

The Meaning of Shokeling [usual spelling, Shuckling]

The picture of a Jew swaying to and fro in prayer or religious study is one that I have long been inclined to explain on "practical" grounds. During lengthy periods of standing, it saves wear and tear on the feet. It also enhances one's concentration. As you focus upon the book before your eyes, it is the rest of your surroundings that appear to be swaying in a vague blur, and hence you are less likely to be distracted by the temptations of the environment.

I am not aware of a fully appropriate English word to designate the action. Nor, for that matter, can I think of a Hebrew word that adequately captures the swaying motion of Jewish prayer.

It is to Yiddish that we must turn to get the precise verb, to *shokel*. This fact would seem to indicate that the practice has a particular association with the Eastern European milieu, and conjures up images of the Hasidic *shtiebelach* of Poland and Russia.

In truth however, the picture of the Jew swaying in prayer is one that has a long history throughout the Jewish world, and has often been noted by outsiders as a peculiarity of Jewish worship.

Most Talmudic sources actually seem to recommend standing straight and still while praying. These sources emphasize that one's concentration during prayer should be absolute. From Ezekiel's description of the angels of the divine chariot standing "with legs straight" (Ezek. 1:7), the Talmudic rabbis learned that one should hold one's feet rigidly together during prayer.

Jewish law tended to discourage excesses of bowing and prostration, and took care to define those points in the service when bowing is allowed.

It is related nonetheless that Rabbi Akiva, when praying privately, would be left in one corner and be found later in another, because of his constant bowing and prostrations.

The Kuzari

By the beginning of the Middle Ages the Jews of Arabia were already notorious for their *shokeling*--to the extent that an old Arabic poem uses it as an image to describe the swaying of a camel.

By the 11th century the practice of *shokeling* had come to be regarded as an identifying mark among the Jews of Muslim Spain.

Thus, we find a reference to it in one of the theological classics of the time, Rabbi Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*. This famous work took the form of a philosophical dialogue between a rabbi and the king of the Khazars, a Mongol kingdom in Russia whose leaders had adopted Judaism in the 8th century.

The *Kuzari*, presenting a fictionalized account of the arguments which ultimately persuaded the king to accept Judaism, focuses on a variety of sober topics in the areas of philosophy, science, Torah, Hebrew language and Jewish history. Amidst all this serious theology, the Khazar king cannot resist asking his Jewish teacher why Jews move to and fro when reading the Bible.

The Rabbi begins by offering a conventionally held view: "it is said that it is done in order to arouse natural heat."

He then proceeds to suggest his own theory: Originally, there were not enough books to go around, and ten or more individuals would have to share a single text. Each would have to bend down towards the book in order to have his turn at reading, then stand back to let others have a peek. "This resulted in a continual bending and sitting

up... Then it became a habit through constant seeing, observing and imitating, which is in man's nature."

A similar theory, current in contemporary Israeli "folklore," explains that Yemenite Jews are often able to read books from unusual angles as a result of the dearth of books in the "old country." Several students would have to sit around a single rare volume, each one observing it from a different direction. The story does indeed have a ring of plausibility.

Igniting the Soul

The phenomenon of *shokeling* during religious study was conspicuous enough to be addressed by the *Zohar*, the classic of Jewish mysticism composed in 13th century Spain. The hero of the book, Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, is asked by his students why it is only the Jews who move back and forth when learning Torah.

Rabbi Simeon begins his beautiful reply by observing that the soul of a Jew derives mystically from the Celestial Torah. Thus, through hearing a word of Torah the soul is immediately ignited like the wick of a lamp, as it is joined with its supernal source.

By swaying during Torah study, the Jew's body is actually quivering to the flame-like rhythm of his soul. No other people, says Rabbi Simeon, possesses such a mystical connection to the divine Torah.

Christian observers were also aware of the Jewish proclivity towards *shokeling*. An interesting testimony to this fact can be found in the margins of a 13th century Latin manuscript of the *Histories of Peter Comestor*, a popular medieval retelling of biblical history.

The marginal glosses in question were composed by one Abbas (i.e. Abbot) Johannes de Brach, a figure who demonstrates an impressive expertise in Jewish as well as Christian and Greek

scholarship, including a measure of familiarity with the Hebrew language.

When he reaches the description of the revelation at Mount Sinai, and to the verse (Exodus 19:18), "And the *whole mount quaked terribly*," Abbot Johannes makes the following observation, "Thence it is that the Jews still quake at their prayer, representing the quaking at the mount."

The remark sounds uncannily like a typical Jewish Midrash, though I am not aware of any Jewish source that presents such an explanation.

A very similar interpretation however is found in an almost contemporary Spanish Jewish commentary, that of R. Jacob ben Asher, known as the *Ba'al Ha-Turim*. Rabbi Jacob links the custom to a verse a few lines earlier in Exodus (19:16) "And all the people that were in the camp trembled."

It is obvious, in any case, that the Jews in 13th century Europe were known for their *shokeling* during prayer.

Call for Decorum

By the time we get to the 19th century the emancipated and religiously enlightened Jews of Germany have little sympathy for the traditional swaying during religious services. Shokeling is grouped with other traditional practices which are regarded as violations of the solemnity and decorum appropriate to a place of worship.

A very articulate call for religious reform, composed by Eliezer Liebermann in Dessau 1818, contrasts the typical Jewish service with that of the non-Jew: "Why should we not draw a lesson from the people among whom we live? Look at the Gentiles and see how

they stand in awe and reverence and with good manners in their house of prayer. No one utters a word, *no one moves a limb...*"

It is perhaps significant that, according to an uncorroborated report by the historian Heinrich Graetz, Liebermann eventually converted to Catholicism.

This insistence on standing still during the service was justified by the Reformers on grounds of promoting respect and orderliness in a house of worship. Over the last two centuries it came to be linked with a number of related changes in the structure of the synagogue service.

Thus, for example, we now find a widespread use of professional cantors, rather than lay prayer leaders. The *bimah* is moved from the middle of the sanctuary to a stage-like structure at its front. The cantors begin to turn towards the congregants, instead of leading them by facing in the same direction.

Congregation as Audience

All these changes, which became particularly widespread in North American Judaism, have legitimate historical precedents or aesthetic justifications. Taken together, however, they produced a common outcome: to place the congregation in the role of an "audience," passively observing as someone else conducts the service for them.

Sociologists and historians of modern Judaism have generally understood this phenomenon as a recognition of the fact that significant proportions of the American communities are no longer knowledgeable enough to participate actively in the services. This fact serves at once to reflect and promote alienation from the community.

In fact one recent sociological study of American synagogue life found that careful observation of different patterns of *shokeling* reveals some remarkable differences between different groups within the Jewish community. One can note distinct variations between the swayings of men and women, modern and traditional orthodox, and even between parents and their yeshivah-educated children.

Perhaps the humble, much maligned act of *shokeling*, wherein individual Jews, moving their bodies to a private rhythm as they commune with their Creator, is the ultimate act of protest against being relegated to religious passivity. As recognized by Jew and Gentile alike over the ages, it represents something that is integral and unique to traditional Jewish religious life.

From: http://people.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/Shokel/891201_Shokeling.html