

PARASHAS KI SAVO

The Power of One Word

Time was running out for Moses, and as the Jewish people massed on the east bank of the Jordan River on the threshold of the Promised Land, he issued his final instructions. Immediately after crossing the river under the leadership of Joshua, there was to be a solemn gathering of all the people in the valley bordered by Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival, which formed a natural amphitheater. Half the tribes were to take positions on one slope and half on the other. The tribe of Levi was to deploy in the lowlands in the center around the Holy Ark. The Levites were to pronounce the twelve cardinal tenets which determine blessing and accursedness, and the people massed on the mountainsides were to respond with a resounding, "Amen!"

Forty years had passed since the Jewish people had received the Torah at Mount Sinai, forty years under the guidance of Moses, the greatest prophet who ever lived. Why then wasn't this special pledge of allegiance to the Creator and His Torah taken at some time during Moses's tenure as the leader of the Jewish people? Why leave it to his successor? Furthermore, why was the pledge encapsulated in the single word "Amen"? Why wasn't each and every individual required to make an explicit statement of allegiance of his own?

Let us reflect for a moment on this mysterious word - Amen. What exactly does it mean and what does it signify? The Talmud tells us that the one who answers Amen is greater than the one who makes the blessing. Why is this so? What gives this one word its extraordinary power?

The commentators explain that the word Amen is related to the word *emunah*, faith. The person who makes a blessing over a delicious fruit, for instance, is poised to enjoy this wonderful pleasure, and naturally, he expresses his gratitude to the Creator of all things. A person who makes a blessing under other circumstances, such as the performance of a *mitzvah*, expresses an intellectual appreciation for the capacity of a *mitzvah* to reinforce the relationship between a human being and his Creator.

The one who answers Amen, however, is not acknowledging the bounty of the Creator out of gratitude, nor is he communicating his appreciation on an intellectual level. Rather, he is grasping the occasions that warrant blessing to express himself to Hashem in terms of a pure faith unrestricted by the limits of his gratitude or the

boundaries of his intellect. His connection with the Almighty transcends the human condition entirely and derives directly from the absolute spirituality of the divine spark in the human soul. It is a total sublimation of the self in the Infinite. This connection as expressed by the single word Amen, explains the Talmud, is far greater than the blessing itself.

With this in mind, we can gain new insight into the purpose and tone of the solemn gathering on Mount Eival and Mount Gerizim. During their years in the desert, the Jewish people had existed in a celestial oasis, fed by manna from heaven and guarded by pillars of cloud and fire. Their faith, instead of being much tested, was continuously reinforced by the miracles which characterized their everyday lives. But now the situation was about to change drastically. Once they crossed into the Promised Land, they would have to engage the physical world in the conventional manner. They would till the soil, ply the seas and frequent the marketplaces. No longer would they walk on a cushion of miracles.

In this new environment, they would need a new and powerful infusion of faith and allegiance. And the most effective, powerful, soul-charging expression of faith would be the thunderous declaration of "Amen!"

A king wanted to test the loyalty of two of his ministers. "What will you do for me?" he asked the first minister.

"For you, your majesty," said the first minister, "I would move heaven and earth. I would battle your enemies and bring you vast riches. I would build you palaces in every city and I would provide food and entertainment from morning until night."

"And you?" said the king to the second minister. "What would you do for me?"

"Absolutely anything you wish," he replied.

The king beamed. "You, my good minister, are a truly loyal servant."

In our own lives, we also find ourselves between a spiritual oasis and the teeming world of affairs. On the Sabbath, we enjoy the wonderful tranquillity of being totally removed from the cares and concerns of mundane living, the soul-satisfying rewards of Torah study, meditation, introspection and uninterrupted family time. But when these sylvan hours pass, we once again face the challenges of the workplace and the world, and we must once again fortify ourselves with a reaffirmation of our faith. The formula is not complex. It is simple, short and powerful. One word. Amen.