

Imagine that you're at a football game, and you hear the shout coming from a group of fans nearby, "Green." You jump to your feet, raise a fist, and say ... "White." Or maybe you're about 60 miles Southeast in the big house and you hear the prompt, "Go," and you respond, "Blue." Or you could be in any football game - and when you hear the syllable "De," you lift up the white pickets you snuck into the stadium and shout, "Fence!"

These are instinctual responses to verbal cues. If you were in a mosque and somebody called out *Takbir*, the Moslem response would be, *Alla Hu Akbar*. If you were in a synagogue and somebody called out *Barkhu Et Adonai Ham'vorakh*, you would say ... *Barukh Adonai Ham'vorakh l'olam va'ed. Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei rabba?* Amen. If you are steeped in the culture, you don't need to think about your response. It is automatic. The words have meaning, but you probably don't think about them, you just respond.

Just as we have verbal responses, we also have physical responses for certain verbal cues. Teachers use tricks to get the attention of their students and calm them down. "Clap once if you can hear me." "Clap twice if you can hear me." "Clap three times if you can hear me." If, God forbid, you are with a group of people and somebody shouts, "Fire!" the instinctual physical response is to jump up and move towards the exit. We hope that people move quickly and orderly, we hope that there is no pushing or shoving, and that people help each other. But the reason that this verbal cue is so often cited as an exception to the principle of freedom of speech is that we know that the instinctual response to find a safe place is so powerful, that people will get hurt as others give in to panic, trying to run to safety.

"Please rise." Please be seated." You don't typically think, you just do what I say. My father could imitate a drill instructor with spot-on accuracy: "Ten-Hut!" "Forward, March!" "About, Face!" In the army, this prompts an immediate instinctual response that has been drilled into each soldier. And back on the football field, when the quarterback yells "Set" and the lineman drop into their stance, this is also a drilled, instinctual response.

I began exploring how our body responds to words when I started thinking about Aleinu on Rosh Hashanah. I've always been fascinated by Aleinu, because I want my body to express the sense of the words I am saying. As a teen, I adjusted my bowing during aleinu so I was acting out the words appropriately. The standard bowing practice of Aleinu is to bow so that the heart is parallel to the floor. The practice during the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur aleinu during the musaf amidah, is to kneel and touch your head to the floor.

As I did this last week on Rosh Hashanah, I tried to pay attention to how it felt to press my forehead into the carpet. The moment passed by too quickly. I didn't have time to process and to feel - I needed to keep the service moving, continue to the next paragraph. Had I not been on the bima, I'd have stayed down a bit longer.

Aleinu's opening lines speak to the chosenness of Israel and how lucky we are to have been born into or chosen to become part of that people. At the key line, when we bow, we describe God as the One who set up the sky and established the earth. That sentence is very long, as we attest to God's glorious abode in heaven above and powerful presence in the loftiest heights. Fred Wooden, minister of Fountain Street Church, told me that a Moslem woman told him years ago, that prostration with her head down to the floor is her "way of connecting with the earth." I'm thinking that perhaps the ideal choreography of the aleinu is to remain on the floor, forehead pressed into the carpet, physically connected to the earth, through the phrase *she'hu noteh shamayim v'yosed aretz*, "who spreads out the heavens and establishes the earth," and then rise

for the rest of the sentence, *u'moshav y'karo bashamayim mima'al*, “whose glorious abode is in the loftiest heights.” Body connected to the earth. Body stretched up towards the sky. The choreography fitting the words. God is unique in heaven above and on the earth below. That's all there is.

The idea that body movement can express devotion to God appears in the Book of Psalms, from a verse we use early in the liturgy: “All my limbs shall say ‘Who is like You, Adonai?’” (35:10) In Midrash Tehillim, (11th-century), the rabbis interpret “all my limbs” quite literally:

With my head, I bend my head and bow down in prayer... And I also wear tefillin on my head. With my neck, I fulfill the precept of wrapping oneself in fringes [tzitzit], a Tallit. With my mouth, I praise You, as the Psalmist said: “My mouth shall speak the praise of Adonai” (Psalms 145:21) ... With my face, I prostrate myself, as Joseph did when he was reunited with his father: “He fell down on his face to the earth” (Genesis 48:12) ... With my nose, when I smell spices with it [during the Havdalah blessing] at the outgoing of Shabbat. With my ears, I listen to the singing of the Torah.

There is one more tradition of prostration today, during the Avodah service, the reenactment of the Temple service of the Kohen Gadol, the high priest. I learned something new this year. The prostration here is different than Aleinu. It is a full prostration, hands stretched out above your head, feet stretched out behind you. I've never done it that way before. I didn't know that was the tradition. I'd never seen it done like that. But I'm going to try it today.

The core of the Avodah service is the three times that the Kohen Gadol confesses and atones on behalf of himself, his family and all priests, and all Israel. At the end of that confession, he quotes Leviticus (16:30), “On this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; before Adonai ...” And that moment was the only time during the year when the name of God would be fully, explicitly, correctly, pronounced.

The power of the sound of God's name elicited an immediate physical response. Think of films of above-ground nuclear tests, the shock wave of destruction, knocking over everything in its path. Or imagine a superhero like Iron Fist hitting the ground with his glowing fist, creating a wave of power which knocks over everything within 100 feet of him. Or Thor slamming his hammer into the ground. The physical response to that kind of shock wave is to fall over away from the source. The instinctual physical response to the sound of God's name is to fall over towards the Source. It is an entire congregation pulled in and bowled over by the power of God's name. What other word, in what other context, has so much power?

There is a Midrash describing the moment when Moses heard the sounds of celebration and saw the Israelites dancing around the golden calf -- that at that moment, the letters flew off the tablets and Moses drops them because it was the lightness of the letters, the word of God, that was levitating the stone; without the letters, the stone is too heavy to hold. It is as if at the moment we utter God's name in our service, as the High Priest sends God's name up to heaven with our confession and prayer for atonement, our bodies become too heavy to carry and we fall prostrate.

I like the fact that prostration at this point in the service beautifully symbolizes total submission to God. At the moment when we need atonement so badly and realize that the final step is in God's hands and no other. Perhaps it is extraordinary to see communal leaders so plainly demonstrating their submission to God in this extraordinary way, but even more powerful

for me is the sight of a community which takes ownership of this practice. To see people scattered around our sanctuary, empowered to take the ritual into their own hands, practicing a do-it-yourself Judaism rather than leaving it to Stuart and to me, this is what moves me.

I know that prostration is awkward, archaic, and uncomfortable. People are squeamish about such an overt display of piety. I understand peer pressure against doing something which is out of the norm. I know that prostration is not for everyone. If you suspect or know that once you are on the floor you will have great difficulty getting back up, then it is probably not for you. We all worship within the constraints of our body, whether we're talking about standing or prostration.

If you are physically able and mentally and spiritually willing, I invite you to move into the back, side, center, or front of the sanctuary when it is time to fall kor'im and give it a try. I'll conclude with the following story that Sharon Strassfeld tells in her book *Everything I Know: Basic Life Rules from a Jewish Mother* (NY: Scribner, 1998).

When I was a teenager, I began reading philosophical works. I concluded that God did not rule the world; that in fact we and God were partners. One Yom Kippur in consonance with my new thinking I decided not to "fall korim" for the aleinu prayer. My zaydee, who had eagle eyes even for the upstairs women's balcony, asked me to take a walk with him during the break in services. He wondered, he told me, why I hadn't fallen korim. I explained that it was a ... [new world] now and the old-fashioned ideas of God ruling everything and people scurrying around to do God's command no longer made sense. Zaydee listened and then asked thoughtfully, "Sherreleh, tell me more about this [new world]. I did, telling him all about the things I had been reading and thinking. When I finished, my grandfather said to me, "This new world you speak about I understand. But there is one thing I don't understand. In this new world, if you don't bow before God, before whom will you bow?"

So to whatever extent you bow or prostrate yourself during the next parts of the service this Yom Kippur, maybe just go a little farther or deeper. Let your body express your humility and submission to a Power greater than yourself. On this Yom Kippur, may God's presence in this room meet each of us in atonement.