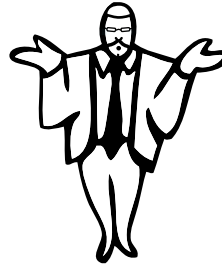




Stump The Rabbi

Bows Without Arrows



Dear Rabbi,
Why do we bow in the prayers? If it's because it's important to bow when we mention God's name, why don't we bow every time we do? I think we only bow 3 or 4 times?
Thanks

Jennifer Ursula Flechter

Dear Jen U Flechter,
Can we use the word "genuflect?" I love the word genuflect. I have no idea why, but it just rollllls off the tongue. Dontcha think? Bowing down (or genuflecting) is something that pops up a whole lot in the Torah. Subjects bowed to kings, and there are even some cultures today whose custom it is to bow slightly to a person to show respect. When I took karate, my sensei explained to us (it was a Jewish karate studio) that bowing to an opponent or a teacher is a sign of respect, not worship.

That reminds me of the guy who brought his golden retriever to the Rabbi and said, "My dog is so Jewish, he knows how to genuflect during prayers!" The Rabbi responded, "Bow wow!"

You don't see much deep bowing going on in a synagogue. In fact, the Torah forbids bowing on a stone floor, because it seems like we're worshipping the stones! The only time Jews ever fully bow (by fully, I mean face on the floor) is on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur (and at those times, we put something over the floor to show that we're not bowing to stone).

We do, however, bow slightly, curving our backs at times during a prayer service. Remember, the goal here is not to touch your toes or do other exercise routines. It's to curve your back in a sign of submission and respect. Here are the five times we bow normally:

When we say the words "and we bow" during the "aleinu" prayer, it would be a bit awkward not to bow (kind of like saying, hey kids, here's some ice cream, and then serving them pickled herring). We also bow twice during the blessing that talks about our forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It's the most important blessing, and it affirms that we really are loyal to God and have been for generations. Finally, we bow twice during the blessing of thanks, or "modim." (This is not really because we bow

out of thanks. It's because a part of thanks is recognizing that we are completely beholden to God and we're in His debt). This is the second most important blessing in the prayer service and we only bow during these blessings. It is inappropriate to bow any other times.

Even during these blessing, though, we don't bow while saying God's name. Here's a rhyme, or rap to go with the dance move:

Say the word "Baruch", and bend yo knees,
Say "Atah", feel the curve in yo spine
But stand up straight before uttering
a name that's divine

While doing something physical (like bowing) can help guide our emotions (like feeling deferential to God), it's our feelings and thoughts that matter most. We don't want to become bowing machines without the slightest thought of God.

By the way, airline pilots pray 7 days a week, 47 weeks a year.

At least if they fly a Bowing 747.

Have - a- Nageela Shabbat

the Rabbi

Stump the Rabbi is a forum where kids can ask ANY Jewish question.

Have a question? Please send it in to stump@nageelawest.org

Questions here are real. Names and some wording have been changed

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