

## **Conquering Mindlessness Through “Mindfulness”**

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One of today’s most popular buzz words is Mindfulness.

*Psychology Today* defines Mindfulness as:

*A state of active, open attention on the present. When you're mindful, you carefully observe your thoughts and feelings without judging them good or bad. Instead of letting your life pass you by, mindfulness means living in the moment and awakening to your current experience, rather than dwelling on the past or anticipating the future.*

### **Point 1:**

Let’s consider the Torah’s first religious act, the offerings brought by Cain and Abel, an act which ended in fratricide. If Cain had been mindful, his fatal crime could have been avoided. It is understandable that Cain felt disappointed when his offering was rejected, while his brother’s offering was accepted. But if he had been mindful, taking the time to process his emotions and calm

down, he may have realized that this apparent setback actually presented him with a great opportunity.

After all, while God accepted Abel's offering, he did not grant him a divine audience, never uttering even a single word to him. On the other hand, God showered Cain with words of encouragement: "Why are you annoyed and why has your countenance fallen? Surely, if you improve yourself, you will be forgiven." If Cain had been mindful, he would have come to realize that God was not dismissing him, but rather doubling down by challenging him to do better. God saw the great potential in Cain and was trying to cultivate it. Unfortunately, because Cain was not mindful, he failed to realize the opportunity God was presenting to him and instead let his anger get the best of him.

But why did God simply accept Abel's offering without taking the time to utter a word to him? Abel in Hebrew is *Havel*, which means "nothingness." It was Cain not Abel who brought the first offering, and Abel's name suggests that there was nothing of substance to his offering. While Cain was motivated by a yearning to draw closer to God, Abel's offering was merely an act of imitation.

Abel was a follower in the worst sense of the word, doing whatever was necessary to fit in.

The mindful reader of the Torah will realize the connection between the Cain and Abel story and that of Noah which follows. Noah courageously refused to be a follower, instead separating himself from the wicked world in which he lived and thereby saving humanity.

**Point 2:**

Through mindfulness one is able to acknowledge and process one's emotions without passing judgment. Once we process our emotions without judgment, it is much easier to act rationally.

But should we not pass judgment on our emotions? The Tenth Commandment prohibits coveting, an emotion. The *Rambam* explains that one only commits the sin of coveting when one acts on the emotion. It would not be sinful to be jealous of someone, but it would be sinful to let our jealousy get the best of us to the point where we lash out against that person. So, if we are mindful of becoming jealous, we give ourselves the ability to conquer the

emotion without acting on it. Mindfulness allows us to reason that, though we are jealous of another (a normal human emotion), we should focus not on what another has but on what we already have.

The commandment to bless God after we eat is a way of fighting the urge to always desire more. By blessing after we eat, we train ourselves to give thanks for what we already have. As Dale Carnegie observes, most people are not unhappy because they don't have enough; they are unhappy because they don't stop to enjoy what they already have. By conquering emotions of jealousy, we actually make ourselves stronger. *Pirke Avot* asks "Who is strong?" and answers, "one that can control his own desires." Believe it or not, Isaac is considered the classic *Gibor* (strong man) in Judaism, not for conquering others (if anything he is faulted for being overly passive), but for conquering his own desires. One only needs to recall his composure on the sacrificial altar.

The concept of mindfulness is powerful because it allows us to rein in our negative emotions before they get the best of us. If we fail to rein in our negative emotions, depression will condemn us to live in the past, and anxiety will condemn us to live in the future.

We are at our best when we take the lessons we have learned in the past and apply them to the present and the future. In other words, we want to live wisely, in the moment.

How do we become mindful? When you feel yourself becoming overrun with negative emotions, take a few deep breaths. This action stops your Limbic system (the emotional part of your brain) from overwhelming the rational part of your brain. Essentially you are resetting your brain to think rationally. Let's all take a deep breath as we prepare to enter the New Year.