

Choreography
Shavuot 2018 Sermon Slam
May 19, 2018
Stephen Baum
Temple Aliyah, Needham

Each Shabbat, we interact with a great many words. We hope to be inspired by some of them, to be moved towards action. The liturgy is filled with beautiful lessons, carefully written, providing wise interpretations of ancient themes.

This does its work, sometimes. But often I find myself inattentive. I just can't be profound and thinking for more than a few minutes at a time. My seat in the pew is soothing, and I find myself drifting away from any real connection with the many words around me.

Luckily for me, there are times when I am prompted to stand.

Twice each Shabbat, we stand for the Amidah. Early in that prayer, there is the Kedushah. If even standing isn't quite enough to bring me back to awareness, I find the choreography in the Kedushah will do so.

We read a few lines from Isaiah 6, which begin with his extraordinary vision of God on a high and lofty throne in heaven, attended by seraphim. We hear the description of the angels calling to each other: "v'karei zeh el zeh", and when we hear those words we turn slightly to each side. Moments later, when we quote the seraphim saying "Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh", we punctuate each word by rising on our toes.

Our first gesture is horizontal, our second is vertical. We reach out to each other first, to God next. We need each other to be able to say the words of the Kedushah out loud, because saying the Amidah aloud requires a minyan. We assure and strengthen each other, and it does matter with whom we pray.

If we are in mourning or observing a yahrzeit, we will also stand for the mourner's Kaddish. That is our usual practice, except for Yizkor services or somber observances such as Yom haShoah when we will all stand for the Kaddish. In the reform movement, I believe it is their practice for everyone to stand during the mourner's Kaddish. Our approach has more fidelity with the history of the



Kaddish, as leading a prayer is an honor, in this case both for the mourner and the person who is being mourned. It also has the practical advantage of letting all of us know who is in mourning or observing a yahrzeit, and to whom we might want to talk after the service concludes. When everyone stands for a Kaddish though, it emphasizes one important truth – anyone’s loss diminishes us all.

This doesn’t happen very often, but occasionally during a daily service, we find that no one is there to recite a mourner’s Kaddish. The leader will generally read through the Kaddish anyway, representing the larger congregation. I haven’t spoken to the Rabbi or the ritual committee about this, but I like the idea of us all standing for the Kaddish if otherwise only the leader would stand. In the larger community, there are surely people whose passing should be remembered.