



GROWTH

At The SHABBAT TABLE

PARSHAT SHOFTIM

The Art of Attention

If you were to track your brain's activity, at what point during the day is the mind most active? Which moment in the day captures the brain's prowess of imagery, recollection, dreams, fears, and fantasies at its peak?

At breakfast? Maybe during some downtime at work? Think again. I'd dare suggest it's sometime between the first blessing of the Amidah and those three steps backward that signal its conclusion.

In Parshat Shoftim, we read the following command (Deut 16:21): *Do not plant for yourself an "ashera" of any tree next to the altar of Hashem, your G-d, that you have made for yourself.*

The ashera was an idolatrous tree or wooden pole used in ancient, pagan Canaanite worship. In other contexts, we are commanded to destroy such trees. This verse, on the most basic level, adds an additional prohibition of specifically planting them near the *mizbe'ach*.

The *Machsof Halavan* adds another dimension to this. Metaphorically, the "Altar" represents tefillah, which is indeed like a spiritual *mizbe'ach* and serves as a modern-day substitution to offering animal sacrifices. Thus, in prohibiting the planting of *ashera* trees in adjacent, the verse is imploring us: do not allow foreign thoughts (signified by the *ashera*, a foreign essence [1]) to arise near your prayers (signified by the Altar).

This point should idealistically seem pretty obvious. Shouldn't it go without saying that one should try avoiding negative thoughts, especially during prayer?

The *Machsof Halavan* adds one more point, however. Lest one believe this only refers to negative or irrelevant, petty thoughts, the *pasuk* includes a small detail that may have gone unnoticed: Do not plant for yourself an "ashera" of any tree next to the altar of Hashem. Even thoughts of Torah or other *mitzvot* are not to be "planted" among one's prayers, which are meant to be totally devoted and undistracted by anything else. As the wisest of all men said, everything has its own time and place. Ideally, even the loftiest and holiest endeavors, when unrelated to the *tefillah* at hand, are not meant for that moment. Doing so, despite how honorable the objective, falls into this category of plating an *ashera* near the Altar.

Perhaps there is an additional depth to the choice of the word "plant." A thought that enters our mind is not necessarily one that we consciously choose to invite. During *Shemoneh Esrei*, a random thought can appear seemingly out of nowhere: an unfinished task, a conversation from yesterday, something we need to take care of later that day. We may not have chosen the thought, but we can choose

what we do with it. We can acknowledge it and let it pass, or we can "plant" it — allowing it to take root, watering it with our attention, and giving it the space to grow. A single stray thought can become an entire mental detour. What began as a tiny seed can, moments later, become a fully developed train of thought, carrying us farther and farther away from the words in front of us. Perhaps the Torah's language of "planting" offers an especially appropriate metaphor: the challenge is not necessarily to prevent every foreign thought from entering our minds, but to refrain from giving those thoughts roots beside the *mizbe'ach*.

For most of us, this is an ideal that may seem beyond reach. It's very difficult to avoid thoughts of work, interactions, errands, daily activities, projects, or other responsibilities during 3 dedicated time slots every single day. Especially when the prayers are said by rote and can feel the same... and monotonous... almost every single day. It can be a challenge to channel the heart when the mind is racing, no matter which direction it takes.

Perhaps, though, a small step in the right direction is all we need to take. Just to start. Just to try. Just to show that we care. It could be to dedicate fifteen seconds beforehand to meditate, prefacing the words with the awesome realization that you are about to speak directly to the Creator of the Universe. It could be merely committing to undivided concentration on one specific paragraph or blessing of choice that feels unique and personal. These are small, practical steps that can help us reclaim some of the focus that so easily slips away.

But perhaps there is a deeper shift that needs to take place as well. The objective is not merely to become better at suppressing distractions, but to cultivate a mindset in which we recognize that not every thought deserves our attention at every moment. Perhaps the goal is not to clear our minds completely. Perhaps it is simply to stop planting. To recognize the thought, acknowledge it, and let it pass without giving it roots. The work can wait. The errands can wait. Even the beautiful Torah thought that suddenly entered our minds can wait. There is a time for everything. And for these few precious moments, there is only one thing that belongs beside the *mizbe'ach*.

No relationship can flourish without communication. And perhaps *tefillah* begins with something even more basic: giving the One we are speaking to our undivided attention.

[1] The *Machsof Halavan* also expounds that through a specific numerical calculation (known as *gematria* בְּמִלּוּת אוֹתוֹת בְּמִלּוּת), "ashera" has the same gematria as "foreign thought" (מחשבה זרה).