

# The New York Jewish Week

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## Contemplate This!

'Contemplative practices' for nonprofits seen catching on, though full acceptance may be years away.



*Mirabai Bush, head of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, recently garnered a \$20,000 grant from the Jewish Funds for Justice's Seasons Fund for bringing contemplative leadership skills into the workplace.*

by Debra Nussbaum Cohen  
Staff Writer

At the Jewish Funds for Justice, a nonprofit devoted to social change and leadership training, Friday staff meetings were recently given the ax. Instead, staffers on Fridays now work, alone or one-on-one, on goal setting and what the head of the organization calls "visioning."

Another change made by Simon Greer, the organization's president and CEO, was to move all performance reviews to the Jewish month of Elul, and approach them in a way that is inspired by the reflection and reconciliation that religious tradition encourages that month. Reviews are now "360 degrees;" that is, each staff member is reviewed by his or her peers and those they

supervise, as well as by their boss.

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These are two of the “contemplative practices” fusing personal transformation work and business-world developments that Greer has recently integrated into the work of JFSJ, which has 39 staff members in three cities but is headquartered here.

It is also the kind of thing that he and his new partners in the Seasons Fund for Social Transformation want to see happening in the larger world of nonprofit social justice work. The Seasons Fund is a new endeavor based at JFSJ, whose five other partners include the Ford and W.K. Kellogg foundations. Its goal is to foster contemplative practices among nonprofit professionals.

The term “contemplative practices” is a broad rubric that can include anything from adding a moment of silence before meetings and employing “active listening” skills, to formal meditation or prayer.

The Seasons Fund recently announced its first grants, a total of \$449,000 this year to 15 organizations that do either training of nonprofit professionals or direct community development work themselves.

“The idea is that they would integrate contemplative practices throughout their work,” Greer said. “Meditation, prayer, yoga, those kind of individual practices, have had a profound effect on individual lives. If they can develop organizationally oriented approaches, it will help them thrive.”

Seasons Fund’s backers say that these techniques will improve the quality and effectiveness of social justice organization workers’ experiences, and decrease burnout. “People come into this work out of such a deep sense of commitment, but they lose that in the grind of the work. The best and brightest leave after five or 10 years to go do something else,” Greer said.

After learning how to integrate contemplative practices into the life of an organization, “I’ve seen a transformation of how staffs and boards work and change their work,” he said.

The Seasons Fund has gotten \$2 million in commitments and hopes to distribute \$5 million in its first three years, said Greer.

The Ford, Fetzer and Hidden Leaf foundations have each promised \$500,000 over three years, and the other partners, which are Kellogg, the Seeds of Justice Fund and JFSJ, have each contributed at least \$50,000.

The Seasons Fund plans to distribute at least \$1 million next year, according to Greer. While there have been sporadic efforts to bring contemplative practices to nonprofit organizations for nearly 20 years, training has been inconsistent and funding difficult to find.

Michael Edwards, director of the Ford Foundation’s Governance and Civil Society Program, has long been trying to spread the word. Six years ago he brought together foundation leaders to discuss a potential collaborative approach. But “it was very difficult for them to find money” for it, Edwards said.

“The Seasons Fund took four years to get going, which is recognition that this is a field in process, and we’re all struggling to find the answers,” he added.

Seasons Fund partners, by distributing money for training in this area more widely and to some organizations like the Rockwood Leadership Program, which then offer the training to a wider swath of the nonprofit world, are hoping to create a “tipping point” in the field.

It is an approach edging toward the mainstream, though even its most ardent supporters admit it hasn’t yet gotten there.

“Mainstream acceptance is still five or 10 or 15 years away,” Edwards said. “This is difficult to even find language to talk to each other about. There’s understandable skepticism and suspicion in the mainstream.”

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In some spheres the Seasons Fund approach is gaining traction, though. “Philanthropically, at least in the Jewish world, I see that it has legs now. It’s not front and center, but it’s not floating out on the margins either,” said Rabbi Rachel Cowan, executive director of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, which teaches contemplative practices to rabbis, cantors, educators and lay leaders. Her organization was awarded \$20,000 by the Seasons Fund to bring the work to Jewish social activists.

“Many more people are asking us to lead retreats for their group than ever before,” Rabbi Cowan said. “If people are concerned about sustainable leadership, then it has an incredibly important resource to help people do what they do with balance and passion,” she said.

Still, it can all sound a little offbeat, acknowledged those involved.

“I see personal and social transformation as inseparable, which crosses every spiritual tradition that I know of. To other people it may still sound a bit spacey, or strange, or ‘out there,’” said Ford Foundation’s Edwards.

“Seasons has had to deal with clarifying why it’s important in straightforward and secular terms, even though it draws from deep wells of spiritual traditions.”

Yet contemplative practices are nothing new in American culture, manifest in the mania for mysticism and meditation that started some 40 years ago, brought west by people returning from travels in India and Tibet.

Some of that, like yoga, has become so mainstream that it is no longer exotic.

The connection between contemplative practice and health is also gaining acceptance, backed by numerous studies linking meditative practices and stress reduction, cardiovascular health and improved healing after surgery.

“There are an increasing number of people who are beginning to get that this actually matters. Neurobiology people are seeing that this isn’t weird new age Buddhism, but that there’s something actually here,” said Rabbi Cowan.

The business world is also slowly, but increasingly, embracing these approaches.

Mirabai Bush recently ran sessions for Google employees on “mindfulness-based social intelligence” and “contemplative e-mailing.”

Bush runs The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, a Northampton, Massachusetts-based organization that earlier this year published “The Activist Ally, Contemplative Tools for Social Change.” It won a \$20,000 Seasons Fund grant to start teaching contemplative leadership skills for use in organizations.

One major challenge before the funders is measuring how effectively their money is being used. After all, how can the effect of a moment of silence be quantified?

“At present there haven’t been systematic studies of effectiveness, and there should be,” Bush said. “There are beginning to be more organizations trying these things, and there should be a study with some quantitative measures. It’s an area in this work that really needs attention.”

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