

Day 3

The Body Language and Movement of Prayer

excerpted from Higher and Higher: Making Jewish Prayer Part of Us by Steven M. Brown

Background information

Body language and movement are an integral part of our prayer experience. Through it we express physically what we are feeling or thinking. Performing many of these acts of body language in community helps us to identify with others and helping us to feel a part of a whole. Often, the body language associated with a specific prayer helps us to understand the author's intent.

During every service, we look to God as King. In ancient times people were more used to kings, and the proper ways of relating to the king: bowing when coming into his presence; bowing without turning one's back on the king when leaving; bowing when making a request or offering praise. Those customs and rituals became a part of our prayer ritual, as God is often conceived and written about as our king. Our prayer service is a kind of drama between God's subjects, the people Israel, and "his Majesty the King" God of Israel.

A comprehensive view of the way we use our bodies to pray follows on pages 52, 53, 54. **Of significant interest are paragraphs on pages 54 and 55 listing the places in the service where we stand, and some of the reasons. Pages 55,56, 57 deal with bowing. Page 58 covers Gestures of Affection and Confession (kissing, breast beating, etc.).**

Activity and Discussion Options:

Practice the movements that are traditional, i.e. the bowing for the *Aleynu*, the bowing for the brachot of the *Amidah*, the *kedusha*.

Discuss each student's individual custom of *davening* movements or some of the varying customs the students have seen or experienced in different synagogues. (Examples may include standing for the *Shema* or *kaddish*, abridgement of certain parts of the service, shuckling for the *Amidah*, etc. Discuss how one should behave when confronted by a custom one is not used to. Should you join in? Sit quietly? Do your own custom?

Discuss the following quotation and the explanation that follows it:

All my bones shall declare, "O Lord, who is like You?" לְעֲצָמוֹתַי הָאֵלֶּיךָ ה' מִי כָמוֹךָ?

The ability to feel the words with one's entire body is what the prayerful act is aimed to achieve.

Talk about ways in which each student can express spiritual or moral values through his/her physical self. What ways could you suggest to dramatize physically a basic belief or value you hold dear?

Body and Soul

Since Judaism embodies all of life and is concerned with every aspect of our daily existence, it is natural that the t'fillah body language experience begins as soon as the Jew awakens. In our physical actions we mirror our faith and values. Our physical hygiene is essential to the t'fillah experience and so a Jew may not approach prayer, or any religious activity, without having washed and groomed. Here are some sources of our early morning rituals of arising and preparing for prayer. Note that we do not even eat before we pray in the morning:

It is forbidden for someone to eat anything or to do any work after daybreak until he prays shaharit. And one should not visit a friend before shaharit or start out on a journey before praying.

אָסור לוֹ לְאָדָם שִׁטְעֵם בְּלוֹם, אוֹ שִׁיעֲשֶׂה מְלָאכָה מֵאַחַר שִׁיעֲלָה עֲמוּד הַשַּׁחַר – עַד שִׁיתְּפַלֵּל תְּפִלַּת שַׁחֲרִית: וְכֵן לֹא יֵשְׁבִים לְפֶתַח חֲבֵרוֹ לְשֹׂאֵל בְּשִׁלּוּמוֹ קִדְּם שִׁיתְּפַלֵּל תְּפִלַּת שַׁחֲרִית: וְלֹא יֵצֵא בְּדֶרֶךְ קִדְּם שִׁיתְּפַלֵּל.

Rambam, *Hilchot T'fillah* 6:4

It is permissible to eat before Musaf, that is, something like fruit or even more substantial food, but a full meal is forbidden.

מוֹחַר לְטֻעוּם קִדְּם תְּפִלַּת הַמוֹסַפִּין דֵּהֵינּוּ אֲכִילַת פִּירוֹת וְאַפִּילוּ פֶת מוֹעֵט אֲפִילוֹ טַעִימָה שִׁישׁ בֵּה כְּדֵי לְסַעוֹד הַלֵּב אֲבָל סַעוּדָה אֲסוּרָה.

Shulhan Aruch, Oraḥ Ḥayyim 286:3

One who is thirsty or hungry is considered in the category of someone who is ill: if he is able to be attentive he should pray; if not, if he wants, he need not pray until he has had something to eat or drink.

הַצְמָא וְהָרַעֵב הָרִי הֵם בְּכֻלָּל הַחוּלִים: אִם יֵשׁ בּוֹ יְכוּלָה לְכוּיִן דַּעְתּוֹ, יִתְּפַלֵּל: וְאִם לֹא, אִם רָצָה אֵל יִתְּפַלֵּל עַד שִׁיאֲכַל וְיִשְׁתָּה.

Shulhan Aruch, Oraḥ Ḥayyim 89:4

(Often on Shabbat morning when the service may be long, some people partake in a light repast such as juice or tea and cookies to tide them over till the end of the service. Bread, however, is not eaten since that constitutes an “official” meal. Sometimes, in group situations such as summer camps, people break for breakfast after the Shaharit service and then reconvene for Musaf.) Also, before beginning to pray we recite the b'rachah over washing the hands and then the b'rachah which acknowledges our bodily functions (respiration, digestion, metabolism and excretion) and praises God who has created the human body. (These blessings appear in the Siddur at the beginning of the Shaharit service.)

The Jew recognizes the wisdom of his Creator not with the sophistication of the scientist who scans the stupendous display of nature with a cold, detached objectivity. Instead he is brought to a sincere and humble admiration by the operations of the human body To him, these are miracles of Divine wisdom performed everyday within ourselves. . . .

Generally, this Bracha is recited only after the discharge of bodily functions. Still it is always to be said at this point of the daily service, as an offering of gratitude for our physical health. By also serving as the Bracha after excretion, it has the effect, so typical of the Jewish view of life, of bringing even the grossest physical act within the orbit of religion.¹⁷

A. Garments

Our desire to involve our physical selves in the t'fillah activity is reflected, also, in articles such as the *tallit*, *t'fillin*, and *kipah*.¹⁸ We wrap ourselves in tallit and t'fillin, actions of body language, in which we are enveloped in objects of holiness and beauty. When putting on the tallit, the b'rachah recited is לְהִתְעַטֵּף בְּצִיצֵת, “to wrap oneself up in the *tzitzit* (fringes).” Some people put the tallit over their heads in an attempt to concentrate better, to block out, as it were, the outside world. (One other custom related to this notion of blocking out extraneous events in order to concentrate is associated with the Shema. Some people take a corner of the tallit, or just take their hand, and hold it over their eyes, while reciting the first line of the Shema.)

The third garment worn by the Jew, the kipah, is of uncertain origin. Part of its use developed from a desire of Jews to be different. As Christians began to take off hats in churches, Jews began to keep them on, as a sign of reverence to God. It has also been the custom for married women to cover their heads when lighting candles or in the synagogue, and some unmarried women now wear head coverings as well. Dress in general is an extremely important part of our body language messages. Jews are to dress appropriately for t'fillah:

How does one prepare his clothing? First, one prepares (adjusts) the clothing and then takes care of one's own appearance, as it is written, "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness" (Psalm 96:9). One does not stand praying (the Amidah) wearing a moneybelt, or with head uncovered, or barefoot (where it is customary not to stand before important people without shoes). One does not pray holding t'fillin in his hands or a Torah in his arms, since he would be preoccupied about (not dropping) them.

תקון המלבושים ביצד? מתקן מלבושיו תחלה ומצדו
 עצמו ומתדר. שנאמר: השתחוה לה' בהדרת-קדוש
 (תהלים כט. ב). ולא יעמד בתפלה באפנתו, ולא בראש
 מגולה. ולא ברגלים מגולות אם בדרך אנשי המקום שלא
 יעמדו בפני הגדולים אלא בבתי הרגלים. ובכל מקום
 לא יאחז תפלין בידו וספר תורה בידו ויהפיל -
 מפני שלבו טרוד בהם.

Rambam, *Hilchot Tfillah* 5:5

What "appropriate" dress is will vary depending on the situation, but one is always to look neat and clean. T'fillah is not a time for ostentation or sexual temptation, by means of clothing. (Refer to Section III in this source book on *Birchot Hashaḥar*, and particularly the b'rachah *malbush arumim* to confront this issue further.) Where dress is too casual, too informal, the prayer experience suffers as a result.

One other aspect of dress, the concept of *hiddur mitzvah* (literally, "embellishing a mitzvah") is to be noted. We seek to perform mitzvot in as beautiful a way as possible. So we create beautiful kiddush cups, Torah mantles, and other ritual objects. Likewise, it has become popular to weave, crochet, or needlepoint beautiful tallitot, tallit bags, or kippot. We further modify our clothing habits to help us in our prayer experience by performing special customs during the year. On Erev Yom Kippur, putting on the tallit before it is dark, we are able to symbolize the holiness and specialness of the occasion. At special times, such as the Yamim Nora'im, the Pesah Seder, or under the wedding canopy, it is a custom to wear a white "kittel" (gown), a symbol of purity and sanctity. (It is also this kittel in which some people are buried.) On fast days such as Yom Kippur and Tishah B'av it is the custom not to wear leather shoes. Leather was considered a sign of comfort and ostentation and, therefore, inappropriate apparel on a day of mourning or fasting. (By the way, the restriction is only for leather shoes; one may wear a leather belt.)

You may notice that the dress of many members of Ḥasidic sects is extremely different from ours. Out of a deep desire to retain their past and remain distinct from the secular culture, Ḥasidim often dress differently to emphasize their Jewishness. On Shabbat they don beautiful fur-covered hats and long caftans, wearing a special Shabbat belt which separates the upper spiritual part of the body from the lower more mundane part of the body. We may find the details of such customs inappropriate, but we can well understand that getting dressed up and wearing something special can make a time such as Shabbat or a holiday all the more special. So we wear something new, or a garment reserved especially for Shabbat or holidays, to help us feel the specialness of the day.

B. Standing

Standing is a sign of respect or of calling importance to a particular aspect of something we are doing. Accordingly, there are many times in the course of our prayer experiences when we stand to honor God the King, or to call attention to particularly important passages in the service. The prayer par excellence for standing is the Amidah (which literally means "standing"). So important is standing up straight, with heels together, that one is not to move his feet even the slightest amount while reciting the Amidah. (Often people stand close to a bench or chair, so that no one can walk in front of them and disturb them while they recite the Amidah.) Even when the ḥazzan recites the special *Alaynu* as part of the repetition of the Amidah on the High Holidays

and bows down on the ground, he does not move his feet apart (and is often assisted back to a standing position).

What is the correct posture? When someone is standing and reciting the Amidah, his feet should be next to each other. He should cast his eyes down, as if looking at the ground, and direct his thoughts upward, as if standing in heaven. He rests his hands on his heart, right over left. He should stand like a servant before his master, in terror, awe and fear, and not rest his hands on his hips.

תקון הגוף ביצוד? כשהוא עומד בתפילה צריך לבנות את רגליו זו בצד זו: ונותן עיניו למטה. כאלו הוא מביט לארץ; והנה לבו פנוי למעלה. כאלו הוא עומד בשמים; ומניח ידיו על לבו כפוחיתן הימנית על השמאלית ועומד בצעד לפני רבו באימה ביראה ופחד. ולא יניח ידיו על חלציו.

Rambam, *Hilchot T'fillot* 5:4

When reciting the Amidah individually, one may be seated upon concluding, but not in front of a fellow worshipper still in prayer. When the ḥazzan repeats the Amidah, we rise for the K'dushah (in most congregations, remaining seated for the first two b'rachot). Some congregations observe "duchanen" -- the custom whereby the kohanim bless the congregation with the three-part priestly blessing. Where that custom is observed, congregants rise, often bowing their heads or folding their tallitot around the young children, so they cannot see the kohanim standing at the front of the synagogue. (Among other reasons, this helps make the blessing as democratic as possible, lest anyone feel that the kohayn is not blessing him and favoring someone else, and so the kohayn will not be able to see whom he is blessing, directing his blessing toward one congregant rather than another.)

Not only *when* we stand, but the direction we face when praying is important.

We face towards the Temple; how? If one is outside of Israel, one prays facing towards Israel; in Israel, one faces Jerusalem; in Jerusalem, one faces toward the Temple (site). If one is in the Temple, he faces towards the Holy of Holies. A person who is blind, or one who cannot determine the proper direction, or one who is on a ship, directs his intention towards God's presence and prays.

נכח המקדש ביצוד? הנה עומד בחוצה לארץ - מחזיר פניו נכח ארץ ישראל ומתפלל. הנה עומד בארץ - מבונן את פניו כנגד ירושלים. הנה עומד במקדש - מבונן פניו כנגד בית קדש הקדשים. סומא. ומי שלא יכול לבנות את הירחות. והמחלף בספינה - יבונן את לבו כנגד השכינה ויתפלל.

Rambam, *Hilchot T'fillot* 5:3

What follows is a listing of places in the service we stand, and some of the underlying reasons. Be aware that customs vary among congregations in these rituals, as in most areas of observance.

We rise for the Birchot Hashaḥar, the morning blessings being seated at the word *koah*, before the final long b'rachah in the series. (It is customary in some communities to remain standing for the selections about sacrifices which follow.)

Mourners and those observing Yahrzeit rise if *Kaddish D'rabbanan* is recited at the end of the Birchot Hashaḥar section.

Once again we rise for *Baruch She'amar*, which begins the P'sukay D'zimrah section.

It is the custom to rise for the recitation of *Hodu*--Psalm 136, recited on Shabbat and festivals.

Again the congregation rises for the introduction to the Song of Moses which begins *vay'varech David*; the congregation is seated at the end of the Song of Moses.

All congregations rise for *Barechu*, the point in the service at which participants are asked to join together to praise God. Customs vary as to how much in advance of *barechu* to rise:

at *Yishtabah shimcha*, end of the *P'sukay D'zimrah* section;
at the *Kaddish*, the separation of the two segments of the service;
at *Barechu* itself.

One should follow the custom of his or her own community or the custom of the place in which one is praying.

In some congregations it is the custom to rise for the *Shema* since it is considered a pivotal part of the service. Respect is shown for it by rising. The difference of whether or not to rise for the *Shema* goes all the way back to a disagreement in the Talmud between Hillel and Shammai: Hillel felt that we should not separate the *Shema* from the two blessings preceding it, reciting the *Shema* in the same posture we recited the blessings. Shammai disagreed.

The congregation remains seated until it rises again in preparation for the *Amidah*, generally for the paragraph *Tzur Yisrael*. The *Amidah* is recited standing, as explained above.

When *Hallel* is recited (holidays and *Rosh Hodesh*) the congregation rises for it.

We stand for the Torah service, generally rising at the words *vay'hee bin'so'a*, just before the Torah is removed from the ark. The congregation remains standing until the Torah is finally placed on the reader's desk to be read. While the congregation stands reciting *V'zot HaTorah* (in some Sephardic congregations this is done prior to the Torah reading), the Torah is lifted after the reading, for all to see. At this point, some people raise a *Siddur* or corner of the *tallit*, holding it up towards the Torah, bringing the book or *tzitzit* to their lips to kiss, as a sign of love and respect.

We rise when we recite the blessing for the coming month, and for putting the Torah back into the Ark. *Alaynu*, at the end of the service, is also said standing at least through the lines in which we bend and bow, ending with the words *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*.

In some congregations on Shabbat morning *Shir HaKavod* is recited, and the ark is opened, while the congregation stands.

One other service in which we stand is *Kabbalat Shabbat*, on Friday evening. During that service we rise for Psalm 29 (*Mizmor L'David*) and then again for the last verse of the famous piyyut (liturgical poem) *L'chah Dodi*, in which we turn and face the entrance to the synagogue, bowing, as we welcome the Sabbath Bride.

In *Ma'ariv* on Friday evening it is the custom to rise for *V'sham'ru* and for *Magen Avot*, an abbreviated reader's *Amidah* repetition. We stand, as well, for *Vay'chulu*.

This long list of examples can be simplified to a degree for all services. As a generalization, the congregation stands for parts of the service requiring a minyan, times when the ark is open or the Torah is being carried, and, of course, for the *Amidah*. Other special occasions or parts of the service to be emphasized--recitation of *Kiddush*, blessing the children on *Erev Shabbat*, putting on or removing *tallit* and *t'fillin*, confessionals on the High Holidays--are also highlighted by our rising. So you can see that standing is an extremely important part of our prayer ritual. Not only does it call attention to certain prayers and separate sections of the service, but standing paces the service with ups and downs physically just as there are ups and downs emotionally and spiritually.

C. Bowing.

Bowing is a central part of the body language of our services. Bowing implies deference and respect. The service is punctuated by that physical action which serves as a kind of chorus to the verses of praise, thanksgiving, and prayer which we recite. Our physical genuflection (bending the knee and bowing) is a visible way of showing our reverence for something much greater than ourselves. At one time Jews used to prostrate themselves all the way to the ground, as a gesture of reverence. When this custom was taken over to a great extent by the non-Jewish world, Jews gave it up, retaining it only at certain times on the High Holidays when the *hazzan* (and in some

congregations, many other worshipers) still bow all the way down, touching the forehead to the ground, recalling the service of the High Priest in the Temple. (This is done during the special recitation of Alaynu and during the *Avodah* service.)

There may be some confusion about how and when to bow; we hope the following explanation will help clarify things for you. Let us survey the bowing procedures in our regular services. Our "official" bow in the service comes with the barechu. The hazzan recites the word *barechu*, bowing only from the waist. Reciting the word *et*, he rises prepared to stand at attention for the word *Adonai*. The congregation then follows a similar procedure, bowing for the word *baruch*, and standing straight for God's name. This is the principle: the Jew stands straight when reciting *Adonai*, God's name.

As we begin the Amidah, we are coming into the presence of the King of kings. One does not just saunter in and casually begin addressing the King, but rather one comes to address God with dignity and honor. Therefore, the custom is to take three steps forward as if you are coming with reverence into the presence of the King. Since we are often stationed in a small aisle, we must take three steps backwards in order to take three steps forward.

Now, let me explain the procedure when one comes to the words בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' in the Amidah: at the word *baruch* we bend the knees; at the word *attah* we bend the waist, straightening the knees; at the word *Adonai* we stand erect (since whenever a Jew hears God's name he stands erect, at attention). This procedure is outlined as follows:

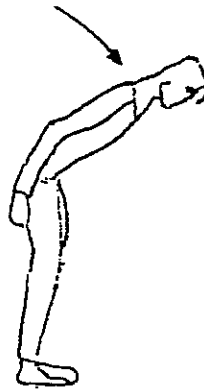
When one bends the knee--it is at *baruch* (blessed); and when one straightens up--it is at God's name.

כשכורע - כורע בברוך, וכשזוקף - זוקף בשם.

Shulhan Aruch, Oraḥ Ḥayyim 113:7



BARUCH
בָּרוּךְ



ATTAH
אַתָּה



ADONAI
ה'

In the Amidah we bow basically four times: the first b'rachah beginning the Avot passage and at the end of that passage (Magen Avraham); when we recite the prayer *Modim anahnu lach* (bowing only from the waist during the first three words); and at the end of that b'rachah, . . . בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' הַטוֹב שְׂמֵךְ . . .

The *Shulhan Aruch* summarizes these places for bowing (*O.H. 113:1*):

These are the blessings at which we bow: Avot (the blessing "Ancestors"), beginning and end, and Hoda'ah (the blessing of "Thanksgiving"), beginning and end.

אלו ברכות ששוחין בהם: באבות - תחילה וסוף, ובהודאה - תחילה וסוף.

At the end of the Amidah, when we come to the final phrase beginning with *oseh shalom bimromav*, we take three steps backwards and bow from the waist, and then come three steps forward as if gracefully taking leave of the royal Presence (*O.H. 123:1*):

D. Gestures of Affection and Confession.

Another area of body language which is extremely helpful in our prayer experience involves gestures which show our deepest affection for ritual items, and the fulfillment of mitzvot, or which represent our desire to become better people through repentance. During the course of the service we kiss a number of items at different times. When we recite Baruch She'amar it is a custom to gather and kiss two fringes, symbolically combining awe and love in our hearts simultaneously. Kissing the *tzitziyot* (fringes) of course, also occurs during the third paragraph of the Shema. The four fringes are gathered at the end of the blessing before the Shema ("...gather us in peace from the four corners of the earth...") As we recite the commandment to wear the fringes, we kiss them (at the words *tzitzit* and *emet*), as a reminder of what they represent, i.e., when we look at them we are to remember all of God's commandments. By kissing them we are forced not only to look at them, but to feel them and sense them and what they stand for on a much more personal basis. There is also a custom to kiss the t'fillin with the fringes during the first two paragraphs of the Shema, when reading the verses which command us to wear the t'fillin.

Many Jews, upon completing the Amidah, close the Siddur and kiss it, or do the same at the end of the service, as a sign of loving respect. Of course, it is a wide-spread custom to kiss a Siddur or Bible when we accidentally drop it, as a sign of our living respect for what the book is and what it contains. (It has been suggested by Dr. Yoḥanan Muffs that we might also read a selection from the book, showing it respect in the best way!) Still another gesture of affection is to kiss the Torah (either with a *tzitzit*, prayer book, or our hand) as it is carried around, as a sign of our love for the Torah and God's law. Also when we are called to the Torah, we take the tallit and touch it to the beginning and end of the text which is read for our aliyah, showing that we accept what is being read, making the aliyah really our own. In another gesture of respect, when the tallit and t'fillin are taken out and when they are put away, it is the custom to kiss them one at a time, again as a sign of parting and loving respect.

Another totally different gesture of respect is involved in taking the lulav and etrog on Sukkot. They are held together and waved in all direction (north, south, east, and west, up and down) to symbolize God's Presence throughout the entire universe and our praising that Presence wherever it is. This gesture is a very emotionally charged and powerful physical symbol of our desire to speak with God and relate to Him in very tangible terms.

On the other hand there are some gestures of confession in which we try to express our feelings of inadequacy and guilt, in concrete terms. When we reach the *b'rachah* in the Amidah which begins *s'lah lanu*, "Forgive us," we take our right hand and beat our chest over our heart. We do the same on Yom Kippur, during confessionals. This symbolic beating of the breast is a way of expressing our feelings of guilt, of having done wrong, and wishing devoutly to repent. A related custom is observed when we recite the penitential prayers (*taḥanun*) on some weekdays. It is the custom to bend forward, putting one's forehead on one's arm in a gesture of sorrow, and to ask for God's forgiveness. This is said to mirror the action of David when he was repenting for his sins.

E. All Senses.

We use our other senses in t'fillot, and their "body language" is extremely important, too. We taste the Matzah of Pesah and the wine of Kiddush or *Havdalah*; we feel the heat and see the flame of the Havdalah candle; we smell the Havdalah spices and the etrog. In ancient times, a Shabbat lamp was lit as well as an incense lamp to give pleasant smells to the home over Shabbat and holidays. In terms of a "negative use" of our senses, however, on fast days we refrain from eating, diminishing the sense of taste.

Perhaps, the sense of all of the body languages can be summed up in one of the most unique gestures of prayer associated with Jewish tradition. For want of a better word we shall call it "shuckeling," a back and forth swaying motion which seems to summarize very adequately the desire of the Jew to achieve oneness with God. The rocking back and forth, the rhythmic swaying to the sound and the feeling of prayer, helps the Jew create a closer and more intimate relationship with his God. The poem *Nishmat* expresses it this way: