

How Movement And Nature Can Breathe Life Into Your Spiritual Practice

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Are you a Jewish mover and shaker?

Literally. Do you move? Is movement part of your Jewish practice? What does that look like, and how does leading a more movement-rich life yield benefits for both ourselves as individuals and for the communities and ecosystems in which we move?

Movement, especially in nature, is central to the Jewish story. Abraham and Sarah's decision to leave the home of their ancestors and journey forth into an unknown land was the decisive action — movement — that launched the narrative of our people. A primordial relationship with the natural world is also part of the Jewish story, from the Garden of Eden to our core nation-building experience in the Sinai Wilderness. Not only have pivotal moments happened in nature — including Jacob's angel-wrestling encounter and sanctification of place at Beth El, Hagar's anguished cry for help and discovery of a hidden well-spring, and Moses' observation of the burning bush in Midian — but the Jewish narrative is also built around the ecologies and symbolism of nature and place.

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Mitzrayim, for example, is the Hebrew word for Egypt, but it also translates literally as “the narrow place.” Agriculture in Mitzrayim was easy — water flowed abundantly from the Nile — but for the Israelites, Egypt was a place characterized by constriction and servitude. As slaves, we lacked independence and the sovereignty to dictate our own actions. Our movement was forced — forming bricks and building grain storehouses that represent long-term planning and food preservation.

In the Wilderness, we found almost completely unrestricted movement. Instead of building storehouses we gathered manna scattered from the heavens, a food that only lasted a single day (except for on Shabbat). In a sense, we returned to Eden, a place where we were gatherers and foragers, but in a barren desert landscape where developing a reliance on the Hebrew God was a prerequisite for building the Hebrew nation in ancient Israel, the Land of Milk and Honey.

In Israel, we were farmers and shepherds who relied on the rains for water in the rolling Judean hills; who made thrice-annual pilgrimage to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem to make sacrificial offerings from our harvest. This ecology fundamentally shaped our theological relationship to the divine and to the land around us.

We can call this interplay between movement, nature and place “Jewish Movement Ecology,” to adapt the term from biomechanist, author and educator Katy Bowman of [Nutritious Movement](#). In other words, movement and its social and ecological contexts shaped our ancestors, and movement — or, in many instances, the lack of it — shapes us today, as humans and as Jews.

You’ve probably heard that “sitting is the new smoking,” and that we need to move more and sit less. And yet, many of us are already totally overloaded with the obligations of our personal and professional lives. Fitting in yet one more thing on our to-do list can often feel downright impossible. But we also know our health and longevity depend on it.

We need to find ways to lead more fully integrated, movement-rich lives in which we maximize outputs and minimize inputs. In permaculture, a design system for socially and ecologically sustainable communities, this is called “stacking.”

So, how do we “stack” our movement practice in ways that also contribute to embodied expressions of Jewish identity, culture and spirituality?

Jewish Ritual

Movement permeates Jewish ritual practice, from the subtle movements of speaking blessings upon the sighting of beautiful objects and smelling of fragrant plants to gathering in the light of the Shabbat candles. During Jewish prayer, we sway, bow, shuffle and sing. We dance at Jewish *simchas* (celebrations), break glass at Jewish weddings and slowly, regretfully, lovingly move earth to bury our loved ones who have passed, tearing our garments in mourning. To be active in Jewish practice is to move in subtle but important ways.

We can also further diversify how we move during Jewish ritual. Instead of sitting in the exact same way for Kabbalat Shabbat services as the 40 hours we’ve just spent sitting during the workweek, we can sit on floor cushions. Perhaps on Shavuot, especially for those who have trouble staying awake for the traditional all-night learning sessions, we can instead make a walking pilgrimage to somewhere special and share in learning and discussion along the way, culminating in watching the sunrise together from a scenic vista. Be creative!

Food and Foraging

In the Garden of Eden, which can be read as a metaphor for our historical human existence as hunters and gatherers, we moved for our food. It may have been abundant and all around us, but if we were hungry, we nevertheless had to climb a tree to pick its fruit, bend over to pick leaves or berries from a bush and squat down to dig edible roots or gather water from the river.

Today, we can literally speak to an electronic box to order our groceries, or even to get delivery straight to our doors. In essence, we are outsourcing what used to be a primary form of movement. We may gain time and convenience, but we lose out not only on the physical benefits of movements utilized to acquire raw materials for our food, but also on those utilized to prepare and cook it.

Most Jewish holidays and Jewish cultures revolve around food. We don’t all have to hunt and forage every single meal, but we can adopt a mindset similar to that of hunters and foragers. We can grow our own food. We can walk to the local farmers’ market or grocery store — carrying heavy bags of groceries home is the equivalent of the farmer’s walk exercise that you could otherwise pay a personal trainer hundreds of dollars to make you do! And we can take

opportunities, when possible, to visit a pick-your-own orchard, join a local wild edibles tour or seek out the best dumplings (or babka, or tabouli, or Southern barbecue) in a five mile radius. Whatever you do, be sure to include some movement.

Nature Connection and Sense of Place

Time spent in nature is important for our individual and collective identity-building. Research shows that time spent in natural spaces, or even a view of greenery through a hospital window, has therapeutic benefits. We were born in nature, and it's in nature that we reconnect with our primordial selves through movement-rich experiences.

Opportunities abound in the Jewish calendar for nature experiences, be they Jewish nature “classics” like Tu B'Shvat or Sukkot, infrequent holidays like Passover or Hanukkah, or frequent holidays like Shabbat and Rosh Chodesh or Kiddush Levanah, the ceremony for the sighting of the new moon.

We can also develop a weekly practice of exploring “Torah of Place” in connection with the traditional weekly Torah portion. This is easier than it sounds. Find a nature area nearby — a park, waterway, your backyard or the grassy median off the roadside. Practice your observation skills, move your body while you're doing it, and discuss with a friend (AKA a *chevruta* learning partner) how this experience may be similar to or different from what's happening in the Torah portion that week. If you're stuck, try using the prompts “I notice...”, “This reminds me of...”, and “I wonder...” to help guide your observation practice.

Community Building

Humans throughout history have primarily moved not through solo exploration, but through collective communal movement. In modern times, it's just as important to find the support and camaraderie of a community of movers. When we do any or all of these things with friends, family and other community members, we bring vital social interaction into our experiences. We also share the movement by taking turns carrying the babies or the buckets of apples, by singing while cracking open nuts and by splitting up cooking tasks. We can bring movement into our professional lives by arranging walking meetings when possible, or by moving together to a nearby outdoor space for lunch. In these ways, we collectively reap the benefits of our movement.

Sustenance, physical movement, social interaction, quality time spent with colleagues and loved ones — a stacked experience.

To live a Jewish life is to embody Jewish practice not only in the stand-out moments of joy and sorrow but also in daily practice. We must think of Jewish movement not in isolation but as a counter-cultural lifestyle. We must think about the societal norms that constrain us and act as modern day Mitzrayim. In this sense, to move away from metaphorical — and sometimes literal — constriction into a place of expansion and in(ter)dependence is to move Jewishly.

So, *nu?* What are you waiting for? Join the Jewish Movement. All movers and shakers welcome.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Forward.