

Taking a Knee

Sukkos Day 2

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The Gaon of Vilna noted that if one wishes to understand the true meaning of a word or expression in Tanach, he ought to take a look at the very first instance where it appears. *Lehavdil*, the same can be said for social phenomena and contemporary idioms. On May 2, 1960, the University of South Carolina held a Varsity/Alumni football game. During halftime, one of the Alumni players, Albert "King" Dixon Jr. (known to his teammates as "the Little King"), paid tribute to [Rex Enright](#), a longtime coach and athletic director who had died only a month before.¹

The State (Columbia, S.C.), May 2, 1960, p. 3B

¹ <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=34671>

THE GREAT MOMENT

Fans missed the game's greatest moment. It didn't happen on the field but in the Alumn's dressing room at halftime.

The place was noisy, almost deafeningly so. With two minutes left before they had to go back out on the field, the Little King stood up and said:

"Some of us talked about this before the game. We all played for him. We all loved him. Now he's gone. So let's all take a knee for a moment of silence for our Rex Enright."

The big men knelt and there was a quietness, so dramatic it stopped the heart for a minute. Then Dixon offered a prayer, a simple and moving tribute to the late University of South Carolina athletic director.

Over time, as we know well, "taking a knee" on the gridiron has come to assume several meanings: It can mean, literally, resting on one's knees, it can mean kneeling in prayer as Tim Tebow did and it can describe the Quarterback of a winning team getting on his knees to run down the clock at the end of a game. However, as of late, this phrase has taken on a new meaning; now, whenever someone "takes a knee" on the field, he is likely doing so in defiance, to register protest.

Today, we will *not* discuss whether the players of the NFL are overpaid ingrates or principled protesters; We will *not* discuss the virtue signaling on this issue by people who scarcely move a muscle from the prone position when they are ensconced in their couches during the national anthem; and

we will *not* discuss what Jerry Jones thinks about kneeling. No, today we will discuss what “taking a knee” means according to *our* tradition.

The truth is that we should be intimately familiar with this posture by this time, having prostrated ourselves twice on Rosh Hashanah and four times during Mussaf of Yom Kippur alone. But it’s not only found in our High Holidays services, in fact, we talk about taking a knee three times a day during the Aleinu prayer-כי לך תכרע כל ברך- *for You, all humanity will take a knee*. But there is another seasonally appropriate connection to the people who were constantly כורעים ומשתחוים ומודים.

The Mishnah tells us that the season of the Chaggim in Jerusalem occasioned a number of significant miracles. Most notably, even as hundreds of thousands of Jews crowded in the teeming streets and bazaars of Jerusalem, there was room for all of them. In fact, not only was there room, but [as I mentioned at Kol Nidrei] no one complained about it-possibly the biggest miracle of all! There was also another miracle, slightly more enigmatic, which took place. As people poured into the sacred precincts of the Beit Hamikdash, the walls expanded to accommodate them. And while there *are* things that tend to expand during the Yom Tov cycle, such as our waistlines and the length of our shopping receipts, that is a far cry from the miraculous kind of expansion that was witnessed by the *olei*

regalim. Nonetheless, the Mishnah informs us that the walls did not expand automatically. People stood shoulder to shoulder; it was still crowded and uncomfortable- עומדים צפופים. Yet, when the time came to bow, there was suddenly ample space for each person- ומשתחיים רוחים.

There is an obvious question to be asked. If the walls expanded to allow ample room for bowing, why not do the same when people stood as well? Rav Shmuel Eliyahu Taub of Modzitz explained that it was the very act of bowing that triggered the wondrous growth of the Beit Hamikdash. When a person stands upright and assumes an arrogant posture, there is no room for anyone else; the world becomes a narrow, tight and uncomfortable place, but prostration, bowing, taking a knee- these are all expressions of humility before God.

עומדים צפופים ומשתחויים רוחים (אבות ה), ולמה לא התרחב הנס שיהיו גם עומדים רוחים? אלא, עומדים בחינת גבהות וגאווה, קומה זקופה, ו"משתחויים", בחינת ענווה, ביטול והכנעה. והפירוש הוא: עומדים – אלה שהיו עומדים בקומה זקופה ובגיאאות, אצלם היה צפוף, בין שהיו עומדים ובין כשהיו משתחויים. ומשתחויים – אלה שהיו בהכנעה, הם היה רוחים, בין כשהיו עומדים ובין כשהיו משתחויים.
ארמור' ר' ש' א' טאוב ממודיץ

It is in the act of bowing that we find the greatest challenge of all. The walls of the Beit Hamikdash expand when we humble ourselves **before God alone**, לפני מלך מלכי המלכים. Nowadays, however, kneeling has become repurposed for other causes and agendas. People bow for all sorts of reasons

and motives, and as such, it behooves us to ask ourselves: To whom do we bow? Before whom do we nullify ourselves?

Perhaps it is someone with more money than we have, who has a better paying or more prestigious job and whose favor we desire. Perhaps it is the administration of a school that bows before a child of an influential parent, or the shuls that lavish disproportionate attention on their biggest *machers*. We know people like this are accorded outsize respect- they command a sense of awe when they walk into a room, and are consulted for their expertise in many areas that have nothing to do with their intelligence or moral character. The great Jewish philosopher Tevye the Milkman nailed it when he wistfully envisioned a world in which he were a rich man:

The most important men in town would come to fawn on me!

They would ask me to advise them,

Like a Solomon the Wise.

"If you please, Reb Tevye..."

"Pardon me, Reb Tevye..."

Posing problems that would cross a rabbi's eyes!

And it won't make one bit of difference if i answer right or wrong.

When you're rich, they think you really know!²

² <https://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/fiddlerontheroof/ifiwearerichman.htm>

And even if it is not done on an institutional level, it is done on a private level. Are we sycophantic toward people we know who are in a crowd we'd like to be in, because they are adored- or feared- by many? Does it bother us when we're not invited to certain parties or events, even though we have absolutely no interest in attending or the availability to do so? We may not even *like* these people, as an aggregate or as individuals, but we bow before them because we want to be part of the "in" crowd, for reasons we can't really define.

Sukkos is the time when we work on our humility- when we are asked to relocate to more modest surroundings. And perhaps the hope is that the unpretentious structure in which we dwell for eight days will affect our experience, but also our character. And so, the next time we "take a knee" let's remember the very first time it was used on the football field- by "Little King" Dixon. Back then, it was still a gesture of awe, reverence and humility. If we can channel the little king, we can make room for the Biggest King of all.