

## The Jewish Tradition of Bowing

Welcome to Worship Shorts!

The question I would like to answer today is: What's with all the bowing?

Well, there are some prescribed bows that are included in Jewish prayer. At Ohev, we haven't really set any standards, so you will probably see many people bowing according to their own customs and preferences.

First I will talk about the prescribed times.

During the *Aleinu* prayer, which, as I pointed out in a previous Worship Shorts message, is not part of the Shabbat Shachrit service (it's part of the *musaf* service after the *shachrit*) – but during the *Aleinu*, there's a phrase: “*va'anachnu korim umishtachavim umodim.*” The word *korim* means to “bend the knee.” And the word *mishtachavim* means “we worship.”

The normal practice in Judaism is that, when bowing, one first bends their knees. Then you straighten your knees while leaning forward. Then you raise up to the erect position. Some groups practice bending a little further forward during *umishtachavim* as a reflection of the act of of worshipping. Only once or twice a year does the worshiper go further – usually on *Yom Kippur*, and also on *Rosh Hashanah*. At times the leader may be seen prostrating himself completely with his face to the ground. It's not done more often, mainly because the practice, which had at one time been more prevalent, was removed when it was noticed that such postures were common among Christian worshipers.

Bowing is also customarily done four times during the *Sh'moneh Esrei*. During the first prayer, the *Avot*, at the beginning and at the end of the prayer, and also during the *Modim* prayer, during the first nine words and at the final blessing. In all these cases, one usually does not bow very deeply. It's seen as a sign of drawing too much attention to oneself when one bows too deeply.

During any part of a *Kaddish*, when the *Oseh Shalom* is recited, the custom is to step back, bow left, bow right, and bow forward. The stepping back is part of the acknowledgement of being in the presence of a King, not turning away, but stepping back while continuing to face the King.

During the *Barchu*, the leader bows for the initial blessing, then the congregation bows during the response. This also occurs for the *Barchu* recited prior to the *Torah* reading.

While there are some who bow during every mention of the name of *Hashem*, that is, where the four letter name is mentioned, this is not part of the prescribed practice.

One good thing to note is that Jewish prayer is not intended as a show. It is a matter of serving *Hashem* and it is the fulfillment of a duty. Many of the practices of Jewish prayer are done in order to show deference to others.

One story is told of a young boy who had not yet learned to speak, but when the others would say Amen, he would blow a whistle. His father reprovved him sharply for doing this, but the Rabbi, who overheard the exchange, pointed out to the father that God finds the boy's whistle as acceptable a response to prayer as the father's Amen. As you can see, this was done to show respect to the boy.

At the same time, I'm sure that once the boy learned to say *Amen*, he would no longer be permitted to use the whistle. Why? Because it would be disrespectful to those who didn't have a whistle to blow. And it would draw too much attention to the little boy.

We should be conscious in our worship that, while many things might be acceptable to God as our personal offering of devotion, we should not be engaging in activities that could be motivated out of pride, drawing too much attention to ourselves, or overly critical of others' practices.

It's when certain practices become objectionable, usually due to pride or other form of offense, that Rabbi's step in and set a standard. What I have given you today are commonly accepted standards, and

for which no one would be criticized. Anything more than these, and you may eventually see the leaders become involved – for the sake of all.

Thank you for listening to Worship Shorts!