



## D'var Torah - Parshah Ki Tavo, Sept. 2, 2023

By Robbie Fein

Shabbat Shalom.

Before I begin, I want to thank Neal for two reasons. First, when we were discussing who would leyn the Toch'chah – the long Aliya today with the curses, when Neal agreed to do it, I said that I could then tell Steve that I would agree to do the D'var Torah today. Second, when R. Aaron Solovetchik was the Rosh Yeshiva of the Skokie Yeshiva he used to tell the young men who would get S'micha from Skokie that they should take the Aliya in their shuls for the two Toch'chah Aliyot – the one in Sefer Vayikra and the one in today's Parasha. I suppose the reason was that the Rabbis would then take on the burden of the curses and save their congregants from the burden of the curses. So, I have to thank Neal for taking on the burden of the curses.

איִם אִין זוג אִין רקוד! – If there is no partner, there is no dance. I understand that there can be solo dance performances, but I believe that our Tefila is a dance that requires partnership – partnership with God and partnership with our community. Especially in a participatory Minyan, we must maintain a connection between the leader – the Sh'liach Tzibbur – and everyone else. In today's Parasha, we are introduced to the communal recitation of the word Amen. Before the long recitation of curses, we have some selected curses relating to idolatry, cursing parents, various moral edicts, some sexual improprieties, and some particularly heinous versions of murder (aren't all acts of murder heinous – a topic for another drash). I'm focused on the ending of each of these sentences:

וְאָמְרוּ כָּל־הָעָם אָמֵן – And all the people will say Amen – similar to the end of each paragraph of the Kaddish – V'imru Amen.

To understand this a little better, let's see what the Rabbis have to say about the meaning of saying Amen. So, I turned to the medieval commentators, but they say nothing about Amen in this Parash.

Fortunately, Midrash in Devarim Raba begins its commentary on this Parasha by answering exactly that question:

R. Yehuda bar Sima said: The (word) Amen has 3 connotations (or attestations might be a better way of understanding the Greek cognate used in the Midrash): Sh'vuah -- an oath, Kabala -- an acceptance and Emuna -- a confirmation. *The Midrash explains:* From where (do we know it connotes) an oath? For it is said: The Kohen shall have have (*the Sotah*) respond amen, amen (B'midbar 5:22). From where, acceptance? For it is stated – and the entire people shall say Amen (*before the Toch'cha (in today's Parasha)*). From where, confirmation or faith? For it is stated – Benaiah the son of Yehoyada answered the king, saying Amen and so may God answer

*(This comes in the first chapter of the Book of Kings after King David commanded that he, Zadok the Kohen and Natan the prophet anoint Solomon).*

Let's look see if we can put these three ideas together as one construct. Let's start with the Rabbinic notion of being Yotzei for a Mitzva by saying amen. The idea is that if you hear someone say a blessing and then you say Amen it's as if you said it yourself. So, for example, we listen to Kiddush and then we say Amen, we have fulfilled the obligation to say Kiddush. The Rabbis thus say we're Yotzei. The three ideas in the Midrash help us understand why. First, you must express loyalty with an oath and note the example given in the Midrash: what is the whole Sota ritual about if not loyalty. Well, it's about something else too, but we don't have to talk about that now. Second, you need to do more than express blind loyalty. You need to understand that you're accepting something and what you're accepting. So, this notion of Kabala – acceptance – means that you are accepting something *and something of substance*. In the example of the Midrash and in today's Parasha, we must accept the Yoke of Mitzvot – of law – or else we will suffer from the curses. Then and only then can you say Amen – or the third idea of Emunah (faith) because it's a meaningless faith without loyalty and substantive acceptance. This is the normative Rabbinic understanding of what it means to say Amen.

The Midrash goes on in several different ways of essentially saying that you merit a place in the world to come by saying Amen. You have to love the Rabbis -- All this stuff on meriting a place in the world to come especially if you listen to their words...I don't know about that stuff, but I love this concept of having to express not just loyalty but actually accept the principle underlying the blessing to enable you to say Amen. It's the combination of those three attestations that gives Amen meaning.

The Talmud says that outside the Temple the people would say Amen to all the blessings of the Amida as well as the blessings surrounding the Sh'ma. Inside the Temple, however, people did not say Amen! Instead, the people would name God by saying: Baruch Shem Kavod Malchuto L'olam Va'ed – blessed is the name of his glorious kingdom forever and ever. Apparently, outside the Temple each blessing has its own special meaning and must be attested to by the Kahal with Amen. Inside the Temple, the context is different. We express holiness and partnership with God by being there and naming God – Baruch Shem Kavod. Outside the Temple, we need community to create partnership with God.

Note, by the way, that Baruch Shem Kavod appears nowhere in the Torah. The Rabbis say that we plagiarized it from the Angels and that's why we say it only to ourselves during the year, but on YK we take the liberty of assuming that we have recreated the Temple Rite for Yom Kippur and thus say the phrase aloud. Also, note that the Sh'lichah Tzibbur is the one person in the Congregation who does not say Amen when the Cohanim do Birkat Cohanim. Why? It's as if the Sh'lichah Tzibbur is sharing the sacred Temple space with the Cohanim.

Note also that when we are alone and say the Sh'ma, we say El Melech Neeman – God, faithful King – whose first letters spell Amen. Ironically, when we are alone we are expressing that we still have partnership – directly with God without the requirement of the intermediary role of a Minyan.

Perhaps we can come full circle by looking at the verbs in the Torah that are used for observance of the Mitzvot – Lishmor – to keep, lishma – to listen, and la'asot – to do. I would relate Lishma to Kabala (you need to really listen to assimilate and accept). I would associate La'asot with loyalty (I'm part of the tribe so I'll do as the tribe does). I would associate Emunah with Lishmor – because you keep and observe when you have faith. Is this all too much of a stretch? Perhaps, but isn't that what Midrash is about? Stretching as a means of assisting you to understand, no?

So, I think I've laid out the communal and theological reasons for saying Amen – it helps us create partnership with the leader in forming community and at the same time partnership with God. That's the Rabbinic ideal. On the other hand, we are human beings and have very personal understandings of the things we say in Tefila. I think that Israeli music – no big surprise coming from me, no? -- can provide us some guidance – the first example, the Hanan Ben Ari Song – Amen Al HaY'ladim – Amen for the Kids. The song shows that Amen can be deeply personal. What does he say in the Refrain?

אני מתפלל על הילדים שלי  
שלא יירשו את השריטות שלי  
שיחבקו אחד את השני  
שיהיו בריאים תמיד  
אמן

I pray that my kids

Won't inherit my hangups (literally scratches)  
That they'd embrace each other  
May they'll be healthy forever, amen

Amen Amen Amen!

We soon will gather for RH and YK and then Succot. We will have many, many opportunities to say Amen to the many words we say in our liturgy. Ironically, there will also be times when we can't really articulate what we're feeling. At those times, our Amen might also reflect something that we can't define in the ways the Rabbis imagine. And, the words of Idan Raichel singing L'ha'amin (do you hear amen in the word for to believe – L'ha'amin) written by the songwriting and production duo of Doli and Penn might help us here:

רק להאמין בלי לדעת  
להרגיש בלי לגעת  
לדבר עם העיניים  
גם כשאין לי יותר מה לומר  
לשחרר את הרגע  
זה טבעי לפחד מהטבע  
לחבק חזק בידיים  
כל רגע לפני שנגמר

just believe without knowing  
feel without touching  
speak with your eyes  
even when I don't have anything to say  
release the moment  
it's natural to fear nature  
hold tight in your hands  
every moment before it ends

Amen Amen Amen

And, of course, the song Amen that Israel entered and won the 1995 Eurovision contest with perhaps shows that Amen can mean exactly what the Rabbis had in mind:

בתפילה אמן  
שעולה אמן  
כל הנשמה תהלל יה — א אמן

In prayer – Amen (I see that as reflecting loyalty)

That we rise up – Amen (I see that as reflecting acceptance)

All who breathe – every living thing will praise the Lord – Amen (I see that as reflecting faith)s

So, in two weeks' time, the Ba'al Shacharit will end the Kedushah by chanting: ברוך אתה ה' המלך הקדוש. -  
- And, we will all answer A-Amen. Note the both the ב in ברוך and the א in אמן are elongated. Why? – to show humility as we approach every blessing and as we respond Amen. We elongate the first letter to show humility before God and to give ourselves time to reflect on what we're saying.

Shabbat Shalom v'Shana Tova u-M'leah Mashma'ut – A good year and a year full of meaning.