



## Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide

*Aryeh Kaplan*

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## **Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide** Aryeh Kaplan

Students of meditation are usually surprised to discover that a Jewish meditation tradition exists, and that it was an authentic and integral part of mainstream Judaism until the eighteenth century.

*Jewish Meditation* is a step-by-step introduction to meditation and the Jewish practice of meditation in particular. This practical guide covers such topics as mantra meditation, contemplation, and visualization within a Jewish context. It shows us how to use meditative techniques to enhance prayer using the traditional liturgy—the *Amidah* and the *Shema*. Through simple exercises and clear explanations of theory, Rabbi Kaplan gives us the tools to develop our spiritual potential through an authentically Jewish meditative practice.

## **Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide Details**

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# From Reader Review Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide for online ebook

## Steve Cran says

Write a review...For such a thin book Rabbi Kaplan's book packs a wallup of information. The book discusses various meditation techniques as can be culled from ancient Jewish sources. Rabbi Kaplan discusses basic techniques as can be found in other forms of meditation. Such techniques as mantras, visualizing, and contemplating. One can also use the words of the prayers as mantras or contemplation. Mundane activities with the proper frame of mind can be turned into acts of meditation that put a person into a higher state of consciousness. Excellent book for those into practicing meditation.

By and large many people think of far eastern religions when the word meditation is brought up. Both Jew and non-Jew alike seem oblivious to the fact that there is a form of Jewish meditation out there. Jews like other people are spiritually hungry and end up looking to these far eastern religions to satisfy their appetite. It takes a lot of work to ferret out the Meditation techniques from Judaism. Jewish Mystics have a history of interacting with Sufi mystics and exchanging ideas. To lose such a connection would be a shame.

What exactly is meditation? Quite simply it means to control your mind. Have you ever tried to stop thinking? Bet you were not quite successful? Better yet try thinking about only one thing. You most likely thought about a whole lot of other things besides the one thing. It is very hard to control your mind.

If you close your eyes you will be bombarded with a barrage of fleeting images. To pay them attention and decipher them would be called "Free Association" This Free Association is one way of reading your subconscious mind. The mind can be divided into two parts. These two parts are the conscious and the subconscious mind. You can control the conscious mind but not your subconscious mind. Your subconscious mind is what control your thoughts. So to control your thoughts you must control your subconscious mind.

Breathing is controlled by your subconscious mind it is voluntary. Hence many meditation method have you control your breathing as a first step to controlling your subconscious mind. Two more related techniques are discussed on is called "imaging". Imaging occurs when you imagine let us say the letter "A" in your mind. The second technique is "Etching" this might be when you permanently engrave the letter A into your mind.

Why?.....The big question what is the benefit of doing meditation? Throughout our lives we have not grown much in terms of thinking. In fact most of us were taught to think at the age of six and not much has really changed since then. Meditation means we take control of our thought and of our mind. At 6 years old we did not learn how to control or harness the power of our mind. This is a quantum leap. The Torah says that our thinking before we practice spirituality is that of a child while the thinking that we practice after spirituality

training is considered adult thinking.

Consider looking at a rose. Is our perception pure? Actually it is not. Even with our eyes open in a well lit room there are images floating right in front of us being generated by our subconscious mind. It interferes with our perception. Some one who practices meditation could learn to quiet the other parts of the brain down. While this does not harness the full power of the mind it does reduce the interference. Considerably close to fine tuning a radio. Clearer sound but not any louder.

Our senses often interfere with each other. Ever try reading Braille? Even someone trained has a hard time doing it unless they close their eyes. Why? Because their vision interferes with their tactile sensations. Blind people also use their cane to navigate. This works because the sounds produced by the cane echo off the walls. This alerts the blind person if he is about to bump into something.

Tibetan healers can feel a person's pulse and determine what is ailing the person. It takes many years to learn how to do this. The healer actually closes his eyes and enters a state of deep concentration as he feels his patient's pulse. This closing of the eyes blocks all the distraction caused by our eyes.

Stimuli is constantly coming our way but our mind makes so much static that we do not even perceive it. Spiritual people, prophets were able to quiet their mind down. In this way they could practice telepathy, Extra Sensory Perception and predictions.

The last chapter we explored the benefits of meditation. This time let us discuss what meditation should look like. Meditation like prayer is practiced in various different religions and cultures and all forms of meditation like prayer share several salient points in common.

When examining prayer one finds three basic components. The first component is praise, next is petitioning and finally thanksgiving. Praise is when we extol the attribute of Hashem or any other Deity we chose to pray to. Thanksgiving is when we thank Hashem or any other Deity we are praying for doing something for us. The second aspect is petitioning. Petitioning is when we ask the creator for something, be it health, money or what ever.

One easy example of meditation would be to think about rearranging the furniture in your mind. The object would be to stay focused. If thought enters then you gently push them out or get your mind back on the

subject. One can take things a step further and think about how they would rearrange their life. This would be an unstructured form of meditation that is internally driven. One can verbalize their thoughts and talk out loud to Hashem or their patron deity. This is still unstructured and through such mediation which if one finds productive can become a set pattern on a daily or weekly basis such meditation could help one realize that G-d is both within and at the same time way out there.

Such verbal meditation is called, by Rebbe Nachman, hisbodedus. One can turn this unstructured meditation into a structured meditation by adding an agenda of what they would like to discuss. In Tzaphat the mystical cabbalists would pick a verse out of the torah and meditate on it for insights. This was called Gerusin. They could repeat the verse over and over again like a mantra. Rebbe Nachman used to repeat master of the universe like a mantra.

This verse could also be gazed upon and looked at. This would be called contemplation. Just staring at it and absorbing its meaning. This contemplation could also be applied to looking at a flame or a Hebrew letter.

The common elements of meditation are contemplation, mantra, structured and unstructured thinking and internally and externally directed meditation.

States of consciousness are always difficult to describe because they are internal events that are subjective hence there is no common vocabulary to describe what I am experiencing in my head. I may even perceive a brand new color yet be totally unable to describe. The situation is different if we both observe a rose because we are seeing the same thing we would be able to describe it using the appropriate vocabulary.

There are two states of consciousness that we are most familiar with and they are waking state and our sleeping state. Within our waking state we can find that at times we can be very drowsy and at the other end of the scale we are extremely alert. Between these two extremes scientists have noted a different wavelength and pattern in our brainwaves.

Likewise when we are asleep there are two different states of consciousness. The two states are called "Dream State" or REM sleep and there is Non Rem or non dream state.

During our waking state even without actively meditating we can become so engrossed in a problem that we work for our without end trying to solve. This is what we would call "Locked on" or "Hot Mode" Sometimes I call it the problem solving mode. The "Cool Mode" is when you relax in the bath tub and your mind just drifts lazily over to the problem and somehow you are able to solve the problem.

Memory is also something you can control the author while in Jewish seminary challenged himself memorize several pages of Talmud. The first page was real difficult but as he memorized more and more it got easier. Our memory has a barrier that blocks extraneous memories after all the brain could not withstand the information over load.

There are some exercises you can do for starter. Sit comfortable for 20-30 minutes close your eyes and let the static coalesce into images. Try holding on to those images for as long as possible. The next exercise is say a mantra over and over again and allow an image to form in your mind. Focus on it for as long as possible.

Jewish Meditation as we have seen shares many salient points with other forms of meditation save for the end result or outcome. Many of the techniques are the same. The bible, Talmud and Kabala all have meditation techniques contained there in. These days it can be a work of Linguistic Archaeology to ferret them out. The Jewish nation has been a nation that practiced meditation as part of their practice quite consistently up until 150 years ago.

The enlightenment or Haskalla encouraged intellectual pursuits and frowned on anything mystical. Anything mystical was derided as superstitious. This infected the Torah world as well. Meditation fell out of practice. In the early days of the Israelite nation meditation was practiced quite regularly.

There were schools of prophets ran by master teachers. They taught their students meditative techniques that would help them reach higher states of consciousness. These school were usually headed by the prophets themselves and only extremely dedicated and spiritually advanced students were permitted to join these schools. Many Jews seeking spiritual ecstasy would practice avodah Zarah or idol worship. This was not too big of a problem provided that the Jewish nation was living in their country. Once the Nation of Israel was placed in exile things began to change.

The spiritual leadership of the Jewish People could no longer contain the problem of Jews seeking other spiritual path to transcendence, ones that may be easier. Merkavah mysticism was practiced by Ezekial the prophet. He was most likely one of the last ones to openly practice it before the Sanhedrin decided to submerge the teaching and keep it secret. This was done at some risk. None the less certain schools kept it alive.

Meditation was further eroded with the coming of Shabbtai Tzvi a false messiah. He used mysticism to promote his own end and challenge the Sultan. He ended up converting to Islam in order to save his skin.

In the Kabbalistic realm The Sefer Yetzirah was written during the Talmudic times. Abraham Abulafia wrote treatises on meditation. There was also a book on Merkavah meditation. The Rambam himself analyzed meditation as did Gersonides .

Yet even within Kabbalistic realms meditation suffered a setback. The Zohar a long complex kabbalistic work was reduced to an intellectual pursuit. The Chassidic movement while providing a bit of a revival in meditation also caused a setback. Due to its ecstatic character and focus on one person the Rebbe the Jewish community as a whole especially the leadership issued bans against the movement.

The sages built meditative devices within the Jewish prayers. The Amidah is said three times per day. Some would argue that this is repetitive yet its purpose is to function like a mantra. A mantra when repeated over and over again produces an altered state of consciousness. Kavannot are also built in they serve as a focus or mental perspective that one is to concentrate on while praying.

Kavannah means focus or what you are to direct your mind to. Some mistake the meaning as concentration or emotional content. Actually the term means to direct our mind towards something.

Another important term mentioned by Abraham Maimonides is Hitbonenut which literally means self understanding. This self understanding can be achieved by contemplating on an object or an idea. This leads to an increase in one's love for God. An example would be to go out in an open field and contemplate the stars.

The last term I wish to discuss is Hitbodedut . This form of meditation was made famous by Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. It literally means isolation. There are two kinds of isolation. External isolation obviously means getting away from everybody. Internal isolation means blocking out all external stimuli and thought.

Rabbi Kaplan proceeds to discuss mantras. Mantras as you recall are words and phrases that are repeated over and over again. Not only is it a good meditation on its own but it can also be combined with other forms of meditations. Such would include contemplation and visualizations. Contemplation is when you gaze on an object or a word. Some examples of a good contemplation are a candle and the word yud hey vav hey

This word is loaded with meaning. Inside it is the secret to charity. It is also the secret to Hashem's beneficence to the Jewish people and the citizens of his planet. Visualization while being safe is very difficult to perform. Most people can keep a vision in their mind for maybe a few minutes and then it fades. There are a couple of visualizations in that chapter. The first one being the letter aleph. Picture it as colored black against a white background. If the background is hazy then you can visualize a dot that erases all the background distortion.

Another visualization is to visualize the seven layers of heaven and imagining your self ascending those layers and coming to a curtain with G-d's name on it. Real powerful meditation. Even a candle can be mystical for when one gazes upon it once seeing Black, Red, Yellow and blue. Blue is a spiritual color that opens up the gateways to God.

The book explores how mantras were written into the daily prayer. The Amidah which is said three times daily. One should say the words slowly and concentrate their meaning. The words establish that God is the one who bestows blessing upon us. We must pray at the proper times.

The Shema is another mantra that is used. Said over and over again one thinks about the unification of the nation of Israel and about the unification of God. Further in the prayers there are also contemplations on the redeemer.

Hitbodedut is discussed. At times it can be rather difficult to start a conversation with God. One can use a mantra "Master of the Universe" in order to get the ball rolling. One can also discuss with God how difficult it is to get into a conversation with him. Hitbodedut is a great meditation for clarifying your life and getting the house in order but be wary of using it as self therapy. One can get into a cul-de-sac they cannot get out of.

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## **Christian says**

A great introduction to meditation for anyone who isn't afraid of religious overtones, albeit from a strictly Jewish Orthodox perspective. While it doesn't bother me as much, others might be put off by the more overtly religious later chapters (which makes them generally not less insightful and interesting). Kaplan gives you no charts with baby-steps, but enough information, to practice several types of meditation. In the end, this stuff is technically rather simple, but it takes a long time of just basically doing nothing, to perfect it.

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## **Janaka says**

As someone who learned the practice of meditation in early childhood, I've always struggled to provide others instruction on how to find an entry into it when asked. This first half of this slim volume provides one of the best primers on meditation as thought directed by will, in laymen's terms, that I've ever read. For those chapters alone I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in meditation, regardless of whether or not you have an interest in Judaism. The rest of the book then takes that fundamental understanding and examines how meditation has been an integral (but in our most recent century: lost) element of Jewish practice, through an exegesis of Torah as well as Talmudic and Kabbalistic texts. I took a star off for the last few chapters, which felt a little tacked in—leaving one with a sense that the second half of the book wasn't a cohesive part of the first, but rather a series of addenda that suddenly felt an obligation to advocate for a return to Jewish practice.



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## **Lori says**

Really interesting. I had no idea such a thing existed. It is fascinating to see how similar and yet how different it is in focus from the kind of meditation I am more familiar with.

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## **Marshall says**

I have found that anything by Aryeh Kaplan is good and this is no exception. It is great to see a Jewish meditation tradition. The book gets a little too on the spiritual wishy-washy side of the practice for me personally but I understand that a lot of people are looking for exactly that.

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## **Joshua Sierk says**

ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL BOOKS I'VE EVER READ. changed my life. my prayer life, my thought life, my way of thinking, my attitude, my outlook. KAPLAN is a master of communication & of meditation.

this is not just about jewish meditation. it incorporates meditation techniques from all over the world, tracing their origins.

read this. it will make you think. ;)

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## **Riobhcah says**

It is sad that today you see so many Jewish people searching for spiritual sustenance outside of Judaism. I always wondered why this is and then found this book. I think that the author is absolutely right. There is an ancient tradition of meditation in Judaism which is very helpful to spiritual growth. However, most Jewish people today don't know anything about this whatsoever. The author explains how this happened (the disappearance of meditation from Jewish practice) and how we can reinstitute meditation into our Jewish practices. I wish that every Jewish person searching for spiritual growth outside of our faith would read this book. I know that the practices recommended herein have certainly begun to enrich my practice of the Jewish faith -- especially looking at the Amidah as a meditational practice. I wish that my parents, Rabbi, etc., has taught me about meditation in the Jewish tradition a long time ago, but none of them really knew about it. It is sad that this was lost somewhere along the way and I hope that it is soon widely rediscovered. This is a wonderful book and I got a lot out of it. I would highly recommend reading it.

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## **Benjamin says**

I learned some things about Jewish religion in here which surprised me. Not like I thought I knew a lot

before but I'm not a total newcomer, either.

The biggest difference from the kind of pop-buddhism you'd get from a mindfulness app is that Jewish Meditation isn't trying to make you lose yourself completely, like blank out your identity, even when it is concentrating on nothingness.

I thought it was interesting how the visualization meditations in the Jewish tradition involve letters or writing, and there is lot in here about the Tetragrammaton. Another interesting difference from more Eastern styles was some stuff about snakes and spines in the explanation for how to move during the Amidah. The same metaphors as in Kundalini Yoga but totally different goal. The four kinds or stages of soul and their relation to God's breath is also different from Chi energy or breath meditation in other traditions.

I think the chapters about mantra-like Jewish meditation missed out on that nigunim thing the hassidim do. Maybe Aryeh Kaplan gets into that in one of his other books.

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### **Justin says**

It seems like Aryeh has a book out there for me (he seems to have profound knowledge), but the way this material was presented wasn't for me. It feels too cold/religious/academic for me. That being said, it does what it should do and will probably be liked a good deal by others

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### **Xavier Alexandre says**

Judaism has a long tradition of meditation, although this is not widely known.

The methods are similar to the ones developed by Eastern religions, although their aims can differ, but not by much, aside from fundamentally different attitudes to the question of the existence of the self.

Aryeh Kaplan makes all this approachable. This book is as much a guide as a treasure of information on the who/what/how of Jewish meditation.

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### **Jeffrey Cohan says**

If you only read one book about Jewish meditation, this should be it. It is safe to say that this is the most authoritative book about Jewish meditation ever written in the English language.

How fortunate we are that Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, one of the most influential Orthodox rabbis of the 20th Century, left us this gift.

Today, it is widely believed, even among Jews, that meditation is derivative of Buddhism or Hinduism. While it is certainly true that meditation has roots in those Eastern religions, Kaplan shows that meditation has been a core element of Jewish worship for 2,000 years or more, as well. Jews do not need to stray from their own religion to have an authentic meditative experience. In fact, Kaplan suggests that Jews not only can

but should incorporate meditation into their religious practice, particularly into their praying.

This book is valuable for beginners who have never practiced meditation, as well as for experienced meditators who want to fuse their practice with Judaism.

Kaplan's descriptions of Jewish meditation yield significant insights into the Amidah, the Shema, and the Tetragrammaton. He has a lot to say about Jewish prayer and spirituality.

Kaplan wrote "Jewish Meditation" shortly before he died. Thank G-d he finished it in time.

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### **Leslie says**

Without a true Jewish education, I was able to follow Mr Kaplan as he explored the ideas and concepts and practices of meditation through the Jewish Lense. As I continue to explore life's meaning...on day at a time...I am eager to learn and practice ways to enrich my experiences. Looking for a way to connect the yogic philosophy to my heritage, I came away with an enhanced awareness and practical advise.

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### **Jeffrey says**

This book had little practical advice to offer, unless you consider a kabalistic interpretation of Jewish prayer and liturgy to be practical. One strange affect that was repeated was the warning not to do certain meditations alone - implying that one might not be able to return from the land of nothingness or contact with God. As a physician and a sometime meditator and student of Zen, I have never heard of anyone who failed to come back from meditation. For most of us, the problem is getting there and staying there - wherever. Getting back is easy. Anyway, this book did not help me to see the sources of Jewish meditation historically as I hoped. On to The Way of Solomon and One God Clapping.

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### **Elijah says**

I love this book. Aryeh Kaplan was a really amazing scholar who talks about how unfortunate it is that so many Jews go outside of Judaism for spiritual practice, like to Buddhism (or in the case of my family, a post 60's gurdjieff cult). But before the Jewish diasopra (late BC - early AD) there were a lot of different kinds of meditative practices and rituals built into Judaism, but according to Kaplan as the diaspora progressed the torah masters predicted that if the meditative practices went out with the Jews who were leaving they would make people more vulnerable to assimilating because the transcendent experiences they had thru the meditations would make them hungry for whatever religion was closest.

Anyways, the meditations were written in obscure hebrew on hidden manuscripts and never translated or printed. He went all over and dug them out of old libraries, translated them, and then wrote a series of books. Jewish Meditation is kind of a book for the average Jew who might not speak Hebrew and never knew that there was such a thing as Jewish meditations (other than the Sh'ma or Amidah). There are visualization practices, no-mind study, breathing meditations, slow prayer, emotional meditations, etc. Its an important book for Jews who want to have a complex, visceral spiritual experience and feel disengaged from torah or

the practices they know.

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## **Justin Green says**

What Is Meditation - Why Meditate? - Techniques - "States of Consciousness" - Jewish Meditation - Mantra Meditation - Contemplation - Visualization - Nothingness - Conversing with G-d - The Way of Prayer (Amidah)- Relating to G-d (Amidah) - Unification (Shema) - The Ladder (action, speech, thought, non-thought; as represented in the daily service) - In All Your Ways (Elevating ordinary actions, Blessings) - The Commandments (Mitzvot) - Between Man and Woman (Sex) - Remolding the Self (Musar).

I liked the degree of integration between ideas found in different chapters, relating meditation to closeness to G-d, to developing oneself, to esoteric mystical ideas particular to Judaism, to the ordinariness of prayer and living. It was impressive that despite the clear purpose of separating non-Jewish practices/ ideas from Jewish ones, the author is never disrespectful to other cultures, and identifies common areas. A respectful and respectable book written clearly. The one thing I noticed was the use of 'pushy' language around meditation e.g. 'pushing' unwanted ideas away, 'controlling' one's mind and thoughts - these seem a bit antithetical to the simple awareness exercises I am used to. But I am glad I got round to reading this book, 10 or so years after attempting it the first time. It does have a lot of abstract ideas and philosophical/ Judaic jargon that could be beyond a lot of readers. However like prayer and meditation themselves, exposure to the liturgy and ideas therein would provide a reader with the necessary context.

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