Waist-Bowing and Knee-Bowing

There are two main types of bowing during the prayer services:

- Bowing just from the waist (with and without taking steps), and
- Bowing with the knees, plus two variations on *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur* (hands and knees on floor).

I. Waist-Bowing (Two Forms)

A. Waist-Bowing/No Steps, for:

- *Modim;*
- *Modim* in reader's repetition of *amida;*
- *Bar'chu;*
- *Lecha Dodi;* and
- *Alenu.*

To bow this way, keep your legs straight and bend forward from your waist.

B. Waist-Bowing/Take Steps, for:

Oseh shalom at the end of:

- *Amida,* and
- *Kaddish.*

To bow this way:

- Bow down from waist with your legs straight.
- Take three steps backward (left foot, right foot, left foot),
- Then:
    - Bow from your waist to the left and say, *oseh shalom bi'mromav,*
    - Bow from your waist to the right and say, *hu ya'aseh shalom alenu,* and
    - Bow from your waist to the front and say, *ve'al kol yisrael v'imru amen.*

II. Knee-Bowing (Three Times during *Amida*)

- Beginning of *amida's* first blessing,
- End of *amida's* first blessing, and
- Next-to-last *amida* blessing: *ha'tov shimcha.*

To bow this way:

- Bend knees (at *baruch*),
- Bow forward (at *ata*), and
- Straighten up (before God's name).

III. Knee-Bowing to Floor (Two Forms)

A. Knee-Bowing to Floor--Hands and Knees Only

(*Rosh Hashana musaf: alenu* in reader's repetition of *amida*)

To bow this way:

- Kneel (with your back straight up) (at "*hayu kor'im*"), and
- Bow down with hands and knees on floor (at "*u'mishtachavim u'modim*"), but

- You are not required to touch your forehead to ground.

NOTE You should still bow from your waist (but not to the floor) on *Rosh Hashana*--even if you are praying alone and even if there is no *Torah* present.

B. Knee-Bowing to Floor--Hands, Knees, Forehead

(*Yom Kippur musaf: alenu* reader's repetition of *amida* describing how the people bowed down on *Yom Kippur.)*

To bow this way:

- Kneel (with your back straight up) (at *"hayu kor'im"),*
- Bow down with hands and knees on floor (at *"u'mishtachavim u'modim"),*
- Touch forehead to floor (at *v'noflim al pneihem*).

NOTE You may not bow down (*modim* for *Yom Kippur*) on a bare stone floor (this also includes concrete, terrazzo and other stone-like materials). You must put a cloth, paper, or some other separation on the floor where you will place your forehead and your knees. A *talit* may be used for this purpose. If you have only one paper towel, put it under your forehead.

NOTE It is customary today to cover any floor, not only if it is bare stone.

SITUATION You are bowing down (*modim* for *Yom Kippur;* also for *Rosh Hashana* if you bow down this far) on a bare stone floor (concrete, terrazzo, and other stone-like materials).

WHAT TO DO You may not touch your forehead or knees (if covered by pants legs or skirt) to the floor. You may cover the floor with some separation such as cloth, paper, or even a *talit* at the place where your forehead (or knees) will touch.

REASON You might wipe off any dirt from the floor on your pant knees or skirt, which is prohibited on *Yom Kippur*. There is no need to use a paper towel or other separation for knees if they are bare (for example, due to wearing shorts or a short skirt).

NOTE There is no problem with brushing dirt off your hands, so you can touch the bare stone floor with your bare hands during the bowing.

© Copyright 2026 Richard B. Aiken | www.practicalhalacha.com