From “Om” to “Shalom”  
Processes of Domestication in Jewish Approaches to Yoga Practice

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Abstract

This thesis examines Jewish approaches to yoga as projects of cultural and religious domestication. My research centers on critical analysis of popular Jewish yoga literature and on interviews and participant observation in classes with 10 Jewish yoga teachers. These teachers either cater specifically to a Jewish clientele or pursue a syncretic form of yoga that facilitates Jewish spiritual experience. I consider how such approaches vary along denominational lines, arguing that Orthodox teachers secularize their practice through processes of de-Hinduization, while more progressive, non-Orthodox teachers cross-ethnicize Jewish religious content into their classes. Orthodox teachers value yoga as a physical technique for the promotion of health, fitness, and body positivity, while non-Orthodox teachers appreciate yoga as spiritual practice for embodying Jewish religiosity. I argue that all of these methods generally preserve the physical form of yoga, while domestication occurs within the textual material that accompanies the technique. Furthermore, I situate these projects of domestication within a larger historical trajectory of interaction, utilizing Weber’s concept of elective affinity to understand how the evolution of the relationship between Judaism and yoga in contemporary American society has made possible projects of confluence pursued by Jewish yoga teachers.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Theorizing Jewish Yoga as Syncretic Culture</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Contextualizing Confluence between Judaism and Yoga through the Model of Elective Affinity</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Processes of Domestication in Jewish Yoga Texts</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Methods of Domestication among Jewish Yoga Teachers in Orthodox versus Non-Orthodox Communities</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

I was first drawn to the topic of Jewish yoga practice by a single photo (Fig. 1). An ultra-Orthodox husband and wife pose together in their yoga studio, which is located in a conservative community in Beit Shemesh, Israel. Behind them is a wall hung with ropes used in the Iyengar yoga technique to support the body in yoga postures. Both wear clothes traditionally acceptable for public appearance. The man wears a large fur hat called a shtreimel and a long black coat. The woman is dressed with her hair, arms, and legs fully covered with a long skirt. They both extend their limbs into challenging yoga poses, holding them and maintaining serious faces for a photo snapped by a visiting journalist (Rotem 2012). I was immediately struck by the
contradictions apparent in this picture. A pair of people very much tied to their own religious culture, which dictates modesty and covering of the body, are exhibiting their bodies in motion while practicing a movement technique that has deep associations with Hinduism and other religions of India. To me, this image hinted at a compelling network of cultural developments and intersections that somehow made it possible for two ultra-Orthodox, Hasidic Jews in Israel to practice and teach yoga.

With just a bit of extra searching I came across the website for the Jewish Yoga Network, an interest group that lists over 100 yoga teachers active in teaching Jewish practitioners throughout the world, most of whom are based in the United States, Great Britain, Canada, and Israel. I found countless online newspaper and magazine articles that profiled Jewish yoga teachers and debated whether yoga can be considered “kosher” as an acceptable activity for Jews. I located several books, many published by longstanding Judaica and religious interest presses, which outlined specific techniques for creating a specifically Jewish yoga practice as a form of religious experience.

So yes, in case you were skeptical, Jewish yoga is a thing. In fact, questions of how Jews should practice yoga, what connections exist between yoga and Judaism as spiritual systems, and how yoga can promote more active physical and religious engagement among practitioners have become cause for major discussion in Jewish communities ranging from Orthodox, to Conservative, Reform, Renewal, and Reconstructionist within the last 20 years. This thesis seeks to take stock of the range of such discussions as they are currently underway in the United States, and to understand the motivations and particular historical contexts which gave rise to them. My hope is that by presenting a history of the terms under which yoga and Judaism have come into contact with each other, and by analyzing popular Jewish yoga texts as well as the
findings of my own ethnographic research with several Jewish yoga teachers, I will offer a framework for anthropological analysis of the syncretism taking place.

**Why Now?**

The first question I seek to address within this framework is simple: Why now? Why, in recent years, has there been such a proliferation of specifically Jewish-oriented yoga? I identify several historical trajectories that have set the stage for this development. Firstly, the popularization of yoga as a secular, codified system of physical movement that is widely practiced in the United States has made it an acceptable and accessible form of physical activity for religious Jews. Indeed, my research indicates that most Jewish yoga teachers first practiced yoga in secular settings, motivated mostly by the pursuit of physical health and fitness. Relatedly, the growth of a culture of fitness and wellness, and particularly the expansion of this culture to a female market, has focused attention on the physical body in unprecedented ways.

At the same time, a movement has occurred within progressive Judaism that seeks to invigorate religious practice with renewed spirituality. Such efforts have incorporated New Age ideals of self-development, personal connection with the sacred, and the universality of religious wisdom. They have looked particularly toward Eastern religions, including Buddhism, for methods of spiritual engagement. This openness to integrating practices from other traditions has influenced many Jewish yoga practitioners who see yoga as a potential source of spiritual enhancement, giving rise to syncretic efforts to Judaicize yoga.
What is “Jewish Yoga?”

As a result of these historical developments, yoga has become an increasingly accessible and relevant pursuit for many Jewish people. While there are certainly many Jews who teach and practice yoga in the United States, my research focuses on those who teach yoga specifically to Jewish clients and/or make deliberate efforts to Judaicize their yoga practice. I have found that teachers in Orthodox communities typically seek to create strictly secular, private, and single-gender environments for their students, thus necessitating a specifically Jewish crowd. They do not, however, attempt to bring Jewish spirituality into their practice, as this would challenge community norms and structures of power. On the other hand, teachers who are members of non-Orthodox movements, including Conservative, Reform, Renewal, and Reconstructionist Judaism, do actively incorporate Jewish material into their classes. In both cases, yoga practice is deliberately adapted to suit the needs of Jewish practitioners.

Domestication by Secularization versus Cross-Ethnicization

According to my research, these adaptations are developed by individual teachers who, though they may be aware of other approaches, are often very dedicated to pursuing their own unique practice. The inclination to make such modifications does not originate as an initial response to yoga exposure, but rather after an extended period of practice and often during or after the time at which they begin teaching yoga to others. It is often in the achievement of a certain level of mastery that the possibility of reforming yoga for Jewish purposes becomes apparent to most Jewish yoga teachers.

Just how this adaptation is achieved varies considerably from teacher to teacher depending on their own motivations, religious affiliations, and clientele. As previously
mentioned, Orthodox teachers are often very conscious to secularize their practice by removing any material associated with Hindu or other foreign worship, including Sanskrit terms and ritual chanting. I argue that more progressive teachers cross-ethnicize Jewish content into their classes by methods such as thematic integration of biblical or scriptural lessons, alignment of yoga poses with the forms of the Hebrew alphabet, recitation of or meditation on scriptural quotes, and exchanging the Sanskrit chant “Om” for “Shalom,” or the closing “Namaste” for “Amen.”

Re-Textualization and Embodiment

I argue that all of these methods of domesticating yoga generally preserve the physical form of the technique, including codified postures and sequences. Adaptation occurs within the textual material that accompanies the technique, which practitioners view as flexible according to the intention and needs of those participating. In other words, the physical form of yoga is viewed as essential to constitute a legitimate yoga practice, while its cultural and philosophical origins are viewed as non- or comparably less essential. By this understanding, the application of Jewish text to the physical technique of yoga results in a practice that is considered both legitimately yogic and legitimately Jewish.

Jewish yoga teachers envision this process as one of embodying Jewish belief and experience through the physicality of yoga. In this way, yoga adds for them a physical component to spirituality that has historically been lacking in Judaism. They are motivated by frustrations with the overly-intellectual and rational orientation of traditional Jewish practice, seeking a more holistic integration of body and mind. This concept of the self as comprising a united body and mind challenges traditional Jewish understandings of the separation between the physical and sacred worlds.
Embodiment is also frequently discussed as an antidote for a general neglect of caring for the body in Jewish culture. Though this acknowledgement may be related to what many Jewish historians have identified as a regeneration of the Jewish body in the context of the Zionist movement, I situate it more within pleas for self-care, health, and personal empowerment expressed by informants. I argue that such motivations for practicing yoga are often tied to goals of female empowerment in improving body image, taking respite from traditional duties of motherhood, and challenging patriarchal structures of religion.

**Organization and Methodology**

The first chapter of this thesis offers a historical overview of the aforementioned cultural developments which have contributed to the intersection of Judaism and yoga. Chapter 2 then surveys a range of scholarship that informs my research, including sociological and anthropological analyses of exoticism and syncretism in New Age religious movements, as well as anthropological understandings of embodiment and participation in communities of practice. Chapter 3 examines several popular Jewish yoga texts, analyzing the motivations and methods of their authors as well as the scope of their distribution. The final chapter investigates the results of my own ethnographic research, informed by the historical and theoretical groundwork laid in the previous three chapters.

My ethnographic fieldwork was conducted among Jewish yoga teachers in New York, New Jersey, Los Angeles, and Baltimore over the course of 10 weeks in the summer of 2015. This included interviews with 10 yoga teachers, as well as participant observation in several classes led by 5 of these 10 instructors. I sought out potential informants through online research, often consulting the listings of the Jewish Yoga Network for information about active
Jewish yoga teachers. I purposely selected a range of participants with diverse affiliations with Jewish religious movements, including two who are Orthodox and teach in Orthodox communities, one who is Orthodox but teaches mostly to non-Orthodox students, one Conservative practitioner, four active in Reform, Renewal, and Reconstructionist communities, and two identifying as independent in their religious activities.

I conducted conversational interviews with each of these informants, meeting with eight of them in person and speaking with two of them over the phone. In these interviews I sought information about informants’ personal experiences with yoga, how they viewed their practice in relation to their Jewish faith, and what methods they used in tailoring their classes to suit Jewish intentionality. In addition, participant observation in classes led by several of my informants enabled me to experience such methods in their actual practice. Interacting with and observing other students in these classes provided insight into the demographic that participates in such classes and their motivations.
Chapter 1
Theorizing Jewish Yoga as Syncretic Culture

My analysis of Jewish yoga is informed by a range of disciplinary discourses. Firstly, I consult two studies on Jewish yoga practice to understand how existing scholarship has treated this particular area. I then consider sociological theories of syncretic religiosity in the postmodern era, as well as anthropological discourse on the nature of religious exoticism. Finally, I employ Max Weber’s concept of “elective affinity” to analyze the convergence of Jewish religious concepts and yoga practice as a product of simultaneous evolutions in their respective values and concerns that caused them to align with each other in the minds of Jewish American yoga practitioners by the end of the twentieth century.

Existing Studies of Jewish Yoga

I have only encountered three brief studies of Jewish yoga, all of which were published in recent years. In a 2006 article entitled “Jewish Yoga: Experiencing Flexible, Sacred, and Jewish Bodies,” religious studies scholar Celia E. Rothenberg builds upon three months of fieldwork among participants in a Jewish yoga class in Canada to argue that “These students work to extend the meaning of the female religious body beyond the halachically observant to one that is “flexible,” sacred, and Jewish” (57). She sees Jewish yoga as growing out of the Jewish Renewal Movement, an American-based movement that began in the 1960s and seeks to reinvigorate what is perceived as spiritually latent Jewish traditions with practices from other cultures and values of egalitarianism. Rothenberg also views Jewish yoga as distinctly characterized by a female majority of participation and hence constituting a feminist religious
initiative. Describing the methods by which the teacher integrates Jewish concepts into the class and the personal narratives of participants, Rothenberg claims that yoga is harnessed as a technique of physical embodiment that critiques the lack of attention to the body afforded by traditional Judaism. She notes that Jewish yoga is one example of the numerous ways that North American Jews have drawn from Eastern religious traditions to reinvigorate Jewish practice, situating such behaviors in the realm of a postmodern "spiritual marketplace" resulting from the shattering of "grand narratives" that enables individuals to choose from multiple religious sources in creating their personal spirituality (Rothenberg 2006, 69-70).

Rothenberg (2008) follows this study with a chapter published in a volume on New Age Judaism that explores Jewish yoga and Jewish shamanism, which draws from Native American ritual practice, as examples of two key characteristics of New Age Judaism and the Jewish Renewal Movement. The first of these is the maintenance of a "core" of Jewish beliefs despite engagement with other spiritual traditions that results in a "syncretic" philosophy of practice. The second is Jewish Renewal's emphasis on "embodied experience" as a method for self-healing and the creation of a personally meaningful spirituality (Rothenberg 2008, 1). In both of her articles, Rothenberg outlines three different categories of Jewish yoga practice, including Judaicized yoga, which refers to classes that focus on the physicality yoga while integrating some Jewish words and concepts; Hebrew yoga, in which yoga postures are aligned with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet; and Torah yoga, which relates to a specific methodology developed by yoga teacher Diane Bloomfield that integrates scriptural concepts from the Torah (Rothenberg 2006, 2008).

A third study of Jewish yoga was undertaken by a cohort of sports studies scholars at the University of Tennessee. In "Adaptations of Yoga: Jewish Interpretations," Eleanor F.
Odenheimer, Rebecca Buchanan, and Tanya Prewitt (2014) discuss their field interviews with 10 teachers of Jewish yoga, attempting to understand “how teachers create meaning of their own yoga experiences and operationalize it in their classes” (52). They cite Rothenberg in situating Jewish yoga practice specifically within the Jewish Renewal movement and also explain the adoption of yoga by Jews as a symptom of the popularization of yoga and the privatization of religion in the postmodern era. They derive three themes from their collected participant narratives, the first of which is Kinesthetic Spirituality, or the sentiment that yoga facilitates a connection between spirituality and the body. The second is Pioneering Pathways, as the authors understood that Jewish yoga teachers often imagined themselves as developing new lineages of yoga and that these interpretations varied from teacher to teacher.

Finally, the theme Parallelisms and Connections summarizes how teachers see connections between Judaism and yoga. The authors explain that some teachers see yoga as a universal technology with relevance to any faith system, while others imagine Judaism and yoga as two parallel paths that diverge in certain places. “In these moments of divergence,” they claim, “some teachers depart from what they see as incongruent yoga teachings and insert a Jewish focus” (Odenheimer, et. al. 2014, 59). Odenheimer, Buchanan, and Prewitt reference the concept of “ritual appropriation” as defined by Catherine M. Bell (1992) in analyzing such moments of syncretism. They argue that Jewish yoga methodologies deliberately adopt a form of ritual from another culture in order to create a new form of specifically Jewish ritual within their own framework. Ultimately, they conclude that Jewish yoga instructors “are not just teaching any other group-fitness class, but are creating new yoga lineages within the yoga community and Jewish inheritance” (Odenheimer, et. al. 2014, 66). Acknowledging that their study only “begins to peel back the layers” of meaning involved in Jewish yoga practice, the
authors conclude their study without engaging the cultural or political implications that may be involved in this act of ritual borrowing (Odenheimer, et. al. 2014, 66). They state that the goal of the study is “to foster dialogue on the state of yoga’s cultural identity, which is currently in flux” among “the larger yoga community” (Odenheimer, et. al. 2014, 67).

I have found certain interpretations advanced by these studies of Jewish yoga to be useful and well-grounded. These include analyses of the significance that embodiment holds for Jewish yoga practitioners in opposition to their experiences with traditional Judaism, Rothenberg’s discussion of the specifically feminist orientations advanced by some Jewish yoga participants, and Odenheimer, Buchanan, and Prewitt’s appeal to the relevance of the theory of ritual appropriation. However, I also perceive these studies as limited by the personal investment of their authors in the communities being examined. Rothenberg, an advocate for Jewish Renewal, indicates this movement as the historical starting point for Jewish yoga adaptations and considers borrowing from other cultures as a characteristic of its philosophy without discussing the historical mechanisms and cultural assumptions that make this possible. Similarly, in addressing “the larger yoga community” and referring to their own experiences with yoga, Odenheimer, Buchanan, and Prewitt discuss yoga as a universalized activity with its own cultural identity, taking its existence as such as a given. In both cases, the privatization of religion is offered as a cause of syncretism, but the particular contexts in which Judaism and yoga intersect are not discussed at length. In an effort to consider the cultural terms under which Jews engage in adapting yoga to their purposes, I consult larger sociological and anthropological discourses on religious syncretism.
Sociological Theories of Syncretism: Postmodern Individualism and *Bricolage*

Sociologists of religion have centered their discourse on religious syncretism on the term *bricolage*, originally employed by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) to describe thought processes among members of "savage," non-European societies. Lévi-Strauss developed this term as a reference to the French *bricoleur*, a common expression for a sort of amateur handyman who fabricates and constructs things in a "do-it-yourself" fashion. In comparison to the modern scientific mind, which is able to engineer precise and complex ideas based on access to a wealth of available resources, Lévi-Strauss claims that the savage mind must make do with the limited resources available to it. He writes, "The characteristic feature of mythical thought is that it expresses itself by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited...Mythical thought is therefore a kind of intellectual ‘bricolage’” (17). Thus, Lévi-Strauss employs the term bricolage to describe an aspect of finiteness in mythical thought that leads to a compelling type of creativity.

Subsequent French social theorists adapted the theory of bricolage in order to describe the particular instance of religious syncretism. For instance, Bastide (1970) outlined a "sociology of bricolage" in his studies of Afro-Brazilian religions, interpreting the syncretism of symbols from separate religions as a project of filling holes in collective memory (cited in Altglas 2014, 2). This emphasis on religious bricolage as an act of repairing or filling in gaps was carried over to sociological studies of the European social context, wherein theorists have argued that mounting religious individualism has resulted from a breakdown in the traditional social authority of institutional religion.

Luckmann (1979) described bricolage as a unique form of cultural pluralism, brought on by the privatization of religion, which occurs within the personal sphere of the home. He claims:
In the global interpenetration of cultures, a vast museum of values, notions, enchantments, and practices has become available. It has become available ‘directly’ but primarily through the filter of mass media rather than social relations. The choice is determined rather less by social conditions—although evidently they continue to play a kind of screening role—than by individual psychologies. (136)

As Altglas (2014) demonstrates, the majority of sociological discourse on bricolage and the New Age has built upon Luckmann’s orientation, with scholars such as Hervieu-Léger (1999) emphasizing “the capacity of the individual to elaborate his own universe of norms and values from his own singular experience” over the regulations of traditional institutions (69—translation from Altglas, 3). Thus, sociologists have adopted an acutely postmodern stance, emphasizing the fragmentation of traditional aspects of social life and the corresponding liberation of the individual. Furthermore, sociologists of religion have expounded the existence of an unlimited availability of foreign cultural resources with which individuals can engage. For instance, Lau (2000) criticizes a global marketplace of religious experimentation in which, “one can practice Chinese meditation while listening [to] Andean relaxation music and burning Indian incense. One can go on a yoga retreat in the Caribbean, enjoy aromatherapy massages, and eat a strictly macrobiotic diet based on Japanese foods” (13).

Altglas (2014) launches a thoughtful critique on such discourse in her cross-national study of communities surrounding Hindu-based yoga centers and the Kabbalah Centre. Firstly, she claims that the existing sociological literature on bricolage inflates the autonomy and self-authority of the individual while neglecting to consider the role that the centering of practice in social community plays in such groups. Furthermore, Altglas criticizes Lau and others as both overestimating and under-analyzing the diversity of religious resources that are available to bricoleurs. Often, such availability is dictated by particular cultural or historical contexts, in
addition to social structures pertaining to gender, race, and class. “Overall,” she states, “inflating the eclectic and personal nature of practices of bricolage has led to a neglect of their social and cultural logics” (6).

I find Altglas’ intervention to be extremely relevant to my findings in regards to Jewish yoga practice. Not only do shared experiences play a large part in the lives of practitioners, but also the means by which Jewish individuals have come into contact with yoga have occurred within the specific historical trajectory and cultural environment of the New Age. Clearly, their simultaneous involvement in yoga practice and continued participation in traditional Jewish institutions such as the synagogue demonstrates that projects of bricolage do not always lie in absolute opposition to traditional religious institutions. Furthermore, the degree of access to information about yoga and the methods by which it is practiced differ highly across Jewish communities of varying sects. In order to move beyond structural explanation of these processes and into critical examination of the cultural implications at play, I follow Altglas in turning to anthropological theories of religious acculturation and domestication.

**Anthropological Theories of Syncretism: Religious Acculturation and Domestication**

In *Positioning Yoga*, Sarah Strauss claims, “the primary trait many people, both Indian and non-Indian alike, imagine as quintessentially Indian is spirituality, often contrasted with the West’s stereotypical materialism” (2005, 9). What she is hinting at here are the complex power relations of exoticism that circulated yoga’s exportation to the West. She argues that while Western interest in yoga was related to an Orientalist idealization of India’s spirituality, Indians themselves, such as Swami Vivekananda, capitalized upon this exoticism and appropriated it to challenge imperialist narratives, to foster Indian national identity, and to suit their own purposes.
Through a complex transnational dialogue, yoga evolved and took on new characteristics, in a process that is often described as Westernization. Altglas (2014) locates this process in the psychologization of yoga into Western therapy culture, while Alter (2008) sees it in the medicalization of yoga through health studies, and Singleton (2010), De Michelis (2005), Markula (2014), and others study its progression in growing emphasis on physicality and fitness.

All of these processes would fall under the realm of what Stephen William Foster (1982) describes as “domestication.” He claims that exoticism involves taking things “foreign and unpredictable” and affixing new labels to them so that they “begin to be structured in a way which makes them comprehensible and possibly predictable” (Foster 1982, 21). In other words, the object of exoticism is removed from its original context and assimilated on new terms that make it acceptable to its domesticators. Just as Foster asserts that the goal of domestication stops short of “neutralizing” the exotic completely so that it loses its excitement and meaning, Appadurai (1986, 28) describes an “aesthetics of decontextualization” that is practiced by Westerners who place foreign art objects on display in their homes. In so doing, people proclaim and observe a sense of the object’s novelty specifically because it has been removed from its original context and now appears in their environment. Both Foster and Appadurai thus define the precarious nature of the exotic as something that must be adapted to suit local taste but nevertheless maintained with an aura of authentic foreignness.

One Step Further: Jewish Cross-Ethnicization of Yoga

Altglas outlines the process by which foreign religious practices are acculturated as including three progressing stages: idealization, universalization, and decontextualization. First, a foreign religious culture is idealized, as yoga has been conceived as a source of ancient Eastern
spirituality in comparison to modern, Western materialism. Then the religious practice is universalized through a repositioning of its methodology as relevant to all people regardless of their beliefs. Finally, the exotic spiritual resource is decontextualized, more specifically de-ethnicized, in order to be acculturated as a tool for self-realization (Altglas 2014). I argue that all of these processes are reflected in the written texts and personal narratives of Jewish yoga teachers, with the added analysis that their acculturation of yoga entails an additional progression of cross-ethnicization. Upon engaging with forms of yoga that have already been popularized through the above processes, non-Orthodox Jewish yoga teachers further domesticate yoga to suit particularly Jewish identities and attitudes by inserting Jewish ethnic material.

In her analysis of religious exoticism among Christian Kabbalists, Altglas (2014, 46) observes that bricoleurs were more focused on making use of the methodology of the appropriated spiritual system than they were on engaging its actual textual content. I argue that a similar tendency is evident among Jewish yoga teachers who emphasize maintaining the physical technique of yoga but feel free to adapt its textual content. Orthodox Jewish teachers de-ethnicize this technique by removing associated Sanskrit terms and yogic philosophies, while more progressive teachers cross-ethnicize yoga by inserting Jewish textual material. In both cases, the physical methodology of yoga remains largely static, while the applied textual content is viewed as a site of conflict in values that requires adaptation. In other words, Jewish yoga teachers select the embodied form of yoga for acculturation, but apply Jewish textual content to transform it into an ethnically Jewish spiritual practice.

I situate this inclination within the complex history of mind-body dualism in Jewish tradition, noting that the body has not historically been viewed as a site for religious development in mainstream Judaism. It being the case that the physical technique of yoga has no
significant counterpart within Jewish religion, it is acculturated in its complete form by Jewish practitioners. Yogic spiritual concepts, however, are considered in direct relation to Jewish religious values as they reside in textual discourse. This requires deliberate projects of cultural domestication, including both secularization and cross-ethnicization, that in various ways involve the application of Jewish textual materials to the physical form of yoga as a means of embodying Jewish religiosity.

Weber's Model of Elective Affinity

The term "elective affinity" was first employed as a sociological concept by Max Weber (2004 [1905]), most popularly in his seminal work, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Weber borrowed the term from chemistry and from its literary usage by famous German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. A scientific term used to describe the laws guiding forces of chemical attraction between two elements, Goethe's acclaimed 1809 novel Elective Affinities used the concept as a metaphor for magnetizing passions between people that were governed by the laws of chemistry. In the novel, these affinities bring characters into conflict with one another and challenge social institutions of marriage and family. The novel's success resulted in the popularization of the term as a common expression in literary and elite circles (Howe 1978).

Weber used the term "elective affinities" in several instances throughout his writing, but most significantly in a series of essays discussing the relationship between Protestant ethical principles and the social and economic values of capitalism. Despite his frequent use of the phrase, Weber does not offer a comprehensive explanation of what his intended meaning is. This fact has inspired numerous studies that try to pin down Weber's intentions, most of which acknowledge that Weber's casual usage of the term stems from the fact that it was a frequent
metaphor used among his literary circles with an established meaning (Howe 1978, Thomas 1985, McKinnon 2010). What is clear is that Weber uses the concept of elective affinity to describe a developing relationship between Protestant ethics and the capitalist ethos that results in the definition of economic accumulation as a value of Protestant cultural life.

This concept has been taken up by subsequent social theorists, particularly in the area of sociology of religion. Michael Löwy (1992) uses elective affinity to describe the interaction between the trend of Romantic anarchist ideals and the tradition of Jewish messianism in the writings of several revolutionary nineteenth-century Jewish writers, including Walter Benjamin and Franz Kafka. Löwy borrows Weber’s concept of elective affinity and outlines his own interpretation, explaining:

By ‘elective affinity’ I mean a very special kind of dialectical relationship that develops between two social or cultural configurations, one that cannot be reduced to direct causality or to ‘influences’ in the traditional sense. Starting from a certain structural analogy, the relationship consists of a convergence, a mutual attraction, an active confluence, a combination that can go as far as a fusion (1992, 6).

I employ Löwy’s interpretation of elective affinity to elucidate how the relationship between Judaism and yoga in contemporary American society has made possible projects of confluence pursued by Jewish yoga teachers. By examining the historical trajectories of these two sociocultural configurations and the context of their convergence in twentieth-century North America, I argue that particular cultural trends both within Judaism and in yoga’s popularization progressed to a point where practicing yoga became both acceptable and meaningful for Jewish people. Furthermore, the active confluence of these two spiritual systems undertaken by some practitioners results in what Löwy describes as the culminating “fusion” of an elective affinity. In the following chapter, I identify and discuss cultural transformations in Judaism and yoga that
have contributed to the development of this elective affinity, while in subsequent chapters I
examine the varied methods of confluence pursued by Jewish yoga authors and teachers.
Chapter 2

Contextualizing Confluence through the Model of Elective Affinity

Veronique Altglas argues that the availability of foreign religious resources to *bricoleurs* is “not a given, but the result of specific cultural encounters and historical contexts that [make] some of them (and not others) ‘available’” (2014, 15-16). In regards to yoga and Judaism, this argument begs the question, what is it that has made yoga a uniquely “available” resource for Jews in recent decades? Perhaps more importantly, what has made yoga a particularly *compelling* resource for these practitioners? While these are certainly far-reaching questions with complex implications, in this chapter I identify some of the major historical developments that have contributed to yoga’s increasing availability and relevance for Jews in America.

I interpret this relationship between Judaism and yoga as one that cannot be understood through a series of direct causes or one-way influences. Rather, this relationship exemplifies the type of dialectical association that leads increasingly to confluence defined by Michael Löwy (1992) as an elective affinity. Löwy outlines three levels of such an affinity, the first being a “simple affinity,” in which a correspondence exists between two socio-cultural configurations. At the second level of “election,” reciprocal attraction and active interaction between the two configurations leads to “mutual stimulation and convergence” while the two structures remain separate (11). Finally, the two configurations are articulated or combined together, resulting in cultural symbiosis and fusion of varying degrees (1992, 11). Through the following historical discussion, I provide an overview of how Judaism and yoga have progressed as an elective affinity both in their individual histories and in their eventual confluence.
Historical Origins and Movements in Judaism

According to Nicolas de Lange (2010), “What binds the Jews together is not a creed but a history: a strong sense of common origin, a shared past and a shared destiny” (24). Indeed, while this paper focuses primarily on the experiences of Jews for whom religion is an integral part of Jewish identity, many Jews view themselves as such simply by virtue of the fact that they were born into a family that traces its cultural and historical roots to the larger Jewish peoplehood (1). That being said, the history of this people is a complex one, with centuries of dispersion leading to the formation of a highly scattered international diaspora.

Early History of Judaism

The origins of the Jewish people lay in the historical region of Canaan in the Ancient Near East, where they likely descended from Semitic-speaking peoples who entered the area sometime between 2300 and 1200 BCE (Sweeney 2000, 23-24). According to the Hebrew Bible, the foundational religious and historical text of Judaism, the nation of Israel is founded when God enters into a covenant with a man named Abraham, who is promised a nation of descendants in return for his devotion. Through a series of misfortunes, these descendants are captured and held captive in Egypt. Their escape from this situation, known as the Exodus, is made possible through divine feats of supernatural intervention and the leadership of Moses, to whom God orally reveals a list of laws and regulations for his chosen people to abide by (20-21).

According to Jewish tradition, Moses proceeded to write down the divine laws revealed to him, as well as the story of Israel stretching back to the world’s creation, in a text called the Torah. While nearly all segments of Judaism aside from its most traditionalist do not maintain the historical fact of Moses as the author of the Torah, most religious Jews regard it as the
foundational text of their religion, superior to all others in its being a divine revelation directly from God (de Lange 2010, 46-47). The degree of historical validity accorded to this overall biblical narrative likewise varies among Jews, with the most traditionalist readings claiming the story as historical fact, and more reformed viewpoints understanding it as an exaggerated history. Regardless, the idea of the Jews as a nation united by their unique relationship with god and their common homeland in Israel remains a foundational aspect of their common identity.

Scholars have located decisive archaeological and historical evidence supporting the establishment of a state of Israel in Canaan at approximately 1000 BCE. Such evidence has also corroborated biblical accounts of invasions of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BCE and the Babylonians from 605 to 562 BCE (Sweeney 2000, 25). This Babylonian invasion included the destruction of the First Temple (the central site of worship in Jerusalem) as well as the first historically substantiated diaspora of Jewish people caused by years of exile and captivity in Babylon (de Lange 2010, 25). The onset of extensive permanent dispersion, however, began with the Roman conquest of Jerusalem in 70 CE. The Second Temple, which had been rebuilt following the Babylonian captivity, was again destroyed and tens of thousands of Israelites killed or sold into slavery. Those who remained in what was transformed into the Roman province of Judea functioned as a self-governing society within the larger structure of the Roman state, thereby developing their own laws and practicing their own religion in relative isolation (24, 27).

Those who left Israel emigrated north of Jerusalem to Galilee, and eventually beyond with large masses settling in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. As Jacob Neusner (2000) cogently observes, “The second destruction (of the Temple) proved final and marked the beginning of the Jews’ history as a political entity defined in social and religious terms, but not in territorial ones” (13). Neusner describes the ensuing period of Judaism’s history as one of
definition, as separation from Temple-oriented life led to the Jewish scribes, or rabbis, gaining greater religious and political authority. As a result, emphasis on written scripture and theological study as the defining features of religious worship grew (Stemberger 2000, 83).

At the same time, as the religions of Christianity and Islam and their respective empires grew and spread, Jews found themselves living within the political boundaries of nations that were increasingly religious in ideology. For the most part, Jews functioned within these states as tolerated, though often persecuted, minorities who were permitted to govern themselves and maintain their own religion (Neusner 2000, 14). As a result, the structure of the isolated urban ghetto became the most common way in which Jewish communities were constituted. In these communities, the rabbis functioned as chief officials and maintained complete and largely unchallenged jurisdiction in establishing regulations for religious practice and moral law (de Lange 2010, 66). This period in Judaism, which is typically referred to as Rabbinic or Traditional, was thus defined by a general cogency in social life and religious ideology (Neusner 2000, 17-18).

However, the onset of Enlightenment policies of secularism in European states led to the emancipation of the Jews from many oppressive restrictions. As Jewish communities in Europe increasingly came into contact with larger developments of European modernity, the beginning of the nineteenth century marked the onset of substantial challenges to rabbinical authority (de Lange 2010, 65 and Vallely 2008, 23). The most impactful of these reform movements began in Germany, where congregations introduced prayers and sermons in the vernacular, choral singing, organ music, and an abbreviated service that resembled those of Christian churches. As discord over more extensive reforms developed, the movement split into traditionalist and modernist camps. The most traditionalist of these named itself Orthodoxy, and ardently upheld the
necessity of observing strictly the *halakha*, or the 613 commandments of divine law as handed down in the Torah and elaborated by subsequent Rabbinic texts. The middle ground, which became known as Conservatism, saw the *halakha* as subject to historical change and advocated for observance of these laws but with readjustments to suit the contemporary Jewish situation. The most radical of the three, known as Reform, sought a total rejuvenation of Judaism that would do away with any heritage that did not enhance contemporary spirituality and morality (de Lange 2010, 69-74).

**Movements in American Judaism**

Not long after these reforms began, however, heightening violence and persecution against Jews living in Eastern Europe, particularly Poland, led to mass emigration. Between 1881 and 1914, around 2.75 million Jews left Eastern Europe, 85% of whom eventually settled in the United States. The Nazi ascendancy in the 1930s caused masses of Jews to leave Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, and when the Nazi genocide came to an end at the close of World War II, multitudes departed Europe (de Lange 2010, 7). From these brief descriptions of population movement alone, one gets a sense of the diversity of religious and social values that accompanied the formation of substantial Jewish communities in the United States. Each of these communities had to confront the realities of living in a comparatively secular and religiously diverse environment from the predominantly Jewish enclaves of their home countries.

Orthodox communities remained dedicated to maintaining the *halakha* with Haredi, or ultra-Orthodox groups advocating a total avoidance of non-Jewish culture, while Modern Orthodox groups sought to embrace the positive aspects of modern society and thus became more open to interaction with the outside world while maintaining the importance of the
One Haredi group, the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, advocated a uniquely open approach to modernity compared to other ultra-Orthodox movements and undertook a large outreach mission to bring in secular Jews beginning in the 1950s (Brown 2000, 322). Since then, Chabad’s base in Crown Heights, Brooklyn has become the center of the world’s largest Hasidic movement. Hasidism is a vein of Haredi Judaism founded in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century that substantially challenged Rabbinical authority and its legalistic approach to Judaism by through its emphasis on the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah (de Lange 2010, 66). As I will discuss further below, Chabad’s extensive outreach has contributed to the growth of broad interest in Kabbalah among the larger American Jewish population in recent decades.

Compared to Orthodoxy, Conservative and Reform Judaism sought assimilation into modern American culture, and these movements took on unique forms in the United States. According to Daniel Gordis (2000), Conservative Judaism appealed to the middle ground of the American population that sought a modern American lifestyle but were still traditionally inclined and therefore uncomfortable with the changes instituted by the Reform movement. Participants were thus attracted to the movement for more aesthetic than theological reasons, and Conservatism in America has tended to emphasize the importance of ritual observance while maintaining an ambiguous attitude toward theology that has resulted in a diversity of positions within the movement (Gordis 2000, 338). The Reconstructionist movement was founded as an offshoot of Conservatism in 1922 by a former Conservative rabbi who sought to preserve the historical and cultural relevance of Jewish traditions to the people of Israel while rejecting the existence of any supernatural or divine being who governed the world. In this way, Reconstructionism seeks a compromise between the value of tradition to Jewish ethnic identity.
and the maintenance of a secular worldview, with the synagogue serving as a center for community gathering (de Lange 2010, 79).

The early stages of the Reform movement in America were marked by a thorough desire to create a modern form of Judaism, resulting in a reorganization of Jewish religious services and other practices in ways that often mimicked Protestant Christian standards of worship. For example, services often came to be accompanied by organ music and delivered entirely in English rather than Hebrew, and some synagogues even held services on the Christian Sabbath of Sunday rather than on Saturday as traditional in Judaism (Gordis 2000, 338). Reform Judaism has also stressed the nature of Jewish revelation as continually evolving, advocating no fixed set of beliefs, laws, or practices. Thus, personal spirituality and flexibility has been emphasized while ritual observance and theological understanding among participants is lax and diverse. Recently, recognition by the Reform leadership of a general lack of literacy in Jewish concepts among congregations has inspired an interest in standardization, as well as reincorporation of ritual tradition that the movement had previously cast aside. Some congregations have made efforts to integrate more Hebrew into their worship services and to institute higher observance of Jewish holidays, milestones such as bar and bat mitzvahs to celebrate the transition to adulthood, and more rigorous study of Jewish religious texts (Kaplan 2000, 305-306).

A significant overall trend within these main movements of American Judaism in recent decades has been the evolution of the position of women in relation to men, which has in certain cases become substantially more egalitarian as a result of a Jewish feminist movement that began in the 1970s. Within Orthodoxy, women have been partially relieved from what are traditionally their sole responsibilities of managing the household as they have begun to enter the workforce. Orthodox women have also been permitted to study certain practical, ethical, and basic
theological texts despite the fact that any form of Torah study has traditionally been banned (Brown 2000, 327). Women in Reform and Reconstructionist communities are now privileged to largely all the same rights of participation in religious practice, including ordination and other forms of leadership, as men, and such egalitarianism is also increasingly a feature of Conservative Judaism (Baskin 2000, 402). Women have thus become active influencers of religious life in these communities.

New Age Judaism and the Jewish Renewal Movement

Few significant reforms were staged beyond these major denominations in American Jewish communities through the 1950s, though smaller groups and movements certainly formed. In addition, many Jewish people chose to lead highly secular lifestyles largely separate from Jewish institutions. During the 1960s, large numbers of young non-Orthodox Jews began to see traditional systems of Judaism as spiritually empty, and to look elsewhere for methods and experiences that would reinvigorate the spiritual area of Judaism. Many Jews converted to or participated in other religious traditions, while others sought to incorporate outside spiritualities or historically neglected traditions within Judaism into a more meaningful approach to Jewish religious practice. Jeffrey Salkin (2000) was the first to refer to such projects in spiritual renewal as falling under the umbrella of New Age Judaism, explaining that motivations for these efforts extended from counter-cultural currents in America at the time, such as the search for ethnic and cultural roots that black communities had undertaken, and increasing interest in non-Western spiritual traditions (354).

A significant number of Jews began looking beyond Judaism to Eastern religions for sources of spiritual renewal. Buddhism, in particular, has been a major point of examination for
Jews, giving rise to the term “JewBu” as a means for describing such participants. As Kamenetz (1994) notes, though the practice of Buddhism by Americans from various backgrounds flourished at this time, Jewish involvement in the movement was especially high. According to him, between 6 and 30% of members in American Buddhist groups during the 1970s and 1980s were Jews, a high proportion given that Jews constituted 2.5% of the American population (Kamenetz 1994, 7). While most JewBUs do not themselves practice conventional Jewish forms of worship (Vallely 2008, 20), the influence of the Jewish-Buddhist dialogue is being increasingly incorporated into more directly Jewish organizations.

Another significant spiritual trend within New Age Judaism was an increased interest in the Jewish tradition of mysticism, known as Kabbalah. Kabbalah is an esoteric vein of Judaism based in texts that were formerly restricted to study by select learned men, traditionally over the age of 40, for the purpose of obtaining direct knowledge of God. Continuous writings on Kabbalah extend back to the thirteenth century, but the tradition was frequently ridiculed during the nineteenth-century focus on European rationalism. German scholar Gershom Scholem, who is credited with pioneering a modern, academic approach to studying Kabbalah, endeavored to trace the main concepts of Kabbalah through its historical texts. As a result of Scholem’s scholarship, such understanding became available to a wide audience. In the United States, Kabbalah has become a legitimate area of study at some Jewish universities, and Kabbalistic concepts have become popular among many Jews, especially among Reform and Renewal communities. A formalized movement for the universalistic study of Kabbalah is centered at the Kabbalah Centre International in Los Angeles. This organization, which has attracted an ethnically diverse following that famously includes Madonna and other celebrities, has
developed its own interpretations of *kabbalistic* traditions that are denounced by most Jewish scholars and religious leaders (de Lange 2010, 163-167).

A specifically Jewish project in spiritual renewal that valued the Kabbalistic tradition was the *havurah* movement, which sought to create small fellowship groups (*havurot*) of intimate worship as opposed to the large synagogues in which services were typically held. These groups emphasized Jewish mysticism and Hasidic tradition, direct and democratic involvement in worship for all members, egalitarianism between men and women, creative interpretation, and informal worship that often used contemporary music and literature. Such havurot exist in several places throughout the United States today and have formed a national body, the National Havurah Committee. Furthermore, many Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist synagogues now use the havurah model to organize small fellowship groups within their larger communities (Salkin 2000, 354-357).

The *havurah* movement also gave way to the Jewish Renewal Movement, which similarly emphasizes Hasidic mysticism while also integrating practices from other religions. Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who was ordained in the Chabad-Lubavitch community, is credited as the primary founder of Jewish Renewal. He broke with Chabad and Orthodoxy in the 1980s by founding his own congregation, the P’Nai Or Fellowship, which has since joined with other organizations to form ALEPH: The Alliance for Jewish Renewal. Schachter-Shalomi combined a passion for Kabbalah and Hasidic mysticism with an interest in other faith traditions, particularly Buddhism and other Eastern religions. His leadership influenced an approach to Judaism that emphasizes the importance of meaningful ritual, such as collective prayer, meditation, chanting, music, and movement, in facilitating personal connection with God. ALEPH is active as a non-denominational organization that offers various resources, including
ordination and other training programs, conferences and retreats and educational materials to Jewish clergy and laypeople. Several thousand Jews in the United States identify with the Renewal Movement, and its mission of reinvigorating Jewish spirituality through the reinvigoration of ritual practice has influenced Jewish institutions broadly (Salkin 2000, 365-368).

Evolving Notions of the Jewish Body

Understandings of the body and how it relates to Jewish religious and cultural life have evolved considerably for many Jews, both as a result of religious emphasis on Kabbalah and secular concerns regarding health and fitness. Louis Jacobs (1997) argues that a dichotomy between the body and the soul is very prominent in the Rabbinic tradition of Judaism. He observes that this dichotomy is evident especially in Jewish thinkers of the Medieval era, where a focus on denial of the body arose. Pointing to Maimonides (1135-1206), who is regarded as one of the most significant Torah scholars in Jewish history, Jacobs summarizes a passage from his *Commentary to the Mishnah* which claims “that the destruction of the soul is in direct proportion to the building up of the body” (1997, 73). This passage exemplifies a traditional attitude within Judaism that regards active cultivation of the physical body as separate from, and even detrimental to, the attainment of holiness through religious observance. Jacobs explains that while many of the 613 *mitzvot*, or commandments, of the Jewish *halakha* regulate bodily actions such as eating, bathing, and circumcision, rabbinical authorities were not historically concerned with understanding why such commandments were made. Sufficiently satisfied with the fact that these *mitzvot* were dictated by God and therefore must be observed, the Rabbinical mainstream
of Judaism has remained largely indifferent to the role of the body in religious experience (Jacobs 1997, 74-75).

The Kabbalistic understanding of Judaism contrasts distinctly with this indifference, envisioning the human body as central to achieving communion with God and comprehending God’s being. The classical system of Kabbalah, as developed primarily in the foundational thirteenth-century text of the *Zohar* and in subsequent commentaries, sets forth two aspects of God. The first is *En Sof*, meaning “The Limitless,” which is the ultimate essence of God known only to itself and beyond all human comprehension. The second aspect is *En Sof* as it has been revealed to humans through the emanation of ten *Sefirot*, or powers within the Godhead. These include *Keter* ("Crown"), *Hokhmah* ("Wisdom"), *Binah* ("Understanding"), *Hesed* ("Love"), *Gevurah* ("Power"), *Tiferet* ("Beauty"), *Netzah* ("Victory"), *Hod* ("Splendor"), *Yesod* ("Foundation"), and *Malkhut* ("Sovereignty"). Each of these *Sefirot* correspond to a part of the human body: Crown corresponds with the head, Wisdom with the brain, Understanding with the heart, Love and Power with the left and right arms, Beauty with the torso, Victory and Splendor with the right and left legs, Foundation with the sexual organ, and Sovereignty with the mouth (deLange 2010, 164-165). These *Sefirot* are understood as the cosmic forces that compose the Godhead, thus comprising the divine counterparts to the forms of the human body. In this way, the human body is imagined as a direct reflection and a microcosm of God’s divine attributes. Through this connection, the human body is able to influence the *Sefirot* through the actions it performs, encouraging harmony in the divine realm through virtuous actions or causing disruption through immoral ones (Jacobs 1997, 75-76).

Jacobs explains that the Kabbalistic emphasis on the power of the human body in relating to God ascribes an intensified significance to observance of the *halakha* and other rituals. He
states that “The body is significant precisely because it alone can provide the cosmic energy required if the divine purpose in creation is to be realized” (1997, 76). The physical body is thus transformed into a central focus of religious practice and virtuous activity by the Kabbalistic system. This emphasis on the body has been maintained throughout the contemporary Hasidic movement and the popularization of Kabbalah in the larger Jewish community. In fact, it has often been highlighted as one of the most significant contributions that Kabbalah can make to contemporary Judaism by members of the Jewish Renewal Movement and other groups who focus on embodiment as a point of access for spiritual experience.

A more secular narrative of embodiment that has been circulated throughout the Jewish community at large in recent decades is that of fostering Jewish mastery of the body as a means of defying the Jewish history of physical weakness. Melvin Konner’s *The Jewish Body* (2009), envisions a rebirth of the Jewish body as stemming from the Zionist response to the threat posed to the Jewish people by the Holocaust and continued persecution. Konner summarizes this history as follows:

> While much of Europe pursued the Apollonian ideal of athletic prowess and physical beauty, Jewish bodies bent over books. By the end of this phase of Jewish history, it was the life of the mind, not that of the body, that produced the greatest heroes. And so it largely remained for eighteen centuries, until the increasingly untenable conjunction of mental power with physical weakness pointed to the end of the Jewish faith and people. This was when women and men like Emma Lazarus, Max Nordau, and Theodor Herzl called the Jewish people back to the life of the body, and saved them. (252)

Todd Samuel Presner (2007) interprets this regeneration of the Jewish body as manifested in the early twentieth-century concept of the “muscle Jew” as a strong Jewish man whose physical prowess was modeled in the feats of strength achieved by Jewish athletes and military victors. These particular interpretations are explicitly associated with Zionist ideology, but also speak to
a larger trend of Jews becoming involved in the thriving culture of physical fitness and sport that has been widely promoted in the United States since the mid-twentieth century.

History of Yoga and Its Journey to the West

At the same time as Jews were becoming more interested in the body and Eastern religious practices, yoga was being popularized as a wellness practice in the United States. The image of yoga that exists in the United States today is one of intense physicality: of health, fitness, and impressive contortions of flexibility and strength. It is increasingly associated with the trend of mindfulness, and differentiates itself from other forms of physical exercise by claiming to promote emotional and psychological awareness and well-being for the individual. However, this focus on fitness and the improvement of the self contrasts definitively with the goals and methods of yoga in its historical origins. The Western concept of yoga is the result of a complex progression of acculturation.

The beginnings of yogic thought can be traced back to the northern Indian subcontinent in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, where it was likely developed in ascetic circles surrounding the Vedic tradition (Samuel 2008, 8). The term Vedic refers to the Vedas, a corpus of philosophical texts that would eventually serve as the foundations for Hinduism. Whether yoga was initially seen as a challenge to this tradition or not, the mention of the word “yoga” and other descriptions of physical practices for focusing the mind first appear in Vedic texts dating to the third century BCE. However, the Yogasutras of Patanjali, which are dated between 200 BCE and 200 ACE, is regarded as the most significant classical yoga text by most Western practitioners. This text draws from previous writings on yoga and outlines an eightfold yoga system, including pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (sense withdrawal), dharana
(concentration), dhyana (deeper concentration), samadhi (absorption), asana (bodily posture), yama (restraints), and niyama (disciplines) (Connolly 2007, 37). These are prescribed practices for achieving isolation of the individual self, and union of this self with the greater universe (Strauss 2005, 4).

The Yogasutras held great prominence among yogic scholars in India through the sixteenth century, but interest in Patanjali’s philosophy declined to the point of obscurity after this time (White 2014, 4). A significant resurgence of interest in the Yogasutras began in the post-colonial era of the nineteenth century when Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) became interested in developing a practical and systematic form of yoga to be easily grasped by a mass audience (Singleton 2010, 26-27). Vivekananda was a Hindu monk who is frequently cited as the first person to bring yoga to a Western audience. He was an Indian religious and political figure who was part of the neo-Vedanta movement, which sought to incorporate Western concepts into traditional Indian religious traditions. He advocated yoga as a means through which the spirituality and physical health of India could be strengthened (Strauss 2005).

Beginning in 1893 with his attendance at the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago, Vivekananda advocated for the merits of Hinduism and the utility of yoga on an international stage (Sen 2000). Vivekananda was extremely strategic in presenting yoga both as a spiritual experience and as a calculated science—a regimen of rationally developed mental and physical discipline. For instance, in his most famous work, Raja Yoga, Swami Vivekananda (1953) proclaims, “Man wants truth, wants to experience truth for himself... The science of Raja-yoga proposes to put before humanity a practical and scientifically worked out method of reaching this truth” (580-581). This approach quelled suspicions of the Eastern religiosity associated with yoga and attracted many followers. Vivekananda journeyed throughout the
United States, to cities including Chicago, Los Angeles, and Boston, and especially New York and San Francisco, where he established formal organizations called Vedanta Societies (Syman 2010, 69). Over the course of several lecture tours in these places and throughout Europe leading up to 1900, Vivekananda planted the seed for yoga’s development as a transnational cultural phenomenon.

Despite Vivekananda’s death in India in 1900, his followers continued to practice and develop schools of yoga. Over the course of the next half-century, according to Singleton (2010), the postural component (asana) of Vivekananda’s yoga was increasingly referenced and detailed in the Anglophone instructional manuals of yoga that circulated throughout India, Britain, and the United States. By relating this fact to physical fitness techniques that were on the rise in these nations at the time, Singleton concludes, “Posture-based yoga as we know it today is the result of a dialogical exchange between para-religious, modern body culture techniques developed in the West and the various discourses of “modern” Hindu yoga that emerged from the time of Vivekananda onward” (5).

According to De Michelis (2005), the development of such forms of modern postural yoga in the West has undergone three main phases: popularization (1950s – mid-1970s), consolidation (mid-1970s – late 1980s), and acculturation (late 1980s onward). In the period of popularization, yoga traditions garnered substantial media attention and a proliferation of new schools and teachers appeared. The wave of counter-cultural “hippies” traveling to India reached its peak, at the same time as yoga was also accessed by mainstream adult education programs. Leading up to the 1980s, this diversity of yoga forms became consolidated, as teachers with small followings fell off the map and the schools of well-known gurus expanded. These schools sought to establish more permanent institutional structures, thus developing educational
curriculums and teaching certification programs. One of the most significant leaders of such a school was B. K. S. Iyengar, who founded his own school in India in 1975, and later the first of an international network of Iyengar Yoga Institutes in London in 1983. Through a growing international network of schools and numerous internationally distributed texts, Iyengar gained a worldwide prestige and legitimacy that appealed to mass audiences. By 1990, there were Iyengar Institutes in India, the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa, and, most notably for my study, the United States and Israel (De Michelis 2005).

From this point in time, the Iyengar School as well as other significant movements entered a period of acculturation in which they began to orient themselves more directly toward the growing consumer base for yoga in the West. One of the major developments of this turn was a greater emphasis on professionalization and continuity of teaching strategies. In addition, several new forms of yoga proliferated in the United States that had strong emphasis on physical fitness and a comparative lack of attention to yogic philosophy. These included Power Yoga, which seeks a vigorous physical exercise as the focus of its classes, as well as Bikram Yoga, which involves doing yoga in a room heated to an extremely high temperature in order to increase blood flow, stamina, and release of toxins through sweat (Singleton 2010, 20). Thus, yoga has become increasingly commodified and secularized as a technique of physical fitness by the demands of the Western consumer market. Furthermore, yoga was increasingly marketed specifically to women in the United States. For example, Pirkko Markula (2014) argues that covers of the popular magazine Yoga Journal have increasingly set forth the image of the lithe, flexible, and toned female yoga body as a goal of self-care and discipline in health.
The Confluence of Judaism and Yoga

The histories recounted above demonstrate how cultural movements within Judaism and yoga practice in the United States have developed in tandem with each other, resulting in a cultural environment wherein yoga is distinctly available and appealing to Jewish people. One major such trend within Judaism is a movement toward spiritual renewal that has emphasized embodiment, the mystical tradition of Kabbalah, and Eastern religious traditions as sources for enhancing religious experience. Promotion of egalitarian involvement of women in Jewish religious practice, as well as a general interest in combating stereotypes of Jewish weakness through the cultivation of physical strength, has created particularly compelling points of contact between Judaism and yoga. Yoga's popularization in the Western world as a secular, physical technique for health and mindfulness that is marketed particularly to women made it an acceptable practice with direct relevance to contemporary Jewish concerns.

In many ways, these developments within Judaism and in yoga's popularization played off one another—though not necessarily directly—in a shifting cultural environment where globalization and privatized approaches to religion made such interaction possible. These developments converged in the personal experiences of Jews who practiced yoga, giving rise to projects of domesticating yoga for practice in specifically Jewish contexts. Such projects move beyond a history of mutual stimulation between the two components of the elective affinity and to an actual articulation of their confluence.
Chapter 3

Processes of Domestication in Jewish Yoga Texts

Over the past 20 years, many books and articles have been published that attempt to link yoga with Judaism through specific instructional methods. In this chapter, I engage with several books that have achieved vast popularity and canonical status within the United States. Released by popular presses, these books are aimed at the individual reader—Jewish or not, experienced yogi or not—who seeks a personal spiritual practice. I argue that these books engage in strategies of universalization that decontextualize yoga from its cultural origins and open it up to adaptation. Furthermore, they domesticate yoga to suit specifically non-Orthodox Jewish spiritual concerns of embodiment and individuality through a process of cross-ethnicization that involves the application of Jewish textual content to the physical technique of yoga.

Overview of Selected Jewish Yoga Books

The first time that explicit instruction in approaching yoga from a Jewish perspective appeared in popular print was in 1995, in a chapter of David A. Cooper’s Renewing Your Soul: A Guided Retreat for the Sabbath and Other Days of Rest. Cooper’s retreat manual includes several recommendations for “moving meditation,” one of which is a series of yoga poses, or asanas, aligned through commonalities in shape with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (or aleph-bet). Developed by Canadian teacher of Iyengar yoga Hart Lazer, the poses are presented in alphabetic order but also organized into specific groupings that should be used to structure a sequential practice of calming, warming, strengthening, and restorative asanas (Cooper 1995, 92-93). In the span of 26 pages, Cooper presents a total of 22 postures, each with an illustration,
step-by-step physical instructions, and a brief meditation passage that draws upon the meaning of the letter. For example, the first Hebrew letter Aleph is matched with the yogic trikonasana, or triangle pose, and accompanied by the following meditation:

Aleph (oxen): Imagine that the central line of your body is yoked to the upper and lower worlds. But even though they seem separate, they are connected into one unity. Aleph represents oneness and Unity" (Cooper 1995, 96).

Only the name of the yoga posture trikonasana is given, without any context as to its origins and purpose in yoga practice. Indeed, Cooper’s brief chapter includes little historical background on yoga, nor critical discussion of its relationship to Judaism. Cooper observes generally that hatha yoga is useful for focusing the mind, and explains that “each Hebrew letter has a unique effect on the body, emotions, intellect and soul. The teachings of Hatha yoga are similar; each posture has a distinct effect on the various dimensions of our being” (Cooper 1995, 93).

In 2002, Steven A. Rapp expanded upon Cooper and Lazer’s ideas with his own publication, Aleph-Bet Yoga: Embodying the Hebrew Letters for Physical and Spiritual Well-Being. Rapp’s book preserves the original 22 postures developed by Lazer while adding poses for the five Hebrew finals (the shapes of certain letters change when they are at the end of a word) and the two Hebrew vowels. Rapp also offers a more deliberate introduction to yoga and its implications for Jewish practitioners with additional meditation materials. These include text quoted in both Hebrew and English from the Torah or the Jewish daily prayer book, as well as original poems composed by Rapp which draw upon meanings associated with both the Hebrew letter and its corresponding yoga asana. For example, Vav, which means “and” and also represents connection, is aligned with tadasana, or mountain pose. Its accompanying poem
discusses the miraculous connectivity of the body’s components, comparing this to the grace of a mountain with its caves, streams, and birds (Rapp 2002, 32).

Ruth Goldeen’s *Alef-Bet Yoga for Kids* of 2009 does not share such contemplative depth, but rather employs the concept of forming Hebrew letters with yoga poses as a means of education for young children. Her book features large photos of children in posture that are superimposed upon colorful shapes of their corresponding letters, enabling children “to learn the letters in a very experiential way by actually becoming the letters” (Goldeen 2009, 1). The origins of the yoga postures are included briefly at the back of the book in a glossary, thus providing background while ensuring that education on the Hebrew alphabet is the primary focus of the reader.

In 2004, Iyengar teacher Diane Bloomfield published *Torah Yoga: Experiencing Jewish Wisdom Through Classic Postures*. This book departed from its predecessors in abandoning the model of linking yoga *asanas* to Hebrew letters. Indeed, Bloomfield deliberately separates herself from the Aleph-Bet fold, explaining of her practice, “It is not the external form of the posture that relates to the Torah concept. It is the consciousness and wisdom inside of you that relates to the Torah concept” (2004, xv). Bloomfield organizes her instruction into seven chapters relating to Jewish spiritual themes, such as hidden light, constant renewal, leaving Egypt, and remembering to rest. Each of these chapters begins with a brief lesson on the theme’s origins in Jewish texts and a discussion of how yoga helps to explore the theme personally and physically, followed by a detailed yoga sequence including around seven Iyengar postures. These postures are identified by their English, rather than Sanskrit names, and their instructions focus on physical process with occasional interjections of mental focus on the chapter’s theme.
In *Mussar Yoga: Blending an Ancient Jewish Spiritual Practice with Yoga to Transform Body and Soul* Edith Brotman (2014) takes a similarly thematic approach to creating a Jewish yoga practice. The basis for her method is Mussar, a tradition of Jewish ethical self-study that arose in Lithuania in the eighteenth century and was practiced within a small segment of Orthodox Judaism until a recent popular resurgence among non-Orthodox Jews. Mussar emphasizes ethical awareness through the cultivation of 13 *middot*, or soul traits, including truth, courage, humility, order, nonjudgment, zeal, simplicity, equanimity, generosity, silence, gratitude, loving-kindness, and trust. Each of these traits is pursued in a cycle of 13 weeks, where one trait per week serves as the focus of ethical behavior and reflection by way of practical exercises such as journaling and group discussion (Brotman 2014, 2-3).

The addition of yoga to this self-study, Brotman claims, “brings with it the opportunity to explore the physical embodiment of a trait. We can cultivate compassion or loving-kindness by doing heart openers (backbends), or we can feel the courage of vulnerability in Triangle Pose with our throat and vital organs open and exposed” (2014, 13). Each chapter guides the reader through this experience while focusing on a specific trait, beginning with a series of relevant quotes from sources that range from Jewish scripture, to Indian poetry, to Western philosophy, to contemporary song lyrics. Brotman then provides both the Hebrew and the Sanskrit translations of the trait, entering into a discussion of its significance in both Jewish and yogic thought, and providing guidelines for how it can be put into practice. Finally, a series of yoga postures is presented with photos and step-by-step guidelines, as well as descriptions of how each *asana* cultivates the soul trait that is the focus of the chapter.

Marcus J. Freed, president of the Jewish Yoga Network, similarly links the forms of yoga *asanas* to biblical themes through a method he calls “Bibliyoga.” His 2015 book, *The Kosher
Sutras: The Jewish Way in Yoga and Meditation, is organized into five sections that correspond to the five books of the Jewish Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Each of these sections contains several “Kosher Sutras”—biblical verses that serve as the focus for extended meditation. Freed connects each Kosher Sutra with a particular yoga asana, explaining how its physical form and benefits relate to the focus of the meditation. For example, drawing from the story of Noah at sea from the book of Genesis, Freed encourages the reader to focus on calming mental waters while practicing navasana, or boat pose.

Universalization for an Audience of “Spiritual Seekers”

Both the publishers and authors of these books situate themselves consciously within the larger genre of New Age religious literature, endeavoring to appeal not only to Jewish people but to a diverse readership of individuals seeking spiritual resources. David A. Cooper’s Renewing Your Soul was published by HarperSanFrancisco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers that has since been renamed HarperOne. The imprint was launched in 1977 with the goal of harnessing the alternative social consciousness that had arisen in San Francisco in the late sixties. According to its current mission statement, HarperOne “strives to be the preeminent publisher of the most important books and authors across the full spectrum of religion, spirituality, and personal growth literature, adding to the wealth of the world’s wisdom by stirring the waters of reflection on the primary questions of life, while respecting all traditions” (“Press Release: HarperSanFrancisco Changes Name to HarperOne” 2007). Such a universalizing approach to reaching broad audiences is evident in Cooper’s introduction to Renewing Your Soul, where he claims that his retreat guidelines will be beneficial to non-Jews since they contain “spiritual
exercises with a universality crossing traditional boundaries...[that] can be used effectively by people from all walks of life” (6).

Both Rapp’s Aleph-Bet Yoga and Brotman’s Mussar Yoga were published by Jewish Lights Publishing, a Jewish-affiliated press that caters to those embarking upon “the quest for the self, seeking meaning in life” (Matlins 2016). Though Jewish Lights admits that its primary audience is people of Jewish background, the press defies being categorized as merely a publisher of Jewish books or Judaica. Jewish Lights endeavors to publish “books that reflect the Jewish wisdom tradition for people of all faiths, all backgrounds” (Matlins 2016). Indeed, Rapp states explicitly that while his Aleph-Bet method provides a specifically Jewish context for yoga practice, it is not limited in accessibility or relevance to Jewish people. Rapp discusses intensely his inclination to synthesize connections across cultures and viewpoints, stating, “I believe that our underlying human nature connects us all” (2002, 2). Brotman similarly explains the value of Mussar Yoga in claiming, “Mussar, like yoga taps into our collective desire to embark on an inner spiritual journey that leads us closer to a connection to the Divine. Indeed, the combination of the two into Mussar Yoga responds to the popular demand for powerful and universal spiritual tools” (2014, 3).

Bloomfield’s Torah Yoga was published by Jossey-Bass, an imprint of Wiley that publishes a range of educational and developmental materials designed “to inform and inspire those interested in developing themselves, their organizations and institutions, and their communities” (“About Jossey-Bass” 2016). The publication of Torah Yoga was overseen by Jossey-Bass’ Judaica consultant, Arthur Kurzweil. Kurzweil is an author and editor who has dedicated himself to serving a popular readership of both Jews and non-Jews, contributing to Wiley’s For Dummies series with both Kabbalah for Dummies and The Torah for Dummies.
Bloomfield herself intentionally makes Torah Yoga accessible for those without knowledge of Hebrew or Torah study, and claims that “Although some aspects of Torah, especially the laws and customs, are particular to the Jewish people, much of the wisdom of Torah is universal” (2004, xiv).

Marcus J. Freed’s Kosher Sutras was published under his own label, Freedthinker Books, and funded by a crowdsourcing campaign. While Freed’s publication was therefore not subject to the goals of any particular press, his writing shares messages of universal accessibility and relevance with his traditionally published peers. He proclaims in the book’s introduction that “A key principle of Bibliyoga, as it has now evolved, is that this is non-dogmatic, non-religious, and open to spiritual seekers of all disciplines (Freed 2013, Kindle Location 344).” This statement may be surprising given that the title of the book, The Kosher Sutras: The Jewish Way in Yoga and Meditation, seems to emphasize a transformation of yoga into a practice that is as uniquely Jewish as the strict dietary laws by which traditional Jews abide. However, it also typifies the extent to which Freed and the other authors and publishers of Jewish yoga texts discussed above have made strides to open their work to the larger market of New Age spirituality literature. Each of these books, to varying degrees, intentionally welcomes non-Jewish readers, argues for the universal relevance of their methodologies, and makes Jewish background information available through the use of glossaries and descriptive historical commentaries.

Idealization and Decontextualization of Yoga

While these authors cast their teachings as universal and seek out non-Jewish readership, the fact that they are Jewish writers catering to a Western, mostly Jewish audience is evident in their analysis and presentation of yoga. Considerable detail is given to Jewish textual and
cultural traditions, but yoga is often discussed in a generalizing way. Cooper gives practically no introduction to what yoga is, merely stating that the various forms of yoga constitute moving meditation, that it is practiced by many people, and that the Aleph-Bet series draws upon hatha yoga of the Iyengar tradition. Rapp, Bloomfield, and Brotman offer brief historical descriptions of yoga, but these begin with the advent of yoga’s popularity in the Western world and focus on its utility for contemporary practitioners rather than its historical origins. Many of these authors most frequently cite B.K.S. Iyengar in their explanations, selecting quotes that argue for yoga’s universal relevance and summarizing the principles of his technique. By focusing on such modern descriptions of yoga’s universality, Jewish yoga authors deemphasize yoga’s association with Hinduism. Whether an intentional strategy or a product of their own awareness of yoga’s history, this de-ethnicization, or specifically de-Hinduization, of yoga by Jewish yoga authors renders its practice more acceptable for religious Jews concerned about engaging in sacrilegious activity.

Brotman and Freed make the most effort to extend back into yoga’s history of origin, citing Patanjali’s *Yogasutras* and alluding to a longer tradition of philosophical thought developed in India. Freed even interacts with several yogic texts throughout the course of his Kosher Sutra essays. More often, though, the history of yoga is generalized and dismissed with brief references to its “ancient” origins. For example, Bloomfield summarizes yoga as “the ancient meditative movement practice of focusing attention on the breath and body in the present moment” (2014, xv). This qualification of yoga as “ancient” serves to avoid the complexities of its history, but also to characterize it as an antidote to modern spiritual challenges. Bloomfield and others discuss at length the trials of living in a modern, spiritually fallow world, with Cooper
going so far as to say that “Modern civilization suffers from a chronic condition of anemic, starving souls” (1995, 7).

This dichotomy between soulless modernity and the spiritually rich, ancient practice of yoga is further aligned with the cultural poles of West and East. The original creator of Aleph-Bet Yoga, Hart Lazer (2002), characterizes this problem in observing that “in the Western world...the false division of the human body into either physical, mental, and spiritual has been all-pervasive” (xi). Yoga, on the other hand, is developed from Eastern philosophies that rightfully conceive of the human person as a unified being of “body, mind, and spirit” (xii). This analysis of yoga’s spiritual utility for Westerners as stemming from its emphasis on the unity of the body and mind is one that is offered frequently in Jewish yoga literature. These explanations cast yoga as originating from a decidedly “other” time, culture, and place, all of which are paradoxically left unexplained and largely obscure to the reader. Yoga is thereby decontextualized as a cultural product that is made accessible to the reader through the author’s expertise and creativity.

A point that all of these authors zero in on is that yoga is not a religion but a spiritual practice. As Rapp summarizes, yoga does not constitute a religion because it “does not have a uniform set of beliefs, rituals, or requirements” (2002, 11). Rather, yoga is a spiritual philosophy or technology which provides techniques for positive ways of being. It can be aligned with any faith system in order to foster virtue and spiritual awareness in the individual (Lazer 2002, xii). Bloomfield describes yoga as being “as vast and varied as the ocean” (2004, xv), and Rapp contends that yoga classes which integrate Indian chants, prayers, and rituals are merely the expression of certain lineages of teaching, and not necessary to experience the benefits of yoga (2002, 11). Freed similarly proposes, “Yoga is usually taught in connection to Eastern
philosophies, which makes sense since most yogic philosophy was developed in Asia. But we live in the West. What about Western spiritual traditions?” (2013, Kindle Location 399). Both Freed and Brotman make historical arguments for yoga’s non-dogmatic nature, explaining that yogic philosophy originated before Hinduism or Buddhism were constituted as religious systems and thus was not initially attached to any particular beliefs regarding divine power in the world (Brotman 2014, 2).

Thus, for these authors, yoga is entirely up for grabs. Despite its foreign cultural origins, yoga’s secular roots and modernization enable it to be molded by the principles of the individual practitioner. As such, yoga stands out as a uniquely acceptable tool for bringing Eastern spiritual awareness to the Jewish tradition in a way that is justifiably “Kosher.” By universalizing and de-Hinduizing yoga’s history and methodology, Jewish yoga authors mindfully address the concerns of a Jewish audience and establish yoga as an acceptable practice for domestication into Jewish spiritual pursuits.

**Domestication for the Jewish Context through Cross-Ethinicization**

Interestingly, most of these Jewish yoga authors provide accounts of happening upon or experiencing yoga in secular contexts unrelated to their Jewish faith before thinking about any connection between the two. Bloomfield describes how as a child she would watch her sister take yoga class and as adult she was brought into yoga practice by a friend (2004, xii). Brotman admits that her interest in yoga reignited her dedication to her Jewish faith and led her to the Mussar movement (2014, xiv). Freed discloses that his “path to yoga happened by accident” when it was included in one of his acting classes, and that some time passed before he attempted to fuse it with his Jewish worldview (2013, Kindle Location 416). In these accounts, initial
encounters with yoga occurred outside of a Jewish framework and often by chance. They were more a product of yoga’s increasing practice by the general population than they were of any deliberate attempt to look beyond the Jewish tradition for spiritual resources. While these authors began practicing yoga in much the same way as other millions of Americans have, they subsequently endeavored to domesticate yoga further for practice within their own religious tradition. This domestication takes the form of cross-ethnicization, in this case Judaicization, of yoga through appeals to spiritual issues within Judaism and application of Jewish textual content to the physical technique of yoga.

Appealing to Specifically Jewish Spiritual Issues

These authors not only argue that yoga is a permissible activity for Jews, but that its principles provide solutions for uniquely Jewish spiritual issues. Among these is what some authors describe as the overlooked place of the individual in Jewish social and religious life. Brotman explains in her experience with Jewish life prior to finding yoga, “Everything Jewish seemed to focus on community, collective ritual, and common practices, with not much attention paid to the individual and his or her uniqueness” (2014, ix). This sense of being overwhelmed by the larger collective is countered by her experiences with yoga, of which she articulates, “The key to yoga’s transformational abilities lies in its attention to the inner workings of the self. The self-awareness that happens on the mat paves the way for self-awareness off the mat (2014, xiii). With such description, Brotman and her peers propose yoga as a venue for establishing a level of personal awareness and individualized religious experience that traditional Jewish ritual practice does not offer.
Jewish yoga authors also repeatedly emphasize yoga’s integration of the body into spiritual practice as a counter to the overly intellectual orientation of Judaism. Lazer, for example, expresses that before exploring yoga he “had often viewed Judaism’s neglect of the physical body at the expense of intellectual pursuits as a fundamental weakness in traditional Judaism” (2002, xi). Rapp notes that Judaism does not explicitly provide methods of caring for the body, yet he claims that “if we look closely at the Jewish texts, we can find acknowledgement of the body’s implicit holiness,” citing verses from the Torah and Jewish prayers (2002, 5). This statement exemplifies a simultaneous frustration with the lack of concern for the body upheld by Rabbinical Jewish religious practice and a belief that valuing the body is implicit in the basic tenets of Judaism but must be renewed.

This frustration is echoed across the Jewish yoga literature, as yoga’s cultivation of embodied awareness is repeatedly emphasized as a means to establishing a more real, personal, and spiritual connection with God. Bloomfield explains that when she began linking her yoga practice to her study of Torah, “I experienced Torah teachings as a reality that I could know and feel within myself, within my body” (2004, xiii). She goes on to explain that many of her students come to class having been estranged from their bodies, and that gaining physical strength and flexibility enhances their overall well-being and wisdom (2004, xiv). This equation of the physical body with the personal self is also evinced by Brotman’s claim that “Yoga changes people because it uses the physical body as a gateway to making changes in the soul” (2014, xiii). In regards to the benefits of linking lessons in Jewish wisdom to yoga postures through his Kosher Sutras, Freed explains, “The theory is that once we have fully mastered a principle within our bodies...we can then live that concept and incorporate it into our daily behavior” (2013, Kindle Location 489).
Freed’s above statement exemplifies a major commonality in the overall approach to Judaicizing yoga undertaken by Jewish yoga teachers, which is the application of Jewish textual content to the physical technique of yoga. These authors generally maintain the physical structure of yoga and its classical asanas, selecting the bodily practice of yoga for direct and largely unaltered inclusion in Jewish spiritual practice. It is through the application of Jewish concepts to this physical technique that cross-ethnicization occurs, transforming yoga into a specifically Jewish observance.

As discussed above, Lazer and Rapp’s Aleph-Bet Yoga reimagines yoga asanas as the forms of Hebrew letters. The postures remain the same as they would in a typical Iyengar yoga practice, but the shifted understanding of them as embodiments of the Hebrew letters ascribes a new, Jewish meaning to their practice. Similarly, Bloomfield, Brotman, and Freed each incite specifically Jewish reflection during yoga practice through the integration of lengthy scriptural quotes as well as their own creative essays on Jewish concepts. In all of these cases, the physical methodology of yoga is preserved, while integration of Jewish textual material as context for contemplation and meditation during the execution of this methodology gives rise to a distinctly Jewish iteration of yoga.

Such methods interpret the physical technique of yoga as separable and adaptable from its original religious and cultural associations. However, they do not view the physical technique itself as a site for possible adaptation, maintaining yoga asanas and other physical practices as central to the nature of a legitimate yoga practice. Rather, it is through an intellectual shift in intention accomplished by the application of Jewish textual content to yoga’s physical form that Jewish yoga authors domesticate yoga. This methodological approach is an extension of the
distillation of yoga into a secular, predominantly physical technique that has accompanied yoga’s popularization in the United States. It is also a symptom of the fact that Jewish religious doctrine and wisdom has historically been recorded, preserved, and examined in the form of text. As a robustly developed system of embodied spiritual practice whose associations with its religion and culture of origin have been historically rendered flexible, yoga serves as an ideal foundation for the application of Jewish religious doctrine through re-textualization.

To return to the historical progression of elective affinity between Judaism and yoga, it is evident that as Jews became interested in finding ways to engage the body in spiritual practice, yoga was progressively decontextualized and physicalized to the point that it became available to Jews as a system of spiritual embodiment. The nature of this convergence created an affinity between Judaism and yoga, which Jewish yoga authors have acted upon in cross-ethnicizing yoga with Jewish content. Resulting Judaicized forms of yoga that have subsequently been formally articulated through published materials. The projects of cross-ethnicization discussed in this chapter thus exemplify the culmination of an elective affinity between Judaism and yoga in that they build upon a moment of historical affinity between Judaism and yoga in creating a syncretic form of spiritual practice.
Chapter 4

Methods of Domestication among Jewish Yoga Teachers in Orthodox versus Non-Orthodox Communities

Over the course of 10 weeks in the summer of 2015, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork among Jewish yoga teachers in New York, New Jersey, Los Angeles, and Baltimore. My fieldwork included interviews with 10 yoga teachers, as well as participant observation in several classes led by 5 of these 10 instructors. In this chapter, I outline significant trends in the demographic backgrounds of these informants, their motivations for practicing and teaching yoga, and the methods by which they do so. I argue that motivations for Jewish yoga teachers and the ways in which they domesticate yoga to serve their particular intentions vary across religious branches and communities. In particular, motivations and methods vary markedly between teachers active in Orthodox versus non-Orthodox communities. While Orthodox Jewish yoga teachers are primarily motivated by health interests, non-Orthodox teachers seek a means of enhancing and supplementing their spirituality. Orthodox teachers do not actively pursue a spiritual syncretism of Judaism with yoga, and their efforts of domestication take the form of secularizing and de-Hinduizing yoga. On the other hand, non-Orthodox teachers actively engage yoga as a spiritual system and seek to integrate it with their Jewish religiosity through methods of cross-ethnicization similar to those evident in Jewish yoga literature.
Yoga for Orthodox Jews: Domestication by Secularization

Two of my informants directed their yoga teaching specifically to Orthodox communities, and I participated in classes led by both of them. The first was Sarede Switzer, a woman who teaches yoga and runs a larger fitness enterprise in her neighborhood of Crown Heights, Brooklyn, which is the current center of the Hasidic Chabad-Lubavitch movement. Switzer also collaborates with friend and fellow Jewish yoga teacher Kinneret Dubowitz in organizing teacher trainings for Jewish and other women in Toronto, New York, and Israel as part of the Kinneret Yoga franchise. The second was Jacki Routhenstein, who operates a yoga studio from her home in an Orthodox community in West Orange, New Jersey. The majority of both of these women’s clientele are Orthodox-practicing individuals who abide by strict codes of modesty in dress and public behavior in accordance with halakha, or Jewish law as dictated by the Torah. Under this law, all women must wear shirts that cover their elbows and collarbones and skirts that cover their knees, and married women must cover their hair. Men must also dress modestly, generally wearing long trousers and long-sleeve shirts and often the black felt shtreimel hat in synagogue and during holidays. Furthermore, non-related women and men are forbidden from entering private spaces together, and it is unacceptable to observe a member of the opposite sex in physical activity.

Clearly, these regulations are not very conducive to participation in a typical yoga class, nor in any form of group exercise for that matter. Switzer and Routhenstein both accommodate these social customs by offering single-sex classes in private environments. Both teach solely to

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1 All information regarding Sarede Switzer’s practice was obtained through an in-person interview and participation in her class on July 9, 2015.

2 All information regarding Jacki Routhenstein’s practice was obtained through in-person interviews on July 7 and 29, 2015, and through participation in her classes on July 7, July 29, August 4, and August 11, 2015.
women, while Switzer has also contracted a male yoga teacher to host men’s-only classes. I took part in women’s classes led by both Switzer and Routhenstein that were held in each of their homes. These private, single-sex settings, along with the secularized form of yoga being taught, made it an acceptable activity for their participation.

Sarede Switzer’s apartment was in a large building on a bustling street in Brooklyn, and she held class in the tight space of her bedroom, though she said this was not standard procedure. Being that it was summertime, and Switzer’s female clients tended to either be on vacation or busier than usual in caring for children at home, she stopped running her regular class schedule but would frequently rally participants for impromptu sessions like this one. The participants in this evening class included one unmarried woman in her 20s and two married women, one of whom was over the age of 50 and another who was young enough to have a 9-year-old daughter whom she brought along to join the class. Upon entering the bedroom, all the women removed their long skirts to reveal pants suitable for active exercise underneath, but the married women kept the caps and scarves covering their hair on for the duration of the class. These four participants spread mats out on the floor of Sarede’s bedroom in an open space that she had cleared, while I sat to watch because the room was too cramped. In this small space of a New York one-bedroom apartment, Sarede still managed to guide her students in an intensely physical Power Yoga practice that included fast-paced transitions from asana to asana. Their fortitude was charged by the noises of city seeping in through the window, by the dim lighting of the bedroom, and by a playlist of punchy pop songs such as Ingrid Michaelson’s “Parachute.”

This high energy environment contrasted markedly with the relaxed and slowly methodical approach to Iyengar yoga that I participated in at Jacki Routhenstein’s home studio. Though still an intimate setting, the studio was located in a specified room largely separated
from the rest of the suburban New Jersey home by a flight of stairs. The room featured a wall mounted with Iyengar support ropes as well as a closet stored with an abundance of other props used in Iyengar practice including blankets, blocks, and chairs. It was a bright, open space with a large window that was mostly stark except for a clock and a set of Tibetan bowls in the corner. Jacki never used music during her classes, but she did sometimes play the Tibetan bowls at the end of class to release healing vibrations and soft sounds while we were lying in sivasana. Based on my three visits to Routhenstein’s classes, her clientele comprised entirely middle-age or older practitioners. These women were not very physically active in their lifestyles and largely new to yoga, so Jacki’s classes involved a lot of patient, guiding conversation between her and the students. Classes usually included between three and 5 people, and the ladies would often talk amongst themselves and laugh self-deprecatingly at their own inabilities. Emphasis was placed on healthy posture and alignment, rather than rigorous strengthening, as the class moved slowly through various asanas.

Motivation: Health and Embodiment

The clients that Switzer and Routhenstein serve do not seek spiritual enhancement from yoga; rather, their main motivations are health-related. Routhenstein acknowledges that most of her students pursue yoga as an antidote for health issues ranging from posture and back issues, to knee issues, to lupus. She observes, “most of my clientele are here because their doctor said, ‘Go to yoga,’ which is quite interesting. If the doctor hadn’t said that to them, they wouldn’t be doing it.” Routhenstein also envisions her classes as serving a more general need for exercise and body image promotion among women in the community who have few opportunities to be active and most often keep their bodies covered. She explains,
What I see is a lot of women—they don’t know that this is a bicep and how to make it stronger...I spend classes teaching women to straighten [their] arms and legs, because they don’t know how to do it...They can’t find these muscles because they hide their bodies, literally. Most of these women stop doing sports around middle school, and they never do anything. I’m giving them a chance to actually find their bodies and appreciate it.

Routhenstein attributes neglect of physical health in Jewish communities not to the principles of the religion, but to a culture centered around eating that simultaneously upholds an unrealistic ideal of thinness for women, saying, “There are these two paradigms: the men can be fat; the women are supposed to be stick-skinny.” At the same time as women are responsible for cooking and joining in the countless ceremonial meals that span the Jewish calendar, many are pressured to remain thin in order to secure good marriage matches for themselves and their daughters. Despite this, Routhenstein claims, neither men nor women, especially, are given opportunities to move and engage with their bodies in the ways that they should, and the result is an abundance of body hate and neglect.

Switzer agrees that alienation from the body is an issue common among Orthodox Jews, and that yoga offers a means for correcting it, saying,

we’re encouraged to think and analyze a lot, so people can become very heavy and very not associated with their body. And women can have this weird connection with their body where they think that it’s more modest to be hunched over, to dress really ugly, and to not be connected with their body. I think it’s a very unfortunate phenomenon that occurs in the Jewish world, and it’s so sad because it really has nothing to do with the religion...So I think what’s great about yoga is that it really connects people to their bod[ies].

Switzer thus also conceives of detachment from the body among Jews as a cultural issue that manifests in unhealthy norms of inactivity and low body self-esteem, particularly for women. However, she identifies the root of the problem less in overeating and weight-consciousness than in over-intellectualism and negatively-adopted ideals of modesty. For both Switzer and
Routhenstein, teaching yoga in Jewish Orthodox communities is motivated by the goal of providing a unique resource for physical activity and engagement with the body.

**Domestication by Secularization**

In order to make yoga acceptable for an Orthodox clientele, Switzer and Routhenstein design their yoga classes to accommodate Orthodoxy’s strict prohibition against *avodah zarah*, meaning “foreign worship” or “idol worship.” Orthodox adherents are extremely cautious of participating in any activity that might constitute veneration of a god or deity other than their own. For this reason, Switzer and Routhenstein deliberately remove elements from their classes that could be associated with Hindu or other forms of worship. Switzer, being a Lubavitch woman herself, is particularly diligent in this regard, explaining, “So if I’m going to a yoga class and I’m going in order to cure my insomnia, to reduce my stress, to get strong or whatever, that’s ok. But if I’m going because I need a spiritual direction in life, that’s when it can become a problem.” Switzer is trained in and teaches Power Yoga, a vigorously fitness-focused method she was first exposed to through instructional DVDs and which she feels comfortable with because it emphasizes the physical, rather than spiritual benefits of yoga. She teaches her classes without the presence of any statues of Hindu deities and without any chanting or recitation of words like “Om” and “Namaste.” Switzer is also careful to avoid Sanskrit posture names or even English terms that refer to religious beliefs or actions, though she will use others deemed harmless. For example, she will refer to a sun salutation sequence, usually associated with worship of the Hindu solar deity, as simply “warmup 1” or “flow 1.” On the other hand, she has no problem using the term *trikonasana* because it only means “triangle pose” and carries no specific religious associations.
Switzer is also wary of including yogic philosophies that are at odds with the Jewish worldview into her practice. She notes that even common phrases that yoga teachers use to encourage mindfulness carry the essence of a conflicting philosophy, and that while ideals of sending love to everybody in the universe, or suppressing anger, or avoiding suffering may sound nice or even similar to Jewish ideas, they are at odds with the goals of Judaism. She argues,

The Eastern religions, not to put them down, I mean I think they’re great for the people that practice them but they’re very—they work sort of in a cyclical way, meaning that it’s all about being one with nature and feeling one with nature and being in a state of acceptance with nature. In Judaism we have a different approach, and it’s more linear in the sense of, like, we’re waiting, we’re working towards a goal of the Messiah, let’s say. And it’s a little bit more aggressive and a little bit more like there’s a fight going on. And the yogic philosophy is about getting rid of that fight. In Judaism we do want to approach things in a calm way, and we do want sort of a preparatory state to get to the state of meditation and all that, but it’s in order to conquer and it’s in order to fight and to push yourself through.

Switzer separates the physical practice of yoga from these philosophies, taking comfort in the fact that recent studies such as Mark Singleton’s *Yoga Body* (2010) demonstrate that the modern form of yoga is vastly different from its ancient predecessors, and is more the product of Western colonial paradigms than it is of ancient Eastern religiosity. She claims, “It wasn’t so spiritual to begin with in India, and then only with it coming [to the West], it was artificially re-inserted back into it.”

In her methodological choices, Switzer draws a sharp distinction between permissible and impermissible intentions in approaching yoga, as well as between bodily practice and linguistic material as repositories of religious tradition. Her argument that practicing yoga for physical benefits is acceptable for Jews, while pursuing spiritual engagement through yoga is not, evinces an assumption that the physical practice of yoga can be separated from its foreign religious
content. This distinction is revealed even more strongly in her belief that removing a name that holds Hindu religious connotations from an asana can rid the posture of its original Hindu associations. Switzer’s strategies of domestication thus rely on a conviction that the intellectual intention of the participant shapes the extent to which yoga engages in worshiping foreign gods. Her methods also indicate an understanding that yoga’s potentially sacrilegious content lies primarily in its textual and linguistic descriptors and principles, but interestingly not within its bodily technique. Switzer’s focus on textual rather than physical manifestations of yoga’s Hindu origins as sources of conflict necessitating secularization thus prioritizes textual transformation in a similar way to the cross-ethnicizing approaches of non-Orthodox Jewish yoga authors.

Furthermore, even Jewish spiritual themes are generally off-limits for Switzer, who does not think a yoga class is generally an appropriate venue for such contemplation. She explains of her yoga classes and her teacher training programs, “I’ve kind of seen it as not to make it spiritual at all, like not even Jewish spirituality. Because if you make it Jewish spirituality, it becomes a very tricky line, like where to draw it.” She admits, however, that the deep nature of the practice will sometimes bring her to emphasizing aspects of letting go and letting God take over, or of being thankful for the body that God gave you during final relaxation. Additionally, Switzer has been hired to create outreach workshops for Chabad houses that integrate Jewish themes as a means of instruction for those who are not very educated or familiar with Judaism. Citing a workshop she did that integrated the Kabbalistic spheres with the body through yoga, Switzer acknowledged that such methods can be useful as a creative exercise or as an experiential learning experience for Jews that are not intellectually versed, but cautioned that yoga should not be viewed as a substitute for actual Jewish religious observance.
Jacki Routhenstein is slightly more relaxed in her efforts to secularize yoga for Orthodox practice, likely by virtue of the fact that she was not raised Orthodox but did marry an Orthodox man, and that she is not intensely observant herself. Routhenstein began practicing and teaching yoga in health clubs in the 1980s, and while the majority of her professional life has been devoted to teaching in Hebrew schools, she recently retired from education to become a certified Iyengar yoga teacher, opening Keter Yoga studio in her home in 2014. After obtaining permission and support from her neighborhood’s three leading rabbis, Routhenstein began offering women’s-only classes to a clientele that is mixed between highly and less observant Orthodox. She herself is very interested in making connections between yogic philosophy and Judaism, as she discussed with me the linguistic parallels that exist between the Sanskrit word “Om” and the Hebrew “Shalom,” wrote a paper on this and other connections between yoga and Judaism for her teacher’s certification, and reads Jewish yoga materials such as Diane Bloomfield’s *Torah Yoga* (2004).

However, Routhenstein explained that she generally steers clear of integrating such “heavy duty” concepts into her classes. This is both to cater to the comfort level of her particular clientele and to respect the community’s rabbis, who would see any attempted syncretism between Judaism and yoga as a threat to tradition and to their religious authority. Though she keeps her studio generally free of any Hindu-associated objects, she does include chanting exercises, explaining the conceptual underpinnings of the word “Om” and offering her students the option of using either that or “Shalom.” By offering “Shalom,” a Hebrew salutation indicating peace and harmony, as an alternative, Routhenstein attempts not to engage her students in Jewish spiritual practice, but rather to provide a more culturally familiar means through which her students can choose to engage in chanting. She uses most Sanskrit *asana*
names freely, and feels that as long as she explains a yogic concept or Sanskrit term thoroughly, ensures that it does not involve worship of other gods, and makes students feel comfortable to join at their will, it is permissible to include. She also occasionally includes meditations on aspects of Jewish life, including weekly Torah readings or references to what is current in the Jewish calendar. For instance, during Passover she may encourage students to think about cleaning out their minds and bodies in addition to their traditional observance of cleaning out their houses. Her classes do not, however, attempt to give guidance or instruction on matters of Jewish religion.

In regards to modifying problematic aspects, Routhenstein acknowledges that she consciously alters the language associated with certain movements to avoid the perception that participants are engaging in a religious practice. She explains of her strategic approach to the yogic custom of bowing at the end of class, “In my studio, we don’t do prayer position; we do hands at heart-center. We don’t bow our heads; we do chin-to-chest. It’s a different linguistic so I don’t make the women feel uncomfortable—so there’s no prayer.” In a similar method to Switzer’s, Routhenstein thus shifts focus away from religious associations of movement through a subtle change in linguistic application. The gesture of bowing remains the same, but the secular way in which Routhenstein presents it renders the movement acceptable for her Orthodox Jewish clientele.

Thus, the Orthodox Jewish yoga teachers I engaged with rely extensively on the notion that yoga, despite its foreign religious origins, can be practiced as a secular form of activity. Restricted by prohibitions against idol worship and the intensely hierarchical authority in administering religious education upheld by the rabbinate, religious syncretism is not the goal of their practice. Yoga is undertaken purely as a secular activity with benefits for physical health,
but the social norms of Orthodox life necessitate a level of domestication in order for yoga to be acceptable. Domestication for this particular Jewish context is actively pursued through methods of de-Hinduization that focus particularly on textual and linguistic points of conflict. The Orthodox articulation of the elective affinity between Judaism and yoga thus places the two traditions in direct relation to each other while maintaining a definitive distinction between them.

**Yoga for Non-Orthodox Jews: Domestication by Cross-Ethnicization**

The majority of my informants were those working predominantly outside of Orthodox communities, most identifying with Conservative, Reform, Renewal, or Reconstructionist Judaism. One, however, is an observant Orthodox practitioner, while two others worship at Orthodox synagogues. What they all have in common is that they are each involved in creating a technique or approach to yoga that syncretizes yoga with Jewish religion. A greater openness to the utility of other religious traditions in enhancing Jewish practice among these informants, as well as less strictly hierarchical systems of religious authority, result in methods of domestication that emphasize cross-ethnicization of yoga to create a Jewish spiritual practice.

**Expressions of Religious Universalism**

Like Switzer and Routhenstein, those of my informants who engage deliberately in teaching a specifically Jewish form of yoga were first exposed to yoga in a way unrelated to Judaism or even to religious pursuits more generally. However, a greater openness to the potential utility of other faith traditions was expressed by many of these informants compared to their Orthodox peers. For those involved in more conservative movements, this idea was
expressed particularly in regards to connections between yoga and Judaism, while those with more progressive attitudes advocated more broadly for the universality of all religious wisdom.

I interviewed Melissa Kurtz, a teacher of yoga and energy healing who attends a Conservative synagogue in Long Island, New York. She began taking yoga classes in high school and college, and though she was interested in the spiritual philosophies of yoga, she recalls feeling uncomfortable with chants and other activities that involved bowing to other gods. She eventually became a certified yoga teacher and received Diane Bloomfield’s *Torah Yoga* as a gift from a friend. This opened her mind to the connections that could be made between yoga and Judaism, and how she could create a practice that better aligned with her own beliefs. During our interview, Kurtz explained that parallels existed between the Kabbalistic notion of the body as a model of the *Sefirot* and the yogic chakra system, as well as the fact that both Hebrew and Sanskrit are vibrational languages that can be chanted. For her, Kurtz said, “There’s a comfort level—being able to chant or have a mantra in Hebrew rather than Sanskrit, because you know what it means.” She was specifically interested in the ways that yoga and Judaism could be easily blended to create spiritual and educational experiences for Jews.

Edith Brotman, author of *Mussar Yoga*, is a member of a Reform synagogue and similarly became interested in connecting her yoga practice with her Jewish spirituality after she had been a certified teacher of Power Yoga for years. She recalls that at the same time as she was looking for a way to enhance her connection to Judaism, “It was on the yoga mat where I really started to feel this very deep spirituality, really started thinking about, “Ok, well why can’t

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3 All information regarding Melissa Kurtz’s practice was obtained from a phone interview on July 27, 2015.

4 All information regarding Edith Brotman’s practice was obtained through an in-person interview on August 20, 2015.
I feel this when I’m in synagogue?” As discussed in the previous chapter, Brotman was able to satisfy this frustration by linking yoga directly to Mussar, a Jewish system of ethical self-reflection. She sees her methodology of Mussar Yoga as expanding upon an initial turn to the East for enhancing Jewish spirituality begun by Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi and the Jewish Renewal Movement in the ’60s and ’70s. Brotman observed that this interest in Eastern spiritual practices is growing in her community and among Conservative and Reform congregations more generally, though she did not discuss any study that she had undertaken in Eastern religions beyond her yoga practice and training.

Three of my informants were directly involved in the Renewal or Reconstructionist movements, and explained their interest in developing Jewish yoga as an aspect of a general interest in learning from other faiths or belief in the universality of religion. Ida Unger, for example, is a yoga teacher based in Los Angeles who works frequently with ALEPH: The Alliance for Jewish Renewal, an organization she values particularly for its interfaith efforts. She recalls that she took her first yoga class because it was being offered at a health club she joined, and that she was interested in it primarily as a means for enhancing her flexibility and dancing skills. After 15 years of practicing and teaching yoga, Unger began to open up to its spiritual underpinnings and to a series of “Jewish epiphanies.” These involved several places in the Torah where people who are questioning spirituality travel East, as well as the speculation that the impact of Abraham’s sons, who travelled “East and farther East” with gifts from their father, may be revealed in the linguistically similar name for the Indian “Brahmin” class.

These connections inspired Unger to develop a Jewish yoga practice, and she worked with Diane Bloomfield and Myriam Klotz in developing such teachings at the Institute for

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5 All information regarding Ida Unger’s practice was obtained through an in-person interview and participation in her class on July 21, 2015.
Jewish Spirituality (JJS), a non-denominational, Renewal-influenced organization that seeks to promote the development of Jewish spiritual practice among Jewish clergy and congregants through retreats and educational programs. Bloomfield and Klotz continued to develop this programming and now offer Torah Yoga certification retreats at JJS. I spoke with two graduates of this program, one of whom was Robin Wald, who is a yoga teacher and Hebrew day school teacher who lives in Mt. Kisco, New York. Wald studied comparative religion in college, becoming interested in Buddhism and Hinduism while feeling distanced from the patriarchal Jewish dogma she had grown up with. It was during this time that she sought out yoga, teaching herself initially through books from her college’s library. Years later, Wald came back to Judaism through a mystical, Kabbalistic perspective, and began supplementing her yoga practice with Jewish music to create a form of personal prayer. As she has continued to develop her Jewish yoga practice and began teaching at Renewal and Reconstructionist synagogues and schools, Wald sees no conflict in using the two in tandem, saying:

for the most part American Judaism is much more wide-open within Conservative and Reform and Reconstructionist and Renewal, and there’s a real sense that Judaism is seeking out a truth, but that we don’t have the truth. There’s not one and one only truth that applies to everyone and is universal. There’s a truth which we can come closer to understanding for ourselves personally and through community and through study, and coming closer to that truth also involves really being open to other people’s faith traditions and their truth because so much of it is supportive and similar.

Wald has developed a significant following that includes several students who have gone on to teach Jewish yoga themselves. She also invited Myriam Klotz to do a training for herself and some interested students in her area, creating a small network of like-minded teachers. One

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6 All information regarding Robin Wald’s practice was obtained through an in-person interview on July 30, 2015.
of these teachers is Laura Rotter,7 a financial advisor who teaches Jewish yoga from her home studio and at her synagogue. Rotter grew up in a Modern Orthodox family, but has become very involved in progressive Judaism, attending a Reconstructionist synagogue and participating in and teaching at IJS training programs. Discussing how she listens to Indian kirtan music and has a statue of the Buddha as well as one of St. Francis of Assisi left by former residents in the home she just moved in to, Rotter explains, “Through my studies with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, I’ve really come to believe that we’re all accessing the same source and that it’s appropriate for me to access it through Judaism because that’s who I am, that’s my culture, and that’s how I was brought up.” Thus, Rotter views yoga as a method of practice from another tradition that she can use while remaining grounded in and enhancing her Jewish spirituality.

Laurie Wolko,8 another New York-based Jewish yoga teacher, expressed a similar sentiment in saying, “I really believe at this point that there are many names of God, depending on how you grew up...Really at the heart of all religions is the same thing.” Wolko prefers not to identify with any particular movement of Judaism, explaining that she is active at numerous synagogues ranging from Orthodox, to Renewal, and in between. Despite Wolko’s religious independence, framing her yoga practice as a Jewish experience is very important to her, and she acknowledges a concern about the fact that certain ways of practicing yoga can amount to worship of foreign idols. Wolko explains, “I believe it’s also about your kavannah, your intention. It’s really the intention behind it. If for you it’s bowing down to gods, then it’s bowing down to gods. But if it’s about energy, that’s something else.” Wolko thus echoes my

7 All information regarding Laura Rotter’s practice was obtained through an in-person interview on July 7, 2015, and through participation in her classes on August 3 and August 17, 2015.

8 All information regarding Laurie Wolko’s practice was obtained through a phone interview on August 4, 2015.
Orthodox informants in elucidating a distinction between the physical aspect of embodied practice and the intellectual power that intention holds in defining the nature of that practice.

Overall, while universalistic attitudes toward religion and efforts to learn about Eastern faith traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism were more evident among non-Orthodox informants, such perspectives were held in tandem with definitive statements of Jewish identity and belief. These informants have been eager to learn from other faiths about methodologies for spiritual engagement, but the focus of their religious worship remains firmly on Judaism. This universalism for the sake of Jewish spiritual enhancement enables practitioners to experiment with foreign methodologies while still maintaining a singularly Jewish cultural identity and religious practice. The simultaneous openness to the wisdom of other other religious traditions and strong attachment to Judaism expressed by these informants creates a space for the articulation of a spiritually syncretic approach to Jewish yoga.

**Motivation: Spirituality and Embodiment**

As in the Jewish yoga literature I reviewed in the previous chapter, embodiment was a key motivation for practicing yoga among my informants. They often contrasted their frustrations with the intellectual and cerebral nature of Judaism to the physically engaging, spiritual orientation of yoga. Describing the Jewish yoga practice she teaches, Ida Unger says that engaging the body in prayer is, “a lot better than stand up, sit down, turn to page 57. That’s just not drawing this generation in—or even my generation in anymore.” Laurie Wolko echoes this sentiment in explaining that as a person with a very physically active lifestyle, she finds it difficult to sit in a synagogue without any kind of movement. She explains that yoga not only
opens her up to prayer, but also becomes a form of prayer in itself when she integrates it with Judaism as a way of connecting with God.

Robin Wald describes the Talmudic, book-oriented form of Judaism practiced in most communities as legalistic, intellectual, and not interested in the physical. Yoga is an important way for her to supplement traditional practice, as she claims that “the physical body is the vehicle through which we access higher and different states.” Edith Brotman argues that Reform Judaism became so heavily cerebral as a result of its attempt to mimic the Protestant Reformation in Christianity, which sanitized away physical rituals. She explains her own frustrations with this intellectuality by saying, “I think the worst way to get to God is through the brain. The worst. It’s like a wall shuts down. The thinking mind doesn’t really get me there. I think you do feel it in the body, in a really tangible way.”

Melissa Kurtz stated that for a long time the importance of the body has been neglected in Jewish culture, as Jews have typically been thought of as “nerdy book people” who are uninvolved in athletic pursuits and do not take care of their bodies given the way they eat. She sees Jewish yoga as being at the forefront of a movement that recognizes the fact that “God gave us a soul and God gave us a body, so it’s not one higher or lower than the other.” She claims, “It’s pretty much equal, and if we don’t take care of our bodies then our soul can’t do what it was meant to.”

Laura Rotter similarly sees yoga as a means for adding a physical dimension to the spiritually rich aspects of Judaism that are often overlooked. She explains that meaning often gets forgotten in the repetition of memorized rituals and mumbled prayers. An example she gives is the morning blessings, which are a series of codified statements thanking God that must
be said every morning, such as “Thank you God for restoring sight to my eyes, for straightening the crooked, for giving power to the weary,” and so on. Rotter explains:

If you grow up an Orthodox kid, you say it by rote to some sort of melody. But if you get up and do a sun salutation, think about what you’re saying, suddenly you have gratitude. It’s a gratitude practice. It’s unbelievably a part of our tradition but nobody pays any attention to it. It’s just like a bunch of prayers. I think that Jewish yoga is one way of tapping into a lot of the beauty that’s already in Judaism that people don’t pay attention to.

Here, the physical form of yoga is applied to a Jewish practice with the intention of enhancing spiritual experience by making it more physically engaging and therefore tangible. Rotter’s efforts and those of my other informants thus exhibit an approach to yoga that is primarily interested in its physical aspects. For them, Judaism already contains a valid, rewarding system of beliefs and spiritual wisdom within its textual dogma that is further enhanced when embodied through yoga practice. While some informants discussed their engagement with the philosophical and spiritual tenets of yoga, yoga’s embodied approach to facilitating spiritual experience was most frequently emphasized as the most important way in which yoga complements Jewish life.

Domestication by Cross-Ethnicization (Judaicization)

The methods of my non-Orthodox informants resembled those apparent in Jewish yoga literature in their efforts to Judaicize yoga through re-textualization. Nearly all the methods I discussed with my informants or witnessed in their classes created Jewish yoga practice through the application of Jewish textual material to the physical form of yoga. I interviewed two of the authors discussed in the previous chapter, including Edith Brotman and Marcus Freed. Many of
my other informants used methods similar to those already discussed, maintaining yoga’s physical structure while applying Jewish religious content through textual integration.

Overall, the most basic and common way that non-Orthodox teachers infuse Judaism into yoga practice is through the extended application of a Jewish-centered theme to focus the class. Many of my informants discussed how pulling a theme from current events and holidays in the Jewish calendar, the daily Torah portion, or other Jewish concepts can transform yoga into the realm of Jewish mindfulness. Laura Rotter took this approach in centering one of the classes I attended on the recent commencement of the Jewish month of Elul, which is a time of repentance and self-awareness leading up to the high holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Using this as a source of inspiration, Rotter directed the class in a practice focused on developing awareness of parts of our bodies that we usually neglect. This theme was integrated throughout the class with consistent reminders to be aware of specific places of bodily tension and release them.

Rotter also played Jewish music throughout the class, a technique that she learned from Robin Wald. Wald views music as a crucial component for setting a uniquely Jewish tone for a class, as she explained to me that “Music has a very powerful influence on what emotions arise, on how your body feels, on how or which direction your spiritual self opens to.” It follows that playing Jewish music during a yoga class can thus serve as a means for opening participants in the direction of Jewish contemplation and experience as opposed to Hindu or other religious creeds. During Rotter’s class, a constant playlist of Jewish songs in both Hebrew and English interspersed her vocal instructions with another layer of specifically Jewish motivation. The playlist included what seemed to be hymns and songs produced in a popular, contemporary vein that progressed from quietly introspective to joyfully exuberant by the culmination of the class.
Rotter then brought her class to a close by asking participants to meditate in sivasana on an interpretation of an excerpt from the Torah Book of Psalms that she read aloud. This incorporation of scripture served as a final point of focus on the theme developed throughout the class, emphasizing its origins in Jewish tradition.

Rotter explained theme as the primary and most significant means by which she Judaicizes yoga, saying of her teaching style, “At the end of the day, you’re talking about a theme. The asana is the asana. The poses are the poses.” In other words, application of a Jewish theme to a yoga class is necessary to transform asana practice into a Jewish experience. Furthermore, the absolute tone with which Rotter describes the static nature of yoga asanas as physical poses evinces a lack of interest or agency in adapting classical yoga postures in any way. Again, it seems that the physical form of yoga is not perceived as a permissible or appealing area for adaptation or cross-ethnicization. The poses remain the poses while Jewish themes intellectually transform their practice into a Jewish spiritual activity. This attitude is also exemplified in Rotter’s substitution of “Amen” for the customary Hindu acknowledgement of respect, “Namaste,” that yoga teachers and students typically say to each other at the end of a yoga class. Through this textual substitution, Rotter further emphasizes her Jewish yoga class as a form of Jewish prayer, thereby cross-ethnicizing physical yoga practice with a Jewish ritual focus.

Marcus Freed also takes a thematic approach to leading Jewish yoga classes, though he encourages more collective vocal participation through chanting and recitation. In a class I attended that he led at a retreat for rabbis studying Mussar, Freed began the class with a chant of “Shalom” rather than “Om.” Through this substitution, Freed actively welcomed his students to

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^9 All information regarding Marcus Freed’s practice was obtained through in-person interviews and participation in a class he led at rabbi’s retreat on July 20, 2015.
engage in a specifically Jewish form of yoga practice. He also supplied each participant with a resource sheet that included Torah excerpts and other quotations centered on the Mussar trait of lovingkindness. He advised participants to keep the paper close to our yoga mats, inciting us at several points throughout the class to join in reciting the quotes out loud in Hebrew or in English. These direct insertions of lengthy scripture into yoga classes exemplify most closely the methods of extended reading and contemplation set forth in Jewish yoga literature.

Both Ida Unger and Melissa Kurtz align yoga asanas with the shapes of Hebrew letters in ways similar to the Aleph-Bet method. In 2011, Unger published a poster entitled “Sacred Shapes,” (Fig. 2) featuring photos of herself exercising Iyengar yoga poses that in association
with each of the Hebrew letters. During our interview, she was very insistent in emphasizing that all of the poses included on the poster were classical Iyengar postures and had not been adapted to accommodate the Hebrew letters. Rather, she cited the fact that a classical Iyengar asana could be found to match every Hebrew letter as evidence that the two spiritual systems are inherently compatible. This emphasis on preserving the physical structure of yoga while aligning it with the pure forms of Hebrew text points to a concern with maintaining the separate legitimacy of each tradition despite seeking confluence between them.

**Common Trends and Methods among Orthodox and Non-Orthodox Teachers**

**Secular Exposure to Yoga**

Interestingly, most of my informants first came into contact with yoga for reasons unassociated with their Jewish life. Their initial participation in yoga can be seen as a symptom of yoga’s general rise in popularity in the United States, occurring outside of specifically Jewish social spaces. Sarede Switzer sought out yoga DVDs for fitness, Marcus Freed happened to take his first practice as part of an acting class, Jacki Routenstein and Ida Unger began practicing in health clubs, and Robin Wald and Melissa Kurtz began exploring yoga in college. Both Edith Brotman and Laurie Wolko recall starting yoga classes only to realize later that many of the participants in their classes and beyond were also Jewish. Essentially, these people came to yoga classes for much the same reasons as any of the other millions of Americans who have done so in the past several decades.

For those who responded to this exposure with cross-ethnicized Jewish yoga pursuits, the idea of connecting yoga directly with Jewish religious practice came only after they had been
involved with yoga for a time. As Robin Wald explains, “There’s a community of people who are like, ‘Hey, this is not separate. Our Judaism and our Jewish spiritual practice isn’t separate from our yoga practice because we’re just one spiritual being. We’re one soul and we’re not compartmentalized. If we are nourishing our soul through Jewish practice, or through prayer practice, or meditation, or through yoga, it all comes together.’”

Wald thus casts the creation of Jewish yoga practice as arising directly from a personal desire to feel whole in her spiritual practice despite the fact that it draws from separate cultural traditions. She practiced yoga separately from any form of Jewish worship for years before a deep familiarity with yoga practice prompted an interest in syncretizing the two systems. Thus, for Jewish yoga teachers like Wald, the motivation for articulating an elective affinity between Judaism and yoga originates in personal spiritual experiences. This fact is supported by previously discussed narratives provided by many of my informants who often recall specific points in time after their mastery of yoga and especially in their transitions to teaching when the possibility of Judaicizing their yoga practice became evident to them.

Entrepreneurial Lay People with Backgrounds in Education

Another notable commonality across my informant base is that they are all lay people in that they are not rabbis, cantors, or members of the clergy. In my research I have come across a total of four clergy members who are teachers of Jewish yoga, including Rabbi Myriam Klotz of the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. In general, though, teachers of Jewish yoga are overwhelmingly part of the Jewish lay population. This is interesting because it means that the motivations and methods of Jewish yoga have thus far been developed primarily outside of traditional structures of organized Jewish religion. However, this relationship is not necessarily
oppositional, as Jewish yoga teachers are often hired by synagogues and other organizations to teach classes, and as all of the teachers I have interviewed remain involved in the activities of their congregations.

Teaching Jewish yoga involves an aspect of faith fostering and education that mirrors the duties of a religious leader. Laura Rotter explains that she is proud of the intensive knowledge of Jewish texts she gained from her Orthodox upbringing and enjoys sharing this wisdom with others in her community. Teaching Jewish yoga, she says, is “my way of being a rabbi without going to rabbinical school.” Many of the other teachers I interviewed share similar passions for education, some of them having extended professional experience as educators. Edith Brotman, for instance, obtained a Ph.D. in Sociology and teaches at a university. Both Jacki Routenstein and Ida Unger have Master’s Degrees in Education, and Routenstein taught at Hebrew day schools while Unger taught in public schools. Laurie Wolko was also a public schoolteacher and administrator, and Melissa Kurtz and Robin Wald also teach at Hebrew day schools. Thus an interest in educating others is often related to becoming a teacher of yoga in general and certainly a Jewish yoga teacher in particular. Furthermore, teaching Jewish yoga can serve as an alternative path to taking on a position of religious mentorship.

As my discussion of the lives of my informants may have already made clear, though, teaching yoga is not the sole source of income for any of my informants. Many either currently hold other employment or have so in the past and are now entering a stage of retirement. Income from teaching yoga to Jewish clients is often inconsistent and varied, as it often takes the form of contracts or arrangements with organizations such as synagogues, schools, conferences, retreats, and private clients for a limited series of classes. The only two teachers who operate their own studios are Jacki Routenstein and Laura Rotter, and both of their studios are built within their
homes. Routhenstein admitted that she was set on building a home studio because she feared the burden of paying rent might cause her to go out of business depending on interest level in her classes. Most of my informants gain most of their income from either teaching yoga consistently to general audiences at yoga studios, or from other professional careers that they maintain outside of their yoga endeavors. Thus while there are opportunities to make money from teaching and publishing material on Jewish yoga, the demand is generally not consistent or large enough to occupy a teacher’s full time.

A Predominantly Female, Middle-Aged Clientele

Across the board, my informants stated that the majority of participants in their adult classes were women, and that they also tended to be at the age of 40 or above. The one area of exception for these trends is school programming, as several informants, including Melissa Kurtz, Robin Wald, and Ida Unger, have taught yoga at Jewish day schools. In regards to the Orthodox sector, while Switzer’s classes do draw in a fair deal of younger women, Routhenstein’s classes were composed entirely of married women, nearly all of whom were in their 40s and 50s. She attributed this phenomenon to the fact that young mothers are often too engrossed in the duties of motherhood to afford the leisurely activity of weekly yoga classes, saying, “Most of the people I’m getting have grown children. [Their children are] not necessarily ‘grown-grown,’ like in their 20s and out of the house, but at least teenagers.”

Routhenstein relates this observation to a general social trend in which women do not tend to get involved in community social events and organizations until they are beyond their 20s and past the point of caring for young children. At this point, she explains, women have more free time to devote to their own interests and health. Taking this time for self-care, however,
often challenges traditional ideals of womanhood and family. Routhenstein perceives this as an obstacle to attracting new clients, explaining, "The thing is getting them out of the realm of being the Jewish mother, having to take care of the whole world." This can be an issue not only in terms of time, but also in terms of finances, as many women and their families do not have funds available or budgeted for such personal activities. As Routhenstein began offering classes for free, many women came who later stopped when she began charging admission. Until recently, she offered a free community class once a week in conjunction with another yoga-teacher-in-training that was her most highly attended class.

A demographic majority of middle-aged women is evident in non-Orthodox Jewish yoga classes as well. All of the participants in the two classes I attended led by Laura Rotter were women. Marcus Freed’s class at the rabbi’s retreat included several men, but the majority were women and most of the men who participated had never done yoga before. All of my non-Orthodox informants relayed that their classes tended to be composed mostly of women. For the most part, my informants felt that this gender imbalance was a product not of attitudes specific to their communities, but rather of more general trends in yoga practice, where women constitute the majority of participants in the U.S. and Europe. As for age, all of the women in Laura Rotter’s classes were around middle age, as were the rabbis in Marcus Freed’s class. Edith Brotman said that her classes also tend to be mostly middle-aged, and that though she gets some young students, she is concerned about interest in Jewish yoga being just a middle-aged movement. In regards to the fact that her classes at a local synagogue drew a middle-aged crowd, Robin Wald was unsure of the cause but postulated, “My experience is that younger women want the real physical workout and they’re not in the same space in their lives to really know necessarily to pursue the more intellectual or more spiritual side of things.”
While Wald is unsure of why Jewish yoga attracts a largely middle-aged demographic, she speaks authoritatively on why women are so involved in Jewish yoga practice, saying:

I think the fact that women have been more than ever now the consumers of fitness has changed the culture around fitness and maybe is what’s made it possible for the body to be included in spiritual practice... I think the fact that women are so involved in religion now, and women are so involved in fitness—it’s a natural crossover. I actually think women are the biggest consumers of this kind of joint effort.

Wald’s analysis thus casts women as more likely than men to perceive and become involved in the articulation of elective affinities between physical and spiritual practice. This tendency seems to be apparent in my findings, though they are certainly also influenced by yoga’s distinctly feminized popularization in the Western world.

**Domestication by Re-Textualization**

The major methodological current that runs through both Orthodox and non-Orthodox approaches to yoga is that they all seek to domesticate yoga primarily through adaptations in textual material. Orthodox teachers de-Hinduize yoga by stripping away text that holds religious connotations, while non-Orthodox teachers cross-ethnicize yoga by adding supplementary Jewish textual materials. In neither case is the physical structure of yoga considered as a source for possible adaptation. This avoidance of altering yoga’s physical technique stems from yoga’s popularization in the West as a decontextualized practice defined primarily by its physical nature. Furthermore, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox methods of domesticating yoga emphasize intentionality as the major factor in determining what sort of meaning yoga practice takes on. Again, the deletion and addition of textual content is harnessed as the most effective means for orienting yoga practice either away from Hindu or toward Jewish religious experience.
Conclusion

Summary of Main Arguments

This study has engaged with Jewish yoga literature and ethnographic data gathered from fieldwork with Jewish yoga teachers to understand motivations for and methods of domesticating yoga as they vary across Jewish religious communities. I have argued that the confluence of Judaism and yoga can be understood as the culmination of an elective affinity that has developed between these two spiritual traditions over time. Yoga’s popularization in the West as a secularized method of physical fitness and mindfulness marketed specifically to women coincided with several related cultural developments in American Judaism. Among these was a movement in Jewish Renewal beginning in the 1970s that emphasized embodiment and consultation of foreign, specifically Eastern, religious methods as means for reinvigorating Jewish spirituality. In addition, rising interest in Kabbalistic theories of the body as a microcosm of God’s holiness, increased involvement of Jews in secular sports and other fitness activities, and the proliferation of ideological narratives promoting the cultivation of Jewish physical strength as a means of countering oppression and stereotyped weakness rendered the body a newly central topic of interest for American Jews. The increasing confluence of these developments in Judaism and yoga made yoga a widely accessible activity for many Jewish people by the 1990s.

Articulation of this elective affinity eventually occurred in projects undertaken by Jewish practitioners of yoga that sought to further domesticate already Westernized forms of yoga for specifically Jewish contexts. The narratives offered by authors of Jewish yoga books and by my own informants indicate that most eventual teachers of Jewish yoga first encountered yoga in secular environments. Motivations for domesticating yoga often came to yoga teachers after
they had gained significant experience teaching yoga and could then articulate their own goals for their practice and education of others. It was in these individual experiences of simultaneous mastery of yoga and dedication to Jewish community or religious values that articulation of the elective affinity between the two became possible.

Methods of domesticating yoga for Jewish practice range considerably from teacher to teacher, and these varied approaches are often related to denominational affiliations. I primarily discuss the differences in methodology that exist between teachers active in Orthodox versus non-Orthodox communities. In general, Orthodox teachers stress secularization and de-Hinduization of yoga to avoid what may be construed as “idol worship” or challenges to traditional religious authority. Non-Orthodox teachers are comparatively less interested in de-Hinduizing yoga because they are interested in using yoga as a foreign spiritual resource that complements their Jewish faith. As a result, they undertake substantial projects of cross-ethnicizing or Judaicizing yoga in order to create a syncretized, specifically Jewish spiritual practice for Jewish yoga practitioners.

In both Orthodox and non-Orthodox approaches to domesticating yoga, the physical technique of yoga is maintained, while the textual content associated with postures is adapted. Orthodox teachers typically see the textual content of yoga as the sole point of controversy regarding Hindu associations, abandoning Sanskrit and other terms for poses that allude to Hindu worship while maintaining the poses themselves as acceptable for Jews to practice. Non-Orthodox methods of domestication similarly maintain the physical technique of yoga without seeking to adapt it. Rather, cross-ethnicization of yoga is accomplished through the application of Jewish textual content to its established physical form. This method of re-textualization most often involves the substitution of purely Jewish content for formerly Hindu aspects, though
syncretism between the spiritual doctrines of Judaism and yoga is sometimes sought. Generally, the distinction in adaptation between yoga as the physical and Judaism as the textual component of this syncretic pairing maintains a level of separation between the two systems. Thus, both Judaism and yoga are emphasized as distinctive spiritual systems despite their combination into the single form of Jewish yoga practice.

**Implications**

This thesis has introduced new, original ways of thinking about contemporary practices of religious and cultural syncretism, as well as brought up compelling methodologies from established yet neglected scholarship that support such understanding. My development of the term cross-ethnicization presents a framework for analyzing projects of domestication that go beyond established theories of such processes. Most anthropological and sociological scholarship on this area imagines domestication as ceasing with the ultimate decontextualization and de-ethnicization of the cultural product in question. For example, Altglas (2014) sees the primary goal of domesticating exotic religious resources on behalf of individuals in industrial societies as self-realization and integration into a personal religious outlook. However, the case of Jewish yoga serves as a compelling example of the ways in which decontextualized cultural traditions can be cross-ethnicized to take on a new collective, ethnic meaning. Acknowledgment and understanding of such processes may become increasingly necessary for understanding the ways in which people and identity groups confront decontextualized cultural products as our world is increasingly globalized.

Furthermore, my engagement of Max Weber’s (2003 [1905]) theory of elective affinity as subsequently developed by Michael Löwy (1992) stresses the complex dialectical
relationships between cultural formations that characterize the historical process of their mutual confluence to the point of syncretism. The model of elective affinity provides a useful way for understanding how personal projects of syncretism are situated within a longer historical progression that positions syncretized cultural components in relation to each other over time. This balance of historical context with individual agency of *bricoleurs* offers a comprehensive framework for inclusion of both the macro- and micro-level developments at work in bringing diverse cultural products into conversation with one another.

Finally, this thesis has explored in Jewish yoga a relatively unexamined area of syncretic religious practice. Offering only a general overview of some of the methods that are undertaken by creators of Jewish yoga and the origins of these methods in denominational divisions within Judaism, this study indicates a path for further research. Areas left largely unexamined by this study include male practice of Jewish yoga as well as participant, rather than teacher, perspectives. The cultural transformations that may take place within the realm of Jewish yoga practice in the future are especially interesting to consider. As founding Jewish yoga teachers develop larger followings and communities of practice that bring yoga to more and more Jewish people who otherwise have not participated in yoga, Jewish yoga may be increasingly codified as a cultural product, and engagement in the practice may become less actively syncretic for students and teachers. As teachers publish books and other materials encapsulating their methods, tendencies toward standardization are clear. Yet at the moment, the field of Jewish yoga remains dispersed and individuals pursue their own projects of syncretism with a high degree of independence.
Bibliography of Consulted Jewish Yoga Texts


Bibliography


