

Yoga is an ancient practice dating back more than five millennia, whose history is vast in time and space and whose dogma has evolved as it converged with various religions, cultures, and peoples. In recent years, yoga has proliferated throughout the world as a common exercise, meditation, and health tool. There are countless yoga studios dotted across Manhattan and even some religious Jewish ones as well. Although difficult to define, yoga is an all-encompassing term for a large collection of values, attitudes and techniques that have developed over time and today is practiced in hundreds of forms.

Traditionally, from its beginnings, yoga was a means to create maximum spiritual and physical performance through a focus on discipline and control. One of the first sightings of the word 'yoga' is found in the *Rig-Veda*, an ancient Hindu text from 3-4000 B.C.E, and is said to mean "to bind together" or "to yoke." In this sense, 'binding' or 'yoking' refers to binding of the consciousness to achieve transcendence [1]. This multifactor body and mind control was practiced in order to attain spiritual development and connection to a higher being. This was expressed through the use of specific physical postures, breathing, and attention and mind awareness.

However, in Western areas today, the dogma and religious structure of yoga is not necessarily discussed or used, and yoga is often practiced for nonreligious reasons. Yoga is widely accepted as an alternative treatment for various psychological and physical issues. It has been shown to be effective in controlling various diseases, including diabetes, obesity, stress, hypertension, multiple sclerosis, coronary heart disease, and male infertility [2,3]. Psychological uses and applications of yoga began in 1971, and today yoga is used to relieve symptoms of anxiety, depression and schizophrenia [4,5].

Although many people may not consider yoga as a specifically religious practice, groups have protested against the inclusion of yoga on religious grounds. An article titled "Malaysia's top Islamic Body bans Yoga, as it can Destroy Muslim Faith" appeared in the November 2008 edition of *The Jerusalem Post*, when the National Fatwa Council ruled that yoga involved "not just physical exercise but also Hindu spiritual elements, chanting and worship." Council chairman Abdul Shukor Husin Abdul said that the purpose of practicing yoga is to "be one with a god of a different religion" [6]. Evidently, there is some discomfort regarding yoga's religious aspects.

In addition, protest has arisen regarding the use of yoga in schools or other public institutions, as it may override the separation of church and state. In Encinitas, California, a first grade yoga class drew strong objection from vocal

parents, who claimed that the classes represented a violation of the First Amendment. One parent said that she was uncomfortable with the program because the classes were "rooted in the deeply religious practice of Ashtanga yoga, in which physical actions are inextricable from the spiritual beliefs underlying them" [7]. Another more recent case occurred in Georgia in March 2016 when parents were "offended by the Far East religion of yoga, and committed to ridding the school of their yoga classes" [8]. This situation also revealed a general feeling of discomfort regarding the connection between yoga and religion throughout many cultures and poses.

Since yoga has become so widespread, it is very surprising that there has not been a larger discussion regarding the *halachic* considerations in yoga, especially considering its strong ties to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and other idolatrous practices. When using yoga in the fullest sense of the term, it may refer to the "union of the individual consciousness with the supreme consciousness." Yoga experts say that through yoga, an individual can reach "complete physical, social, mental, and spiritual well-being and harmony with nature" [9]. This union between the subject's consciousness and the 'supreme consciousness' resembles idolatrous worship, and today is still used in certain *avodah zarah* (idol worship) practices. For many people today, especially those who practice yoga, an investigation into the *halachic* aspects of yoga is very important and seems to have been largely overlooked.

One of the main issues that yoga presents is the *mitzvah* that we are commanded to not follow in the ways of other religions. The Torah writes "After the doings of the land of Egypt, where you lived, you should not do; and after the doings of the land of Canaan, where I bring you, you should not do; neither should you walk in their statutes" (*Vayikra* 18:3). This *passuk* serves as the source for the *mitzvah* of '*chukas hagoyim*', the commandment that Jews should not replicate the customs of the nations.

There is a disagreement in the Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 11a) on what exactly is the definition of this *mitzvah* of *chukas hagoyim*. Tosfos commented that this *passuk* in *Vayikra* is specifying two categories of *chukas hagoyim*: one, customs of the idol worshippers for the purpose of idol worship, and second, customs of the idol worshippers that have **no apparent purpose**, that are "*hevel v'shtus*," "meaningless and nothingness." According to Tosfos, whether the practice is a form of idol worship or not, it is prohibited because it is the practice of other nations.

The Ran (*Avodah Zarah* 11a and *Sanbedrin* 52) and the Maharik (*Shoresh* 88) further define *chukas hagoyim*. The Maharik wrote that one definition of *chukas hagoyim* is a

practice of the idol worshippers which does not have an apparent logical purpose or reason, which the Tosfos mentioned as his second answer. If a Jew performs this practice, then we assume that it **must be** because he wants to be like the idol worshippers. According to the Maharik's explanation, it would seem that yoga is permissible. Today, no one would think he wants to be like an idol worshipper, and therefore that would not be considered *chukas bagoyim*.

The Rema cited the Maharik when explaining *chukas bagoyim* (*Yoreh Deah* 178a). He agreed with the Maharik on his definition of *chukas bagoyim* but not on the reason behind it. He wrote that idol worshippers' practices that have no logical reasons are classified as *chukas bagoyim* because we assume that **it has its roots in avodah zarah** (the Maharik said the reason is because we assume one is trying to be like an idol worshipper). However, if something has a logical reason, it would be permissible. For example, the practice of doctors wearing white coats does not have to be viewed as *chukas bagoyim*, because its reason is logical. Doctors need to wear white coats so that they can be recognized as doctors and maintain cleanliness.

This seems to pose a very difficult Halachic problem in regards to the practice of yoga. According to the Rema, if a practice has no reason, then we assume it stems from *avodah zarah*. Therefore, one can deduce from this statement that if one **knows** for certain the practice is from *avodah zarah*, then it would definitely be prohibited! There is a debate about the technicality of whether yoga preceded Hinduism or came after it. However, even if yoga preceded Hinduism, many Hindu practices and ideas have been absorbed by yoga, and therefore it would seem that, according to the Rema, yoga is prohibited.

Rav Moshe Feinstein noted this difference in the Maharik and Rema in a *teshuvah* (*Yoreh Deah* 1:81). He was asked the question: Can Polish Chassidic immigrants wear western style clothing? Rav Moshe wrote that according to Rema, it would appear to be permissible because the clothing source clearly is not from *avodah zarah*, but the Maharik would say it is prohibited because it would appear that the wearer is just trying to be like the non-Jews. (Rav Moshe decided on this case that wearing the western clothing is fine, because it was clothing made for anyone, not specifically for idol worshippers.)

However, in a different source, it appears that Rav Moshe claimed that yoga is permissible. The *Rishumai Aharon*, written by Rabbi Aharon Felder (a *talmid muvhak* of Rav Moshe) wrote that he heard in the name of Rav Moshe that yoga was just a preparation for *avodah zarah* and not *avodah zarah* itself, so it would not be a problem of *chukas bagoyim*. This is a possibility that will allow a *beter*, although texts are not clear on whether yoga was in fact a preparation for *avodah zarah* or the worship itself.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, in his writings from 1977, is one of

the few *poskim* who mentioned yoga. The Rebbe first discusses the giving of the *mitzvos* on Shavuot. He writes that is unfortunate that a Jew would have to search after "greener pastures" when he could be delving into Torah. He includes yoga in this discussion of 'greener pastures' and wrote that "the above (greener pastures) includes **yoga and similar cults** even if it is not connected to anything pertaining to *avodah zarah*" [10]. He continued by saying that most cults are connected to *avodah zarah*, and if a cult which presents itself does not appear to be connected with *avodah zarah*, an expert *posek* must be asked regarding its legitimacy. The Rebbe does not specifically *pasken* whether yoga should be considered *avodah zarah* or not, but he looked upon yoga disapprovingly, as a cult. However, consideration must also be given to the time in which the Rebbe was writing, during which yoga may have been seen as related to the mystical cults to which Jews were straying, whereas the situation today appears very different.

There remains one other question to consider regarding yoga, and that is the usage of names of *avodah zarah*. In yoga there is the use of mantras, which are terms from the ancient Sanskrit, a language of Hinduism and Buddhism. In Mishpatim, *Shemos* 23:13, the Torah states "*V'shem Elohim acherim lo tazkiru, lo yishma al picha*"—"and make no mention of the name of other gods, neither let it be heard out of your mouth..." The Maharam, Rambam and Sefer HaChinuch all counted this statement as two negative commandments. First, one shall not swear by the name of an *avodah zarah*, and second, one should not lead Jews to *avodah zarah*. The Talmud in Sanhedrin 63, wrote in reference to this *passuk* that one cannot use *avodah zarah* as a landmark when talking with your friend, or refer to a city of *avodah zarah* unless its name is mentioned in the Torah. The Talmud took this farther, noting that one can also not cause others to mention the *avodah zarah*.

The Rash wrote on this Gemara that some interpret this to mean that one cannot use the name of *avodah zarah* for his own purpose. However, it follows from this that mentioning a name of *avodah zarah* for no specific purpose would be permissible. The Rash and the Tur (*Yoreh Deah* 147) disagreed with this opinion, and write that one can never mention the name of *avodah zarah*, purpose or no purpose. Therefore, the Shulchan Aruch wrote, in *Yoreh Deah* 147a, that is prohibited to mention the name of an *avodah zarah* whether or not there is a specific purpose for doing so.

The complicated history of yoga and its connections to various idolatrous religions poses many serious *halachic* questions regarding yoga practice. Today, there are several Jewish yoga studios, which have removed the mantras, chanting, and definitely any icons from the yoga practice. One should be very aware of these considerations when choosing to practice yoga, and be careful to choose a safe place for this relaxing and healing practice.

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