Having now lived in Hong Kong for a bit over 5 years, I've been exposed to new foods and sites, friends and colleagues, opportunities and experiences. Of all the new things that I've learned from being in Hong Kong and touring around Asia, the most notable is an appreciation for philosophies and practices that, although I was aware of their existence before, I have only recently begun to more fully understand and explore them. In particular, I have been moved by what I have learned about mindfulness practices as derived from Buddhism.

Now, Jews being interested in Buddhism is nothing new. Books like That's Funny, You Don't Look Buddhist: On Being a Faithful Jew and a Passionate Buddhist or The Jew and the Lotus: A Poet's Re-Discovery of Jewish Identity in Buddhist India have been around for many years. It's only through living here and investigating these practices that I have come to see that we do not need an integration of Buddhism and Judaism to get the best of both, because in fact the mindfulness practices that so many admire about Buddhism are already a part of Judaism.

Rabbi Arthur Green in These Are the Words: A Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life writes in his introduction that the interface with Buddhism and Judaism has reawakened a need to rediscover certain practices in Judaism that many of us don't associate with Judaism, even though they have been there all along. For me, mindfulness practices do not
to him, I found my mind searching to connect his teaching with Jewish practices. As an example of Jewish mindfulness practice, in the morning we appreciate another day in reciting Modeh ani, the daily acknowledgement of gratitude for life. The blessings that follow turn our attention to the functioning of our bodies, the Divine inside of all of us in the form of our soul, and the ability to comprehend by studying a passage of Torah. On erev Shabbat, L’cha Dodi calls our attention to the presence of Shabbat and Kiddush focuses us on present moment Shabbat joy. Reflecting on these and other practices was a great reminder that rituals and prayers are not archaic ways of pleasing a God who can be easily angered, but as a way to cultivate a practice of presence and awareness. And for what purpose is this awareness? Pure and simple attention to the moment, which in Judaism is simultaneous with attention to God, because this awareness prepares us to appreciate life, treat others well, serve our community, and engage in tikkun olam (repair of the world). It’s unfortunate that many of us have forgotten or have not been let in on this aspect of Judaism.

Although my work at an integrated body-mind-spirit practice and research center has reinforced the importance of mindfulness practices, last year I was fortunate to attend a one-day training and then a lecture by the renowned Buddhist Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. His constant message was that for each of us, at every moment, happiness is here and now. I should be clear that in Buddhism, happiness is a general state of compassion and freedom from suffering, rather than a momentary episode of elation or pleasure. According to the teacher when it comes to happiness, we don’t need to search for it, pay for it, will for it – we only need to be open and aware of the present moment. The meditations and practices that he recommended were all meant for one purpose, to cultivate the mind to this state of awareness to increase our contentment in daily living and as a guide when we encounter painful circumstances. Be aware. Be present. Be open to the moment.

Hearing a common truth as I listened to him, I found my mind searching to connect his teaching with Jewish practices. As an example of Jewish mindfulness practice, in the morning we appreciate another day in reciting Modeh ani, the daily acknowledgement of gratitude for life. The blessings that follow turn our attention to the functioning of our bodies, the Divine inside of all of us in the form of our soul, and the ability to comprehend by studying a passage of Torah. On erev Shabbat, L’cha Dodi calls our attention to the presence of Shabbat and Kiddush focuses us on present moment Shabbat joy. Reflecting on these and other practices was a great reminder that rituals and prayers are not archaic ways of pleasing a God who can be easily angered, but as a way to cultivate a practice of presence and awareness. And for what purpose is this awareness? Pure and simple attention to the moment, which in Judaism is simultaneous with attention to God, because this awareness prepares us to appreciate life, treat others well, serve our community, and engage in tikkun olam (repair of the world). It’s unfortunate that many of us have forgotten or have not been let in on this aspect of Judaism.

The constant refrain of here and now, brought to mind a phrase from Jewish liturgy that rings with the same sounds. Hineni. Sometimes translated as, “I am ready,” it is also translated as “Here I am.” More than announcing one’s availability or presence, hineni takes on a weighty meaning that implies present moment awareness and intense engagement.

This isn’t what someone would answer when a teacher announces role call. In that case a simple “Ani po” or “I am here” would suffice. Rather than announce physical presence – “I am here”, hineni is a declaration of spiritual presence, “Here I am”.

This definition is heightened when we consider some of the contexts in which hineni occurs. Just in the book of Bereshit (Genesis), hineni is offered four times in a response to a call from God (22.1, 22.11, 31.11, 46.2). The other times are in response to another person such as Abraham responding when Isaac asks what they will sacrifice on Mt. Moriah (22.7), Esau answering Isaac when called for his blessing (27.1) and then Isaac responding to Jacob when he comes disguised as Esau (27.18), thereby receiving his father’s blessing. All of these moments are spiritually heavy and during recognizable moments of importance.

There is one more occurrence of hineni in Bereshit that teaches us a lesson that parallels the lessons of cultivating mindfulness in our every day lives. When Jacob summons Joseph to find his brothers in Shechem, the favored son does not just go or simply answer in the affirmative. Joseph responds, “Hineni” (37.13). Even though this utterance of hineni, is in response to a seemingly simple utilitarian task, for me it offers an important teaching on mindfulness in Judaism.

Knowing how the story progresses with Joseph’s ultimate rise to serving as vizier
of Egypt, it is easy to see this example of hineni as spiritually important. Neither of them knew what that exact moment would lead to; otherwise how do we explain their individual anguish in the years between this moment and their reunion in Egypt? This is exactly why I think it is a powerful lesson and one that can be said to illustrate the teaching by Thich Nhat Hanh. The fact that Joseph stated his readiness and presence in a non-obvious spiritual situation speaks to the benefits of mindfulness in our regular lives. It is in some ways easy to be attentive in the midst of a solemn occasion. It is less so in normal times, but these are the moments when a state of mindfulness is so important.

By answering, hineni Joseph was signaling that he was present and ready for whatever would come – no matter how ordinary or extraordinary. Later when we read that Joseph is successful in Egypt, it’s only after we read that “Adonai was with him,” that is, present in his life (39.2). He was aware of God and this awareness made him fortunate. In Joseph’s case, being fully aware of God’s presence had financial reward, but more importantly it allowed him to make the difficult ethical choices when approached by his master’s wife, maintain hopeful humility when imprisoned, and replace hatred and bitterness towards his brothers with forgiveness and mercy. This is exactly what the teachings of mindfulness are meant to help us with; that is, it slows us down and increases our compassion to masterfully handle whatever comes our way. For Joseph, like many of us, God does not talk with us directly in obvious ways. And so, for Joseph as well as for us, hineni is a call to the present moment, which keeps us centered in our lives, sustains our relationship with others and God, and nurtures our ability to cope with adversity.

When I practice mindfulness and bring such strategies into working with clients, I am always amazed how distress dissipates and happiness increases. In some ways it took me living in Asia to fully comprehend that there is no need to infuse Judaism with practices from the East. Only now have I been able to appreciate what has always been here.

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