



## Parshat Chayei Sarah

# Is Any Kind of Meditation Associated with Idol Worship?

Dear Rebbetzin,

I once attended a workshop with you where you incorporated a meditation. You had us close our eyes, breathe slowly and do something. I can't remember exactly what, but it was very much like doing transcendental meditation. I was not comfortable with it. I have since moved to a more *chareidi* congregation. I tend to lean on the examples and teachings of the *gadolim* and to be fairly stringent, and I am concerned that any kind of meditation may somehow be associated with idol worship, so I stay away from it. Hope you understand.

Dina Migdal (name changed)

Dear Dina,

Thank you so much for sharing. I very much appreciate it. In the future, I will be careful not to introduce Jewish meditation unless I know beforehand that everyone is comfortable with it. By the way, I am not familiar with transcendental meditation. I became *frum* as a teenager and, b"H, never learned very much of what's out there in the world. I understand now, that since Eastern meditative practices involve idol worship, many G-d fearing Jews are concerned that perhaps Jewish meditation has a semblance, G-d forbid, to these idol-worshipping practices. I agree that it is of the utmost importance to steer away from any such resemblance.

## Meditation Originates in the Torah

*Parashat Chayei Sarah* teaches us that meditation doesn't originate in the East. Actually, the source for meditation is in our Torah. The great role models in the Torah practiced meditation in order to feel Hashem's presence. The Talmud teaches that the early Chassidim used to meditate for one hour both before and after prayer. (*Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 32b*). The relatively recent renaissance of Jewish meditation can be accredited largely to Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, who contributed two important books on the topic: *Meditation and the Bible* (1978), and *Meditation and Kabbalah* (1982). Quoting a wealth of classical, medieval, Kabbalistic and Chassidic commentaries, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan demonstrated how meditation has always been an integral part of Torah. Moreover, he thoroughly researched biblical vocabulary referring to meditation and cleared up prior mistranslations. The two most common biblical words denoting meditation are: שִׁיחַ/*siach* and הֶגְיוֹן/*hegayon*. The Hebrew word הִתְבּוֹדְדוּת/*hitbodedut* – to seclude oneself, is consistently used by classical commentaries and Kabbalists to refer to meditation. Another closely related term, הִתְבּוֹנְנוּת/*hitbonenut* – contemplation, refers to an intense focus on an image- a technique that I frequently use in my *Parasha Meditations* ([Chana Bracha Siegelbaum, Parasha-Meditations-Bereishit](#) p. 20).

## Yitzchak was Meditating in the Field

Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan discovered the first reference to Jewish meditation in the Torah in this week's *parasha*, where it states that "Yitzchak went out to לְשׁוּחַ/*lasuach* (speak or meditate) in the field" (Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible* p.101).

ספר בראשית פרק כד (ג) וַיֵּצֵא יִצְחָק לְשׁוּחַ בַּשָּׂדֶה לְפָנוֹת עָרֶב וַיִּשָּׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה גַמְלִים בָּאִים:  
 "Yitzchak went out to meditate in the field toward evening, and he lifted his eyes and saw, behold, camels were coming" (*Bereishit 24:63*).

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An earlier source for *hitbodedut* – speaking with Hashem in the field- advocated so highly by Rebbe Nachman, is the Italian Torah commentator, Sforno. He explains that when “Yitzchak went out לְשׁוּחַ בְּשָׂדֶה /*lasuach b’sadeh*” – to meditate in the field- he turned away from the main road, in order to pour out his prayer before Hashem in a quiet field, where he would not be interrupted by other people (Rabbi Ovadiah ben Ya’acov, *Sforno, Bereishit* 24:63). Rebbe Nachman of Breslev explains that the letter ב/ *bet* as a prefix, which usually means ‘in,’ can also mean “with.” If so, then when Yitzchak went out to pray בְּשָׂדֶה /*b’sadeh*, he was praying *with* the field! In other words, his prayer was so intense, that nature itself felt compelled to join together in prayer with Yitzchak (Rebbe Nachman of Breslev, *Likutei Moharan* 2:1). (This section is taken from my *Parasha Meditations for Spiritual Renewal and Strengthening Communication with the Creator, Bereishit, Parashat Chayei Sarah*, p. 65).

### Our Holy Rabbis Practiced Meditation

In the fast-paced Western world, because we move so hurriedly, it is difficult to focus in prayer. Therefore, taking some moments to close our eyes, take a few deep breaths and meditate on Hashem’s presence can help bring more focus to our prayer and connection with Hashem.

**משנה מסכת ברכות ה:א** חסידים הראשונים היו שוהים שעה אחת ומתפללים, כדי שיכנונו את לבם למקום:  
 “The first Chassidim would meditate for one hour before praying, in order to direct their hearts in proper *kavana* (intention) to *Hamakom* (meaning the place, a reference to Hashem as the place of Creation) (*Mishnah Berachot* 5:1).

All through Jewish history, there have been great Rabbis practicing various meditative techniques. Rabbi Avraham Abulafia (1240-1291), wrote meditation manuals focusing on Hebrew letters and words. Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (1522-1570) the author of the famous *Tomer Devora* was also involved in Jewish meditation. The Ba’al Shem Tov, founder of the Chassidic movement, taught how to develop *deveikus* (cleaving to Hashem) through meditation. The list goes on and on. Most meditation involves closing the eyes, as we do when reciting *Shema Yisrael* in order to be able to really focus.

### The Spiritual Gifts Sent Away from Yitzchak

Avraham, our father, was a master of Jewish Meditation. He bequeathed part of this spiritual practice to the sons of Keturah (whom he married after Sarah’s passing) and sent them off to the East:

**ספר בראשית פרק כה: (ה)** וַיִּתֵּן אַבְרָהָם אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר לוֹ לַיְצְחָק: (ו) וּלְבָנֵי הַפִּילִגְשִׁים אֲשֶׁר לְאַבְרָהָם נָתַן אַבְרָהָם מִתְּנַת וְיִשְׁלָחֵם מֵעַל יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ בְּעוֹדָו חַי קְדָמָה אֶל אֶרֶץ קֶדֶם:  
 “Avraham gave all that he had unto Yitzchak. But to the sons of the concubines, whom Avraham had, Avraham gave gifts and sent them away from Yitzchak his son, while he yet lived, eastward, unto the east country” (*Bereishit* 25:5-6).

Rashi explains that the gifts that Avraham entrusted to Keturah’s children were a name of impurity. The commentary, Fa’aneach Raze, understands Rashi to mean that Avraham gave the children of his concubines the ability to mention the ineffable name without harming themselves, even though their body may be in a state of impurity. Since this gift was given explicitly to the children sent away from Yitzchak, it seems that this ability does not apply to Jews. Since we have greater spiritual capacity, a more perfected vessel is required to hold this spiritual light. Therefore, it may be possible, that until we have developed our vessels to the highest degree, spirituality may be more accessible to the descendants of Keturah than to the Jews descending from Yitzchak. This is in spite of, or rather, because of the fact that our spiritual capacity is so much greater.

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## Reclaiming Our Lost Meditational Traditions Preserved by the East

While we need to become a pure vessel to access Hashem's true spiritual light by meditating on G-d's Names, like the earlier Chassidim, it is also possible, to a smaller degree, to access spiritual, life giving energy through other forms of Jewish meditation. As the Torah includes all truth, any spark of value discovered in Eastern practices, originates in our own holy sources. It is understandable how such practice may have gotten lost during our prolonged exile, where, unfortunately, we have absorbed many Western, non-Jewish values without being aware of it. Indeed, our 'instant-gratification-consumer society,' does not leave room for becoming mindful of the vital breath, which is blown into our nostrils by none other than the Creator of the universe! Yet, mindfulness and the awareness of our breath has been preserved by the Eastern tradition. We too need to apply focused breathing – breathing the Torah into our entire being and learning Torah mindfully and meditatively in order to allow its Divine energy to flow into all the parts of our body and soul. The importance of conscious breathing is encoded in the very fiber of our holy tongue, as the Hebrew word for breath, נְשִׁמָּה/*neshimah* shares the exact same letters as the word for soul – נֶשְׁמָה/*neshamah*.

## Providing a Backdoor for Spirituality during Exile

Perhaps Avraham sent these spiritual gifts away from Yitzchak with the intention that they would ultimately return to Yitzchak. Avraham knew that Yitzchak's descendants would desire specifically that which was not designated for them. They would ignore their own spirituality, which includes everything true, and search in faraway places, eventually discovering that the source of all spirituality is in their own heritage. In addition, it is possible that Avraham Avinu intended to provide us with a 'backdoor' way to access spirituality, during our long exile, while we remain in impurity and the main entrance is locked. Throughout the millennium, the impurity of idol worship became attached to the original Jewish meditations that Avraham sent to the East. "Meditation techniques, as commonly practiced today, are adopted mainly from Eastern practices, and they carry with them many of the rites peculiar to Eastern faiths. In the East, mediation is not regarded as a mere therapeutic device. It is an integral part of religious practice (notably in Hinduism and Buddhism), and many of the ceremonies associated with it are religiously inspired," Adapted from an address by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, 13th Tammuz 5739, regarding meditation). Therefore, we need a lot of caution when exploring Eastern meditation. We must not forget that we are entering the backdoor, filled with mire and mud, and we are obligated to filter and cleanse meditation from its traces of idol worship.

## Jewish Meditation as Preparation for Prophecy

Nevertheless, meditation "can be a positive force in one's spiritual growth. Meditating on G-d's greatness and kindness, for example, brings a person to more devoted service of G-d. Thus, our forefathers, Abraham, Yitzchak and Ya'akov, were shepherds, finding the accompanying solitude conducive to contemplation and communion with G-d. With such a definite goal in mind, and set within proper limits, meditation can help strengthen the bond between man and his Creator" (Ibid.). B"H, when the *Beit Hamikdash* will be rebuilt and the front door, with "all" that Avraham entrusted to Yitzchak will re-open, Jewish meditation will rise to an even higher dimension, becoming a vital preparation for the return of prophecy, may it be soon!