YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

***MIKDASH***

**Rav Yitzchak Levi**

**Lecture #262: The History of the Divine Service at Altars (LXXII) – The Prohibition of Bamot (XLIX)**

To complete our discussion regarding the spiritual significance of prostration, I wish to relate to prostration as the ultimate expression of prayer. We will examine this issue both in the verses in Scripture and in the words of *Chazal*. We will then consider the position of the Rambam and the way the Rambam himself fulfilled the matter of prostration in the course of his supplications after the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer.

Prostration is an essential element of prayer, and does not depend exclusively on the Temple service, but rather it applies at all times and in all places. Part of the expression of prostration as an essential element of prayer is connected to the matter of confession and admission of one's sins.

After we examine the words of the Rambam, we will conclude with an examination of the book of *Tehilim*, and we will see the connection between prayer, prostration and thanksgiving.

### Prostration as prayer

When Moshe pleads with God that he should pardon Israel for the sin of the golden calf, he says:

Thus I fell down before the Lord forty days and forty nights, as I fell down at the first. (*Devarim* 9:25)

Yonatan ben Uziel translates this verse as: "Then I fell down in prayer," I fell down to the earth forty times in prayer, and in the wake of my prostration and prayers God forgave and pardoned Israel for the sin of the golden calf.

Prostration with outstretched hands and feet is the ultimate expression of prayer through which a person expresses his absolute submission to God.

*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* says the following about the sin of the golden calf:

Moshe said: On Yom Kippur I will see the glory of the Holy One, blessed be He, and when the Holy One, blessed be He, passed over Him and called out: O Lord, O Lord, the Holy One, blessed be He, removed his hand from upon him and he saw the back of the *Shekhina*. (end of chapter 46)

It is immediately stated there: "And Moshe made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and prostrated himself" (*Shemot* 34:8), and in that way Israel was pardoned. It is possible that like Moshe who merited hearing the names and attributes of God on Yom Kippur at Chorev, so too Israel on Yom Kippur merit hearing in the Temple courtyard the Tetragrammaton issuing forth from the mouth of the High Priest and prostrating themselves.

### Confessing sins while prostrating

We saw above that Moshe fell down before God so that He would pardon Israel for the sin of the golden calf, and similarly Moshe and Aharon fell on their faces following the sin of the spies.[[1]](#footnote-1) There is room to ask whether falling on one's face is the same as prostration.

The *Seforno* in connection with the sin of the spies explains:

"And Moshe and Aharon fell on their faces." When they saw "that which is crooked cannot be made straight" (*Kohelet* 1:15). As in *Sanhedrin* 19b, they looked down at the ground, when they did not know what to do, for fear of the king. (*Seforno*, *Bamidbar* 14:5)

David and the elders' falling on their faces when the angel of God revealed himself to them at the threshing floor of Aravna the Yevusi (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 21:16) can explained in similar fashion.

Another example of such conduct is when Ezra the Scribe hears from the princes that the people, the priests and the Levites did not separate themselves from the people of the land, but rather they took foreign wives:

And at the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting; and my garment and my mantel being rent, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands to the Lord my God. (*Ezra* 9:5)

And in the continuation:

When Ezra had prayed, and when he had made confession, weeping, and casting himself before the house of God, there assembled to him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very bitterly. (*Ezra* 10:11)

It would seem that we are dealing here with the same event. In one place it is stated that Ezra fell on his knees and spread out his hands to God, and in the other place he makes confession, weeps, and casts himself before God. This seems to prove that there is a connection between falling before God, and kneeling and perhaps also prostration.

At a similar convocation led by Nechemya all of Israel gather together, in a fast and sackcloth:

And the seed of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins, and the iniquities of their fathers. And they stood up in their place, and read in the book of the Torah of the Lord their God one fourth part of the day; and another fourth part they confessed, and prostrated themselves before the Lord their God. (*Nechemya* 9:2-3)

Here the connection between confession and prostration is stated explicitly.[[2]](#footnote-2) During confession, a person admits the truth and states that he has sinned. He submits in total manner before God and through his prostration he gives physical expression to his absolute effacement before God and full subordination to him. Accordingly, there is an essential connection between confession and prostration.

With this we can explain the fact that during the High Priest's confession on Yom Kippur, the people in the Temple courtyard prostrate themselves when they hear the Tetragrammaton issuing from his mouth.

Now we also understand why we fall on our faces when we confess our sins. We don't actually prostrate ourselves, but nevertheless we fall on our faces.

Another example of this phenomenon can be brought from Yehoshua, who following his rout at the battle of Ai, falls on his face:

And Yehoshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord. (*Yehoshua* 7:6)

Based on this verse, the Rema rules in the name of the *Beit Yosef* (*Shulchan Arukh*, *Orach Chayyim* 131:2), that one falls on his face only in a place where there is an ark with a Torah, and in the absence of such an ark, the supplication prayer is recited but without falling on one's face.

It is certainly possibly that originally the supplication prayer was accompanied by full prostration with outstretched hands and feet, as was the practice in the Temple. Since such prostration is prohibited by Torah law outside the Temple – the prohibition to bow down on a stone floor - the *Tur* (*Orach Chayyim* 131) adds that by Rabbinic law all falling on the floor is prohibited even without spreading out one's hands and feet.

### Prostration as a special expression of Prayer in the words of the Rambam

The Rambam opens the laws of prayer with the assertion that there is a positive commandment to pray every day. At the beginning of chapter 5, he writes:

A person who prays must be careful to tend to [the following] eight matters. [However,] if he is pressured, confronted by circumstances beyond his control, or transgresses and does not attend to one them, they are not of absolute necessity. They are: 1) standing; 2) facing the Temple; 3) preparation of his body; 4) proper clothing; 5) proper place; 6) control of his voice; 7) bowing; and 8) prostration. (*Hilkhot Tefila* 5:1)

From here we learn that according to the Rambam bowing and prostration are essential components of prayer, and therefore a person engaged in prayer must be careful to attend to them.

Later in the chapter the Rambam clarifies the eight matters listed in *halakha* 1. In *halakha* 13 he relates to the various different forms of bowing and prostration:

Prostration, what is implied? After one lifts his head from the fifth bow, he sits on the ground, falls with his face towards the earth, and utters all the supplications that he desires. Kneeling always refers to [falling to] one's knees; bowing, to bending over on one's face; and prostration, to stretching out on one's hands and feet until he is flat with his face on the ground. (*Hilkhot Tefila* 5:13)

The Rambam writes that only on Yom Kippur would the people fall on their faces after every *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer, because it is a day of supplication, petition and fast. It is interesting that in his review of the regular liturgy, the Rambam describes what happens when falling on one's face:

It is our custom to offer supplications while falling on one's face with these words and verses… I, therefore, kneel, and prostrate myself, and plead before You, Master of the Universe, God of gods, and Lord of lords, for it is not based on our righteousness that we cast our supplications before You, but rather based on your great compassion. (*Seder Tefilot*, *Kaddish*)

It turns out that the Rambam identifies prostration with falling on one's face when the person's face is flat on the ground.

Rav Israel Ariel[[3]](#footnote-3) suggests that the position of the Rambam and the *Tur* regarding the obligation to fall on one's face with outstretched hands and feet at the end of the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayerhas a source in the Gemara in *Megila* 22a. There it is stated that at the end of the prayer service on fast days "everyone fell on their faces," that is to say they fell on their faces with outstretched hands and feet.

During the period of the Geonim it was customary to bow down at the end of every *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer. As it is brought in *Siddur Rav Amram Gaon*: "And the congregation fall on their faces." The supplication prayers recited at that point in the serve include confession.

We see then that this practice was observed not only during the Biblical period and during the time of the Second Temple, but also during the periods of the Amoraim and the Gaonim, and even in the time of the Rambam.[[4]](#footnote-4)

### Prostration as an expression of prayer in the book of *Tehilim*

Let us briefly survey several examples that connect prostration to prayer in the book of *Tehilim*.

In Psalm 66 an appeal is made to all the inhabitants of the earth to make a joyful noise to the Lord:

All the earth shall prostrate before You, and shall sing to You; they shall sing to your name. Sela…

O bless our God, you peoples, and make the voice of His praise to be heard…

I will go into Your house with burnt-offerings; I will pay You my vows… (*Tehilim* 66:4-13)

And at the end of the psalm, King David states:

But verily God has heard me; He has attended to the voice of my prayer. Blessed be God, who has not turned away my prayer, nor removed His steadfast love from me. (*Tehilim* 66:19-20)

Psalm 86 deals explicitly with prayer. In the framework of this prayer, the psalmist turns to the nations to come and prostrate themselves before God:

A prayer of David. Incline Your ear, O Lord, hear me: for I am poor and needy…

Give ear, O lord, to my prayer; and attend to the voice of my supplications.

All nations whom You have made shall come and prostrate themselves before You, O Lord, and shall glorify Your name. (*Tehilim* 86:1-9)

Psalm 95 which also deals with prayer also relates to thanksgiving: "Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise to Him with psalms" (*Tehilim* 95:2). In this framework it is stated: "O come let us prostrate ourselves and bow down: let us kneel before the Lord our maker" (*Tehilim* 95:6).

In Psalm 132 David beseeches God to reveal to him the site of the Temple, and says: "We will go into His dwelling places; we will prostrate ourselves at His footstool" (*Tehilim* 132:7).

We have brought these examples from the words of King David in the book of *Tehilim* which show a clear connection between prostration and prayer and thanksgiving in general, and in connection with the Temple in particular.

In many senses, there are few figures like King David who succeeded to give detailed expression of his desire for God's closeness and of his prayers to God in every situation, in times of trouble and in times of gladness, in times of sin and crisis and in times of elation and happiness.

It is therefore very understandable, based on what we learned in this *shiur* that David often prostrated himself before God, that prostration is the ultimate expression of prayer, not only through man's words, but through his very body.

In next week's *shiur*, we will deal with the prohibition to bow down, even to the God of Israel, on a stone floor.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. *Bemidbar* 14:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Later in the chapter mention is made of "the host of heaven that prostrate themselves before You," as was discussed in the previous *shiur.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In *Machzor ha-Mikdash le-Yom ha-Kippurim*, in the chapter dealing with prostration in the Temple and after its destruction, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Those who follow the view of the Rambam prostrate themselves with outstretched hands and feet at the end of every *Shemoneh Esrei* on Yom Kippur. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)