

The Ancient Problem of Distraction: What Pirkei Avot Teaches About Attention & Purpose



Smartphones and other digital technologies have made distraction more constant and more difficult to resist. Yet the underlying challenge is much older.

The sages of *Pirkei Avot* addressed many of the habits and pressures that divide our attention: excessive busyness, avoidance, misplaced priorities, and commitments that are not protected by structure. Read together, their teachings offer a framework for thinking about focus that extends beyond the problem of technology.

One of the most striking teachings related to this theme appears in the words of Rabbi Yaakov:

המהלך בדרך ושונוה ומפסיק ממשנתו ואומר,
מה נאה אילן זה ומה נאה ניר זה, מעלה עליו
הכתוב כאילו מתחייב בנפשו.

*One who is reviewing his Torah study
while walking on the way, and interrupts*

*his study to say, "What a beautiful tree"
or "What a beautiful field," is regarded by
Scripture as if he had endangered his soul.
Avot 3:9¹*

The mishna is difficult to understand. There is nothing inherently wrong with appreciating nature. On the contrary, the natural world can inspire wonder, gratitude, and awareness of God. Contemporary research also suggests that exposure to nature can improve attention, working memory, and emotional regulation.² Why, then, does Rabbi Yaakov describe the interruption in such severe terms?

Some commentaries understand the person's statement as idle chatter. Meiri and Abarbanel suggest that he has turned from Torah to something trivial or useless. Yet most commentators do not assume that appreciating the tree is itself without value. Bartenura notes



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that even if the person recites a blessing over what he sees, the interruption remains problematic. Rabbi Dr. Reuven Bulka explains the point clearly: "There is profound significance in everything, but not everything is the same. There is a scale of values; there are priorities and

levels of importance.”³

The person in the mishna does not choose something bad over something good. He chooses one good thing at the expense of something more important at that moment. The beautiful tree becomes a distraction not because it lacks value, but because he allows it to displace the Torah he is already learning.

This is one reason focus is so difficult. We often imagine distraction as a contest between what matters and what does not. Sometimes that is true. But many distractions are legitimate interests, responsibilities, or pleasures that enter at the wrong time. The problem is not always that we value the wrong things. It is that we fail to order our values and give priority to the task presently before us.

Technology has made this challenge more pronounced. A phone gives immediate access to work, news, family, friends, entertainment, and Torah. Much of what appears on the screen may be worthwhile. Yet the fact that something is worthwhile does not mean it deserves attention now. Rabbi Yaakov’s warning asks us to distinguish between the value of an activity and its priority in a particular moment.

A second teaching in *Pirkei Avot* addresses a different source of distraction. Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinas warns that morning sleep, midday wine, childish conversation, and sitting among the ignorant “remove a person

from the world” (*Avot* 3:14). Once again, the examples require explanation. Sleep, wine, conversation, and recreation are not inherently forbidden. Why are they described so negatively?

Rabbi Moses Alashkar understands the mishna as warning about patterns that damage both body and soul: laziness, unhealthy indulgence, wasted time, and negative social influence. Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski, drawing on his clinical experience with addiction, reads the examples as forms of escapism. When difficulties are not confronted, they usually grow worse. People may attempt to avoid reality through substances, sleep, daydreaming, idleness, or other activities that temporarily distract them from the problem at hand. These behaviors “remove a person from the world” because they prevent meaningful engagement with life and responsibility.⁴

This adds an important distinction. At times distraction comes from the outside. Something captures our attention and pulls us away from what we intended to do. At other times we seek distraction because we do not want to remain with a demanding task, uncomfortable emotion, or unresolved responsibility. The same activity can serve either function. Rest can restore us, or it can become a way to postpone what needs to be faced. Technology can help us accomplish meaningful goals, or it can offer an immediate escape whenever effort becomes difficult.

Rabbi Dosa’s warning is not an argument against leisure. Rest and recreation are necessary parts of a healthy life. The concern is that seemingly harmless habits can gradually consume more time and energy than intended. The central question is not only, “What am I doing?” but also, “What function is this activity serving?” Is it helping me return to my responsibilities with greater strength, or is it helping me avoid them?

Pirkei Avot also recognizes that a meaningful life will contain many legitimate obligations. Rabban Gamliel teaches that “it is good to combine Torah study with a worldly occupation, for the effort involved in both makes one forget sin” (*Avot* 2:2). Torah is not presented as requiring withdrawal from work and responsibility. Purposeful engagement can provide structure, financial stability, and protection from temptation.

Psychological research similarly distinguishes between harmful time pressure and what some researchers call a “busy mindset.” Feeling overwhelmed and rushed can impair self-control and decision-making. Yet perceiving ourselves as purposefully occupied, without feeling overloaded, can increase feelings of productivity and strengthen self-control. Busyness is not necessarily the problem. The problem arises when activity becomes fragmented, anxious, or detached from clear priorities.⁵

Rabbi Meir sharpens this point: “Limit your business activities and occupy yourself with Torah” (*Avot* 4:12). The mishna does not reject work. Maharal explains that limiting business is not a call to laziness, but an expression of longing for Torah. Rabbi Samuel de Uceda draws attention to Rabbi Meir’s choice of language. He does not warn against *melakha*, work



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itself, but against *esek*, the mental and emotional preoccupation that can allow business to occupy the whole person. A person may leave the workplace while continuing to carry its pressures, ambitions, and unfinished concerns throughout the day.⁶

Rabbi Meir continues, “If you neglect the Torah, you will have many excuses to neglect it.” Meiri explains that when other pursuits are given priority, they demand increasing attention, making it progressively harder to return to learning. Distraction often develops in this way. It is rarely a single decision to abandon what matters. More often, one secondary concern is granted priority, then another, until the central commitment has been crowded out.

This does not call for a narrow life with only one concern. Work, family, community, health, rest, and Torah may all be genuine obligations. The question is whether they fit within a coherent hierarchy or continually compete for our attention.

Maimonides provides a broader framework in the fifth of his *Eight Chapters*, which he titles “Concerning the Application of Man’s Psychic Faculties Towards the Attainment of a Single Goal.” A person, he writes, should keep “his mind’s eye

fixed constantly upon one goal,” the knowledge of God, and should arrange his actions, conduct, and speech so that they lead toward that end. He connects this to the teaching, “Let all your deeds be for the sake of Heaven” (*Avot* 2:12).⁷

Maimonides does not mean that a person should engage only in explicitly religious activity. Eating, sleeping, working, and caring for the body all have a place. Their value depends partly on the purpose they serve. Physical health enables intellectual, moral, and spiritual development. Ordinary activities can therefore become parts of a unified life when they are directed toward a higher goal.

This distinction helps clarify the nature of focus. Concentration means sustaining attention on a present activity. Focus, in the broader sense, means ordering multiple activities toward a central purpose. A person can have many roles and remain focused if those roles reinforce a coherent set of commitments. Conversely, a person can concentrate intensely on a series of individual tasks while living without an integrated direction.

Rabbi Nehunya ben HaKanna expresses a related idea through the metaphor of a yoke: “One who takes on himself the yoke of Torah will be spared the

yoke of government and the yoke of worldly responsibilities” (*Avot* 3:5). The metaphor acknowledges that Torah requires discipline, sacrifice, and effort. Yet the yoke also provides direction.

Several commentators understand the removal of other yokes psychologically rather than literally. Rabbi Joseph Nahmias suggests that Torah cultivates contentment and reduces material craving. Rabbi Dr. Reuven Bulka explains that when Torah becomes primary, other concerns recede in relative significance. The Kotzker Rebbe notes that great Torah scholars still needed to work for a living. The mishna does not promise that responsibilities disappear. Rather, livelihood need not become an obsession when it is placed within an all-embracing commitment to Torah.⁸

Stephen Covey’s well-known Time Management Matrix distinguishes between what is urgent and what is important. Urgent demands, such as deadlines, messages, errands, and administrative responsibilities announce themselves and press for an immediate response. Important commitments, including Torah learning, reflection, relationships, and long-term growth, are often easier to postpone precisely because they do not always feel urgent. Accepting the yoke of Torah means deciding in advance that what is important will not always wait until everything urgent has been completed.⁹

Pirkei Avot therefore supplements its ideals with practical structures. Shammai teaches, “Make your Torah study a fixed habit” (*Avot* 1:15). Rabbi Israel Lipschitz identifies several meanings in the word *keva*, fixed. It can refer to seriousness, a peaceful

environment, depth of thought, and persistence. It can also mean finding and using small openings in the day. Focus is supported both by protected periods of sustained learning and by a consistent willingness to use the time that is available.¹⁰

The instruction of the Men of the Great Assembly to “make a fence for the Torah” provides another practical principle (*Avot* 1:1). The sages understood that good intentions are fragile. Behavioral researchers use the term “commitment device” to describe an arrangement adopted in advance to protect an intention from future temptation or insufficient self-control. Rabbinic fences cannot be reduced to psychological commitment devices, but both recognize that structure can support intention. Fixed times, appropriate environments, and boundaries around technology do not guarantee concentration. They create conditions in which concentration is more likely.¹¹

The High Holiday season invites a *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of our actions and character. The wisdom of *Pirkei Avot* suggests that this accounting should include not only what we did, but what repeatedly received

our attention. Which important commitments were displaced by secondary concerns? Which forms of rest restored us, and which became avenues of escape? Did the many responsibilities of our lives support a coherent purpose, or did they pull us in competing directions?

The forms of distraction we face may be new, but the underlying challenges are not. Rabbi Yaakov’s passerby noticed something genuinely beautiful. His mistake was not appreciation, but interruption. The other teachings of *Pirkei Avot* broaden that insight. Focus requires us to set priorities among the things we value, confront what we are tempted to avoid, and create structures that protect our central commitments. Silencing a notification may help, but the deeper task is to determine what deserves our attention and ensure that our habits reflect that priority.

Endnotes

1. The wording and numbering of the mishnayot are adapted from *The Koren Pirkei Avot*, trans. Jonathan Sacks, commentary by Marc D. Angel (Koren Publishers, 2015).

2. Annie Murphy Paul, *The Extended Mind: The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021), 95–102.

3. See Meiri, Abarbanel, and Bartenura to *Avot* 3:9; Reuven P. Bulka, *As a Tree by the Waters: Pirkey Avoth, Psychological and Philosophical Insights* (Feldheim, 1980), 111. For a broader discussion of the interpretations of this mishna, see Jeremy Benstein, “‘One, Walking and Studying...’: Nature vs. Torah,” *Judaism* 44, no. 2 (1995): 146–168.

4. See Moses Alashkar, *Merkhevet HaMishnah*, to *Avot* 3:14; Abraham J. Twerski, *Visions of the Fathers: Pirkei Avos with an Insightful and Inspiring Commentary* (Shaar Press, 1999), 168–169.

5. Jeehye Christine Kim, Monica Wadhwa, and Amitava Chattopadhyay, “When Busy Is Less Indulging: Impact of Busy Mindset on Self-Control Behaviors,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 45, no. 5 (2019): 933–952.

6. See Maharal, *Derekh Hayyim*, Rabbi Samuel de Uceda, *Midrash Shemuel*, and Meiri to *Avot* 4:12.

7. Moses Maimonides, *The Eight Chapters of Maimonides on Ethics*, trans. Joseph I. Gorfinkle (Columbia University Press, 1912), 69.

8. See Rabbi Joseph Nahmias to *Avot* 3:5; Bulka, *As a Tree by the Waters*, 106; Yosef Stern, *Pirkei Avos: With Ideas and Insights of the Sfas Emes and Other Chassidic Masters* (Mesorah Publications, 1999), 175–176.

9. Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Free Press, 2004), 151–182.

10. Rabbi Israel Lipschitz, *Tiferet Yisrael*, to *Avot* 1:15.

11. Gharad Bryan, Dean Karlan, and Scott Nelson, “Commitment Devices,” *Annual Review of Economics* 2 (2010): 671–698.

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