

[A Basic Meditation Technique of the Kabbalah: Chanting the Name JHVH](#)

The meditative techniques created by Abraham Abulafia and his followers are unusual in several respects. First, they are some of the clearest meditative techniques in all of the Kabbalah, and come with directions that even a beginner may understand. Second, unlike most classical writers on meditation, Abulafia generally explains precisely why the techniques work, based on his particular synthesis of Kabbalah and Maimonidean philosophy. Third, and unlike most of the Kabbalah, Abulafia's practices are clearly intended to bring about a particular mystical experience; they are not speculations on the cosmos, or elaborations on the commandments. Rather, they are recipes for experience.

Abulafian meditation may be unusual for Kabbalah, but in some ways it more closely resembles the mystical literature of other religions. Christian mysticism, for example, is often recorded in first-person narratives: I did this practice, contemplated in this way, and then had this experience. Likewise with Sufi mysticism, though the practices are often communal rather than individual. Kabbalah, however, is primarily composed not of similar first-

person accounts, but of abstruse literature which may or may not be about direct experience. Today, there are excellent anthologies of Jewish "mystical testimonies" -- but these testimonies are not the primary form of Kabbalistic literature.

The truth is, they are not even primary in Abulafia's writings. What has happened, in the last forty years, is that Abulafia's meditation practices have been extracted from his books and presented as stand-alone exercises. In fact, when one actually opens Abulafia's books -- none of which has yet been translated into English -- one quickly sees that this extraction is a bit misleading, because Abulafia's prophetic techniques are tied to the type of prophecy one receives. In general, the techniques involve manipulation and permutation of the Hebrew language. What they bring about, in Abulafia's accounts and my own experience, is often a kind of stream of free association which plays within the concepts and words being permuted. Notice, though, that if you don't have the tools to interpret the "prophesies" you are receiving, they will be meaningless.

Suppose, for example, you are associating using gematria, the numerical equivalents of letters. Abulafia makes much of the equivalence of "Israel" with the term "Sechel Ha-Poal," which

means Active Intellect. But if you don't know that 541 is the numerical value of each, or can't calculate gematria that quickly, then you may reach the end of the line very quickly. Or suppose you have a vision of certain letters, as you are rotating through the 72-letter name of God (really, the 216 letter name, comprised of 72 triads). This can be a beautiful experience, but without the tools to make sense of what you are seeing, an experience is all it is. It's ecstasy, but not prophecy.

For those dabbling in spiritual matters, or using meditation as a substitute for "getting high," experience is quite enough. This is why, I think, the term "ecstatic Kabbalah," which was used by certain scholars, is often used instead of "prophetic Kabbalah," which was used by Abulafia himself. Ecstasy is a diffuse experience; prophecy is particular. Ecstasy is focused on the escape from the world; prophecy on how the escape relates to the rest of life.

In the wake of the 1960s, whose mass spiritual phenomena were often focused entirely on escape and experience, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan publicized the teachings of Abulafia, demonstrating that the mystical practices that were attracting many Jews to Buddhism, Hinduism, and other "Eastern" religions were present

right within Judaism itself. Kaplan had his own reasons for doing so. For our purposes, I simply want to make clear that the attainment of a mystical state is really only half of the "point" of Abulafia. We will focus on those techniques which work with very limited knowledge of Hebrew or Kabbalah, as did Kaplan. But for the other half of the project, which integrates the knowledge received in mystical states with the rest of the world, there is no way around actually learning the language, the symbols, and the terms of Judaism and Kabbalah.

One of Abulafia's simplest practices, popularized by Aryeh Kaplan, involves a series of head movements and breath, combined with pronouncing the Divine name.

The shortest version works by sounding out different Hebrew vowels together with the tetragrammaton (Y-H-V-H). When you do the practice, you'll want to sit comfortably in a place where you will not be disturbed, and allow the eyes to close. One begins with the first letter of the Divine name, Yood, and pronounces with the yood the vowels Oh, Ah, Ay, Ee, and Oo. Each vowel has a corresponding head movement, which resembles the way the vowel mark is written in Hebrew: with Oh the head moves up and back to center, Ah to the left and back to center, Ay to the right

and back to center, Ee down and back to center, and then Oo forward, backward, and back to center. Move your head with the breath: on each inhale you move away from center, then on the exhale, pronouncing the sound, you move back. So, it looks a bit like this:

Inhale - move head upward

Exhale - move head back to center, pronouncing Yoh

Inhale - move head to the left

Exhale - move head back to center, pronouncing Yah

Inhale - move head to the right

Exhale - move head back to center, pronouncing Yay

Inhale - move head downward

Exhale - move head back to center, pronouncing Yee

Inhale - move head backward

Exhale - move head foreward, backward, center, Yoo

You then repeat that process with the letters Hey, Vav, and then Hey again.

There are many layers to this practice. On the esoteric level, notice that since you're permuting each letter of the Divine Name with each vowel, somewhere in there you have pronounced the

ineffable name of God. On the more practical level, the complexity of this practice really focuses the mind. You can be thinking about mortgages, tests, and kids when you start, but in order to keep it straight, those thoughts just have to leave. Moreover, this is just the simplest level of the practice. As you develop, there are more and more complicated versions. One is to visualize the letters and vowels as you pronounce them. Another is to combine Divine names, such as YHVH and ADNY ("adonai"), and rotate through the vowel-sequence with the two names. You can even do one name backward and the other name forward.

Now, if this is approached as a sort of parlor trick, it's not very interesting or uplifting. But look closely at what Abulafia is doing: focusing the mind, and training the mind and body to work together. And all in a system that expertly pushes distracting thoughts away.

The results can be amazing. For example, there's a version of the practice above in which you rotate through the vowels on the exhale. Instead of just inhaling, you pronounce a vowel and move the head on the inhalation. So it sounds like "Oh-Yo... Oh-Yah..." etc., then "Ah-Yo, Ah-yah," then "Ay-yo, Ay-yah," and so on. The

practice takes about twenty minutes, if you don't rush. Usually, when I finish it, I've really got YHVH in my head -- I can imagine the letters of the name imprinted on whatever else I'm seeing: trees, people, traffic jams. And that is the truth, isn't it? That the trees and people and cars are just the skin of the Divine? Isn't that the simple truth we've been trying to wake up to?

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