

THE CANTOR'S VOICE

A Nod to the "Perfect Prayer" By Cantorial Soloist David Morgenstern

Every year, with each new class of Bar and Bat Mitzvah students, we greet a new group of friends to our services, a good number of whom have never been to a service, not just here at BIJ, but to any Jewish service anywhere. They are impressed by the leadership of our students in chanting Torah, Haftarah and prayers in the service, the learning of our rabbi and the spiritual messages of our tradition. And to many, they are interested in the many rituals incorporated into our prayers. After attending his first Jewish service, one of my former editorial colleagues told me he was "wowed" by the many prayer gestures, so unlike the services of his Christian upbringing.

Here at BIJ, we have many ritual gestures in our service: standing, moving, bending our knees, bowing, shielding our eyes, wrapping *tzitzit* around our fingers, kissing the fringes, touching the fringes to the Torah and so on. There are prayers when we move or bow at a certain word and aren't supposed to move after others. There are many more that we could list.

Some of the prayer gestures in our tradition are said to recall our ancestors' experience when dealing with ancient monarchs. In those days, people would drop to their knees before a king; in our services, we bow and kneel to the Sovereign of the Universe. The Hebrew word for knee is *berech*, which is from the same Hebrew root as the word for blessing, the *baruch* that starts and ends many prayers.

A number of our prayers include the words of the gestures themselves, such as in the *Aleinu* near the end of the service. There we say: "V'anachnu (And we) *kor'im* (bow) and *mishtachavim* (prostrate ourselves) and *modim* (acknowledge) *lifnei Melech* ... (before the "King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed is He)." Many people, bend their knees on *v'anachnu*, bow and hold on *kor'im* and rise up on *lifney Melech*; others start bending on *kor'im*. Others do a three stage bow going low, lower and lowest on each of the bowing words. Sara Heckelman told me that it's her custom to rise up onto her tiptoes with the words *lifney Melech*, in the same way that we do for the words *Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh* (Holy, Holy, Holy) in the *Amidah*. That's a superb addition to the gestures in this prayer, one that I'm adding to my own observance.

On a recent Shabbat morning, Rabbi Gottlieb pointed out another place in the service where we find one of these gesture words. Right after *Mi Chamocha* and before the *Amidah*, there's a paragraph that starts with the words *Tzur Yisrael, kuman b'ezrat Yisrael*... (Rock of Israel, arise to help Israel...). There's a note above the text that says to rise for

the *Amidah*, but Rabbi noted that the custom is to rise on the gesture-related word *kumah*. So, if you can remember, wait for the *kumah* to be called.

One interesting feature of the new High Holiday prayer book *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, published by the Conservative Movement's Rabbinical Assembly, is the use of a symbol to signal a bow. The bow sign is based on a "paleolithic" Hebrew version of the letter *kaf*, the first letter in the word *kor'im*. They have it facing left for the Hebrew prayers and facing right for English translations.



We rise. Leader:

Praise ADONAI, to whom all prayer is directed.

Congregation, then the leader repeats:

☞ Praise ADONAI, to whom all prayer is directed forever and ever.

Barukh Adonai ha-m'vorakh l'olam va-ed.

We are seated.

At the services of my youth, we didn't observe many of these gestures, but the Reform movement has been bringing them back. Of course, many of them have long been BIJ custom because of our history. I will write about some others in a future column.

I appreciate this quote by Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits of Chicago (1908-1992), where he said that gestures make our prayers human and not angelic — and that's a good thing:

"The perfect prayer on earth is one which is prayed not only by the soul of man but by the whole of the human being, body and soul. As the Psalmist exclaims, "All my bones shall say: 'Lord, who is like unto Thee...?'" Man's situation requires that his very bones should be capable of "prayer." But this is only possible if prayer too becomes a mitzvah, i.e., a deed unifying body and soul. Prayer, therefore, cannot be only silent meditation; it has to be spoken word. It has to be bodily action, informed by *kevanah* [intention]. Bodily prostration before God, for instance, is no less essential for prayer than is spiritual concentration. The prayer of man should be "manly" and not "angelic."

May this secular New Year be filled with blessings and joy!

B'vracha (with blessing),

David Morgenstern