



TOWARDS MEANINGFUL

TEFILLA

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Kavanah in Shemoneh Esrei

It's the start of a new year and Miriam has decided to work on her davening. She realizes that her kavana (concentration) is not great and that her mind wanders a lot in the middle of davening. But she has decided that this year is going to be different. She is going to make sure to concentrate on every word and imbue it with meaning. She takes three steps back to begin her first Shemoneh Esrei of the year, and before she has a chance to notice, she is mentally planning her to-do list, thinking about a work-related issue, preparing a grocery list, and deciding what to make for dinner. She finishes her Shemoneh Esrei and with a start, realizes that she has not had any kavana at all for the entire Tefilla! She is shocked and disappointed and not sure how to fix the situation.

I would venture to say that most of us can probably relate to the above scenario. We truly want to connect to Hashem in our davening and want our Tefilla to be a spiritually uplifting experience, and yet, we somehow are unable to control our minds and thoughts as we daven.

This is true for all of our Tefillot, but especially pertinent to the Shemoneh

Esrei. The **Shulchan Aruch** (OC 101:1) writes that a person is required to have Kavana for the entire Shemoneh Esrei. If he is unable to do so, he should at least concentrate for the first bracha ('Avot'). If he did not have kavana for the first bracha, he must repeat the entire Shemoneh Esrei. The **Rama** quotes there that in today's generation (he wrote this in the 1500's), one does not go back and repeat because *he surely will not have kavana the second time around either*, so there is no point in saying it again!

Wow! The fact that we can assume that most people will not have kavana even on their second try is quite depressing. But, on the other hand, we can understand from here that we are not alone in our struggles. Already in the Rama's times, people were having difficulty with Kavana. Wandering minds are a part of human nature. And this fact is amplified a thousand times in today's super busy world.

The question is – what do we do about it?

The **Shulchan Aruch** (OC 98) gives many suggestions. He recommends that one pay careful attention to the meaning of each word. One should remind himself that the Shechina (Divine Presence) is standing before him. One should try and imagine how he would act if he were speaking before a human king – how he

would prepare his words beforehand and pay careful attention to everything he would say so as not to mess anything up. One should spend time preparing before davening. He also suggests davening in a place and at a time where there will not be distractions.

I think one of the most practical suggestions the Shulchan Aruch gives is the first one we mentioned above. There, the Shulchan Aruch brought down the ideal (to have kavana for the whole Shemonah Esrei) and the practical (to try and have kavana for at least the first bracha). I think this is an important message for us. In order to be successful in our davening, we need to know ourselves and to work on ourselves at the level that we are at. We need to be realistic. We should shoot for the stars, we should try to work on our kavanah for the entire davening, but at the same time, we need to be practical. So if one is not yet ready to have kavana for all of Shemoneh Esrei, every day take a specific bracha and make sure to concentrate extra hard on at least that one bracha. And then move on from there.

A similar idea is brought down by the **Chofetz Chaim**. As human beings, we have limited attention spans. If we want to be able to concentrate on each bracha, we need to prepare for a moment before each individual bracha. Before each bracha, we need to pause and think about we are about to say. Don't just mumble the entire Shemonah Esrei by rote. Stop, think, decide what you want to praise and request from Hashem in that specific bracha, and then continue.

This idea of pausing in the middle of our Tefilla is actually brought down in the **Shulchan Aruch** as well. (OC 98) He says as soon as you feel your mind begin to wander, stop and don't continue until you are able to get rid of those thoughts and bring yourself back to the Tefilla. **Rav Naftali Amsterdam** (one of the leaders of the Mussar movement in the 1800's) used to pause at three specific points in the Shemonah Esrei in order to bring his mind back into focus.

To conclude - having Kavana in our davening is not an easy task. But the main point is to take baby steps, be realistic in our expectations, find "tricks" that work for us, to be patient and not to despair, to ask Hashem for help in this area, and to be proud of ourselves for each moment of success. ■

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