



THE REBBE'S URGENT CALL FOR A KOSHER MEDITATION

MORE RELEVANT TODAY THAN EVER



Over the past several years, meditation has become extremely popular, especially in the United States. By the end of 2017, one iPhone app, Headspace.com, which teaches mindfulness meditation, reported 16 million downloads. During the same timeframe, a similar app, Calm.com, had more than 14 million downloads, with 40,000 new users a day signing up.

As early as the mid-1970s, the Rebbe recognized that meditation could reduce mental anguish and stress. However, as will be seen in this essay, the Rebbe had strict criteria regard-

ing who might benefit and under what circumstances.

Three of the most popular approaches to meditation are mindfulness, Transcendental Meditation (TM), and the relaxation response.

Mindfulness, by far the most prevalent approach, emerged from Buddhism. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a Professor of Medicine at the University of Massachusetts, originated Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in the 1970s as a secular version of mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn didn't want MBSR tied to any religious belief. He defined mindfulness as "Paying attention in a certain way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally" ("Wherever You Go, There You Are—Meditation in Everyday Life," *Hyperion*, 2005, p. 4). Many mental health practitioners use MBSR as an adjunct to clinical treatment.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, an Indian guru, introduced TM to the West in 1957. TM became wildly popular in the late 1960s as the result of the influence of the Beatles. In 1978, Maharishi's emphasis shifted from teaching the basic TM meditation technique to the general public to teaching advanced meditation techniques that promised a range of superpowers including levitation, omniscience, and eternal life to TM teachers and others who saw these techniques as their superhighway to enlightenment.

Although TM markets itself as a secular, scientifically based relaxation technique, nothing could be further from the truth. Learning TM involves the student's participation in a Hindu religious ceremony that is the very definition of avodah zarah, including incense offerings and prostration before an image of a guru. In TM, a mantra is assigned to the student and mentally repeated twice a day for 20 minutes. Although TM teachers deny this, the mantras are the names of Hindu deities. In fact, if someone purchases a more advanced TM mantra, the Sanskrit word *namah* is added to the end of the student's current mantra. In Sanskrit, *namah* means "I bow down."

The relaxation response was developed in the mid-1970s by Harvard medical researcher Herbert Benson. Dr. Benson did the original research on TM and identified a set of physiological parameters during meditation that indicated the body was resting deeply while the meditator was alert.

Benson subsequently discovered that the same physiological responses identified during TM could be achieved without Hindu ceremonies or mantras. The repetition of any sound could achieve the relaxation response. Benson initially used the word *one* in his experiments; later he found that people experienced even better results if they used a sound from their tradition. For example, Jewish students might use *shema* or *shalom*. It is important to note that, when he was speaking to a Hindu audience in India in 1955, Maharishi said that any sound would allow the mind to settle down, but that his particular sounds would attract to the meditator the beneficence of a Hindu deity.

In the relaxation response, a sound, phrase, or short prayer is repeated silently or aloud, or one's gaze may be fixed on an object or candle flame, twice a day for a period of 15 to 20 minutes. The only other instruction is that one maintain a passive attitude—simply putting aside distracting thoughts when becoming aware of them and returning to one's focus.

A cover letter dated 16 Adar, 5738 (February 23, 1978) accompanied a confidential memorandum the Rebbe sent to a select group of medical professionals, including Dr. Yehuda Landes, in which the Rebbe acknowledged the therapeutic benefits of meditation, mainly as a method to relieve stress for those suffering from mental anguish. However, the Rebbe also wrote that he was extremely concerned about the avodah zarah and cultic aspects of "Oriental" meditation practices that he identified as "Transcendental Meditation, Yoga, Guru and the like" (memorandum by the Rebbe dated Teves 5733).

The Rebbe wrote that certain aspects of these movements, which are entirely irrelevant to religious worship or practices, have a therapeutic value in relieving mental stress.

The Rebbe went further and issued a call to medical professionals urging that, "appropriate action be undertaken to enlist the cooperation of a group of doctors specializing in neurology and psychiatry who would research the said methods with a view to perfecting them and adopting them in their practice on a wider scale."

The Rebbe concluded, "This memo is intended for all Rabbis, doctors, and layman who are in a position to advance the cause espoused herein, the importance of which needs no further elaboration.... Needless to say, even if one feels doubtful whether he can advance this cause, or whether the expectation warrants the effort – the vital importance and urgency of saving so many souls from Avodah Zarah, not only warrants but dictates every possible effort, even if there be a doubt about achieving success; certainly when there is every reason to believe that much, indeed, can be achieved, with G-d's help and Zechus Harabbim."

Also, highly unusual, the Rebbe included with the memorandum a copy of a 1977 U.S. District Court decision, which ruled that TM was a religious teaching, and that allowing TM in public schools was a violation of the establishment clause of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. (Although it is still illegal to teach TM in public schools, there are TM programs in the Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco public schools.)

In a *Living Torah* video, *Kosher Meditation*, (Disc 60, Program 237, sicha of 13 Tammuz 5739), the Rebbe refers to TM as a plague not even mentioned in the Torah that has spread in the United States and other countries—even in Israel—which involves incense rituals, prostration, and other practices that are literally forms of idolatry or that



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border on idolatry. The Rebbe also said that most people don't appreciate how many Jewish young men and women and adults have been caught in this trap. That number was, and likely still is, in the tens, if not hundreds, of thousands.

The Rebbe states that young people or their friends who are experiencing inner turmoil have fallen into cults because they may have found peace of mind and emotional tranquility and generally improved health in those groups. They attribute feeling better to the idolatrous practices, not realizing that healing can take place through kosher meditation practices without the slightest hint of avodah zarah.

The Rebbe set two conditions for what might best be termed *therapeutic* as opposed to Jewish meditation: First, such therapy is only for an unhealthy person suffering from stress, anxiety, or other mental health issues; it's not for a healthy, functioning person living an active, productive life. The Rebbe includes among the unhealthy those people who have persuaded themselves that they cannot function without meditation. Second, the one who prescribes meditation must be qualified to distinguish between that which is allowed by Jewish law and that which is idolatrous. If any doubt exists, that individual must consult with rabbanim who specialize in these issues. Importantly, the Rebbe did not see meditation as a lifelong practice. It was to be done under the direction of someone competent to prescribe correctly and was to end when no longer beneficial.

The Rebbe's entire emphasis here was on saving Jews who had stumbled into a form of idolatry. It seems to me that the Rebbe did not want this effort to be mixed with other elements—such as Kabbalah meditation—or used to promote Torah Judaism. The Rebbe said that the vast majority who needed rescuing would not be interested in these worthy and commendable teachings and that promoting the teachings might result in pushing the people away from efforts to rescue them.

As in the confidential memo, the Rebbe in the video again makes a plea to

all doctors and mental health professionals who treat psychological and emotional disorders to consider the matter and to supplement their knowledge of how to utilize the therapeutic benefits of meditation. The Rebbe goes so far as to describe it as a "sacred obligation." The Rebbe emphasizes that when a kosher meditation is properly publicized as being available, it will immediately rescue those standing at the crossroads because there is a kosher alternative. Additionally, upon seeing success with kosher meditation, those who have already fallen into cults will also be rescued.

In an article in *B'Or Ha'Torah*, Dr. Landes's son, Rabbi Yehoshua Landes, wrote that the full set of meditation correspondence comprises 60 pages and includes the confidential memorandum, eight letters, and a telegram from the Rebbe, in addition to detailed responses to the Rebbe from Dr. Landes. The amount of correspondence is evidence of how important this issue was to the Rebbe. In fact, the Rebbe guided

Dr. Landes in planning an institute that would directly challenge TM, and he even offered money to pay for its establishment. That effort was ultimately unsuccessful because the Rebbe apparently concluded that results would take too long to achieve. As an alternative, Dr. Landes and Dr. Chaim Rosen conducted a series of Jewish meditation workshops in California and New York, but they were disappointed by the lack of response from rabbis and Orthodox mental health practitioners.

I first learned about the Rebbe's views on meditation a few years ago when reading Rabbi Chaim Miller's biography of the Rebbe. I was dumbfounded because in 1978, when the Rebbe wrote the memorandum, I was a top executive in the TM organization working at the U.S. headquarters in Los Angeles. I was responsible for teaching TM in rehabilitation settings throughout the United States. (I had learned TM in 1971, as a Berkeley graduate student.)

I was married in 1975, and solely because of my wife's resolute determination, we started exploring Judaism. Due to the influence of Rabbis Shlomo Schwartz AH, Avremel Levitansky AH, and *yibadel lechaim tovim* Manis Friedman, within six months we were shomrei Torah u'mitzvos, our three children were in Rabbi Levitansky's first Talmud Torah, and I was learning Tanya once or twice a week with Rabbi Schwartz. In 1978, Rabbi Schwartz brought me to the Rebbe for the first time, and my wife was regularly attending courses with Rabbi Friedman in Minnesota.

At the same time, we continued our advanced TM techniques; my wife and I were meditating four hours a day. If someone would have told us we were in a cult, we would have thought them mad. Even when we were frum, no one ever suggested we stop meditating. We did stop on our own in 1981, but that's another story.

As mentioned above, TM had become wildly popular due to the influence of the Beatles in the late 1960s. In

1978, Maharishi's emphasis shifted from teaching the basic TM meditation technique to the public to teaching advanced meditation techniques primarily to TM teachers and others who saw these techniques as their path to enlightenment and could pay their outrageous cost. In addition to enlightenment, Maharishi promised the techniques would result in the ability to levitate, omniscience, and eternal life.

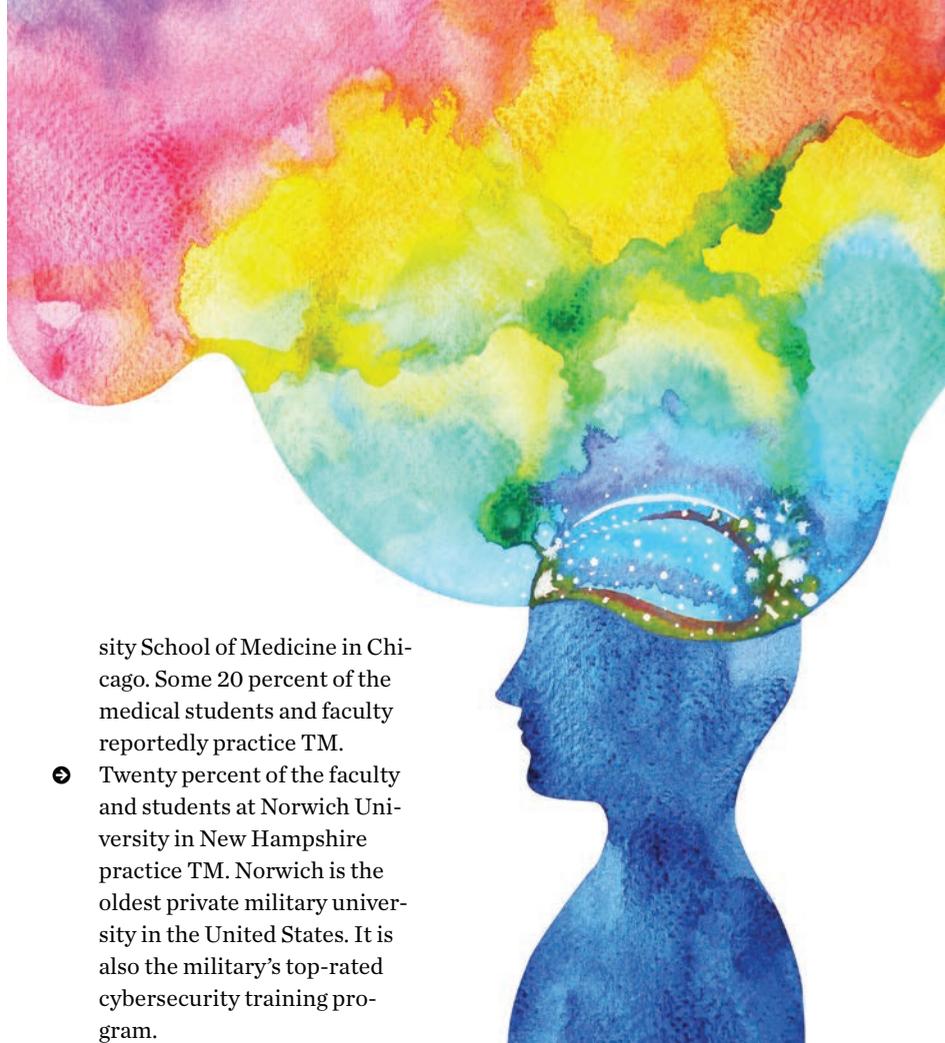
By 2015, we were so far removed from TM that we didn't know Maharishi had died seven years earlier (he died in 2008). It was then, after a thirty-five year silence, that TM woke up. Suddenly it was everywhere. A-list celebrities and business leaders were touting TM, and there was an unending stream of favorable newspaper and magazine articles.

I began to notice that every celebrity interview and article mentioned that TM wasn't a religion. I knew that this was a lie. Curious, I went on TM's flagship U.S. website and was shocked to find no mention of Maharishi or even "enlightenment," something we had spent four hours a day for four years trying to achieve. The website consisted of hyped health benefits and celebrity endorsements. It was only when I learned that TM, through the David Lynch Foundation, had a goal of teaching TM to a million public school children that I understood why everything Hindu had been scrubbed from the website, even Maharishi.

THE CRISIS TODAY

Over the past two years, there has been a resurgence of interest in TM that is unprecedented in the sixty-year history of the organization. I have no question that the Rebbe saw it coming.

- ➔ Despite being illegal, TM is taught in public schools in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago.
- ➔ TM is offered as a full-credit elective at the Loyola Univer-



sity School of Medicine in Chicago. Some 20 percent of the medical students and faculty reportedly practice TM.

- ➔ Twenty percent of the faculty and students at Norwich University in New Hampshire practice TM. Norwich is the oldest private military university in the United States. It is also the military's top-rated cybersecurity training program.
- ➔ The National Defense University (NDU) has had five TM training programs to date. NDU offers accelerated degree programs to active-duty military with strong academic abilities.
- ➔ The Veterans Administration has just completed a \$2.4 million study of TM at the San Diego VA Hospital. TM was not found to be better than the VA's existing PTSD treatments. Regardless, TM advocates push to expand the program.
- ➔ The David Lynch Foundation has offices in six major US cities and 60 employees who work full time promoting TM. In 2015, the Foundation raised \$15 million.
- ➔ A recent TM book authored by Lynch Foundation Executive Director Robert Roth has become a national bestseller.

In his book, Rabbi Miller states that, unlike almost every other campaign of the Rebbe, very little has been accomplished with regard to publicly challenging TM. I knew that I had the experience in TM and the academic background to do something. I decided to write a book exposing TM as a Hindu-based, cultic organization. My book, *Transcendental Deception: Behind the TM Curtain* (Janreg Press, 2018), enables shlichim and their congregants to respond effectively to inquiries about TM and to fight TM's encroachment in public schools. In addition, the book is a resource for campus rabbis because college students are prime targets for TM due to David Lynch's popularity as a film producer/director.

In the 18 months I spent writing the book, seven people who were about to learn TM were dissuaded from doing so. Two others already doing TM changed

their Hindu mantra to a Jewish word. On a day-to-day basis, I am doing everything I can to create awareness that TM is a Hindu religious cult and that other meditations are as good as or better than TM to reduce anxiety and stress.

THE REBBE EXPECTS MORE

The Rebbe wanted the benefits of meditation without a trace of avodah zarah to be widely available. I believe the relaxation response may be what the Rebbe had in mind.

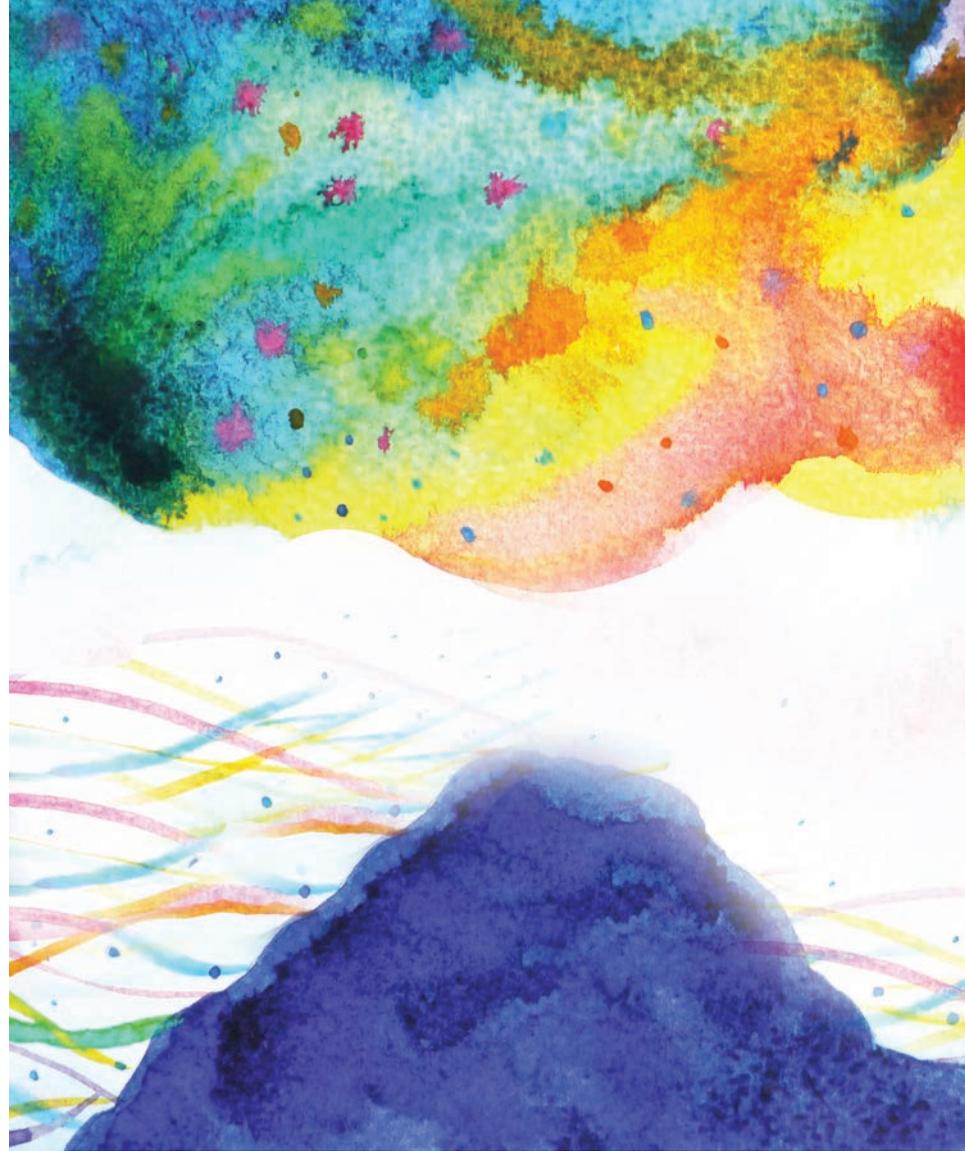
One can easily learn relaxation-response techniques from a book or inexpensive CDs available online. Dr. Benson and his colleagues at The Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine (BHI) at Massachusetts General Hospital have treated thousands of patients and published scores of studies in medical and other professional journals demonstrating that the relaxation-response approach has a significant role to play in the prevention and treatment of many stress-related illnesses.

What I believe is the most important study to date tested the effects of an enhanced relaxation-response program on medical-care utilization. The study targeted patients with chronic stress. More than 4,450 study participants received enhanced relaxation-response training, and all were members of an academic health network for a median period of 4.2 years in the study. The impact on medical-care utilization was extraordinary:

- Total utilization decreased by 43%
- Clinical encounters decreased by 41.9%
- Imaging decreased by 50.3%
- Lab encounters decreased by 43.5%
- Medical procedures decreased by 21.4%

As previously mentioned, the Rebbe stated that all doctors and mental health professionals who treat psychological and emotional disorders have a sacred obligation to consider this matter and to supplement their knowledge on how to utilize the therapeutic benefits of meditation (13 Tammuz, 5739).

Unlike in 1978, the relaxation response methodology is now available, as is train-



ing through BHI. The Institute offers a training program that allows healthcare professionals to earn certification and offer their patients an easily learned technique to reduce the debilitating effects of stress. Also, the program will allow health networks to offer relaxation-response training to their members, which will no doubt result in lower medical-care utilization and a better quality of life for their members.

The Rebbe could not have been more explicit: “[W]hen these methods are publicized as being available, they will immediately rescue those standing at the crossroads. Additionally, when those who have already fallen into cults see there is success with kosher meditation, they will also be rescued” (Living Torah, Disc 60, Program 237, sicha of 13 Tammuz 5739).

Most shlichim know many health professionals in their communities. These professionals should be encouraged to learn about relaxation response approach and consider getting the training necessary to incorporate it in their practices. I am available to provide support and assistance.

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Additional information can be found on my website, tmdeception.com. 

