousands of disenchanting Jews are seeking a way back to Judaism. And, for a significant number of them, Jewish yoga is a legitimate path that can lead them to reconnect to the richness and depth of their heritage.

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<sup>16</sup> Eugene, Estelle; Telephone interview, July 2003

<sup>17</sup> Wolko, Laurie; Telephone interview, July, 2003

## Glossary of Terms

*Amidah* – a famous silent prayer, recited 3 times a day in Jewish liturgy

*Avodah zarah* – Taken in its literal sense “avodah zarah” means "other people's worship." In this sense, avodah zarah may be perfectly acceptable for a Gentile. But avodah zarah came to be a synonym for idolatry, an abomination for Jews and Gentiles alike. In a more modern tone, rabbis teach that idolatry is valuing anything higher than God.

*Chassidism* - A Jewish religious movement founded by Baal-Shem-Tov in the 18th century. Although it was declared heretical in 1781 by the Talmudists, Hasidic communities continue to thrive in the United States and Israel. Followers of Hasidism regard acts of religious devotion as being more important than scholarly learning

*Jewish Renewal*: Jewish renewal is a worldwide, transdenominational movement grounded in Judaism’s prophetic and mystical traditions. Jewish renewal seeks to bring creativity, relevance, joy, and an all-embracing awareness to spiritual practice, as a path to healing our hearts and finding balance and wholeness—tikkun halev.

*Kabbalah* – It refers to the mystical interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures. It has two principal written sources. *Sefer Yezira* is a third century work which purports to present a series of monologues given by the patriarch Abraham. The second, *Zohar* is a mystical commentary on the Torah written by Moses de León in the 13th century. As a religious movement, it appears to have started in 11th century France, and then spread to Spain and elsewhere. It influenced the development of Hasidism in the 18th century, and continues to play a role in contemporary Judaism.

*Kavvanah* -- approximates the Hindu term, *dhyana*, indicating one-pointed concentration that's directed at a particular object and which reveals that object's true nature.

*Mitzvot* – Lit. commandment. Any of the 613 commandments that Jews are obligated to observe. It can also refer to any Jewish religious obligation, or more generally to any good deed.

*Torah* - Literal translation: law, teaching. Known as the Written Law, or the five Books of Moses, the Torah is the foundation of Jewish law. Jewish tradition says that God gave the Torah to Moses at Sinai, together with an oral explanation of the laws. According to the rabbis, Judaism is based on three pillars: "al haTorah, al haAvodah, v'al gemilut chasadim" ("on Torah, on ritual/worship, and on acts of loving kindness"). Torah, the rabbis said, is considered the strongest pillar, upon which the others are built.

## Links

Yoga Mosaic – an association of Jewish Yoga Teachers; <http://www.yogamosaic.org/>

Elat Chayyim, a retreat centre in upstate New York, affiliated with ALEPH, the Alliance for Jewish Renewal; <http://www.elatchayyim.org/>

Devekut: “Authentic resources in Kabbalah, Chassidut, Jewish meditation and Jewish spirituality; <http://www.devekut.com/>

Ophanim, [www.angelfire.com/pe/ophanim](http://www.angelfire.com/pe/ophanim)

A Still Small Voice – “a correspondence school that presents classic Judaism as a powerful path to spiritual transformation.” <http://www.amyisrael.co.il/smallvoice/>

Makor Or ([www.makor-or.org](http://www.makor-or.org))

Torah Yoga, Diane Bloomfield’s website: [www.torahyoga.com](http://www.torahyoga.com)

The Torah Yoga Institute: <http://www.torahyogainstitute.org/pages/1/index.htm>

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Bill Heilbronn

Laurie Wolko

Hanna Sara Zeller

Zvi Zavidowsky