

## Say It Again?

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is characterized by recurring, unwanted thoughts, ideas, or sensations. These cause affected people to feel compelled to engage in repetitive behaviors to alleviate the thoughts, which can significantly interfere with their daily activities and social interactions. Although many individuals in the general population have distressing thoughts or repetitive behaviors, these are typically not disruptive. However, in OCD, the thoughts are intrusive and persistent and the behaviors are rigid. People with OCD often struggle to disengage from their obsessive thoughts or halt their compulsive behaviors, even when they understand that these thoughts are irrational. OCD often begins in childhood, adolescence, or early adulthood, and affects approximately 2-3% of the adult population in the United States. The many manifestations of the disease raise the need for a comprehensive review of its Halachic ramifications that will be the subject of the upcoming series of articles, beginning with questions relating to Tefila and Brachos.

People with OCD often encounter great difficulty when Davening or reciting Krias Shema. They may repeat the words again and again out of an irrational fear that they might not have pronounced the words correctly, or that they have forgotten to say one of *Birchos Krias Shema*. It can take a long time until their mind is at ease, and, in the meantime, they feel severely stressed and anxious.

Sadly, this is not a rare phenomenon. We often encounter it in the case of God-fearing individuals who are exceedingly careful in matters of Halacha. Unfortunately, their *Yiras Shamayim* can become a source of great anxiety.

Recent Poskim have been asked many questions about this disorder. In particular, the *Steipler Gaon z"tl* established several important principles related to the subject, delineated in his Sefer, "*Karyana d'Igresa*".

At the heart of the matter is the premise that the habit of repetition exacerbates and intensifies the problem. People with OCD should be encouraged not to repeat Brachos or Tefilos for any reason. After all, in the vast majority of cases they will have pronounced the text correctly and with adequate *Kavana* on the first occasion.

The question arises when a person is convinced (rightly or wrongly) that he was definitely not *Yotzei* with his Tefila or Bracha. Should he repeat them in this instance, or should he listen to medical advice and make no exceptions?

The Poskim's answer is clear: He should not repeat the Bracha or Tefila. *haGaon Rav Asher Weiss Shlit"א* provides two Halachic bases for this ruling (*Shu"t Minchas Asher 2:134*):

1. A *Choleh* does not need to perform a particular *Mitzvas Asei* if it will interfere with his recovery. This is evident from the fact that one is not obligated to spend an enormous amount of money to fulfill a *Mitzvas Asei* (as opposed to a *Mitzvas Lo Sa'ase* for which a person must spend all of his money to avoid violating it). Similarly, a person with OCD will not be able to manage his disorder if he attempts to fulfill the Mitzva of Krias Shema by reading it again whenever such circumstances arise.
2. The *Chasam Sofer (Shu"t O.C. 83)* was asked whether it was permitted to commit a child considered a "*Shoteh*" to an institution that would feed him nonkosher food, given that he had a chance of being cured there. The *Chasam Sofer* responded that it was permissible even if this violated the *Lo Sa'asei* of "*Sefiya*"<sup>1</sup> since we are obligated to seek a cure for him so that he will be able to fulfill all of the Mitzvos in the future.

The same is true in our case. Repeating *Krias Shema*, Tefila, or Brachos can cause the individual's condition to deteriorate, making it less likely that he will be able to fulfill these Mitzvos in the future. In the words of *Chaza"l*: "Desecrate one Shabbos on his behalf so that he can fulfill many Shabbosos in the future."

[In this regard the Steipler warned people: "*Al Titzdak Harbe* – Do not be too much of a Tzaddik." Sometimes, *Chumros* of this sort can lead a person's *Ruchniyus* to collapse, to the point that he no longer observes any of the Mitzvos.]

Rav Asher also quotes a passage from another of the Steipler's letters (373):

I instructed him to Daven from a Siddur, and not to repeat that which he has already read even if he is certain that he did not say it correctly or that he skipped words. It is clear that he is not obligated to do any more than that but it is impossible to explain this to one who is greatly distressed in this way. Therefore, this instruction should be given absolutely ("*b'Hechlet*") without providing any reasons, or perhaps it is best just to tell him that there is no

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<sup>1</sup> The prohibition to directly feed forbidden food to *Ketanim*.

*d'Oraisa* concern here. It is difficult to elaborate further on this matter here and just instruct him that he should not repeat anything that he has already read.

Rav Asher also presents a fascinating discussion as to whether an individual with OCD should avoid eating an amount of bread that would satiate him to avoid an obligation of *Birkas haMazon mid'Oraisa*.<sup>2</sup> Rav Asher contends that this is not a correct approach. Instructing him to act strangely will only increase his anxiety, opening him up to dozens more strange questions and worries. Instead, he should be told not to make these sorts of calculations and to behave like a regular person. He should eat as usual and attempt to *Bentch* correctly just once.

In another *Teshuva* (3:128), Rav Asher was asked whether a person with OCD who does not pronounce all of the words of Tefila correctly has any benefit from Davening at all.

Rav Asher responded with a *Chidush*: There is an important difference between Tefila and other Mitzvos. Even if a person cannot read the words of the Tefila correctly, his Tefilos are nevertheless accepted by Hashem. Though, like all Mitzvos, Tefila has a form and structure, it is also the pathway to Hashem's *Shefa*, *Rachamim*, and *Chesed*. It simply cannot be the case that one who is unable to enunciate his Tefilos correctly will not be able to access these great Brachos. We must say that one who can Daven correctly must do so to access the *Shefa*, but one who is unable to read the words properly, does not need to.<sup>3</sup>

The Steipler also implies this as he ruled that a person with OCD should recite *Krias Shema* once only and know that **in that way he fulfills the Mitzva of Krias Shema**.

In summary, a person with OCD should follow these guidelines for Tefila and Brachos:

1. Act in the same way as others and not attempt to exempt himself from Brachos or other obligatory Tefilos.
2. He should recite the Tefilos only once and must not repeat words.
3. He should know that "*Rachmana Liba Ba'i* – Hashem desires the heart". If he does his best to fulfill the *Ratzon Hashem*, based on instructions from Gedolei Yisrael and Poskim he will be rewarded and *b'Ezras Hashem* will be cured of his disorder.

<sup>2</sup> [Editor's note: Ostensibly, the individual would be less anxious about fulfilling a *Chiyuv d'Rabbanan*.]

<sup>3</sup> [Editor's note: Although he must make reasonable efforts to do so when feasible.]