

## Spurious Thoughts (Machshavot Zarot)

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In this week's parsha we read the famous imperative:

**פרשת תרומה (ח) וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם :**

Upon which the Gemara tells us that all Batei Keneisiyot have the status of a Mikdash Me'at:

**תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף כט עמוד א**  
"וְאָהִי לָהֶם לְמִקְדָּשׁ מְעַט" (יחזקאל יא:טז), אמר רבי יצחק : אלו בתי כנסיות ובתי מדרשות שבבבל.

So I thought it would be appropriate to discuss the primary reason we gather in our Mikdash Me'at: Tefilla. And specifically, I want to discuss one of the greatest challenges of tefilla: Machshavot Zarot.

We are all familiar with Machshavot Zarot – any one who has prayed 18 has experienced the phenomenon of his mind wandering and having all kinds of unrelated thoughts pop into his head. The phenomenon is so ubiquitous that there are even jokes about it:

There once was a Jew (hayo haya Yehudi) who borrowed (shaal) money from a non-Jew. The loan came due (yom hapiraon higia) and the Jew didn't yet have the money to pay. He was beside himself (mudag meod) that the non-Jew would remember the date and come to collect the payment (ligvot et hatashlum). The Jew went to his Rav and asked what he should do. The Rav looked at him calmly (bebitcha) and said, "Don't worry, he won't remember the loan very soon (lo Yizkor)." "How can you be so sure?" asked the Jew. "Simple, the non-Jew does not daven 18 (aino Yehudi aino mitpalel 18 kach shelo yeheyu lo) to have machshavot zarot (tzatzot) pop into his head to remind him of the yom hapiraon."

On a more serious note, Jews for generations have tried to find ways to deal with the phenomenon. The term "Machshavot Zarot" first appears in the 13c in a book called "Shaarei Tzedek" by R. Natan b. Saadia Charar (student of R. Avraham Abulafia). The concept appears in various texts in 14c – the most famous being that of the Tur :

### **טור אורח חיים הלכות תפלה סימן צח**

מחשבתו כיצד דתניא המתפלל צריך שיכוין לבו שנאמר תכין לבם פירוש שיכוין פ"י המלות<sup>(א)</sup> כל שמוציא בשפתיו ויחשוב כאילו שכינה כנגדו<sup>(ב)</sup> שנא' שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד ויעיר הכוונה ויסיר כל המחשבות הטורדות אותו עד שתשאר מחשבתו וכוונתו זכה בתפלתו ויחשוב כי אילו היה מדבר לפני מלך ב"ו שהיום כאן ולמחר בקבר היה מסדר דבריו ומכוין בהם יפה לבל ישל ק"ו לפני מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא שצריך לכוין אף מחשבתו כי לפניו המחשבה כדיבור כי כל המחשבות הוא חוקר וכן היו עושין חסידים ואנשי מעשה שהיו מתבודדים ומכוונים בתפלתן עד שהיו מגיעים להתפשטות הגשמיות ולהתגברות רוח השכלית עד שהיו מגיעים קרוב למעלת הנבואה ואם תבא לו מחשבה אחרת בתוך התפלה ישתוק עד שתתבטל המחשבה ולא יתפלל לא במקום שיש בו דבר שמבטל כוונתו ולא בשעה המבטלת כוונתו ...

In the 16c, the Reishit Hochma, the Alshich and others wrote about ways to deal with MZs; but it wasn't until the 18c that the Baal Shem Tov gathered these ideas, and over time, developed (piteiach) a number of methods (gishot, sheetot) to deal (letpel) with them. Prof. Moshe Idel (in his maamar “tefilla, ek'steza, v'machshavot zarot”) analyzed (niteich) all the maamarim of the Besht's students on this issue and built the following table of approaches.

Approach	Origins	Description	Methods/Tools	Theological Outlook
<b>Agony</b> (from Greek: Agon = Struggle; מאבק)	found in MUSSAR Lit. & Pre-Kabbalah & Kabbalah Lit.  sourced in Alshich – 16c, among others.	- AT are bad, come to distract you. - Response: fight (pure battle against AT). - Anthropocentric	Rush דריז Fight: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>before tefilla: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>say tehilim,</li> <li>learn Torah,</li> <li>Cry</li> </ul> </li> <li>during tefilla <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>concentrate YKVK (prevent AT)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Dualistic (i.e., good and evil two separate realms)
<b>Harmony</b> הרמוניסטי	Reishit Hochma (deVidas) – 16c  ("sparks" from Ari, "sparks of shechina" – from RH)	- AT come from separation of Shechina; hevel (worthless thoughts) but from God. Maybe need to do teshuva, maybe need tikkun. - Response: Tikkun Shechina (may have fight but goal is harmony); - Theocentric	3 types of THEURGY (based on Lurianic thought) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Beirur sparks – separate good/evil (shechina/klipot)</li> <li>Yihud of divine (connect thoughts to YKVK and thus elevate) –harmony model but Idel says expresses Agony (p.77).</li> <li>Elevate shechina sparks – connect spark to higher sefira (apparently mental action).</li> </ul>	Theosophical/Theurgic (i.e., divine system given to human manipulation)
<b>Noetic</b> (from Greek: NUS = cognition, הכרה)	Noetic model is Besht HIDUSH.	- AT are not only from God, they are PART of GOD (eivarei hashechina) - Response (branch of Harmony model) –focus on cognitive aspect – i.e., "know God" – Know that: לית אתר פניו מני - this recognition allows one to realize that there is no evil. KNOWLEDGE, not THEURGY, is key.	Besht taught that God is hidden in all things, including evil (e.g., AT). And when man realizes this then God is not hidden. Realizing this removes klipot and AT. No Agony only Harmony but not interested in raising/haala; <b>not about Ha'aala (of sparks) but Hakara (that God in all).</b>	Immanence (i.e., God is in everything, evil is an illusion)

The first approach is the Agony approach – coming from the Greek word Agon which means struggle (maavak). The struggle is due to the fact that MZs are evil, they come to distract you and so you must fight. How does one fight? The Besht uses the allegory of the Lisitim (Bandits) in the Forrest. How do you get through the forrest without getting accosted? The simplest way is to run (livroach) – that means: you say the words of the tefilla so quickly that you don't leave time for the MZs to bother you. This model is based on the Theological approach of Dualism – there is good, there is evil, and the evil must be fought.

In contradistinction to the Agony model, one can understand that the MZs are not evil but are coming from God. That is, the MZs are actually a negative thought clothing a

holy spark within. It could be the thought of a sin, for example, that needs tikkun – you are to do teshuva, then and there in your prayer and thus fix the MZ. In doing so, you release the spark of the Shechina – separating good from evil – and unite the Shechina w/her husband, thus bringing Harmony to the world.

The last model is the Noetic model. The term Noesis comes from the Greek word Nus, meaning cognition (hakara). Here one has to realize (lehakir) only one thing: Leit Atar Panui Minei – God is in EVERYTHING. This model is, of course, based on the theological outlook of immanence – God is in everything – there is no evil, only good. This includes the MZs. They are not evil, they are not even *coming* from God – they *are* GOD – eivarei hashechina! When one realizes this, the MZs simply vanish (Neelamot).

Now, though these are indeed the 3 main approaches that the Baal Shem Tov offers, he too is aware that sometimes nothing works. And so he adds that sometimes your best bet is to daven like a tinok from the KTAV – you simply read the words of prayer straight from the siddur. Nevertheless, even this mode is laden with theurgical meaning, for the word KTAV is made up of the letter KTV, which the Besht interprets kabbalistically as connecting the Keter of Malchut (symbolized by the letters כה) to Bina (symbolized by the letter ב).

Interestingly, the Baal Shem Tov's grandson, Rebbi Nachman of Breslav believed it was futile to try to do anything with MZs and that it was best to simply ignore them. And the Baal Hatanya said that only tzaddikim can apply the Harmony model and all others should apply the Agony model and move quickly to avoid getting attacked by spurious thoughts.

And that brings us to our conclusion. But if we started with a joke, let's end with one:

A rabbi gets to heaven (shamayim) and the angels ask him why he thinks he deserves to come in to Gan Eden. He says that he davened 3 times a day ... with a minyan! "Impressive," they say, "Let's check if that is so." They check and indeed it is true. They say, "Congratulations. Let us explain to you how to get in (aich ata nichnas): alkjahdfalksjhfklsjfiweuyr". "What??" asks the Rav. To which the angels answer: "at the speed you said your tefilla is the speed we answer you."

Apparently, he adopted (imetz) the Agony model.

May all your prayers be accepted – regardless of which method you use – and may we merit to say them with kavana not only in our Mikdash Me'at but in Mikdash HaMashiach, BBY.