



What Is the Difference Between Standing and Sitting?

Why do we stand up for certain prayers but sit for others? And what is the deeper meaning behind it?

Standing

"Congregation, please rise."

These familiar words can be heard in many shuls. If you pay attention, you'll notice that at certain times in the prayers everyone sits and at other times, they stand. Why? We all know that the Shemoneh Esrei is known as the Amidah, or the Standing prayer, named for the requirement to stand during its recital.

From where do we get this law of standing during prayer? We know that prayers were instituted in place of the sacrifices which were brought in the Temple. In the Temple, when one brought a sacrifice he would have to stand. From that we learn that during prayer one should also stand.

In general, there were no chairs in the Holy Temple and anyone who came would stand. The Supreme Court (Sanhedrin) that convened in the Temple, had to gather in an area that was not officially part of the Temple — in order to be able to sit.

During prayer we stand not only during the Silent Prayer but during any very important prayers such as the prayer of "Baruch Sheamar"

and “Yishtabach.”

Nevertheless, there is one very central prayer during which we sit: the Shema. If someone is already sitting while he is reading the Shema, not only does he not need to stand, but it is forbidden to stand!

Sitting

There are two reasons for this. The first is according to Halacha and the second is according to Kabbalah. The first explanation is that one may think that from the words “when you lie down and when you stand up” we learn that we should stand during the Shema. The Sages concluded that this is not what is meant and we do not need to stand. Therefore, anyone who stands during the Shema — it is as if he is disagreeing with the Sages.

On a deeper level, Chassidus explains that there is a difference between standing and sitting. When a person is standing it is an expression of humility and nullification to the King before whom he is standing. On the contrary, when a person is sitting it is an expression of feeling full of his “self.” An important person does not stand for someone of lesser stature.

On the other hand, when a person wants to meditate and think deeply about something profound, it is easier to sit and be relaxed.

Therefore, during the Shema, when a Jew is obligated to meditate on the oneness of G-D, it is better to remain seated.

The silent prayer, on the other hand, is an actual “meeting” with G-D. This is why we take three steps back and then three steps forward — like one who is entering the chamber of the King to talk to him. The same applies to the end of the prayer when we again take three steps back as if taking leave of the king.

When a person meets a king, he needs to be completely nullified and

humbled before the king and therefore we are required to stand during the Amidah prayer.

Torah Study

Now, what is the law regarding the reading of the Torah? In the synagogue here everyone sits during the reading of the Torah, but there are many synagogues where people are stringent and have the custom to stand. Which is correct?

Seemingly, since during the reading of the Torah we are hearing the words of G-D, the correct thing would be to honor it with standing. Just like by the giving of the Torah, the Jews were not sitting on easy chairs listening to the Ten Commandments; so too maybe we should also stand during the reading of the Torah.

In addition to all of this, there is a story in the book of Judges in which a non-Jewish king, Eglon, king of Moav, stood to hear the prophecy from G-D that Ehud, son of Gera, brought him. Rashi comments that “from this deed he merited to have Ruth descend from him.” If a non-Jewish king stood to hear the words of G-d, how much more so we, the Jewish nation, should do so.

The answer to this question is found in this week’s Torah portion. The Torah talks about how Moshe tells the Jews about his forty day stay up in heaven. He went up on Mt. Sinai to get the first set of Tablets from G-D, and afterwards the Jews sinned with the Golden Calf and then he went up to get the second set of Tablets.

When Moshe talks about the first set he says, “When I went up the mountain to receive the stone tablets...and I was sitting on the mountain forty days and nights.” It would seem that Moshe literally sat on the mountain.

One chapter afterwards, when Moshe is telling about the second set of tablets he says, “And I stood on the mountain like the first, forty days

and nights.” This says that he stood on the mountain, so which one is it? Did Moshe sit or stand on Mount Sinai?

The Talmud asks this question and brings a few answers. Rav says that Moshe stood when he heard the Torah from G-D and when he reviewed it to himself, he sat. Raba says he learned the simple things standing and the more complicated ones sitting.

The Gemara tells us that from the days of Moshe until the days of Rabban Gamliel everyone learned Torah standing. When Rabban Gamliel passed away, a weakness descended on the world and everyone learned Torah while seated.

For close to 1300 years, from the giving of the Torah until the days of Raban Gamliel, who lived soon before the destruction of the second Temple, the Torah was learned while standing. There were no benches in the houses of study and all the Torah lectures were heard standing. (No one fell asleep during speeches, truly the times of Moshiach!) However, they started to notice that the generations were getting weaker and if they did not put in benches, no one would come to learn Torah! Therefore, they permitted the learning of the Torah while seated.

Since we found both sitting and standing by Moshe, nowadays important parts of prayer are said standing — but Torah study and listening to the Torah reading is done sitting.

The Difference

There is a clear difference between sitting and standing. When everyone is standing, each person is a different height. When seated, everyone is basically the same height, and no one has to lift their head to look at another.

When a Jew comes to pray to G-D, it is a personal connection that exists only between him and his creator. Naturally, each person is on a

different level in their relationship with G-d, and that is why we stand during prayer.

Learning Torah on the other hand, is done as a group effort. To truly be successful in learning Torah, we must sit together and not look down on each other, and that is why we sit when we learn Torah.