

## Should one Pray from the *Bima* or the *Amud*?

Over the past number of years it has become increasingly more common to find the *shliach tzibur* (prayer leader) praying from the *bima* rather than from the *amud*. This article will focus on the differences between the *bima* and *amud*, their specific functions and locations, which prayer services are meant to be recited from which location, and will examine various responsa on the topic.

It should be noted at the outset that this discussion pertains to *Ashkenazic* Jewry who have both an *amud* and *bima* in their synagogues (*schuls*). *Sefardim* and *Teimanim* have a different layout in their *schuls* in that they *only* have a *bima*. This point will be also be examined in this article.

### Definition of the *Bima*

The *bima* is located in the middle of the *schul*. Beside for *bima* it has alternative names including '*almemar*<sup>1</sup>' and '*migdal*'. The *bima* is generally higher than the ground level of the *schul* (hence the name *migdal* or *bima*, both of which denote height). The main use of the *bima* is to read the Torah from this location. In, "A World in Ruins"<sup>2</sup>, Hermann Schwab (1946, p. 101) briefly discusses the *bima*:

In the **centre of the synagogue** stood the *Almemar*. The origin of the word is disputed. Some derive it from the Arabic *Alminbar* (pulpit of a mosque), but it is popularly traced to *memorieren*, and signifies a place **for the reading of the Holy Scriptures**. The *Almemar* was a **raised dais**, in most cases roofed over or flanked by pillars. Of ancient origin, it was carved in wood, hewn of stone or wrought of iron.

In "*Makom Shenohagu*"<sup>3</sup>, a book about the customs of Bechhofen, Germany, the authors (Katanka & Doerfer, p. 44, 2011) describe the *bima* as follows:

<sup>1</sup> <almemar> is pronounced [alMEmar], or in IPA, /,æɫ'mɛmæ/.

<sup>2</sup> Schwab, H. (1946). *A world in ruins: History, life and work of german jewry*. (English ed.). London, England: Edward Goldstone Publishing Company.

<sup>3</sup> Katanka, S., & Doerfer, M. (2011). *Makom shenohagu: Minhag bechhofen*. London, England: Machon Moreshes Ashkenaz.

In *Ashkenaz*, the *bima* was commonly referred to by two names, each of which was used during different periods. During the Middle Ages and up to the seventeenth century it was known as a *migdal*, and from about that time right up to the present day (amongst German Jews and their descendents) it is known as the *almemar* (or *almemor*, *almemra* etc.). It is thought that *almemar* is a corrupted form of the Arabic word *al-minbar* (the pulpit in a mosque), but this explanation of its etymology has yet to be accurately proven.

The *almemar* in Bechhofen was typical of its period, the eighteenth century. It stood **in the middle of the synagogue**, as prescribed by Jewish Law<sup>4</sup>...

This last point, that the *bima* must be located in the middle of the *schul*, follows standard Ashkenaz custom. How this differs from Sefardic and Yemenite customs will be touched on below.

#### Definition of the *Amud*

The *amud*<sup>5</sup> (lectern) is located in the front of the *schul*. It is situated either in front of the *aron* (ark which holds the Torah) or off to the side of the *aron*<sup>6</sup>. The *amud* is the dedicated location from where the *shliach tzibur* represents the congregation. It was common in the past (and one can find examples of this in modern *schuls* as well) that the *amud* was lower than the floor of the *schul* (i.e., down a step or more). Alternatively, the entire *schul* floor was situated somewhat lower than street level<sup>7</sup>. The former represents the Polish custom while the latter represents the German custom.

Both of these customs have similar rationales. Having the *amud* lower than the floor of the *schul* gives meaning to the verse in Psalms (130:1) "מִמַּעַמְקִים קָרָאתִיךָ יְהוָה" - Out of the

---

<sup>4</sup> Rama in Orach Chaim 150:5, based on Rambam, Hilchos Tefillah 11:3.

<sup>5</sup> Rav Mordechai Doerfer told this author that in Ashkenaz, no "*amud*", per-se, existed until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the term is inaccurate. The Shliach tzibur would use a regular *shtender*. The term is used here as this is what most are familiar with.

<sup>6</sup> This variation is dependant on custom. Having the *amud* in front of the *aron* appears to be the more prevalent *minhag* (custom). Rav Doerfer mentioned that the more prevalent custom until the 19<sup>th</sup> century was to have the *amud* off to the side, although still opposite the *aron*.

<sup>7</sup> This does not necessarily mean that the floor of the *schul* was always lower than the street. The point is that when one walks into the main sanctuary, one must take a step down.

depths have I called You, O Lord". This meaning is represented by the *shliach tzibur* who is standing in the lower location. *Schuls* that have the floor lower than ground level (i.e., one takes a step down to enter the sanctuary) are giving meaning to the same verse for the *entire* congregation - everyone should call out to HaShem from the depths.

Many German *schuls*, such as the Barn Schul in Bechhofen, had the floor lower than the street. A number of *schuls* that followed the Polish custom, such as the Altneuschul in Prague, had the *amud* lower than the *schul* floor<sup>8</sup>.

The Polish custom follows the opinion of Magen Avraham as quoted by the Mishna Berurah (O.C. 90:1:5):

"The Magen Avraham writes that today we are accustomed to have the location of the *shliach tzibur* at a **deeper level than the rest of the synagogue**. This is based on the verse *מִמַּעְמָקִים קָרָאתִיךָ יְהוָה*. [One can find an allusion to this custom in the Talmudic phrase] that states that **one must go down in front of the aron**<sup>9</sup>."

Regarding the German custom, Hermann Schwab (p. 101, 1946) writes that,

"Not far from the Ark stood the reader in a depression in the floor, thus literally realizing the Psalmist's phrase: "Out of the depths have I called Thee"; unless, indeed, it was preferred to **site the whole structure below street level.**"

Makom Shenohagu is clearer in this regard (Katanka & Doerfer, p. 44, 2011). While describing the Barn Schul in Bechhofen, the author's state as follows:

"From the vestibule there was one small step (of approximately 8cm [about 3in]) leading down into the synagogue. The custom of going down into the synagogue is based upon the Talmudic dictum: 'Do not stand on a high place to pray, rather from a lowly place, as it is written: From the depths I call to you God'. **In Ashkenaz, the "depths" were symbolised by going down into the main**

---

<sup>8</sup> These are just examples. Many other *schuls* can be found that followed both customs. It was pointed out to the author by Rav Doerfer that some *schuls* had **both** a lower floor and an even lower location for the *shliach tzibur*.

<sup>9</sup> The exact phrase is יורד לפני התבה.

**synagogue.** This differs from the view of the Magen Avraham that the *Chazzan*<sup>10</sup> should stand in a specially lowered part of the synagogue floor.”

### Height of the *Bima*

Why should the *bima* be higher than the floor of the *schul*? Rav Binyamin Shlomo Hamburger<sup>11</sup> gives ten rationales to explain this phenomenon:

1. One must be ***oleh l'torah*** - a person receives an *aliyah*. The word *aliyah*, beside for denoting a 'spiritual lift', also has a physical representation in that the individual must walk up to the platform where the Torah is read from.
2. The Torah was given on Mount Sinai which was **above** the nation. Reading the Torah in *schul* is considered a reenactment of the Sinai experience. We therefore read the Torah from a high location.
3. When Zechariah spoke to the nation, he **stood on a high platform so all the people would be able to hear.**
4. When Ezra read the Torah to the people in the street, it says he **stood on a 'migdal'**.
5. By the commandment of *Hakhel*<sup>12</sup>, they would make a *bima* and **the King would read from on top of the *bima*.**
6. In the *schul* that was located in Alexandria, Egypt, the Talmud states that a *bima* was in the middle of it so that **the person standing on it could be seen** by the congregation<sup>13</sup>.
7. Rambam states (*Hilchos Tefillah*, 11) that a *bima* should be placed in the middle of the *schul* for two reasons. One is for reading the Torah. The second reason given is that when the rabbi gives his speech, **all will be able to hear him since he is in a high location.** Furthermore, he is surrounded by *mechitzos*, walls. These walls, according to Jewish Law, make it that the rabbi is considered to be

---

<sup>10</sup> Prayer leader.

<sup>11</sup> Director of Machon Moreshes Ashkenaz ([www.moreshesashkenaz.org](http://www.moreshesashkenaz.org)). This summary is taken from an audio lecture given in England. Exact title and date of the lecture are unknown to this author.

<sup>12</sup> When portions of the Torah were publicly read by the king. This took place once every seven years.

<sup>13</sup> This statement by the Talmud will be examined in more detail below.

in a separate domain so that his back is not to the ark. It is considered an affront to the ark to have one's back turned toward it<sup>14</sup>.

8. Kabbalistically, according to Magen Avraham, one may not have more than **six steps leading up to the *bima***. Although this statement is unclear to the author, clearly the *bima* is on a higher level than the *schul* floor.
9. Many of the early **commentators refer to the *bima* as a '*migdal*'**, which implies a high location.
10. Reading the Torah is compared to bringing a sacrifice on the altar. Just like **the altar was high, a *schul* should have a high *bima*** (Chasam Sofer).

If a *schul* does not have a high *bima*, it is still 'kosher'<sup>15</sup>. It is clear, however, that it is proper to have a high *bima*.

#### Why One May Not Pray From the *Bima*

The *shliach tzibur* should not pray from the *bima*, as praying from a high place is considered arrogant. This is one of the reasons why there is a designated location for the *shliach tzibur* to pray from, and why the location of the *amud*, or the *schul* floor, is often lower. *Mechaber*, in *Hilchos Tefillah* (O.C. 90:1) states that, "One who is praying should **not stand on...any high location**<sup>16</sup>." *Mishnah Berurah* (ibid, 3) commenting on this says that, "[The reason that one may not pray from a high location is because] there is **no haughtiness before God**, as the verse states, 'from the depths I call out to God'."

---

<sup>14</sup> See for example, Yechezkel 8:16 and Rabbi Dr. Elie Munk's, *The World of Prayer*, vol 2, p. 7. for some examples of this. In short, R' Munk discusses turning toward the *aron* after bowing at the end of *L'cha Dodi*. The concept of not having ones back to the *aron* was so obvious to previous generations that Conor Cruise O'Brien, in his book, "The Siege - The Saga of Israel and Zionism" (1986), relates the following incident with regard to one of Herzl's first public speeches (p. 73): "On his way back, Herzl addressed the congregation in the synagogue at Sofia (June 30, 1896). As his diary records: 'I stood on the altar platform. When I was not quite sure how to face the congregation, without turning my back to the Holy of Holies, someone cried: 'It's all right for you to turn your back on the Ark, you are holier than the Torah.'" It is well known that Theodor Herzl was from an assimilated family and knew little about Judaism - yet this concept was even obvious to him! It is astounding that there are few congregations that are concerned for this today. According to Rav B.S. Hamburger, Polish Jewry was generally lax with regard to having ones back to the *aron*.

<sup>15</sup> It is especially common that a small *schul* or *bais medrash* will only have a *shulchan*, table in the center of the room, for reading the Torah.

<sup>16</sup> This is difficult. Sefardic custom is specifically to *daven* from the *bima*, which is a high location! Some answers to this difficulty will be offered below.

### *Bima* Location - Middle vs. Front

A topic that is related to this discussion in an ancillary manner is the argument that existed between Reform and Orthodox as to the placement of the *bima*. In short, the Reform movement wanted the *bima* moved to the front of the *schul* instead of the center; the Orthodox strongly and sharply rejected such an idea for various reasons. A discussion on this topic is beyond the scope of this essay<sup>17</sup>. One source on this topic however, deserves examination as it is related to the current discussion.

Rabbi Yaakov Ettlinger (1798 - 1871), known for his books, *Aruch Laner*, described that there are separate and distinct places for the *chazzan* and for reading the Torah. He does this from a philosophical/polemical viewpoint which will further expand on some ideas as to why the *amud* and *bima* are separate.

Rav Ettlinger says<sup>18</sup> that a *schul* has three functions, and each one of these functions is represented by something specific in *schul*.

- A *schul* is meant to sanctify the human spirit. This is represented by the *aron*, which is located in the east side of the *schul*. The eastern side of the *schul* (facing toward Israel), along with the *aron kodesh* (holy ark), shows the earthly manifestation of the Divine.
- The second purpose of a *schul* is for prayer. This is **represented by the location [amud] where the chazzan stands to lead the congregation in prayer.**
- The third purpose of a *schul* is spiritual enlightenment and instruction. These ideas are represented by the *bima*. The *bima* should be in the middle of the *schul* the same way that a seed is embedded in the core of a fruit, as the heart is in the center of the body, as rays emanate from a central pinpoint of light, so to the *luchos* and Torah were located in the middle of the encampment in the desert. **In our schuls, this idea is represented by the bima, where we read**

---

<sup>17</sup> Many responsa have been written on this topic. See for example: Chassam Sofer O.C. v. 1, 28; Seridei Eish v. 2, 154 (Mosad HaRav Kook); Igros Moshe O.C. v. 2, 41-42.

<sup>18</sup> The following consists of both a partial paraphrase and direct quotations from Dr. Judith Bleich's book on Rabbi Yaakov Ettlinger, *Jacob Ettlinger, his Life and Works. The Emergence of Modern Orthodoxy in Germany* (1974) p. 154.

**the Torah**, which is located in the middle of *schul*. This teaches us the centrality of Torah in the life of a Jew; the center represents equality - all of Israel has an equal share in Torah. All Jews are reminded by this to guard the Torah. In a battle, there is a flag that must be protected; in the same way Israel has its banner that we rally around and must be protect - the Torah.

The above is a short summary of what Rav Ettlinger says. All of the ideas described will only work for the *bima* and Torah which are read from this center location. It is clear that prayer, as he points out, has its own unique location in the synagogue.

### Sefardi and Teimani Custom

As mentioned, Sefardim and Teimanim only have a *bima*. The entire service is done from this location. The *bima* itself, which according to Ashkenazim must be in the middle of the *schul*, will not necessarily be in the center according to the Sefardi and Teimani custom. In *Makom Shenohagu*, the authors describe how according to the Ashkenaz custom the *bima* is in the middle. The authors then add that,

“Rabbi Yosef Karo does not bring this Law, since in his own commentary on the *Rambam, Kesef Mishnah*, he brings a reason for placing the *almemar* at the western end of the synagogue (a Spanish practice which is seen in the *Esnoga* in Amsterdam and at its smaller sister congregation in Bevis Marks in London, and typically found in many Italian congregations)” (Katanka & Doerfer, p. 44, 2011).

Both of these *schuls* follow Spanish-Portuguese *minhagim*. Since Rambam says the *bima* must be in the middle, and Rabbi Karo disagrees, this is bound to cause divergent customs among Spanish Jewry.

### Responsum Relating to Praying from the *Amud*

Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Binyomin Sofer (1815-1871) in his work *K'sav Sofer* (O.C. 19) discusses the issue of praying from the *bima* versus the *amud* in great detail. The following is a translation/paraphrase of some portions of his responsum.

You (the questioner) describe a *schul* where the *Sha"tz* stands on the *bima* to represent the congregation. However, you are concerned that this is an incorrect

practice considering that the Magen Avraham writes that the *shliach tzibur* should stand at a lower location than the rest of the *schul*...

You should know that the Magen Avraham finds a reference to the custom of the *shliach tzibur* standing at a lower location from a common phrase used in the Talmud. The phrase is that one should *go down before the ark*. The implication of this saying is that the *shliach tzibur* is standing in a physically lower location in front of the ark than the rest of the *schul*.

I, in my humbleness, have also found a reference to this custom based on the Talmud in *Brachos*... The Talmud states that, “one should not stand in a high location to pray, but rather one should stand in a low location to pray”. This Talmudic saying is troublesome. Why should the Talmud have to tell us both statements? The Talmud did not need to write that one should stand in a low location as it has already told us not to pray from a high location!

I believe the answer is as follows. If the Talmud would have only written not to stand in a high location to pray, I would have thought that there is no specific rule that states that I must pray from a low location. The Talmud therefore had to spell out for us that one should pray from a low location. This is important as when one is praying it is insufficient to only show that he is not haughty by making sure not to pray from a high location. Rather, **a person should actively show that he has extra lowliness before God...**

Why doesn't the Talmud just state that a person should pray from a low location? There is a distinction between these two injunctions. The fact that **one may not pray from a high location - this is an actual Law as there is no haughtiness before God**. The statement, however, that one should pray from a low location is not a Law - rather it is a nice gesture to show extra lowliness before God.

This is why the Talmud writes the statement twice, “One may not pray from a high location,” **this is the Law**. “One should pray from a low location,” this is a nice thing to do but is not a binding injunction...

According to our understanding of the Magen Avraham’s custom, we must ask why this idea only applies to the *shliach tzibur*. In reality, every individual should pray from a low location to show his own humbleness<sup>19</sup>. The reason that we are not careful for this is that it is simply not practical to have a *schul* that has a tiered floor; every place would need to have a higher and lower location next to it<sup>20</sup>. However, we are careful that the *shliach tzibur* should be in a low location. The effect of this is that the *tzibur* now sees their representative is showing his personal humbleness and humility which will in turn cause the congregation to have humbleness and humility during prayer<sup>21</sup> ...

If one was standing on the *bima* prior to praying, even if he never intended to pray in a high location, he should come down from the *bima* for *davening*. **Certainly one should not purposely go to the *bima* to pray**. (It is possible that this rule of not praying in high location would even apply to a place which is just slightly higher than the floor<sup>22</sup>). One can certainly extrapolate from this situation using a fortiori argument to show that **it is wrong for the *shliach tzibur* to specifically go to the *bima* intentionally to daven from there**. A person who specifically

---

<sup>19</sup> This is the German custom.

<sup>20</sup> Such a possibility would exist in a *schul* built like a stadium - each level is progressively lower than the level that precedes it. A floor like this is sometimes found in the women’s section if it is a balcony. Rav M. Doerfer, in an article in *Yerushaseinu*, v. 7 (השתלשלות מנהגי סדרי הישיבה בבתי כנסת: משיבה לארבע קצוות ביהכ"נ), points out that such a setup was found in ancient *schuls* in Israel.

<sup>21</sup> As pointed out earlier, much of this is a paraphrase and not an exact translation. *K’sav Sofer* is railing on the German custom. To explain the two customs: according to the German custom, everybody is standing at a low level. However, this is only recognizable when one enters the sanctuary. Once inside, there is no distinction between the congregation and their representative. The positive of this is that every individual is physically in a lower place. The negative is that when the congregation is praying, it is no longer recognizable. According to the Polish custom, only the representative of the congregation stands in a low location. The positive is that everybody is always cognizant that their representative is in a low location. The negative is that the *tzibur* is never physically on a lower level. *Eilu v’eilu divrei Elokim chayim*.

<sup>22</sup> Usually something under three *tefachim* in height is considered part of the floor. *K’sav Sofer* says that this is not necessarily the case by *teffilah*.

goes to a high location to pray is showing the absolute height of haughtiness – and in a public manner!

If a *schul* is very large, *Bais Yosef* is of the opinion that, for acoustical reasons, the *shliach tzibur* may daven from the *bima*. According to *Bais Yosef*, this is only true in a situation where it would otherwise be impossible to hear the *shliach tzibur* if not for his standing in a high location. If it is possible to hear his voice from the *amud*, but his voice would be stronger and more easily heard from the *bima*, even *Bais Yosef* would not permit the *chazzan* to stand on the *bima*<sup>23</sup>. The Talmud in *Succah* (51b) records<sup>24</sup> that the *schul* in Alexandria, Egypt placed the *schul chazzan*<sup>25</sup> on the *bima* to wave a flag. The purpose of this was to let the congregation know that it was time to answer *amen*. Rashi states that the *shliach tzibur* was standing at the *amud*. Due to the size of the *schul*, many were not able to hear the *shliach tzibur* and they did not know when to answer *amen*. One sees from here that **they never even considered placing the *shliach tzibur* on the *bima***. It is difficult to say that if the *shliach tzibur* would have been on the *bima* that his voice still would not have been heard. Those that were closer to the *shliach tzibur* heard his blessing and the *amen* would travel back through the *schul*... Both Rashi and Tosefos are of the opinion that **they never wanted to place the *shliach tzibur* on a high position** so the congregants would be able to

---

<sup>23</sup> Again, considering that Sefardic custom is *only* to daven from the *bima*, this is difficult. Answers to this difficulty will be proposed later.

<sup>24</sup> This *schul* was exceptionally large. In order to give an idea as to how large this *schul* was, the Talmud relates that it sometimes had, “double the amount of individuals who left Egypt inside at one time.” (Presumably, this is a hyperbole as that number would have been several million individuals). This story is recorded in three different locations; the Babylonian Talmud, Jerusalem Talmud and the *Toseftah*. The Babylonian edition relates that a wooden *bima* was in the middle of the *schul* and the *chazzan* of the *schul* would stand on it. When ‘he’ would reach *amen*, the *chazzan* would wave his flag and the congregation would answer *amen*. This was done due to the *schul*’s size; not everybody was able to hear the *shliach tzibur*. There is an argument among the commentators as to who the ‘he’ is referring to. According to Rashi, the *chazzan* was the *shamash* (sexton) and the ‘he’ refers to the *shliach tzibur* who was standing at the *amud* in the front of the *schul*. *Tosefos HaRosh* quotes *Aruch* in the name of *Rabbeinu Nissim* that the ‘he’ and the *chazzan* are one and the same - but the case has nothing to do with praying. Rather, they were reading from the Torah. *Tosefos HaRosh* also quotes *Rabbeinu Shemuel* who seems to understand the Talmud in line with Rashi. The Jerusalem Talmud clearly records the incident revolved around Torah reading.

<sup>25</sup> The word ‘*chazzan*’ has multiple meanings. It often refers to the *shliach tzibur*. It can refer to someone in charge of something. In this case, according to *K’sav Sofer*’s understanding, the word ‘*chazzan*’ refers to the *schul shamash*.

hear the blessings of the *shliach tzibur*<sup>26</sup>. **Certainly in the situation that you (the questioner) are describing, one should not place the *shliach tzibur* on the *bima* just so his voice is louder and more powerful...**

### Those that Say One May Pray from the *Bima*

Are there opinions that allow one to pray from the *bima*? As quoted above, ***Bais Yosef* permits one to *daven* from the *bima* in a situation where it would otherwise be impossible to hear the *shliach tzibur* in various *schul* locations.**

Rabbi Dr. J. David Bleich in his book, “Contemporary Halakhic Problems<sup>27</sup>,” (Volume 1, p. 65-67) discusses various possibilities. *Avudraham* quoting the Jerusalem Talmud<sup>28</sup> states as follows,

“From this incident in the Jerusalem Talmud **we are accustomed to have the *shliach tzibur* stand [on the *bima*<sup>29</sup>]** in order that the congregation should be able to hear and to allow those who are uneducated to fulfill their [prayer] obligations with the *shliach tzibur*. Even though the Rabbi’s said that one should not stand in a high location to pray, **this custom is good, for otherwise they would not hear on account of the multitudes which assemble in the synagogue<sup>30</sup>.**”

Two caveats to this. First, *Avudraham* is also dealing with a situation where there is no other possibility to hear the *shliach tzibur*. Second, *Avudraham* and *Bais Yosef* are both Sefardim. It has already been pointed out that Sefardim only *daven* and read the Torah from one location. This point, as mentioned in the footnotes above, is particularly confusing. It seems clear that the *schul* in Egypt had both a *bima* and *amud* (at the very

---

<sup>26</sup> It is difficult to know if *K’sav Sofer* intends this as a proof for or against *Bais Yosef*’s position. In the beginning, it appears that he is citing this incident as a proof. His conclusion however, seems to say that one should not even be able to move to the *bima* in a situation where parts of the congregation can not hear at all.

<sup>27</sup> Bleich, J. D. (1976). Contemporary halakhic problems: Library of jewish law and ethics. (Vol. 1). Ktav Pub Inc.

<sup>28</sup> As mentioned above, the Jerusalem Talmud records that this incident revolved around Torah reading - not prayer.

<sup>29</sup> Actually, the Hebrew word used is תבה which makes this confusing. The *taivah* generally refers to the ark.

<sup>30</sup> This last part is an exact quote from Rav Bleich’s book. One can find the original statement of *Avudraham* in the two volume set of his works, volume 1, p. 126.

least according to Rashi's opinion. One could argue that this is the basic implication of the Talmud). Perhaps *Avudraham* refers to the location of the *bima*. As mentioned, Rambam says the *bima* must be in the middle of the *schul*. *Bais Yosef* disagrees. It is possible that the structure of the Sefardic and Teimani synagogues have changed over time<sup>31</sup>.

Another possible leniency discussed by R' Bleich is related to Rambam's opinion that was quoted above. Rambam states that the *bima* is high and surrounded by *mechitzos* (walls). **Since the *bima* is surrounded, by Jewish Law it is considered its own domain and not a "high place"**. No doubt that this is *halchikally* true, and it would both explain how Sefardim and Taimanim *daven* from the *bima*. This explanation would also provide a 'merit' to those Ashkenazim that *daven* from the *bima*. However, it most certainly does not fit in with the spirit of the law; one still needs to walk up and the congregation sees their representative in a high location. Many of the reasons given as to why the Bima is supposed to be high are not compatible with this explanation. It would appear, that Ashkenaz *poskim* do not accept this view.

The best source that Ashkenazim have to pray from the *bima* is from Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895-1986). In two separate responsa in his work *Igros Moshe* (O.C. 2:28 and 3:10) Rabbi Feinstein permits one to *daven* from the *bima*, albeit that it must fulfill the same conditions laid out by *Avudraham* and *Bais Yosef* - it must be that it is impossible to hear the *shliach tzibur* from the *amud*. What makes Rabbi Feinstein's responsa unique is that he takes a decidedly more lenient approach to the entire issue. Rabbi Feinstein states at the end of the second responsa,

“...Therefore, I rule that the main place for the *shliach tzibur* to stand at is before the *amud*. However, when a large crowd is in *schul*, and **due to this crowd it is**

---

<sup>31</sup> This question was posed to Rav Shlomo Katanka in an email (August, 2013). R' Katanka responded as follows: “The Teimani *Schul* of Al-Sharabi had a movable Bima/Amud which is placed in front of the *Aron Kodesh* for *Tefilla*. It is then moved to the middle of the *schul* for Leining. It is then moved back again for *davening*. Apparently this was the original *Minhag* in Yemen but more recently a permanent fixed bima was built in *Schuls* preventing this practice. This is still done in the Temani Shul in Kiryat Sefer. This seems to make it understandable why the Rambam talks about the Amud but the Sefardim do not use one at all! They may have had a movable Amud/Bima.” This theory, posed by Rav Katanka to the author, if true, would answer this difficult question. However, one may still need to assume that there was an *amud* and *bima* - i.e., two separate heights.

**impossible to hear the *shliach tzibur* throughout the entire *schul*, it is permissible for the *shliach tzibur* to daven from the *bima*.** This will allow the entire congregation **to hear without difficulty**<sup>32</sup>. Even in [Eastern] Europe this practice was followed in many large synagogues.”

#### What May be Recited at the *Bima*

Which aspects of *davening*, according to everybody, may be recited at the *bima*? In short, anything that is not considered actual praying is specifically done on the *bima* in order to show that it is not part of *davening*. The following includes some examples of permissible recitations from the *bima*.

In some congregations, the *chazzan* either recites everything up to *Yishtabach* from his seat or from the *bima*. The reason for this is that from the point of *Yishtabach* and forward is considered the main part of davening. One source for this can be found in *Divrei Kehillos*, written by Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Geiger<sup>33</sup> (1792-1878),

“**From the beginning of *teffilah* until the [end of *Yishtabach*] the *shliach tzibur* stands at his seat** (literally, ‘stands in his place’). He does not stand before the ark (i.e., at the *amud*) as **one does not go down to the ark until reaching the blessing of *Yishtabach***. [The reason for this is that] the *kaddish* after *Yishtabach* and *Borchu*, through the remainder of *davening*, is considered the main portion of the service” (Geiger, 1868).

There are many different variations as to the exact juncture that the *shliach tzibur* approaches the *amud*. While most readers are most probably unfamiliar with any of these practices<sup>34</sup> and their various combinations, one aspect of this is probably familiar to many of Eastern European descent. On *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*, it is common that the *shliach tzibur* for *Shacharis* stays at his seat until he says the word,

---

<sup>32</sup> Rabbi Feinstein’s responsa must be studied to determine if he is only allowing his leniency when it is **impossible** to hear the *shliach tzibur*, or if he even allows it if it is to allow the congregation to **hear without difficulty**. Obviously, one has more leeway if he means the latter.

<sup>33</sup> *Dayan* in Frankfurt.

<sup>34</sup> Today, it is common to find the *shliach tzibur* standing at the *amud* from *Birchas HaShachar*, the very beginning of the prayer service.

“*Hamelech*”, from his location, in a loud voice. Only thereafter does he approach the *amud*.

More familiar to readers is the common custom that in most *schuls Kabbolas Shabbos*, the service recited to welcome the Shabbos, is recited from the *bima*. After this portion of the service concludes, the *shliach tzibur* proceeds to the *amud* for *Borchu*. The reason for this is that *Kabbolas Shabbos*, is not part of *davening* per se. In *schul*, we explicitly show this by reciting *Kabbolas Shabbos* from the *bima*. *Maariv*, which is an actual prayer, must be recited from its proper location. This is why the *shliach tzibur* approaches the *amud* before *Borchu*. Some sources to show this follow:

1. *Divrei Kehillos* (p. 62) mentions that in Frankfurt, *Kabbolas Shabbos* was not initially accepted<sup>35</sup> for the entire congregation. When *L'cha Dodi* was recited<sup>36</sup>, it was only on condition that there would be certain restrictions; it was recited from the *bima* to show that it is not part of *teffilah*, and the *chazzan* would not wear a Tallis. This specific method mentioned in *Divrei Kehillos* is uncommon; just about every synagogue today has the *chazzan* wear a *tallis* for *Kabbolas Shabbos*<sup>37</sup>. Further, there is a custom that the *chazzan* only stands on the *bima* for *L'cha Dodi*, as mentioned by *Divrei Kehillos*, and the remainder of *Kabbolas Shabbos* is recited from the *amud*. This custom is practiced among German congregations<sup>38</sup>.
2. Rabbi Dr. Elie Munk in his book, “The World of Prayer,”<sup>39</sup> explicitly states as follows (p. 4):

“It was pointed out that this festive inauguration of the Sabbath (i.e., *Kabbolas Shabbos*) was not part of the actual Divine service and it was

---

<sup>35</sup> Rav S.R. Hirsch instituted *Kabbolas Shabbos* in Frankfurt. Until he instituted it, only select members of the congregation would recite *Kabbolas Shabbos*. Arguments for and against its implementation existed until WWII ended these arguments. It might not be far to say that it is due to Rav Hirsch's great influence and esteem that *Kabbolas Shabbos* is now recited by all Jews of German descent.

<sup>36</sup> It is unclear if this refers to the time period when the congregation recited *Kabbolas Shabbos*, or it is still referring to the time period before it was accepted by the entire congregation.

<sup>37</sup> A notable exception to this rule is *Adass Yeshurun* of Manchester, England. The original custom is followed that the *chazzan* does not wear a *tallis* for *Kabbolas Shabbos*. (Heard from R' S. Katanka).

<sup>38</sup> The rationale is that the verses in *Kabbolas Shabbos* are recited in an alternating manner, akin to the recitation of Psalms. It is therefore considered more in line with praying than *L'cha Dodi* (Heard from R' Yisroel Strauss).

<sup>39</sup> Munk, E. *The world of prayer*. (Vol. 2.). Israel: Feldheim Publishers, Ltd.

therefore decided that this group of psalms, ending with *מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד*, would be recited by the Reader not from the regular Reader's stand, but from the Bima".

3. "The Commentators' Shabbos Prayers,"<sup>40</sup> (p. 27) has a similar comment: "These prayers before Ma'ariv are to be viewed as an integral part of the ceremony of welcoming Shabbos. They are not to be considered part of the Ma'ariv service, which is clear from the fact that they are chanted by the Chazzan not from the regular reader's stand but rather from the Bima, the table set in the center of the synagogue" (Sender, 2005).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the sources quoted, it seems clear that Ashkenazim have two separate locations in *schul*; an *amud* for the *chazzan*, and a *bima* for reading the Torah and other non-*davening* parts of the liturgy. In a *schul* where it is impossible to hear the *shliach tzibur* without him standing on the *bima*, Ashkenazim have the opinion of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein to rely on. In most typical situations where one can hear the *shliach tzibur*, even when difficult, it appears that the Ashkenaz consensus is not to allow *davening* anywhere beside the *amud*. Although many synagogues currently pray from the *bima*, based on the quoted sources, it would appear that this is something that should possibly be reevaluated<sup>41</sup>.

---

<sup>40</sup> Sender, Y. (2005). *The commentators' shabbos prayers*. Feldman Publishers, Ltd.

<sup>41</sup> How is it that so many synagogues pray from the *bima*? A number of possibilities exist, although all are far from certain. It is possible that Sefardic *minhagim* have influenced the Ashkenazi understanding of this issue. Perhaps the Reform movement, who pray from a *bima* in the front, have influenced some Ashkenazim to always pray from the *bima*, even when it is not in the front. Another possibility is that architects have been designing synagogues unaware of the Ashkenaz custom on the matter. The most compelling possibility is as Rabbi Feinstein writes. Since large congregations in Eastern Europe were known to pray from the *bima*, it is possible that many erroneously believe that this is the Ashkenaz custom. Rav Katanka, in an email to this author (October, 2013), said the following as a possible approach as to how so many Ashkenazim pray from the *bima*: "In London, *circa* 1725, when the Hambro' *Schul* began, the *chazzan* always prayed from the *bima*. The Great Synagogue (Dukes Place, London – opened in 1791) also *davened* from the *bima*. Most other *schuls* in the United Kingdom (and perhaps even in the United States) followed and copied the Great *Schul* in London, which was extremely influential; it was even called the most important *schul* in the world by Cecil Roth in his, "History of the Great Synagogue", London 1950. This included both *schuls* that were large **and** small. This practice is still standard in the "Englischer" *Schul's* in United Kingdom. Great *rabbonim* *davened* in these *schuls*. For example, Rav Meshulem Zalman son of Yaavetz (at the Hambro *Schul*), Rav Dovid Tevle Schiff at the Great Synagogue), Rav Nosson Adler of London at the Great Synagogue), Dayan Yechezkel Abramsky (at the New Synagogue in Stamford Hill) etc. The list is endless. Even if one could

The author would like to express his thanks to Rabbi's Shlomo Katanka and Mordechai Doerfer (authors of *Makom Shenohagu*) for their invaluable insights and assistance with this article. The author can be reached at [danielyadler@gmail.com](mailto:danielyadler@gmail.com).

---

claim that these *rabbonim* could not change the established custom, they were not against it enough to say anything negative about the *chazzan davening* from the *bima*." This author still stands by his conclusion that the topic should be reevaluated, at the very least in the United States where, as of now, this is in no way a universal practice.

An interesting notion was posed to this author. Perhaps many congregations pray from the *bima* on Shabbos and Yom Tov since the injunction of *קראתיה יהוה*, praying to God from the depths, should not apply on these special days. Although such an idea may be a merit to those who pray from the *bima*, one must contend with the following facts. None of the sources mentioned in this article state such an idea. (Although it is certainly possible that other sources mention such an idea elsewhere and this author is unaware of it). Furthermore, three sources were quoted above that specifically show that one should go down to the *amud* - on Friday night! It would seem that none of the above sources would support such an idea.

When this article was sent to Rav Mordechai Doerfer for review (email, October 2013), he sent back numerous points, both directly and non-directly related to this topic. His main comments are included here:

”כמה הערות והארות כלליות:

המאמר מתייחס בעיקר לשאלה מדוע הש"ץ לא יעמוד על הבימה. אבל צריך גם לבאר, מה עניין בזה לעמוד לפני ארון הקודש? ועוד, מה הם הסיבות להעמיד את הש"ץ באמצע? שגם למנהג זה [בלי להתייחס לבעיה שהבימה גבוה] יש מקור, והחשוב ביניהם הרמב"ם פ"ט הל' תפילה. ובעניין חשיבות האמצע ע' גם במאמרי בירושתינו. פשוט לי שבמניין מזדמן במקום שאין ארון הקודש [מצוי במנינים בחתונות וכדו'] על הש"ץ לעמוד באמצע, שאם אין ארון הקודש, למה יעמוד במזרח? אבל עדיין לא מצאתי לזה מקור מפורש, ועינינו ראות שאין זה מנהג העולם.

אנסה לתאר בקיצור נמרץ התפתחות עניין מקום הש"ץ בבית כנסת. בבתי כנסת הישנים, בתקופת המשנה, לא מצאנו לא אלממור ואפי' לא ארון הקודש. מסביב לקירות היו שורות מדורגות, כך שאמצעיתו של בית הכנסת היה יותר נמוך, ולשם יד הש"ץ לפני התיבה – כעין ארון קודש קטן נייד שהכניסו רק בשעת התפילה. בתקופת האמוראים כבר מצאנו ארון קודש קבוע, אבל מלבד זה לא השתנה שום דבר. ארון הקודש ובית הכנסת כולה לא היו דווקא מכוונים לכיוון ירושלים, כך שאין סיבה לחשוב שמקום הש"ץ עבר שינוי. בתקופת הסבוראים וגאונים אין לנו מידע ברורה. מה שברור שבת כנסת של תקופת ראשונים היו נראים כבר אחרת, אבל אין הוכחה מתי שינוי זה חל. בתקופת הראשונים בתי הכנסת פיתחו את הצורה שמקובלת (מלבד השינויים של מאה ה-19 וה-20) עד היום, כולל החלוקה בין מנהג הספרדים ואשכנזים בעניינו.

עדיין אין הדבר ברור אצלי, אבל יש לי כמה סיבות לשאר שגם בבתי כנסת הראשונים באשכנז הש"ץ עמד על האלממור: ראשית, צורת הישיבה לד' קצוות שגורמת למרכזיות מוחלטת. שנית, שבכל בתי כנסת מימי הראשונים באשכנז שנחרבו אין שום זכר למקום מיוחד לש"ץ מול ארון הקודש אבל יש כעין תיבה מאבן בפינה מזרח-דרום של האלממור [יש בתי כנסת מימי הראשונים כמו וורמיישא ופרג שהיו בשימוש גם בתקופה החדשה ועברו שינויים רבים. מאידך, יש בתי כנסת שנחרבו ונשאר במצבם האחרון עד שנתגלו שוב בימינו, כמו רגנסבורג, שפירא, ארפורט, קלן]. ועי' בפיוט במוסף ר"ה [היה עם פיפיות]: גשים מול ארון הקודש באימה לשכך כעס וחימה ועמך מסובבים אותם כחומה...וקשה לפרש פיוט זה גם כמנהג אשכנז וגם כמנהג ספרד, אבל אם באמת כמו שאמרנו שהש"ץ עומד על האלממור מול ארון הקודש ואין ספסל בינו לבין ארון הקודש שמפריד (אולי מלבד ספסל אחד מחובר לאלממור ששם מקום הרב, כך היה בוורמיישא) אולי לא קשה. כל זה כמובן לא אומר שעלינו לחזור למנהג של ימי הראשונים, היות וכבר נהגו לפחות יותר מ-400 שנה בחלוקה מוחלטת בין אלממור לבין מקום הש"ץ."