

## WEEKEND

# Life stressing you out? Help is on the way

We're living in an era of anxiety, confusion and lack of clarity about the future. What a good time to talk to Richard Davidson, who has a very simple suggestion for shoring up our mental resilience

Dani Bar On

Let's say you're holding a lump of Play-Doh in your hand. You want to shape it into a ball but you flatten it into a pita. The Play-Doh is your brain. If you hit it every day – you get a pita. What else could you expect to get?

"The science of training the mind is all based on the idea of neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity is a fancy term that basically just means that the brain is constantly changing in response to experience," says Richard Davidson, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and one of the world's leading scholars studying contemplation, emotions and the human brain. "Usually the forces around us are driving these changes, but when we train our minds, we're in the driver's seat. If we scatter enough short moments of practice throughout our day, we can actually rewire our brains to work in a healthy way."

In other words, everything that happens to us, from significant traumas to small annoyances caused by notification chirps from the phone, strikes the Play-Doh that is our brain. If there's one process going on, it's a good idea to confront it with a counter-process. The practice of meditation is a serum that works against the toxin that is poisoning Western consciousness, according to Davidson – and he knows where-of he speaks. His ideas are backed up by serious research.

"We know, from hard scientific evidence, that when we cultivate healthy habits of mind it actually changes our brain in ways that support the enduring qualities of wellbeing. That is an amazing fact that really does give us hope," he observes.

Just a minute, the reader is undoubtedly wondering: Is this yet another article about meditation and its wonders? We've heard it all before. Mindfulness. Paying attention to our breathing. Compassion. Enough already.

"I think the word 'meditation' can be off-putting for some people," says Davidson. "People have an image of someone sitting in a lotus position, contorting themselves on a cushion. We don't have to call it meditation, let's call it 'human flourishing.' How many of your readers brush their teeth every day?"

*Ninety-nine percent.*

"Okay. If they can brush their teeth, they can do this, because they can do it while they're brushing their teeth! You don't have to spend more time. The scientific data shows that you don't need to sit for three or four hours a day, you don't even need to sit for 10 minutes a day. We and other scientists have evidence to show that even five minutes can have enormous effects, particularly if you do it every day. What we say to a person is, 'Please pick an amount of time about which you think you can make an unswerving commitment every day, and do the practice for 30 days even if it's just for one minute.'"

*One minute?*

"One minute is perfectly fine. If you asked your reader-ship which they consider more important – their teeth or their mind – I bet you the vast majority would say their mind is more important than their teeth, yet we don't respect our mind in the same way we treat our teeth. I believe that within the next 10 years we will look back on this era and we won't be able to believe how unconscious we were as a society, in not regarding this as being as important as it is."

Davidson, 71, is the founder and director of the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin. The well-worn superlative "world-renowned" is a bit small for him, since he is in fact one of the pioneering scholars who founded the field of contemplative science. To a substantial degree, the 3,000 studies that are published every year about mindfulness meditation – a practice whose essence is focusing one's attention on the present moment – stem from the spring that he himself carved out of the rock. Davidson is the type of scientist who has both a reputation that is etched in concrete (some 160,000 scholarly citations, etc.) and who also appears as a guest on Oprah Winfrey's show, and who featured on Time magazine's 100-most-influential people list (in 2006).

According to Prof. Amit Bernstein, director of the Observing Minds Lab at the University of Haifa, Davidson is unrivaled in his field: "There is no one who can even come close to the scope, sophistication, boldness and influence of his center." Accompanying the American professor during his three-day visit to Israel last month, I was struck by the admiration expressed for him by his milieu. Everyone wants a minute of Richie's time.

The veteran researcher, who himself spends about a total of about one month annually on meditation retreats, and rubs elbows with the Dalai Lama, is not a sterile figure politically. He signed a petition calling for the failed 2012 recall of Scott Walker, who was at the time the right-wing Republican governor of Wisconsin, and he identifies (in a way that apparently goes beyond pure sympathy) with Israelis who are now fighting the government's judicial upheaval plans. He thinks the protesters would do well, both for the benefit of the struggle and also for themselves individually, to exert a minimal amount of energy to the practice meditation, because it will spawn energetic dividends down the line.

How does one concentrate during meditation when it's barely possible to concentrate on the news, I asked Davidson.

"I can empathize with your situation; I know that for me too it has often been challenging not to be distracted by the latest news. The situation is incredibly challenging – it's tragic in many ways, and it was very tragic also for us in the United States [during the Trump years]. We just need to not give the media control over our minds. The media is very effective in capturing our attention, but we need to steer our own minds. And the situation only gets worse when we succumb to the distractions all around us. We need to do our best not to allow Bibi Netanyahu to set the agenda. I think that it will provide vitality to those of you in Israel."

...

Born into a Jewish family in Brooklyn 71 years ago, Richard Davidson married his high-school sweetheart and earned his doctorate at Harvard. In the 1970s he entered the gates of Buddhism in the wake of friends who had embarked

on that path, whose behavior enchanted him ("I wanted to find out what their secret sauce was"). But when he set out to combine Buddhist practices with research, his teachers told him that it was "a terrible way to start a scientific career." Back then, the scientific study of meditation seemed like a surefire way to be awarded the Ig Nobel Prize, if that honor had existed at the time. So Davidson focused on a more conventional subject – the neural basis of emotions and of such disorders as depression and anxiety – and scored some impressive achievements.

The turning point in Davidson's professional life came in 1992, when he met the Dalai Lama, the revered leader of Tibetan Buddhism, for the first time. "He asked me why I didn't use the tools of modern neuroscience to do research on good-heartedness, compassion and happiness. That was my wake-up call." At first the American scholar approached the most experienced meditators – Tibetan monks – who "lent" him their brains so he could examine their attributes. The scientific logic was that if he didn't find clear-cut differences between them and other people, there would be little point in checking what happens in the minds of people who are less dedicated to contemplative practices.

The results were earthshaking. Not only did the Tibetan monks report incalculable subjective happiness; their ability to concentrate, as reflected in certain patterns of brainwaves, was above and beyond anything previously known. It was found that the gray matter of their brains was compressed like a truffle, the brain was younger than its chronological age, and plenty more. The monks also possessed the ability to recover astonishingly quickly from adversity.

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In an impressive study from 2012, Davidson and his team compared longtime meditators with much less experienced ones. The subjects were all told that they would hear a warning beep and that 10 seconds later they would feel pain. In MRI scans, the novice meditators' brains lit up like spotlights in a stadium as soon as they heard the beep; they experienced anxiety while the pain was inflicted and then slowly and gradually grew calm. Among the group of experienced meditators, no special activity was registered when they heard the beep; indeed, they seemed to maintain a stoic peacefulness. When pain was inflicted on them, their brains lit up like everyone else's but only for a very short time, after which absolute calm returned. "That is the neurological signature of mental resilience," suggests Davidson, "and it's something that can be learned."

Brains that have meditated for tens of thousands of hours can be likened to sophisticated racing cars. Anyone who owns a brain will be drawn to data like this, in the same way that the owner of a Mazda Lantis will enjoy reading about the amazing performance of Formula 1 cars. But on the assumption that most of us will never come close to that mileage, what can we nevertheless gain from meditation, which – truth be told – frequently seems to be more boring and off-putting than many other activities?

The bad news is that it seems that the brain structure does not change so easily. That was one of the findings of a study conducted last May by Davidson and his colleagues, which found that a standard nine-month course in mindfulness does not have that impact – contrary to results obtained by other scientists. Davidson's enthusiasm for the subject of his research ("I get up every morning with fire in my belly") has not blinded him to such results, but it did emerge, on the margins of that study, that the amygdala – located in the temporal lobe of the brain and considered to be its fear center – did begin to shrink among those who meditated more



Richard Davidson. He advocates cultivating compassion for all human beings – from those we love most all the way to Chanamel Dorfman, Itamar Ben-Gvir's chief of staff. That doesn't mean we are not allowed to get angry.

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regularly at home. Another enlightening study showed that the frontal lobe, which manages the brain, starts to thicken after about three months of mindfulness practice.

Even if the brain's structure is in no hurry to change, its patterns of activity may be. For example, it was found that even for someone who has been practicing meditation for only a few days, when the brain is at rest, an increase in activity can be seen in the neural pathway that connects the region identified with wandering thoughts with another region that is associated with attention control – which could indicate a certain improvement in the ability to focus oneself. These and other findings are the basis for Davidson's promise that he can rewire your brain.

At present, the researcher is examining another promising direction: whether meditation by pregnant women will have a beneficial effect on epigenetic changes – that is, in modification of gene regulation – in the fetus. "There are clear scientific findings about intergenerational transmission of the effects of trauma through epigenetic mechanisms," he says. "We want to examine whether there is also intergenerational transmission of happiness."

The positive implications of meditative practices for both mind and body are well documented. A gargantuan survey of 44 meta-analyses, published two years ago by Richardson's Center for Healthy Minds, encompassing the results of hundreds of studies, in which a total of 30,000 subjects participated, found that mindfulness-based interventions are effective treatment for a very broad spectrum of problems, from breaking the smoking habit to coping with chronic pain. The researchers concluded that in most cases these interventions are at least as effective as medication or cognitive-behavioral psychological therapy, "both immediately after the treatment and in follow-up." For its part, England's Department of Health and Social Care officially recommends mindfulness courses as a first-line treatment for non-severe depression.

The problem is that it's apparently easier to take a pill than to meditate regularly. Accordingly, Davidson spends much of his time working on enhancing accessibility: That is, in recent years he has come up with a free and friendly app called the Healthy Minds Program, which is intended to strengthen what he terms "the four pillars of wellbeing." Practicing mindfulness bolsters only one of them: awareness. (We'll get to the other three later.)

Strengthening awareness and attention is more critical now than ever, says Davidson. He frequently quotes a 2010 study conducted at Harvard, in which researchers examined what subjects were doing when the former sent them a message: How much they were enjoying what they were doing, and how focused they were on it. The subjects were found to be distracted 47 percent of the time.

"We'll repeat that figure, in case you were distracted," says Dr. Cortland Dahl, a colleague of Davidson's, in his charmingly narration that accompanies the app's meditation exercises. "Well, 47 percent of the time! The data were collected in the first decade of the century, before the smartphone era. Now it's probably worse." In an interview with the Hebrew edition of Haaretz in March, Prof. Gloria Mark, who studies how digital media affects our attention span, noted that the ability to concentrate has declined considerably since the rise of smartphones – although even today, half of our distractions are internally generated.

In any event, the more interesting finding of the Harvard study, conducted by psychologists Matthew Killingsworth and Daniel Gilbert, was that the subjects reported that they enjoyed themselves more when engaged in activities in which they said they were focused, even if the activities themselves were boring. Accordingly, the prestigious journal Science titled their article "A wandering mind is an unhappy mind."

There are at least 50 good studies showing that it's possible to strengthen meta-awareness – the ability to be conscious of your own thoughts – Davidson says. "People think they know what their mind is doing, but they don't," he explains. "Did you ever read a book and after a few minutes you didn't have any idea what you just read, and couldn't remember the details of the mind wandering either?"

*Yes, but isn't it tiring to live in a state of meta-awareness all the time?*

"At first, yes, but afterward it becomes effortless." The professor also stresses that meta-awareness does not adversely affect the ability to enter into a state of "flow," that coveted situation of being immersed in a particular experience, which happens sometimes when things go well for you on the job or you give yourself over to a movie. "Meta-awareness is not necessary for flow, but it doesn't interfere with it, either," Davidson says.

## Buddhists on Kaplan

People who have gone to the weekly anti-government protests in Tel Aviv in recent months have seen a peculiar sight. In the midst of all the chaos, the crowding and blaring plastic horns, a few dozen Israelis, dressed in white cotton garb, sat on the ground, their eyes closed, and they meditated. A small smile hovered on the lips of some of them, like someone who has just managed to find their favorite oat milk on the supermarket shelf. Some placed one hand over their heart. The meditation circles in the demonstrations, which by now have become a tradition, stir mixed feelings. "Such sweethearts," wrote Dr. Esther Peled, one of the leading intellectuals in the Israeli Buddhism field, when she encountered a similar group at a demonstration outside the prime minister's residence on Balfour Street in Jerusalem in 2020. "[But] in a time of crisis there is no place for meditation, you have to get up and take action."

Davidson admitted with some embarrassment that he doesn't have an opinion about meditating during demonstrations, but he has no doubt that overall, the exercises he is proposing can oil the wheels of the protest movement. They are, to use a different metaphor, a capsule of focus, of energy, of intensity, of determination and of persistence, which are likely to be the most necessary attributes in the months ahead.

"There is this stereotype that meditation and related practices produce a kind of withdrawal from the real world," he observes. "The evidence, however, suggests just the opposite. Nelson Mandela did a lot of meditating during his 22 years in prison, according to his autobiography. That really helped him become a more effective leader."

Demonstrations, as hundreds of thousands of Israelis have come to know first-hand, can be wearing. "Burn-out can express itself as health problems, as excessive fatigue,



Davidson at a 2007 meeting with the Dalai Lama. He says meeting the Buddhist leader was a wake-up call. "He asked me why I didn't use the tools of neuroscience to study good-heartedness, compassion and happiness."

Tenzin Lhuwang/AFP



or just as irritability. Meditation can be helpful in preserving the energy and vitality of social activism. [These are] skills of resilience, so by burning out I mean just becoming exhausted. And sometimes it can express itself as health problems, other times it can express itself as excessive fatigue. Other times it can express itself as just irritability. So these are not going to be productive and will interfere with a person's ability to be an effective change agent."

*Even so, with violence in the streets surging, is this a time to let up – maybe meditative energy isn't what we need just now?*

"I think it will provide really good energy – that is, strong, fierce, focused and nonviolent. Nonviolence and compassion don't mean softness."

Echoes of the situation in Israel were also felt in a workshop Davidson led at a conference of the Center for Compassionate Mindful Education, which was held last month at Tel Aviv University – and the principal reason for his visit to Israel. The attendees addressed him not only as a brain researcher but also as a spiritual leader, a wise elder and as an openly identifying Democrat who survived four years under the Trump administration.

"How do you cope with a government like that, it's so difficult?" a woman asked him in despair. "How do you wage a struggle without entering a mental state of war?" another participant wanted to know. Davidson tried in his way to raise the morale. "It's not going to be an easy road. One of my meditation teachers often says, 'The road to Lhasa [capital of Tibet] goes up and down.' But it's really important that we preserve to the extent that we can our hope for the future, that we continue to fight for what is right, and not give up."

The practice that Davidson advocates includes, naturally, cultivating compassion for all human beings – from those we love most all the way to Chanamel Dorfman, chief of staff of National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir. But that doesn't mean we are not allowed to get angry.

"Moral anger certainly plays an important role in social change," Davidson acknowledges. "I think the key here is that the anger or moral outrage not be directed toward a person, but rather toward the actions the person might be engaged in. The actions could be morally reprehensible, but the actor is still a human being. So, it's really an occasion for compassion, because any person who is committing immoral acts is really doing it out of delusion, out of confusion."

Everyone in the workshop laughed when another participant asked Davidson: "There are so many types of courses for learning meditation, but are there also courses for politicians?" Davidson's reply: "There was a member of Congress, indeed a progressive, who organized a mindfulness group in Congress, and right-wingers came to it, too." Almost automatically, the imagination conjures up the following scene: MK Limor Son Har-Melech (Otzma Yehudit) is sitting, eyes closed, on a meditation cushion, flanked on one side by MK Mickey Levy (Yesh Atid) and on the other by MK Aida Toumah-Sliman (Hadash-Ta'al). The lights are dimmed. Har-Melech's eyes open and meet the eyes of Toumah-Sliman. Will the two proceed to the Knesset cafeteria for a cup of lemon-verbena infusion? Does the Knesset cafeteria even serve lemon-verbena infusion?

### Mere minutes

"In just a few minutes each day you can train your mind and even rewire your brain to be more focused, more resilient, and feel a deep sense of connection and purpose," says Cortland Dahl in his soothing voice, in the three-minute talk that serves to introduce the Healthy Minds Program app, to which I committed myself a month ago for at least one daily meditation session. "This has the potential to completely transform how you deal with stressful situations at work and at home. These skills will teach you how to use the natural capacities of your own mind to the fullest." Stay with it, he urges, you are already on the way to a healthier and more balanced mind. Say what you will about the Americans – they know how to make promises.

The app consists of short lessons of four to seven minutes, and of modular meditations ranging from five minutes to half an hour, a rich weave of knowledge and easy practice that is easy to digest and convenient to implement. The exercises come in two versions: seated or active, the latter for those who wish to meditate during activity they are engaged in anyway. Dahl and Davidson constantly urge us to practice meditation when we are resting, swimming, cleaning the toilet bowl or delousing a child – to just do it.

'I do the flower and candle exercise,' says a girl of about 10 wearing pink-framed glasses. 'I breathe in like I'm smelling a flower, and breathe out like I'm putting out a candle. That helps me when I'm stressed or I get upset.'

In one session, Dahl explains that meditating while one is engaged in routine activity is not inferior to seated meditation. On the contrary, it possesses a special virtue, because it strengthens the neural connection between that activity and meditative observation. Neurons that fire together wire together," he says. The fact that Davidson is placing his full academic reputation behind the practice, and assures us that it's all backed up by scientific research, naturally enhances the draw of meditation. For example, one study he conducted found that five minutes of practice a day with the app, over a period of 30 days, will reduce one's distress indices by 25 percent and catapult wellbeing by 15 percent. It also doesn't hurt that the whole thing is free.

The app devotes equal attention to each of four pillars of wellbeing because, according to Davidson, all four can be practiced and all of them are equally important to improving well-being. Besides awareness, which was mentioned above, there are exercises to cultivate "connection" (compassion and the like), "purpose" (finding the association between your bland life and your lofty values) and "insight" (identifying our inner narrative). The human mind tells stories, invents all sorts of things, Dahl says in one of the lessons. Classic brain studies showed that the left lobe, which houses the brain's verbal region, tends to expostulate, fire off monologues, float verbiage, explanations, ideas and theories, also about things that happen in the right lobe about which it doesn't have a clue.

Everyone has an inner voice that represents the narrative about oneself. It's the voice that explains, for example, that your interlocutor yawned because "I'm a boring person" (and not because their baby didn't sleep all night). "It's a recipe for depression," Davidson says, and suggests an exercise that aspires to undercut that narrative, to replace some of its exclamation marks with question marks.

Not all the app's exercises suited me to the same degree, but even so I felt, at times at least, as if something in my heart and my consciousness was shifting. During my evening run, when I was asked to transfer the eye of consciousness from the soles of my feet to actual vision, to hearing and back again, I felt as though a strip of dust that had accumulated on hidden attentiveness muscles was falling away. I didn't get along at all with the compassion meditation – I have a journalist's hard heart, after all – but even so, I found myself giving more money to junkies on the street.

With their active approach and short lessons, Dahl and Davidson have eased the introduction of effective meditation into



A visit to Lod's Levi Eshkol school, selected for a mindfulness program because it seemed like it was the most in need of it.

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everyday life. "Effective," it should be noted, doesn't mean "enjoyable." I noticed, for example, that on the first days of doing the practice I was more attentive to my own stress when I looked after my little children, and that was a very small pleasure indeed. You promised well-being, I said to Davidson, so when does the fun begin? He laughed heartily.

"Your experience is common," he said. "We just finished some research, which hasn't been published yet, showing that after the first week of following the practice, people actually report feeling more anxiety, not less. That's because they are more aware of their stress and of the chaotic nature of their minds. The fun begins gradually. Step by step, you loosen up. You are more able to ride the waves of life's slings and arrows. But it takes time, it doesn't come immediately."

### 'I tell myself thanks'

One rainy Sunday morning in mid-March, the surrealism was working overtime. Davidson, in a light checked jacket, a button-down shirt and with a mane of graying curls, was sitting with his entourage in a conference room at the Levi Eshkol Primary School in an underprivileged neighborhood in Lod. Opposite him were 14 boys and girls, among them Arabs and Eritreans, playing "Hava Nagila" for the guests on melodica keyboards. They finish, the performance seems to be over, but then it turns out that there's another number. The teacher apologizes in a Russian-accented Hebrew.



DAVID GERSTEIN - "Soft Lips", 2023, mixed media, 113x113 cm

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## Blowing up the income tax department

Jewish Agency Executive, 37 Lilienblum Street

The visitors center of the Bank of Israel at 37 Lilienblum Street (corner of Nahalat Binyamin) is sandwiched today between Independence Hall and the Haganah Museum. The massive structure originally housed a credit bank and was acquired by the Histadrut's Solel Boneh construction company in 1939. During World War II, the Mandatory authorities expropriated the ground floor, where they installed the income tax offices and the recruitment bureau for the British Army.

In January 1941, the Jewish Agency Executive rented offices in the three-story building. The top floor was allotted to the aliyah department, while other Agency departments that had been scattered across the city were consolidated on the first floor. Moshe Sharett, head of the Political Department, ran a project to recruit volunteers for the British Army, and his local bureau was located on the second floor.

The location of his office was mentioned in a report that was sent after 35 discharged soldiers burst into it in order to make various demands of Sharett. In February 1942, Sharett, who was visiting Kibbutz Givat Brenner that day and did not meet them, refused to yield to the former soldiers' ultimatums. After a withering clash they stalked out, leaving behind historical verification of the location of Sharett's headquarters.

Although the Jewish Agency Executive generally held its meetings in the National Institutions compound in Jerusalem, beginning in February 1945, Ben-Gurion was sometimes forced to convene them in Tel Aviv, in the Agency's offices on Lilienblum Street – for example, during the siege of Jerusalem during the War of Independence.

Today there is no sign on the building explaining that it housed “the government of the state in the making” – the offices of the Jewish Agency – but its façade does bear a prominent plaque whose text is embarrassingly hyperbolic: “This building was erected on the ruins of the income tax offices of the British Mandate, which were destroyed in an Irgun operation on 3 Adar 5704 (27.2.1944).”

Although the offices were not in fact destroyed, and the original building is still intact, the incident referred to is definitely deserving of note, having taken place at the height of the war against Nazi Germany. Although tens of thousands of people from the Yishuv had been re-

cruited to the British Army by then, Menachem Begin declared a rebellion against the British Empire. To avoid casualties, so-called “real estate attacks” – on offices manned by Mandatory officials – were carried out on Saturday evenings, when no one was working. On February 26, the Mandate's income tax offices in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Haifa were attacked.

The Irgun probably singled out the tax departments to win the support of the citizenry, who bore the burden of taxation. According to press reports, at 8 P.M., the toilet on the ground floor of the building on Lilienblum Street was damaged by two grenades that were thrown in from the rear terrace, and at 9:30 P.M. two delayed-action bombs went off in the clerks' office.

“Almost no damage was caused, other than a few windows that were shattered in the building and a few [other] buildings in the area,” Haaretz reported. The attacks are important because they were a milestone in the annals of the Irgun's armed struggle, but over the years their significance was clearly inflated, as can be seen in the inscription on a plaque on the building's exterior.

The building's main importance in the history of the Yishuv is the fact that it housed the Jewish Agency Executive. But it also acquired notoriety in Israel's security pantheon on the “Night of the Bridges,” June 16-17, 1946 – the largest and most impressive operation carried out by the Jewish Resistance Movement: The Palmach, the Haganah's elite strike force, blew up 11 bridges that connected Palestine to its neighbors, from the Lebanese border through the Jordan River and down to Gaza. On that night, a General Staff forward command post – a kind of miniature High Command – was created in Sneh's office in the Jewish Agency building. The site was chosen because of the possibility of conducting close security checks on people entering and because it contained telephones.

Upon Israel's establishment, some of the departments of the Jewish Agency Executive became government ministries (defense, foreign affairs, finance), and their offices were transferred to the Kirya. In 1955, the Bank of Israel acquired the building on Lilienblum Street. Below the window of the then-governor of the bank, profiteers of the black market plied their trade unhindered.



37 Lilienblum Street. Mandatory authorities expropriated the ground floor, during World War II.

Tomer Appelbaum



President Samuel Doe, during a very productive visit to Israel in 1983, seen here with then-IDF chief of staff Moshe Levi (at left). Nati Hamik / GPO

## GREASING

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didn't want to forgo ties with Liberia. Thus, while Congress was imposing sanctions on the country, the administration looked for indirect ways to preserve its interests in Liberia. As in the case of the Iran-Contra affair (when Israel served as a conduit for the sale of U.S. weapons to the Islamic regime in Tehran, as well as passing the payments on to right-wing rebels in Central America), Israel took it upon itself to fill the shortages in the Doe regime's security needs, which the Reagan administration couldn't itself supply directly.

Contacts to renew relations began in 1982, but were unsuccessful, because leading members of Doe's military junta preferred the support of the Arab states and of the Soviet Union. The solution was found at the beginning of 1983. According to a series of cables, Israel's representative in Ivory Coast, Benad Avital, who represented Israel in contacts with Doe's regime, got a request to pay off five ranking figures in the junta in return for their support in renewing diplomatic relations with Israel. The five demanded a payment of \$25,000, which was to be split between them.

A dispute arose over whether to pay the bribe up front or only after the full restoration of relations. A compromise was reached, by which \$6,000 was paid in advance, and after the necessary authorizations were received in the Foreign Ministry, the rest of the money would be forwarded.

It wasn't only a lone cash payment. A cable sent by Avital to the financial department of the Foreign Ministry referred to the initiative as “Operation Gifts.” Among other requests, he sought reimbursement for a briefcase he had bought the Liberian army chief of staff for 30,000 West African CFA francs (then worth about \$50). He had also promised the army chief “a gold Star of David, a Hebrew-English Bible and a visit to the Holy Land at Israel's expense at a time of his choosing.”

In an April 1983 cable, Avital suggested completing payment of the outstanding \$19,000 of the bribe, explaining that “the requested sum is not large as grease for the wheel of important business.” The Foreign Ministry wasn't sure how to proceed, and decided to consult with the United States. In the end, with the mediation of the American ambassador to Liberia, Israel managed to arrange a meeting with Doe. At this stage, Israel stated that it was refusing to pay the rest of the bribe, because the task had been accomplished through the U.S. ambassador. Indeed, about a month later, Doe announced the resumption of diplomatic relations with Israel.

Following this development, combined with Liberia's renewed support for it in the UN, Israel, in coordination with Washington, renewed its aid to the country's

security forces, which were responsible for the domestic suppression. According to the cables, Israel decided to send a delegation to Liberia to survey the situation ahead of establishing and training a unit to combat guerrilla warfare. Israel also decided to supply the junta with a gift: ammunition worth \$100,000 to \$200,000.

In August 1983, Doe visited Israel, accompanied by an entourage that included the entire top ranks of the junta. They met with the prime minister, Menachem Begin, and with representatives of the Mossad, and visited military industries. During the visit a deal was struck with what was then called Israel Aircraft Industries for the purchase of four Arava transport aircraft by Liberia, and it was agreed that Israel's national carrier, El Al, would provide Liberia with two Boeing 707s in return for a maintenance services agreement with the airline. Following the visit of a Mossad team to Liberia, an agreement was reached under which the Israeli agency would establish and train a special force to guard President Doe and train police forces to deal with domestic disturbances.

In a meeting in Washington with representatives of the Liberian opposition, including members of Sirleaf's party, officials of the Israeli embassy were told emphatically that the perception among broad circles in Liberia was that “Israel constitutes Doe's main security prop,” including aid to what they termed “death squads.”

The Foreign Ministry cables reveal that the Mossad and the Israel Defense Forces established one of Doe's most murderous units, known as the Special Anti-Terrorist Unit (SATU). Its extensive and systematic violence is considered one of the major causes of the public ferment against Doe's regime and for the country's slide into civil war in 1989.

The unit's creation is mentioned for the first time in a cable sent by the director of the Africa Desk, Avi Primor, in January 1984. The document stated that the ammunition shipment had already left Israel and that Mossad representatives in Monrovia were preparing a plan to form a special anti-terrorism unit. A cable sent a year later by the ambassador to Liberia, Gavriel Gavrieli, noted that a “highly successful” training course of 17 members of the unit's commanders had “just now” ended. “We are about to send instructors of ours to assist them in forming the [army] company,” Gavriel wrote and added that the company members had received personal weapons “as a gift, according to their request.”

The two planes that El Al handed over proved an embarrassment. The ambassador reported that they had been found to be “almost unworthy of further use, which is why El Al couldn't get rid of them.” The Liberians, Gavrieli reported, felt “not only cheated, but what is worse, they feel they have been mocked.” The

deal for the Arava planes, which were intended to fly soldiers within the country in the event of an uprising, also turned into a farce. Even though Israel trained 15 pilots, Liberia was able to make only one down payment, of \$600,000, out of a total of \$8 million. As a result, only two of the four planes were delivered, and when the door of one of them ceased to function and was sent back to Israel for repairs, IAI refused to send it back, rendering the aircraft non-operational.

Concurrently, pressure by the U.S. Congress increased to condition aid to Liberia on its transition to a civilian regime. Doe also tried to leverage this into payment of bribes. Dozens of cables reveal that he asked Israel to pay \$20 million to 17 junta members who were his partners in power. He claimed that these individuals were preventing him from setting up a civilian regime and that the money would allow them to leave the country and take up studies in the United States under “VIP conditions.” Doe warned that if their palms were not greased, they would stage a coup against him and would act to break the ties with Israel. Instead of \$20

million and studies in the United States, Israel was ready to pay for tractors for them so that they would be able to work their land in Liberia. The Liberian ambassador did not accept the Israeli proposal. Together with the renewal of the diplomatic and security ties, in 1983, the private Israeli companies also resumed their activity in Liberia, with Foreign Ministry assistance. The companies' projects included the construction of more luxury buildings for the government and operation of franchises to exploit and cut down forests in the country for decades to come.

In November 1985, in the wake of allegations about the falsification of election results in the country, a coup attempt was staged, led by the former chief of staff. A series of cables reveal that Doe anticipated the insurgency, because of the elections, and asked Israel to strengthen the security forces and the police in advance. Israel helped, sending advisers on intelligence and on counterterrorism, and local 150 police officers underwent a crash course on dispersal of demonstrations. Israel also supplied tear gas. The deployment paid off, and Doe believed that Israel had saved him. Israel's ambassador to Liberia at the time, Arie Ivtsan, a former police commissioner, reported Doe as remarking that it was “only thanks to the Israeli ammunition and assistance that he remained in power.”

In a meeting held in Jerusalem two months later, Foreign Ministry officials summed up Israel's success in preventing the coup. According to the minutes of that meeting, the Israeli embassy in Monrovia reported that the opposition was indeed correct: The election had in fact been rigged. “In an unofficial count of the votes, the opposition won 65 percent,” it was written in the minutes, “but the ‘corrected’ official count left power in Doe's hands.” According to the embassy, the rebels had fought “incompetently,” whereas “SATU, which was trained by Israelis, operated with self-confidence... Similarly, the police, which also underwent Israeli instruction, preserved public order efficiently.”

The Israeli embassy also reported on the human cost of the events: Doe executed hundreds of people. According to a report by Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was established in 2005, the former chief of staff, who led the coup, was murdered, and his body was eaten by Doe loyalists. The tyrant launched a campaign of collective punishment and massacre against the general's ethnic group, spearheaded by SATU.

The Doe regime's oppression became more severe in the years that followed. Dozens of Foreign Ministry cables describe the brutal violence of the special ops units that were trained and armed by Israel. They carried out mass arrests, torture and the murder of opposition activists, demonstrators, journalists, teachers, physicians, students, rival ethnic groups and even just civilians who were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The cables also mention the political persecution of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who was then one of the leaders of the opposition, because of her public criticism of human rights violations in the country.

Israeli Foreign Ministry representatives in Liberia and in the United States reported to Jerusalem that the Liberian opposition was critical of Israel's involvement in the domestic suppression. In a meeting in Washington with representatives of the Liberian opposition, including members of Sirleaf's party, officials of the Israeli embassy were told emphatically that the perception among broad circles in Liberia was that “Israel constitutes Doe's main security prop,” including aid to what they termed “death squads.”

Despite having clear knowledge of the untenable human rights situation in Liberia, Israel continued to train and arm the country's security forces as usual, in coordination with and knowledge of the administration of Ronald Reagan. The tour of duty of the special Israeli advisers to the domestic security service (from the Mossad), the police (from the Israel Police) and the counterterrorism forces (from the IDF) was renewed each year. In June 1987, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir visited Liberia and met with Doe. The Foreign and Defense Ministries approved gifting SATU with sniper rifles, and more tear-gas grenades were sent to the police.

With the knowledge of the Foreign Ministry, Israeli companies also continued to be involved in corrupt practices. A top figure from Doe's regime was a salaried employee of an Israeli firm that received a license to cut down forests. Another Israeli company succeeded in obtaining a permit to fell forests in a vast region in a different part of the country, after promising to provide as a “gift” to SATU of the jeeps and military equipment it lacked.

The bitter end was a tale foretold. On Christmas Eve in 1989, the warlord Charles Taylor invaded Liberia at the head of a group of rebels and triggered a bloody civil war that some years later led to Taylor's conviction on charges of crimes against humanity. Doe was captured by rebel forces on September 9, 1990. Following 12 hours of torture, captured on video and broadcast, he was executed and his naked body was displayed in the streets of Monrovia.

In June 1990, a few months before that incident, at the height of the civil war and amid atrocities he himself was committing, Doe found time to send a personal cable to Shamir, to congratulate him on becoming prime minister again. This time Shamir chose not to reply. At the head of the cable, the director general of the Foreign Ministry added by hand, “Seen by the prime minister.” Below, he wrote, “In the meantime, President Samuel Doe was murdered. October 1990.”

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## STRESSED

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“They prepared so much...” she says. And, blowing into the short tube attached to the keyboard, they play “When Peace Will Come” to the tune of “When the Saints Go Marching In,” as the guests clap along in time.

The Center for Compassionate Mindful Education, which sponsored Davidson's trip to Israel, is a nonprofit that brings the tidings of mindfulness and compassion practices to around 50 schools and preschools throughout the country. Levi Eshkol School was chosen to take part in the program precisely because of its problematic point of departure: grim socioeconomic situation and students from diverse backgrounds with inherent tension between

them. About half are Jews, the rest are Arabs and the children of asylum seekers from countries in Africa. Several years ago, the principal, Galit Gershon, a veteran mediator, decided to bring the program to the school. This year she has the aid of a facilitator from the center, Hagar Ben Zaken. “I know that when a child is emotionally free for learning, and has self-confidence and believes in himself,” said Gershon, “only then can we improve their scholastic achievements. And so it has been.”

The guests simply melted when they met the children in person and heard from them, in simple words, the effect that meditation practice was having on them. “It helps me to pay attention to what I feel or think,” said a girl of about 10 wearing pink-framed glasses. “I do the flower and candle exercise: I breathe in like I'm smelling a flower, and breathe out like I'm putting out

a candle. That helps me when I'm stressed or I get upset. I close my eyes and tell myself thanks for who I am.”

We were then taken to a first-grade class to witness the daily meditation exercise, which includes a great deal of movement and touch. There's a significant research basis to support meditation in schools. One example is a 2022 study by Dr. Ricardo Tarrasch and Dr. Ronny Berger, from Tel Aviv University, among eight classes of fourth and fifth graders. By way of questionnaires answered by the children, they found that meditation practice led by the teachers alone is enough to improve considerably the students' well-being of their anxiety levels and their attention span. When external instructors also entered the classrooms, they were also able to identify an improvement in the atmosphere among the students and in their pro-social behavior.

Moriya Rosenberg, the CEO of the

Center for Compassionate Mindful Education, which organized the TAU conference, told the gathering about something that happened in one of the schools where her organization is active. Yuval, a girl in the second grade, was relentlessly attacking Roni, another girl in her class. The homeroom teacher, Dina Zohar, went over to Yuval and put a hand on her shoulder. Then, according to Rosenberg, the teacher said to the pupil, “It can't be pleasant to be angry for so many days. It's hard to be angry like that, and you really don't have to be so anymore. Roni, whether it's her fault or not, is already really afraid of you. Do you know how hard her heart is pounding? Do you want to feel her heart?”

Rosenberg described how Yuval approached Roni and asked her, “Can I?” Fearfully, Roni nodded in assent. “Yuval stretched out her hand, and after a minute, she gave her a big hug.”

The audience, most of them women – teachers of mindfulness, educators and psychologists, and other academics – gasped with emotion. But the truth is that even if the audience had been composed of members of La Familia, openly racist and violent fans of the Betar Jerusalem soccer club, there would not have been a dry eye among them.

Sometimes, after all the stories, the examples and the studies, what sticks in the memory most intensely is what you see with your own eyes. Davidson arrived very late for one of our meetings, back at his hotel, though he wasn't to blame. Nevertheless, he said he wanted to go up to his room for a minute to refresh himself before starting. On the way he also found time to stop and open a jar of gummy bears that was standing in the hotel lobby and pull one out for himself. There is no compassion like self-compassion.

When I was a schoolboy, I told him,

an instructor from The Magic Circle – a quasi-psychological emotional intervention program that was popular at the time – came to my class. Now what's being taught is mindfulness. Every seventh American says they had meditation experience in the past year. Could it just be a fad?

“There are different approaches to wellbeing, just as there are many ways to train the body,” Davidson replied, sipping an iced coffee. “Even in the realm of meditation, there are hundreds of types of practice, although the West is familiar with only a handful of them. Do you know that the Dalai Lama doesn't practice meditation in the way you know at all?”

What does he do?  
“Analytical meditation. He thinks. Do you know what the best type of meditation is?”

What?  
“The type you succeed in doing.”