

And All Believe

A Weekly Leaflet from the House of "Bnei Emunim"



PARASHAS VAYERA

In the Pathways of Emunim:

Amen and Prayer in this Parsha

Answering Amen upon Good Wishes

Answering Amen is the fulfillment of a blessing. We find this concept expressed daily when we try our best to have our berachos completed and perfected by their being responded with an 'Amen.' But have we ever stopped to think how important it is to say 'Amen' even after a simple good wish coming our way?

When Chazal (Berachos 7a) determined that "Let not the good wishes of a simple man be taken lightly," they sought to teach us how important it is for us to answer 'Amen' after any person's good wishes, even a blessing without holiness, as Rashi explained that when an angel nodded in affirmation to the blessing of R' Yishmael, it was as if he was answering 'Amen' afterwards.

Answering Amen Expresses Emuna

In our parasha we read about the argument, as it were, which took place between Hashem and Avraham and Sarah after they were told the good news of a son to be born to them. Hashem asks Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying: Shall I really give birth even though I am old?" But Sarah denied having laughed...

The Ramban poses a difficulty (ibid 15). How can we believe that Sarah didn't believe the angel's tidings? Furthermore, why did Sarah deny having laughed?

He explains that Sarah was not aware that the wayfarers were angels, and when they blessed her that she bear children, she thought it amusing. Hashem did not hold it against her for having laughed but He did reprimand her for not having answered 'Amen' after their words, for even if these visitors had been simple folk, she should have anyway responded to their benediction with an 'Amen' - So be it G-d's will.

According to the Ramban, Sarah is being taken to task for not having at least responded to the angel's good wishes that "at this time [next year] your wife Sarah will have a son" when she should have answered 'Amen' to it, regardless of the well-wisher's status as holy men or only simple folk.

We can substantiate the Ramban's observation from the pasuk itself. "And Sarah laughed within herself saying: Shall I indeed [umnam] give birth even though I am old?" The word 'umnam' hints at 'Amen' (Pninin Publication, Parashas Vayera 5754).

The Mashgiach R' Yerucham Halevi zt"l of Mir derives an important principle in the area of bitachon from the words of the Ramban: Let us imagine, he says, that a poor man were to knock upon the door of an old, childless woman asking for a handout. Upon receiving a generous donation from her, he blesses her from the depths of his heart that - among other things - she should give birth to a son by that time next year. So what if the old woman does not answer a hearty 'Amen' after such a blessing which sounds ridiculous to her -- does that make her an apikores?

The Torah tells us that Sarah had stopped having - "the manner of women". In other words, she was no longer naturally capable of bearing a child. Why, then, should she be expected to answer to a well-wisher who seems to her like a stupid Arab?

But there is an important principle incorporated here: A true believer must never take things at face value but

should always proceed with the belief that "can anything be beyond Hashem's power?" One must firmly believe that all natural processes and laws are in Hashem's hands to do as He wills. Sarah was taken to task for not responding with an 'Amen' because at her spiritual level, she should not have put any stock in her physical condition but have truly believed and answered with a pure and wholesome 'Amen' (Daas Torah Vayera).

After the Good Wishes of a Non-Jew

Chazal related to the good wishes uttered by a non-Jew as follows (Midrash Bereishis Rabba Toldos 66): R' Tanchuma said: If an idolator blesses you, you should answer 'Amen', as it is written (Devarim 7:14), "Blessed shall you be from all the nations." Chazal tell that R' Yishmael once encountered an idolator who blessed him. Said R' Yishmael: Your kind wish has already been predicted in the Torah -- Blessed shall you be from all the nations."

"Sefer Chassidim" (427) derives from the words of Chazal a practical application: "If a non-Jew says to you: Your G-d... will save you, you should reply with 'Amen'."

'Amen' After a Mi Shebeirach

We find the requirement of answering 'Amen' stated as a Halacha in the works of the poskim. The Mishne Berura (215 9) quotes the words of the Midrash that one who hears a man praying or blessing a fellow Jew, even without uttering the Name of Hashem, must respond with 'Amen'. It adds that this is why the custom of answering 'Amen' has become so widespread after the 'Horachamon' of the bircas hamazon.

The Aruch Hashulchan (215 1) adds that whoever answers 'Amen' after a 'mi shebeirach' or to any blessing which one bestows upon a friend, is fulfilling the mitzvah of "Ve'ahavata... You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Those who were close to Hagaon R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l tell that he would continually remind them to adhere to this special practice (Hilchos Shlomo, Tefilla Chap. 12:68). He also said that after reciting Tehillim for a sick person, they should also make a 'mi shebeirach' out loud and that the public should wait until it is completed so that they can respond with 'Amen' (ibid Chap. 8 61).

A man who was in dire need of help once came to Hagaon R' Chaim Halevi of Brisk zt"l since his wife was on her deathbed. R' Chaim blessed him fervently, adding, "I would like to give you some good advice. This coming Friday, when people go to the mikve to cleanse themselves for Shabbos, go and ask all the passersby to bless your wife with a 'refua sheleima', **and don't forget to answer 'Amen' afterwards.** I believe that the power of this suggestion will save you and your household from all trouble" (Notrei Amen Vol. II 17).

"Gishmei Beracha" (p. 494) brings a fascinating story in the name of Hagaon R' Dovid of Ashkavitch, Av Beis Din of Anihad, heard from Hagaon R' Shmuel Engil from Radomishla. He once spent a Shabbos in Sanz by his Rebbe, the Divrei Chaim, who noticed him studying from a sefer during the interims of the reading of the Torah.

After the davening, he called him over and said, "Although I am aware that you are very familiar with the Halacha and know that it is permissible to study between the aliyos, nevertheless, I do have something to reprimand you for: perhaps when they are making a mi shebeirach for a sick person, where your 'Amen' would add to his chances of recovery, you may be lax. Therefore, I must ask you to stop studying at this time but insist that you train yourself to listen to the blessings of the mi shebeirach so that you can respond with a proper 'Amen'."

And Let us Say 'Amen'

In a lighter vein, the Admor R' Shimon of Yaroslav zt"l (quoted in 'Otzar Efraim' Parshas Bo) said: "In the bircas hachodesh which we say on the Shabbos preceding Rosh Chodesh, we say: 'May Hashem usher [the new month] in for us and all of the House of Israel for life and peace, elation and joy... and let us say 'Amen'.' It seems that the ending is a sign for the congregation to respond with 'Amen' to all the blessings they have just recited. But we can also suggest that we are praying that we be able to say 'Amen' [to the realization of such blessings] in the course of the upcoming month many times."

In other words, we ask of Hashem that the coming month be most blessed and that it be filled with joyful occasions where people bestow upon us their good wishes for which we will answer 'Amen', and likewise, that we in turn bless them, so that the word 'Amen' resound again and again.

The Vizhniter Rebbe shlita told of the esteemed Jew who came to the Satmar Rebbe once to receive his blessing upon the marriage of his only son who had been born to him after eighteen years of marriage. Upon that occasion, the father of the chosson asked the Rebbe: "What is the most proper thing for me to do on the wedding day so as to utilize this momentous and holy day for the best?"

He was sure that the Rebbe would tell him to fast, to visit the graves of tzaddikim or to complete the entire Tehillim. To his surprise, the Rebbe advised him to sleep at least three hours. Why? "On this day, a large crowd will surely come to share your joy and bless you accordingly. In order for all their good wishes to come true, you must answer 'Amen' with full intensity, and this is sure to be taxing for you, but very important. In order to do it properly, you must be alert and focused. Therefore, it is advisable that you sleep before the wedding..." (Der Vizhniter Hoif" Vil. 163-164).

Rivka Answered 'Amen' to Yitzchak's Blessing

In Parashas Chaye Sara we find a reference to this Halacha: The pasuk states: "And when Yitzchak finished blessing Yaakov, and just as Yaakov emerged from the presence of his father Yitzchak" etc. The wording there is double, "yatzo yatza", which is puzzling. R' Chaim Yitzchak Yustman zt"l, outstanding talmid of the Chiddushei HaRim, said in his work, 'Chayei Yitzchak' that when Yitzchak blessed Yaakov, Rivka was standing behind the doorway and answered 'Amen' after each and every blessing so that it be whole and perfect. And since Yitzchak's blessing fill two pesukim, she answered 'Amen' twice. This is hinted at through the repeated 'yatzo yatza', which is a reiteration of 'tzei', the numerical value of 'Amen' - ninety-one times two.

The Divrei Yisrael of Modtitz commented along these lines on the pasuk at the beginning of this parasha (25:22): "And Yitzchak prayed to Hashem opposite his wife." Rashi explains: "He stood in one corner and prayed, and she stood in another corner and prayed." The initials of the words "Ishto ki akara - because his wife was barren" add up to ninety-one, just like 'Amen', to teach us that Rivka believed and trusted in Yitzchak's prayer and stood by his side while he prayed so that she could answer 'Amen', and thus complete his requests and have his prayer received Above.

Tales of Emunim:

A story about Amen and Prayer

A FATEFUL 'AMEN'

As in previous years, one of the regular worshippers of the Zichron Moshe shul was certain that this year he would be honored with Maftir Yona. But when the time came for selling it, he was more than surprised to hear someone else bidding for it. This had not happened in all those years; the congregants knew that it belonged to him and had not even questioned his right to this honor. But here, a newcomer decided to bid against the veteran. Our friend refused to be outbid and the sums began to skyrocket to a point that the old timer was ready to back out.

The gabbai was about to announce the 'winner' when the old timer had regrets. How could he pass up such a mitzvah? Maftir Yona is known to have special segulos for long life and he was determined not to let it pass out of his hands. The atmosphere in the shul became volatile with the two men shouting angrily.

"How can you let a newcomer run the bidding up to such an exorbitant price?" demanded the old timer of the gabbai.

"The shul needs every penny it can get for its ongoing expenses, and that's what counts here," said the newcomer.

"But I've held the rights to this maftir for dozens of years! It belongs to me and you have no right to steal it from under my nose," said the other.

"Well, it's time for a change. From now on, this honor will be my privilege," the other retorted heatedly.

The argument could have continued until the end of the fast had it not been for the intervention of R' Yisrael Yaakov Fisher zt"l, Rosh Av Beis Din and Rav of the Zichron Moshe neighborhood. As a halachic authority of stature, he settled the argument: The highest bidder should get this aliya. "But for the sake of peace, he must ask permission from the holder of this right have him waive his claim."

The old timer was not willing to do so. "How can I give up such an honor which is known to be a segula for long life?" he asked bitterly.

"Well then, I hereby bless you with all my heart that you live to a ripe old age and enjoy a good life even without this segula," Rav Fisher assured him. He even repeated his blessing aloud several times.

The story could have ended right here except for the fact that the original holder of the kibud passed away that very year, in the prime of life!

When Rav Fisher came to pay his condolences to the family, the sons couldn't help hide their dismay and pain. Perhaps their father shouldn't have given in after all!

Rav Fisher sensed their hard feelings and said, "You should know that my blessing for a long life should have been realized in full but what could I do if no one bothered to respond with 'Amen'? Neither your father nor those who heard me express it out loud?"

"I made a point of repeating my blessing out loud several times," he added, "in the hope that at least someone would

answer 'Amen', but no one did. A beracha which is not followed by an 'Amen' is not a completed beracha and its power is limited."

Dear Ben Torah!

In anticipation of the yahrzeit of Maran the Chazon Ish zy"o, we ask you to reflect upon the extreme scrupulousness which he practiced with the mitzvah of answering 'Amen' with all one's intent. As Chazal said (Shabbos 119b and Rashi ibid): "Whoever answers 'Amen' with all his might - with full kavana - has the gates of Gan Eden opened for him."



His talmidim testified:

When Kaddish was being said, the Chazon Ish would stand and lean upon his stender, his hands covering his eyes and his whole being focused intently upon answering 'Amen'. One time, at the end of the prayers, there was no one to recite the Kaddish, He was about to leave when someone finally did begin Kaddish. The Chazon Ish did not stand still but returned to his regular place, stood by his stender, covered his eyes and listened to the Kaddish with intense concentration

("Notrei Amen" Vol. I, p. 86).