



Using mindfulness practices for greater self-awareness and self-improvement:

**An interview with Rabbi Marc Margolius, Senior Program Director,
Institute for Jewish Spirituality**

April 2022

Transcript of Gov Innovator podcast episode #201

<https://govinnovator.com/marc-margolius/>

Andrew Feldman (AF): Welcome to the Gov Innovator Podcast, I'm Andy Feldman. Our topic today is mindfulness practices that can help leaders understand themselves better and be more effective in working with others. Our guest is mindfulness expert Rabbi mark Margolius. Here's a clip

Rabbi Marc Margolius (RMM): There's a wonderful quote from Victor Frankel who's famous for his book *Man's Search for Meaning*. He was a Holocaust survivor and psychotherapist who really sums it up beautifully and says "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. And in that space lies my power to choose my response. And in my response lies my growth and my freedom."

[Podcast jingle]

AF: When we think about the skills that leaders need to be successful, like making good decisions, regulating their emotions and stress, and forming strong and healthy relationships with others, in important foundation for those skills is mindfulness.

Our guest today has deep expertise in helping people cultivate self-awareness and mindfulness in order to—to paraphrase his own words—help them become the person they're meant to be in the world, hopefully growing towards that, day-by-day.

Rabbi Marc Margolius is the senior program director at the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. He hosts IJS's daily mindfulness meditation sessions and teaches an online program called Awareness in Action, designed to cultivate character through mindfulness. Marc, it's very good to have you with us.

RMM: Thank you so much, Andy. It's really an honor to be here with you.

AF: Thank you, Marc. I wanted to say upfront that we've got a diverse podcast audience, people of different religions or not religious. Am I right, Marc, the topics we're discussing today, will draw at times from Jewish spiritual practice, but the approaches can be useful for anyone.

RMM: Absolutely the practices that we teach the Institute for Jewish Spirituality are basically practices that are intended to help us cultivate consciousness, awareness, being more awake, more alert, more present.

One can understand those in religious terms, spiritual terms, but you can also understand them and completely secular terms as well—just about consciousness. For me, personally, that kind of consciousness and awareness is a portal to spiritual connection and spiritual experience, but that isn't the case for everybody, but it doesn't need to be.

AF: That's really helpful. You've talked about the goal of this work as raising the bar for our behavior and our inner life. But at the same time, recognizing that we are flawed, limited, mortal human beings who are not capable of perfection, meaning this is not easy work. And the goal is all about improvement. You've got a story that captures that well, if you'd share it.

RMM: Yeah, this is really kind of a turning point for me. When I was a seminary student, I was mentored by a very renowned rabbi, who I really looked up to, who said to me and to the group of other seminarians who were learning with him, that our tradition was about helping people become fifteen percent better human beings.

And at the time I was outraged and thought, "Fifteen percent? That is pathetic!" I thought it was about becoming a hundred percent better person; It was really about perfecting ourselves.

And it was only after many years, growing up and having my own hard-earned experience of repeating the same mistakes over and over, and realizing how difficult personal change was even on a micro, granular level, on a day-to-day level. How do we get ourselves out of our habits—out of our reactive habits about how we speak to people and how we treat ourselves and treat others?

I realized that, actually, fifteen percent was way too ambitious—that actually two or three percent would be more realistic and actually attainable. And it might not be so bad, actually, if you had a return of two or three percent—a change of two or three percent—that's compounded annually over time.

Sometimes people will compare it to steering a big ocean liner, right? If you just change the trajectory a couple of degrees, eventually you're going to wind up in a very different place than where you were headed when you started. And so that's a lesson that I learned.

AF: Marc, I want to ask you next about some of the concrete approaches to both mindfulness and self-improvement. One situation is when you can feel yourself about to act in a way that's a script—something you've done over and over before, but you know a different way would be better. How can you catch yourself in that situation?

RMM: Well, there are, I think basically three steps in that process. Number one is what you just said—is, first of all, just recognizing and being aware of, oh, I'm to use the cliched word triggered here, right? This is pushing my buttons. I'm in danger of reacting in a way which is the way I normally react, following the script. I'm on autopilot here. Can I put the brakes on for a moment?

Just that awareness that this is what is happening is a big part of step one. It's as if almost like stepping onto the balcony. I know in management techniques there's often that idea of stepping up to the balcony. Here it's stepping up to the balcony of the mind, as if we're observing or saying, "Here you go again." We don't do that with an accusatory tone [but instead]...more of a loving tone.

And so you could just be curious about that: "Isn't this interesting that I do this all the time? This is what happens. It's interesting!" Let me look at that more closely." Instead of, "Oh, I do this over [and over] again. Let me look away. I don't want to see that."

What is actually happening here? If I take a moment to breathe, just to take a breath, and to be curious about it and say, "I am stepping into the pothole again here." That can give me the possibility of not stepping into the pothole. I realize I have a choice—that's step two. What would be a better choice here?

And then the third step is to think about: What is the kind of quality, or what's the kind of person I want to present myself as in this moment?

You know, everyone can have their own vocabulary for what that might be—I want to be kinder; Or I want to be clearer; I want to be stronger; I want to be more direct; I want to be more honest; I want to be more generous; I want to be a more orderly, more clear-minded; I want to be more responsible; I want to be more trustworthy; you know, make your own list of qualities. Say, okay, now what are the qualities I need right now? Can I make that choice?

My mother was an artist, a painter, in fact. So I really liked the metaphor of having a pallet of oil paints, where each of those character traits is a color on that palette. And essentially what I'm asking myself in the moment is what is the combination of colors that this moment calls for—a little bit of kindness, a little bit of boundaries, a little bit of judgment, a little bit of humility, a little bit of a self-assertion.

AF: Marc, I was thinking about that first step of nonjudgmental curiosity. And I think I've heard this advice from a few different sources, including my recent IJS course, but you can think of

those scripts, those bad habits as like an old friend—you know, the moment you're less empathetic than you could be or should be, or more fearful or more distracted, you can say, "I recognize you, old friend. I know you."

RMM: I really love that, actually—to think about those obstacles or hindrances or what we might sometimes think about is kind of our character flaws, actually, as our friends. They're little reminders that say, "Oh, here's an opportunity for me to do something different. Thanks for being my teacher today. Thanks for reminding me." Which is different than, "Oh, I hate saying that about myself." I don't want anybody to know that about me. That I can be rude. I can be selfish. I can be mean. I can have a lot of qualities that are not so becoming.

AF: I want to ask you one final question, Marc, which is to think of some examples in a context that may be most relevant for our podcast audience, which is government. If you're a public executive or a public manager, am I right that this could be applied, for example, in getting mad at a colleague or an employee or a boss and thinking, "How could I handle this differently than my first reaction?"

RMM: Yeah, I think the example that I always think about for myself really has to do with email and texting or Slack or whatever people are using or Basecamp, where there's always an ease of responding very quickly to people.

And I have caught myself numerous times, and not caught myself numerous times, when I realize that something someone has said to me in an email or a ping or a text has really irritated me, upset me. And it feels good to fire back, whether it's a snarky comment or something terse or sarcastic or unkind in some way or ungenerous in some way.

And if I can catch myself in the moment and say, "Let's not do anything until tomorrow. There's no need to respond right now. Let's see what it looks like tomorrow." I don't think there's been a single case where I haven't decided either I don't need to say this or I can say in a very different. That that space creates an opportunity for a different response.

There's a wonderful quote from Victor Frankel who's famous for his book *Man's Search for Meaning*. He was a Holocaust survivor and psychotherapist who really sums it up beautifully and says "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. And in that space lies my power to choose my response. And in my response lies my growth and my freedom."

So, what you just said about opening a space, that pause after the stimulus, which enables me to choose a response instead of react in that moment. If I can just have a little space, whether by putting my hand on my heart space, taking a few deep breaths, looking out the window, taking a walk around the block, listening to my favorite song on my playlist—something that will just calm the nerves for even a few moments, it doesn't have to be long, it makes the difference.

So, I know I still probably fire off too many unwise communications in reaction because it feels good in the moment, it feels good to do, it feels good to give expression to that. But I know I don't feel very good about it afterwards and it certainly doesn't contribute to the health of the workplace. And so I always do better—always—if I put things in the draft folder and decide later, “Do I need to say it? Do I need to say it this way?” Often I don't need to say anything.

AF: For our listeners. I'll put a link on the podcast website to the IJS website if you want to learn more. My thanks to Rabbi Mark Margolis. Marc. I am grateful for you sharing your knowledge and your wisdom, said in such a clear and compelling way. Thank you.

RMM: It really, Andy, has been my honor to do this and a pleasure to talk to you.