

The Davening Breakthrough

How Stopping to Daven Fixed My Davening



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from blah-blah
words to heartfelt
tefillah.*

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By David Adress



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Dedications

I am deeply grateful to Hashem for granting me the inspiration for this work and the opportunity to bring it to life. My hope is that it may inspire others as well.

A heartfelt thank you to my incredible wife, Debbie, who selflessly sacrifices our time together so I can focus on projects like this. She never complains, always supports me, and embodies generosity — always ready to help others without hesitation.

To my parents — for being the beginning of my journey.

To my in-laws — who are no longer with us, but whose presence is still felt.

A special shout-out to my oldest son, Rabbi Yossi Adress. I've had the privilege of watching him grow with a true zest for davening. One family moment I'll never forget was when Eli, at about ten years old, cut himself and came running down the stairs, bleeding, and immediately cried out: "Yossi, daven!" That story has stayed with me forever.

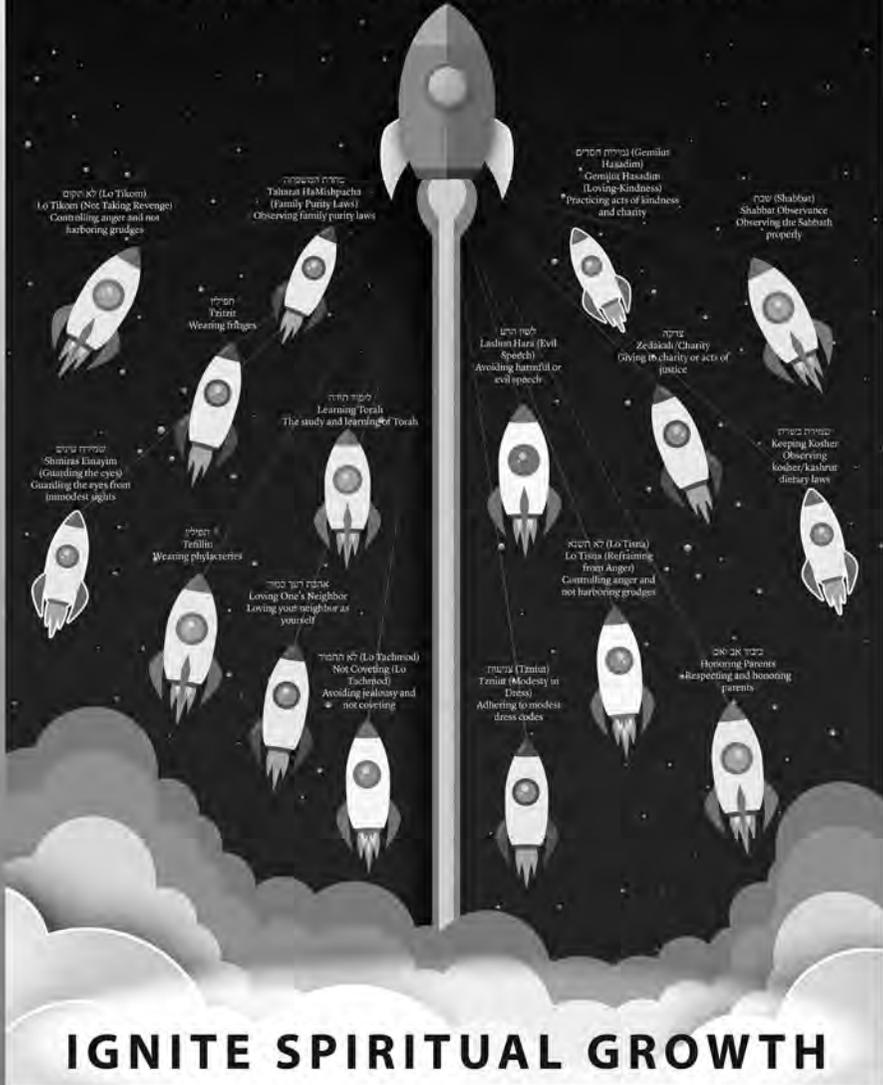
To my wonderful children — Rochel & Binyamin, Yossi & Ruchie, Eli & Yehudit, Baruch & Emunah.

To my precious grandchildren — Meira, Baruch, Yehuda, Ari, Sari, Talia, Batya, Layla, Rosie, Daniel Simcha. I love you all.

Finally, a special thanks to an incredible talented individual, Dovi Edell.

תפילה / Tefilah (Prayer)

Questioning your recent Mitzvah? Wondering why the connection feels fleeting?
Remember: Your Mitzvah is the spark—prayer is the fuel that keeps the spiritual fire
blazing. Sustain your bond with Hashem through heartfelt prayer.



IGNITE SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Chapter 1: Introduction – Why I’m Sharing This

March 21, 2025



This all began as a simple reflection I shared on LinkedIn. I didn't expect much—but the response was overwhelming. Somehow, my struggle and journey struck a chord with people. That feedback pushed me to expand those thoughts into this short book, with the hope that it might help even one person. And truthfully, I already feel I've succeeded. Every time someone reaches out to say, "*This helped me,*" I feel deeply grateful and accomplished.

At the end of the day, isn't that what we're here for? To keep working on our own *Avodas Hashem*—and to help others along the way?

If you've picked this up, I ask you to share it. Not because I want recognition, but because someone else might be struggling in silence, just as I once was.

Let me be upfront: this is not a scholarly sefer, and it's not meant to be. It's short by design—straightforward, honest, and hopefully relatable. I wanted it to read more like a conversation than a lecture.

And no, I'm not trying to make money from this. You can even download it for free from my website. If it resonates, pass it on.

I'll admit, I hesitated before putting something this personal out into the world. But then I thought: *What if someone out there feels stuck the way I did? What if they're just waiting to hear that there's a path back to real davening, to real connection?*

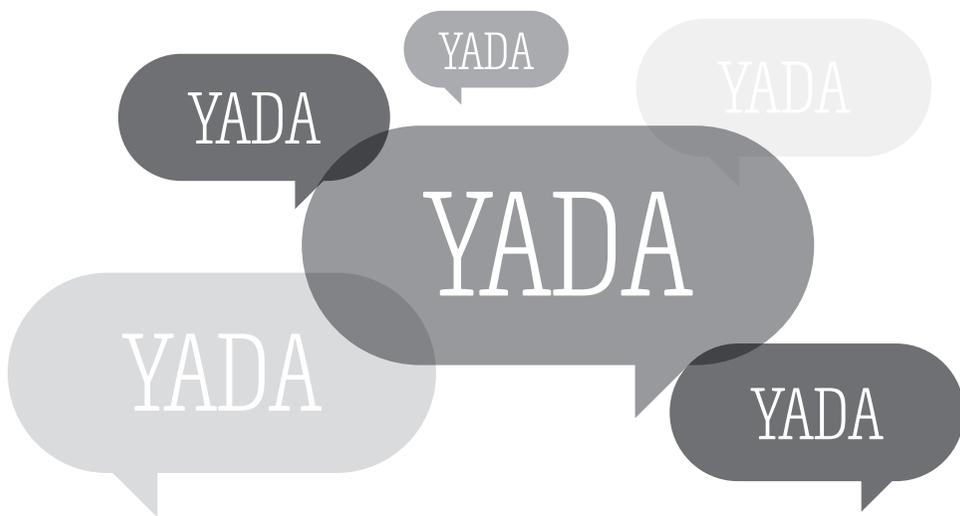
So... here goes.

Chapter 2: The Hidden Disconnect – Strong Learning, Weak Davening

Over the past few years, I started noticing something that really troubled me. My Torah learning was alive—it had energy, structure, and clarity. But my *Avodas Hashem*, especially davening, was crumbling.

And when I say it was bad, I mean *really* bad.

For years, I went through the motions without actually davening. I said the words, but they felt empty. It was mechanical, rushed—Shacharis in 20 minutes flat. My mind wandered, my lips mumbled, and I'd catch myself drifting into a “yada yada yada” rhythm—straight out of a Seinfeld episode.



There was no heart. No connection. No real focus.

I tried everything—books on tefillah, new kavanah tricks, sheer willpower—but nothing worked. If anything, it only

made me more anxious. The moment I opened the siddur, I felt tense. My only thought was, “*Let me just get through this.*”

Davening became something I dreaded. And when I finally took off my tallis and tefillin, I didn’t feel uplifted—I just felt relief, like I could finally breathe again.

Chapter 3: Going Through the Motions – When Tefillah Feels Empty

There's a painful irony many frum people quietly carry: we can be thriving in one area of Yiddishkeit while completely disconnected in another. One person might be meticulous in *Shmiras Einayim* but constantly stumble with *lashon hara*. Another might be immersed in *chessed*, yet feel nothing in *tefillah*.



That was me.

My learning *sedarim* were rock-solid—consistent to the point of obsession. (In fact, I plan to write a short *kuntres* about that story on its own.) But the moment I stood up to daven, it felt

like punching a time clock for a job I didn't want, instead of standing before my Creator.

The disconnect seeped into everything—Shacharis, Mincha, Maariv, benching, Kiddush. Even “Asher Yatzar” was reduced to a robotic mumble. And the later in the day it got, the worse it became. By Mincha and Maariv, I was barely saying the words at all. Sometimes my eyes just skimmed the page, tossing out a word here and there. If I said ten words on the whole page, it was a lot. My only goal was to finish—just to be done.

And I hated it.

Worse than that, the words themselves felt blocked. It was like trying to force them through a narrow straw. I don't know if you've ever experienced that, but it's a crushing feeling—especially when you know Hebrew well and the words should flow naturally, yet they refuse to leave your lips. It was painful, physically and spiritually, to try to say them.

And the thought haunted me: *If I can't even get my words out here in Olam Hazei, how could I possibly expect them to rise up to Shamayim?*

Chapter 4: Help? Me? – How I Found the Courage to Ask for Help

At some point, I had to face the truth: something inside me was really off—and I couldn't fix it on my own.

Opening up to someone wasn't easy. For years, I resisted the idea. I even used to joke with my wife that if we ever needed marriage counseling, I'd rather just get divorced. (I was joking... but not completely. Baruch Hashem, my wife and I have been happily married for over 30 years.)



What finally pushed me over the edge was another challenge—navigating the pain of dealing with narcissistic family members. At the time, “narcissism” was just a buzzword I'd barely understood. Let's just say, I learned its meaning firsthand, and it was not pretty. Honestly, that subject alone could fill a whole series of books.

Eventually, I reached out to Dov Edell. He's an incredibly gifted person—one of those rare individuals you meet and immediately think, “*We could have been best friends if life had introduced us under different circumstances.*” I had heard of him through someone he had coached on an entirely different matter, and decided to give it a try.

I only mention his name here because he ended up helping me in ways I never could have imagined.

In our very first conversation, he told me something I'll never forget:

“It's not your fault—but it's your responsibility.”

That single line completely reframed how I looked at my spiritual stuckness. Life hands each of us challenges. But if I truly want to grow, it's on me to take responsibility for the next step.

And then came the conversation that changed everything.

Chapter 5: The Davening Dilemma

During one of our conversations, I finally opened up about my struggles with davening. I carried this deep-seated belief that I had to say everything in the siddur—every word, every tefillah. It became almost like an OCD block: if I skipped even a line, I felt I was doing something wrong.

But here's the irony: in trying to say everything, I was really saying nothing.

The pressure was crushing. The long tefillos felt unbearable. I used to ask myself, what happened to the days when all we had was “Shema Yisroel”? Maybe I could have managed that. But if I'm being honest, I probably would have struggled even then. If Shema was all there was, I likely still wouldn't have been able to focus on that one sentence.



It reminded me of how the Gemara in Sanhedrin (102b) describes the temptation for avodah zarah in earlier times. Rav Ashi once made a dismissive comment about King Menashe, until King Menashe appeared to him in a dream. There, he demonstrated his deep Torah knowledge—down to the precise place where bread should be cut. Rav Ashi asked him: “If you were such a talmid chacham, how could you worship idols?”

Menashe answered: “Had you lived in my generation, you would have lifted up the hem of your cloak and run even faster toward avodah zarah.” (And Rashi on Vayikra 26:35 notes that Menashe later did teshuvah.)

That story hit me. Every generation has its struggles. What avodah zarah was for them, shmiras einayim is for us.

In any case any struggle is real, just in a different form.

Chapter 6: The Breakthrough

Dovi suggested something that felt radical to me: *change your davening*.

By “change,” he meant: stop saying everything.

I may be paraphrasing, but what he really told me was: “*You’re not davening out of avodah—you’re davening out of an obsessive need to just get the words out.*”

And he was right. If I’m only saying the words without any feeling, I’m still technically fulfilling tefillah—but I’m missing the entire essence of *Avodah Shebalev*, the inner service of the heart. It’s like offering someone a gift with no love or thought behind it. Yes, even imperfect tefillah has value, and the effort to bridge the gap is itself an act of connection. But without *kavanah*, it risks becoming recitation rather than relationship.



Chazal were very clear on this. The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 98:1) says:

"המתפלל צריך שיכוין בלבו פי' המלות שמוציא בשפתיו ויחשוב כאלו שכינה כנגד-
"דו ויסיר כל המחשבות הטורדות אותו עד שתשאר מחשבתו וכוונתו זכה בתפלתו"

"One who prays needs to concentrate on the meaning of the words which one brings forth from one's mouth. One should consider [it] as if the Divine Presence is opposite one, and remove all distracting thoughts from one, until one's thought and intention remain purely about one's prayer."

I immediately pushed back. "I can't just skip parts of davening," I told him.

He didn't accept that. "I don't like the words 'I can't,'" he said. "That's a mindset."

But the truth is, it wasn't just mindset—it was my OCD speaking. For me, the idea of leaving anything out felt impossible.

So he gave me a challenge: instead of forcing myself through the entire siddur, choose a smaller core of tefillos—and say them slowly, with real intention.

Can I really stop davening?

Chapter 7: Redesigning My Daily Davening

After giving it careful thought—and with the support and encouragement of my Rav—I made the decision to move forward with a new davening approach and methodology that felt both structured and meaningful to me.



I committed to reciting only a select group of tefillos each day, following the Nusach Ari tradition that I daven:

- בְּרִחוֹת הַשַּׁחַר (Birchos HaShachar)
- קִרְבָּנוֹת (Korbanos) – Primarily the sections of Pitum HaKetores and a few select passages said before Hodu. Not all of them.
- בְּרוּךְ שֶׁאָמַר (Baruch She'amar)
- אֲשֵׁרֵי (Ashrei)
- הַלְלוּקָה (Selected Hallelukas) – Not all of them.
- אֶז יָשִׁיר (Az Yashir)
- יִשְׁתַּבַּח (Yishtabach)

- קריאת שמע (Krias Shema)
- שמונה עשרה (Shemoneh Esrei)
- תחנון (Tachanun) – Only part of it.
- יום תהלים (Yom Tehillim)
- קנה and Pitum Haktore
- עלינו לשובח (Aleinu L'Shabeach)
- **The final parsha of Tefillin** – Remembering Yetzias Mitzrayim and the mitzvah of Tefillin.

Each tefillah was chosen with care, striking a balance between depth and consistency—allowing me to daven with heart, kavanah, and sustainability.

I cut out a lot of stuff. This was going to be my new davening regimen.

Chapter 8: Week One – The Fight Begins



The first day was brutal.

Forty-five minutes of slow, deliberate davening — out loud. Every word, every syllable. I wasn't just *saying* the tefillos — I was trying to *feel* them, to *live* them.

But instead of serenity, my mind was a battlefield.

The inner voice was relentless:

“What are you doing?”

“You're skipping parts!”

“You're not doing it the right way!”

“You're wasting time!”

It felt like I was betraying the version of davening I had

always known — the fast, autopilot mode that let me check the box and move on with my day. This was different. It was uncomfortable. Vulnerable. Almost childish.

But I kept going.

Word by word.

Pasuk by pasuk.

Berachah by berachah.

I wasn't chasing perfection. I was chasing presence.

Looking back, I think I started this experiment on a weekday — I'm not even sure which one. It's a blur.

All I remember is the pressure — not from within, but from life.

What happens when I have to be somewhere by 9:00 a.m.? How will I fit this in on days packed with meetings or when I'm traveling?

Honestly? I don't know.

But I told myself: “עַתָּה לַעֲשׂוֹת לַה'” – Now is the time to act for Hashem.

I'll deal with tomorrow when tomorrow comes. That day, I just wanted to win one small victory — to sit in front of my Siddur and not run away.

And I did.

Chapter 9: Week Two – The Words Start to Sing

I kept at it, day after day. And then—something shifted.

The words began to flow more naturally. Each phrase seemed to carry its own tune. The niggun became a bridge between the printed words and the feelings in my heart. Sometimes the melody reflected what I was experiencing; other times it shaped the way I connected to that tefillah in the moment.

That was the breakthrough: niggun lifted my davening to an entirely new level.



It may sound like an odd mashal, but it reminded me of the Mary Poppins song, “A Spoonful of Sugar.” Mary tells the children that even unpleasant chores—like taking medicine or cleaning up—become easier when accompanied by joy and song: “In every job that must be done, there is an element of fun.”

So too with tefillah: niggun transforms effort into connection.

Why Niggun Matters

Chazal & Halacha

- Gemara Megillah 32a – “Kol hakoreh b’lo ne’imah...” One who reads Torah without melody is criticized. Rashi explains that melody deepens both understanding and emotion.



- Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 61:24) – The ta’amei hamikr (cantillation notes) aren’t ornamental; they guide rhythm, focus, and meaning.
- Zohar — “Discusses the songs of the angels, the songs of the Levi’im, and the songs composed by Dovid HaMelech.”

- Chassidus - There are references in Chasidus to song and tunes lifting up the neshama.
 - Memory boost – Music strengthens retention, especially with abstract material like Torah and tefillah.
 - Mood & focus – Singing reduces anxiety and increases dopamine.
 - Multisensory engagement – Voice, melody, and even slight movement activate the whole person.
-

Slowly, my mind began to reach for familiar tunes—*Lecha Dodi*, *Benching*, *Dida Natzach*. Some niggunim lifted me with joy, some moved me to tears, and others gave me energy when I needed to move faster. Over time, I found two favorites that became my personal go-to melodies for davening.

I'll share links to them on my website—but the truth is, my song may not be your song. The beauty of niggun is finding what lifts *you*. And remember—there's a time and place for every kind of melody, depending on what your heart needs in that moment.

Chapter 10: Shabbos Transformed

After a few weeks of keeping up with Shacharis, something amazing happened—Mincha and Maariv began to follow naturally. Once rushed and empty, they slowly started to feel alive and real.

Then came Shabbos davening. I decided to take a leap: on Shabbos, I would say *everything*. For the first time, I actually could. Why? Because on Shabbos there are no distractions. No work deadlines. No buzzing phone. No one pulling me in a dozen directions. Shabbos gave me the space to breathe, to focus, and to pour myself fully into tefillah.

I still can't believe it—I now stay in shul the whole Shabbos, davening every word. And yes, I've become *that guy* in shul—the one you hear davening out loud. But I'm not embarrassed. This is my Avodas Hashem, and I need to do it with strength.

As Pirkei Avos (5:20) teaches:

הָיֵה עֹז כַּנְּמֵרָה, וְקַל כַּנְּשָׂרָה, וְרָץ כַּצִּבִּי, וְגִבּוֹר כַּאֲרִי, לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹן אָבִיךָ שֶׁבַשְּׁמַיִם
Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion to do the will of your Father in Heaven.



That line has become personal for me. I've even had people move seats because I was davening too loud. And honestly—it makes me smile. I get moving away from talkers, but from someone who's actually davening? Life is funny.

And here's the part that still blows me away: I who once barely davened at all—now I *want* to daven. I *need* to daven. I feel this powerful connection, something I never imagined possible. It means something to me now. I love Hashem.

Davening has become meaningful again. Today, I literally can't wait to daven. I'm excited to get to shul early, to settle in with kavannah, and to let the words pour out of me.

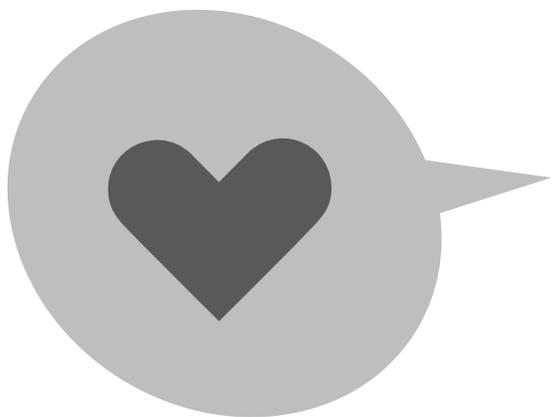
I can't believe these words are even coming out of my mouth. But they are true: davening no longer feels like a chore. It has become something I genuinely look forward to.

Now, don't get me wrong—I still have a long way to go. My benching needs work. Getting to minyan every single day is still a challenge. But I'm learning that real growth comes step by step. Baby steps.

Chapter 11: Silence in Shul

Another thing I began to notice—once I really started paying attention—was the silence. Imagine twenty people standing together in a room for davening, and you could hear a pin drop. Not the holy silence of awe, but the empty silence of people barely whispering through the words.

That silence hit me hard. It made me realize how often tefillah has become mechanical. People show up, open a siddur, mumble their way through, and close it again. I know, because for years that was me. Just getting it done. Words without voice. Voice without heart.



But now—something inside me had flipped. Me, the one who once couldn't bring myself to daven at all, now found myself on fire. I didn't just want to daven—I *needed* to daven. I wanted to let the words pour out of me, to cry them, to sing them, to scream them if I had to.

And here's the part I never thought I'd say: I actually feel love. I love Hashem. I want Him to hear my voice. And when I let it out, the words stop being a burden and start becoming a lifeline. **The flow and love are real!**

Chapter 12: Incredible Feeling

There's a spiritual joy that's almost impossible to put into words. All I want is to praise Hashem. To speak with Him. And I feel beyond grateful that Hashem gives me that privilege.

I wake up with excitement—I can't wait to daven, to learn, to do a chesed. The love I feel is real, deep, and emotional.

Now, don't get me wrong—I still have bad days. The yetzer hara doesn't disappear. But somehow, my learning anchors me. It pulls me back, gently but firmly, to the right path. It isn't always easy, but it's steady.

To capture this feeling, I wrote a short poem:

I keep my schedule, firm and true,
With תורה lighting each day anew;
Though sometimes meaning slips from view,
Its ripples flow, felt through and through.

In mind's vast vault these treasures lie,
A פסוק recalled when shadows fly;
A רש"י's note, a Gemara's spark,
A ה'הלכה's grip that lights the dark.

When furthest from the true path I stray,
These vault-kept sparks renew my way;
The Torah's light draws my soul back,
And guides me home when I've lost track.

Chapter 13: Summing It All Up



We assume spiritual problems require spiritual solutions. But sometimes, spiritual numbness comes from other types of misalignment. Speaking to someone helped me slow down, listen inward, and awaken my neshama.

Chapter 14: Some Lessons I Learned Along The Way

- Take the small wins. Start with something manageable.
- You don't need to daven the entire siddur to feel connected.
- Mindfulness transforms everything.
- Speaking to someone is never a bad idea. It can unlock your soul.
- Consult a Rav before changing your routine.
- You're not broken. You're human. Hashem wants you close, just as you are.



