

Yoga and Judaism — perfect together

LOIS GOLDRICH

Staring at the ceiling, trying to stay focused, I reflect on the words from Pirke Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) read at the start of my yoga class by instructor Andrew Kahn. As I strain to balance my entire weight on my left foot, I replay in my mind an ancient rabbi's wise words about strength and compassion. It is not easy, but it is strangely exhilarating.

Though the origin of yoga is unclear, the practice is thought to go back at least 5,000 years. Archeological finds excavated from the Indus valley, probably dating to around 3000 B.C.E., depict figures performing yoga postures.

The weekly class I attend is offered at Temple Israel in Ridgewood. According to Rabbi Gil Steinlauf, spiritual leader of the congregation, "Yoga provides us with an opportunity to experience the meaning of a lot of the things we study, letting us access the realm of the spirit through the experience of the body. Through yoga we may discover both chesed [lovingkindness] and strength."

Steinlauf himself participates in the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, a national interdenominational cohort of rabbis who come together twice a year to study texts, meditate, do yoga, and otherwise seek new ways to enhance their spiritual awareness.

At the inaugural session of the Temple Israel class, Steinlauf delivered a brief dvar Torah. Since then, at the rabbi's request, Kahn has included excerpts from Jewish spiritual teachings in his weekly session.

Bringing yoga to religious institutions is very important to Kahn, a certified Kripalu Yoga teacher with an office in Ridgewood. In fact, he says, it is his dream to use yoga's message of peace and unification to "build a



Yoga enthusiast Maureen Nassan prepares to stretch at Temple Israel in Ridgewood.

bridge," bringing people of faith together.

A resident of Fair Lawn for over 20 years, Kahn moved to Ridgewood some five years ago. Now 37 years old, he has been teaching yoga for 16 years.

"My mother was my first yoga teacher," he says, explaining that she taught him the "cat" and "dog" positions in the living room of their home when he was 14 years old and in search of spirituality. He believes strongly that yoga is entirely compatible with Judaism, "which asks that we love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our might."

He points out that to do this, we need to have "some might." And to achieve that, we need good health. Yoga,

like Judaism, seeks to achieve a union of the individual spirit with the Divine. Along the way, it creates a strong physical body, a focused mind, and an open heart.

Chanting "shalom" or "amen" in place of "om," class members sit on their mats and close their eyes, trying to focus on the sensations induced by yoga poses. The concentration demanded by each pose generally prevents me from checking out the capabilities of my classmates. Still, I steal the occasional glance at the woman to my immediate right, who has risen in my esteem immeasurably because of her uncanny ability to raise her arms while balancing on one knee.

Fair Lawn resident Marcia Minuskin, a group stalwart, agrees with Kahn that learning to control our muscles will ultimately give us greater control over other areas of our lives.

"I do a lot of exercise," she says, "but with yoga I get to use muscles I don't usually use. It looks easy, but it's not."

Minuskin says she finds it more helpful to exercise with a group under the watchful eye of an instructor. "That way, we know if we're doing it right and we don't get hurt."

Nancy Siegel, an Orthodox Jew who belongs to Keter Torah in Teaneck, began doing yoga 10 years ago. She now runs a yoga studio, Nesheemah, in Bogota, with a mostly Jewish clientele.

Siegel has a background in education and says her work allows her to combine her two loves: yoga and teaching. She began her yoga career working with 3-year-olds, taking great pains to make the exercises age-appropriate. She found the children very responsive and ultimately branched out to include classes for older children and adults.

The name of her studio was suggested by two Israeli girls who lived with her family while teaching at Ben

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June 22, 2006

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which is why Abbas reached out to Jewish leaders.

In a long and blunt but friendly exchange, Abbas said Israel was delaying coordination on the Gaza withdrawal. He also said he wants Israel to open back-channel talks on tough permanent-status issues, including Jerusalem and Palestinian

refugees, so they don't stymie negotiators at a later date.

Israeli officials say Palestinians are mishandling the coordination, apparently because of internal disputes over who is in control. Palestinians canceled two recent meetings at the last minute, one on water and the other on sewage. Back-channel talks, they suggest, are out of the question until the Palestinians get the details right.

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Porat Yosef, a Sephardic yeshiva in Leonia that offers an intensive Hebrew program. "Nesheemah" means breath. According to Siegel, "breath is a crucial part of yoga and helps to bring us into the present moment."

In fact, Siegel begins her classes with small children by having them raise their arms and recite the word "Nesheemah."

With older children, she initiates a discussion of the word itself. She tells them that in Beresheet, we read that God breathed life into man's nostrils and created the neshamah (soul). Therefore, "Our neshamah is the breath of God."

Siegel, the mother of four, says that yoga has helped her to be more in touch with her spirituality. She believes that yoga and Jewish teachings complement one another and would like to popularize

Some of the Jewish leaders said they were impressed with Abbas' sincerity. Still, like Israeli officials, they wonder if Abbas is misleading himself when he says a cease-fire agreement with Hamas has neutralized the group.

"He was persuasive in coming across as a person whose intentions were good, who genuinely believes in negotiations as a means of meeting a political objective

and as someone who wants to make progress," said Jess Hordes, director of the Anti-Defamation League's Washington office. "Where I felt he left a little room for concern was his optimism on the meaning of his agreement with Hamas and the other terrorist Palestinian factions, and how meaningful that agreement was in reflecting what he called a political transformation on their part."

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the injury to academic freedom rather than mitigates it" because it "requires compliance with a political or ideological test in order for an academic relationship to continue."

Other North American groups were silent.

The National Education Association, for example, told Scholars for Peace that it would not consider the issue, and gave no further explanation, Beck said.

In Canada, the president of the Canadian Association of University

Teachers said the group would take no action on the matter since the AUT was reconsidering its stance.

Scholars for Peace urged its roughly 650 members to write letters of protest to the AUT. The group also worked with the Anti-Defamation League to collect more than 450 names of university faculty from around the world for a petition delivered to the AUT.

The group also encouraged faculty to apply for affiliate faculty appointments at the blacklisted Israeli universities. Some 400 faculty have applied for affiliate appointments, Beck said.

the discipline in the Jewish community.

As part of this effort, she is offering complimentary yoga classes to the sisterhoods of area congregations in the hopes of registering new students. She has also offered after-school programs at local yeshivot. Siegel points out that she is especially careful in her choice of music when leading classes in these venues. Right now, she is working on a self-directed study focusing on "where the Jews

were when yoga was developed."

Is yoga kosher?

Says Siegel: "Yoga and Jewish teachings support each other. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan — while he did not write specifically about yoga — did popularize the notion of meditation in the Jewish community. And the Lubavitcher rebbe wrote a lot about 'being in the present moment,' which is central in yoga as well."

"The thing that we learned is that people were able to separate their feelings from the current government of Israel, Israeli policy, and the question of academic freedom and scholarship, and they were able to land on the issue of the academic boycott as a violation of academic freedom," he said.

Some people, such as Jeff Weintraub, a social and political theorist at the University of Pennsylvania, worked on their own to make a difference.

Weintraub drafted an online petition to academic associations endorsing the American Association of University

Professors' statement and asking other academic associations to adopt it. To date, he has garnered nearly 5,000 signatures.

On the whole, the British Jewish community was encouraged by the support it received for its anti-boycott efforts.

"We've seen a situation we haven't seen for a long time, where Israeli policy can be healthily debated in the U.K. without questioning Israel's right to exist," said a spokesman for the Campaign Group for Academic Freedom.

Rachel Pomerance in New York contributed to this story.

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Court FROM PAGE 28

Michael Lieberman, Washington counsel for the Anti-Defamation League, noted that Tuesday's opinion cited information and statistics provided to Congress from Jewish organizations during debate over the 2000 legislation.

He said that careful drafting of legislation can help determine a law's constitutionality, and the court can rely in part on that kind of data.

The legislation passed in 2000 had been supported by a wide swath of Jewish groups, many of whom joined the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and other civil liberties groups in a brief backing the petitioners in the case. Those groups included the American Jewish Committee, the ADL, B'nai B'rith International, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, and all the major Jewish religious movements.

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WORLD BRIEFS**High flier takes over**

Dan Halutz became Israel's military chief. Halutz, a former air force commander, replaced Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon as chief of the Israel Defense Forces' General Staff at a blue-ribbon ceremony Wednesday. Considered a confidant of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Halutz's immediate challenge is implementing the Israeli withdrawals from the Gaza Strip and northern west bank. "The decision of the government and the Knesset on the matter of 'disengagement' will be carried out with the proper sensitivity and the required determination," Halutz said in his inaugural speech. Halutz, 56, is Israel's 18th chief of staff but the first to come from the air force. Another strategic concern facing him is the Iranian nuclear program, which analysts describe as the greatest threat to Israel's existence.

Denying the deniers

Internet providers should block French users from accessing a Holocaust denial site, Paris' district attorney said. The comments, made Monday, came during a trial on the issue of whether Web users should be allowed to access Aaargh, which in French stands for the Association of Amateur War and Holocaust Historians. The case, which went to trial March 8, was brought by eight anti-racist associations fighting to put into effect Internet filters to forbid access to Aaargh in France. A law passed in June 2004 would allow a French judge to order the site's host to shut down the site or prohibit access to it. Two of the site's hosts OLM and Globat have agreed to prohibit access, but a third the American company ThePlanet.com has refused to cooperate.

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