Attention! The Challenges of Prayer in an ADHD Society

Studies indicate that between 5 to 15 percent of children suffer from this disability, and at least half of those continue to suffer from the symptoms of this disorder throughout adulthood (Sibley, Swanson, Arnold, Hechtman, Owens,, Stehli, Abikoff, Hinshaw, Molina, Mitchell,Jensen, Howard, Lakes, Pelham, and the MTA Cooperative Group, 2016). The primary characteristic of this disorder is the inability to maintain focused attention and behavioral control over extended periods of time in the absence of a highly stimulating or rewarding environment (Barkley, 1997). In addition, sufferers of ADHD have significant difficulty filtering stimuli, so that data not particularly relevant to performance of a target goal is not blocked from interfering with performance (Brodeur and Pond, 2001).

Rav Chaim Soloveitchik (2007) described two aspects of *kavvanah* in prayer. First, the pray-er must imagine him or herself to be standing before the Master of the Universe. Secondly, the pray-er must concentrate and understand the meaning of the words that are being said. These two seemingly straightforward conditions are extremely challenging for adults, and even more so for children and adolescents. This challenge is magnified for students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Each of the *tefillah* processes described by Rav Chaim as essential for *kavvanah* is seriously impaired in the individual suffering from ADHD.

In this article, we will attempt to highlight the specific cognitive deficits that affect prayer and suggest accommodations that may make prayer more meaningful and relevant for those who engage in it.

Let's contemplate what cognitive processes are required to in order to pray.

**Standing before the Divine**

Regarding Rav Chaim’s first requirement, the individual is required to extract from his memory some concept or image of the Divine Presence. For some this may be an image of an old man with a long white beard. For others, it may be a visual representation of the Clouds of Glory that surrounded the Jews in the desert or the Pillar of Fire. Others may simply attempt to rely on a concept of the "Wholly Other" in an attempt not to attribute any worldly characteristics to God. In any case, this unto itself is an act of acrobatics for the attention system since it requires conceptualization of the incomprehensible Piaget's theory of cognitive development identifies conceptual thought as the final and most intricate stage of cognitive development (Piaget, 1997; Brain and Mukherji, 2005); a stage of cognitive functioning which only begins to develop at the age of twelve. More recent studies indicate that, for most individuals, conceptual thought only begins to manifest in the mid-teens (Mcleod, 2013)). It is clear that, from a developmental perspective, the notion of standing before God is difficult for all. For sufferers of ADHD it is daunting.

Moreover, conjuring an image of being in the presence of God requires utilizing an executive neurological function referred to as working memory. Working memory is a cognitive process in which we access data from our memory system and "hold it" in our awareness in order to perform a specific function effectively (Baddeley, 1986). A simple example is recalling a telephone number and holding it in our awareness for long enough to actually dial it. In order to maintain focus on the immanence of God's presence, we not only must access an image of God from our memory, but we must maintain awareness of it as we simultaneously pray. Between the conceptual operations delineated by Piaget and the executive function of working memory, Rav Chaim's first fundamental requirement for prayer presents an incredibly challenging task.

**Focusing on the words**

Regarding the second requirement for prayer as delineated by Rav Chaim is the need to concentrate on the meaning of the words being said. This apparently, straightforward and simple task, is actually an extreme neurological challenge that can be subdivided into different components.

*Decoding of words*. Reading involves a process in which our brain decodes words into small segments called phonemes. If we are growing up in the New York area and we are learning to read the word dog, our brains first analyze the word into the phonemes of d-aw-g. After the analysis the brain is capable of synthesizing the letters into the complete word – dog. Brain studies indicate that the initial stages of reading involve a high involvement of the frontal lobe, the region of the brain responsible for conscious, effortful thinking (Buchweitz, Mason, Tomitch & Just, 2009). Once we have mastered the reading process, the frontal lobe takes on a relatively minor role in the technical process of decoding words, and the process becomes much more automatic. When this occurs, there is significant mental energy to focus on the meaning of the words being read. For individuals who have difficulty with reading, most of their cognitive energy is consumed with the technical process of decoding. Even if the words can be read, the level of comprehension is, in most cases, significantly impaired (Shaywitz, 1996).

*Attentional Filtering*. Concentration on the meaning of words requires significant filtering of non-relevant stimuli. In terms of our brain functioning, the parietal lobes play an important role in allowing us to separate the significant signal from irrelevant background noise. The parietal lobes tend to block irrelevant stimuli so that the frontal lobes are able to focus on comprehension (Edin, Klingsberg, Johannson, McNab,Tegner & Compte, 2009).

**“ADHD” of prayer**

Although individuals suffering from ADHD represent those with extreme attention deficits, studies indicate that within the past two decades the ability to regulate one’s cognitive processes in order to choose wisely and to inhibit inappropriate decisions or behavior has decreased significantly among most of the population. The constant bombardment of stimuli has simply overloaded our brains and effective functioning has been compromised (Levitin, 2014).

When the attentional system is not functioning efficiently, one tends to feel overwhelmed with cognitive stimuli. It is very difficult to maintain focus on a particular thought when the brain is processing multiple thoughts simultaneously. This process of cognitive overload is particularly present in our technologically advancing society, wherein "multi-tasking" is viewed as a usual and normative form of functioning. The reality is, that our brains are not wired to perform two tasks that require conscious thought simultaneously. When we attempt to do this, our task performance is poor.

A poignant and life threatening example of this occurs when we drive our automobile. In Israel, despite improvements in road conditions, the past several years have seen a significant rise in the number of auto accidents and related fatalities. Studies indicate that multi-tasking while driving significantly increases the risk for accidents and fatalities (Strayer, Drews & Johnston, 2003).

As applied to prayer, the tendency to multi-task creates a critical difficulty. Because we are bombarded by so much stimuli on a regular basis, our brains have relatively little experience in sustained focus on individual stimuli. Hence, sustaining concentration on reading comprehension, without distraction feels strange and uncomfortable. It requires a great deal of effort to quiet the flood of consciousness that we are accustomed to and focus on specific, isolated pieces of information. As a result, it is not uncommon for many people to lose themselves while mindlessly mumbling the words of prayer, only to realize that they have been “daydreaming” rather than focusing their concentration on the prayer itself.

The neurological and sociological factors described above have significant impact upon our society in general and on prayer in particular. As a society, we are becoming more impulsive. Studies indicate that in spite of higher average intelligence, there has been a significant decrease in cognitive functioning related to self-control (). We are more impulsive and less capable of restraining impulses and controlling behavior than we were in previous decades. We require satisfaction of needs at a much quicker rate than our parents and grandparents. Clearly, this disturbing trend, is likely to make *kavvanah* in prayer more difficult, less rewarding, and much less common.

Each of these neurological factors play a significant role on our psychological relation to prayer. On the most basic level, prayer is meant to fulfill a fundamental need of connection to a caring and interested Divine Being who is actually concerned with our individual existence. On the one hand, this ought to significantly elevate our self-esteem. After all, the notion that the Master of the Universe concerns Itself with each and every individual makes us important. I remember a cleaning woman working in the Veteran’s Administration Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio, where I did my clinical psychology internship, wearing a button upon which was written, “I am worth more than gold, ‘cause God don’t create junk.”

Unfortunately, this boost in self-esteem conflicts with the experience of inadequacy and alienation that is common to prayer today. When I find myself unable to concentrate or mumbling words that I do not understand, I tend to be overwhelmed with feelings of inadequacy.

**Prayer for students**

The policy of compulsory prayer in Jewish day schools combined with the neurological stressors that affect each and every one of us today, are likely to transform prayer into an experience of frustration and failure. If I find myself as not meeting the basic requirements of prayer, I experience a reduction in my sense of adequacy and efficacy. These are basic psychological needs, equivalent to oxygen on a physical level (Jarvis, 2004 ) If I imagine myself as experiencing prayer as less meaningful than those around me, I not only experience alienation from the prayer experience, but I also experience myself as disconnected from the group to which I supposedly am a member. This diminishes my experience of attachment and meaning; two additional psychological needs that are considered fundamental to psychological well-being (Tuber, 2008). Finally, if prayer becomes an experience that is tedious and unpleasant, I associate it with a diminished sense of pleasure. This too, contraindicates a basic need of psychological health (Felluga, 2011).

Before delineating methods of coping with the problem of prayer, there is one further neurological reality that educators in particular must be cognizant of. Our brains develop from the back to the front (Jensen and Nutt, 2015). This means that the particular skills needed to achieve the proper focus in prayer are not close to being fully developed in children and are still only eighty percent developed in adolescents. Oftentimes, when we create an expectation that children and teenagers are supposed to pray, just as adults, we are creating an unbalanced playing field that often has extremely negative ramifications on student attitude towards prayer.

In light of the numerous difficulties associated with praying in our society, I offer the following suggestions to educators and individuals who are interested in transforming prayer into a more meaningful experience for the individual living in the twenty-first century. These suggestions are based on my own personal experience, seminars that I have conducted with individuals interested in enhancing their prayer experience, and three decades of working with children, teenagers and adults who suffer from attention deficits and subsequently find prayer daunting at best and devastating at worst.

1. Discuss the problem of prayer with your personal Rabbi. Because Jewish prayer is a halakhic requirement, it is essential that one be guided by a spiritual leader that can delineate how one is able to meet the halakhic requirements of prayer in a manner that is not unreasonable or cruel towards the individual. I have found that most people are unaware that there exists significant flexibility in terms of the required length and content of prayer. Rabbinic guidance, based on an awareness of each individual’s personal capabilities, allows many to continue praying without feeling that they are simply wasting time or displeasing God.
2. Search for the minyan or prayer group that is a “good fit” for your personal neurological and emotional make-up. Today, even within the halakhic world, there are a wide variety of styles of prayer. Some emphasize song. others emphasize speed, and yet others emphasize the continuation of traditions typical of previous generations. Some incorporate significant participation by congregants while others emphasize congregants taking on a more passive role and experiencing prayer through a prayer leader. Prayer is not a one size fits all endeavor and we are fortunate to live in a time where prayer is available in many different shapes and sizes.
3. Learn mindfulness and meditation. Our fast-paced world that demands multi-tasking does not allow our brains to experience the meditative, focused and reflective cognitive stance that typifies prayer. Classes are available in mindfulness, meditation, or yoga – all of which can easily be adapted to traditional Jewish prayer. Those who are concerned with praying more effectively need to develop the set of cognitive skills that allows effective praying. If these skills are available within a Jewish context they provide an excellent opportunity. If they are available only within a secular or non-denominational context, there ought to be little difficulty adapting them to be utilized within Jewish prayer meaningfully.
4. Remember that praying is a developmentally dependent skill that needs to be matched with each and every individual’s cognitive level. Many children and teenagers are simply not developmentally ready to participate fully in adult prayer services. Demands to pray in environments that contradict neurological and psychological readiness are likely to be emotionally and spiritually damaging. Empathic understanding and developmentally appropriate didactic methods are likely to prevent these students from abandoning prayer prematurely.
5. Emphasize individual, spontaneous prayer. Jewish education highly focuses on formal communal prayer at the expense of spontaneous, individual prayer. *Hitbodedut*, a Hasidic form of personal communion with God, is an example of prayer that offers an alternative or supplement to traditional communal prayer. Educators, rabbis and individuals who seek to enhance their prayer experience can seek guidance in *hitbodedut* as a means of praying “Jewishly” and circumventing many of the difficulties described in this essay.

In sum, although prayer has always been viewed as hard work, or in Rambam’s view, “work of the heart,” there are numerous factors prevalent in current society that accentuate the probability of prayer being an experience of alienation rather than communion with the Divine. In a sense, we are somewhat of a lost generation, without a prayer. If we are to re-establish the vibrancy, vitality and meaningfulness of Jewish prayer, we need to accommodate to neurological, psychological and sociological realities of the twenty-first century and integrate these realities within the halachic process.

**References**

Baddeley, A. D. (1986). *Working memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Barkley, R. A . (1997). *ADHD and the nature of self-control*. New York, Guilford.

Brodeur, D.A. & Pond, M. (2001). The development of selective attention in children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. *J Abnorm Child Psycholpgy,,* (*29)* 229-239. doi:10.1023/A:

Brain, C., & Mukherji, P. (2005). *Understanding child psychology.* United Kingdom: Nelson Thornes.

Buchweitz, A., Mason, R.A., Leda, M., Tomitch, B. Adam, M. (2009) Brain activation for reading and listening comprehension: An fMRI study of modality effects and individual differences in language comprehension. *Psychology & Neuroscience, (2)* 111 - 123 doi: 10.3922/j.psns.2009.2.003

Felluga, D. (2011, January 31). Pleasure principle and reality. [www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/definitions/pleasureprinciple.html](http://www.cla.purdue.edu/english/theory/psychoanalysis/definitions/pleasureprinciple.html) Last Updated 8/17/2015.

Jarvis, M. (2004). *Psychodynamic psychology: classical theory and contemporary research.* London, UK: Thompson.

Jensen, F.E., & Nutt , A.E. (2015). *The teenage brain.* New York, New York: HarperCollins.

Klingsberg E.F, Johansson, T., McNab P., Tegner F., Compte,J.A (2009). Mechanism for top-down control of working memory capacity. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America 106,* *(16)* 6802-6807.

Levitin, DJ (2014) *The organized Mind; thinking straight in an age of information overload*. New York: Penguin Random House.

McLeod, S. A. (2013). Kolb - Learning Styles. Retrieved from [www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html](http://www.simplypsychology.org/learning-kolb.html)

Merikangas K. R. , He J. , Burstein M., Swanson S.A., Avenevoli S. , Cui L., Benjet C., Georgiades K., Swendsen J. (2010). Lifetime prevalence of medical disorders in U.S. adolescents: Results from the national comorbidity study-adolescent supplement. *J Am Acad Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, *49(10),* 980-989.

Piaget, J. (1977). Gruber, H.E.; Voneche, J.J. eds. *The essential Piaget*. New York: Basic Books.

Sally E. Shaywitz (1996) dyslexia. S*cientific American,* November, 97-104.

Sibley, M.H., Swanson, J.M., Arnold, E.L., Hechtman, L.T., Owens, E.B., Stehli, A., Abikoff, H., Hinshaw, S.P., Molina-Brook, S.G. (2016). Defining ADHD symptom persistence in adulthood: optimizing sensitivity and specificity. *J. of Child Psychology and Psychiatry.* Version of Record online: 19 SEP 2016, doi: 10.1111/jcpp.12620

Soloveitchik, Rav Chaim, (2007) *Hiddushei Rabeinu Chaim Halevi al HaRambam* [Hebrew].Jerusalem.

Strayer, D. L., Drews, F. A., & Johnston, W. A. (2003). Cell phone-induced failures of visual attention during simulated driving. *Journal of Applied Experimental Psychology* *(9)* 23–32

Tuber, S. (2008) *Attachment, play and authenticity: A Winnicott primer.* Lanham, Maryland, Bowman and Littlefield.

**Bio**

Simcha Chesner (adhd.matara@gmail.com) is Instructor of Psychology and Special Education at Orot Israel Teachers College, and founder of the Bnei Chayil school network for children with behavioral and neurological challenges. Dr. Chesner has authored three Hebrew books on coping with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder at school and home. He is currently completing a book in English devoted to helping parents, teachers and professionals deal with behavioral and learning issues within the context of religious, Jewish families. He consults with schools and organizations interested in integrating emotional wellness in the school environment and maintains a private practice of psychology in Jerusalem.