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Going Online and Taking the Plane. From San Francisco to Jerusalem.

The Physical and Electronic Networks of “Jewish Mindfulness”

Mira Niculescu

Abstract

In this article, I analyze the emergence of a new hybrid practice within American Judaism: “Jewish mindfulness”. Jewish mindfulness is a new meditation practice inspired from “mindfulness meditation”, a westernized form of Buddhist meditation.

I look at the role played in the Internet in the rapid success and in the geographical unfolding of this new practice within the transnational English speaking Jewish religious networks.

First, I retrace the emergence of the practice of Jewish mindfulness and the role played by Internet in this process. Second, I focus on the genealogical and geographical structure of today’s Jewish mindfulness networks. Finally, through focusing comparatively on two groups offering the practice of “Jewish mindfulness”, I show how the Internet becomes the surface of expression of hybrid discourses that are not necessarily expressed as such.

In conclusion I suggest that electronic networks can be used to support, rather than to replace “offline” religious connections.

Keywords

Buddhism, Judaism, mindfulness, hybridity, lineage, transnational networks, diaspora

In May of 2009, from a Parisian office, I went online to take a look at the websites of Buddhist centers in America. In the context of my sociological fieldwork on the “Jewish Buddhists” (Niculescu 2014), I was trying to evaluate the proportion of Jewish-born teachers in this environment, to detect in advance my future interlocutors, and also to see if there was any tentative synthesis between Judaism and Buddhism wasn’t showing up in the programs.

Among all the “salvation good” suppliers that have a presence on the web today, I was able, within a few clicks, to get remotely and preemptively a quite consistent panoramic view of this vast field.

This is when the serendipity of web surfing came into play: on the website of *Spirit Rock Meditation Center (SRMC)* <<http://www.spiritrock.org/>> was published the announcement of an upcoming “Jewish mindfulness’ retreat”. I had never heard of such a practice, and for a reason: this retreat was the first of its kind. Curious of what seemed like a possible first doctrinal crystallization of the phenomenon of the “Jewish Buddhists”, I took a flight to San Francisco a few months later to attend this retreat as a participatory observer.

I didn’t know yet- nor did its organizers- that the expression “Jewish mindfulness”, then published *ad hoc* for the first time on a website, was about to become a new label in the American Jewish religious field.

By offering the example of the very fast fashioning of a new practice within a “historic religion” like Judaism, “Jewish mindfulness” constitutes a privileged case study to observe the role of the internet in the making of Religion.

It is on this aspect that I will focus here, as part of a reflection on the impact of electronic practices on “lived religion”. In particular, I wish to show how this practice has developed as a twofold network: by the simultaneous weaving of an electronic network and of a human transnational network.

First I will retrace the emergence of “Jewish mindfulness” and the role internet played in this process. Second I will examine the genealogical and spatial structure of the networks of “Jewish mindfulness”. Third, through a content analysis of the online visual and textual discourses, I will show how the Internet becomes the space of expression of hybridities that are not necessarily expressed as such.

1 The role of the internet in the emergence of “Jewish mindfulness”

The concept of “Jewish mindfulness” appeared in practice before it started developing institutionally, in great part via the Internet.

1.1 A “Jewish mindfulness” retreat: the birth of a hybrid

The Buddhist center in which the first “Jewish mindfulness” retreat was taking place teaches “Insight meditation”, a Western version of the *Vipassana* (“penetrating vision”) meditation technique taught in Theravada Buddhism¹. Founded by Burmese monks U Ba Khin and Mayasi Sayadaw in a spirit of modernist reform influenced by Western culture (see Baumann 2001, p.3; Fronsdal 1998, p.165), and popularized by Satya Narayan Goenka who gave it its international dimension, the Vipassana school claims to represent one of the most ancient Buddhist meditation techniques, coming back to the time of the Buddha himself <<https://www.spiritrock.org/meditation>>.

“Insight meditation”, its American version, was fashioned in the seventies by a group of Buddhist Jews freshly back from years of monastic training in Asia. It can thus be described as the Western translation of a globalized Asian neo-traditionalism that was already westernized. Its success in America (Fronsdal 1998 precit) comes in great part from the fact that it is maximally stripped of the ritualistic aspects of Theravada Buddhism, and that it focalizes on the ‘universal’ concept of ‘mindfulness’.

In its structure, the retreat I was attending in the summer of 2009 was almost identical as those usually offered at Spirit Rock. The only difference consisted in a few adjustments, aimed at alleviating its strictness, and –especially- its Buddhist character. These concerned mainly the schedule: the retreat lasted seven and not ten days, the day started later and ended earlier, and most of all, a daily time for collective prayer² and for ‘Torah yoga’ <<http://torahyoga.com/page1-what-how-content.htm>> had been introduced, opportune distractions to the harshness of a schedule otherwise entirely dedicated to meditation. Through this process the religious³ ‘flavor’ that was underlying the meditation practice had slid seamlessly towards a thematic substitution: the Buddhist references had been erased and Jewish ones introduced.

This is how the walls of Spirit Rock had seen the disappearance, the space of a week, of the Buddha statues usually enthroned in its common spaces, while *kippot*⁴ had made their appearance on the heads of many participants and *kashrut*⁵ standards were observed in the kitchen.

Such a hybrid formula between ‘eastern’ practices (Buddhism and yoga) and Judaism (prayers and references to Torah in the discourses) was designed to make the practice of ‘insight

1 The ‘old vehicle’, as it is considered as one of the oldest Buddhist schools.

2 The kaddish or ‘sanctification’, a central prayer in jewish liturgy, was recited every morning.

3 In as much as Buddhism can be discussed in the context of organized religion.

4 The kippa is the Jewish ritualistic round hat usually worn by men- but also in liberal circles by women.

5 Kashrut refers to the dietary laws in Judaism.

meditation' accessible to a Jewish audience, in a frame as respectful as possible of the demands of *halakha*⁶.

However in this case, the step towards the religious neutralization of Buddhism was a small one to take: except for the Buddha statues, that may have seemed for some to contravene to the prohibition of idolatry⁷, there was nothing in the practice offered at Spirit Rock, that would have seemed incompatible with the symbolic boundaries of a Jewish frame. Even more so, it was the very nature of this type of 'debuddhaized Buddhism' proposed in this Western meditation center that had made such an arrangement possible.

Conceived as a first try, this retreat met with unforeseen success. It was reiterated the year after, and the year after that. Today one can count about ten retreats a year based on the same model, from the Californian coast to the Galilean hills in Israel.

While five years ago, the expression 'Jewish mindfulness' was non-existent, today, one just needs to type it in a search engine to find instantaneously a thousand results referring to blogs and articles on the topic, but also, more concretely, to websites of groups offering this practice on a transnational level. What role exactly has played the Internet in the genesis of such a practice?

1.2 The role of online communication in the making of offline religion

The main characteristic of the Internet as a communication tool is that it offers immediate information, to a larger audience, and at virtually no cost. This enables new groups to come to existence without a pre-established institutional frame: all that is required is to create a web page, to present a practice, and to announce an upcoming meeting. The group then meets punctually in an *ad-hoc* place- most of the time lent by a Jewish or Buddhist institution. If the public shows up, the collective is launched. It can then spread out and consolidate itself as the participations turn into adhesions- that is, into financial support.

The Internet also stands as a symbolic space for groups that don't have a permanent institutional anchor. Such is the case of the *Awakened Heart project* <<http://www.awakenedheartproject.org/>>, or of *Or ha lev* <<http://orhalev.org/>> two projects which don't dispose of a permanent place, but which founders and teachers circulate internationally to teach within the transnational English speaking Jewish community.

But just like the difficulties met by the start-ups of the two thousands era, these new doxopraxic⁸ enterprises are frail: they can collapse as fast as they appeared. The reason is that they

6 Jewish law.

7 Prohibited in the 2nd and 3rd commandments of the Pentateuch.

8 From *doxa*: doctrine, and *praxis*: practice, the term "doxopraxic" serves to designate systems of thought and

are based on the principle of punctual participation rather than on a system of affiliation, and for some, on the principle of donation rather than of fee charging. Hence, their financial stability is never granted, and depends greatly on external funding.

The end of a funding can therefore challenge the viability of a group, as shows the fate of the *Jewish Meditation Center* (JMC) <<http://www.jmcbrooklyn.org/>> of Brooklyn. Funded in 2008 by two students who had discovered “Jewish meditation” in retreats such as the one described above, the JMC had appeared from scratch on the landscape of a Jewish New York scene that was thirsty for spirituality and in demand for a ‘home version’ of ‘meditation’.

This new institution had appeared without any investment funds, but rather carried by the enthusiastic pedagogical and material support of their elders: Jewish Buddhist teachers spread out between Connecticut and California. Yet in 2013 the JMC had to let its director go: after the departure of her cofounder and a solo management by the remaining one, the group wasn’t able to develop financially in a sustainable manner. The JMC since became more grassroots than ever: it is now run collectively by volunteering members - but for how long?

These institutional hazards don’t inhibit the exponential blooming of new groups over the past few years, which call themselves alternatively ‘Jewish mindfulness’ <<http://Jewishmindfulness.net/>> ‘Jewish meditation’ <<http://adasisrael.org/jmcw/>> or ‘Contemplative Judaism’ <<http://www.awakenedheartproject.org/>> but which all offer the same type of practice: a meditation practice based on the import of mindfulness meditation within a Jewish frame. Let us now take a look at the human networks through which these practices unfolded.

2 The physical networks of “Jewish mindfulness”: genealogical and spatial structure of a transnational practice

The ‘flesh and blood’ aspect of the ‘Jewish mindfulness’ networks is twofold: it refers first, to the human networks that constituted it, and second, to the transnational networks by which they spread out geographically.

practice.

2.1 The genealogical structure: a network of lineages

French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger uses as the criteria of the constitution of a religious group, the concept of “believing lineage” (1999, pp. 23-24). Such a structuralist view, because it superposes the notion of “religion” to that of “tradition”, seems to open a category too vast to be operational in terms of the definition of “religion”. However it remains particularly useful to show its genesis: the concept of “believing lineage” takes all its relevance at the level of the observation of ‘religion in the making’: a dynamics particularly representative of the contemporary Western religious field.

By making the ‘religious’ qualification of a practice depend on the notion of ‘transmission’, the concept of ‘believing lineage’ facilitates the distinction, within the religious productions of modernity, between ephemeral phenomena and emerging new religious groups. In the case that interests us here, this concept helps distinguish between the phenomenon of the ‘Jewish Buddhists’, whose individual *bricolages* remain circumscribed to their religious autobiographies (Niculescu 2012) and the constitution of ‘Jewish mindfulness’, which has become a collective religious practice.

More precisely, these two objects are articulated chronologically, the second being considered as a properly ‘religious’ consequence of the first, of which it constitutes a specific crystallization (Niculescu 2015 forthcoming).

It is the observation in real time of the constitution of doxopraxic lineages of ‘Jewish mindfulness’ that enabled me to identify, within the span of three years, the transformation of a summer ‘one shot’ into a proper new religious label within American Judaism.

If one applies the concept of ‘network’ to that of ‘lineage’, it is possible to say that a lineage is a vertical network. In the case of ‘Jewish mindfulness’, this network rapidly grew horizontal as the transversal connections were growing in complexity -between generations but also between a lineage and the next.

The network of lineages of ‘Jewish mindfulness’ takes its source at two Buddhist stems: the ‘Insight meditation’ school originating from the *theravadin vipassana* tradition which we described earlier, and the Japanese Zen school belonging to the Mahayana tradition¹⁰.

To use the terminology of transnational networks framed by French anthropologist Nathalie Luca (2012, p.68), the ‘head of lineage’ of the first stem is Jewish Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein. Cofounder of Spirit Rock and co-leader of the first retreat in 2009, Boorstein can be

9 “Lignée croyante” in French.

10 The ‘large vehicle’, which advocates for a form of ‘liberation’ (*nirvana*) that would be more altruistic because collective.

considered as the grandmother of ‘Jewish mindfulness’: it is she who took the initiative of training her Jewish fellows in the dharma- and in particular rabbis from various liberal denominations, who, when later on systematizing the application of ‘mindfulness’ to the Jewish doxopraxis, have finalized the concept of ‘Jewish mindfulness’.

The second stem sprouts from the American Zen tradition, heir of Japanese masters DT. Suzuki and Suzuki Roshi. It emerged through the collaboration of a Jewish Buddhist teacher, Zoketzu Norman Fischer (2002) and a former Zen student who became a conservative rabbi, Alan Lew (1999). In 2000, these two old friends founded in San Francisco a meditation group geared towards a Jewish audience: *makor or*: ‘source of light’ and a meditation place within a synagogue: *makom sholom*, ‘place of peace’ <<http://www.bayjews.org/DETAIL.aspx?ID=4081>>.

It is however important to specify that if the current actors take inspiration from these two stems, it is only from the first one that “Jewish mindfulness” emerged.

The second generation of teachers of “Jewish mindfulness” is constituted by the first generation of rabbis formed by Boorstein; especially Reconstructionist rabbi Jeff Roth, teacher in the 2009 retreat, and conservative rabbi Jonathan Slater, author of *Mindful Jewish living* (2004).

The third generation, of which the previously cited JMC is a pioneer, is constituted of younger Jews born in the eighties. Neither ‘professional’ Buddhists nor rabbis, they have taken the initiative of opening horizontal spaces of practice in order to fill the lack of institutions offering meditation in a Jewish frame on a regular basis. By creating weekly meetings, at first informal, to fix these ‘structural gaps’ of a practice that was still in its first steps, this generation of ‘amateur meditators’, strongly carried by electronic networks, has contributed to the development of the physical networks by accruing the density of local anchors.

Finally, a third lineage has appeared in parallel with the second generation. It is lead by young rabbis of various denominations¹¹ but coming from similar trajectories: by contrast with the rabbis of the second generation which have later become teachers of ‘Jewish mindfulness’, they started their path by exploring independently the dharma, and more eclectically so, before engaging in the rabbinic path. They are more engaged with Buddhism than the second generation, and more engaged with Judaism than the third. The teachers of *Or Ha Lev*, that I already mentioned, or of the ‘Jewish mindfulness center of Chicago’, that I will describe in a moment, are representative of this generation.

Hence, within the space of two generations, we find ourselves very far from the ‘total’ engagement of the founders of ‘insight meditation’, who had embraced for years the demanding path of Buddhist monasticism in Asia.

11 From orthodox at the far ‘right’ to *Reconstructionist* at the far left via the *Conservative* in the center.

The weaving of these lineages operated in two directions: vertical, via a process of genealogical transmission from teacher to student, and horizontal, via a process of collaboration between peers.

However often, these two dynamics are cumulated, since the teachers don't hesitate to raise their students to the status of co-teachers in order to spread their practice faster. The horizontal development of these practices on a networking mode tempers the vertical and hierarchical dimension of the lineage they stem from.

Moreover, the actors don't describe themselves as forming any kind of lineage -and for a reason: everything, in the transmission of the teaching authority of 'Jewish mindfulness', is informal. There are no rules, nor transmission rites. On the contrary, the friendship ties and the reciprocity of roles – especially when one is a rabbi and the other a Jewish Buddhist teacher- that unite the actors, blur the hierarchies so much so that initiators and initiated, in the absence of a sufficient pool of teachers, often find each other rapidly teaching on equal footing -and this notwithstanding the important discrepancies of training between them, in one area or the other.

This fraternal 'informality-horizontality' at the core of the transmission knots of 'Jewish mindfulness' sharply contrasts with the strictly hierarchical character of the notion of lineage within Buddhism, a notion accentuated by the passage rites of 'teaching authorization' and 'dharma transmission'.

2.2 The spatial structure: the 'almost diasporic' networks of 'Jewish mindfulness'

The networks of 'Jewish mindfulness' connect groups located mostly in large metropolitan areas of North America (San Francisco- Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia Washington, Boston), and in Israel between Jerusalem and the Galilee (figure 1 below).

These zones constitute the local outposts of the networks, or its 'bridge actors' (Luca, p.66): they connect the network on a local level. By contrast, the India of Buddhist meditation centers, and especially Dharamsala¹², constitutes not an outpost but rather an 'initiator point': it is the indirect locus of the genesis of 'Jewish mindfulness', as it is the place many teachers of 'Jewish mindfulness' went through in order to deepen their practice of the *dharma*¹³.

Each group is linked to the others by cooperation links, and as the meditation retreats multiply and the actors circulate, the circulations along the lines of the network are growing in complexity.

12 Residence in exile of the Dalai Lama, head of the Gelugpa Tibetan lineage.

13 The teaching of the Buddha. What common language understands as 'Buddhism' is called 'dharma' by its more serious practitioners.



Figure 1: Map of the 'Jewish mindfulness' networks.

The topography of 'Jewish mindfulness' thus describes the mobile networks of a traveling practice. As a testimony of this, along my research fieldwork, I found myself meeting in New York or Jerusalem the same actors previously encountered in Dharamsala or San Francisco.

The circle formed by the transnational network of 'Jewish mindfulness' seems to follow the lines of the contemporary western Jewish diaspora. Only the networks of the new Jewish meditation aren't organized on a diasporic mode: they are not the fruit of migrations and exile from a motherland. Omnipresent in the Jewish liturgy, Jerusalem is neither a primordial geographic pole nor a central reference in the discourses of 'Jewish mindfulness'. Are we then in the presence of a network deprived of a center, in the image of its spreading on the web?

It doesn't seem so: a recent dynamic of institutionalization- centralization of the practice is pointing towards a specific topographical zone: the North East of the United States:

Founded in New York in 1999, the Institute of Jewish Spirituality has been offering over the past three years a "Jewish mindfulness" teacher training". Many other workshops and retreats of "Jewish mindfulness" are being held in the only Jewish "retreat center" in America, Isabella Freedman <<http://isabellafreedman.org/>> a place dedicated since 1990 to Jewish spirituality together with biological agriculture and farming. The presence of these two key institutional poles, as well as the recent multiplication of "Jewish mindfulness" groups around the state of New York, are factors that tend to indicate that the East coast has taken the lead from the San Francisco area- which was its crib- as the 'knot actor' (Luca 2012, p.66), that is to say as the neuralgic center of 'Jewish mindfulness'.

Hence the a-topography of Internet networks shouldn't make us forget that the reality they point to is a progressively organized specific space revolving around a center, geographically as well as symbolically -which is the case for any practice in the process of its institutionalization.

Internet also plays another role in the making of this new practice: in the process of being displayed on the web, the discourses develop and the websites become autonomous spaces of religious expression and experience.

3 The electronic discourses of 'Jewish mindfulness': interactivity and hybridity

The characteristics of Internet communication have an impact on the lived practice of 'Jewish mindfulness', on two levels: on the one hand, by increasing the interactivity, the websites intensify the dialogue, and thus the horizontality between the religious supply and demand; on the other hand, the unfolding of visual and textual discourses on the Internet highlights the founding hybridity that seems to be formulating the definition of this new practice.

3.1 Textual communication on the Internet: an increased interactivity

The contents of the websites are first and foremost informational. They enable the web surfer to find the place and time of the practices he is interested in, to be informed of the one time events and recurring retreats, but also, thanks to external links by which the websites refer to each other, to constitute for oneself a personal overview of the general offer in 'Jewish mindfulness' that unfolds between the united states and Israel.

This personal dimension is accentuated with the new generation of more interactive platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, through which the teachers can talk more directly to their audience via posts that the recipients can in turn 'follow', 'like' and even 'comment'.

The interactivity then is almost direct, not only on a spatial-temporal level but also symbolically: in terms of encounter between the religious supply and its consumers.

But the websites of 'Jewish mindfulness' are also places of discourse in and of themselves: the surfer is being offered a whole battery of online teachings: articles, 'daily thoughts', podcasts of chanted prayers and guided meditations, etc, all of which constitute an extensive electronic pedagogical field.

By way of his, the websites become autonomous spaces for the deepening of the practice of ‘Jewish mindfulness’, fit for playing an interim role in between the off line encounters. For the researcher, they also constitute an ideal observation laboratory of hybridity in action.

3.2 Visual communication on the Internet: observing hybridity in action

In short, the concept of ‘Jewish mindfulness’ simply refers to the process of importing the Buddhist meditation technique called ‘mindfulness’ within a Jewish frame. ‘Jewish mindfulness’ can thus be defined as a process of translation-absorption of Buddhist concepts within the doxopraxical Jewish system. Two modalities of hybridity appear:

According to the first one, the practice of meditation is being inserted within the frame of a religious Jewish practice. An ideal-typical example of this is the innovation introduced by late rabbi Alan Lew, who had started in his conservative synagogue in San Francisco, before religious services, a meditation space conceived after the model of Zen practice (<<http://www.bethsholomsf.org/worship-and-spirituality/makom-sholom-meditation-practice.html>>).

This modality describes a form of *bricolage* that could be connected to the mode of alternation or ‘cut’ proposed by French anthropologist Roger Bastide (1955): Buddhist meditation and Jewish prayer belong to two distinct physical and temporal spaces which are being chronologically and thematically articulated. Only in our case, the switching is not dissociated, but complementary: the first aims at preparing spiritually for the second.

A second modality of hybridity consists in the symbolic translation of Jewish practices in the light of Buddhist concepts. This is manifested for instance in the requalification of Jewish blessings (*brakhot*) into mindfulness practices. This modality would refer to the modality of ‘reinterpretation’, the most basic form of syncretic work (Mary 1999).

To illustrate this very elementary typology, I will take two examples from the discourses displayed on the websites of two ‘Jewish mindfulness’ groups: the Awakened Heart project (AHP) and the Center for Jewish Mindfulness (CJM).

By aiming at “the integration of mindfulness together with the study of Jewish texts” (<<http://Jewishmindfulness.net/>>) the CJM seems to be implementing a type of hybridity on the alternation mode. But hybridity also operates on the level of ‘reinterpretation’: the Jewish texts are being read through a lens that is being informed by the ethics of ‘mindfulness’, that is to say, by the Buddhist philosophy it is being taken from.

By contrast, the AHP seems to be implementing a type of hybridity built on the mode of ‘reinterpretation’ (<<http://www.awakenedheartproject.org/>>):

Jewish meditation (...) provides the wisdom to understand the nature of mind including those factors of mind that tend to obscure clear seeing. The practice teaches us how to direct our attention into the present moment of experience

If we compare the terminology used here to the one displayed on the website of Spirit Rock, the Buddhist school at which the founder of the AHP was trained, the similarity is striking (<<https://www.spiritrock.org/meditation>>)

The practice concentrates and calms the mind. It allows one to see through the mind's conditioning and thereby to live more fully present in the moment (...). The practice develops clarity of seeing.

In both cases, it is about ‘concentration’, ‘present moment’, ‘understanding the mind’ and attaining ‘clear vision’ (‘insight’). The difference appears at the level of the aim of the practice: while the Buddhist conception, expressed by Spirit Rock, is to ‘put an end to suffering via the discovery of an unconditional and total freedom’, the AHP states that the ultimate goal of meditation is to ‘make the experience of the divine’.

This allows us to formulate another definition of ‘Jewish mindfulness’: this new practice can be described as a theistic application of the Buddhist concept of mindfulness; a practice via which meditation becomes a mystical pathway to the divine.

‘Jewish mindfulness’ can thus be described as a new hybrid technology within the liturgical Jewish apparel, aiming at a direct encounter with God- an encounter even more direct than prayer, because beyond words, rather lying in the depths of the intimate individual experience of life.

In these two examples, – as in the vast majority of cases, there is no express mention of a hybridity that is yet obvious in practice.

This can be attributed to two reasons: on the one hand the desire of affirming an autonomy of ‘Jewish mindfulness’ by affirming the ‘universality’ of the concept of ‘mindfulness’; on the other hand the fear of losing a Jewish audience concerned with avoiding ‘idolatry’. This tendency to silence the Buddhist sources of ‘Jewish mindfulness’ has been denounced by some observers, as in this online article entitled “Judaism, meditation and the B word” (Jay Michaleson 2005, <<http://forward.com/articles/3652/judaism-meditation-and-the-b-word/>>).

These reservations may explain why hybridity is often more eloquent in images than in words. To use again our two previously comparative examples:

The letters forming the logo of the CJM are suggesting the silhouette of a lotus flower, the symbol of Buddhism (figure 2) <<http://Jewishmindfulness.net/>>.



Figure 2: Logo of the center for Jewish mindfulness of Chicago.

In another style, the visual of the AHP shows the photograph of a man sitting in the ‘lotus seated pose’, the classic Buddhist meditation posture, but wearing a tallit, the Jewish prayer shawl (Figure 3) <<http://www.awakenedheartproject.org/>>.

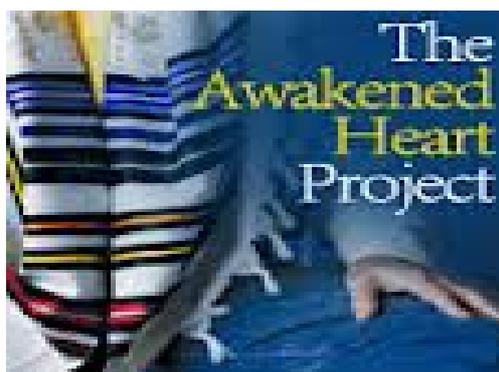


Figure 3: Logo of the awakened heart Project

Hence, a proper discursive landscape is emerging on the Internet, as the websites are growing in content. Notwithstanding, these electronic resources keep referring to offline practices, which they view themselves as ‘introductions to’ rather than as ‘substitutes for’.

It is the lived practice that matters in ‘Jewish mindfulness’, and the meditation retreats are its flesh and bones. Hence the websites in this case are not their own end constitutive of a type of alternative ‘virtual religiosity’, as is the case of part of online religion (see for instance Duteil-Ogata, 2015, and Jonveaux 2015) but rather a communication space that serves as a preamble to physical encounters.

4 Conclusion

Within the space of five years, the term ‘Jewish mindfulness’ has become a proper label within American Judaism. This transformation is attested by a growing electronic visibility, the appearance of generic practices, the emergence of a specific literature, and a new institutional centralization. The networks of Jewish mindfulness present three main characteristics: horizontality, polycentrality, and hybridity.

Observing the evolution of this practice since 2009, I was able to identify two main dynamics: first, an increase of the Jewish aspect of the practice -often correlated to a distancing with the Buddhist aspect of it. The activity of Jeff Roth testifies for it: he had to move his annual Californian retreat out of Spirit Rock, the direction of the Buddhist center being opposed to the integration of Shabbat services within the meditation retreat format.

Second, the networks are growing increasingly complex, with the emergence of new actors and new collaborations between actors of different groups. Still, this phenomenon remains marginal within large scale Judaism: it is estimated by its to count to no more than a few thousand actors, mainly established in the large American metropolitan areas.

However, a few signs tend to indicate that Jewish mindfulness is it is growing within the English speaking religious field, as show its new developments outside of the American transnational networks: Jeff Roth has led in 2012 his first retreat in Quebec and James Maisels, founder of Or Ha Lev, led his in Toronto in 2013. Both taught their first ‘Jewish mindfulness’ retreat in England in May 2014. France remains so far removed from this dynamics, perhaps because of the language barrier as well as a more traditionalist Jewish culture (Niculescu 2014).

These rapid evolutions show how the medium of the Internet has contributed to the evolution of offline religion. Provided, as is the case of American Judaism, the local religious culture already be propitious to religious creativity.

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