

Targeted prayer

MARGIE PENSAK

Have you ever started davening, your lips moving to the familiar *tefillos*, only to realize just a few minutes in that your mind was elsewhere (like up to fifth item of your Shabbos shopping list)? Unfortunately, this scenario is familiar to many of us. But there's hope. Here are some tried-and-true ways to improve your *kavanah*

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Going to the "Boss"

For years, Brooklynite Dina Sara Levine struggled to focus during davening. "I tried many different approaches to improve my davening, including warm-up brain exercises, various brain function improvement techniques, and trying to 'force' myself to focus more," she remembers. Despite her efforts, nothing helped.

Then she came up with an idea: She would launch a davening "campaign." As she relays, "It was my way of taking my struggle to the 'Boss' for help. I knew that when we ask Hashem for something physical, the answer might be 'not now,' but when we ask to come closer to Him, we are always helped.

"My strategy for the campaign was to talk to Hashem and tell Him that if I receive the prayed-for item, ability, or quality, it will help me better fulfill 'ivdu es Hashem b'simchah' (serve Hashem with joy) and bring Him *nachas* from me," she continues. "Such a *tefillah* could be about a commitment to any relevant improvement, be it having more *ahavas Yisrael*, or doing a specific mitzvah with more focus. In my case, I chose serving Hashem with joy. And one day, I suddenly realized that I had become a *really* happy person — happy for no external reason!"

Little did Mrs. Levine know where this campaign would eventually take her. "One day, I was reviewing the introduction of a *sefer* on the halachos of *brachos* when my attention was drawn to the statement that it's a halachah to focus on the meanings of Hashem's names when we say a *brachah* — specifically that Hashem is Master of all; always was, always is, and always will be, and that for Elokim we are to think that Hashem is all-powerful, all-capable, and Almighty.

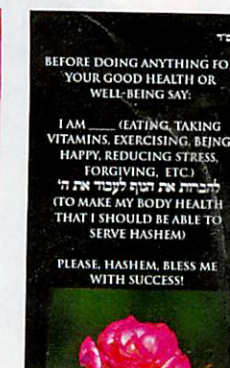
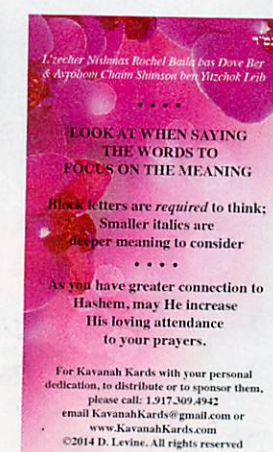
"Hashem gave me a flash of an idea: to write those words on a Post-it



Stay Focused

Practical tips for improving *kavanah* from Dina Sara Levine:

- 🎯 **Set a goal** to improve your relationship with Hashem through greater *kavanah* in davening.
- 🎯 **Ask Hashem** to help you achieve your goal and sincerely give this struggle over to Hashem.
- 🎯 **Use the Kavanah Kard** as a "line guide" in your siddur beneath the line you're reading, and post the business-card size wherever you make *brachos* so they can help you focus on the meaning.
- 🎯 **Set a reasonable goal** with the Kavanah Kard because it can be challenging to change a habit. For example, start by using it with a particular *brachah* (such as *asher yatzar*) or with one part of davening, such as Shema and the first paragraph. As you grow more comfortable, add additional *brachos* and *tefillos*.
- 🎯 **Focus on growth.** Look for, celebrate, and thank Hashem for every improvement, no matter how small!



For Kavanah Kards with your personal dedication, to distribute or to sponsor them, please call: 1.917.309.4942 email KavanahKards@gmail.com or www.KavanahKards.com ©2014 D. Levine. All rights reserved



The Weekly Tefillah Focus

note and put it into my siddur, above the words, so I could look up and see them when I davened. It was a great help. Not only was I more focused, I began to feel more during davening and when making *brachos*.

“Very quickly I realized that if this technique helped me, it could help others,” says Mrs. Levine. “I was inspired to design a bookmark type of card, similar to my Post-it note. The name Kavanah Kard suddenly popped into my mind. I also printed a small, business-size Kavanah Kard that would be easy to carry and plain enough to be used by men. Thanks to sponsors, I was able to keep the Kards free.

“Then came the big job — getting people to use them. I ordered display boxes and took them to everyone I knew and even didn’t know. People took multiples to give to others. So many people got into the act.” In total, 6,000 Kavanah Kards have been given out.

“In addition to having greater response to my *tefillos*, I’ve also experienced more spiritual elevation using the Kavanah Kards,” notes Dina Sara. “It was very noticeable when I was in Israel and davened at the Kosel. My experiences of elevation are not unique. Many tell me how much more meaningful their davening is with the Kards. The man who is sponsoring the new cards described how when he gave one to his friend at shul, the man actually cried at how uplifted he felt during davening.”

A new Kavanah Kard format is in production and Mrs. Levine is gearing up to have them widely available before Rosh Hashanah. “This goes far beyond the outcome for the individual,” explains Mrs. Levine. “The more of us who connect with Hashem, the greater the cumulative impact — the closer Hashem becomes to us individually and to Klal Yisrael. It reflects the idea that we should each feel as if the world’s scale is perfectly balanced and our every act could tip it to the good or the other way. This is such a critical time, when every one of us can make the difference.”

How can a young man in his late 20s, who learns every available moment, comment that he has “zero” *kavanah* during *tefillah*? “When I heard this remark, made by someone I highly respect as a *masmid*, I was baffled,” says Eliezer Szrolovits, a Queens *balabos*. “My initial thought was, if even *he* has so much difficulty with *kavanah*, it must be true for so many others as well.”

Mr. Szrolovits started interviewing people from various segments of Klal Yisrael, asking them if they felt challenged with *kavanah* during davening and, if so, what they felt were the most prominent causes for their struggles. “What I ended up understanding was that many people show up to do their davening duty but lack the spiritual and emotional connection with Hashem that’s so essential in *tefillah*.”

So what exactly could be done to help people improve their *kavanah*? Mr. Szrolovits sought guidance from Rav Mordechai Finkelman, *mashgiach ruchani* of Yeshivas Ohr Hachaim, who passed along advice he had heard from Rav Avrohom Pam *ztz”l*. The result of that conversation was the creation of Weekly Tefillah Focus, a program that places extra focus on one phrase/*pasuk*/*brachah* weekly.

“The thought and process behind this practical step-by-step program is simple but so effective,” contends Mr. Szrolovits. “It requires an investment of focus and effort but only a few minutes of time each week. While there are many commentaries to choose from for any given segment, we look specifically for those that are focused on building and nurturing *emunah* and increasing our yearning to come closer to Hashem.

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“Since we’re all davening in any case,” continues Mr. Szrolovits, “we have the opportunity all week to review, think more deeply about, and adapt the concepts set forth in the current weekly focus segment. This daily review for an entire week is the heart of the program and the key to steady and consistent success, building one segment after another until you ‘own’ that section of *tefillah* and cannot wait to say it each day because you feel such a strong connection as you say it.

“Like all first steps, it’s hard to believe that you’ll ever get there – but it does work,” adds Mr. Szrolovits. “I have experienced a transformation, personally, and we have heard from others who have likewise experienced favorable results. It’s never too little, never too late. Like all other areas of growth, ‘slow and steady’ is what’s needed. When you look back after a few months, you’ll be amazed at your progress and growth.”



Stay Focused

Practical tips for improving *kavanah* from Mr. Eliezer Szrolovits:

-  **Ask Hashem to help** you daven with more *kavanah* and feel more connected. This should always be our first step in any endeavor, be it *ruchniyus* or *gashmiyus*. He’s waiting for us to ask, and ready to help.
-  **Firmly believe** that your *tefillah* can change any bitter situations in your life to sweet, and can help you merit to continue all that’s sweet in your life now.
-  **Personalize your *tefillah***. Keep in mind others who need help in various areas and fulfill the mitzvah of *v’ahavta lerei’acha kamocha* as you daven.
-  **Strengthen your *emunah*** that we are dependent on Hashem for *everything*.
-  **Read, listen, or watch** the brief, new segment of the Weekly Tefillah Focus and/or Rabbi Heshy Kleinman’s focus of the week.
-  **Review, internalize, and personalize** the new segment each time you say it this week.
-  **Continue emphasizing** the focus from previous weeks until you “own” it and look forward to connecting with Hashem as you say it.

Feeling the Blessings

If a person felt he was praying for his life, he wouldn’t have trouble praying with focus and sincerity. For Rabbi Heshy Kleinman, author of the best seller, *Praying With Fire* (ArtScroll/Mesorah), the essential challenge in inspiring people to pray with *kavanah* is to get them to not only understand, but to *feel* that they are indeed praying for blessings in their lives every time they pray.

“It’s apparent, however, that this has never been an easy concept for people to integrate,” says Rabbi Kleinman. “The Gemara (*Berachos* 32b) says that *tefillah* is one of four things that require strengthening. There are several reasons for this. Among them are habit, a lack of joy and excitement, and a lack of clarity as to the main purpose of *tefillah*. Even a commitment to daven with *kavanah* only works when there’s a clear understanding that the change will truly improve our lives.”

This was the conclusion reached by Rabbi Kleinman and his good friend and *chavrusa*, Reb Mordechai Gelber, a cofounder of Hakhel, when they would discuss ways to inject more inspiration into people’s daily *avodas Hashem*. They were convinced that something had to be done to bring *tefillah* to life. But when they brought their idea of having shuls develop a *tefillah* program to *rabbanim* they knew, no one seemed hopeful that anything could be done to inspire real change.

That’s when Rabbi Kleinman decided that he’d try to write a book that would be practical, in that it would take only five minutes a day to learn over 89 days (to be reviewed three times a year). It would be inspirational, include well-written stories and anecdotes, and would be written on a level that would be relevant to and understandable by every shul member – men, women, and young adults. He hoped that by clearly explaining the fundamental concepts and discussing the true power of