



Shevat YOGA & WELLNESS by Paula Coplon

The spiritual discipline of yoga has been around for thousands of years. Although people often think of yoga specific movements and poses, its primary purpose began as a way to reach spiritual enlightenment. Hindus and Buddhists practice yoga as a way of reaching greater spiritual heights.

In modern times, we all need to find a place in our busy lives to be quiet allowing us to express our spirituality and touch our inner beings – in turn creating wellness. Yoga can help with this by making us aware of breath, posture, diet, and positive thinking.

A typical yoga class begins with people joining together in a dimly lit room with soft music playing. Each person has her own yoga mat, which becomes her personal space where she can create her own practice. The instructor will spend the first moments asking participants to become aware of their own breath (pranayama). Our muscles keep us breathing and our hearts beating even without our awareness. Therefore, this attention to conscious breath is key to the practice of yoga. As you progresses through the class, the movements and poses (asanas) coordinate with the breath. This, in turn, leads toward a more meditative practice.

Many of the classic yoga poses can be interpreted easily in a Jewish way. This month of Shevat, for instance, includes the reading on Shabbat Shira of Beshalach and the vision of Miriam and the women dancing as they reach safety after crossing the Yam Suf strongly resonates with me. I picture Natarajasana (the Hindu Lord of the Dance) pose at the end of the reading. It suggests joy, openness of spirit and oneness with God. How fitting that Women's League Shabbat often includes this reading.

Tu B'Shevat, of course, is about growth, greenness and trees. What better pose could there be to celebrate than Vrksasana, the Tree pose? With some creativity, each month's theme can easily translate to a spiritually fulfilling class.

Two very helpful books to help begin an at-home yoga practice or Rosh Chodesh gathering are *Torah Yoga* (Diane Bloomfield, Jossey-Bass, 2004) and *Aleph-Bet Yoga* (Steven A. Rapp, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2002). They give a delightful Jewish spin to the practice as well as offering poetry, prayers and meditations. When teaching a class I often choose a word as a theme and use the poses throughout the class to spell out the word. This helps create a flow and allows kavanah (the Jewish mindset for prayer). At the end of class we all participate in Savasana (corpse pose). This is often the most difficult of poses as it can be a struggle to be still but its rewards are so beneficial as we learn to relax, breathe and meditate. As tension is released from the body we feel at peace and one with the universe.

Namaste (shalom)

Additional information can be found in *Yoga Journal Magazine*, *Active Interest Media*

Paula Coplon teaches Torah Yoga and is a past Southern Branch President and Women's League Creative Judaica Arts Chair.