

Introduction

Torah Yoga is both a Torah book and a yoga book, presenting classic yoga instruction in the light of traditional and mystical Jewish wisdom.

What makes it a unique Torah book is that it actively engages body and breath in the study of Jewish wisdom. It offers guided meditations based on Jewish spiritual concepts. It teaches a wide range of fundamental yoga postures that are suitable for both beginning and advanced students.

What makes it a unique yoga book is its presentation of traditional Jewish study. This includes teaching and quoting directly from Jewish texts and exploring their relationship with yoga. It involves analysis of the original Hebrew letters, words, and phrases, without requiring of the reader any prior familiarity with Hebrew or Torah study.

Torah Yoga is a way to discover and experience yourself through study of Jewish wisdom, meditation, and yoga.

In the worlds of both Torah and yoga, we are sailing in previously uncharted waters. This book, *Torah Yoga*, is for all those who yearn to explore the open seas.

Voyage to Torah Yoga

My own voyage to Torah Yoga began when I was a little girl in love with the Hebrew language. Before I knew how to read the Hebrew letters, they looked like fire to me--made

of turning, moving, flickering shapes. When we went to synagogue, I gazed with rapt attention at the dancing flames of the Hebrew letters in the prayer book. Some letters rose high, and some cast shadows downward. Some letters looked like sparks, and some looked like full flames. They radiated warmth and depth. They seemed to fly off the pages of the prayer book right into my soul, igniting it with whispered promises of stories, secrets, and meaning. Even though I grew up in St Paul, Minnesota, far away both in time and space from the traditional great centers of Jewish learning, the mystic power of Hebrew was clear to me.

Black Fire, White Fire

My passion for Hebrew eventually took me straight to the heart of the flames, the Torah itself, which is written in Hebrew. When I first became interested in studying the Torah, the image I had was of big, old books, filled with lots of tiny words. I asked a friend, Gary Shapiro, who had already found great meaning in these tiny words, if he thought I would find spiritual meaning in Torah study. He answered very simply, “Yes.”

Not long after asking Gary this question, I enrolled in a year-long Torah study program at Pardes, an institute of Jewish study in Jerusalem based on the yeshiva, or traditional house of study. As a child, I had seen the fire in the Hebrew letters. As an adult at Pardes, I learned that the Torah itself is described as fire. “The Torah is black fire written on the back of white fire.”¹ One way to understand this is that the black fire is the written words of the Torah. The white fire is the expansive silent wisdom between the words.

To my great surprise, and my family's, my one year of study at Pardes turned into five, during which I warmed my mind, heart, and soul by the fire of Torah's radiant wisdom. Gary and I often laughed over my original question. Nevertheless, I began to sense that something was missing.

About this time, I had a dream in which I saw three African women in traditional dress dancing. In my dream, I knew that these women were praying. They were praying with their whole bodies. When I awoke, I knew I needed to pray and to learn with my whole body as well as with my mind, heart, and soul. First I began to dance, and then I turned to yoga.

First Impressions of Yoga

I first saw yoga when I was twelve years old. Yoga was just appearing on the horizon in America, and my older sister Laura took a class. She used to practice her postures in our living room. I loved watching her. She looked calm and beautiful. There was an ethereal and mysterious look about her, something soft in the expression on her face and in her eyes.

In watching my sister—poised, balanced, and quiet in her postures—I sensed that yoga was a way to understand something deeper about life. I felt that what she was doing had something to do with knowing God. I knew that some day I would do yoga.

It was many years before I saw yoga again. My friend, Myriam Klotz, was in my living room practicing yoga. Once again, I was drawn to the mysterious, soft beauty of a person

in a yoga posture. I sensed energy, like a gentle, good light, radiating from her. I wanted to experience for myself what these beautiful postures felt like. At that point, I knew the time for me to do yoga had arrived. I went to my first class soon after. Before long, I was practicing yoga every day, as I still do.

Seeing Yoga With Torah-Centered Eyes

My deep immersion in Judaism gave me a different lens with which to see and experience yoga. Every time I heard a yoga teacher speak about some of the principles of yoga, my *yiddishe kop* (Jewish head) immediately located where this teaching was in Torah texts.

One time I shared this awareness with an Indian yoga teacher. “Everything you are saying is in Torah,” I exclaimed, rather awe struck by the connections. “Of course it is,” he replied.

Although yoga is often linked with Hindu, Vedic, Buddhist, and even New Age spirituality and philosophy, B.K.S. Iyengar, one of the foremost yoga masters of this century says, “Yoga was given for the human race, not for the Hindus.”² His daughter, Geeta S. Iyengar says, “Yoga is not Hinduism, or any other ism. It is something eternal.”³ In other words, although yoga is certainly spiritual, it is not tied to any one particular religion.

Students of diverse religious backgrounds flock to India to learn yoga. They are often told by the great teachers there that yoga can enhance their connection to their own religion, their own roots.

Experiencing Torah With Yoga-Centered Body

With yoga, I discovered that the wisdom of Torah was also inside of me. I experienced Torah teachings as a reality that I could know and feel within myself, within my body. Because Torah was within me, practicing yoga was a new way to study Torah. Every yoga posture was a gateway to greater Torah consciousness.

The more yoga I practiced, the more Torah I understood at a deeper level, a level that included my body as well as my mind, heart and soul. I felt that the quiet inner expanse I experienced in yoga was the white fire of the Torah scroll. From the white fire, the black letters of the Torah became increasingly clear to me.

Knowing Worlds in Yourself

The twelfth-century Torah commentator from Spain, Ibn Ezra, realized the importance of the body on the spiritual path of wisdom long before it dawned on me: “The one who knows the secret of his soul and the characteristics of his body can know things of the upper world, because the human being is a little world.”⁴ With Torah Yoga, you study the secrets of your soul and the characteristics of your body. Through the study and experience of your own personal “little world,” you can know things of the “upper world.”

While sitting by a gigantic sunflower, I envisioned teaching Torah and yoga together, which I have been doing ever since. This book presents Torah Yoga inspirations from the past twelve years of teaching.

Torah Yoga for You

Although some aspects of Torah, especially the laws and customs, are particular to the Jewish people, much of the wisdom of Torah is universal. Torah itself teaches that the light of Torah, its wisdom, is for all nations. The Torah themes for this book are all universally relevant.

I have taught Jews, Christians, and people of other religions, with varying levels of commitment to their faith, as well as people with little or no connection to any formal religion. Men and woman of all ages participate in Torah Yoga classes. I have taught those blessed with good health as well as those who are struggling with illness.

People enjoy Torah Yoga for many reasons. Those of different religions, as well as those who have no connection to any formal religion, are inspired by the universal Jewish teachings. Some students are grateful to find a yoga class that draws from the Judeo-Christian heritage rather than Hindu, Buddhist, or other sources. Some students deeply involved in yoga, but not Judaism, are surprised and pleased to find inspiration and meaning in Jewish wisdom through Torah Yoga. Some students deeply involved with Jewish study and practice are moved, even to tears, when they discover that their own bodies are expressions of Torah wisdom. Many students, estranged from their bodies, are surprised and pleased to discover that they *have* bodies, and that they can gain strength, flexibility, wisdom, and a sense of well-being by connecting to them.

What Happens in Torah Yoga?

Torah Yoga classes usually consist of several minutes of warm-up postures, a few minutes of meditation on a Torah subject, a question and answer study session based on Jewish texts, and then a full yoga session. Doing yoga takes up about three quarters of the class time.

In this book, I teach seven central Jewish spiritual concepts: hidden light, constant renewal, leaving Egypt, essential self, body prayer and alignment, daily satisfaction, and remembering to rest. You will find other Torah concepts as well. Connecting one Torah concept to others is an integral part of Torah study.

After short introductory and introspective sections, each chapter is divided into three parts. The first part, Torah Yoga, connects you, yoga practice, and Torah teachings. The second part, Torah Study, presents traditional Torah study on the chosen concept for that chapter. The third part, Yoga Practice, gives a detailed yoga practice with which you can further experience, express, and “exercise” the Torah concepts of the chapter in your own body-mind-heart-soul.

It is not the external form of the posture that relates to the Torah concept. It is the consciousness and wisdom inside of you that relates to the Torah concept. The posture is the vehicle that takes you to your inner Torah wisdom. Therefore, although I have selected a set of postures for each Torah concept, the study of a particular concept is not limited to the postures presented within a particular chapter; many other postures could be used as

well. Conversely, each yoga posture is not limited to a single Torah concept; any yoga posture may apply to many Torah concepts.

More About Yoga

There are as many ways to talk about what yoga is as there are people practicing it. For some, yoga is an extremely effective body-mind technique for greater health and well-being. For others, it is a mystical map for a journey to unification of the self with God. Some people practice yoga because it makes them stronger and more flexible. Others practice it as a path to higher consciousness and transformation. Some practice yoga to teach them to relax. Others practice it to become more confident and powerful. For some, yoga is a difficult struggle to heal their relationship with their body. For others, yoga is an immersion into ecstasy and pleasure in the body.

For many, it is all of these things at various times, and much more. Because yoga is as vast and varied as the ocean, I continually describe yoga in different ways throughout this book.

B.K.S. Iyengar says that the Sanskrit word *yoga* is related in meaning to “focusing attention on.”⁵ Yoga is the ancient meditative movement practice of focusing attention on breath and body in the present moment. Our minds and bodies are so often split into different places and different times. For example, we exercise on a stationary bike in our living room while watching what is happening thousands of miles away on the television

news. While we are involved physically in this day's activities, we are busy in our minds planning tomorrow's.

In yoga postures, you focus your attention on different “news”— the live, up-to-date coverage of what is happening with you now. The word *yoga* comes from the Sanskrit root meaning “to join” or “to yoke.”⁶ In yoga, by attending to what is happening in yourself in the present moment, you can join all the parts of your fragmented self back together.

The Practice of Postures

The ancient yoga sage Patanjali divided yoga into eight categories called limbs or steps. One of the limbs is called *asana* or the practice of physical postures. Another branch is called *pranayama*, which is the practice of conscious breathing or control of breath.

Breath and the physical postures are seen as pathways to the soul, self-realization, enlightenment, and union with universal consciousness.

Each posture is made up of various movements that involve the whole body, like stretching, bending, and twisting. Focused attention is given to all stages of a posture: moving into it, deepening it, holding it, and releasing it. Postures are never static. Even when you are “holding” a posture, you continue to refine and energize the particular movements of the posture, often in coordination with the flow of your breath. Even when your outer body is lying still in relaxation posture, your inner body is a pulsing, dynamic flow of energy and consciousness.

There are many different styles and approaches both to teaching and doing the postures. Some styles are more rigorous than others. Some pay more attention to the details of the posture, whereas others focus on the emotional and psychological experience of the practitioner. In all the styles, meditative movement and conscious breathing are used to build the postures. A few of the most well-known styles are Ashtanga, Bikram, Iyengar, Kripalu, and Sivananda yoga.

This book reflects and integrates primarily the Bikram, Kripalu, and Iyengar styles.

Not Answering the Phone for an Hour

Once, while traveling in India, a friend of mind, Ruti Soudack, asked an Indian yoga teacher “What are we trying to accomplish by doing yoga?” To her great surprise the teacher did not say, “We are learning to find the divine within, the holy light, great love.” She answered: “We are learning how not to answer the phone for an hour.”

What does it mean not to answer the phone for an hour? What does this have to do with yoga? Yoga is a practice of focusing your attention and learning not to be distracted. Distractions can come from inside as well as from outside of you. Your own busy thoughts--the list of things you need to get done, the problems you are trying to resolve with your eager, active mind--are all akin to a ringing phone.

You cannot stop the phone from ringing, any more than you can stop your mind from whirring. You can, however, hear the phone and not respond to it. You can notice your

thoughts and let them go. You can learn not to answer all the urgent clamoring calls and turn your attention instead to other dimensions of existence.

The Indian teacher did not say that yoga teaches you never to answer the phone. Yoga is not about disconnection from others. She is saying that yoga is a reminder to take some time to connect and be with yourself.

The Torah teaches that human beings are made in the image of God. Since you are created in the image of God, learning to be with yourself—learning not to answer the phone for an hour—is a great spiritual experience.

When you do yoga, let all the phones ring. You can attend to them later. Yoga is an opportunity to attend to yourself. It is a time to answer a different call, the call of your own soul.

More About Torah

The Sacred Texts

Inclusiveness

The Connection to God

Torah Study

God's Name—YHVH

Torah in the Present Tense

Torah Yoga and the Whispers of Existence

All existence whispers to me a secret:
I have life to offer—take it, take it—

Arise, and live, and sing to beauty and to life—
Draw delight unending from the dew of heaven.

—Rav Kook

In our time, the gentle sounds of life have too often been drowned under a cacophony of pain and destruction. Thank God, there are many ways to rise up like the phoenix from the ashes, and to hear again the whispered symphony of life-affirming secrets. There are many ways to sing the song of life.

Torah is a way. Torah is called the Tree of Life. Her wise branches rustle and whisper secrets full of life to all who listen.

Yoga is also a way. With yoga, you can hear your own breath and body whispering to you: I have life to offer—take it, take it.

With these ancient and ever renewing whisperers of life, Torah, and yoga, you can rise up with a joyful and renewed body-mind-heart-soul. This *Torah Yoga* book is for all those who want to draw delight from the dance of life.

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