

He shall dwell in it until the death of the Kohen Gadol. (35:28)

The *Talmud Makkos* 11a teaches that, since the fate of the *rotzeach b'shogeg*, unintentional murderer, was dependent upon the *Kohen Gadol's* longevity, there was fear that the *rotzeach* would pray for the early demise of the *Kohen Gadol*. Once the *Kohen Gadol* died, the murderer would be free to leave the *ir miklat*, city of refuge. To circumvent their prayers, the mothers of the *Kohanim Gedolim* would furnish the murderers with food and clothing to keep them happy and satisfied, so that they would not pray for the death of their sons. Why did the *Kohen Gadol* not personally pray for longevity? His prayer for life would certainly be as effective as the murderer's prayer for his death. Perhaps this is why he had been elected as *Kohen Gadol*. He was a holy person to whom life was certainly quite important. He realized, however, that, by praying for life, he was essentially praying for the many unintentional murderers to be doomed to a life of exile away from family and friends. I guess the *Kohen Gadol* was such a person that "living at the expense of another Jew's pain" was not something he felt warranted his prayer. If Hashem allowed him to live, if his personal merit outweighed the prayers tendered by the murderers – good. If not, well, that was his lot. It came with the territory. Nonetheless, he could not allow his personal prayer to have a detrimental effect on another Jew.

We derive from here the incredible power of prayer. The *Kohen Gadol* is a holy man. The murderer is an exiled Jew, who is in his position for a reason. True, the murder had been unintentional, but it was no accident. One is not sent to the *ir miklat* for an accident. He is sent for unintentional murder, which covers a gamut of ambiguous circumstances. This man is certainly not on a spiritual par with the *Kohen Gadol*; yet, the *Kohen Gadol* fears his prayers (or, at least, the *Kohen Gadol's* mother fears for her son's life). *Karov Hashem l'chol kor'av l'chol asher yikre'uhu b'emes*. "Hashem is close to all who call upon Him – to all who call upon Him sincerely" (*Tehillim* 145:18). Hashem listens, and, when the prayer is sincere, it achieves efficacy. The exiled murderer is sincere (perhaps for the wrong reasons, and self-serving – but sincere). And, thus, his prayers gave the *Kohen Gadol's* mother reason to be anxious for her son's life. This is the awesome power of prayer.

It works because of our relationship with Hashem. He is our Father in Heaven. A father always listens. He never closes his door to his children – regardless of the offense or the duration of time that has elapsed since they had last spoken. If this is true of human emotion, how much more so of Hashem, Who is our Creator?

While the significance of prayer cannot be sufficiently emphasized, we often (because of a lack of knowledge and awareness) ignore the significance of one mysterious word: *Amen*. *Chazal* teach that the individual who answers *Amen* is even greater than the one who initially recited the blessing. *Amen* is related to the word *emunah*, faith, a derivative of *emes*, truth. One who recites a blessing is acknowledging that he is about to partake of Hashem's beneficence, and he offers his gratitude for this opportunity. The one who answers *Amen* is not acknowledging his gratitude to the Creator for the bounty, because he did not receive it. He is, however, seizing the opportunity to

express himself to Hashem in terms of pure faith – unfettered by the limits of his gratitude. When he says *Amen*, he is connecting with Hashem on a purely spiritual level, declaring his total subjugation to Him. In other words, he is affirming his faith in Hashem as Provider, Benefiter – even though he personally did not receive; he is affirming it based upon pure faith. Thus, *Amen* is greater than the blessing, because the blessing is contingent upon gratitude, while *Amen* is a declaration of pure faith. When we say *Amen*, we declare to Hashem that we are prepared to do anything that He asks. We believe wholeheartedly in His ability to do anything. It really cannot get any better than that.

Amen is effective – even if the blessing to which one responds might be unreasonable, even injudicious. Even if hope for the realization of the blessing hangs by less than a shoestring, one should respond *Amen* in the hope that his response may catalyze the actualization of the blessing. The following vignette reinforces this idea.

Shabbos Kodesh, Sivan 26, 5677, 1917, in Vienna's most prominent *shul Khal Adas Yisrael*, popularly known as the *Shif Shul*. The *chazzan* began reciting the *Yehi Ratzon* for *Mevarchim haChodesh*, Blessing the New Moon. Herr Goldshmidt, the elderly *gabbai* announced the *molad*, precise time at which the new moon begins to appear in Yerushalayim. (Traditionally, they announce the exact hour, minute and *chelek*/portion – 1/18 of a minute or 3½ seconds.) Surprisingly, the time was precisely on the complete hour – no minutes or *chalakim*. The congregation continued with the recitation of the prayer with all the wonderful blessings that it engenders. The *Mussaf* service was concluded, and everyone began to return his *siddur* to the bookcase, in preparation for returning home.

Herr Goldshmidt asked everyone to wait a moment; he had something to say, “You all must certainly know that this *molad* is unique in the sense that the precise time falls out on a perfect hour.” Immediately, one of the congregants asked, “Does this not occur often?” “No!” replied Herr Goldshmidt. “It takes place only once every eighty-seven years! Therefore, at this most propitious time, I would like to wish each and every one of you to experience such a *molad* one more time in your lives!”

Most of the people smiled; some even laughed. After all, eighty-seven years was expecting a bit much. Even a *brachah*, blessing, should be realistic. Standing next to the *bimah*, listening to the *gabbai* and the congregation's reaction, was a fifteen-year-old teenager, a refugee from Poland (it was during World War I) who did not react like everyone else. Perhaps it was because of his upbringing by his mother. Growing up, he was inculcated with the notion, “My child, never ignore a blessing that is given to you. Always respond with a hearty *Amen!*” Today was no different. When Herr Goldshmidt blessed the congregation, this teenager, true to his mother's inspiration, responded *Amen*.

Fast forward to Yerushalayim, *Shabbos Mevorchim HaChodesh Mar Cheshvan 5765, 2004*. The *gabbai* of the *shul* announced the *molad* Thursday morning precisely at 2:00 am. The *shul* was

silent. The congregants heard *Reb* Yosha, the oldest member of the *shul*, whimpering as tears slowly began to streak his face. They understood that every month was special to *Reb* Yosha. He had reason to be emotional. He had far surpassed in longevity the lifespan of his friends. One man, however, took a special interest in *Reb* Yosha's weeping. "*Reb* Yosha, *lama bachisa*, why did you weep?" asked Gedalyah Stein. He assumed that, if *Reb* Yosha was weeping, he had to have a good reason.

Reb Yosha looked at Gedalyah and said, "My friend, this is the second time in my life that the *molad* fell on a perfect time, on a complete hour – without fractions. The last time that this occurred, I was a fifteen-year-old teenager in the Shiff *Shul* in Vienna. Today, I am one hundred and two years old. I have every reason to express my emotion. My *Amen* eighty-seven years ago was the catalyst for my longevity. You, Gedalyah, are still young. I encourage you to take to heart and teach your children the lesson my mother taught me – never ignore *Amen*! Every blessing is valuable. Answer *Amen* with great *kavanah*, intention, devotion! May it be the will of Hashem that you should be there for *Mevarchim HaChodesh, Tishrei* 5852, 2091, in good health and welfare!"