

AFTER THE FACT

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

We have established that one is obligated to concentrate on the meaning of the words that he is saying, at least during the first berachah of Shemoneh Esrei. If a person did not pay proper attention, he did not fulfill the mitzvah of tefillah; however, he is not required to repeat his prayer, for fear that the next tefillah would encounter the same lack of intention (Rema).

What can a person do if he has just completed the first blessing of Shemoneh Esrei without intention? If he is in shul, he may listen to the first berachah recited by the shaliach tzibbur, and then continue his tefillah (Biur Halachah 101,1). However, this is not the customary practice (Ishei Yisrael 11,8). Some suggest that reviewing the entire first berachah in one's head without verbalizing the words, instills the concentration into one's tefillah.

Since today the attention span has dwindled down to seconds, we must address the following question. If a person did not have the proper intention for the first blessing, how can he be permitted to continue? Aren't all of the ensuing berachos considered to be uttered in vain?

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach explains that the blessings that follow are not said in vain. Once the first berachah was recited devoid of proper intention, his berachos cannot be considered a cohesive unit of tefillah. Rather, they are related to as nineteen separate blessings (as cited in Siach Halachah 104,4). Although one does not fulfill the mitzvah of tefillah, it is as if he recited nineteen blessings.

Gaining Composure

Chazal tell us, "If a person does not make his tefillah keva (set), then they cannot be considered prayers." Rav Hoshia says this means that he recites his tefillos in a way that implies ridding himself of the obligation. The Chachamim explain that that this refers to praying without tachanunim (supplications).

The halachah accepts both understandings. Therefore, a person should try and avoid praying in a frame of mind of "getting things over with" (Shulchan Aruch 93,1). In addition, he should intone the supplications at the end of Shemoneh Esrei (Elokai Netzor) with heartfelt feeling, adding some of his own entreaties (Shulchan Aruch 98,3).

We can comprehend the more profound significance of this halachah by visualizing someone who must appear before a king. This person realizes that his life is on the line, and he needs to be focused and to speak with emotion. If he recognizes the urgency of the situation he will definitely

not attempt to run off after a curt exchange.

Today's attention span has dwindled, and we are no longer so adept at conducting a focused conversation. These two halachos are crucial to ensure successful communication with Hashem. Preparing ourselves before, during and after prayer, can help us gain the composure and state of mind needed to approach the King of kings.

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