

## Focusing on Tefilla

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## KOL ATZMOTAI TOMARNA: PRAYING WITH BODY AND SOUL

כי כל פה לך יודה וכל לשון לך תשבע וכל ברך  
לך תכרע וכל קומה לפניך תשתחוה וכל לבבות  
ייראוך וכל קרב וכליות יזמרו לשמך כדבר  
שכתוב כל עצמתי תאמרנה ה' מי כמוך ...

*For every mouth will give thanks to You and every tongue will vow allegiance to You and every knee will bow to You and every upright being will prostrate before You and all hearts will revere You and all internal organs will sing the praises of Your name as it states: All of my bones shall say, "G-d, Who is like You..."*

**W**hile tefillah is intrinsic to the daily life of a Jew, it is highlighted even more so now, during the High Holiday season. With the daily recitation of Slichot in the period leading up to Rosh Hashana, with extra tefillot during the Aseret Yemei Teshuva, and with the additional time spent

in prayer both on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, prayer is clearly central to these Days of Awe. The recent articles about prayer in the *Jewish Action* magazine (Fall 2017) and the addition of special classes and yimei yun in yeshivot and day schools on the topic of making prayer more meaningful are commendable. Rav Tzvi Hersh Weinreb's "The Best Books on Prayer"<sup>1</sup> provides many options to reflect on our prayers and gain a deeper understanding of them. However, despite the resources available, a meaningful prayer experience is elusive for many.

To properly appreciate prayer, we need to arrive to shul early, or at least on time. I have heard Rav Hershel Schachter say, "if you arrive to shul on time, you are already late." How true this is. To properly begin praying at the official

start time, we need to arrive beforehand and prepare. We are obligated to ensure that our surroundings and our bodies are appropriately clean, that the setting has few distractions, and that our minds are in the proper frame for communicating with our Creator. In addition to preparing ourselves before beginning prayer and even more specifically before beginning the Amida, with the recitation of "G-d, open my lips (so that) my mouth can tell your praises," there are several elements during prayer that help to refocus our experience and to remind us that we literally are standing before the Almighty. The countless references to Hashem in second person, as in "Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d..." is an almost continuous reminder that we are communicating directly with the Ribbono Shel Olam. Additionally,

the various movements designed by Chazal and by our traditions heighten our awareness of being in Hashem's presence.

Psychological researchers have codified different modalities with which people experience the world. These are commonly broken down into visual, auditory and kinesthetic (movement). Some people grasp information better when material is presented visually, while others process information more readily when they hear it. A third group learn material best when they are fully drawn into it with movement. Interestingly, the way our tefillot are arranged requires that we use all three modalities while praying, to help us maximize the experience. People tend to be more familiar with the visual and auditory aspects of prayer, while the kinesthetic elements are less obvious and thus warrant more extensive elaboration.

The visual modality is activated by reading the words in the siddur, whether in Hebrew or in translation, and for some people, by closing their eyes and creating a visual image of connecting with Hashem. Using a translated siddur helps us understand the words we are saying, and studying any of the excellent English commentaries on prayer helps us understand the deeper meaning of our tefillot. This undoubtedly helps us focus our attention and have a more meaningful prayer experience. The image of a beautiful shul, a tastefully decorated Aron Kodesh, and being surrounded by others intently absorbed in prayer further heighten our visual sense as we daven.

We are supposed to audibly recite the Shema (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 62:3), thereby stimulating our auditory system. Additionally, our

prayers are replete with responsive sections. We listen to the shaliach tzibur repeat the Amida and we frequently respond in Chazarat Hashatz, Kedusha, and Kaddish with various exclamations of *baruch Hu uwaruch Shmo* and *amein*. We hear the call of *Borchu Et Hashem Hamivorach*, and we respond in turn. Responsive prayers are even more numerous during *Slichot* and during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuva*, including the especially moving prayers of *Kol Nidrei*, *Avinu Malkeinu*, the *Sh'losh Esrei Middot*, and the *Yom Kippur Musaf*. Meaningful prayer certainly requires much listening, in addition to audibly articulating the prayers.

When we reflect on our own prayer, we typically consider the words we are saying and their meaning, and we think about the experience of what we see and hear during services; however, we usually do not consider the kinesthetic aspects of tefilla to have as deep significance. A newcomer to an Orthodox synagogue once remarked to me how surprised he was by all the movement taking place. He said it seemed loosely choreographed, like an ensemble in a play — sit, stand, turn around, bow, step forward and step backward. The truth is that observant Jews seem to be in almost constant motion while praying.

It seems clear that movement during prayer is meant to heighten the prayer experience and to evoke different emotions at different parts of prayer. Unfortunately, in the same manner that people often recite prayers by rote to merely satisfy the requirement or because they are on autopilot, our movements in prayer are executed in the same way. Movements in prayer are often mindlessly followed as prescribed in the siddur — strike your

chest, bow here and turn around here, with regrettably little thought to their meaning. By increasing our awareness of the many movements we perform in our prayer, we can more appropriately benefit from their execution.

There are three primary functions for the various movements in prayer, which all have the goal of enhancing our prayer. Some of the movements serve to heighten our awareness of the awesome experience of approaching the King of all kings in supplication. At other times, we act out motions related to the specific words we are saying to help us become more keenly aware of these words. And at times, movements are intended to help us feel part of the *tzibbur*, with all participants following similarly choreographed ritual movements. The list of movements during tefilla is long, so we will highlight only some of them from each category.

## **Movements that Highlight our Experience**

Many aspects of tefilla serve to experientially transport us to another realm. The Rema (95:1) states that we take three steps forward at the start of the Amida as a way of “approaching” Hashem. The *Aruch Hashulchan* (95:3) likens this to other aspects of holiness that warrant preparation beforehand. We also take three steps backward upon completing the Amida as a way of submitting to Hashem and taking leave of Him. We start the steps back with the left (weaker) foot to show our reluctance to depart from our closeness to Hashem.

The most common reason why we specifically take three steps is because of the three times in Tanach where it is recorded that someone “stepped

forward” in prayer (*Aruch Hashulchan* 95:3).<sup>2</sup> Rav Shimon Schwab (*On Prayer*, pages 401-405) describes how the Amida relates to the Kodesh Hakadashim (Holy of Holies), and that through tefilla we bring our neshama from the mundane world into the Holy of Holies. Just as the Kohain Gadol on Yom Kippur walked from the Azarah, through the Ulam, into the Heichal and into the Kodesh Hakadashim, we take three steps forward as we begin the Amida to demonstrate that we are symbolically leaving this world and entering the world of the Kodesh Hakadashim. And just as a korban is bound, so too, we bind our feet together as if to say to Hashem, “I am completely bound up and offer myself as a korban to you.” This evokes the verse “*uneshalma parim sefateinu*” — we will offer the words of our lips instead of bulls (Hosea 14:3) — which indicates a link between our tefilla and sacrifices. Rav Schwab describes (page 538) that following the Amida:

*... we take leave from the Kodesh Hakadoshim by taking three steps backwards, which symbolically brings us back, first into the Heichal, then to the Ulam, and then to the Azarah, from where we came. The three steps backwards are to be taken while bowing, as one would reverentially do when taking leave of his master (Yoma 53B).*

An additional reason for three steps is that Moshe Rabeinu moved through three distinct levels to ascend to Hashem’s presence on Har Sinai, as indicated in the pasuk describing “darkness, a cloud and opaque darkness” (Deuteronomy 4:11) on Har Sinai.

Rabbi Menachem Penner<sup>3</sup> quoted Rav Uri Weisblum’s sefer *Ha’arat Hatfilla*, which likened the three steps forward before the Amida to an airplane taking

off from a runway. The world around us is dark and as we fly through the clouds, all is grey. But then the plane bursts through the clouds and the sun is shining. Flying above the clouds, we realize that the sun was there the whole time, we just couldn’t see it. The three steps forward could be experienced as our bursting through the clouds to be in the sun, or in the case of tefilla, in G-d’s presence. The steps backward following the Amida are our return to our earthly existence, albeit bringing G-d’s grace back with us, so that as we face whatever challenges we are experiencing, we can know that Hashem is with us.

We start and conclude the Amida with two bows at the beginning, in the brachah of Avot, and two toward the end, in the brachah of Hoda’ah (Modim), showing our deference to G-d and our experience of being in His presence. In addition to bowing in the Amida, we also bow when we say Barchu, both in the morning and evening prayers, and at other times, showing our humility and subservience to G-d. The source for this is in Divrei Hayamim I (29:20), which recounts how:

וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד לְכָל הַקְּהָל בְּרַכּוּ נָא אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וַיִּבְרְכוּ כָל הַקְּהָל לַה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיהֶם וַיִּקְדּוּ וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ לַה' וְלַמַּלְאָךְ.

*Dovid said to the people “Bless Hashem your G-d” and the entire congregation blessed Hashem, the G-d of their fathers, and bowed down and prostrated themselves before Hashem.*

Although the countless references in Tanach to the Avot and Neviim bowing to Hashem were full prostrations, our custom is to bend our knees and then our upper body (*Brachot* 28b). We fully prostrate ourselves in prayer only during Musaf on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

## Movements that Highlight Content

Other movements in prayer are meant to heighten our awareness of specific words and themes. We elevate our heels in Kedusha as we say “Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh,” (*Yeshayau* 6:2-3) comparable to the angels who are elevated when they praise G-d with these words. This evokes a feeling of lifting ourselves toward G-d, similar to those who raise their eyes heavenward. We bow specifically when we say Modim, demonstrating our appreciation that all aspects of our very being are entirely dependent on Hashem. We strike our chest over our heart with our fist as we say “we have sinned,” as if to say “I am sorry.” This is based on the verse “*Ve’hachai yiten el libo*” — and the living will lay it on his heart (*Kohelet* 7:2), and that our misbehavior is due to inclinations of the heart. And we hide our faces as we say Tachanun out of contrition and embarrassment over our sins.

The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 61:5) explains that we cover our eyes as we recite the first verse of Shema to enhance our concentration and reduce distraction, focusing on accepting the yoke of Heaven and declaring G-d’s oneness. The Talmud (*Berachot* 13b) traces this practice to the great Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, who would interrupt his Torah lectures to recite Shema and would pass his hand over his eyes as he said the verse. Similarly, many people close their eyes while praying or bury their face in a siddur to increase their concentration and reduce distractions. The *Magen Avraham* (132:2) cites that the custom to bow during Aleinu while saying “*va’anachnu korim u’mishtachavim u’modim*” is so that we should not

appear hypocritical as we say, “they bow to vanity and emptiness... but we bend our knees, bow and acknowledge our thanks before the King over kings of kings, Hakadosh Baruch Hu.”

## Movements that Help Connect us to the Tzibur

Another aspect of movement during prayer is a way of joining the *kahal* (congregation) during particular parts of davening. The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 65:2) describes a situation in which the tzibur is saying Shema, but the individual is saying a prayer that he cannot interrupt to say Shema. At that point he should pray loudly, in the tune the congregation uses for Shema, while continuing to pray the part he is actually saying. The *Kaf Hachaim* (65:7) writes that he should cover his eyes as well, to demonstrate that he is an active member of the tzibur, accepting the yoke of Heaven as described in Shema. The *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 109:1) similarly writes that if the shaliach tzibur, during Chazarat Hashatz, reaches the brachah of Modim while you are still reciting the silent Shemoneh Esrei, you should bow with the tzibur, in order not to appear as if you deny the message of Modim. A parallel to this in contemporary culture is the American practice of standing and placing our right hand over our heart during the singing of the national anthem. Just as “taking a knee” during the Star-Spangled Banner is seen as offensive to some, not participating in the important prayer rituals which everyone else is doing, can be seen, *l’havdil*, as being a *poresh min hatzibur*, literally one who separates himself from the community and denies the specific declarations being made.

## Swaying

Although one of the most obvious movements in Orthodox prayer is the almost constant swaying (also known as *shukeling*), which is the unofficial custom of most Orthodox Jews, swaying is certainly not a halachic requirement. The *Shulchan Aruch* (95:3) states that during Shemoneh Esrei, we should “stand like a slave before his master with fear, awe, and dread,” which some interpret to mean standing still and not swaying. The Rema (48:intro), however, states that those who are careful (*midakdikim*) sway while praying to fulfill the verse “*kol atzmotai tomarnah Hashem mi kamocho*” — All my bones shall say, Hashem, who is like You?” (Tehillim 35:10). While the primary reason for swaying is so that we pray with “all of my bones” i.e. literally, my whole body, other reasons are given as well. The *Magen Avraham* (48:4) says swaying shows a humbleness before G-d. The *Zohar* offers a more spiritual explanation for swaying: “When a Jew utters a word of Torah, the light [in his soul] is kindled... and he sways back and forth, like the flame of a candle” (*Zohar* to Numbers, 218b-219a). The *Kuzari* (2:79-80) writes that it was a practical custom because several people studied out of a single large book and moved up and down to make room for the many others who wanted to use that book.

Although the *Mishna Brurah* (95:7) speaks of swaying during the Amida, the *Mishna Brurah* (48:5) also cites other opinions about swaying (*Magen Avraham* and *Eliyahu Zuta*) that we should only sway during Pesukei D’zimra and Birchot Kriat Shma, but not during the Amida. The *Mishna Brurah* (48:5) further quotes the *Magen Avraham* who says that it all

depends on the individual — people who concentrate better while swaying should sway and those who focus more intently while standing in place should just stand and not sway. The *Aruch Hashulchan* (48:3) similarly says that swaying is very person-specific and we should each find our own pattern of movement when praying.

Although our prayers are expressed verbally, tefilla is meant to be more than a mere recitation of words. Chazal created a structure that mandates us to speak our prayers, and to also utilize sight, hearing, and movement as we pray. Prayer is meant to be a full-body experience and a complete immersion into the encounter. When Rabbi Akiva prayed alone, he moved from one corner of the room to another, due to his many bows and prostrations (*Berachot* 31a). Other stories recount how rabbis were so engrossed in prayer they were not aware of things going on around them. Let us recognize the gift we have in being able to approach the Almighty in prayer. Let us focus on the words we are saying, the sights and sounds of prayer, and the movements in which we engage to come closer to Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Let us ask Hashem to open our mouths in prayer, but also to allow our bodies and souls to come close to Him, especially at this time of the year.

## Endnotes

1. Available at: <https://jewishaction.com/religion/shabbat-holidays/rosh-hashanah/best-books-prayer/>
2. “Avraham Stepped forward” (Bereishit 18:23), “And Yehudah stepped toward him” (Bereishit 44:18) and “Eliyahu stepped forward” (Melachim I 18:36).
3. Shiur available at: <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/828818/>