

SHAKE

SHUCKLE

AND

BOW

Swaying back and forth: the liturgical dance of shuckling

As Hayim Halevy Donin puts it in his book, *To Pray as a Jew*, "Swaying is surely the most widespread and most typical movement associated with Jewish prayer, yet it is not imperative in Jewish law or even a universally recommended custom. There are those who sway slightly while they pray. Others do so with greatly exaggerated and rapid movements of the body. And still others, great and pious scholars among them, say their prayers with hardly a trace of movement."

There are countless forms of swaying in prayer. Such modes include the pitch roll motion of the upper torso, hands and clenched fists fluttering in all directions, and implementation of movable and immovable furniture. Some find its effectiveness lies in its simplicity, others thrive on its most extreme forms such as banging against the walls or convulsing.

Sources

Zohar

Zohar, meaning "shine" or "glow", is the name of the primary book of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. Traditionally believed to have been authored by the disciples of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Having been written in the second century C.E., the text was lost until the late 13th century. There is a dispute as to which parts were later additions and if the discovered manuscripts were actually an edited version completed much later than the 2nd century. In any event, the conversation goes as follows:

Rabbi Yoseh: Why is that among all the nations the Jews alone have a custom to sway their bodies?

Rabbi Abba: This illustrates the excellence of their souls. "The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord (Proverbs 20:27)," refers to them. The light of that lamp flickers and wavers in unison with the light of the Torah."

Talmud

The Talmud states that when an ill R. Eliezer was visited by his disciples, he explained the path of life as follows: "Be solicitous for the honour of your colleagues and keep your children from meditation, and set them between the knees of scholars, and when you pray know before whom you are standing." (Berakoth 28B) Such a verse can be interpreted as both a re affirming and a denial of the practice of swaying. In emphasizing concentration, the Talmud continues to discuss positioning under the guidance of a quote from Ezekiel, "with legs straight." (Ezek. 1:7) However, it also suggests that one bow quickly and rise slowly "like a snake" which, the rabbis said loosened the spine and opened the body to the flow of divine energy.

Later in Berakoth, the Rabbis teach that if one is standing outside Palestine, he should turn mentally towards Eretz Israel. If he stands in Eretz Israel, he should turn mentally towards Jerusalem, etc. The Rabbis validate this motion with the verse, "Thy neck is like the tower of David builded with turrets." (Cant. IV, 4)

Kuzari – A case for academic swaying

Judah Halevi (1085-1140), in his classic defense of Judaism, claims that swaying in prayer originated out of necessity. As the Spanish poet-philosopher writes, since there was such a low availability of manuscripts, especially copies of Jewish religious texts due to the high costs prior to the invention of the printing press, it became second nature to crowd around a single book in order to study. In order to catch a glimpse of the text, the scholars could only do so by swaying back and forth. Even more so, students reading their texts aloud would sway in order to shut out the competing texts being muttered. In time, this habit of swaying during study carried over into the minhag of swaying during prayer.

An explanation can be found in Book II, paragraph 80 of the *Kuzari*, a text centered on the king of the Khazars, a Mongol kingdom in Russia whose leaders had adopted Judaism in the 8th century, asking a rabbi questions about the faith:

Al Khazari: "I Should like to ask whether you know the reason why Jews move to and fro when reading Scripture."

The Rabbi: "...As it is often happened many people read (a given book) at the same time... Each of them was obliged to bend down in turn in order to read a passage, and to turn back again. This resulted in a continual bending and sitting up, the book lying on the ground... Then it became a habit through constant seeing, observing and imitating which is human nature."¹

This text based swaying culture, similar to that of the Yemenite (see Yehudah) tradition of reading the Hebrew text upside down, is born out of hovering over the text.

Histories of Peter Comestor

In his retelling of the biblical narrative, Abbot Johannes de Brach (13th century) makes a connection between Jewish prayer and the verse from Exodus 19:18 which states, "And the whole mount quaked terribly."

Baal Haturim

¹ Judah Halevi, Book of Kuzari, trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld (New York, 1946) pp. 112-113

The compiler of the Arba Turim, Jacob ben Asher (circa 14th century), was a German scholar who later moved to Spain. He explained, "The Jews received the torah from Mt. Sinai with awe, trembling, and quaking. This accounts for the swaying of the body during the study of the Torah."

Interpreting in similar terms, *Abudarham* attempts to describe total Immersion in God's prayer, mentally physically and spiritually by using a verse from Psalms. Psalms 35:10 states, "All my bones shall say (Kol Atzmotai), the lord, who is like you?" In effect, swaying backwards and forwards creates a full body experience, thereby including all the limbs/bones of the human body and spirit.

Shuckling- the Chasidic way

Shuckling, being a Yiddish word, is therefore conceivably the product or at least the adaptation of an Eastern European Jewish community. However, such a community was divided between two schools of thought, Hasidim and Mitnagdim. The following is a collection of quotes from lay leaders and biblical scripture for and against the implementation of shuckling into prayer.

For:

The Hasidic struggle surrounding shuckling is centered on the verse from the prophet Isaiah (29:13), "With their mouth and lips they honor Me but they have removed their heart far from Me and their awe toward Me is taught by rote."

The founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, was once informed that the Mitnagdim, who were opposed to Hasidic changes, were laughing at their motions and their shaking. He said to his students, "Look, when a man is drowning in a river and thrashes around desperately so that someone should save him, do the observers on the shore laugh at him? No one should scorn a man who makes fierce gestures when he prays for he is trying to save himself from the husks, from the klepot and from evil thoughts."

Against:

Rabbi Isaiah Halevy Horowitz (1565-1630), also known as Shelah, wrote: "Can you imagine a person approaching a mortal king to present a petition and make requests while his body is swaying as the trees in the forest sway before the wind?"

Individual versus the Community

Rabbi Hinena the elder says in the name of Rab: (Berakoth 12B) "If one is in position to pray on behalf of his fellow and does not do so, he is called a sinner, as it says, *Moreover as for me far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you*²."

Leviticus 25:17, Parashat Bihar, states, "Each one of you shall not aggrive his fellow," or "V'lo Tonu eesh at amito." In discussing personal spiritual development alongside the building of community, the following issues are addressed.

Menachem Mendel of Kotsk, also known as the Kotzker Rebber, would say that whoever emits a sound that lacks integrity, that is not from his heart, is a gonev da'at (daas), one who steals knowledge. The kvetch that is not real, the moan that is a put on, the shuckling- moving during davening insincerely, performed only to call attention to oneself, is geneivat da'at.

Not only can the swaying be a distraction to look at, but it can also be a violation of space.

Holding hands when people pray as a group is definitely not a Jewish custom; in fact, people who are praying shouldn't stand too close to one another so they don't interfere with each other's concentration (see Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 102)

Geh gezunterheit! (go in good health and soundness of soul)

Sources:

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Ausubel, Nathan THE BOOK OF JEWISH KNOWLEDGE

Millgram, Abraham JEWISH WORSHIP

Baumgard, Rabbi Herbert M. JUDAISM AND PRAYER

² I Samuel XII, 23