



A Jewish Journey into the world of Yoga

By Sarede Switzer

I have always been into physical fitness to one degree or another. As a kid, I took gymnastics, figure skating and swimming and when I got older I inherited both of my parents love of jogging and dabbled in kickboxing and other “typical” workout regimens. But yoga? My impression of yoga was of an aging hippy sitting cross legged on a mountaintop breathing. Not exactly appealing to a hyperactive and athletically minded young person like myself. Then one day, my good friend Sarah said, “You know, you should really try yoga”. “Hm” I answered - which to anyone who knows me well knows that in Sarede-speak this means “Yea right, never in a million years.” So she stopped talking, and proceeded to show me instead. “Stand with your feet hip distance apart” she ordered. “Now bend forward and try to touch the floor.” My dangling fingers were no where near the floor. Then Sarah stood behind me and placed her hands on my low back and gently directed me to become conscious of my breath. “With every inhale feel your body rise” she said. “With every exhale, go deeper and allow your fingers to move closer to the ground.” And would you believe it - within about 10 seconds of doing this exercise, my palms were touching the floor. “Cool”, I acknowledged. “Ok, teach me more.”

I soon learned that yoga involved a whole lot more than just sitting in a lotus position for hours on end. And that certain styles of Yoga can actually be more physically demanding than many high intensity fitness regimes out there. Considering my gymnastics background and hunger for challenge, it’s no surprise that Power Yoga became my gateway into the larger world of yoga practice.

As time went on, my practice deepened, and one day, I found out about a Yoga Teacher Training taught by a religious Jewish woman. I was about to sign up, when a nagging voice in the back of my head wouldn’t let up. I vaguely remembered

hearing something about how Yoga has something to do with Avoda Zara (idol worship) and thus might be problematic for a religious Jew. If I were to take the path of becoming a Yoga Teacher, this brought with it a new level of responsibility - how could I take on the role of instructing others in a system that I had never clarified was not at some level be problematic or G-d forbid harmful to their soul?

So I called my local orthodox Rabbi. Unfortunately, it was very difficult to find a Rav who knew enough about yoga to give a clear answer. Eventually, I found someone. A prominent figure-head in my community’s Beis Din, he too, he admitted, knew very little about yoga. However, being an expert in Jewish law in general, the Rav asked me key questions, and concluded that the style of Yoga that I had set out to learn and teach was perfectly fine and even encouraged me in my pursuit.

The training took my practice to a whole new level. I clicked so well with Kinneret (the head of the program), that I eventually became her partner in teaching subsequent trainings.

As our trainings grew in popularity, the Jewish question kept coming up. Although I had received clearance from my Rav, the more I learned, the more questions arose. What is the origin of Yoga? Do the postures have any inherent religious meaning to them? What is “yogic philosophy” and in what ways does it contradict or coincide with Jewish philosophy?

The Book that Changed Everything

And then we discovered it. ‘YogaBody’ by Mark Singleton, published in 2010, is a book that rocked the Yoga world. His thesis is that rather than being an ancient practice with 5000 year old roots, the origins of modern yoga posture practice are less than 100 years old and

have roots far removed from anything remotely considered Hindu. And he has the proof to back it up. For fundamentalist Yogi practitioners, this is nothing short of sacrilege. For a religious Jew, it’s refreshing and removes many issues surrounding Yoga’s possible Hindu (i.e idolatrous) connections.

At the end of the 19th century and into the beginning of the 20th century, explains Singleton, a major cultural shift occurred in India that would forever alter the country’s relationship to yoga and would become the instigator for yoga’s popularity here in America and the rest of the western world. This shift was a direct result of British imperialism and the hybridization of cultures. On the one hand, India became infatuated with British ideals of physical strength and beauty. Gymnasiums popped up and yoga practice took on a distinctively European gymnastics flavor. And the Brits, for their part, were fascinated with contortionism and yoga demonstrations traveled around the country showing off royal protégés who mastered acrobatic “yoga” skills.

Suddenly Yoga was no longer about a devotional practice for cleansing the atman (soul), so much as it was a regimented fitness routine to build strength, health and wellness.

Once in America, a funny thing happened. Just as Yoga had become secularised in India, American yogis, craving “authenticity”, reinserted Hindu ideas into some styles, in the forms of chants, mantras, Hindu decor etc. A Rabbi I once spoke to likened this to when a Hollywood movie inserts the song “Hava Nagila” into the background to demonstrate that it’s a Jewish scene.

As time goes on, Yoga continues to evolve into styles too numerous to list even a fraction of here. Some notable examples include Acro Yoga, Aerial Yoga, Yoga competitions (under Bikram Yoga) and even Yoga for Dogs (yes - Doga! It’s a thing!)

In exploring Yoga practice from a Jewish perspective, I think it is important to acknowledge this continual evolvement in order to understand how it can fit into our lives.

Bringing it all Together

In 1977, The Lubavitcher Rebbe became disturbed by the increasing numbers of Jewish youth who were flocking to Eastern movements, including Transcendental Meditation and Yoga. He pointed out that many of these groups had ties to idolatrous practices and some could even be classified as cults. On the other hand, the Rebbe recognized that many of these systems used very powerful and effective healing techniques, which he felt were often the reason for the participant’s attraction to begin with.

Rather than forbidding these practices altogether, the Rebbe implored professionals in the field of neurology and psychology as well as knowledgeable laymen, to study these techniques, so that they could be further developed, perfected and ultimately identified under a medical banner to help those who could benefit from them.

In his great wisdom, the Rebbe understood what Singleton would subsequently illustrate with his research - that the Hindu trappings of yoga and other related practices are not integral to the practices themselves, but rather superimposed and unnecessary “extras” that could be shed without compromising the disciplines.

So how can we, as laymen apply this to our own lives/yoga practices?

Well, with the umbrella disclaimer to AYLOR (Ask Your Local Orthodox Rabbi), may I dare to offer a few suggestions to help ensure that your Yoga practice is a kosher one:

There’s the obvious - any religious paraphernalia, such as statues, altars, incense, chants etc should be avoided. Also, going to classes taught by someone who is a devout Hindu (or other religion that is considered idolatry for a Jew) is not a good idea.

Then there’s the not so obvious. Many yoga instructors bring up certain philosophical ideas which at first glance might sound really nice and “humanitarian” but on deeper investigation are not really in line with Jewish philosophy. To get into detail

about this would require a whole other article. The bottom line however is: Best to practice yoga for it’s physical and mental benefits, but let the spiritual growth flow from that. As the saying of our sages goes “Chochma b’goyim taamin, Torah b’goyim al taamin” (Eicha Raba 2), that wisdom is to be found amongst the nations of the world, but not the Torah.

The Benefits of Yoga

The benefits of yoga are countless! Once I start listing

some of them, I know it might sound too good to be true, but yoga really is that good! Try it yourself and you’ll see what I mean. Here are just a sample few benefits that come to mind: The focus on breath and connecting breath to movement creates a deeper sense of awareness and sensitivity to oneself and others.

Deep and methodical breathing activates the hypothalamus, which links the nervous system to the endocrine (hormone) system. This in turn regulates mood, metabolism and sleep, and alleviates anxiety.

Yoga is an all in one workout that combines balance, flexibility, strength and stamina The detailed anatomical focus of yoga helps prevent injury and strengthens deep muscle layers that often get overlooked in more run of the mill fitness classes. Keeping a steady “practice” trains one to be more process oriented which brings with it a consistent feeling of both reward and humility. Accessible to everyone, at any age, weight, fitness level etc.

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