

“*Aleinu* and the significance of making prostrations”

By Rabbi Jeffrey M Cohen

The *Aleinu* prayer is recited as the concluding composition of every service throughout the year. At the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur Musaf services, *Aleinu*'s status is elevated by being accompanied with full bodily prostrations made by the entire congregation. This was in commemoration of the ancient daily Temple practice, whereby, whenever the High Priest invoked God's four-letter personal Name (*Shem Ha-meforash* or Greek, Tetragrammaton), all the priests and people present in the Temple court would perform full prostrations. The drama of the latter posture is heightened by the accompanying recitation, *Baruch shem kevod malchuto l'olam va'ed* – ‘Blessed be the Name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever.’

Whenever the priests completed their tasks as part of their rota duties in the Temple, they would also prostrate themselves as a gesture of fond farewell, as would the pilgrims thronging the Temple court on festivals. The Mishnah records a miracle that occurred there on festivals, that, though, when they were standing, people were crushed together, yet, when it came to making their full prostrations, there was room for all to stretch out and ensure thereby that their neighbours could not hear their neighbour's private petitions.¹

Such prostrations were not restricted, however, to the context of prayer and confession. When the Maccabees defeated the Greeks, who, during their siege of Jerusalem (168-165 BCE), had breached all of its gates, the Hasmonean priests enacted that all visitors to the city should prostrate themselves in the direction of the Temple at whichever gate they were entering.²

On Yom Kippur, the High Priest would make three *Vidui*-confessionals – one ‘for himself and his household’ (v.6);³ the second on behalf of his fellow priests (v.11.);⁴ and the third, a confession and plea for pardon on behalf of the rest of Israel (v.16) when the divine Name was recited over the scapegoat that was chosen by lot to be sent into the desert, laden with the sins of the community (see vv. 7-10).⁵

Our custom is to prostrate four times: once during each of the three *Vidui* prayers, and a fourth time when reciting the phrase *kor'im umishtachavim umodim* in the *Aleinu* that precedes the description of the *Avodah* service in the Temple.⁶ The Sephardim prostrate for the fourth time at the reference to the he-goat that was chosen by lot to be sacrificed to God. The Yemenites, on the other hand, do not have the custom to perform prostrations during the *Amidah*.

An obvious question is that, given that our thrice-daily *Aleinu* prayer states, *va'anachnu kor'im umishtachavim*, ‘we bow and prostrate ourselves,’ why, then, do we not prostrate every time we recite *Aleinu*, rather than restricting it to those three days of the year?” Why did we not preserve the Temple practice of daily prostrations?

The answer lies in the adoption of prostrations by early Christianity, and, especially, Islam, as a central aspect of their rituals. Christianity borrowed it from Judaism; Islam from Christianity. Jewish authorities, always passionately determined to make a clear distinction between our practices and those of other religions, recoiled from those full prostrations, leaving us with just a token bowing during the recitation of *Aleinu* (and some other prayers, such as in some of the *Amidah* blessings, *Barchu*, *Kaddish* and *Kedushah*). One exception to

this was permitted, however, on the Days of Awe when we have the strongest desire to demonstrate our repentance, humility, and total submission to God.

Judaism maintained a difference, however, between its method of prostration and that performed by Islam. The latter ritual, called *Sujood* (like the Aramaic verb *s-g-d*, ‘to bend, bow, worship.’), involves the placing of the forehead and the bridge of the nose on the ground, a position that is adopted for the duration of most of their prayers, whereas we bend down on our knees and then merely lower the forehead to touch the ground to recite the *Baruch shem kevod malchuto l’olam va’ed* praise of God.

As to why our full prostrations are restricted to the *Aleinu* of the High Holy Days, this is because it was originally composed as an introduction to the *Malchuyyot* (‘kingship’) section of the Rosh Hashanah *Amidah*, before it was elevated to become a daily prayer, and, additionally, because of the pertinent phrase, *va’anachnu kor’im umishtachavim...* ‘and we bow and prostrate ourselves.’ The combination of those two themes made it especially appropriate as an accompaniment to our prostration at this time when petitioning the *melech malchei ha-melachim*, ‘the King of all Kings.’

So, why, and when, was *Aleinu* elevated from Rosh Hashanah to its prime position at the conclusion of every daily service? This came about as a tribute to the martyrs of Blois in southern France who were massacred in 1171, and who, it was reported, chose to utter in unison that Rosh Hashanah *Aleinu* prayer as their dying affirmation of God’s sovereignty and righteousness, and as acceptance of their impending fate. By association, it became a tribute to all the subsequent martyrs of our people in every age.

The decision to elevate it in that way was probably also determined by a particularly fierce reference in the prayer – regarded, no doubt, by many in the modern age as politically incorrect – that originally referred specifically to idolators, but which the martyrs would have applied to their merciless Christian murderers: *sheheim mishtachavim lehevel varik umitpallelim el El lo yoshi'a*, ‘For they bow to vanity and emptiness and pray to a god who cannot save.’ This phrase was subsequently expunged by the censors but is still retained in some prayer rites and has been incorporated into the popular ArtScroll editions of the daily and festival prayer books.

The last two words, *lo yoshi'a*, may have been perceived in the minds of the martyrs as a double entendre, given that it can be viewed as a play on the name (Yeshua) of Jesus and that the phrase may also be rendered as ‘he is not a saviour!’ The Christological reference was also underscored by some who pointed out that, according to the gematria system, the word וריק (*varik*), has a numerical value of 316, which is the same as the variant form of the name ישו (*Jesu*)!⁷

But what does full prostration symbolise, and wherein lies the conceptual difference between praying in an upright position and praying fully prostrated on the ground?

Well, the *Aleinu* itself hints at both modes in relation to where God may be located, and, by inference, the direction and posture that man should adopt in prayer. It speaks of God as residing in the remotest transcendence – *umoshav yekaro bashamayim mima'al ushekbhinat uzzo begavhei meromim*, ‘The seat of his Glory is in the heavens above, and His mighty Presence is in the loftiest heights.’ It was in acknowledgment of such a remote Being, that the notion of raising one’s hands heavenwards - one of the earliest gestures of petition⁸ – arose.

But *Aleinu* makes it clear that that is but one aspect of God's relationship to man. It affirms that, though He may at times adopt a transcendent pose, that is only His response when man demonstrates a preferred relationship of distance. In that situation, we should not be surprised that – to borrow the phraseology of the Priestly blessing – His face does not appear 'to shine upon us' or His countenance 'to be lifted toward us'.

That is when the first part of the *Aleinu* reference applies – *Hashem hu ha'Elokim bashamayim mima'al*, 'The Lord is the God [who is] in heaven above.' But, the continuation of the verse makes it clear that He also has a polar, benign dimension, as described in the continuation of that verse: *v'al ha'aretz mitachat*, 'and [He is also] upon the earth below.' And here we have the reason for our full prostration on the ground: to give expression to the God whom we hope and we pray will be close to us on earth below,' and accessible to our every need.

Someone once asked a rabbi why it was that no one experiences God face to face any more, as did some of our biblical forebears. The rabbi answered: "It's because we're all looking in the wrong direction!" We think of Him as remote. We make Him remote by banishing Him from our lives and our concerns, and then we expect Him to be close and a reality in our lives. We raise hands aloft to Him at a distance. We do not explore the pathways that lead directly to Him, pathways indicated and illuminated by daily prayer, study of His revealed word, observance of His mitzvot, and by daily acts of *gemilut chesed*, concern, charity, and kindness.

We speak of God as a Father, yet when He reacts like a father we are mystified. What does a parent do when a child is badly behaved? The parent punishes it in some way, such as by withholding a treat or preventing it from attending some activity that it was looking forward to. He or she (preferably both!) also indicates by their body language that it is displeased. A sense of distance is consciously created, and the child is meant to read displeasure in the set of the parent's face, in the reduction or absence of communication, and to take to heart the appropriate message.

We regard that as an appropriate response; yet when God does the same, most of us cry foul! When He hides His face we challenge His mercy, His righteousness, if not His very existence. We fail to appreciate that when we drive God into exile, when our actions banish Him to the remotest regions, He is entitled to respond accordingly.

When Adam sinned and hid from God, God cried out *ayyeka*, "Where are you?" He felt and lamented Adam's absence. His Glory was diminished by Adam's gesture of defiance. His pride in His offspring was impaired by the latter's act of rejection.

This is the symbolic message of the *Aleinu* prostrations at this season. It is a call for us to locate God, not at a distance, not by scanning the heavens, but by discerning His presence – 'on earth below' - in the closest proximity to us. It calls on us to consider and praise God for the multiple, life-sustaining and pleasurable blessings that spring 'from the earth,' in the people - created in the image of God - that surround, love, teach, and inspire, us, in the cry of a new-born babe, in the innocent and trusting smile of an infant, at the attainments of Science and technology, at the amazing human- and bio- diversity that is to be found on earth.

So, the *Aleinu* prostrations, in addition to symbolising the humility that we should adopt when we contemplate the grandeur and the mystery all around us, are also a gesture of embrace of the earth and an acknowledgement – in the words of the *Attah chonein Amidah* blessing, of the One ‘who *graces* humanity with knowledge and teaches mortals understanding.’ That blessing contains two deceptively small words that nevertheless define the Source of all our knowledge, namely *mei’itcha* that all that wisdom and creativity comes “from You” and from the advanced brain created and implanted into man at creation; and, secondly, *chonein*, that it was a special “act of grace” on God’s part to share that with earth man.

When we consider that the observable universe is reckoned to possess two trillion galaxies, with each galaxy containing one hundred billion stars, and each star possessing around 1,6 planets, we may appreciate something of the nature of that ‘act of grace’ that it was only earth man that was endowed with such intellectual powers. And perhaps that is what is alluded to when the Torah states that man was created *b’tzelem Elokim*, ‘in the *intellectual* image of God.’

So, as we bow our heads to earth it is not only an act of obeisance to God, but also a token of gratitude for the unique, divine blessing of knowledge and intellectual progression with which we are invested, and for which earth provides the stage upon which we are all called to give a morally and ethically virtuoso performance.

NOTES

1. Mishnah *Avot* 5:5
2. See Mish. *Shek.* 6:1.
3. See Lev. 16:6; Tal. *Yoma* 36b
4. The second confession, by the High Priest on behalf of his fellow priests, is derived from the repetition of the phrase 'He shall atone for himself *and for his household*' (see Rashi on v.11.), his priestly fraternity being regarded as members of his own family, the *Bet Aharon* (Ps.135:19-20; Tal. *Yoma* 41b).
5. See Tal. *Yoma* 39b.
6. See *Remah Sh. Ar.* 622:4.
7. For further reading on *Aleinu*, see Jeffrey.M. Cohen, 1001 *Questions & Answers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur* (Rowman and Littlefield, Pennsylvania, USA., 1997), pp.256ff., and *Prayer and Penitence* (Rowman and Littlefield), pp. 40, 88-92.
8. See, Gen. 14:22; Ps.63:5; 141:2).

Wishing you and your dear families a

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Rabbi Jeffrey & Gloria