



Institute for Jewish Spirituality™

Cultivating Mindfulness. Deepening Connection. Enlivening Jewish Life.

## Reflection on Retreat Meditation Practice during an Election

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I remember election night 2016, which coincided with an IJS meditation teacher training retreat. At first glance, it might seem dissonant to bring an election with all of its emotion, spin, and hype into the retreat experience. However, at the Institute we have the conviction that if our practice is going to be real it must be accessible and operative in real life--no matter what the circumstances.

We sat at Brandeis Bardin, and watched the PBS coverage of the election. Every 20 minutes or so I rang a bell, we muted and covered the projection, and just sat together for a few minutes. It was quite surreal and challenging to be in that strong container of practice while also watching the election coverage. We all felt an intensity of emotion that evening, compounded by the long hours of meditation leading up to election night.

However, as I've understood upon reflection, it was importantly and truly in the spirit of our practice. It would have been easier and in many ways preferable to have not been on retreat for that election, but it was also a powerful way of meeting the moment as it is, with bravery and integrity to the principles of our practice. I am proud of the courage and dedication of all the participants in the JMMTT program that year, as well as of our staff. We all held each other up in real ways.

I believe that the fundamentals of what we did that night are good guidelines for all of us to practice in the midst of this season, including on election night. These include:

**Set an Intention:** Before turning on coverage, pause and formulate a guiding vision for how you hope to receive and hold whatever happens and whatever you experience.

*Please note*, this intention is not an opportunity to remind yourself of your desired outcome-- you know this already!

**Don't Hide/ Be Brave:** To quote the title of Alan Lew's (z'l) book, *This Is Real and We are Completely Unprepared*--we cannot and will not be ready for what will occur. This not-being-readiness could easily translate into a deep desire to hide from the difficulty and fear of this moment. In our practice, we are training in our capacity to *not duck*, to summon the courage to face whatever arises-- internally and externally.



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**Bear witness:** Stay connected to your witnessing mind/ *eidut*, noticing what arises. Pay extra attention to how things are made manifest in your body. Work with softening the physical sensations as opposed to focusing on the stories that are correlated with the physical sensations.

**Be Gentle:** When facing the realities of our world is easy, it does not require courage. When it requires courage, as this moment does, it behooves us to be gentle towards ourselves as we summon that courage. Take breaks while you watch the coverage on election night. Drink or eat something delicious, bringing mindful, sweet attention to the experience of eating and drinking. Try to carve out extra time in the weeks before and after the election to do the things that “fill your bucket”-- be outside, speak with loved ones, exercise.

**Pay Attention to Motivations and Intentions:** What drives our desire to consume more news and to keep watching? Of course, it is essential that we are all as informed as possible-- however, does our reading another article actually inform us better? Does watching returns until 3AM serve us? Maybe! It is essential that we each pay close, honest attention to what drives what we do and the choices we make. Hopefully, this insight will help guide towards an appropriate, healthy balance of us of being informed, and feeling connected-- but not overcome and controlled by the firehose of information and opinions.

**Feel the feels:** Relate to whatever arises as Torah, pointing towards essential truths of this human life. While you don't necessarily need to act on each feeling, welcome everything in.

Jewish spiritual practice takes place in the world. It is essential that we recognize this time as one that we have been training for. Now is a time to double down on the foundations of our practice.