

SECTION 2: *PIRUSH HAMILOS*

CHAPTER 1. CONCENTRATING ON THE *PIRUSH HAMILOS* OF THE SET *TEFILOS*

Although it is important to speak to Hashem in one's own words (as explained in the previous section), it is just as essential, if not more, to understand the *pirush hamilos* of the *tefilos* instituted by *Chazal*.

The reason for this is because the average person isn't (fully) in touch with the feelings of his *nefesh ha'elokis* (as we can all testify from personal experience), and consequently we lack the means to express ourselves properly to Hashem on our own. Because of this deficiency, *Chazal* established the language of the *tefilos*, using *ruach hakodesh* and integrating *pesukim* from Tanach, thus enabling every person to properly praise and thank Hashem and ask Him for what he needs. These *tefilos* contain whatever sentiment one might possibly want to express to Hashem, and they express them in a much more powerful way than one can express them on his own. Therefore, despite the importance of talking to Hashem in one's own words, it is critical to understand the *pirush hamilos* of these *tefilos* and to communicate to Hashem through them.

It is important to underscore this point, namely, that the goal is to communicate with Hashem particularly through the words of davening and Tehillim, as these words contain a unique *kedushah* and reveal a person's *neshamah*. Speaking to Hashem in one's own words is merely (1) a temporary method of communication that should be used until a person starts taking davening more seriously; and (2) a way to enhance the regular davening and help one realize that he is actually speaking to Hashem. Additionally, a simple person who is unable to understand the *pirush hamilos* of davening can speak to Hashem in his own words. But someone who has the ability to understand and feel what he is saying should try his utmost to do so. We can pour out our hearts and souls when davening and saying Tehillim if we would only connect to it and take it personally.

There are times when you can and should express yourself on your own, such as (1) when adding a specific request in *Shemonah Esrei*, and (2) when asking and thanking Hashem throughout the day. But the main method of communicating to Hashem is by reciting the holy words of davening and Tehillim.¹

Three Levels of Importance in *Kavanah*

The various parts of davening can be divided into three levels, based on how significant a role *kavanah* plays when saying them. The first level includes the parts of davening one is not *yotzei* without *kavanah*, and they must be repeated if they were recited without concentration. The

¹ . עיין ד"ה מים רבים תשי"ז.

second level includes the parts of davening where there is a Halachic doubt if one has fulfilled his obligation without *kavanah*, and one should therefore be especially careful to have *kavanah* when reciting them. The third level consists of the parts of davening where it is strongly recommended to have *kavanah*, but *bedi'eved*, one has fulfilled his obligation even if he didn't have *kavanah*.

It goes without saying that it is important to have *kavanah* during the entire davening (even when saying those parts that aren't included in one of these three categories). But it's important to have a *seider* in *avodas Hashem*, meaning that you have to know where to start and where to continue. For this reason, you need to have priorities in davening: first you should accomplish what is most important and then you can continue to the next step. Being aware of these three levels can assist in doing this, so you can first work on concentrating on the parts of davening that belong to the first level and then continue with the second and third levels. Chassidus explains that davening is like a ladder; this process is also part of the ladder of davening.

First level. It is of primary importance to concentrate on the *pirush hamilos* of the parts of davening where lack of *kavanah* is *me'akev bedi'eved*. Halacha lists three things as belonging to this category: (1) the first *brachah* of *Shemonah Esrei*; (2) the first two verses of *Krias Shema* (i.e., from "*shema*" until "*va'ed*"); and (3) the *possuk* פותח את ידיך ומשביע לכל חי רצון (in *Pesukei Dezimra*). If one didn't have *kavanah* by any of these three sections, he must go back and repeat them.² It is therefore of utmost importance to have *kavanah* when saying each word of these three sections. (This can be done either while saying the words, before saying each word or two, or after reciting each word or two, as explained in Chapter 3.)

². See Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim* 51:7; 63:4 and commentaries), regarding *Shema* and *posei'ach es yadecha*.

Regarding *Shemonah Esrei*, the Mechaber rules that one should go back and repeat the first *brachah* if he didn't have *kavanah*, while the Rama says that one should not repeat it, because it is likely that he won't have *kavanah* the second time as well (ibid. 101:1). However, one should not infer from this that it is not as important to have *kavanah* during the first *brachah* of *Shemonah Esrei*. Just the opposite, this halacha demonstrates the importance of having *kavanah*, to the extent that he hasn't fulfilled his obligation. But he cannot fix the problem by repeating *Shemonah Esrei*, since he might lack *kavanah* once again and will have said *Shemonah Esrei* twice in vain (as opposed to *Shema* and *posei'ach es yadecha*, where there is no issue of *brachah levatalah*). This demonstrates the importance of having *kavanah* the first time.

(Additionally, even according to the Rama one can sometimes be required to repeat *Shemonah Esrei* due to lack of *kavanah*. The commentaries [*Mishnah Berurah* and *Shaar Hatziyun*, *Orach Chaim* 96:1] write that someone who normally has *kavanah* but was distracted by something beyond his control [like a ringing cell phone] should repeat *Shemonah Esrei*, since his lack of concentration wasn't his fault and he will have *kavanah* when he repeats it.)

Second level. This level includes the numerous *brachos* recited during davening and over the course of the day.

The Alter Rebbe cites a Halachic argument regarding how much *kavanah* is needed when saying a *brachah*.³ Some say that one does not fulfill his obligation at all unless he has a minimal amount of *kavanah*, while others say that one has fulfilled his obligation without *kavanah*. The Alter Rebbe concludes that this is a matter of Halachic doubt, and therefore one must be extremely careful to have *kavanah* by all *brachos*. This is especially true regarding *Birchas Hamazon*, as it is possible that one has not fulfilled an obligation *min hatorah*. (Even by any other *brachah* which is *midrabanan*, saying a *brachah* without *kavanah* may be a *brachah levatalah* G-d forbid.)

The Alter Rebbe lists four parts of each *brachah* that require *kavanah* to fulfill one's obligation:

1. The words ברוך (אתה).⁴
2. Hashem's Name; i.e., the words ה' אלקינו (or just ה' if אלקינו is not said, such as at the conclusion of a long *brachah*).
3. Hashem's Kingship; i.e., the words מלך העולם.
4. The content of the *brachah*; for example, the words בורא פרי האדמה.

In a long *brachah*, namely, one that both starts and concludes with *boruch* (such as *Al Hamichyah*), having *kavanah* is mandatory only at the beginning and end of the *brachah*. In other words, you must concentrate on the above four parts at the beginning of the *brachah* and on three parts at the end (where מלך העולם is not mentioned), while concentrating on the text in the middle isn't *me'akev*. The same applies for any other long *brachah*, such as *Asher Yatzar*, *Kiddush Levanah*, and *Hama'avir Sheinah Mei'einay*.

Thus, when *bentching*, it would be mandatory to have *kavanah* for the following parts: (1) the beginning and end of the first *brachah*; (2) the end of the second and third *brachos* (but not the beginning, because these *brachos* are said as a continuation of the preceding *brachah*⁵ and don't

³ . שו"ע או"ח סי' קפה ס"ב.

⁴ . It is unclear if the word אתה requires *kavanah* as well.

⁵ . Known as a *brachah hasmuchah lachavertah*.

start with *boruch*); and (3) the beginning of the fourth *brachah* (which doesn't conclude with *boruch*).⁶

Regarding *Pesukei Dezimra* and *Birchos Krias Shema*, it would be mandatory to have *kavanah* for the following: (1) the beginning and end of *Boruch She'amar*; (2) the end of *Yishtabach*;⁷ (3) the beginning and end of *Yotzer Ohr*; and (4) the end of *Ahavas Olam* and *Emes Veyatziv* (i.e., ברוך וכו' גאל ישראל). The same would apply to *Birchos Krias Shema* by Maariv.

⁶. It would seem that the content of the fourth *brachah* is mainly expressed in the words המלך הטוב (and not as much in the words אבינו מלכנו וכו' (הא-ל אבינו מלכנו וכו'), and it would be these words one would be required to concentrate on, but further investigation is required.

(To elaborate:

Several factors indicate that the words המלך הטוב והמטיב לכל express the main content of the *brachah*.

1. The *brachah* is known as *hatov vehameitiv*.
2. These words must be said in all forms of the *brachah*. [For example, in the house of a mourner where the text of the fourth *brachah* is changed, these words remain—see Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 189:2.]
3. In *Al Hamichyah*, the shortened version of the fourth *brachah* of *Birchas Hamazon* is כי אתה ה' טוב ומטיב לכל.

Despite these indications, further investigation is still required, as I have yet to find a definite source that these words are the most important in the context of having *kavanah*.)

⁷. It would seem that the content of *Yishtabach* is mainly expressed in the words א-ל מלך גדול ומהולל בתשבחות, and it would be these words one would be required to concentrate on, but further investigation is required.

(To elaborate:

The Shulchan Aruch [Orach Chaim 54:2] cautions that one shouldn't answer *amen* after א-ל מלך גדול ומהולל בתשבחות but rather after ה' העולמים since these words constitute the real conclusion of the *brachah*. This implies that the words א-ל מלך גדול ומהולל בתשבחות express the main idea of the *brachah*, and that is why one would think to answer *amen* at that point [but one shouldn't do so since the *brachah* isn't actually over].

Furthermore, the Mishnah Berurah [ibid.] deliberates whether one may interrupt after saying א-ל מלך גדול ומהולל בתשבחות to answer *amen yehai shemai rabba* or *kedushah*, since the main idea has already been expressed.

However, further investigation is still required, as I have yet to find a definite source that these words are the most important in the context of having *kavanah*.)

In short *brachos* (that only begin with *boruch*), such as the morning *brachos*, you must have *kavanah* by each one, and lacking *kavanah* might prevent you from being *yotzei*. Similarly, having *kavanah* is mandatory when saying a *brachah* before eating, drinking, and performing a mitzvah. It is therefore very important to have *kavanah* when saying these *brachos*. (Additionally, as explained in Section 1, the reason *Chazal* instituted that we should recite numerous *brachos* throughout the day was to help us be aware of Hashem constantly, and this objective can be attained primarily when we have *kavanah* when saying them.)

Third level. It is important to have *kavanah* by the end of each of the *brachos* of *Shemonah Esrei*. Even though one has fulfilled his obligation even if he has said these *brachos* without *kavanah* (with the exception of the first *brachah* as explained above),⁸ it is nonetheless very important to have *kavanah* when saying them.⁹

Additionally, the Gemara strongly praises someone who has *kavanah* when saying *yehei shmei rabba*, saying that this causes such happiness by Hashem that He revokes any evil decree against that person.¹⁰ Chassidus explains that saying *yehei shmei rabba* with *kavanah* reveals Hashem's Great Name within this world, referring to the ultimate truth of Hashem that will be revealed when *Moshiach* comes.¹¹

The Frierdiker Rebbe relates that when the great chossid R. Dovid Tzvi Chein was a boy, his father brought him to the Tzemach Tzedek. The Tzemach Tzedek told him: "Stop being a child. When you make a *brachah*, you must know to Whom you are speaking." From then on, whenever R. Dovid Tzvi recited a *brachah*, he would place his hand on his forehead and think for a moment, and only then would he say the *brachah*, slowly and with *kavanah*.¹²

⁸ . שו"ע אדה"ז סי' קפה ס"ב.

⁹ . שו"ע אדה"ז סי' קא ס"א.

¹⁰ . שו"ע או"ח סי' נו ס"א.

¹¹ . תו"א מג, ג ובכ"מ.

¹² . סה"ש תש"ג ע' 143 (משיחת ח"י אלול תש"ג).

CHAPTER 2. HOW TO DEVELOP KAVANAH

Developing *kavanah* in davening is a lifelong *avodah*. Every day a new battle must be fought to daven properly, so that instead of being done by rote it should be filled with meaning. However, as is the case with everything in life, the key to success is to have a *seder*, a planned-out approach how to accomplish this goal. With Hashem's help, the next few chapters will explain some basic ideas how this can be done.

These techniques can be divided into those that deal with the davening itself (*cheftza*), i.e., to study *tefillah* and divide the davening into sections, and those that focus on the person (*gavra*), i.e., how to conduct yourself to enable proper concentration. The present chapter will focus mainly on the first category, while the second category will be discussed primarily in Chapter 4.

Studying *Tefillah*

One who has not yet studied the meaning of the words of davening must begin by taking the time to go through the davening with an English siddur, one section at a time. This is true regardless of your current age. A suggested way to do this, to avoid making it seem tedious and dull, is by focusing on one paragraph of davening every day. You can look at the English translation before saying each word or phrase in that paragraph and think the meaning of what you are about to say. This will enable you to think through the meaning of that paragraph, and the next day you can focus on the next paragraph. (Obviously, it's recommended to start from the beginning of davening and continue in order.) This process can be repeated until you are familiar with the meaning of the words of davening.¹³

This method can also be used to build up an understanding of Tehillim. You can focus on a chapter of Tehillim every day and think through the meaning of the words as described above, and the next day you can continue with the next chapter, until you will master the meaning of the entire Tehillim. (I recommend the Artscroll Interlinear Tehillim which has a user-friendly format that makes it much easier to learn the meaning of every word.)

Dividing the Davening

Once you have mastered the meaning of at least most of the words of davening, you are ready to work on the next step—to actually think the meaning of the words you are saying while saying them. Understanding the meaning of the words doesn't necessarily mean you will actually think their meaning while saying them. This is because when a person gets into the habit of saying the same words every day, it becomes second nature for him and he tends to say them without

¹³. See Chapter 4 where various techniques will be discussed to assist in concentrating on the meaning of the words.

concentrating.¹⁴ Special effort must therefore be put into thinking the meaning of the words while saying them.

However, it's not easy to have *kavanah* for the entire davening every day. You must therefore work out a plan to figure out how to have as much *kavanah* as possible during the time you have available for davening. Three general ideas play a role in forming such a plan: (1) making priorities, (2) focusing on a different part of davening every day, and (3) building up your ability to concentrate.

Making priorities. As explained in Chapter 1, there are certain parts of davening where it is especially important to have *kavanah*, and these parts of davening can be divided into three levels, based on how significant a role *kavanah* plays when saying them. You should therefore begin working on having *kavanah* at the first level, by putting effort into thinking the meaning of the words of the first *brachah* of *Shemonah Esrei*, the first two verses of *Krias Shema*, and the *possuk* of *posei'ach es yadecha*.

You should grow accustomed to the idea that when it comes to these parts of davening, come what may, you will concentrate on the meaning of every word, even if, for whatever reason, you are unable to do so for the rest of davening. After you get used to having *kavanah* for the first level, you should continue with the second and third levels.

Concentrating on a Different Section Every Day. Making priorities as discussed above can help you develop *kavanah* for those parts of davening where you should have *kavanah* every day. Additionally, you should create a cycle in which you will go through the entire davening with *kavanah* by having *kavanah* for one section of davening each day.

It says in *Tanya* that even if one has thought the meaning of each part of davening only once throughout the entire year, it is enough to elevate all the prayers of the year.¹⁵ This demonstrates that creating a cycle is effective even if it consists of having *kavanah* for only a small part of davening each day, to the extent that it takes a complete year to go through the entire davening.

In order for this system to work for both the weekday and Shabbos davening, you should create a separate cycle for each one and keep track of both of them.

¹⁴. *Tanya* (*Igeres Hakodesh* §19 p. 257) explains that as a rule, a person can only say something he has previously thought about, because speech is an expression of thought. But nevertheless, if a person is in the habit of saying certain words, he can say them without thinking. The reason for this is because since his thoughts entered these words many times, the words continue to receive their energy from the “imprint” and outer aspect of these thoughts, even if he is not actually concentrating on the words at this time.

¹⁵. קו"א דף קנד, ב.

Building Up the Ability To Concentrate. Obviously, the ideal goal is to have *kavanah* for the entire davening. But the only way to reach this goal is by working on building up the ability to concentrate for an extended period of time. Doing this takes much time and effort at each stage of growth. It's like a person who works on strengthening his physical muscles; he has to spend time working on each intensity level so that his muscles will grow slowly but surely. Similarly, you must spend time at each stage of *kavanah* development so that your ability to concentrate will continue to grow.

We will present here two alternative approaches how to develop the ability to concentrate:

1. **Increasing the amount of time.** One way to build up concentration is by starting with a short amount of time when you will focus on concentrating, and then expanding on it. For example, you can start by taking five minutes every day when you will think the meaning of every word, regardless of how many, or few, words you end up saying during that time frame. (This isn't that hard to do, because you can tell yourself, "What? I can't control my thoughts for even just five minutes?!")

If you do this every day for a month or more, you can continue with ten minutes of concentration. After working on this for many months (or perhaps a few years if needed), you will grow so accustomed to thinking the meaning of the words that you will be able to think the meaning of all the words of davening in an hour or so.¹⁶

2. **Increasing the parts of davening.** Another way to build up concentration is to start with taking one part of davening (in addition to the three levels listed above) and think the meaning of every word of that part. Once you get used to concentrating on that part, you can add another part of davening.

For example, you can start from the beginning of *Shemonah Esrei*, and after getting used to thinking the meaning of the first *brachah* (which takes priority over the rest), you can add the next two *brachos* (from *atah gibor* through *hakail hakadosh*) and make sure to think the meaning of these *brachos* as well. When it gets easier to think the meaning of these *brachos*, you can add the next three *brachos*. After many months, you will get used to thinking the meaning of the entire *Shemonah Esrei*, and you can then continue with *Shema* and other parts of davening. After working on this for a few years, you will get used to thinking the meaning of the entire davening.

The common factor between these two approaches is that you must be consistent and have patience to put in the daily struggle to work on developing *kavanah*, and with Hashem's help, you will succeed and grow in davening. Just like everything else in life, you get what you give, and the affect davening will have on you depends on how much effort you put into it.

¹⁶. The Rebbe once said that *Shacharis* shouldn't take less than an hour from beginning to end.

CHAPTER 3. SYNCHRONIZING THE KAVANAH WITH THE WORDS

The ultimate goal in davening is to think the meaning of the words while saying them.¹⁷ However, since this may be difficult to actualize, we will divide synchronizing the *kavanah* with the words into two stages:

1. To think the meaning of the words slightly apart from saying them.
2. To think the meaning of the words while actually saying them.

The first stage, where you think the meaning of a few words slightly apart from saying them, is a recommended method when learning the meaning of the words (see Chapter 2, “Studying *Tefillah*”). By doing this, you will get used to thinking the meaning of the words. This is what you should do the first few times you go through the siddur and Tehillim.

We will present here two alternative techniques how to get used to thinking the meaning of the words slightly apart from saying them, so that you will eventually be able to think their meaning while actually saying them:

1. One technique is to think over the meaning of a few words *before* saying them, and then to think it over again while actually saying them. This may appear difficult, but it isn't as difficult as articulating the meaning of the words in your mind while actually saying them (if you aren't used to doing so).¹⁸
2. Alternatively, you can first say a few words and *then* think over their meaning.¹⁹ This is not as difficult as thinking beforehand, because here you are thinking

¹⁷. שו"ע אדה"ז או"ח סי' ה: "צריך לכוין הברכות פירוש המילות שמוציא מפיו, וכשיזכיר השם יכוין וכו' ", היינו בעת האמירה, והוא לשון הטור ומחבר (עם שינויים קלים).

¹⁸. באשל אברהם ובאלי' רבה (או"ח סי' ה) העירו מהבחי' (ויקרא כד, י) שכתב שקודם שיזכיר השם יכוין בו.

וז"ל הבחי' שם: "צריך המברך כשהוא מברך את ה' שיתבונן תחלה בלבו בפירוש אותיות ה', ובמה הן מורות ולכוין בהם במחשבתו, ואח"כ יברך את ה' ויזכירנו בפיו, ועם זה יקבל שכרו משלם ויחיה חיי עד, זכר לדבר מה שכתוב: ארוממך אלקי המלך ואברכה שמך לעולם ועד, יאמר: ארוממך תחלה במחשבתי ובכוונת הלב ואח"כ ואברכה, כענין שאמרו: לעולם יכנס אדם שעור שני פתחים ואח"כ יתפלל", עכ"ל.

¹⁹. עיין שו"ע אדה"ז סי' ס"ז, שמביא מתרומת הדשן ומגן אברהם שהפירוש ב"מאריכין באחד" הוא שחושב הענין אחר אמירת התיבה. ועיין רמב"ם הל' נדרים פי"ג הי"ט שיש תוך כדי דיבור לכוונה כמו לדיבור.

ולהעיר מכתר שם טוב [הוצאה החדשה ע' כה] (אות לט): "[ופעם א' שאל השואל למורי זלה"ה אם אמר כמה תיבות בק"ש ובתפלה בלא כוונה אם רשאי לחזור פעם שנית ולאומרם בכוונה, ואמר בזה הלשון: הלא ידוע ומפורסם שאין לך שום דבר שלא יהא בו מציאות השם, אפילו מחשבה חיצונית שם יש ג"כ ניצוצות קדושות כנודע, וא"כ] אם אמר כמה תיבות (בק"ש ו) בתפלה

the meaning of the words just once (immediately after, instead of both before and while saying them), but it isn't as ideal as thinking beforehand.²⁰

(I have personally found this technique to work well for myself, but I have heard from many *mashpi'im* that it's better to think the meaning of the words before saying them.

This can be demonstrated from the following story: When the Frierdiker Rebbe was a young boy, he once asked his grandmother Rebbetzin Rivka why it takes his father such a long time to daven. She answered: "Your father is a great chossid and tzaddik, and he thinks the meaning of each word of davening before saying it."²¹)

The second stage is when you are already used to thinking the meaning of the words, so you can suffice with concentrating on the meaning while saying them. Since this can be difficult, you should first become familiar with the meaning of the words (by having one or more cycles to go through the davening and learn the meaning of each piece, as explained in Chapter 2). After you are familiar with the meaning of all the words, you should then continue with another cycle (or cycles) in which you will focus on thinking the meaning of the words slightly apart from saying them. When you feel ready for the next step, you should choose a piece of davening every day where you will think the meaning of each word while actually saying it, and slowly expand to additional sections.

If you feel you can begin right away with thinking the meaning of the words while saying them, that's great, and there's definitely nothing wrong with that. But some people might find it hard to start off immediately in this manner and may find it easier to progress in stages as described above.²²

בלא כוונה, לא יאמרם פעם שנית, רק יהרהר במחשבה ובכוונה התיבות שאמר בלא כוונה. כל זה שמעתי [בשם] מורי (הבעש"ט) זלה"ה [ודפח"ה].

²⁰. See Chapter 4, "Some More Practical Tips" (especially paragraphs 5 and 6), for additional ideas to assist in thinking the meaning of the words.

²¹. *Lekutei Diburim*, Vol. 4, p. 1347.

²². I have not seen this method written explicitly in any *sefer*, but it worked well for me personally, and I hope it will be effective for others as well.

CHAPTER 4. PREPARING FOR DAVENING AND STAYING FOCUSED

The only way to have *kavanah* while davening is if you maintain a conduct that is conducive to doing so. We will go through some basic habits (taken mostly from Halacha) that can help a person develop the right frame of mind for davening.

Removing Distractions

1. One shouldn't converse with others excessively before davening. According to one opinion, one shouldn't even greet someone with a "good morning" in the regular fashion, to remind him to avoid entering conversations before davening.²³ This is especially true right before davening, when you should be exclusively involved with learning and thinking Chassidus and the like. (Obviously, even if you want to discuss an idea in Chassidus with someone else, which is fine to do before davening, you shouldn't do so in the place where the minyan is davening, as that will disturb those who are davening.)

2. One shouldn't hold an object that might distract him.²⁴ It goes without saying that you should turn off (at least the volume of) your cell phone before davening.

3. The Gemara states that when entering shul, one should first enter the size of two doorways and then begin davening. The Shulchan Aruch cites three explanations of this passage:

- a. One should stand the size of two doorways (i.e., eight *tefachim*) away from the door before davening, to avoid giving the impression that he wants to leave shul immediately after davening. This halacha can be extended to include any action that gives the impression that he wants to leave shul the moment davening is over.
- b. A person shouldn't sit within the size of two doorways (eight *tefachim*) from the door so that he won't be tempted to look outside. This implies that one shouldn't sit in a place where he can easily become distracted.
- c. One should wait the amount of time it takes to walk through two sets of doors before davening. This implies that one shouldn't start to daven the

²³. שו"ע או"ח סי' פט ס"ב.

²⁴. שו"ע או"ח סי' צו ס"א.

moment he enters the shul, rather he should first stop, wait, and focus for a moment.

The Shulchan Aruch concludes that one should pay heed to all three explanations and their implications.²⁵

(According to Chassidus, entering the first doorway means to remove worldly thoughts from your mind, i.e., to clear your mind of all distracting thoughts. Entering the second doorway means to think about and focus on the fact that you are about to speak to Hashem Himself.²⁶)

4. When learning before davening, one should conclude with something inspiring that will help him daven, and not with something complicated that will occupy his mind and disturb his davening.²⁷

Proper Body Position

1. One should sit or stand in one place while davening and not walk around. Some people claim that they have an easier time concentrating when they move around; however, the opposite is true—it makes it harder to concentrate.²⁸

2. One should lower his head slightly²⁹ and look into the siddur³⁰ while davening.

3. One shouldn't put his hands on his hips during davening, rather they should lie on the table, hold the siddur, be folded over, or the like.³¹ The Rebbe wrote to yeshiva students that they shouldn't sit with their legs crossed when davening.³² (This is also

²⁵. או"ח סי' צ ס"כ.

²⁶. קונטרס התפלה פי"א.

²⁷. שו"ע או"ח סי' צג ס"ג.

²⁸. קונטרס התפלה פי"א.

²⁹. שו"ע או"ח סי' צה ס"ב.

³⁰. מג"א סי' צג סק"א.

³¹. שו"ע או"ח סי' צה ס"ג.

³². קונטרס קטן באנגלית בענין חובת התלמידים.

mentioned in Ba'eir Heiteiv³³ in the name of Ateres Zekainim.) Additionally, one shouldn't lean on his back, lean to the sides, or stretch out his legs.³⁴

Proper Thoughts Before Beginning to Daven

There are two *simanim* in Shulchan Aruch (95 and 98) which discuss how one should focus his thoughts properly before beginning to daven. What follows is a synopsis of these two *simanim*:

1. **Siman 95.** One should turn his eyes downward (toward the siddur) and face Yerushalayim, but in his heart he should focus upward and think that he is speaking directly to Hashem Himself. One should consider as if he is actually standing in the *Beis Hamikdash* and davening to Hashem.

2. **Siman 98.** While davening, one should concentrate on the meaning of the words he is saying. Before beginning to daven, one should view himself as if he is standing before the *shechinah* and remove from his mind all thoughts that trouble him until he can concentrate.

He should tell himself: If I would be speaking before a king of flesh and blood, I would be very careful with every word I say; how much more so should I be careful when speaking to Hashem! The difference is that before Hashem our thoughts are like words because He hears our thoughts; consequently, we must be as careful with our thoughts before Him as we would be with our words before a human king.

If a foreign thought comes and disturbs him during davening, he should pause and wait for it to pass before continuing to daven.

The Rama adds that before davening one should reflect on great Hashem is and how lowly a human being is when compared to Him, until he divests himself from thinking about physical pleasures and instead focuses on connecting to Hashem.

In *Kuntres HaTefillah*,³⁵ the Rebbe Rashab adds more explanation on how to remove distracting thoughts. If someone claims that he can't remove distracting thoughts from his mind while davening, he should contemplate on the following: When it comes to falling asleep, a person succeeds in removing all disturbing thoughts, since he knows that he needs to sleep. This is because a person can remove distracting thoughts for something that is important. (Some give an example from someone who is learning how to drive a car: when he must focus on the road, he can push away all other thoughts, since his life depends on it.) When he will realize that davening is just as

³³ .או"ח סי' צה סק"ג.

³⁴ .באר היטב שם.

³⁵ .פי"א.

important and is something his *neshamah* needs, he will certainly be able to remove all distracting thoughts.

Upon thinking about this idea a few times, a person will realize that it's within his ability to remove all other thoughts and focus only on davening.

In several letters the Rebbe recommends thinking over the first page of Tanya Chapter 41 before beginning to daven.³⁶ This can serve as a way of fulfilling the abovementioned directive of the Rama.³⁷

The Rebbe also says that this halacha applies to all three *tefillos*, *Shacharis*, *Minchah*, and *Maariv*. The only difference is that more time should be spent on this preparation before *Shacharis* than before the other *tefillos*.³⁸

To summarize:

1. Before beginning to daven, you should consider as if you are in the *Beis Hamikdash*, and you should think that you are speaking directly to Hashem Himself.

2. You should also tell yourself: If I would be speaking to a king of flesh and blood I would be extremely careful with every word I say; how much more so should I be careful when speaking to Hashem with my every word and thought, because Hashem hears my thoughts as well. (Additionally, you should realize that since davening is important for you both spiritually and physically, you certainly have the ability to remove all distracting thoughts.)

3. You should spend some time before davening thinking about Hashem's infinite greatness, since the entire universe consists of merely a single thought of Hashem that He is projecting into existence out of nothingness, and that He is the only true existence. You should think about this concept until you realize that all worldly matters are utterly futile and the only thing that matters is Hashem and His mission for us. (This thought process should include the beginning of Tanya Chapter 41.)

These ideas should be contemplated upon before davening; during davening, you should focus on thinking the meaning of the words you are saying.

³⁶. ראה לדוגמא אג"ק חי"ח ע' קכז.

³⁷. ראה אג"ק חי"א ע' שפ.

³⁸. אג"ק חי"ח ע' קנג. חי"א ע' רל.

These ideas—namely, what it means to think about Hashem’s greatness, how to remove worldly desires from your heart, and so on—are explained in Chassidus at length. This is why it is important to think Chassidus before davening every day (as explained in Section 3).

Some More Practical Tips

Not all of these tips are mentioned in Halacha, but they seem to work well:

1. It’s important to relax completely before davening; to simply sit down, relax, and allow your thoughts to gather.³⁹ You should remain serious but also be relaxed, to ensure that davening is something natural and enjoyable and not a burden *chas veshalom*.
2. When saying the words, it’s important to take up a pace that works for you, one that is not too fast nor too slow.
3. It’s very helpful to have a tune to use for davening (either a *nigun* or a simple personal tune). This way, it’s as if you are singing the words of davening and not just reciting them monotonously.
4. The Shulchan Aruch states that the words must be said loud enough for you yourself to hear,⁴⁰ but it doesn’t have to be louder than that. Depending on how you feel, you may prefer to daven quietly or out loud, whichever way helps you concentrate better.
5. If you are familiar with the Hebrew words, you can sometimes look at the English translation while saying them to make it easier to think their meaning. Obviously, it’s preferable to look inside the siddur while saying the words. But since it’s hard to avoid getting distracted at times, if you feel that it’s getting hard to concentrate while looking at the actual Hebrew words, you can look at the English translation to make it easier.
6. When you are trying to think the meaning of a word, it can help to picture the meaning of the word (in English) in your mind while saying it.
7. If you said words without *kavanah*, you should not repeat them in order to have *kavanah* (except for those places where *kavanah* is *me’akav*, as explained in Chapter 1). Instead, you should think over the meaning of the words you just said and then continue.⁴¹

³⁹. See above, “Removing Distractions.”

⁴⁰. או"ה סי' קא.

⁴¹. ראה כתר שם טוב שבהערה 19.

וראה גם מאמרי אדה"ז הקצרים ע' תקפא: "אם בא לאדם איזה בלבול במחשבתו בתפילתו הוא מהלב והוא כמו אדם אחר שמדבר עמו בעת תפילתו כך הלב הוא כמו אדם אחר ממש רוח הבהמיות כי האדם הוא מורכב ומבלבל מחשבתו שבמוחו. אמנם

CHAPTER 5. KAVANAH WHEN SAYING HASHEM'S NAMES AND THE FIRST POSSUK OF SHEMA

Hashem's Names

Halacha specifies certain *kavanos* you should concentrate on each time you say Hashem's Name.⁴²

When saying the Name of Hashem that is spelled *Yud Kei Vov Kei* and pronounced *Ad-n-y*, you should think that *Yud Kei Vov Kei* signifies that Hashem is *Hayah, Hoveh, VeYiyihyeh*, meaning that Hashem has existed, exists, and will exist forever. In addition, you should think the meaning of the Name as it's pronounced (*Ad-n-y*), namely, that Hashem is the absolute Master of all.

When saying the Name of Hashem as it is spelled *Alef Daled Nun Yud*, you should think that Hashem is the absolute Master of all.

When saying the Name *Elokim* (or a name derived from *Elokim*, such as *Elokeinu*), you should think that Hashem is All-Powerful and that He has the ability to do whatever He desires in both the higher and lower spheres (and that all power comes from Him alone and He is the cause of everything⁴³).

Being that it is difficult to have all this in mind each time one says Hashem's Name, it is suggested to say a short declaration at the beginning of the day as follows: "Whenever I say the Name *Yud Kei Vov Kei*, I mean that Hashem has existed, exists, and will exist forever, and that he is the absolute Master of all. When I say the Name *Ad-n-y*, I mean that Hashem is the absolute Master of all. And when I say the Name *Elokim*, I mean that Hashem is All-Powerful and that He has the ability to do whatever He desires in both the higher and lower spheres (and that all power comes from Him alone)."⁴⁴ However, when saying Hashem's Name in the first *possuk* of *Shema*

אעפ"י שאמר קצת דברים שלא במחשבת הלב לא יחזור לראש אם לא במקום שאחז"ל בפסוק ראשון דק"ש ובאבות אבל לא במקומות אחרים. והטעם שמעתי כי א"צ לאדם כ"א שידבר כ"ב אותיות במחשבה והיא הנשמה שמח' את כל אותיות תפילתו כמשל אדם גדול כמו עוג מלך הבשן מחייהו נשמה קטנה של תנוק קטן בן יומו כך המחשבה מח' את הדבור".

⁴². שו"ע או"ח סי' ה.

⁴³. The ideas in parentheses are not mentioned by the Alter Rebbe but are mentioned by other *poskim*.

⁴⁴. סידור תפלה לדוד (לבעל האשל אברהם) סעיף כא. ועיין פסקי תשובות או"ח סי' ה.

(where Hashem's name is mentioned three times—"Hashem Elokeinu Hashem"), it's better to think these *kavanos* explicitly.⁴⁵

First Possuk of Shema

There are three ideas one should have in mind when saying אחד ה' אלקינו ה'. We will first explain these three ideas separately and then how all three ideas join together as one.

1. The oneness of Hashem. When saying "ה' אחד," one should contemplate on the fact that Hashem is the only Ruler over the seven heavens, the earth, the four directions of the globe, and the past, present, and future.⁴⁶

More particularly, the א of אחד indicates that Hashem is the ruler of the world (as the Hebrew word for ruler—*aluf*—is similar to the word *alef*); the ח (eight) indicates that He rules over the seven heavens and the earth;⁴⁷ and the ד (four) indicates that He rules over the four directions of the globe. And since He is ה', meaning that he existed, exists, and will exist forever, His Kingship over the world is also for all time—in the past, present, and future.⁴⁸

2. Hashem's Kingship. When saying *Shema* one should accept *ol malchus shamayim*, that Hashem is our King.⁴⁹

⁴⁵. עיין סידור תפלה לדוד הנ"ל ובביאור הגר"א או"ח סי' ה'.

⁴⁶. שו"ע או"ח סי' ס"ו. וראה שער היחוד והאמונה פ"ז.

⁴⁷. Additionally, the letter ח written in *ksav ashuri* has a "roof" on top. This signifies that Hashem is alive (as the letter ח stands for חי, alive) in the summit of the world (see Shulchan Aruch [ibid.], from Menachos 29b).

Perhaps this *kavanah* complements the general *kavanah* of *echad* (as explained in the text): Hashem transcends the world (the *kavanah* of the "roof" of the *ches*), while at the same time His Kingship permeates all aspects of the world (the general *kavanah* of *echad*). This is similar to the Rebbe's explanation that the word *Oybershter*, which means "the One Above," doesn't tell us who Hashem is, rather that He is beyond any limitation or definition one can provide. Yet, His Essence is known to all, even to children (see Torah Or 14b), because even as He transcends anything and everything, He is found everywhere and rules over every aspect of existence.

⁴⁸. שו"ע שם, וראה שער היחוד והאמונה שם. וראה ברכות יג, ב: "כיון דאמליכתייה למעלה ולמטה ולארבע רוחות השמים תו לא צריכת", ובפרש"י: "שהארכת שיעור שתחשוב בלבך ה' אחד בשמים ובארץ וד' רוחותיה".

⁴⁹. ראה ברכות יג, א במשנה: "כדי שיקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים תחלה". וראה שם יג, ב בענין ק"ש של רבי יהודה הנשיא, ושם יד, ב ואילך.

By which word(s) of *Shema* should one concentrate on this idea? It seems that accepting Hashem's Kingship is related to the word אחד:⁵⁰

The Gemara states that the verse *Shema Yisrael* is one of the *pesukei malchiyos* recited during *Musaf* on Rosh Hashanah.⁵¹ But the word מלך is not mentioned in this *possuk*. How can it be used as one of the *pesukei malchiyos*?

There are two answers to this question.

1. The Tur⁵² explains that Hashem's Kingship is expressed in the word אלקינו, because by saying that He is our G-d, we are accepting Him as our King and that we must fulfill whatever He desires.

2. The Me'iri⁵³ answers that Hashem's Kingship is connected to the word אחד. Hashem's oneness is such that it excludes any other type of kingship or dominion, as He is the sole ruler over everything.

The Levush⁵⁴ quotes both explanations; however, when quoting the Levush, the Alter Rebbe⁵⁵ only quotes the explanation that the word אחד demonstrates Hashem's Kingship, and he omits the other explanation (that it is expressed in the word אלקינו). This indicates that the Alter Rebbe follows the Me'iri, and one should concentrate on accepting Hashem's Kingship primarily⁵⁶ when saying the word אחד.⁵⁷

To summarize: The main place where we accept Hashem's Kingship is when saying ה' אחד. One should then think that Hashem's oneness is such that He is the only King and that it's

⁵⁰. The following discussion is the author's and is inconclusive.

⁵¹. ר"ה לב, ב.

⁵². או"ח סי' קיג.

⁵³. בחידושי ר"ה שם.

⁵⁴. או"ח סי' תקצ"א ס"ד.

⁵⁵. או"ח סי' תקצ"א ס"א.

⁵⁶. As mentioned earlier (from the Tur), the word אלקינו expresses the acceptance of Hashem's Kingship as well; however, it is expressed *primarily* in the word אחד (see note 96).

⁵⁷. This also corresponds with the Gemara in *Brachos* (see note 48) that ה' אחד indicates that Hashem rules above, below, and over the four directions of the globe.

impossible for any other kind of kingship to exist, and we should accept Hashem's Kingship upon ourselves to fulfill whatever He desires.⁵⁸

3. Sacrificing one's life for Hashem. When saying *Shema*, one should accept Hashem as his King to the extent that he is prepared to sacrifice his life to fulfill His desire.⁵⁹ One should have this *kavanah* when saying the word אחד.⁶⁰

When joining all three ideas together, we can conclude that when saying יה' אחד you should consider the following: I recognize that Hashem is the only ruler and king of the entire universe, and that no power can exist that is separate from Him. I therefore accept His Kingship to fulfill whatever He wishes, even if I must sacrifice my life or personal desires⁶¹ for this purpose.

When a Yid realizes that Hashem is אחד—the only king, creator, guide, and cause of all existence, and that He is the only one who has real importance and is the only true existence (as explained in Tanya Chapter 25), he will accept His Kingship to the point of *mesiras nefesh*, since a Yid is unable to separate himself from His oneness (א איד איז נישט ער וויל און נישט ער קאן זיין ח"ו א נפרד) —מאלקות—a Jew is unwilling and unable to become separated from Hashem, *chas veshalom*).⁶²

This idea is central to a person's *avodas Hashem* throughout the day. As the Alter Rebbe explains in Tanya,⁶³ the reason we are commanded to recite *Shema* twice daily is so that we will remember our belief in His oneness to the point of *mesiras nefesh*. This is expressed in everything we do throughout the day, since anything that is against His will is essentially a denial of His true

⁵⁸. Perhaps the difference between accepting Hashem's Kingship when saying אלקינו or when saying אחד is as follows: Accepting Hashem as our king because He is *our* G-d (אלקינו) doesn't emphasize that there is no other king other than Him. *Lehavdil*, every country has its king, but he is only the king of that country; the citizens of another country have a different king. Whereas by saying that Hashem is our King because He is אחד—the one and only King that exists, we emphasize that we are talking about a different type of kingship altogether—one which is exclusive to Hashem alone, and this is what our acceptance of Hashem's Kingship is really about.

⁵⁹. ב"ה או"ח ריש סי' סא, הובא במשנה ברורה שם סק"ג.

⁶⁰. ראה סידור אדה"ז סוף סדר נעילה קודם אמירת שמע ישראל מה שמביא בשם השל"ה שיש לכוון למסור נפשו באחד. וכן מובא בכמה מקומות בדא"ח בנוגע לקריאת שמע של כל יום. וראה לקו"ש ח"ט ע' 12 שמחלק בין זכירת ענין מסירת נפש של כל יום בק"ש (כמבואר בתניא פכ"ה) שהוא רק נתינת כח לקיום תומ"צ, ובין עצם ענין מסירת נפש כמו בק"ש של נעילה.

⁶¹. מובא בכמה מקומות בדא"ח שהפירוש של מסירת נפש הוא מסירת הרצון, כמו בפסוק "אין נפשי אל העם הזה", שפירוש "נפש" הוא רצון.

⁶². היום יום כא סיון. וראה ד"ה ועשית ציץ עת"ר ובכ"מ ההפרש בין מסירת נפש של יהודי למס"נ של (להבדיל) אינו-יהודי.

⁶³. פכ"ה.

oneness that there is nothing separate from Him, and anything that is in accordance with His Will is an affirmation of His oneness.

This is a deep idea, and it's not always possible to be *ma'arich be'echad* properly by contemplating on it each time you recite *Shema*. Nevertheless, if you think through this concept properly even just once, you can think it over briefly for a minute or less every day when saying *shema*, thus fulfilling the mitzvah properly.

This idea should be thought about while saying the word אֶחָד and afterward, before beginning בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם (as long as he starts doing so within *toch kedai dibur*—about two to three seconds—of saying the word אֶחָד).⁶⁴ (This is allowed even *lechatchilah*, as there isn't enough time to think the entire *kavanah* while saying the actual word.)

(See Chapter 3 for further discussion regarding the preferred time to think the meaning of the words of davening—before, while, or after saying the words.)

⁶⁴. ראה שו"ע אדה"ז סי' סא ס"ז.

