

REACHING FOR Calm & Focus

I believe that the one constant, all-pervasive reality in speaking about any topic involving human behavior is simply just that—we are all fundamentally human with all of our contradictions, dichotomies, limitations, and tendencies. For how long has man been saddled with this complicated and sometimes messy makeup? From the very beginning of his creation.

In the very creation of man, when HKB'H utters the famous words: ויאמר אלקים נעשה: אדם, *Let Us make man in our image and in our likeness*,¹ there was a foreshadowing of who we are and what we must contend with. For while Rashi famously says that when G-d said *na'aseh* it was a call to and a consultation with the lower heavenly bodies,² the Ramban said that it was, in fact, a statement of collaboration of sorts, with everything that was created before man. G-d calls to the earth and the animals to contribute a piece of their mortal, physical selves to combine with the eternal soul derived from G-d's essence to form this new,

unique *beriah* called man. Whether the formulation to express this fundamental complexity is that man has one essence, one soul, and that the soul (or self) must contend with certain internal competing elements, or, as the *Tanya*³ and other *sifrei chassidus* write, that man has two competing souls, the *nefesh Elohis* and *nefesh bahamis*, the end result is the same: man has been complicated from our very inception.⁴

While this complexity expresses itself in every corner of a person's life, I would like to address the topic of concentration and focus. It is both commonplace and accurate to identify and decry the impact of technology in challenging our ability to concentrate.⁵ However, it is clear that the challenge of concentration and distractibility goes back, once again, to the very beginning of time. Adam's failure to remain focused on G-d's words as he fell prey to the seduction of the *nachash*; the Torah's repeated need to place G-d's commandments and admonitions before our eyes; the concepts of *hesech hada'as*



Rabbi Josh Blass

Mashgiach Ruchani, Yeshiva University

and *machshavos zaros*; and the injunction of *hafachta bo v'hafachta bo*—all these, and hundreds of other examples, point to the basic reality that man is highly distractible and has difficulty sustaining focus. Undoubtedly the source that comes most to mind is the mishna in *Avos* 3:7 that writes:

אמר רבי יעקב: המהלך בדרך ושונה ומפסיק ממשנתו ואומר, מה נאה אילן זה ומה נאה ניר זה, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו מתחייב בנפשו. *Rabbi Jacob said: if one is studying while walking on the road and interrupts his study and says, "how fine is this tree!" [or] "how fine is this newly ploughed field!," scripture accounts it to him as if he was mortally guilty.*

Many meforshim take this mishna in directions other than the simple explanation;⁶ however the simple peshat remains that a person who finds himself distracted by that which is in his environment faces condemnation.

While the current milieu didn't create the problem, undoubtedly the industrial revolution and the new technological era have taken the challenge of focus into a new and complicated chapter. What are some areas on which we might concentrate, and what tools are at our disposal as we navigate these complex waters?

Recognizing the Importance of Concentration

A good starting point would be a reminder of the significance of sustained focus. In every area of Jewish life we are exhorted to maintain focus. *Kavanah b'tefillah* is an obvious starting point. Reb Chaim Soloveitchik, in a famous comment on the Rambam,⁷ said that davening without a continued consciousness of being *omed lifnei Hashem* constitutes *misasek b'alma*, a fundamentally meaningless act. Of note is the Ramo⁸ who felt that in our days sustained concentration throughout all of Shemoneh Esrei is nearly impossible, but even the Ramo concedes that *kavanah* is necessary for at least a part of tefillah.

Similarly, Talmud Torah requires the same form of dedication and concentration. Stories of the Chazon Ish, Reb Chaim Shmulevitz and others who were reported to be able to sit for a full twenty-four hours focused on their learning set an unreasonably high standard, but the gist of concentrated focus remains. Rashi notably comments⁹ that the Torah's command of *bechukosai teileichu*—to walk in the ways of G-d's decrees—mandates the necessity of being an *amel ba'Torah*. The Ran in *Nedarim* (8a) believes that our baseline

obligation in *limmud Torah* is to know *kol ha'Torah kula*. Others disagree with that formulation,¹⁰ but regardless of what our obligation is, it can only be accomplished with prolonged focus and study. On a related note, the Rambam,¹¹ among others, believes that there is a mitzvah *leida*—to know—that there is a G-d who created the universe. The Rambam in the introduction to the *Moreh Nevuchim* writes that only through sustained concentration, study, and reflection can we come to fulfill this mandate of *yedias Hashem*.

Mitzvah observance is no different. The Meiri¹² notes the pasuk in Tehillim (119:126):

עת לעשות לה' הפרו תורתך.

There is a time to act for G-d, for they have violated Your teaching.

He writes that it can be understood in the following innovative fashion: there is a time to do the mitzvos, and when we perform the commandments simply out of rote, without feeling for the actions we are performing, and without intent and focus, just mindlessly going from action to action, then these potentially beautiful acts end up resulting in *heferu Torasecha*, an actual annulment of the Torah itself.

This necessity of sustained concentration applies to all areas of a meaningful Jewish life, including working on our character traits.¹³ Without the capacity of sustained focus we may be able to build a beautiful palace of a Torah life, but to some degree the soul of that life is fundamentally incomplete.

Practical Tips

Perhaps spend 15 minutes a day on sustained focus. Read a book, learn a sefer, take time during tefillah, have sustained conversations with a friend or family member etc. without looking at your phone or jumping to a different task.

Cultivating the capacity for the intellect to determine behavior, as opposed to falling into natural impulse:

The Chazon Ish writes¹⁴ that there is one fundamental positive *midda* that all other good *middos* emanate from, namely, the capacity for a person to prioritize the *regesh mussari* (the refined thoughtful impulse) over the *regesh ta'avani* (the natural need-based impulse). The Chazon Ish is advocating intentionality and mindfulness instead of simply allowing ourselves to become enslaved to a natural instinct. In a similar vein, the Alter Rebbe writes throughout the *Tanya*¹⁵ that all growth begins with the mind. The decision to act in accordance with our values and the capacity to connect with HKB'H starts with the intellect, and only once we have clarity of mind can that clarity extend to the heart.

The Sefas Emes writes in parshas Nasso about the purpose of tefillin:

היינו שהתפילין מסייעין לאדם לברר הדעת שלא יסיח דעתו.

That is to say that the purpose of tefillin is to help a person clarify his da'as and to not allow for distractions.

The Sefas Emes recognized man's basic propensity toward distractions and that the mitzvah of tefillin, among other elements of Jewish life, is geared toward allowing the head and brain to dictate and dominate.

This necessity for constant contemplation, reflection, and directed mindful actions is best reflected in two statements in Chazal:

אמר רבי לוי בר חמא אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש לעולם ירגיז אדם יצר טוב על יצר הרע.
Rabbi Levi bar Chama said that Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: One should always incite his good inclination against his evil inclination.

Berachos 5a

אריב"ל כל השם אורחותיו זוכה ורואה

בשעותיו של הקדוש ברוך הוא שנאמר ושם
דרך אל תקרי ושם אלא ושם דרך אראנו
בשע אלוקים.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Whoever appraises his ways in this world and contemplates how to act in the most appropriate way possible merits seeing the salvation of the Holy One, Blessed be He, as it is stated: "And to him who orders his way." Do not read it as vesam, who orders; rather, read it as vesham, and appraises. With this reading, the verse indicates that one who appraises his ways, him will I show the salvation of God.

Moed Kattan 5a

What's clear from these sources and many others is that despite our natural pull toward impulse, the demand on a thoughtful person is to act mindfully, intentionally and with engagement of the intellect.

Practical Tips

Pick an area to focus on being more intentional. Perhaps only eat late at night if you are, in fact, hungry, instead of instinctively migrating to the food pantry.

Take an extra moment to contemplate the eating process before habitually saying a beracha and then eating.

Take a moment to think whether or not you should talk about another person before giving in to your natural impulse. These are just a few of hundreds of similar examples.

Cultivating the capacity to enter into a different spiritual space:

Rav Schwab writes in his masterful work on tefillah that the ultimate goal of prayer is to "enter" into the *heichal Hashem*. All

of tefillah from *birchas ha'shachar* until the last words of davening is geared toward allowing man, step-by-step, to enter into a different and more rarefied space.

Almost every halacha of tefillah is geared toward this end. We put our feet together to mimic the *mal'achim* and take three steps forward to enter a different space as we face Yerushalayim or the *makom HaMikdash*. All of this is about leaving the world of the finite and entering a spiritual domain.

While most rishonim believe that the law demanding that we do not walk in front of, or to the side of a person engaging in tefillah is geared toward allowing the *mispallel* to have proper concentration, others believe that it is actually more philosophically significant. Namely, when we daven, we acquire around ourselves a space of four *amos* of kedusha. A person has created and entered into a different spiritual domain that needs to be felt by the supplicant and respected and acknowledged by those around the *mispallel*.

Echoes of this idea are found throughout our practices. The purpose of the shofar is to transport the listener into the *lifnei v'lifnim*, the innermost chamber of the Beis HaMikdash. Shabbos and Yom Tov, days of *kedushas ha'zman*, bring us into a different dimension of time. The *beis ha'knesses* and *beis medrash* bring us into a mikdash, with all of the halachos that reflect the space we have entered into. Even saying the tefillah before beginning a period of learning signals to us that we are leaving the world of the "outside" and is entering the *olam HaTorah*.

Consciousness of all of this is critical in developing a meaningful religious personality, and can help focus attention accordingly.

Practical Tips

Take a few moments before and during tefillah to concentrate on the words of Rabbeinu Yonah¹⁶ of *peshot gufecha mei'al nishmasecha*, removing the outer layers of your body to allow yourself to more fully feel the soul.

Take a few minutes before a learning seder to realize the important opportunity at hand.

While those of us in Chutz La'aretz have no siren announcing the beginning of Shabbos, pause for a moment to mindfully feel that a new dimension of *kedushas ha'zman* is upon us.

Cultivating a greater capacity for calm and yishuv hada'as

This is critical. The *Sefas Emes* writes that the Torah instructs that *shoftim v'shotrim titein lecha* means that we should not act out of *regilus*, habit, but rather that everything that we do should be animated by a spirit of *yishuv hada'as*, calmness of bearing. He comes back to this theme throughout his writings.¹⁷

Similarly, Rabbeinu Bachya in several places emphasizes the need to remove ourselves from a place of *pizur nefesh*, the sense of the soul being scattered, and to bring a greater sense of calm and thoughtfulness.

Tefillah as a time of *hisbonenus* (deep reflection) and inwardness as well as Chazal's admonition that we need to take a *sha'ah*, literally an hour, before tefillah speak to this same idea, especially elusive in our days, of calmness of heart and mind. The *hisbodedus* first mentioned by the rishonim¹⁸ and later made famous by Rav Nachman is an invitation to step away and connect with the gentler, more

internal, and perhaps more authentic parts of ourselves. The Ramo's opening to his commentary on the *Shulchan Aruch* with the reminder of *shivisi Hashem l'negdi tamid* is an encouragement to find calm and to be grounded in our priorities at the very beginning of our day before "life" takes over.

The impact of these moments in cultivating focus, attention, calm, groundedness, and faith cannot be overstated. While this was critical in the days of the Ramo and Rav Nachman, the necessity of seeking internal calm has only grown in importance with the harried, overworked, stressful and technologically focused times that we are living in.

Practical Tips

Set aside time every day, preferably the same time, to sit, breathe, perhaps meditate, and to set an intention for the day.

Before beginning Shemoneh Esrei take a moment to consciously breathe in calm and *yishuv hada'as*.

Before disciplining a child, or before any confrontation or difficult conversation, ground yourself and decide how you would ideally like to navigate the interaction ahead.

Conclusion

While I began these words alluding to the fundamental quagmire that man finds himself in from his very inception, the good news is that we are never stuck. As frustrating as it is to feel limited in our capacity for calm, focus, concentration, and achievement, these are areas that can improve greatly with sustained effort. Greater emphasis on focus, developing the capacity for the brain to be imposed on the impulse, working to be able to enter into the spiritual spaces that are created for us and that we create for ourselves, along with a daily focus on calmness of spirit, can pay great dividends in our ability to navigate our lives with focus, intention, productivity, and ultimately with a sense of both accomplishment and *shleimus ha'nefesh*.

Endnotes

1. Bereishis 1:26.
2. See Rav Wolbe on Chumash for an incredibly beautiful comment on this Rashi.
3. See *Likutei Amarim* Perek beis and beyond.
4. According to *Nefesh HaChaim*, Sha'ar aleph, chapter six in the footnote, and others, this complexity was only intensified with Adam and Chava's sin in which the yetzer hara was

transformed from an element outside of our consciousness and, through the sin, became enmeshed into man's spiritual makeup.

5. See Brain Drain, Ward et al, Journal of the Association for Consumer Research.
6. See a truly beautiful idea in the sefer *Avos al Banim*, a compilation of thoughts based on the teachings of the Alter Me'Slobodka. He writes that the issue is not being distracted by the tree, which he argues itself is a form of learning and connection to the Ribbono Shel Olam. Rather the issue at hand is that he is *mafsik* from his connection with learning and has separated himself, his essence from the endeavor of limmud Torah.
7. *Rav Chaim on the Rambam*, Hilchos Tefillah.
8. Ramo, *Orach Chaim* 101a. See the *Biur Halacha* there as well as the *Mabit* in *Beis Elokim* in his discussion about tefillah.
9. Vayikra 26:3.
10. See the *Ohr Sameach* in *Hilchos Talmud Torah*.
11. *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 1:1.
12. Introduction to his commentary on the Talmud
13. See the Vilna Gaon at the beginning of *Even Shleima*.
14. *Emunah U'Bitachon* beginning of the 4th perek.
15. See in particular the 9th perek.
16. *Berachos* 5th perek on his commentary to the Rif.
17. See *Parshas Vayakhel* 5651.
18. See writings of Avraham ben Ha'Rambam.