

Introduction to the Jewish Tradition

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ben Lev Ya'acov ha levi*



Be aware of deep reverence, and connection to that which is beyond form. Be aware of the place inside where sound and words are yet to be born, a place in resonance with the template of all creation. Be aware of the rhythm of activity and rest (Shabbat), and of inspiration and of letting go. Breathe in the qualities of deep trust and faith, and breathe out compassion for all.

Softly intone the sound 'Hu' or 'Baruch Hu.' 'Baruch' is 'Blessing,' being in the presence of blessing. (The 'ch' sound is pronounced like a guttural 'h.')

The word 'Jewish' is derived from the Hebrew word 'Ya-hu-dim,' centered around the sound 'Hu'. One translation would be: those who praise or turn around the holy presence, their 'Hu'-ness. This is the same 'hu' presence we celebrate in other Semitic languages (Allah Hu) in our Dances.

In the Jewish tradition, we ask to connect to this Presence through thought, feeling and action, in ways expressed and unexpressed. The symbol of the 'Jewish Star'/'Star of David,' is defined as 'two triangles sharing a common center which is unexpressed.' It is an ancient symbol we also find in other cultures.

Connecting our heart, our breath and our actions to the Divine Source is at the core of Jewish practice. Continually developing and learning how truth unfolds in the world is at the heart of Torah study. It is given that we are all spiritual beings. Our task is to bring this awareness into life. Hence the many guidelines and boundaries followed in observant Jewish life.

The Jewish tradition begins with the creation of the world. Through the blessing of the mothers and fathers of this tradition, Abraham and Sarah, and many others known and unknown, a connection to living wholeness develops. This stream of blessing flows directly as a legacy into later forms we now call 'Christianity' and 'Islam.'

The Jewish tradition of prayer is deep and subtle in mantric power, alignment, and meaning, much deeper than may first appear when walking into some modern American synagogues. Reb Shlomo Carlebach, of blessed memory, was a great rabbi in this century who had met Murshid Samuel Lewis. Reb Shlomo's songs form the melodies of the Shalom Benediction Dance and a number of our other Dances. He explained sadly that many of the deepest teachers of the Jewish inner tradition perished during the holocaust of the second world war. This loss resulted in a great spiritual hunger in Jewish young people that definitively contributed to the welcoming and flourishing of Eastern meditative forms in the West in the last 50 years.

Historically in the Jewish tradition, there is a central teaching that the true name of Oneness is considered 'unpronounceable, unspoken.' (Murshid S.A.M. and other teachers have evolved new views on this subject. See commentary by Rabbi Pamela Bough elsewhere in this manual).

The connotation is: whatever words we use (even in our Dance) to express our connection to Oneness, we are still as a finger pointing to the moon. There is always more growth, more emptying and filling, our expression is an approximation. In observant Judaism, this unspoken, unpronounceable name is sometimes referred to as 'HaShem,' literally 'the name,' sound,

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light. (The root is essentially the same as 'shemaya' of the Aramaic Prayer of Jesus.) The word G-d even when written in English, contains a hyphen, as a reminder of this unspeakable vastness of Divine Presence. In our Jewish inspired Dances, when we sing, 'Lai-la-lai' or similar phrases, this is yet another way of calling the Holy Presence beyond words.

Attunement to certain phrases in the Dances

'Shema Yisrael, Yah/Adonai Elohenu, Yah/Adonai Echod'

This is a central phrase in Jewish prayer, traditionally repeated morning, evening and at bedtime. It is an affirmation of Oneness, and our inherent unity. It is also recited on one's death bed. 'Shema' implies 'listen' again connotations of name, sound and light, 'Yisrael' often refers to the Jewish people and the land of Israel. It was the name given to Jacob after wrestling with an angel. In this context, 'Yisrael' refers to all of us who wrestle with, who interact and intertwine with G-d, and with our own G-d like nature. The power of this prayer comes in breathing this connection of Oneness right into our cellular memory. We feel comfort, strength and wholeness. 'Echod' is One.

The Hebrew word 'Shalom' usually translated as 'peace' also means 'wholeness.' Notice how it is composed of the sounds 'shhh' and 'om.' 'Shabbat Shalom' is the peace of 'Shabbat' or 'Shabbos.' (The different endings are because the last letter 'tet' in Hebrew, is pronounced either 't' or 's' in different parts of the world.) Shabbat (in English, 'Sabbath') is one of the great gifts that has come through Judaism to the world. It is an opportunity to experiencing a rhythm of renewal, a perspective free from striving, whatever be our circumstances, to be graced to perceive see how inside and out 'it is good.'

Some parting thoughts

The Hebrew language is truly wondrous. Every Hebrew letter and word is interpreted as containing myriad hidden meanings. Can you discover some? In presenting translations during our Dances, be conscious that what we share is but one of many possible meanings, which we have learned or been graced to intuit. Experience both exaltation and also humility in the sounding and moving to these phrases in Hebrew, and indeed in all languages we employ in the Dances.

Let us ask for the blessing of the masters, saints and prophets, both feminine and masculine of the tradition we are representing to help us model confident humility rather than posturing knowledge. Be of service to the Oneness, the community and to all life. (All life, 'Kol yoshev Taivel' in Hebrew).

Resources: There are many illuminating texts in this tradition, including teachings from a feminine perspective. I recommend a wonderful booklet on attunement to Jewish tradition, *Gate to The Heart: An Evolving Process* by Reb Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, 1993 ALEPH Publications, Philadelphia, PA.

May G-d's holy Presence shine through you and nourish you powerfully, gently. Amen.