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[Home](#) > Fixing Your Focus - 009 Prioritizing

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Wind - The Root of Pizur Hanefesh (Scattering of the Soul) and the Antithesis to Focus

With *siyata d'shmaya* we will continue here to learn about the power of focus. In the coming chapters, we will learn about focus-related issues which stem from the element of wind. This chapter will be specifically about the "earth" aspect within wind, but first we will explain about the element of wind in general.

It has been explained so far that the power of focus stems from the element of earth, which provides the stability that enables one to focus. Understandably, all of the elements are each able to contribute to the power of focus. But the main source of focus is in the element of earth, which has stability and permanence, establishing something in its proper place.

Wind is the element that opposes earth. There are two groups of opposing elements - fire and water, and wind and earth. Man's body and soul was formed from the earth and the air (wind). There are four directions of the wind. The Gemara^[1] explains that each of the winds move in opposite directions, so the winds are always clashing with each other.

A large percentage of problems with focus and concentration are due to what the *Chovos HaLevovos* calls as "*pizur hanefesh*", "scattering of the soul".^[2] This term describes the epitome of a person who is unfocused. The *Chovos HaLevovos* adds on that there was a blessing which people would give to their friends, "May the Merciful One save us from "*pizur hanefesh*". In our times, we refer to this as the problem of being "unfocused".

How is "*pizur hanefesh*" formed? The element of wind in the soul causes the element of earth in the soul to spread and scatter. The dust of the earth will stay in place as long as the wind doesn't blow it. If water is poured on it, the dust will solidify and will stay even more in its place. The wind, though, will spread the dust of the earth and scatter it. So when the element of earth becomes "scattered", it is due to the element of wind.

Thus, the element of wind is a contradictory force to the ability of focus. Within wind, there are aspects of all the elements, so there is earth-of-wind, water-of-wind, wind-of-wind, and fire-of-wind. We will begin with the "**earth**"-of-wind.

Earth-of-Wind: Consistently "Scattered"

Wind is the element which causes spreading and scattering, and in the soul, an impaired element of wind will mean that a person is inwardly scattered - he is spread apart between too many things at

once. “**Earth**”-of-wind is when one is **consistently** ‘scattered’ - resembling the permanence of the earth.

There are two kinds of “*pizur hanefesh*” in our life - one of them which is inevitable [and which is not as damaging], and the other which is due to poor choice of habit [which is more harmful].

There is a universal “*pizur hanefesh*” which all people have to endure, which Hashem has placed us in - the reality of living. On a normal day, we wake up, go to *daven*, and then continue with our day, but sometimes, Hashem has other plans in store for us. A person gets a phone call from the bank that he needs to go down there, or he gets a phone call from the school that his daughter needs to be picked up. There are all kinds of situations Hashem places us in, which we didn’t plan on. Although this also causes us to have “*pizur hanefesh*”, it is not due to our own choice and it happens to come our way.

But a large part of the lifestyle of today which we are familiar with involves a kind of *pizur hanefesh* which has become a regular part of one’s schedule. Such *pizur hanefesh* stems from impaired **earth-of-wind**.

We will give a few examples of it, starting from examples from our world and continuing into examples which we are more familiar with.

Example 1 - Owning Businesses and Property All Over The World

A large amount of people who are financially well off usually own property in several countries. This is especially the case in our generation. Today, a person can be “here” yet he is really “there” - he may be living in a certain country, but his property is spread out between different countries. The very fact that a person can be living in one place yet have his property and assets all over different places, is already enough to scatter his mind to all four directions of the world. He will think about his property in one place and of his property that’s in a different place, and this itself is *pizur hanefesh*, because he’s ‘spread out’ all over the place.

Even more, there are those who are so well off financially that they do not invest their money in any one particular business - rather, they own several businesses, in many different countries. A person today may live here but he has a business in Russia, another one in China, in the U.S., in Australia, in South America, and in Africa. Others who have even more money may have property all over the world, both real estate and moveable possessions, one for renting purposes, another one for sale, another for advertisement purposes, etc.

This way of living is also an example of *pizur hanefesh*. This kind of person may not consciously be aware that all of this makes his inwardly scattered - he doesn’t realize that he is really living life with an attitude of *pizur hanefesh*.

Example 2 - Owning a Supermarket

Even if a person does not own many different businesses all over the world and he is only involved with one business, he may have the problem of *pizur hanefesh* within the field he works in.

For example, if he is in the food industry, how many different kinds of foods did he order for his store? If he owns a big supermarket, his mind is thinking about 40,000 different food products which he needs to have available in his store. How much can his brain process at once? How is his mind affected by this?

(If a person has a brain which doesn’t remember anything for too long, then he won’t be affected by this. But this is not the case with most people.)

I knew a *Kolel avreich* who went out to work after some time. One of the resolutions he made was that he won't remember anything from his work – it's impossible to say that he didn't remember anything, but he at least had the attitude that he doesn't want to remember any of the details involved in his workday. But the average, normal person who is involved in a business has to remember all of the products in his store, especially if it is a kind of supermarket that carries every kind of item (except for pharmaceutical items). Besides for the large amount of information entering his head each week, he becomes inwardly 'scattered' from remembering all of the many products.

Example 3 - The "Pizur HaNefesh" In Most Lives: Too Much Information In One Day

If we reflect a bit, we can ask: How many topics a day are we involved with? We are involved with the spiritual and the physical, and we are involved with different actions, words, thoughts, and emotions. Our minds are processing a lot of information every day about so many different things. With every person, the amount is different, but every person is processing so much information every day.

As mentioned, some people are involved in several businesses. A person may have a certain job in the morning, another one in the afternoon, and a different job at night, and on Friday he has a different job, and in the summer he has an additional job. But even if a person is not spread apart between so many jobs like this, how many different things does he involve himself with each day? To say that the average person is not involved with more than 20 different things a day, is an understatement. We are not talking about involvement with big or major things, just the involvement with many different little and small things.

If we consider the very structure of our lifestyle which we recognize, we can see that it is built upon much *pizur hanefesh* – with some it is more, and with some less, but the common denominator between most people is that their life is based upon *pizur hanefesh*. In some people, the *pizur hanefesh* is much more "built-in" to their life – let us explain.

In some people, their problem of *pizur hanefesh* is due to a lack of focus; their minds are simply not focused. Others, though, are living a "lifestyle" of *pizur hanefesh* – because they have formed the belief that they need to live life in this way, and to keep "grabbing" as much as they can, to accomplish as much as they can in one day, etc. Indeed, the Sages state, "Grab and eat, grab and eat, for tomorrow we die" – but a person may misunderstand this statement by taking this quite literally (which, G-d forbid, is not the intended meaning of the Sages), by always trying to utilize all of the time of his life to its fullest, so that he can always gain from his time as much as he can, packing it all in – but in doing so, he is making a big error.

As an example, a person might come to his Torah learning session in the morning and he brings 10 *sefarim* to keep on the table, and each of the *sefarim* are on 10 different topics. One *sefer* is on the *parshah*, another is a *Chumash* so that he can recite "*Shnayim Mikra*", another is a volume of *Navi*, another is a volume of *Kesuvim*, another is a *Mishnayos*, another is a *Gemara*, another is a *Talmud Yerushalmi*, another is a *halachah sefer*... and he also brings four volumes of *Shulchan Aruch* with him, in order to learn two *halachos* from each of them. He may also bring him with a pamphlet of *Perek Shirah* and a "*Nishmas Kol Chai*" which he makes sure to say every day.

These are just examples, and there can be more, but the point is that a person may be bringing 10 *sefarim* (and more) with him every day when he sits down to learn, but from all of these 10 *sefarim*, where he is truly found? There is a simple answer: he is not present in any one of them! If he's 'spreading himself out' over so many different topics, he is really not in any of them.

Some people though really have the belief that they need to learn and review many different topics in one day, one after the other, so that they can be able to remember all that they have learned. There

are a few who have succeeded at this, because they have an amazing memory. But this cannot become a way of life, for it causes a person to be “spread out” all over the place. When one forms the erroneous “belief” that he must live life in this way, in which he is spread out over so many different areas, this is an even worse form of *pizur hanefesh*.

1) Identify Where There Is “Pizur HaNefesh” In Your Life.

To counter the problem of *pizur hanefesh* (“scattering of the soul”), each of us must do some reflection, and discover the nature of our particular soul and to take note of if we have any tendencies to become ‘spread out too thin’.

One needs to first know: **“Do I have a tendency to become ‘spread out’ over many different interests, or not?”**

If one discovers that he does have a nature to become ‘spread out’, he will have more inner work to do. If he does not have the tendency, he will still have to do some inner work, but it will be much less.

There are some people who, by nature, have more of a tendency to become ‘spread out’. They see a certain thing and they naturally enter it, immediately dragged and pulled after it. After some time, they may realize that they have become pulled into it, and they may disconnect from it. We discussed this nature in the previous chapter. Here we are discussing an additional factor of this problem: When a person, in the midst of being drawn towards something, becomes ‘scattered’ and spread apart between different activities. If one identifies that he has this nature, he should make use of the solutions in the previous chapter.

To briefly summarize, if one has a nature to become drawn after something and to become ‘spread out’ between different interests, his work is to train himself not to become pulled into things. This is what we spoke about in previous chapters (5-8). But now we are discussing an additional point: If one knows that he has the nature to become spread out between different interests, he should examine his day and see the areas in which he is too ‘spread out’ in.

2) Identifying Your Priorities of the Day.

Then, after figuring out the above, one needs to give some sense of order to his life, by asking himself: **“What is the number one priority in my life? What is second-to-most important? What is third-to-most important, fourth-to-most important, and fifth-to-most important, etc.?”**

Throughout the day, a person *davens*, learns Torah, sleeps, eats, etc. One should give a sense of order towards all of this; this does not mean, of course, that one should cut out one of these and only do others which he deems more important, for you cannot choose if you should eat instead of sleep, or vice versa, because we need each of these things in order to survive. Rather, what we mean here is that you should give an *order of priority* to the things you do throughout the day, by knowing what your main priority in life is, and what your second-to-most priority is, etc.

3) Knowing The “Musts” of Your Day.

After you know this, the next step is for one to know: **“What is really a “must” in my day, and what is not that much of a “must”?”**

This is not about knowing what the pros and cons of each of the activities in your day. You may be able to find many gains in whatever you are doing, but that is not the issue here. You must know which parts of your day are a “must” for you to do, and which things are not a “must” for you to do.

What does this mean? If you learn Torah during the day, obviously, this is a must. How much you should learn, though, and how, is a different issue. But it is definitely a must for you to learn Torah.

If we take apart our daily schedule, we will discover that there things we do which are a “must”, and there are also things we do which are not a “must”.

4) *Identifying Your Central Aspect of the Day.*

The next step is to deepen this reflection. We can each discover the point in our life which we spend our main energies on. It is for one to know: **Which area of my day, am I mainly immersed in? Which point in my day does everything revolve around?**

Some people do not have this central point of their day. They simply take life as it comes. They get up in the morning, wash their hands, make the morning blessings, go to *daven*, then they either go to learn Torah or go to work, doing whatever they have to do – but there is no central point in their day of which everything else revolves around. If they have no main part of the day, this means that they are much more likely to have *pizur hanefesh*!

Why? Either they are becoming ‘dragged’ after different things throughout the day, and if they are not, they can still become inwardly ‘scattered’ within the act they are doing. In addition, in most cases a person is not totally focused on what he is doing, so his mind will be floating elsewhere. If he adds up how much he does, speaks, thinks about, and imagines, throughout the day – he will discover how much *pizur hanefesh* he really has.

The ideal way to live, in contrast to above, is that every person must find have a central part of his day, which he puts his main energy into, and which everything else in his day revolves around. If one does not have this central point, it means that the very basis of his life is lacking in focus.

Here is a fundamental example of this idea [for those who are learning Torah for the major part of the day]. If a *Kolel avreich* has two sessions a day of Torah learning - for example if he is learning *halachah* in the morning and he learns “*bekiyus*” in the afternoon – the question he must know is: “Which one is the main part of my day?”

From a superficial perspective, his morning session is the main learning session, and his afternoon session is second-to-most important. But what does he mean if he says this? If he does not have any point in his day which he views as the central part of his day, what will happen when he isn’t learning *bekiyus* or *halachah*? We all know what will happen - he will be daydreaming his way through all of the learning sessions. There is no central point in his day where he is anchored to, so his soul will be ‘scattered’.

In contrast, when a person does have a central part of his day, this provides stability for his soul. When it comes to that part of his day, he will be focused. When he will be involved with other parts of his day, it will be like a person leaving his home and he knows he will return home later. Unlike a person who is homeless, who sleeps in a different place every night, with no place to settle in, a person who has a home or place to live in has a base to return to. When he leaves his place, it is only a temporary leave from his home. In the same vein, every person needs a place in his soul where he can keep “returning” to.

Of course, it is impossible for a person to always live with that point throughout the day. A person cannot stay focused on one particular point or goal the entire day, even if it is a very exalted and worthy goal. For example, even if a person is learning Torah the entire day, he will still need to attend to bodily needs, and he won’t be able to think about Torah then. A person cannot be involved with the same point the entire day. But he can still have a central point in his life, which his entire day and life

revolves around. When he inevitably has to take leave of that point, it should only be a temporary leave, for the purpose of later returning to it.

This is what it means to live a life of focus.

In Summary of Steps 1-4

In summary, the first step of living a focused kind of life is to find a central point which your life revolves around, and this is what you consider as the main part of your schedule. You can't be involved with it all day, but even though there are times where you inevitably have to leave it, it is the point that you keep returning to.

5. Staying Centered.

If the above has been understood, we can now proceed to the next step of, giving inner order to our souls, thereby reaching a focused way of living.

How many points can we be involved with? How many different things can a person take upon himself to do? 3, 7, or 13 different things? The answer to this is very fundamental. There is no way to know "how many" things you can do. There is only an inner definition to this. **As long as you have the ability to leave your main priority of the day and you find that you are able to return to it and that you don't lose your focus on it**, that is the sign that you are able to sometimes take leave of the central point in your day.

This does not apply to anything which you are obligated to do according to *halachah*, which you must do no matter what [even if it causes you to lose focus]. We are speaking here simply of the very concept of how to build a proper lifestyle for ourselves.

To review, the first step is to find a central point in your day, which the rest of your life revolves around; and the second step is that when you need to sometimes take leave of this primary part of your day, you are doing so on condition to return to it afterwards.

You can become involved in anything else as long as you are still able to return to your central point of the day. What determines this? As long as you can remain focused on your main priority of the day and you can immediately return to it, to that extent, you can become involved with other things throughout the day. If you cross that boundary, it is "*pizur hanefesh*" (scattering of the soul) for you.

(This boundary is subject to change. Time and maturity can bring changes, and then you may be able to do more things throughout the day and be able to immediately return to the central point of the day.)

That is the definition of the amount of activities that you can or cannot do, throughout the day. This point is the deep fundamental of how we can properly build our power of focus. This is not mere advice – it is rather the very structure, of how we can live a life of focus. It is how we can ideally develop our soul in a way that will allow us be focused, in whatever we need to be focused on, in our life.

Our Ultimate Focus (Hashem and Torah) and Our Personal Central Point of Focus

We have laid out the definition, but this point can be complicated for a person to work on. Let us explain why.

All of us have a constant, stable place where we are connected to – namely, our connection to

HaKadosh Baruch Hu, and to our Torah learning. But if we want to figure out where the central point of our life is, this is not easy at all, to know. There is no one answer for every person which describes where we must all place our focus on. Rather, each person needs to be focused according to his own level. After some time, a person's level can change, and then his focus can change as well.

Our primary focus should be on the purpose of life, which is to focus on our connection to HaKadosh Baruch Hu, which extends into our focus on Torah learning, and which then extends into our connection with the rest of the Creation. But when we try to figure out our central point of the day which we need to be mainly focused on, this itself divides into two aspects [which we will soon explain] which we need to progress to and regress from, in a cycle.

The root of our focus should be on Hashem and on the Torah, but most people are not actually focused on this root. The highest level of focus which most people identify with is the central aspect of the day which they are involved with and which the rest of their life revolves around.

After we have understood the above, we can now proceed to practically implement this concept in our lives. We should bear in mind, though, that this concept is the basis of living an inner kind life, of being focused. If people would practice the concepts explained in this lesson, most problems with focus would be mitigated. The problems wouldn't disappear completely, of course, but they surely would be less.

6. Practicing Focus In The Primary Area of Focus In Your Day

Now let us see how we can practically implement the idea in this lesson.

Every person needs to find an area in his life where he can be focused in. For example, if a person is learning Torah during the day, he can be aware that he is focused on his Torah learning; and if he works for a living, he is aware that he is focused on his work. In any case, in whatever one has decided to focus on, he needs to get used to "focusing exercises" in these areas. He needs to get used to practicing his focus, on the area which he is mainly involved with during the day.

A person cannot get up in the morning and immediately decide, "From this moment onward, I will be focused on what I do." This is unrealistic. Instead, one needs to begin getting used to focusing on the area which he considers himself focused in.

For example, if a person is learning Torah during the day, and he wants to implement this concept of becoming more focused on his Torah learning - which he considers as his primary aspect of the day that he is focused on - he should get used to having times of the day where he is consciously focused on his learning session. (On a more subtle level, there is also an additional aspect of focus here to consider - during the actual time he is learning Torah, for how much of the time is he focused and his thoughts aren't wandering?) Even during the time where there is no *sefer* in front of him, he should keep returning his thoughts to whatever Torah discussion he is learning about.

At first, getting used to this focusing will require longer amounts of time, and as a person continues this exercise, it should be for a shorter amount of time. After practicing this for some time, a person can take this further and slowly increase his focus on the depth of understanding in what he is learning about.

If a person cannot be focused on Torah learning throughout the day, especially those who work for a living, should deepen their power of focus in other areas. A person can take an important matter to think about, such as *emunah*, and practice focusing on it at different intervals throughout the day. During the time that he thinks about, he should focus solely on *emunah*, on what it means, on verses which describe *emunah*, on thoughts that are *emunah*-oriented, etc. His thoughts throughout the day

should revolve around *emunah*.

Similarly, a person may feel an affinity for doing *chessed* for others, and he can make this into the focus of his day. Either he can make sure to do *chessed* for others throughout the day, in order to keep his focus on it; and when he can't actually do *chessed* for others, he can still think about *chessed*, such as by thinking into what *chessed* is, or review verses which describe *chessed*, or to awaken his heart to the concept of *chessed*, etc.

There are more examples as well, but the idea here is that a person can decide upon a certain important point which will become the central focus of his day, and the rest of his day will revolve around that point. During the day, he should think about it often. When he gets up in the morning, he should think about it after he says *Modeh Ani*. As he is on his way, he should continue to think about it. One should keep mentally reviewing the point that he considers worthwhile to focus on.

This usually has to be worked on gradually, and with mental composure, calmly. If it is practiced in a pressurized manner, a person will be robbed of his internal life in order to gain from this *avodah*, and, understandably, he will not be successful.

So, practically speaking, a person needs to take a certain thought which he will think about often throughout the day, which he considers as the focus of his day; and he should see how the rest of his day revolves around this particular point.

The Obsession of Today With The News – A Lifestyle of “Pizur HaNefesh”

What is being described here is not a lifestyle which most people are familiar with. Here we have described a kind of life which totally contradicts the way of life which many people today are used to living. The words here have described an internal kind of life which is based entirely on having a **focused perspective** towards life. It is not about solving problems with focus – though, understandably, we also need to actually solve some of the issues with focus.

Here, we are not coming to solve problems with focus. The words here are about how to build a kind of life which is already focused from the start. When our life is built upon a focused perspective, many problems related to focus will never even start. We have described here is a fundamental way of living, to live with.

As mentioned earlier, the kind of life which most people are familiar with today is a total antithesis to this. Here is a common example. When a person has a cellphone in his pocket, and he always answers it when it rings or buzzes, can he stay focused? Or does he lose his focus?

If he is trying to focus his day on doing *chessed* for others, then it would make sense for him to keep answering his phone, so that he can do his work of doing *chessed* for others. But even this requires a lot of sense on the person's part, because most people cannot stay focused when they live in such a way. In most cases anyway, *chessed* is not the main focus of a person's day. What will a person be focused on, then, when he is always answering his phone? Can a person remain with his power of focus, when he lives in such a way? Even more, usually people are not just answering their phones. If they have a phone, they will naturally be calling other people, and to listen to the news, etc.

As an aside, once we are on the subject of following the news, let us wonder: How much information does a person pick up, from hearing the news? When a person listens to the news for even 2-5 minutes, how much does he hear? How many different topics, and about how many different countries in the world? In a few minutes, a person can lose his focus entirely. By the time he is done listening to the news, his power of focus has ended with it.

Let's also consider newspapers and magazines, which can contain an average of 50-90 pages in it, of different news and articles. There are some who can finish several volumes of reading material of the news, by the end of the week. How many different topics are discussed in one newspaper? Today there are separate papers for just one entire topic. There are some people who will not go to sleep until they finish the entire pile of newspapers and magazines of that week.

What kind of life does this cause a person to have? It causes a person to be inwardly "spread out", between so many different topics. Yet he may want to also *daven* afterwards with deep concentration, composure, and *d'veykus* in Hashem....amidst all of this *pizur hanefesh*! This is a lifestyle by, with its very design, is a sure recipe for *pizur hanefesh*, for being inwardly spread out.

The newspapers and magazines of reading material that are available, together with the news that one can hear, combined with all of the smartphones and various forms of communication where people can hear and text everyone - can any person be focused on even one important or spiritual thing throughout the day, when he is connected to all of these things? Can a person like this remain focused throughout the day on any point that he considers to be his central priority, and to keep returning his thoughts to it, when his mind is processing so much information throughout the day and sending his mind in so many different directions....?

Forget for a moment about all the gossip, slander and lies that which are found in all of the reading material of today. Even if it would all somehow be spiritual kind of material (which is oxymoron, because if a spiritual person is opening the paper to read, he is already no longer a spiritual person), even if would all be kosher (which is unrealistic today), how much *pizur hanefesh* does a person go through when he reads all of it? It scatters his soul all over the place, by processing all of this information about so many different topics. It is the total antithesis to the very perspective of an internal life.

Understandably, no one can disconnect from all of this completely. In the best scenarios, a person will still at least read the headings of the articles, so that he gets the picture from a few words. (How relevant these news headings are is a different issue, and it is also a compelling question to consider). But even this is the total opposite of the internal kind of life which have described in this lesson.

Living Internally - Remaining Focused On One Important Point Throughout The Day

In contrast to the above, what is the internal way of living? It is as we mentioned before - every person can find a point which he considers important and worthwhile to think about, and to think about this often throughout the day.

How much should he think about it? If he can return to thinking about it later, he can temporarily digress from it, but if digressing from it will mean that he never thinks about it again during the day, he should not digress from thinking about it. If he starts thinking about other things throughout the day and he feels that that is causing him to lose focus on his central point, he should try to re-focus on it and continue involving his mind with it.

Understandably, one will not always be able to implement this idea. When a person is in his home with his family, or when he is around other people, he cannot always remain focused on his central point. But the general structure here has been laid out - as long as one is in a situation where he is able to remain focused on his central aspect of the day, he should do so.

In Conclusion

These words are about a fundamental way of living, a way to live an internal life, and with particular regards to the power of focus - because it is a way to live a "focused" kind of life. It is the

fundamental path which will greatly mitigate problems with focus, as long as one develops this approach of living. Of course, there is also a separate inner work to do when it comes to the specific issues of focus, of learning how to focus the mind in the first place. But here we have laid out the fundamental way of living which builds the very structure of the power of focus in the soul.

[1] *Talmud Bavli: Tractate Bava Basra, Chapter II*

[2] *Editor's Note: For more about "pizur hanefesh", refer to **Fixing Your Fire-Anger_011_Scattering of the Soul***

Source: <http://bilvavi.net/english/fixing-your-focus-009-prioritizing>