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## WARNING: PRAY ONLY WITH CAUTION

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

In American English, “falling flat on one’s face” is a comic fail. In Jewish tradition, however, it is a prayer posture of terrible power and danger, known as *nefilat apayim*.

After the Oven of Akhnai incident, Rabbi Eliezer’s wife prevented him from praying prostrate. She knew that he blamed her brother, Rabban Gamliel, for his excommunication, and feared that G-d would avenge his pain. One day, she was distracted, and her brother died.

Many siddurim still refer to the “Tachanun” prayer following the morning and afternoon *amidahs* as *nefilat apayim*. We however limit prayerful prostration on any surface to the High Holidays. There are many reasons for that choice<sup>1</sup>, but I think at least one of them is a fear of praying too successfully.

Another possible reason is that prostration on a stone floor is permitted only on the Temple Mount; anywhere else, the same action is a violation of *even maskit*, a prohibition closely related to idolatry.

However, there is no violation of *even maskit* if something separates between face and floor. Around 3.5 minutes into his recorded OU shiur on 2Divrei HaYamim Chapter 7, Rabbi Shalom Rosner contends that this is why we put our heads on our arms when saying *tachanun*. The practice is a vestige of a time when we did *nefilat apayim*. The arm was used to separate between our head and the floor, just in case.

On this basis, Rabbi Rosner asserts that it is a mistake to believe that there is a halakhic requirement for the relevant arm to be clothed, for example in a long-sleeved garment. “There is no such halakhah!” It is true that the arm by itself would not suffice as a separation. However, one can say *tachanun* on a *shtender*, or over a table, and the furniture serves as an adequate separation. The point is to separate face from floor, not face from arm.

However, the ArtScroll siddur’s instructions say that: “The head should not rest on the bare arm, rather the arm should be covered with a sleeve, *tallis*, or even a cloth”. Mr. Mitchell Klausner was bothered by Rabbi Rosner’s seemingly cavalier dismissal of a position endorsed by ArtScroll and brought it to my attention.

I initially responded based on my high school *girsas deyanakuta* that ArtScroll is merely channeling Mishnah Berurah 131:3:

ונוהגים לכסות הפנים בבגד,

ולא די כיסוי היד שנופל פניו עליה,

לפי שהיד והפנים גוף אחד הם, ואין הגוף יכול לכסות את עצמו [מ"א]:

The custom is to cover the face with a garment,  
and the covering of the hand that his face falls onto is not  
sufficient,

because the hand and the face are one body, and the body cannot  
cover itself.

But this only intensified the problem. While Rabbi Rosner might not be aware of the ArtScroll instructions, he surely was familiar with the Mishnah Berurah, and with the Magen Avrohom that the Mishnah Berurah cites.

One might respond that Rabbi Rosner understands those sources as discussing cases where there aren’t enough tables for the people saying *tachanun*. But this is a weak reading of Mishnah Berurah’s statement that “The custom is”.

On the other hand, Mishnah Berurah states that the custom is “to cover the face”, and not the hand, which I think fits well with Rabbi Rosner’s contention that the issue is about separating face and floor, with the hand having no per se significance.

However, Magen Avraham does not say quite what Mishnah Berurah ascribes to him. Here is Magen Avraham 131:2:

ומ"מ נוהגין להפסיק בבגד,

דיד לא חשיב כיסוי,

דמיין במינו אין חוצק,

כמ"ש סימן צ"ח:

Regardless, the custom is to separate via a garment,  
because the hand is not considered a covering,

because a thing does not legally separate between its own kind  
(and something else),  
as is written in Siman 98.

Where Mishnah Berurah speaks of “one body”, Magen Avrohom speaks of “one kind”. I thought of connecting the dispute between Rabbi Rosner and ArtScroll to this difference. But I worried that I was overreading mere stylistic variations, so I looked in Siman 98 – and found nothing obviously relevant. However, Machatzit Hashekel corrects the citation to Siman 91, and adds a citation to Siman 74 as well.

<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Peninei Halakhah at [https://ph.yhb.org.il/20-15-13/#\\_te01ftn15\\_18](https://ph.yhb.org.il/20-15-13/#_te01ftn15_18)

Here is Shulchan Arukh OC 91:3-4:

יש אומרים שאסור להוציא אזכרה מפיו בראש מגולה;  
וי"א שיש למחות שלא ליכנס בבהכ"נ בגלוי הראש.  
כובעים, (קפיל"ה בלעז) הקלועים מקש - חשיבא כסוי,  
אבל הנחת יד על הראש - לא חשיבא כסוי;  
ואם אחר מניח ידו על ראשו של זה - משמע דחשיבא כסוי.

Some say that it is forbidden to speak a Divine Name with one's head uncovered;

and some say that one should express an objection in order to prevent someone entering a Beit Kneset with an uncovered head.

Hats woven of straw – are considered a covering,  
but placing a hand on the head – is not considered a covering;  
but if another person puts their hand on this person's head – the indications are that this is considered a covering.

The distinction between the same person's hand and another's demonstrates that Mishnah Berurah's formulation is just a more precise formulation of his source Magen Avrohom. All hands and faces are of the same kind, but my hand is part of the same body as my face.

However, Rav Yosef Caro (=“the Mechaber”) in Shulchan Arukh OC 74:2 does not distinguish between hands.

הרוחץ ערום במים צלולים, ורוצה לשתות –  
יכסה בבגד ממטה ללבו,  
כדי שלא יהא לבו רואה את הערוה כשיברך.  
ודוקא בבגד, אבל בידים - לא הוי כסוי.

A person who is bathing in clear water, and wishes to drink – must cover with a garment under their heart, so that their heart will not see their genitals while they bless/ Specifically with a garment, but with their hands – this is not a covering.

Perhaps the distinction should be imported/assumed; but again, the temptation is to make a conceptual distinction between the contexts and connect it to our issue. For example: Siman 91 is discussing whether the head is **covered**, while Siman 74 is discussing whether the heart and genitals are **separated**. (The separation here would be accomplished by putting an arm across the chest) Someone else's hand suffices to cover, but not to separate.<sup>2</sup> Does someone else's hand suffice for *tachanun*? If yes, would that prove that the issue there is about covering the face and not about separating it from the floor, and that's why ArtScroll insists on long sleeves?

Unfortunately, this speculation is disproven by Ramo's (=Rabbi Moshe Isserles, Mapah) gloss:

A gloss:

The same is true if he covers his head with his hands – this is not considered covering the head.

See Siman 91.

(Terumat HaDeshen in the name of Or Zarua).

Ramo explicitly equates the separation of heart and genitals with the requirement to cover the head, and even cites Siman 91!

We could still say that while Ramo equates the two contexts, Rav Caro distinguishes them; but that seems a bridge too far without clear evidence. More likely, Rav Caro assumed that one would understand the law regarding headcovering from Siman 91.

The upshot is that the standard for all these contexts is the same, and our issue can't rest on a dispute about which standard applies.

With that avenue exhausted, I reconsidered Rabbi Rosner's argument from first principles, and asked myself: If the need for an anti-*even maskit* separation can be satisfied by a table, why is the arm necessary at all? I'm not aware of anyone suggesting that leaning on an arm, sleeved or otherwise, is necessary for *tachanun* only when there is no furniture to put one's head on.

Moreover, why retain a concern for *even maskit* if we no longer put our faces anywhere near the floor? Moreover, why are anti-*even maskit* precautions necessary at all if the floor isn't stone? This question is hotly debated even regarding Yom Kippur, when we do put our faces to the ground!

The historically correct answer is that there is another reason for covering the arm. Here is Elijah Rabbah 131:2:

כתב בספר המנהיג לכסות פניו בטלית או בסדור,  
ולא ביד עצמו, מפני שכתובין שם עונותיו:

The Sefer HaManhig wrote that one should cover his face with a tallit or *sudar*, and not with the hand itself, because his sins are written there.

This is cited by a host of Acharonim (always as “HaManhig quoted by Elijah Rabbah”); it seems that they were unable to find the source in HaManhig, and I have not found it either). This rationale obviously cannot be satisfied by saying *tachanun* over furniture, and is the source for those who require long sleeves.

Elyah Rabbah does not explain why the hand is necessary at all, only why it must be covered. Let's assume that the purpose is to prevent any risk of actual *nefilat apayim*, as Rabbi Rosner argues (and as did Rav Elyashiv). Regarding *even maskit*, this seems hopelessly overdone, requiring the law to stack precaution upon precaution. But what if the true concern is lest we damage others with our prayer?

My custom is not to say *tachanun* whenever I am conscious of being angry with someone else for personal reasons.

*Shabbat shalom!*

<sup>2</sup>The halakic discussion is based on traditions about Rabbeinu Tam's bath etiquette that would make for a fascinating historical article, if this has not already been done.