

PRAYER CHOREOGRAPHY

The What, When, How, Where and Why of Physical Movement During Prayer

כָּל עֲצָמוֹתַי, תֹּאמְרֵנָה יְהוָה, מִי כָמוֹךָ: Every bone in my body cries out: 'Adonai, who is like You?'
(Psalm 35:10)

Things To Know:

- Movements during prayer are *minhag* (custom), not *halakha* (law); lots of variations!
- Choreography is designed to enhance our spirituality and make it more meaningful, not stressful!

Prayer/When	What to do	How To Do It	Why
In general	Shuckling	Back and forth swaying motion	To involve all of your heart and soul to connect with God through prayer
In general	Standing		To call attention to certain prayers throughout the service; to separate sections of the service; to show respect
In general	Gestures	Kissing (i.e. the Torah, the <i>siddur</i> , <i>tefillin</i> , <i>tzitzit</i>), stepping , gently beating one's heart (i.e. during confessional prayers), shaking (<i>lulav</i>), covering eyes, smelling (<i>Havdalah</i> spices and <i>etrog</i>), tearing (<i>k'riyah</i>) garments to express mourning, eating (<i>motzi</i>), drinking/tasting (<i>kiddush et al</i>)	To show deep affection for ritual items and the active fulfillment of <i>mitzvot</i>
In general	Bowing	Three kinds: at the waist, bending knees, then waist, full prostration	Implies deference and respect
L'kha Dodi (final verse)	Standing & Bowing	Stand, face entrance bowing at the waist to the left, right and forward at <i>bo'i kallah, bo'l kallah</i>	To welcome the Sabbath as a Queen
Bar'khu	Bowing	Leader bows at waist on <i>bar'khu</i> , then up straight at <i>et Adonai</i> ; Congregation bows at waist on <i>barukh</i> , then up straight at <i>Adonai</i>	To honor God as if bowing before a Sovereign
Ahava Rabbah	Gathering fringes/ <i>tzitzit</i>	Gather the <i>tzitzit</i> together to prepare for <i>Shema</i> at <i>v'havieinu l'shalom</i> .	Text is "bring us towards peace from the four corners." Fringes gathered as we too have been gathered from the corner of the earth.

Prayer/When	What to do	How To Do It	Why
Shema	*Closing your eyes/*Standing	*Cover your eyes with your right hand. Some people leave eyes open to “witness” that God is One. *Some communities stand for <i>Shema</i> , some do not.	To focus completely on the Oneness of God.
Vayomer Adonai (3 rd paragraph of <i>Shema</i>)	Kissing <i>Tzitzit</i>	Kiss <i>tzitzit</i> at every mention of <i>tzitzit</i>	To remember the <i>mitzvot</i> and our loving dedication to God
Amidah	Stand facing East toward Jerusalem	In most places, East is located where the Ark is placed	<i>Amidah</i> means “standing.” We direct our prayers towards our holy city of Jerusalem.
Adonai S’fatai	Stepping/Bowing	Take three small steps back and then forward	To symbolically approach God
Avot v’Imahot (beginning) and Magen Avraham b’ezrat Sarah (end of first blessing)	Bowing	Bend knees at <i>barukh</i> , bow at waist on <i>atah</i> , up straight on <i>Adonai</i> at the beginning and end of the first blessing of the <i>Amidah</i>	To show respect before God
Kedusha	Bowing and Rising on toes	Bow side-to-side (left→right) on each <i>zeh l’zeh v’amar</i> . Rise up on toes on each <i>kadosh, kadosh, kadosh</i> .	To symbolically reach toward Heaven as the angels did
Modim	Bowing	Bow at waist only on the words <i>modim anaḥnu lakh</i>	To show respect before God
Barukh...hatov shimkha ul’kha na’eh l’hodot (in Amidah)	Bowing	Bend knees at <i>barukh</i> , bow at waist on <i>atah</i> , up straight on <i>Adonai</i>	To show respect before God
Oseh Shalom (conclusion of Amidah and Mourner’s Kaddish)	Stepping/Bowing	Take three steps back, then bow side-to-side (left→right) at <i>shalom bimromav</i> , then <i>hu ya’aseh shalom</i> , then bow head forward at <i>aleinu v’al kol Yisrael</i> , and up straight on <i>v’imru</i> .	This is the reverse of the approach to God at the beginning of the Amidah. Here we take leave of God.
Aleinu	Bowing	Bend knees at <i>korim</i> , bow at waist on <i>umishtaḥavim umodim</i> , up straight on <i>lifnei melekh</i> .	To show humility to God, the Sovereign of all Sovereigns
Mourner’s Kaddish	Standing/Bowing	Mourners, those observing <i>yahrzeit</i> (anniversary of loved one’s death), or those whose custom it is to stand; Take three steps back, bow side-to-side (left→right) at <i>shalom bimromav</i> , then <i>hu ya’aseh shalom</i> , then bow head forward at <i>aleinu v’al kol Yisrael</i> , and up straight on <i>v’imru</i> .	To mark a separation between this special uplifting spiritual time of prayer.

Prayer/When	What to do	How To Do It	Why
Torah Service	Standing/Kissing/Bowing	Stand whenever the Ark is open, when the Torah is moving or uncovered (and face towards it); bow at the waist on the word <i>gadlu</i> and straighten up on <i>l'Adonai iti</i> before the Torah procession; kiss Torah with your <i>tzitzit</i> during the Procession and when called for an <i>Aliyah</i> (kiss the beginning/ending words in the reading using your <i>tzitzit</i>)	To show respect for the Torah
Confessional Prayers	Beating one's heart	Using your right fist, gently beat over your heart when making confessional prayers: weekday Amidah at <i>s'lah lanu</i> , Selihot and High Holidays at each word in <i>Ashamnu</i> , each <i>Al Het</i> and each <i>s'lah lanu</i>	To express feelings of guilt and inadequacy
Aleinu HaGadol and Avodah (during High Holidays)	Full Prostration	Fall to your knees on the word <i>korim</i> , bend your waist towards floor at <i>umishtaḥavim</i> , bow and touch your forehead to the floor at <i>umodim</i> , up straight on <i>lifnei melekh</i> ; In <i>Avodah</i> service, fall to your knees on the word <i>korim</i> , bend your waist towards floor at <i>umishtaḥavim</i> , bow and touch your forehead to the floor at <i>umodim v'noflim al p'neihem</i> and remain prostrated, up straight after <i>l'olam va'ed</i> ;	To show deepest respect for the way in which the <i>Kohanim</i> practiced in Temple days

👉 Choose 3 gestures or pieces of prayer choreography to “practice.” Report back to the Cantor with how you are doing, how it makes you feel, or if you need help! Remember...*practice makes it feel natural and comfortable!*

1.

2.

3.