

Book Review

מדיטציה יהודית: התפתחותן של תרגולות רוחניות ביהדות זמננו, תל אביב: אוניברסיטת תל אביב (in Hebrew), *The Jewish Meditative Tradition* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2016).

Reviewed by Gideon Elazar

"Tradition" is a rather complicated concept to speak or write about in this post-modern era. It seems it comes under attack, almost before it is uttered. How do we know what has really been passed down through the generations and what is simply our contemporary commentary to words that held entirely other meanings for those who first articulated them? For those dealing with the history and development of religion, the question of authenticity and our inevitably limited ability to answer it in any definitive way is always in the background. This difficulty is greatly enhanced when the traditions discussed are, at least until recently, of a largely esoteric nature, drawing primarily on the Jewish mystical teachings. Indeed, any discussion of Jewish meditation cannot avoid the question of whether or not such a thing really exists at all. Moreover, a discussion of meditation, a term often associated with the Hindu and Buddhist worlds, requires a comparative approach. As Tomer Persico notes in his recent book *The Jewish Meditative Tradition*, the idea that mystical experiences in different religions are comparable has come under severe attack in the last few decades (p.31). Keeping all this in mind, Persico has taken on a formidable task: an attempt to answer the questions raised above by providing a comprehensive historical overview of a large variety of practices and teachings that may be, or have at some point been, categorized as forms of Jewish meditation. The result is highly recommended for those who are interested in understanding the nature and scope of meditation in a Jewish context.

While the topic of the book is meditation, in many ways this is really a book about Jewish modernity. At its core is the claim that is revisited throughout the book: that the current flowering of interest in Jewish meditative techniques is a reflection of the rise of the modern subjective individuality, as expressed in the writing of Charles Taylor, implying a religiosity that is focused on the introspective self and his road to spiritual experience and faith. According to Persico, this modern form of religion stands in distinct contrast to the earlier pre-modern religious systems in the West, which are largely collective and focused on the transcendental. As such, despite the reference to certain traditional practices than may be typified as meditation, contemporary interest in Jewish meditation is presented by Persico as an essentially New Age phenomenon.

The book opens with an interesting discussion revolving around the crucial question of definition: what can be considered meditation? One cannot avoid thinking there is a certain degree of irony in the attempt to systematically categorize meditation and mystical practices, practices distinctly aimed at nullifying and transcending categories. Yet, in writing an academic book this task is unfortunately unavoidable. While Persico examines a large variety of meditational methods, he chooses to employ a series of dichotomies to provide a useful meditation typology. These include extraverted versus introverted methods, those aimed at ecstasy and others at anesthesy, and practices focused on consciousness as opposed to those centered on energetic-physicality (for this final category, the Hindu terminology of Shivaist and Shaktiest is employed, in my opinion, adding a somewhat unnecessary comparative model). Finally, Persico adds the category of nomic versus anomic, referring to the relevance of Jewish halachic practice to the specific meditational practice. The importance of these categories for the book's central argument becomes evident in the final chapter and summery. In a chart presenting the techniques described in the book (p.401), the author attempts to demonstrate that a shift has occurred in the 20th century, with the rise of introspection and introversion as opposed to the earlier methods focused on concentration and extroversion.

The first chapters of the book provide a concise and useful summary of early practices, beginning with the *Heichalot* literature of Maimonides and Abulafia, followed by a discussion of the techniques offered in Lurianic Kabala and the Hasidic movement (focusing primarily on Chabad and Breslov). These are followed by a fascinating analysis of the relatively unknown work of Menachem Eckstein and of Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the Piaseczno Rebbe. The author's declared goal here is to reveal the distinct modernity of these two last writers, their movement away from Kabbalistic terminology and use of the psychological terminology of introspection. The book then turns to a lengthy discussion of the New Age movement and its distinct link to the rise of free market capitalism. Here, Persico discusses the selective importation of East and South Asian religious philosophy, a process that has led to the widespread interest in meditation in the West. Persico's analysis of the American Jewish Renewal movement is particularly instructive for the Israeli reader, whose acquaintance with the movement is for the most part virtually non-existent. Similarly, the book contains an important summary of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shlomi's writings and teachings on meditation. Once again, while Schachter-Shlomi's ideas have had a profound impact on Jews in the United States, he remains virtually unknown in Israel.

Persico dedicates another chapter to the work Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, commonly considered one of the modern fathers of the present-day interest in Jewish meditation. Here, I feel the author's criticism of Kaplan is far too harsh. Returning to the haunting specter of authenticity, Persico accuses Kaplan of inventing meditative traditions and presenting them as elements of ritual knowledge that has been lost or obscured over time. In other words, from Persico's academically-oriented perspective, Kaplan's "discovery" of meditation in various sources seems like an attempt to fabricate tradition. Yet, one should keep in mind that Kaplan does make use of a large variety of Kabbalistic sources that had until recently been almost unknown in the general Jewish public; this includes the esoteric writings of Abraham Abulafia that Persico himself discusses in chapter five of the book. Perhaps it would have been more palatable if Kaplan had presented his work as an offering of commentary rather than an unearthing of knowledge lost. But in fact, by choosing to present his work as an expression of an authentic meditative tradition, Kaplan was simply following conventions of traditional commentary. Kaplan's commentary of *Sefer Yezira* is a case in point. As Moshe Idel shows in his book on *The Golem* (Idel, 1990), commentary on the correct and original way of using *Sefer Yezira* and on what exactly it means to create a Golem vary widely, ranging from magic, to astral projection, and to practices that are entirely experiential in nature. Kaplan reads the book as a meditational guide – a commentary that is, in my mind, no less authentic than others offered. Indeed, Persico's view of Kaplan may be applied to the rise of Jewish meditation in general, viewing it as an imaginary tradition. Yet, at the same time, if one accepts that the question of authenticity is unanswerable, the ability to find meditation where it was not seen before may also be seen as a testament to the power and vitality of commentary.

The book does a convincing job of creating the link between the rise of religious subjectivity in the West, the New Age movement and the growing popularity of Jewish meditation. Clearly, the interest in such practices has increased dramatically in recent years. It also shows how many of the techniques are in fact imported from the Buddhist and Hindu worlds and given a Jewish semblance. And yet, I would argue that the turn to subjectivity within Judaism predates the 20th century. Indeed, it stands at the center of the Hasidic movement since its inception in 18th century Eastern Europe. Moreover, it is worth remembering that it is one of the central features of Hasidic writing, namely the attempt to reinterpret Lurianic and Zoharic cosmological concepts in terms of the private self. Perhaps the most famous expression of Hasidic subjectivity is evident in the reworking of the Mishnaic verse *da ma she'lemala mimcha* ("know what is above you": Avot 2,1) by the Baal Shem Tov, reading: *da ma she'lemala – mimcha* ("know, what is above, is from you": Toldot Yakkov Yosef, Parsht Ekev). Thus, the rigid objectivity of traditional Judaism that incurs the most

severe criticism on the side of early Hasidic thinkers was the movement's focal point. One is reminded of the story ascribed to Yitzhak Meir Alter, the founder of the Ger Hasidic dynasty who told his disciples that the idea that the answer "everywhere" to the question "where is God" is incorrect. Alter argued that God is where you let him enter, advocating a distinctly subjective form of religiosity. Perhaps no one was as radical as Rabbi Nachman of Breslov who equates the divine truth of God (*emet*) with the subjective truth of the believer and contending that orally conveying an individual's subjective feelings and state of mind in a given moment is an expression of truth in its highest form (Likutei Moharan 9; 112). Thus, while Persico is correct in noting the remarkably methodological writings of the early 20th century Pieszna Rebbe, I would argue that his instructions of introspection are an extension of the Hasidic tradition from which he emerged, repackaged in modern terminology rather than a radical departure from it.

In fact, Durkheim's dichotomy that stands at the center of the book between collective religion and religion focused on the individual believer's personal relationship with the divine is, in my opinion, somewhat overstated. It is largely a result of one of another central feature of modernity: the idea that present-day humans are fundamentally different than their pre-modern ancestors. While the massive turn towards religious individualism and away from collective religion in the modern era is undeniable, it would be wrong to view the idea of individual transcendence as a new one. In my (admittedly religious) point of view, it has always been part of Jewish thought. It is enough to note that already in the Talmud, the collective ritual of the Temple is transmuted into individual, devotional prayer, as expressed in the often quoted saying *Rachmana liba baei* – "God wants the heart" (Sanhedrin 106:2; see also Zohar 3 281:2). Indeed, the balance between individual, experience-based religiosity and collective-communal religious thinking is a permanent, constantly shifting feature of Jewish thought.

Finally, it is important to note that while interest in Jewish meditation parallels the abandonment of traditional and organized religion in many places, this is not necessarily the case in Israel. In fact, the thinkers discussed in the book's final chapters – Breslov teachers Rabbi Erez Moshe Doron and Rabbi Besancon and Chabad Rabbi Yitzhak Ginsburg – can be placed clearly within the confines of Orthodox Judaism. Moreover, much of their writings are dedicated to issues closely related to Halachic practice. While Persico argues that the Breslov practice of *hitbodedut* is perceived as a potential threat to tradition practice, a glance at the reality of Breslov Hasidim today reveals that the threat is negligible as the practice is usually understood to be another feature of life within the framework of Jewish law. The same can be said of anti-intellectualism, rightly recognized by Persico as key elements of the New Age movement (p. 224). While a certain criticism of the over-emphasis on learning in the Jewish world appeared in the early Hasidic movement, today's teachers mentioned above advocate a distinctly traditional approach to learning as a central feature of Jewish practice.¹ Likewise, while the book presents a convincing argument regarding the deep connection between the rise of the autonomous self and the estrangement from established religion in large parts of the West, the popularity of imminence does not necessarily mean that we have parted ways with God the transcendental. Thus, while Jewish meditation clearly has some new age features, the two are far from being synonymous.

Once again, the question of authenticity comes to mind. Are my own views or those expressed by Persico simply a reflection of my modern anachronistic readings of canonical texts? The discussion of authenticity becomes a means of constructing it. Thus, I would posit that Persico's work will become an important source of learning for those who aim to further the popularization of Jewish meditative practices.

Notes

¹ Persico is probably correct in his assertion that moving away from the intellectual on towards the experiential is a distinct feature of the contemporary American Jewish Renewal movement. However, my feeling is that this is at least partly due to problems related to Jewish education in the United States and the accessibility of traditional texts.