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High Holy Days

Rabbi Cowan Speaks Out About Meditation, Action and New Job

By Jay Michaelson

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“Meditation practice,” said Rabbi Rachel Cowan, outgoing director of the Jewish Life Program at the New York-based Nathan Cummings Foundation, “is a daily practice of *teshuva*. Literally, physically, you are coming back to your breath. But you are also coming back to who you are.”

This journey to one’s true self has animated Cowan throughout her rich and varied life history, which includes 1960s civil rights activism, a stint in the Peace Corps (which she wrote about in her 1972 memoir of that time, “Growing up Yanqui”), a 1980 conversion from Unitarianism to Judaism and a 1989 rabbinical ordination from Hebrew Union College. Now, after 14 years at the New York-based Nathan Cummings Foundation, one of the largest Jewish family foundations in the world, she is poised to make another life change: to become the director of the Spirituality Institute, which runs contemplative retreats and other spiritual programming for rabbis and Jewish lay leaders.

“This is the best job in the world,” Cowan, 62, said of her Cummings position, “but through it I have gotten to meet people doing wonderful work, important work in grounding of a spirituality in Jewish sources but reframing it through the lens of egalitarianism and pluralism. I feel called to do that work.”

The work of the Spirituality Institute is part of what Cowan called a groundswell of interest in contemplative practices in Judaism. Cowan says this turn to the contemplative is a rectification of an imbalance in contemporary Jewish life.

“So much of Jewish life is either just from the head or just staying with what is familiar and comfortable,” she said. “All of which is well and good — contemplative practice is not for everybody. But for those who have deep questions, it opens up so much, to really notice what God wants from us and how we are called upon to serve — and how to minimize our egos’ demands in order to serve the whole. That’s a treasure for any religious community.”

Cowan’s move to the Spirituality Institute may surprise some in the institutional Jewish community, but it is a natural outgrowth of her work both at the Cummings Foundation (which funded the Spirituality Institute) and with Makom, the meditation institute at the Jewish Community Center in

Manhattan.

"Every Wednesday morning," she said, "I sit for an hour with a group of people who are supporting each other in their practice of sitting and paying attention and connecting it to the Jewish and prayer life." Such "circles of cooperation," she said, are becoming more and more common in Jewish communities.

Indeed, there are a growing number of institutions devoted to promoting Jewish spirituality. Besides the Spirituality Institute, the list includes Elat Chayyim, the retreat center in upstate New York; Israeli communities such as Ohad Ezrachi's HaMakom and Mordechai Gafni's Bayit Chadash, and meditation centers like Chochmat HaLev in San Francisco and Rabbi David Cooper's Heart of Stillness center in Crestone, Colo., not to mention the enormously popular and controversial Kabbalah Center, with branches in New York, Los Angeles and around the world.

Some have doubts about these institutions. Critics argue that the increasing popularity of meditation comes at the cost of time spent dedicated to fulfilling Jewish law or promoting Israel, social justice and *tikkun olam*. Even Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, one of the founders of the Jewish Renewal movement and a primary source for much of today's neo-chasidism, has cautioned that "passive contemplation" should not come at the expense of engaged activism.

Cowan disagrees. "I think that's a false dichotomy," she said. "I practice meditation in the Jewish context because you're always in dialogue between contemplation and action, and if they don't inform each other, it's really problematic. The Cummings Foundation funds contemplative practice, but we are looking for where contemplative practice is helping to support the work of social change. And I've seen this at the Spirituality Institute, where rabbis come for five-day retreats and later report how much the practice of meditation — just paying attention — helps them be much more effective as rabbis and stay dedicated to the deep value of what they are doing. That's what this practice is about."

A veteran of the civil rights movement, Cowan points to the destructive aspects of the 1960s as evidence of the importance of contemplative practice in social change. "We saw what rage did to the '60s. To learn how to be in the moment, to respond and not to just react — it is crucial for social-justice movements to be based in that perspective."

Cowan is also critical of many conventional synagogues. "For me, Jewish practice and meditation practice is all about connecting with your soul, and with your people and your covenant. But that's not necessarily what happens in shul when you go," she said. It is this loss of connection between institutional life and what Cowan sees as Judaism's core values that is behind both the perceived crisis in contemporary Jewish life and her move to the Spirituality Institute. By immersing rabbis and Jewish leaders in contemplative practices, the hope is that the practices will "trickle down" to members of Jewish communities throughout the world.

Cowan dismisses the rumors that her departure, coupled with changes in the leadership at the Nathan Cummings Foundation, spell trouble for

the large philanthropy's Jewish Life Program. The program, she said, is "integral to the work of the foundation" and exists within a larger framework that includes funding for projects in the arts, social action and environmentalism. The time has simply come, she said, for her to "learn and teach and write."

Meditation, Cowan said, is particularly appropriate for the High Holy Day season with its themes of introspection, contemplation and return. "We say every day, '*maleh kol ha'olam k'vodo*,' that God fills the world. Whoever has time to notice that? Who would even have a clue what that means? Meditation is a way to know and experience what it means because you're silent, you're calming your mind and you're not jazzed all the time with the details of your life or telling yourself the same stories over and over. It provides the place and the time and the calmness, so you can see how much of what is going on in your mind — and littering your desk and eating away at every day and every minute — is not who you are and where you're really going. It isn't your mission. It isn't what's important. It may be what's urgent, but it's not what's important."

Jay Michaelson is the chief editor of Zeek: A Jewish Journal of Thought and Culture, and is the director of Nehirim, a spiritual retreat for gay and lesbian Jews (www.nehirim.org).

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