

OPEN EYES

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

Although looking up to the heavens or down towards the ground inspires one at the start of prayer, closing one's eyes blocks out the physical world and all of the associated distractions. In fact, our Sages said: "Anyone who does not recite Shemoneh Esrei with his eyes closed will not merit seeing the Divine Presence when he leaves this world." For this reason, many prefer reciting Shemoneh Esrei with their eyes closed (Mishnah Berurah 95,5).

If one chooses to keep his eyes open, he should be careful and refrain from looking around. Pictures, signs, other people and a myriad of other things happening around a person can be the ruin of one's entire tefillah. Concentration can be maintained only by focusing exclusively on prayer.

Notwithstanding the benefits of closed eyes, at times a person may find it helpful to say Shemoneh Esrei while looking into a siddur. In his sefer Shem Olam the Chofetz Chaim writes that the first condition to concentrating during prayer is to pray from a siddur (addendum at the end of the book). The Arizal would pray from a siddur in order to increase his concentration in his tefillos (Mishnah Berurah 93,2).

"When you appear before the King with a sefer, this will cause him to revoke his evil thoughts" (Megillas Esther 9,25). The Vilna Gaon writes that the sefer referred to in this verse hints to the use of a siddur for prayer. Tefillah from a siddur helps to dispel improper thoughts that might enter one's mind during tefillah (Even Sheleimah 9[2], Ma'aseh Rav 43). Halachic authorities write that seeing the letters of a siddur has a sublime effect on one's prayers (Kaf Hachaim 96,9). Every individual must decide whether to open or close his eyes based on what he feels will promote optimal communication with Hashem (Mishnah Berurah 93,2).

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