

Getting your “Rosh” in the right space for a healthy New Year

Dad, asked my daughter Talia yet again, have you made use of the Headspace app I sent you? Over and over again, I put it off or when time permitted I peeked at it. Finally, she sat me down and convinced me to try it. For those that don't know, Headspace is a mindfulness training app which research from 2018 shows that using it can offer multiple benefits including improved affect, mood and emotional reactivity. Using guided meditations, mindful workouts and sleep techniques it was found to also reduce irritability as well as stress linked to personal vulnerability and external pressure. In other words, the headspace app trains your mind to intentionally set your mind free, not trying to stop your thoughts, but rather to allow your feelings to freely come and go. The app can also help with reducing anxiety and even increase your tolerance for pain.

Then I began to think more deeply about the core concepts and philosophical underpinnings that flow out of the Eastern Spiritual

traditions of Buddhism. I discussed them with Talia and realized that these same core ideas which are the basis for these mindfulness techniques, are very similar to deeply felt spiritual concepts within Judaism.

So I owe the idea for this sermon to Talia who correctly surmises that while we as Americans and Jews might try to eat better and exercise regularly, we neglect the head, the mind and the life of the spirit at our own peril. So with a nod to my one daughter who is not a Rabbi or becoming one, but is really the stealth Rabbi in the family, I invite you to make a New Year's resolution to give more attention to training not just our bodies but our minds in the New Year. Not only will we find that we might live a little more focused on what really matters, we will be able to do so with more clarity, less stress, and more resilience and vigor.

Allow me to share 3 key components to mindfulness training and how they are Jewish to the core.

In other words, as the title of my sermon suggests, “Getting your “Rosh” in the right place for a healthy New Year”.

The first of the 3 underlying Principles of the Practice of Mindfulness is impermanence, the idea that nothing is forever, and the only constant in life is change itself.

A medieval Jewish philosopher by the name of Bachya ibn Paquda once taught: _____

“The past is over, the future is not yet, the present is like a blink of an eye, so why worry, why stress?”. Accepting impermanence teaches us to live in the moment to be present to what is in front of us here and now.

In fact, it’s been proven that 90% of the things we worry about never occur, and we already know that while we can learn from the past, we can never change it.

The prophet Isaiah who lived 2700 years ago in Jerusalem recognized the fleeting nature of time when he preached saying:

“A voice rings out: “Declare!”

Another asks “what should I declare?”

That all flesh is grass.

All its goodness like flowers of the field.

Grass withers, flowers fade

When the breath of the Lord blows on them.

Indeed, man is but grass:

Grass withers, flowers fade –

But the word of our God is everlasting.”

Similarly, in the familiar words of the Una Tana Tokef “man’s origin is dust and dust is his end. Each of us is a shattered urn, grass that must wither, a flower that will fade, a shadow moving on, a particle of dust

floating in the wind, a dream soon forgotten. But you are the everlasting God!”

If we were to allow this daunting and existentially frightening prospect that nothing is forever to seep into our consciousness we can begin to train our minds to accept this reality, thereby releasing the stress on controlling something we ultimately have no control over.

Think of something you can let go of, because nothing is forever. Is it anger, frustration, regret or fear of the unknown? Is it envy or jealousy?

As an exercise in mindfulness, I invite you to experience eating an apple as if it was a fine glass of wine. Savor its texture, admire its color, listen to the sound of the first bite, taste its unique flavor and then also say the B'racha before taking the first bite. Baruch ata Adonai Elohenu Melech Ha-olam, Boray Pri Ha-Aytz. - Blessed are you Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe who created the fruit of the tree.

Rabbinic Judaism understood this concept of mindfulness by requiring us as a mitzvah to say a blessing before engaging with God's world,

whether before biting an apple, upon seeing a rainbow, lighting Sabbath candles; seeing the ocean or even reuniting with a friend you haven't seen in quite a while. By forcing us to stop, even for a few seconds to acknowledge the moment that is right in front of us, we are taught to train ourselves to be mindful. I encourage you to try to not only stop and smell the roses at least once a day, but to utter a prayer of thanks for being able to be in the moment. Awareness of our impermanence is empowering and freeing and is even uplifting.

Embracing impermanence is fundamental to mindfulness. Embracing impermanence when our natural desire is for constancy, learning to be unattached when every fiber of our being longs for attachment, not judging when we are prone to judgment and learning to abhor routine when routine offers us predictability. All this seems impossibly counter-intuitive. But in truth, counter-intuitive behavior can save our lives.

When your car happens to skid on ice, and your instinct is to turn away from the skid and slow down, we must instead turn into the direction of the skid and speed up in order to save ourselves. Similarly, if you are in

the ocean and a big wave comes at you, it is better to walk steadily into the wave than turn to let it knock you down from behind.

In other words, the Eastern concept of Ying and Yang, the idea of polar opposites held together as one, offers us a place of equanimity and balance. If we can learn to embrace paradox instead of trying to harmonize it, avoid it or explain it, we can live more fully, breathe more deeply, and walk more serenely through life with all its challenges, trails, and reversals of fortune.

Rabbi Milton Steinberg recounts that after narrowly avoiding death due to a severe heart attack, he writes how he clung to every “miracle of life and nature” that surrounded him, but also realized how easily it can slip away. He wanted some way to cling to life with all his might but also be ready to accept with grace the inevitable when the time came, and hold both of these desires at one and the same time.

So he coined the phrase, “to hold with open arms”. Just imagine that image, it says it all.

We hold tightly, as tightly as we can, but with arms open wide to the reality that we won't be able to hold tightly forever. What a paradox, but that is what we must do to overcome despair and not succumb to fear, anxiety, and hopelessness. Often that which is paradoxical expresses truths about existence which pave the way for healthier living.

The Second Principle of Mindfulness has to do with non-judgment and yet again, especially at this season, how can we as Jews think of non-judgement. In fact, Rosh Hashanah is also known as Yom Ha-Din, the day of judgement when all the world stands arrayed before God. So how can non-judgement be a Jewish ideal?

First and foremost the answer is that only God can do the judging.

With regard to others we are commanded to give others the benefit of the doubt, and to not occupy ourselves by looking at the faults of others. In fact, none of us has two eyes with equal strength. One is invariably stronger than the other. We ought to use the stronger eye to

judge ourselves; the weaker eye to judge others. Just imagine if we didn't spend so much time in our head either beating ourselves up or always judging others. It would leave a lot more room for empathy and compassion for ourselves and others, creating the space for a healthier soul to grow.

The ability to actively practice non-judgement while perhaps among the most difficult things to do, is a key to developing a healthy mindset.

Finally training your psyche to acquire a **(beginner's mind)** is a tried and true way of living life with an attitude of gratitude.

Each morning when we awake, it is the Jewish way to utter these words: _____

I acknowledge before you, oh everlasting source of life, that I am thankful that you have mercifully returned my soul to me.

You see according to Rabbinic lore sleep is considered 1/60 of death and indeed while we sleep we are vulnerable to the unknown. Waking up each new day is like being reborn even as our soul which the Holy one guards through the night is returned to us each morning. To regard each new day as a new beginning gives us the opportunity to see the world afresh. The Baal Shem Tov used to teach:

“A man should believe that the world is created anew each day, and that he himself is born anew each morning. He also said: “The first time something occurs in nature people call it a miracle. When it recurs, they call it ‘natural.’ And soon, when it occurs again and again, they disregard it entirely. A man’s worship and service to God should be a fresh miracle every day.”

The grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Nachman echoed his grandfather’s words when he once said, “It is forbidden to be old” He was not thinking of age, because some people are younger in outlook and spirit at 70 than others at 30; indeed, some people are born “old.”

Nor did he say “It is forbidden to become “old” – that would have been as useless as King Canute trying to command the tide to stand still. He must have been thinking of what his grandfather taught: a person must believe that the world is reborn each day, and he or she with it.

Each morning in our prayers we recite _____

“with God’s goodness the work of creation is renewed continually each and every day”. Can you think of a time when you felt renewed? When the miracle of being alive, just to breathe in and out was something you were really mindful of.

To develop a beginner’s mind is a task that takes effort, intention, and persistence. It is so easy to let life become a habit which steals from us the possibility of spontaneity, new outlooks, and the ability to think outside the box.

Using Headspace or some other app can help us acquire a beginner’s mind which is essential for a healthy mindset.

My friends all of the above mentioned principles of mindfulness, embracing impermanence, practicing non-judgement and developing a beginner's mind, are in fact core Jewish teachings rooted firmly in our unique approach living a healthy life. And yet in each one is the phenomenon of a living paradox.

But herein lies the secret to living our lives with a "Rosh" that is ready for prime time. Life itself is paradoxical. If we can learn to embrace paradox, instead of trying to harmonize it, avoid it or explain it, we can live more fully, breathe more deeply, and walk more serenely through life with all its challenges, trials, and reversals of fortune.

Accepting that real life is living "in the in between" in the in between moments of ups and downs and focusing our minds on what is really most important, is the key to mastering mindfulness.

May we on this eve of the New Year 5783, commit ourselves to seriously taking care of our headspace, by getting our Rosh in the right place, helping us to experience a good and healthy New Year.

L'Shanah Tovah U'Briah

May we all be blessed with a good and healthy New Year

And let us say amen