

**Parsha Halacha - Parshat Behar - Bechukotai/Shabbat Mevarchim Chodesh  
Sivan/Shabbat Chazak**

## **Not Bowing on Stone Why, Where and How**

**Sponsored by Jessica and Brent Levison in memory of Brent's mother,  
Chana Necha bas Yakov Levison, of blessed memory - Yohrtzeit, 29 Iyar**

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There are 24 mitzvot in the Torah portion of Behar and 12 in Bechukotai (according to the Sefer HaChinuch). The final mitzvah in Parshat Behar is that one may not bow on a stone floor even when bowing to G-d, as the Torah says ([Levit. 26:1](#)), “וְאֶבֶן מִשְׁכִּית לֹא תִתֵּנוּ בְּאַרְצְכֶם לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת עָלֶיהָ” - And in your land you shall not place a pavement stone on which to prostrate yourselves.” The commentaries differ as to how to translate the words מִשְׁכִּית, a pavement stone:

- **Covering Stones**

[Rashi](#) says that מִשְׁכִּית means “covering” as in the verse (Exodus 33:22) “וְשִׁכְתִּי כָפִי” - And I will cover with my palm.” This means that one may not bow on a floor covered with stones.

- **Gazing Stones**

[Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor](#) and the [Da’at Zekeinim](#) say that מִשְׁכִּית means “gaze at” as in the words סוֹכָה בְּרוּחַ הַקּוֹדֵשׁ, which means “she would gaze with the holy spirit” ([Rashi on Gen. 11:29](#)). (The letters samech “ס” and sin “ש” are interchangeable in some cases.) The verse is referring to stones that were carved with a design and were therefore “gazed at” by people. The Ibn Ezra and the Rashbam cite additional verses where the word מִשְׁכִּית means to “to gaze.” (See [Tehillim 73:7](#) and [Isaiah 2:16](#).) If one were to bow on these stones it might appear as if one were worshipping them.

- **Bowing Stones**

Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg in [HaKetav VeHaKabbalah](#) (based on [Targum Onkelus](#)) translates מִשְׁכִּית as “bowing.” The word is similar to the word שִׁכָּח [וחמת המלך] ([Esther](#)

[7:10](#)] which means “calmed down” or “was lowered.” Thus the verse means that one may not fashion stones on which to bow.

- **Engraved Stones**

The [Targum Yonatan](#) translates אֶבֶן מְצֻיָּר as an אֶבֶן מְצֻיָּר i.e., a stone engraved with designs. As [Rabeinu Bachaye](#) explains, the pagans would carve stones with designs and place them in front of their idols for people to bow on them. In order to distance us from such behaviour, the Torah commands that we not bow on such stones even when worshipping G-d.

Based on the above translations, the verse means that one may not bow down (even to G-d) on a stone floor or on a stone floor with designs on it.

### **Reasons**

Several reasons are given for this mitzvah (some of these are mentioned above):

- **Pagan Custom**

The Rambam writes ([Laws of Avodah Zara 6:6](#)), “The pagans would customarily place a stone before a false deity so that they could prostrate themselves upon it. Therefore, this practice is not followed in the worship of G-d.” (Note that the Rambam does not limit this prohibition to a stone with designs.)

- **May Appear as Idol Worship**

The Sefer HaChinuch says that since the stones in question were engraved with designs (see above), if one were to bow on them, it might appear as if one was bowing to (and worshipping) the stone.

- **Reserved for Worship in the Beit HaMikdash**

The Minchat Chinuch suggests (based on [Rashi D.H. Lo Asra, Megillah 22b](#)) that the reason for the mitzvah may be that since the floor of the Beit HaMikdash was stone (see below) and people would bow on those stones to G-d, the Torah forbade such worship elsewhere so that this form of worship would be unique to the Beit HaMikdash. It is thus similar to sacrifices, which may only be offered in the Beit HaMikdash, and the Keruvim, which may only be fashioned for use in the Beit HaMikdash.

- **To Emphasize Humility**

Rabbi Avraham, the son of the Rambam, writes (Sefer HaMaspik Le’ovdei Hashem, Chapter on Humility) that bowing to G-d on a stone represents arrogance as the stone is above the ground. Bowing directly on the earth symbolizes true humility without any vestige of arrogance. When one humbles oneself to G-d, it must be done with complete submission.

### **In the Beit HaMikdash**

The Talmud ([Megillah 22b](#)) interprets the wording of the verse to teach us that one may bow on a stone floor when worshipping G-d in the Beit HaMikdash (Holy Temple). This is because the verse says, “A *maskit* stone may not be placed **in your land** to bow on it.” The implication is that it is only forbidden in your private land but that in the Beit HaMikdash it is permissible. In fact, we know that the floor of the Beit HaMikdash was stone and that they would bow to G-d on that floor regularly.

Several sources indicate that the floor of the Beit HaMikdash was stone. See [Rambam, Beit HaBechirah 5:1](#) that the Temple Mount was built on (stone) underground arches. See also Josephus (Wars of the Jews 5:192) that the open air courtyards were tiled with stones of various colors and designs.

The fact that bowing took place in the Beit Hamikdash is mentioned in [Avot \(5:5\)](#) and in [Yoma \(21a\)](#).

### **Why Is It Permissible in the Beit HaMikdash?**

The Sefer HaChinuch explains that the reason it is permissible to bow on a stone floor in the Beit HaMikdash is that in this holy place no one would suspect that one is bowing to (and worshipping) the stone rather than the Almighty G-d.

As mentioned above, some say that the reason for the prohibition not to bow on stone is that it is disrespectful to co-opt this holy form of service from the Beit HaMikdash and do it elsewhere (see above). According to this opinion it is clear that it is permissible in the Beit HaMikdash since there is no reason to prohibit it there.

According to the opinion that the reason for the prohibition is that it was a pagan style of worship, it is difficult to understand why it is then permissible in the Beit HaMikdash. The Sefer HaChinuch wonders about this and writes that some things are hidden from our understanding. The Chatam Sofer (on this verse) explains that G-d permitted a stone floor in the Beit HaMikdash as He knew that a stone floor would not absorb the blood of the sacrifices and could be easily washed. So He allowed it despite the similarity to pagan worship.

According to the opinion (the son of the Rambam) that it is forbidden as it symbolizes arrogance, perhaps the overwhelming feeling of the Divine Presence in the Beit HaMikdash precluded any arrogance.

### **Halacha**

The Rambam ([Avodat Kochavim 6](#)) cites several laws that relate to this mitzvah:

- **Bowing or Kneeling**

By Torah law it is only forbidden to prostrate oneself completely on a stone floor, i.e., with one's body, hands and feet, completely flat on the floor.

By Rabbinic law one may also not kneel on a stone floor (with one's knees and face to the ground) even without spreading out one's hands and feet.

- **Carpets and Rugs**

In order to allow for people to bow in Shul (for example on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur), the Rambam writes, “It is a universally accepted custom among the Jewish people to place mats, straw, or hay in synagogues that are paved with stones, to separate between their faces and the stones. If it is impossible to find anything to separate between them and the stones, the person should go to another place to prostrate himself, or lie on his side, so that he will not press his face to the stone.”

### **Other Commentaries**

Here are some of the halachot relating to this mitzvah as discussed by later commentaries:

- **Tile Floors**

The Magen Avraham ([O.C. 131:20](#)) writes that a tile floor is not included in this prohibition as it is not stone.

- **Marble**

The Shevet HaLevi writes (1:23, quoted in the Dirshu Mishnah Berurah 131:52) that, for the purpose of this prohibition, marble is considered to be a regular stone.

- **Carpets That Are Attached**

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (Halichot Shlomo, 19:6, quoted in ibid 54) writes that it is customary to be strict and not bow on a carpet covering a stone floor if the carpet is attached to the wall as it is considered to be part of the building itself. If it is a rug or a carpet that is removed from time to time, one may bow on it.

- **Bowing While Standing**

The Magen Avraham cites the Rivash who says that one who is praying in a room with a stone floor may bow during his prayers while standing with one’s feet on the floor (as we do in the Amidah).

- **Prostration on Other Floors**

The Mishnah Berurah writes ([131:40](#)) that, by Rabbinic law, it is forbidden to completely prostrate oneself (like a flat line) on any floor whatsoever. This decree was made lest one forget and do so on a stone floor.

- **Hard Floors**

Some say (Mateh Efrayim 121:14) that it is customary not to bow with one’s face to the floor on any hard floor (for example, on Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur). This would include a dirt floor, a tile floor, or even a wooden floor. According to this opinion, in all of these cases one should place a rug (or one’s tallit, see Sha’ar HaTziyun 131:44) on the floor before bowing down with one’s face to the floor. These items should be placed so that they form a separation between one’s face and the floor. This is more important than having a separation between one’s knees and the floor, as the Rambam writes (ibid 6:7), “to separate between their faces and the stones.”

The Piskei Teshuvot (131:27) writes that, although the Mishnah Berurah permits using one's tallit to separate between oneself and the floor, that is only because a tallit is worn loosely on one's body. Other articles of clothing (such as a sweater) would not constitute an interruption for this purpose.

### **No Stone Floor Shuls**

The Me'iri (on Megillah 22b) writes that some say one should not build shuls with stone floors so that one not come to transgress this mitzvah.

**May we soon merit to bow to G-d on the stone floor of the Beit HaMikdash!**

**Wishing you a Shabbat Shalom Umevorach and a Chodesh Tov! Chazak!**

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