

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Moshe ben Mordechai a”h
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Are the People at the *Kosel* Facing the *Right Direction*?

PARSHAS ACHAREI MOS 5776

(An analysis of some of the laws relating to proper positioning during davening. A significant portion of what follows is based on the sefer Piskei Teshuvos, vol. I, 94:1:2.)

This week’s *parshah* centers around what must be described as one of the most awe-inspiring situations imaginable: The Kohen Gadol (High Priest) – a most elevated personage, entering the Kodesh Hakaddashim (Holy of Holies) – the most sacred place on earth, on Yom Kippur – the holiest day of the year.

And while the thought of it might seem so removed from people such as ourselves, the truth is that it might not be as far away as we think. In fact, we can – and are actually bidden to – relate to a most similar situation on a fairly constant basis.

This situation manifests itself in the *halachos* governing the daily prayers – specifically in the realm of *kavanah*, which can include intention, concentration, and even direction.

Direct Your Heart

This notion is mentioned in the Mishnah in Berachos (4:5), which states:

הִזָּה רוֹכֵב עַל הַחֲמֹר, יֵרֵד. וְאִם אֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לֵירֵד, יִחְזִיר אֶת פְּנָיו, וְאִם אֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לְהִחְזִיר אֶת פְּנָיו, יִכּוֹן אֶת לְבוֹ
כְּנֶגֶד בַּיִת קֹדֶשׁ הַקְּדוֹשִׁים.

“(If) someone is riding on a donkey (and the time to *daven Shemoneh Esreih* arrives), he should descend (from the animal and pray). If he is unable to descend, he should turn his face (toward the direction of Yerushalayim [*Rashi*]). If he is unable to turn his face, he should direct his heart toward the Holy of Holies.”

There actually is a certain complexity involved with the *halachos* of proper positioning and intention, regarding where exactly one should be facing and what he should be thinking. (As always, this forum is intended for study and consideration, not for rendering actual rulings; for that, one should consult a proper *halachic* authority.) While stopping short of clarifying the exact parameters, we cite some noteworthy quotes relevant to the topic. They are brought here somewhat out of the full context, but their inclusion should at least serve the purpose of imparting some of the flavor of this lofty ideal:

צָרִיד שְׂכֹחוֹף רִאשׁוֹ מֵעֵט שְׂיִהְיוּ עֵינָיו לְמַטָּה לְאַרְץ וְיִחְשׁוּב כְּאִילוֹ עוֹמֵד בְּבַיִת הַמְּקֹדֶשׁ וּבְלִבּוֹ
יִכְוֶן לְמַעְלָה לְשָׁמַיִם.

“(When praying,) he should bend his head slightly, such that his eyes point downward toward the earth. **And he should think in his mind as if he was standing in the Beis Hamikdash**, and in his heart he should direct himself upward toward the Heavens” (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 95:2*).

שְׂיִחְשׁוּב בְּלִבּוֹ וְרָעִינוֹ כְּאִילוֹ הוּא עוֹמֵד בְּמְקוֹדֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם בְּמְקוֹם קוֹדֶשׁ הַקְּדוֹשִׁים...
וְיִרְאֶה אֶת עַצְמוֹ כְּאִילוֹ הוּא עוֹמֵד לְפָנֵי הַכְּפֹרֶת.

“He should think in his heart and mind as if he is standing in the Sanctuary, which is in Yerushalayim, in the area of the Holy of Holies... **And he should view himself as if he is standing before the Holy Ark**” (*Mishnah Berurah* 94:3,7).

When You Don't Know Where to Turn...

An interesting question arises regarding this very idea. The sight that greets a visitor to the *Kosel* is always beautiful and inspiring: numerous Jews standing at this last vestige of the Temple area, pouring out their hearts in close proximity to the holiest site on earth. At first glance, however, there might be something incongruous with this picture. Most people at this prayer site stand directly opposite and facing the Wall. Technically speaking, however, it would seem that they should actually adjust their positioning somewhat if they want to be facing the precise area where the *Kodesh Hakaddashim* actually stood. This area (which cannot be accessed on *halachic* grounds) is currently covered, to our great chagrin, by a foreign structure topped by a prominent dome. Shouldn't the worshippers at the *Kosel* shift their positioning such that they face directly toward that particular area? (In fact, the *sefer Mo'adim U'zmanim* [vol. III, § 229] states that there are those who are indeed particular to do just that: when they *daven* at the *Kosel*, they position themselves on a diagonal in order to face that very direction.)

This matter is actually taken up by the *halachic* commentators who offer various explanations as to why most worshippers continue to face forward. The *Mishnas Yosef* suggests that we are unable to face diagonally for technical reasons. In other words, *in theory* it would be ideal to face directly towards the area of the *Kodesh Hakaddashim*. But it is the presence of that foreign structure that prevents us from doing so, as it would not be appropriate to offer our prayers to Hashem while facing that object of disgrace.

Another approach is offered by R' Moshe Shternbuch (*Teshuvos V'hanhagos*, vol. III, § 39; also the author of the aforementioned *Mo'adim U'zmanim*). He casts aspersions on the notion that the *Kodesh Hakaddashim* is actually located in that area. He elaborates on the view that there is much evidence suggesting that the *Kodesh Hakaddashim* is actually situated somewhere else; thus, there is little to be gained by shifting one's position.

Taking the matter one step farther, the *Piskei Teshuvos* cites opinions that those who face forward at the *Kosel* are not only sanctioned to do so, but are actually facing precisely the right way! Unfortunately, there actually are not one but two improper, foreign structures situated on this most sacred site. There are opinions that hold that the actual location of the *Kodesh Hakaddashim* is squarely *between* those two intrusive structures. That would place it directly opposite the *Kosel* itself. According to this, then, the worshippers facing straight ahead at the *Kosel* are indeed praying in the direction of the actual *Kodesh Hakaddashim*.

(Needless to say – for actual rulings, consult your *rav*!)