

JEWISH HERALD VOICE
Using meditation to deepen interfaith dialogue
By AARON HOWARD 26.NOV.09

“Sometimes, words get in the way. Silence can go deeper.”

“That’s especially true if you’re trying to get to God,” said Robert J. Hesse, co-founder of the Contemplative Network, an organization dedicated to interdenominational contemplative prayer and member of the board of trustees of The Institute for Spirituality and Health at the Texas Medical Center.

“There’s no dogma in silence,” Hesse said. “The first person I heard using that phrase was Fr. Thomas Keating, with whom I learned my practice. He inspired me in many ways. I have attended many interfaith dialogues and, inevitably, participants get hung up on words, and then dogma. Then, you stop talking. I found that frustrating.”

While interfaith dialogue often can work at the academic level, such dialogue can be perilous at the grass-roots level. Even with careful explanation of the “ground rules,” there is the potential for heated emotions, confrontation and the risk of exacerbating conflicts.

In contrast to the usual methodology of grass-roots inter-faith dialogue, Hesse advocates starting interfaith dialogue with contemplative prayer or meditation. Hesse and Harvey Gordon, M.D., will present a workshop, “Judeo-Christian Contemplative Prayer – A Meditative Experience,” on Sunday, Dec. 6, from 2 to 5 p.m., at The Rothko Chapel. No fee or no preregistration is required.

Contemplative prayer practice is common to all faith traditions. For example, there’s the example of “*misboded*” (of being alone) in Judaism. Described by Aryeh Kaplan (of blessed memory), this practice was noted in reference to the Hasidic practice of being “totally divorced from the physical to be more readily in tune with the spiritual.”

Similarly, there’s the tradition of the Centering Prayer in Christianity. “When you ‘talk’ on that level, people resonate,” Hesse said. “The common meditation experience draws people together. It transcends words that you may use later. People who are contemplative, regardless of their traditions, are touched by or in the same place.

“Some beliefs describe that place as God; others, as self-awareness. I personally believe that place is God, but it really doesn’t matter. We can get caught up in the fundamentalist mentalities of all religions, which tend to be populated by followers who want the security of rules and laws. For them, there’s no need to love. All they have to do is follow the rules. Every religion has had its fringes. Even a religious center can get off kilter and go that direction.”

The contemplative prayer tradition that Hesse draws on is called “center-ing prayer.” This type of Christian meditation was described and influenced strongly by the Trappist monk and writer Thomas Merton, who passed the practice on to Fr. Thomas Keating.

“I felt that we should be doing this in a Judeo-Christian way,” Hesse said. “Our goal is to bring the Jewish and Christian communities together, not to proselytize, but to start this dialogue. When I spoke to Rabbi Samuel Karff about this, he recommended that I meet Harvey Gordon.”

Gordon, clinical professor of urology and medical ethics at Baylor College of Medicine, also is on the faculty at The Institute for Spirituality and Health.

“Robert [Hesse] and I started to talk about what we did and our experiences,” Gordon said. “Almost immediately, we knew that we had been to the same place. Just because somebody calls himself a meditator doesn’t mean they’ve been there. But if they are true contemplatives, or experienced this Oneness, there is this mutual sense of peace and trust. Perhaps, we use different words and different symbols. But, our meditative experiences are similar. I felt we were essentially in the same place.”

Gordon has meditated for about 12 years. “I entered a deeper phase of meditation around 1997,” Gordon continued, “when I attended a silent retreat with Rabbi David Cooper in Colorado. We spent a week in silence. It was during the week of the High Holy Days, and the retreat ended on Yom Kippur. We worshipped, so we were vocalizing prayer. But, that was the only speech that we were engaged in for a week.

“That was really jumping into the water for me.”

There are some in our community who distinguish Jewish meditation from other forms of non-Jewish meditation. Gordon said he tried to understand that view, but found himself on a different path.

“I meditated because it seemed like a natural thing for me to do,” he said. “I believe we’re hard-wired to meditate. And, we have to, in our modern context, get away from all those barriers that keep us from meditating. There were consequences [of my regular meditation] such as my blood pressure went down, and I stopped experiencing road rage. But, these were consequences, not goals.

“More recently, I go into meditation after davening. So, I often use my tallit and kippah to meditate. I drape myself completely in the tallit, so that when I come out of the experience, the first thing I see is the world through the fabric of the tallis – which is a good way to see the world.

“I understand my meditation as the path to that state that involves quieting my ego. My ego never goes away completely. But, instead of being the limit to how I see the world, when I meditate, my ego has become transparent, and I’m seeing a reality beyond my ego.

“Through the technique that we’re going to teach in this course, when thoughts intrude during meditation, as they will, you don’t focus on them or pursue them. You simply note them and let them go. I let them dissolve into the *ayin*, which is the nothing or the no- thing.

“This workshop will teach what we call 'Oneness Prayer.' This is an effort to open oneself to experiencing the one-ness of the cosmos so that the borders dissolve and you don’t end at your skin. We’re teaching the methodology of quieting the mind to open oneself and be prepared to allow what many people call God to come in.”

Hesse and Gordon believe that two things could happen as a result of their workshop. One, an ongoing Jewish-Christian meditative prayer group could emerge. Two, such a type of interfaith meditative practice could enhance the Jewish and Christian communities.

“Most of the masters of the contemplative traditions believe in a kind of collective consciousness,” Hesse said. “If that’s the case, and if there’s enough of the practice, you get what the Buddhists call good karma, which lessens the animosity and basic distrust of each other. We hope to strengthen authentic spirituality in both religious communities.”