

How To Daven Without Distraction

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Tetzaveh 5784

At Avremi's invitation, Jessica and I joined him and his class for davening on Wednesday morning. The enthusiasm with which these kids belted out the *tefillot*, and the looks of joy on their faces are enough to restore optimism to even the most hard-bitten pessimist, and the half hour we spent in his classroom was a high point of the week for us. Forget explanatory tefillot like we are having today (actually, don't)- just daven with kids, and you will be inspired to daven yourself!

Before davening began, Morah Megan Wolicki gave the kids the following instruction:

I'm going to tell you what I tell you every morning. If you are sitting next to a friend, I suggest you don't, so that you will be able to concentrate on the Tefillah.

Morah Megan was on to something. So many decorum problems in shuls (other than ours, of course) arise from people sitting next to friends and talking to them throughout davening. In *other* communities, I've often felt that the purpose of the line on the High Holidays sign-up forms, where people identify whom they want to sit with, should be

to identify who NOT to seat near one another! Of course, it's more complicated than that. Morah Megan's instructions, while ideal for kids, take on some nuance when we reach adulthood. *Unetaneh Tokef* is powerful when you are sitting near a stranger, but it's so much more powerful when you are sitting next to your best friend who has confided in you about her marital challenges, or your cousin whose child is struggling with mental illness. Besides, it is possible to daven alone and still be completely distracted! The promotional flier for this explanatory Shabbos featured a picture of an undoubtedly righteous woman, her face buried in the timeless text of the tefillah by the holy stones of the Kotel. No doubt she is pouring her heart out about her son in *miluim*, about a shidduch for her daughter, or thanking God for the successful course of treatment she just weathered. But in the midst of her tearful supplications at such a holy site, perhaps she started thinking as well about an important project at work, or what dress she will be wearing for her niece's wedding the following evening. We have all stood with two feet firmly planted on the ground during *Shemoneh Esrei*, while our mind has traveled around the world 10 times from *internal* distractions. If we start factoring in external ones - our phones, other people's phones, social media, streaming services and so on- we haven't a prayer...pun intended. The truth is that distraction is not a modern problem. Some time ago I began reading a book titled *The Wandering Mind: What Medieval Monks Tell Us About Distraction*, by Jamie Kreiner, a Professor of Medieval Studies at the University of Georgia. In it, she describes the titular medieval

monks, living monastic lifestyles designed to eliminate any source of distraction, routinely complained about how hard it was to maintain concentration on lofty spiritual matters. As the eighth century monk John of Dalyatha complained, “All I do is eat, sleep, drink, and be negligent¹.”

Indeed, the challenges of concentration go back even further, *lehavdil*, to this week’s Parshah. In it, we are introduced to the various garments the Kohen Gadol would wear, each of them serving a unique purpose, eliciting a specific intention. One of these items is the *tzitz*, the plate the Kohen Gadol wears on his forehead on top of the turban.

וְהָיָה עַל-מִצַּח אַהֲרֹן וְנָשָׂא אַהֲרֹן אֶת-עֲוֹן הַקִּדְוֹשִׁים אֲשֶׁר יִקְדִישׁוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְכָל-מִתְּנַת קִדְשֵׁיהֶם וְהָיָה עַל-מִצַּחֹ תָמִיד לְרָצוֹן לָהֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה:

It shall be on Aaron’s forehead, that Aaron may take away any sin arising from the holy things that the Israelites consecrate, from any of their sacred donations; it shall be on his forehead at all times, to win acceptance for them before God.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/01/30/what-monks-can-teach-us-about-paying-attention-wandering-mind-jamie-kreiner>

The Torah tells the Kohen Gadol that he must have God, and the Jewish people, in mind when he is wearing the sacred garments and performing sacred tasks. It's not just for one minute, either. Listen to what the Talmud says in Tractate Menachos (36b)

ומה ציץ שאין בו אלא אזכרה אחת אמרה תורה והיה על מצחו תמיד שלא תסיח דעתו ממנו

As long as the Kohen Gadol is wearing the frontplate, he must be mindful of it *at all times*. Indeed, that same passage in the Talmud uses it as a paradigm for the way men are supposed to relate to their Tefillin.

אמר רבה בר רב הונא חייב אדם למשמש בתפילין בכל שעה קל וחומר מציץ ומה ציץ שאין בו אלא אזכרה אחת אמרה

תורה והיה על מצחו תמיד שלא תסיח דעתו ממנו תפילין שיש בהן אזכרות הרבה על אחת כמה וכמה

Rabba bar Rav Huna says: A person is obligated to touch his phylacteries regularly for **the entire time** that he is wearing them. This is derived from **an *a fortiori*** inference from the **frontplate** of the High Priest, as follows: **And if** with regard to the **frontplate**, which has **only one mention** of God's name, **the Torah states: "And it should be always upon his forehead"** (Exodus 28:38), which means that the High Priest must always be aware that the frontplate is placed on his head and **that he should not be distracted from it**, then with regard to **phylacteries, which have numerous mentions** of God's name, **all the more so** one must always be aware of them.

If you think about it, though, it is remarkable that the Kohen Gadol needs to be told this. He lives *in the Beit HaMikdash!* He is surrounded by holiness at all times, and is

constantly occupied with holy pursuits, yet the Torah has to tell him to maintain his concentration. So if this poses a challenge for the Kohen Gadol, what are we to do?

Indeed, our sages seem to recognize that maintaining *kavvanah* at all times during davening is practically impossible. The Talmud in Tractate Berachos (34b) tells us that, ideally, one should-

איכא דמתני לה אבריימא: המתפלל צריך שיכוין את לבו בכלן, ואם אינו יכול לכוין בכלן — יכוין את לבו באחת.

Some teach that this statement was made on a *baraita* referring to another topic. It was taught in a *baraita*: One who prays must focus his heart in all of the blessings. And if he is unable to focus his heart in all of them, he should focus his heart at least in one.

אמר רבי חייה אומר רב ספרא משום חד דבי רבי: ב"אבות".

Regarding this *baraita*, **Rabbi Ḥiyya said that Rav Safra said in the name of one of the Sages of the school of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi: In one refers to the blessing of Patriarchs.**

I'd like to share a radical suggestion from the Baal Shem Tov. If you find yourself waging a losing battle with distracting thoughts- don't! Listen to what the Baal Shem Tov said²

² Kesser Shem Tov 39, quoted by Rav Dov Zinger in *Tikon Tefilati* p. 186

והענין כי האדם מחויב להאמין כי מלא כל הארץ כבודו יתברך,
לית אתר פנוי מיניה, וכל המחשבות של האדם יש בו מציאותו
יתברך, וכל מחשבה היא קומה שלמה. וכאשר יעלה במחשבתו
של אדם בעת עסקו בתפילה איזה מחשבה רעה וזרה, היא באה
אל האדם לתקנה ולהעלותה.

רבי ישראל בעל שם טוב, ספר שם טוב, ל"ט

A human being is supposed to believe that the whole world is full of God's glory, and there is no place that is devoid of God. God's presence can be found in all the thoughts of mankind...when a foreign or negative thought occurs to someone at the time of prayer, it comes to a person to repair and elevate it.

In other words, when we are praying, the thoughts that *distract* us also *instruct* us.

Instead of trying to fight them, to push them away, let us embrace them. There is a reason I am having this thought right now, isn't there- so why not pray about it? Here is a practical example, based on one offered by the pathbreaking educator Rav Dov Zinger in his remarkable work about Tefillah, *Tikon Tefillati*³:

If you are davening, and you begin to think about a worry you have concerning your job, your income or money in general, ask yourself: What is this worry I have? Why am

³ Ibid

I worried about money? Is it for my family? What is it that I want for them? And if it is for me, what do I hope to accomplish with the money I think I need, or wish I had? A foreign thought becomes the vehicle for some really deep prayer:

Please Hashem, give me the means to provide for my family, and to free them and myself from external pressures so they can do as their heart desires, to express their true voice in the world.

Please help me use the gift of parnassah in the most meaningful way possible that will benefit the most people, and please help me use the blessing I am asking from you in the way that brings the most honor and glory to Your name.

It is a so-called “foreign” thought that causes me to get in touch with my values, to interrogate my desires, and to connect with those I love.

Even the holiest of Jews had to work hard to maintain concentration; only angels are immune to distraction, no matter how hard we try to separate ourselves from it. Let us use our struggle with it as an opportunity to learn, and a chance to grow- and may all our prayers be answered in the best possible way.