

# JEWISH MINDFULNESS IN PRAYER

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## What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the ability to pay attention to the present moment, the here and now, not the past or the future. We can be mindful about both mundane and sacred activities: washing the dishes, praying, brushing our teeth, or studying holy texts. Instead of brushing our teeth quickly while focusing on a to-do list, we can, instead, set an intention (הַיְיָ) to brush our teeth, noticing the taste of the toothpaste, the feel of the bristles on our teeth, and the sound of the motions. In every activity we do, we can choose to be in either a mindful state or a distracted one.

Sitting quietly (meditation), yoga, prayer, gratitude, and intention-setting are all examples of practices that can help us cultivate mindfulness. Increased awareness of what gets in the way of being present, cultivating compassion for ourselves and others, heightening gratitude and awe, learning how to be still, and bringing calm into our lives are other ways we can become more mindful. Mindfulness is a way of being in the world that both adults and children can learn.

## Why Is Mindfulness Important?

In our busy world, we are often “on” 24/7. Neurobiological studies have shown that our brains are hardwired for survival. When confronted with stress, we demonstrate the “fight or flight response”: We either react, remaining in a state of constant alert, or flee, becoming overwhelmed and tuning out. Researchers have discovered that mindfulness practice can help us learn to calm our nervous systems and become more thoughtful about our reactions to stress. Diane Musho Hamilton, a leading researcher in the field, writes in the *Harvard Business Review*:

[Mindfulness] allows us to override the conditioned nervous system with conscious awareness. Instead of attacking or recoiling, and later justifying our reactions, we can learn to stay present, participate in regulating our own nervous system, and eventually, develop new, more free and helpful ways of interacting. (<https://hbr.org/2015/12/calming-your-brain-during-conflict>)

There is an increasing body of research that shows how mindfulness training for children increases their ability to make good decisions, calm themselves, pay better attention, and

become more compassionate.

### **Mindful Breathing**

Paying attention to our inhaled and exhaled air is a core mindfulness practice. It is simple but not easy. Our breath is always with us, so we can practice paying attention to it anywhere we are. Many schools and sports programs are teaching mindfulness these days. Once you teach it to your students, you will be able to use the practice again and again to help them concentrate.

Script for Introducing Breathing Practice:

Ask: “How many of you have experienced sitting quietly for a set amount of time, either in school or in other activities you are involved with? We are going to sit quietly for a very short time to see what we can learn about our own breathing. In the book of Genesis in the Torah, God breathes life into Adam. Each of us is filled with the breath of Adonai. At every single moment of our lives, we can decide to pay attention to our breath, remembering that it is a gift.”

Continue: “Now I want you to close your eyes and sit up straight, while still feeling relaxed. Feel your body sitting on the chair. Notice your breath—without forcing it in any way. Everyone feels their breath differently. Where do you notice your breath coming into your body? Do you feel the air coming into your nostrils? Your tummy rising and falling? Your upper chest? The back of your throat? For the next fifteen seconds, all you are going to do is pay attention to your breath as it moves in and out of your body. You may notice that your mind starts thinking about other things. That’s okay. When you notice that, gently come back to paying attention to your breath.”

You may find it helpful to use a timer when you use this breathing practice with your students. As you repeat the practice in future meetings, increase the time from fifteen seconds to thirty or sixty. Upon concluding this activity, you might ask the children: “How was that experience? Where did you most notice the inhale and exhale? Did you notice your mind wandering? Were you able to remind yourself to come back gently to your breath? How?” Explain that wherever they are, they can bring this idea to anything they set as an intention.

### **What Is Jewish Mindfulness?**

Jewish mindfulness means bringing a Jewish lens to the principles of mindfulness. Just as we used the story of Creation above to teach mindful breathing, we can use other Jewish texts,

values, and stories from our tradition to teach about being present, grateful, and compassionate, and to highlight the value of being still. Judaism at its core is about being intentional; our recitation of בְּרָכוֹת (blessings) focuses our awareness—on a piece of fruit, Shabbat candles, thunder, or a rainbow. Every Jewish holiday calls our attention to a particular Jewish value, moment in history, or season. Passover, for example, celebrates our freedom from slavery in Egypt and the birth of the Jewish people, but it is also an opportunity to notice signs of spring growth. Master stories in Jewish tradition, such as Moses at the burning bush, illustrate core mindfulness principles, such as finding the sacred in the ordinary and the power of being fully present.

### **What Are the Benefits of Bringing Mindfulness to Jewish Children?**

First, children who attend after-school Jewish education programs arrive after a long day at regular school or a weekend filled with activities. They need a way to transition to new material. By simply asking children to close their eyes and focus on their breathing, you can help them become more present for what you will teach. Second, the principles of mindful awareness, taught through Jewish stories, such as Jacob’s dream of angels going up and down the ladder, can serve as fundamental life lessons: when Jacob wakes up from his dream and says, “God was in this place and I didn’t know it,” one is teaching about how to notice God in the ordinary and everyday. Finally, for students who have been exposed to mindfulness programs elsewhere, teaching the Jewish perspective helps children see that mindfulness also is a value in Judaism.

### **What Are Some Principles of Jewish Mindfulness in Prayer?**

We recommend that you discuss the following principles of Jewish mindfulness with students so that you can use them throughout the year.

**הִנְנִי** (here I am) is an important word that describes being fully present, in this moment.

Throughout the תּוֹרָה, there are individuals who utter this simple yet profound word. For example, at the burning bush God calls out, “Moses, Moses,” to get his attention before asking him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses responds, “הִנְנִי,” “Here I am” (Exodus 3: 4).

Commentators agree that **הִנְנִי** suggests both an awareness of one’s physical presence in the moment *and* a mental, emotional, and spiritual readiness. This biblical story provides a wonderful entry for Jews of all ages into the state of mind and heart we call “mindfulness.”

**כְּוִנָּה** is about intentionality, directing one’s heart and mind to a particular focus, whether on one’s breath or the sounds around oneself—or paying attention in class or to the words of a certain prayer. Discuss with children how easy it is to do one thing while thinking about another; for example, setting the table while thinking about their homework. Invite them to share their own examples.

Having **כְּוִנָּה** or setting a **כְּוִנָּה** is the opposite of “going on automatic.” When we memorize our prayers, we may slip into reciting them by rote, forgetting the meaning of the words. Before the start of a prayer experience, invite students to sit quietly and set a **כְּוִנָּה** for the service; for example, “In today’s service, I will pay attention to my own experience of the prayers we are saying,” or, “Today I intend to say the **שְׁמַע** slowly and pay close attention to each word.”

**תְּשׁוּבָה** (turning, returning) is a key Jewish mindfulness concept. Whenever we set an intention, it is very likely that our minds will wander away. **תְּשׁוּבָה**, applied to mindfulness, means that when we become aware that we have veered from our intention, we gently can remind ourselves to return to it.

Let’s say your intention for **וְאָהַבְתָּ/שְׁמַע** is to slowly focus on each word. You get off to a good start but as you continue, you notice that you have begun to think about a conversation you had with a friend earlier in the day. Even though you may still be reciting the words of the **שְׁמַע** out loud, your mind is elsewhere. Rather than judging yourself for not sticking with your intention, simply remember your intention and *turn* yourself back to it, gently and kindly, without berating yourself.

### **What Are Some Specific Examples of Mindfulness Practice in Prayer?**

All prayers can be ripe opportunities for mindfulness. Here are three examples:

#### **בְּרָכוּ**

The **בְּרַכּוֹת**, which serves as the signal for us to come together with the intention of reciting the **שְׁמַע** as a community, is a perfect way to introduce mindful attention. Here's a simple visualization activity you can do for the **בְּרַכּוֹת** in class or in the service itself.

Say: "Close your eyes and imagine that people have gathered to pray. People are coming to sit beside you, in front of you, and behind you. You are settled in your seat. You experience the beginning of the service—some people are attentive; others might be daydreaming. Then, the prayer leader calls out 'בְּרַכּוֹת.' Everyone immediately quiets down and stands as one. The prayer leader continues: 'בְּרַכּוֹת אֶת יְיָ הַמְּבַרֵּךְ.' Then, imagine that you and the entire community respond with 'בְּרוּךְ יְיָ הַמְּבַרֵּךְ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד,' bowing at the same time. Feel your feet firmly on the ground. Feel your body present in this new moment. Be aware of yourself present as an individual and also as a part of the entire Jewish community who has come together to be present and pray."

**שְׁמַע** [There are many ways to use the lens of mindfulness to experience the profound message of **שְׁמַע**. In addition to the themes of the Oneness of God and the unity of God and the Jewish people, here is a **כִּינּוּן** you can set for listening. Try this listening practice after you've had a few practice sessions in simple breathing (above).

Ask children how they know if someone is listening to them. Ask if they can tell when someone is NOT listening to them. Explain that good listening requires a special kind of attention.

Say, "Notice the sounds of your own breathing. What sounds do you hear around you? Keep listening. The sounds you hear may change. When your mind wanders, bring yourself gently back to listening. When a new sound arises, pay attention to that sound. See if you can become especially attuned to listening."

Do this for around sixty seconds or whatever you think your students can manage. This is an especially wonderful activity to do when it's raining, or windy, or in a place where there are birds singing.

Ask students what they noticed about the sounds they heard. Did they hear sounds that they had never noticed before, such as the radiator, or kids playing, or children running in the halls? Did they hear the sound of their own breath? What was easy or difficult about just listening?

Make the connection between the kind of attention it requires to listen only to sounds (quieting oneself) and what is required for really listening to our friends or family. How can we remind ourselves to be better listeners?

## **בְּרָכוֹת**

Blessings are an opportunity to bring mindful attention to whatever it is we are blessing. The challenge is to bring **כְּוִיָּנָה** to the blessing when a blessing has been memorized. A wonderful way to teach mindfulness around food blessings is with **וְצִיאַת הַמֶּן**, the blessing over bread.

With the approval of the education director, bring in a tasty, fresh challah. Without any discussion about mindfulness, say the blessing over bread and have everyone take *two* pieces of challah. Tell the children to eat only one of the pieces. Then tell them that you are now going to bring **כְּוִיָּנָה** and mindfulness to eating the second piece of challah.

Say: “We are going to do this in silence, and if you want, you can close your eyes. Say the blessing slowly, really focusing on thanking God for the bread. Before you eat the challah, think about everyone who was involved in bringing this bread into your hands: God, who made the seed, the people who sowed the seed for the wheat, the people who watered the land, the people who harvested the wheat, those that brought it to the market, the bakers who baked the bread, the truck drivers who drove the bread to the market....

“Now, take a look at the challah and notice everything you can about it: its color, the way it smells, the different textures. Now take a bite, and very slowly, with intention, taste it. Notice the texture. Notice the flavor as you chew it.”

When everyone has finished, discuss as a group what they noticed about the challah that they may not have noticed before. In what way did bringing mindful attention to eating change the experience for them?

You might ask students, “How can you bring this kind of mindful attention to other blessings? Do you think this applies only to blessings over food? What about the blessing over the Shabbat candles? How can you bring **כַּוְנָה** to this blessing?”

Bringing a mindfulness approach to teaching can support your work in multiple ways: transitioning students to your learning space from where they were before, deepening children’s prayer experience by helping them become more present in the moment, and increasing awareness of how the stories and prayers in Judaism can be woven into their daily lives.