

B'racha Rishoina

R'Saffer B'Iyun Newsletter

Amen to your own B'racha

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The gm in 53b states "The one who answers *Amen* is even greater than the one who makes the *b'racha*". Rav Malinowitz *shlit'a* once suggested that this might be the case because a *b'racha* is typically specific to the experience of the individual reciting it. Saying *Amen* to someone else's *b'racha* is unique in that it is unprovoked by personal benefit. The person saying *Amen* must therefore be opportunistic in linking to the other person's *b'racha*, in addition to being mindful of *Hashem's* glory when experiencing it. The gm and *rishonim* on 53b (may we get there soon) discusses this and many fundamental ideas involved in answering *Amen* to a *Bracha*.

Our gm on 45b discusses a unique question. What is the value of saying *Amen* to **one's own b'racha**? The gm records conflicting *braisos* on this issue. One *baraisa* states "one who recites *Amen* after his own blessing is praiseworthy" (*m'shubach*). Another *baraisa* states that such a person is doing something "...despicable" (*m'guna*). The gm then resolves the contradiction by explaining that it is "**praiseworthy**" to say *Amen* to your own *b'racha* after "*boneh yerushalaim*" (of benching), whereas it is "**despicable**" to recite *Amen* to your own *bracha* by "other *brachos*".

Before we can explain the gm's resolution to the contradiction that *Amen* after one's own *b'racha* is laudable after *boneh yerushalaim*, and despicable otherwise, we must ask ourselves a more basic question. Why should *Amen* to one's own *b'racha* ever be despicable? Even if there is no value in saying *Amen* to one's own *b'racha* if indeed one did recite *Amen*, what is so horrendous that the gm should call it despicable? R' Saffer suggested that to answer this we must consider what we are saying when we answer *Amen* to a *b'racha* of another individual. The simple understanding of *Amen* is that we are affirming that we believe that all that is being expressed in the *b'racha* is true (see also *gm shabbos* 119b, SA 124:6). Such affirmation is praiseworthy when responding to someone else's *b'racha* but highly inappropriate when responding to your own *b'racha*. After all, one's own *b'racha* is significant on its own merits and a redundant affirmation seems to suggest a lacking in the *b'racha* itself.

Following the above logic, we concluded that the **affirmation** aspect of *Amen* which is so central when answering *Amen* to someone else's *b'racha*, is in fact "despicable" (*m'guna*) when answering your own *b'racha*. It follows, therefore, that the "praiseworthy" (*m'shubach*) *Amen* after *boneh*

yerushalayim must serve a function other than affirmation of the *b'racha*; a function that legitimizes saying *Amen* even to one's own *b'racha*. What is this function that applies to *boneh yerushalayim* but not other *b'rachos*?

Another major issue that the *Rishonim* on this gm address is whether the "praiseworthy" *Amen* that follows *boneh yerushalaim* is exclusive to *boneh yerushalaim*. The prevalent position in *Rishonim* (although this prevalence is not reflected in our *minhag*) is that *boneh yerushalaim* is prototypical of a type of *b'racha*, and that other such similar *b'rachos* should also be followed by *Amen*. The *Ritva* suggests that whether *boneh yerushalaim* is the only example of a *b'racha* that requires *Amen*, or representative of a type of many such similar *b'rachos*, is precisely the dispute between *Abaye* and *Rav Ashi* in the following gm on 45b. The gm relates that whenever they would arrive at "*boneh yerushalaim*" of benching, *Abaye* would say *Amen* really loud, and *Rav Ashi* would say *Amen* in a whisper. The gm explains each *amora's* rationale, *Abaye* was loud because he wanted to alert the workers who were "on the clock" that they should get back to work and forego the rest of benching, as *boneh yerushalaim* marks the end of the *d'oraisa b'rachos*. In contrast, *Rav Ashi* did not want to call attention to the *Amen* between the *d'oraisa* and *d'rabonon b'rachos* of benching. Although the *halacha* is clearly that a day worker should forego the end of benching (gm 46a), saying *Amen* out loud would be a *zilzul* (denigration) of the rabbinic *b'racha* of *ha'tov v'hameitiv*.

The *Ritva* explains: Neither *Abaye* nor *R' Ashi* could have been saying *Amen* to *boneh yerushalaim* as a form of affirmation, because, as we have explained, affirming one's own *b'racha* is despicable. Why, then, did they say *Amen* after *boneh yerushalaim*? The *Ritva* explains that *R' Ashi* said *Amen* because *Amen* is not only an affirmation of a *b'racha*, but also serves as a "finisher" (*sof birchosav*) of a *b'racha*. In other words, *Amen* does not only serve to affirm a *b'racha*, it can also be a fitting exclamation point to a *b'racha* or a series of *b'rachos*. This explains why *R' Ashi* was able to say *Amen* to *boneh yerushalaim*. He was not affirming that the *b'racha* was true, he was "finishing" his *b'racha* with an exclamation point! This also explains why *R' Ashi* viewed said the *Amen* in an undertone. In the context of benching, "finishing" the *d'oraisa b'rachos* of benching with an *Amen* as if the "important" *b'rachos* have been completed, is *zilzul* to the rest of benching. According to the *Ritva's* explanation of *R' Ashi*, defining *Amen* as a "finisher" should apply to other *b'rachos* as well and not limited

to *boneh yerushalayim*. Any time that *Amen* can be viewed as a “finisher” of *b'rachos* the *Amen* will be “praiseworthy”.

At this point one should be asking why *Abaye* was seemingly unconcerned with the *zilzul* of *hatov v'hameitiv* caused by the “shout out” of the *Amen* after *boneh yerushalayim*. We can assume that he was just as demanding as *Rav Ashi* in preserving the dignity of rabbinic *b'rachos*. The *Ritva* suggests that according to *Abaye* *Amen* has no meaning as a “finisher”. A person is finished with *brachos* when they are completed. There is no need for a “finisher”. Therefore, all *Amen's* except after *boneh yerushalayim* will be “despicable” (*m'guna*) as they have no meaning unless to suggest a lacking in the *b'racha* itself. *Boneh yerushalayim* is unique in that it is the only *d'oraisa b'racha* that immediately precedes a *d'rabanan* one. For this unique situation, *Abaye* felt it appropriate to employ an *Amen* as a **distinguisher** (*mishum hekeira*) between the first three *brachos d'oraisa* of benching and the subsequent *bracha d'rabanan* of *hatov v'hameitiv*. Now we could explain why according to *Abaye* there would be no *zilzul* to the *brachos d'rabanan* if said out loud. To **distinguish** with your *Amen* between the *b'rachos d'oraisa* and *bracha d'rabanon* as *Abaye* does is a simple pragmatic function, but to declare that the *brachos* are **finished** with an *Amen* after reciting the *d'oraisa b'rachos* is an affront to the *d'rabanan bracha* that follows.

In **summary** we have arrived at two new conceptions of *Amen*. *Amen* as “distinguisher” and *Amen* as a “finisher”. *Amen* as a distinguisher limits *Amen* (after one's own *b'racha*) to the *b'racha* of *boneh yerushalayim*. *Amen* as a finisher, however, will as we said be meaningful whenever one is finishing *b'rachos*.

Now *Amen* as a **finisher** leaves us with some open questions. Does *Amen* as a finisher function to culminate only a series of *b'rachos* (as is the case in “*boneh yerushalayim*”) or even a single *b'racha*?

The Rambam in *b'rachos* 1:16-18 refers to “*boneh yerushalayim*” as being the prototypical *b'racha* that can be answered with a “finishing” *Amen* by the one who recites it. More specifically, the Rambam views ***b'rachos* that are said in series** as being eligible for a finishing *Amen*. As the Rambam states in 1:18 “...we only say *Amen* (to our own *b'racha*) after a final *b'racha* that was preceded by another *b'racha* or *b'rachos*, such as the *b'rachos* of a *melech* or a *kohen gadol* and similar such *b'rachos*, in order to exclaim that one has finished all of his *b'rachos*, and for that reason he says *Amen*.”

The **Rambam** is clearly in line with our notion that saying *Amen* to one's own *b'racha* is redundant unless it serves a legitimate function other than its usual role of affirmation. The Rambam is asserting that *Amen* at the end of one's own *b'racha* has no innate meaning as a “finisher” and would thus be despicable (*m'guna*) at the end of a single *b'racha*. Finishing a series of *b'rachos*, on the other hand, serves to unify all the individual *b'rachos* in the series. That, claims the

Rambam, is a function worthy of punctuating with an *Amen*, the *Amen* of **finisher**.

The **Ra'avad** does not understand the Rambam's position (“I don't know what this is...”). He assumes as a matter of course that even a single *b'racha*, such as “*Al Hamichya*” deserves a finishing *Amen* as he views *Amen* as having innate meaning as a finisher.

R' Saffer pointed out that the Rambam and Ra'avad understand the gm's distinction between “*boneh yerushalayim*” and “other *b'rachos (she'ar b'rachos)*” differently. According to the Rambam, “*boneh..*” is the paradigm of a *b'racha* said as a culmination of a series, all other individual *b'rachos* should not have a finishing *Amen* and would be despicable. According to the Ra'avad, “other *b'rachos*” that do not get followed by an *Amen* are only individual *b'rachos* that are within a series but do not culminate it. The gm is teaching us that **even** “*boneh..*” can be followed by *Amen*, despite the fact that it is followed by more *b'rachos*, because it is at least the culmination of the series of biblical *b'rachos*.

The *rishonim* all bring up another factor in determining why we wouldn't say *Amen* after every *b'racha*; that is the issue of *hefsek*. When *hefsek* is involved even if one held the opinion of the Ra'avad that *Amen* serves as a meaningful “finisher” after a single *b'racha* the *Amen* could not be recited.

The **Ra'avad** holds that we would not say *Amen* after a *birchas mitzvah* or a *birchas hanehenin*, because it would create a *hefsek* between the *b'racha* and the mitzvah or the *hana'ah*. The Meiri quotes 2 other opinions. One opinion, the “**Yesh Omrim**”, is that there is no *hefsek* between the *b'racha* and the *hana'ah* or the mitzvah in either case. The second opinion in the Meiri, **the “Yesh Machre'eem”**, distinguishes between *birchos hanehenin* and *birchos ha-mitzvah*, stating that only by *birchos ha-mitzvah* is there a *hefsek*. Rabbi Saffer explained that the possibilities posited in the *Rishonim* hinge on the relationship of the *b'racha* to the *Amen*. The **Ra'avad** apparently holds that the *Amen*, while meaningful as a “finisher”, is not integral to the *b'racha*, and therefore constitutes a *hefsek* both in *birchas ha-mitzvah* and *birchas hanehenin*. The “**Yesh Omrim**” represents the opposite extreme *shita*. They view the *Amen* as being not only a “finisher”, but actually becoming the culmination of the *b'racha* itself. If the *Amen* is integrated into the *b'racha*, it obviously is not viewed as a *hefsek*. Finally, the “**Yesh Machri'im**” view *Amen* as not part of the *b'racha* itself, but “connected” to the *b'racha*. With this one might distinguish between *Amen* after a *birchas ha-mitzvah* and *Amen* after *birchas hanehenin*. It is well known that *birchas ha-mitzvah* itself might become an actual part of the mitzvah itself. This obviously demands a complete fusion between *b'racha* and mitzva. It is then obvious that while by *birchas hanehenin*, a “connected *Amen*” will not be a *hefsek*, by *birchas ha-mitzva* where a complete fusion is necessary between *b'racha* and mitzva a “connected *Amen*” will be a *hefsek* as it disrupts the fusion.