

This morning, this afternoon, this evening, we continue our journey together, engaging in an experience of prayer. Jewish prayer uses a set of conventions to structure the experience. For those who understand the unspoken choreography, the synagogue service is a bonding experience rich with meaningful interactions amongst participants and between the individual and God. For those new to the synagogue service and those who never learned the Siddur or Mahzor code, our worship is mystifying, a foreign language beyond Hebrew.

So today's talk is an attempt to decode part of the service, the central part of the prayer service, known as the Tefillah, a word meaning prayer, or the Amidah, a word meaning standing [prayer]. Specifically, I want to focus on the choreography of the opening and closing moments of the prayer, the traditional body posture while praying, and additional body movements during the third section of the Amidah, called the Kedusha or holiness blessing.

We spend our time living as embodied human beings. By this, I mean that we are embedded in a body. That means we get to experience physical pleasure, we can laugh and giggle and roll around on the floor, we can run or ride a bike and feel the wind, we can play sports and watch movies and plays and listen to music. But we also experience aging and when our bodies experience a momentary or permanent malfunction, we call that sickness, and we feel pain and we feel sadness when loved ones die and we have to work hard, a sometimes different kind of pain and tedium, to earn money to feed and clothe and shelter our bodies.

As human beings, we are not always secure and balanced, physically or emotionally or spiritually. We get tired and frustrated and angry, and sometimes our desires and needs come in conflict with those of a neighboring body and we have to deny ourselves or negotiate or fight for resources.

As human beings, we have the ability to imagine perfection, being in perfect balance with others, being in harmony with the universe. And in this perfect, trouble-free existence, we shed the burden of our bodies and exist as pure unencumbered light. In our imagination, we can be souls or angels. But only in our imagination, because even in our deepest meditation, we'll feel an itch or a pang of hunger, or something else to knock us off balance and remind us that we are embodied beings again.

And this is the setting for prayer. The choreography of prayer is entirely symbolic. Standing with your feet together, conscious of your balance yet feeling unbalanced, stepping forward, stepping backward, swaying, bowing -- none of these actions have any meaning in and of themselves. But if you put them in the context of a service and if you use the body position and movement to create an image in your mind and inject a certain feeling into your prayers, then they have meaning.

At the beginning of the Amidah, we stand up as embodied, human beings and as we take three steps forward, we imagine ourselves entering the presence of God and becoming perfect angelic beings.

To me, beginning the Amidah by taking those three steps forward also takes me out of myself to a place where it is OK to be self-critical. I step away from my protective ego, stepping into the presence of holy space. The three steps are symbolic of flipping a mental switch to put myself into a different mental space. The Talmud teaches, *m'shaneh makom*, *m'shaneh mazal* [Talmud Bavli Mesechet Rosh HaShanah 47b]. Your place determines your fate.

When you step forward, you move out of this world into a divine space, in which you have a private conversation with God, audible only to yourself. The Amidah is also known as the silent

prayer. When you pray, the lightest whisper is enough. If the person next to you can hear your words of prayer, they are too loud.

The words of prayer are either for me alone or they are between me and God. We may be praying as a community, but the prayer itself is strictly individual. Prayer is self-examination, and no one but me alone can fully examine my life. So I stand in prayer, engaged in critical self-examination, and imagining that I am an angel. In Ezekiel's vision of angels, he observes, "Their legs are a straight leg" (Ezekiel 1:7). Angels are personified divine attributes or facets of consciousness, they are static; they do not grow, develop, or change in any way. So, they therefore have no need for any means of walking, and their 'leg' serves only as a pedestal to stand on. Thus, one leg is enough, and they have no knee to bend it since they do not need to move it.

So my posture of prayer as an angel standing in the presence of God is to present myself with feet together as if perfectly balanced on one leg. In this somewhat awkward, slightly off-balance, one-legged position, no matter how much I play at being an angel, I am still an embodied human standing in a wobbly, insecure, posture. In order to honestly be self-critical, you have to be willing to be knocked off balance and hear something that you'd rather not hear, learn something about yourself that you rather not know.

As human beings, we are imbalanced. We like to think that we have some skill at multi-tasking. We can be aware of our surroundings so we can acknowledge co-workers, greet people who pass by, answer the phone, respond to text and email, handle requests and decide on the fly which task is more important right now and file away other tasks for the future or pause this task and take of the other one. We switch very quickly, but we do not actually multi-task. We focus our mind on only one task at a time. So if you are answering email while on the phone, you will tune out of at least some of what the caller is saying while you compose the email.

In Jewish texts, angels have exactly one task. There is no pretending to multi-task. They have a single-minded focus on doing their job. Prayer invites us to be a little less human and a little more angel-like. We stand on that one leg pretending to be an angel, focusing on balance. Prayer-time is hitting the reset button on your mind, and giving yourself exactly one thing to think about.

Why is it that whenever you try to think about one thing, your mind presents you with a dozen other things to consider? It is the limitations of a carbon-based, neuron-wired, physical brain, it is your body that holds you back. You are an embodied human being and no matter how hard you try, distraction arise.

Take a lesson from angels. The reason that we envision ourselves as angelic beings during prayer is that they are disembodied, except for when they cloth themselves in a body to walk among humans. They have form, but only to the extent that our imagination needs to give it to them in order to fill in the gaps in our imagination. So we imagine angels surrounding God in praise, and use that to imagine our communal prayer experience with God at its center.

And that leads us to the Kedushah scene. A second function of prayer, beyond self-examination, is cultivating gratitude. Our congregation becomes a cluster of angels happily bouncing on their toes, singing praises to God. Stuart Rapaport or David Reifler or Rhonda Reider is the lead angel. We are the chorus of angels, responding to their words.

Finally, a third function of prayer is the model of speaking to God and unloading an emotional burden. We mimic the prayer posture of angels because that gives us the standing to be in the

presence of God, in a setting which we construct to be intimate, face to face with the Divine Presence.

For some of you, prayer might be a time to cultivate love and gratitude and wonder. For others, it might be a time to do a spiritual self-examination. For some, it might be time to engage with God as an external Power, for others, the God with whom you speak may be within. For some, prayer is a time to struggle with the limitations of your humanity. No matter how you choose to use our prayer time together, I invite you to consider the power of the Jewish choreography:

Three steps forward at the beginning, three steps back at the end, to move in and out of sacred prayer time and space.

Align your body, as much as you can, in an attentive and alert posture. Imagine you are an angel balanced in the presence of God.

And let a great quiet descend upon our sanctuary, holding all of us together in its warm, peaceful, embrace, as we welcome and celebrate Yom Kippur and the beginning of 5780 together. May it be a sweet new year of blessing.