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“And We Bow”: The  
Choreography of Yom Kippur

By Liz Shayne

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# “And We Bow”: The Choreography of Yom Kippur

By Liz Shayne<sup>1</sup>

In reflecting on the experience and complexity of praying on the High Holidays, I noticed how carefully choreographed our prayers are. This is true even of our daily prayers—from the hand that covers our eyes during the *Shema* to the bows that punctuate the *Amida* prayer. However, we feel this choreography most profoundly on Yom Kippur, a day that has more corresponding actions during prayer than any other. With the addition of *Ne'ilah*, we say an extra *Amida*, with all the bowing it entails. We say *vidui* (confessional prayers) so many times that over the course of 25 hours, we strike our chests 320 times. And finally, Yom Kippur is the only time of year that we fall to the floor and prostrate ourselves before God. Especially for a fast day, Yom Kippur demands a lot of the human body.

The emphasis on choreographed movement on Yom Kippur suggests something interesting about the nature of the day. While the Day of Atonement is a day on which we “afflict our souls,” as the verse “ועניתם את נפשותיכם” in Leviticus states, it is also a day that emphasizes the actions of the body. Although we refrain from eating and drinking in order to be like angels,<sup>2</sup> the angels we emulate are not formless beings of pure spirit. Our angels are portrayed as embodied; they worship with both their voices and their movements, and it is their actions that define the choreography of the *kedusha*. Yom Kippur is often understood to be about rising above our material concerns—but we should not take that to mean that it dismisses the body. Instead, the choreographed and embodied

nature of prayer on Yom Kippur is an integral part of how the Day of Atonement connects us to God.

To explore how this connection develops, I want to focus on the one action that is distinct and specific to this day: the bow known as the *השתחוה*, which the Gemara describes as bowing to the floor with arms and legs outstretched.<sup>3</sup> Rambam explains that this bow is so distinct that we cannot fully emulate it outside of the Temple.<sup>4</sup> We may talk about prostrating ourselves before God every time we say *Aleinu*, but the only time we ever do so fully is on Yom Kippur. Such a distinction is fitting, as *Aleinu* was originally composed for the *Yamim Noraim*, the High Holidays, and only later became part of our daily prayers. According to Rambam, we reserve such a bow for Yom Kippur because Yom Kippur is a day for *תחנוה ובקשה ותענית*. That is, a day for supplication (*tahana*), request (*bakasha*), and affliction (*ta'anit*). Rambam assumes that there is a link between *hishtahavut* and the posture of request. Something about the nature of the day, the focus on humankind standing before God in a position of supplication, makes it appropriate that we not stand quietly, but instead bow in the most dramatic and extravagant way possible.

What is it about asking that lends itself so well to *hishtahavut*? When we ask, we initiate a dialogue with God. *Tahana*, often translated as supplication, is the plea for grace; when we say “*יאיר ה' פניו אליך ויחונך*” as part of the Priestly Blessing, *Birkat Kohanim*, we link *hen*, or grace, with God turning toward us. *Bakasha*, on the other hand, is the opposite. Asking is what happens when we turn our face to God. Leaving aside affliction, which captures the more familiar part of the fast day, the reason for *hishtahavut* is that Yom Kippur is a day on which we reach out to God, and, we hope, God reaches out to us.

The appropriate response when coming

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2 The Midrash in chapter 46 of *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* lists the ways in which human beings become like angels on Yom Kippur. The list includes fasting, fostering friendships, and freedom from sin.

3 BT *Berachot* 34b.

4 This is the source of the custom to put down a rug between one's face and the floor when one is praying in a synagogue with stone floors, so as to reserve the true *hishtahaveh* on stone for the Temple.

face-to-face with Godly presence, as we know from *Tanakh*, is *hishtahavut*. When Yehoshua encounters God's emissary, he prostrates himself before the angel. And when Eliyahu summons fire from the heavens to disprove and destroy the priests of Ba'al, the people fall on their faces and call out "God is the only God," a scene that we reenact every year at the end of Yom Kippur. Most importantly, *hishtahavut* is what all of Israel would do when they gathered in the Temple on Yom Kippur and waited for the High Priest to speak the name of God. When he did so, the entire nation would bend their knees (כורעים) and prostrate themselves (משתחוים). The High Priest's action makes explicit the implicit character of the day that speaks out to God and asks for God to speak back. The emotional tenor of the moment is so overwhelming that the language of the siddur does not specify whether the people bow because they are supposed to or because they feel so overwhelmed by the presence of the Divine that they cannot help but do so.

In reciting the order of the Temple Service during *Mussaf*, the Hazzan is retelling the script for the day and inviting us to participate as well. We perform the actions of *tahana*, *bakasha*, and *ta'anit* that Rambam talks about. First we hear the High Priest's supplications as part of his confession; then we listen to his request for forgiveness; and finally, we are told that he calls on God using God's name. In that moment, the entire nation would respond to God's presence by "falling on their faces" and blessing God's name. We recite our lines and execute our blocking—to use the language of the theater—along with the Hazzan. We use our bodies and our breath to recreate the encounter between God and God's nation that occurred in the Temple. If Yom Kippur is a performance, then we are both the audience and the principal actors.

To think of Yom Kippur as a performance is to return to this idea of choreography and of movement. The act of *hishtahavut* defines Yom Kippur as a moment of encountering the Divine.

By bowing, we acknowledge God's presence. There is, however, more to the *hishtahaveh* and the other embodied actions of the day than performance. By acting and reenacting, we can bring ourselves to truly feel God's presence. To adapt language used by the *Sefer HaHinuch*, "אחרי הלבבות נמשכים הפעולות," or "the hearts will follow where the actions lead." Modern psychology says something similar: If you want to feel better, try smiling. By acting as though you are happy, you may feel happier. If we act as though we are in the presence of God, perhaps we can in turn feel God's presence.

There is another element to acting as a way of encountering God. The late Daniel Stern, an infant psychologist who primarily studied the connection between babies and their caregivers, talks about something called "attunement." For Stern, attunement is the process by which babies and their caregivers mirror the rhythm of one another's actions to strengthen their bond and create connections. If a baby bangs a table with a toy hammer, the parent claps his or her hands in time. Both child and caregiver are delighted by this interaction. Stern extends this idea to humanity's relationship with art: When we experience singing or dancing, we experience that same sense of attunement and connection brought on by the rhythm and vitality of the art. To bring this idea full circle, the choreography in which we engage on Yom Kippur is actually an opportunity to attune ourselves to *Avinu Malkeinu*, our Divine Parent and Monarch. If we feel moved by moving our bodies or lifting our voices in song, that is an opportunity for us to experience God as the source of our movements and the cause of our singing. The *hishtahaveh*, and, by extension, the rest of our liturgy, is not simply our way of recognizing God, but our way of creating the conditions that allow us to connect with God. By attending to how we move and how we feel while praying, we can hopefully experience all three of aspects of the day—*tahana*, *bakasha*, and *ta'anit*—and allow Yom Kippur to be not merely a Day of Atonement, but also a Day of Attunement.

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