

# DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

## “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Tzav  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Tzav – The lost art of concentrating

This week’s Parasha of Tzav continues with details relating to the korbanot that were offered in the Mishkan and the Bet Hamikdash and details the special role of the Kohanim in this Divine service. The word korban comes from the word ‘karov’ meaning to come close. One who offered a korban could come close to Hashem in a very unique and special way. These days we don’t have the privilege of being able to offer korbanot, however we can still tap into this form of service through prayer.

Our daily tefillot were instituted by the Sages to replace the daily korbanot.<sup>1</sup> When we pray to Hashem in the proper manner, we also have the opportunity to draw close to Hashem. Unfortunately, one of the major impediments to achieving this feeling of closeness is our inability to focus and concentrate on our tefillot. One of the costs of modern technology is that we are used to shifting our focus rapidly from thought to thought. We are amazingly adept at checking our emails, monitoring our social media accounts, checking the headlines and the weather while having a phone conversation and driving a car, all at the same time!<sup>2</sup> But this is all at the cost of the ability to think deeply about a single thought for a significant period of time.

Remarkably, the Gemara<sup>3</sup> states that one who returns from a journey should not daven for three days because they need to recover from the journey, and thus will not be able to have the requisite concentration to pray properly. The fact that this is no longer the halacha in our times shows just how far we have fallen since those days. If we were exempt from tefillah whenever we could not have the appropriate levels of kavana, we would almost never pray!

The Rosh provides us with some insight into how we might improve concentration during tefillah. The Rosh, Rabbeinu Asher, was one of the great Rishonim and one of the three main pillars of authority on which the Shulchan Aruch was based. The Rosh wrote a beautiful work called Orchos Chaim (Paths of Life) where he summarised in simple terms how to live a good life as Jew. He provided us with a list of guidelines that focuses on matters that seem little but are of fundamental importance.<sup>4</sup> There are many commentaries on this work, particularly by the Ba’alei Mussar<sup>5</sup>.

In his guideline 14, the Rosh states as follows:

*One should not speak from when he begins Baruch She’amar until after he has finished the silent Shemoneh Esreh, nor while the shaliach tzibbur is repeating the Shemoneh Esreh aloud, unless he must speak words of Torah, perform a mitzva, or to greet someone or return someone’s greeting.*

In his commentary on this guideline, R’ Eliyahu Lopian writes that one should not look outside of the siddur from Baruch She’amar until after Shemoneh Esreh, so that nothing will divert your attention and so that you

<sup>1</sup> See the Gemara Brachot 26b. An alternative explanation is also provided by the Gemara, i.e., that the tefillot were instituted by the Avot. The two opinions are not necessarily inconsistent. It could be that the prayer services were originally instituted by the Avot, but Chazal later fixed them as a replacement to the korbanot. See Darchai Noam Tzav 5782 where we explore this in more depth.

<sup>2</sup> Example used for illustrative purposes only. Please don’t try this at home!

<sup>3</sup> Eruvin 65a.

<sup>4</sup> The following ideas have been extracted from the Artscroll translation and commentary called “Orchos Chaim of the Rosh”.

<sup>5</sup> The Rabbis that focused on how we can improve ourselves by working on our middot.

can gain tranquillity of the soul<sup>6</sup>. Though challenging for many, we should try to achieve this to the best of our ability.

The Ohr Yechezkel<sup>7</sup> writes that one who gets into the habit of listening attentively and calmly to the repetition of the Amidah will acquire many virtues. The main virtue one acquires is the ability to concentrate. One also learns from this behaviour to be submissive, to not follow every urge, to be patient and to be humble.

In guideline 20, the Rosh continues this theme as follows:

*When the appointed time for any of the three daily prayers arrives, one should put aside all his concerns and pray. Above all else, one should prevent his eyes from looking at whatever is not his.*

Why does the Rosh include the admonition against looking at what is not ours in the guideline which discusses proper prayer? The Orach Yescharim explains the link as follows. When praying, we must free ourselves from all other considerations. However, this can be difficult because we have strong desires for wealth and pleasure. If we guard our eyes from looking at that which is not ours, we can minimise our desires and are more easily able to concentrate. The Orach Yescharim explains that when a person is involved in his business affairs, he finds it difficult to forget everything and concentrate on his prayers. He should realise that some things do not belong to him, including the time for prayer. If he understands that this time is not his own, it will help him to keep his mind from resting on other matters during the time of tefillah. The Ohr Yechezkel writes that if we look at an object that is not ours, that can stimulate envy which will confuse our prayers. The Orach Yescharim also adds that when the body is at rest, the mind naturally starts to have stray thoughts about things that one saw in passing. If we are able to guard our eyes from looking at what is not ours, we are less likely to start thinking about these things during tefillah.

So how does one increase the ability to concentrate? I am reminded of the “Life. Be in it” campaign to encourage healthy activity amongst Australians. Norm, the main character, was resting in his comfortable armchair and daydreaming about his imaginary sporting and athletic achievements. He was “proclaimed throughout the nation”. But: “what a shame it all took place in his imagination”.

The message of the campaign was clear. If you want to be healthy, you have to be active. If you want to be fit, you need to exercise. So too, if you want to improve your concentration, you need to practice concentrating. There are no short cuts. Admittedly, like any other muscle building routine, it is difficult at the beginning, and it takes hard work to get stronger.

Here is a take home practical tip for how to apply the teachings of the Rosh during the repetition of the Shemoneh Esreh. The Shelah HaKadosh writes that he noticed many “chareidim l’dvar Hashem” (those who are meticulous in following the will of Hashem) who would participate with the repetition of the Shemoneh Esreh. They would place their siddur in front of them during the repetition, looking inside with their eyes and their hearts, and refuse to allow anything to distract them, as they followed along word for word. This is a great technique that we can all try. It is a simple step (although difficult to put into practice) to achieve greatness in prayer. Pointing to the words with your finger can also be very helpful in maintaining concentration.<sup>8</sup>

Let’s try something this week:

1. Try to follow along for at least some of the chazan’s repetition of the Shemoneh Esreh. Choose a realistic goal (e.g. try to maintain concentration for a certain number of brachot) and then try to beat your personal best.
2. Try pointing with your finger at the words as you recite them and as the chazan repeats them and follow along word for word. It really helps!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>6</sup> What a beautiful expression! Who wouldn’t want ‘tranquillity of the soul’!

<sup>7</sup> Written by Rav Yechezkel Levenstein, the Mashgiach Ruchani of the Mir Yeshiva and the Ponovezh Yeshiva.

<sup>8</sup> As some memory experts explain, the more of the five senses that we employ in practice, the stronger our attention will be.