

# *The Final Word in Faith*

**שיחה** *Sicha*  
Shabbaton in the Mountains  
August 7-10, 2014

Wildacres Retreat  Little Switzerland, NC

August 2014

## *Amen!*

Certainly a strange greeting. *Amen* is, after all, a response, not an opening. An *amen* that stands alone invites questions: What does this *amen* confirm? To what is it an affirmation? Would we add our own *amen* to an unheard claim or blessing? To what claims and blessings are we prepared to say, *amen*? Are there circles of trust and tradition within which we are readily disposed to saying, *amen*—regardless of the speaker? How can we characterize our own *amen* circles? Do we have spiritual *amen* circles? Perhaps political, or a social justice *amen* circles? Under what conditions are we not prepared to say, *amen*?

The Hebrew word, *amen*, is the root word of faith, trust, belief, dependability, and artful practice. *Amen* is so engrained, so ready on the tongue, so familiar to the ear that we overlook the ways in which the word forms and informs our lives as individuals who live in communities that are both constant and changing.

Sages and poets have explored *amen*, the final word in faith. But they do not have the final word as to its meaning, its use, or its place in building community.

During this weekend in the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains, we will add our voices to theirs. May we discover new and renewed meaning—*amen*!



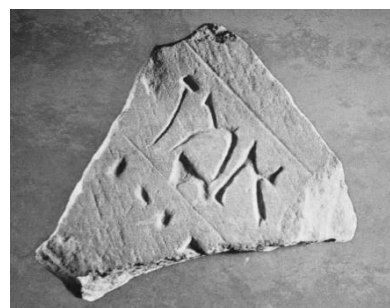
*שיחה* *Sicha*  
Shabbaton in the Mountains  
August 7-10, 2014 at Wildacres Retreat

## How Shall We Say *Amen*?

על שלחני מנחת אבן שפתוב עליה "אמן",  
 שבר מצבה, שארית מבית קברות יהודי  
 שנחרב לפני כאלף שנים, בעיר שבה נולדתי.  
 מלה אחת "אמן" חרוטה עמוק באבן  
 אמן קשה וסופי על כל שהיה ולא ישוב,  
 אמן רך ומזמר כמו בתפילה,  
 אמן ואמן וכן יהי רצון.

On my table sits a stone *amen* written upon it,  
 a grave stone fragment, a remnant of a Jewish graveyard  
 destroyed more than a thousand years ago, in the city where I was born.  
 One word, *amen*, cut deep in the stone  
 an *amen* harsh and final over what was and will never return  
 an *amen* soft and melodic as in prayer,  
*amen* and *amen*; so may it be his will.

Yehuda Amichai,  
 Translated by Rabbi Steven Sager



הרב לפני התבה נצב. על ספסלים, מאחוריו, העדה יושבת.  
 הרב בחזקה שותק.  
 העדה שותקת "אמן" אחריו.  
 מהנר הדולק בשתיקה מהבהבת "אמן" השלהבת.

The Rav before the ark stands fixed. On benches behind him the community sits.  
 The Rav is mightily silent.  
 The community un-sounds *amen* after him.  
 From the lighted lamp silently flickers the flame's *amen*.

Rivka Miriam  
 Translated by Rabbi Steven Sager

## *Amen and Amen: Concluding The Five Books of David*

מִשֶּׁה נָתַן חֲמִשָּׁה חֻמְשֵׁי תּוֹרָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל  
 וְדָוִד נָתַן חֲמִשָּׁה סְפָרִים שְׁבַתְהֵלִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל

Moses gave five books of the Torah to Israel and David gave five books of Psalms to Israel  
 (Midrash on Psalms 1:2)

### End of Psalms, Book I

בָּרוּךְ ה'	Overflowing is the Lord	
אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל	the God of Israel	
מִהָעוֹלָם וְעַד הָעוֹלָם	from eternity to eternity	
אָמֵן וְאָמֵן	<i>amen and amen</i>	(Psalm 41:14)

### End of Psalms, Book II

בָּרוּךְ ה'	Overflowing is the Lord	
אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל	God, God of Israel,	
עֹשֶׂה נִפְלְאוֹת לְבַדּוֹ	who alone does wondrous things	
וּבָרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹדוֹ	and overflowing is his glorious name	
לְעוֹלָם	Forever	
וְיִמְלֵא כְבוֹדוֹ	and may his glory fill	
אֶת-כָּל הָאָרֶץ	the whole world	
אָמֵן וְאָמֵן	<i>amen and amen</i>	(Psalm 72:19)

### End of Psalms, Book III

בָּרוּךְ ה'	Overflowing is the Lord	
לְעוֹלָם	Forever	
אָמֵן וְאָמֵן	<i>amen and amen</i>	(Psalm 89:53)

### End of Psalms, Book IV

בָּרוּךְ ה'	Overflowing is the Lord	
אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל	God of Israel	
מִן הָעוֹלָם וְעַד הָעוֹלָם	from eternity to eternity	
וְאָמַר כָּל-הָעָם	let all the people say	
אָמֵן	<i>amen</i>	
הַלְלוּ-יָהּ	halleluyah.	(Psalm 106:48)

### End of Psalms, Book V

כָּל הַנְּשָׁמָה	Everything that breathes	
תְּהַלֵּל יָהּ	will praise the Lord	
הַלְלוּ-יָהּ	halleluyah.	(Psalm 150:6)

## I Say With Complete Faith: A Conversation

אֲנִי מֵאֲמִין בְּאַמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה שֶׁהַבּוֹרֵא יִתְבָּרַךְ שְׁמוֹ הוּא בּוֹרֵא וּמְנַהִיג לְכָל  
הַבְּרוּאִים וְהוּא לְבִדּוֹ עָשָׂה וְעוֹשֶׂה וְיַעֲשֶׂה לְכָל הַמַּעֲשִׂים.

I believe with complete faith that the Creator, may his name be blessed, creates and directs all creatures and that he alone has made, makes, and will make all things.

Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith - 1st principle

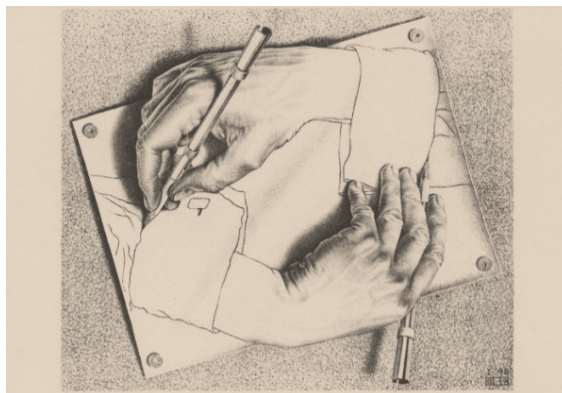


## I Say With Complete Faith

אֲנִי אוֹמֵר בְּאַמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה	I say with complete faith
שֶׁהַתְּפִלוֹת קָדְמוּ לַאלֹהִים.	that prayers preceded God.
הַתְּפִלוֹת יָצְרוּ אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים,	Prayers fashioned God,
הָאֱלֹהִים יָצַר אֶת הָאָדָם	God fashioned man
וְהָאָדָם יוֹצֵר תְּפִלוֹת	and man fashions prayers
שִׁיוְצֵרוֹת אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים שִׁיוְצֵר אֶת הָאָדָם.	that fashion God who fashions man.

Yehuda Amichai

Translated by Rabbi Steven Sager



Drawing Hands by M.C. Escher

## Perfectly Faithful

The biblical poet extols God:

אֵל אֱמוּנָה וְאֵין עָוֹל    A faithful God, never false,  
צַדִּיק וְיָשָׁר הוּא    Dependable and upright is he!

Deuteronomy 32:4



The phrase, *El emunah, a faithful God*, is just as easily—but more provocatively—translated: a *God of faith*. An ancient commentator did not hesitate to answer the question that rose from the more provocative reading: In what does God have faith?

אֵל אֱמוּנָה :    A God of faith:  
שֶׁהָאֱמִין בַּעֲלָם וּבְרָאוּ.    who had faith in the world and created it.

Sifre Deuteronomy on Deuteronomy 32:4



Another sage imagined that evidence of God's faith in the world could only be revealed by stewards who took their place in the deeply grounded, seeded faithfulness that lay in potential.

רַבִּינִין אָמְרִי : מֵאֱמוּנָתוֹ שֶׁל בָּשָׂר וָדָם אֵת יוֹדֵעַ אֱמוּנָתוֹ שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא.  
מַעֲשֵׂה שֶׁל רַבִּי פִּינְחָס בֶּן יֶאֱרִי שֶׁהָיָה דָר בְּעִיר אַחַת בְּדֶרֶס. וְהָלְכוּ אֲנָשִׁים  
לְהַתְּפִיֵּן שָׁם וְהָיוּ בִּגְדָן שְׁתֵּי סֵאִין שֶׁל שְׁעוּרִים וְהִפְקִידוּ אֶצְלוֹ וְשָׂכְחוּ אוֹתָן  
וְהָלְכוּ לָהֶן. וְהָיָה רַבִּי פִּינְחָס בֶּן יֶאֱרִי זֹרֵעַ אוֹתָן בְּכָל שָׁנָה וְעוֹשֶׂה אוֹתָן גֶּרֶן  
וְכוֹנֵס. אַחֵר שָׁבַע שָׁנִים וְהָלְכוּ אוֹתָן הַחֲבָרִים לָשֵׁם לְתַבַּע אוֹתָן לֵתֵן לָהֶן. מִיָּד  
הִפִּיר אוֹתָן רַבִּי פִּינְחָס בֶּן יֶאֱרִי אָמַר לָהֶם : בּוֹאוּ וְטָלוּ אוֹצְרוֹתֵיכֶם. הֲרִי  
מֵאֱמוּנָתוֹ שֶׁל בָּשָׂר וָדָם אֵת יוֹדֵעַ אֱמוּנָתוֹ שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא.

The sages said: From the faithfulness/*emunah* of human beings you learn about the faithfulness/*emunah* of the Holy One, blessed be he. A tale about Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair who lived in a city in the south: Two men traveled to find work there. They had with them two seah of barley which they deposited with Rabbi Pinhas for safe keeping. They forgot about the barley and subsequently went home. Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair would sow the barley each year and he made a granary and stored the barley. After seven years those two friends came back to claim their grain. Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair immediately recognized them and said to them: Come and take your stores. Thus, from the faithfulness/*emunah* of human beings you learn the faithfulness/*emunah* of the Holy One, blessed be he. (Deuteronomy Rabbah 3:3)

## When I Was Young I Believed With All My Heart

כְּשֶׁהָיִיתִי צָעִיר הָאֵמָנָתִי בְּכָל לִבִּי שֶׁאֵת אֶגֶם  
הַחוּלָה חֲזָבִים לִיבֵשׁ, וְכָל הַצְּפוּרִים הַצְּבָעוֹנִיּוֹת  
בְּרָחוּ מִשָּׁם וַעֲכָשׁוּ, אַחֵר כִּמְעַט חָצִי מֵאָה,  
שׁוּב מִמְּלָאִים אוֹתוֹ מִים, כִּי הִיָּתָה טָעוּת. וְאוֹלִי  
כָּל חַיִּי אֲנִי חֵי בְּטָעוּת. וְאֱלֹהֵי יְלָדוּתִי גַם הוּא  
טָעוּת, וְהוּא נִקְרָא עַדִּין אֱלֹהִים.  
אֲבָל הַטָּעוּת הַשְּׁלֵמָה עוֹשָׂה חַיִּים שְׁלֵמִים  
כְּמוֹ אֱמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה. וְאֵת הַמְּלִים "טָעוּת לְעוֹלָם חוֹזֵר"  
הִפְכֵתִי לְזֶמֶר מְרֻגֵעַ, וּמִן הַמְּלִים  
"כָּל הָאָדָם כּוֹזֵב" עָשִׂיתִי קָצֵב מְחוּל בַּיּוֹם  
וְשִׁיר עֶרֶשׁ בְּלִילָה. אָמֵן.

When I was young I believed with all my heart that the Hula  
swamp had to be drained, but all of the colorful birds  
fled and now, after almost half a century,  
they are again filling it with water, because it was a mistake. Perhaps  
I have lived my whole life in a mistake. The God of my childhood also  
is a mistake, yet he is still called God.  
But a complete mistake makes for a complete life  
the same as complete belief. The words "a mistake lives forever"  
I have made into a soothing melody, and from the words  
"everyone disappoints" I have made a dance step by day  
and a lullaby by night. *Amen.*

Yehuda Amichai  
Translated by Rabbi Steven Sager



Hula Lake with Migrating Birds 2012



## Faith In That Which Is Faithful

In 586 BCE, Jerusalem burned and faith was ruined. Gone was the faith that the city's walls would withstand the enemy; gone, the faith that God would protect the Temple. The poet-survivor, searching for faith among the ruins, noticed that the sun continued to rise faithfully, even over the devastation:

זאת אֲשִׁיב אֶל-לִבִּי	This I keep in my heart
על-כֵּן אוֹחִיל	therefore I have hope
חֲסִדֵי ה' כִּי לֹא-תִמָּנוּ	that Lord's kindnesses are endless
כִּי לֹא-כָלוּ רַחֲמָיו	that his mercies never cease
חֲדָשִׁים לְבִקְרִים	renewing each morning
רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ	great is your faithfulness

Lamentations 3:21-23



Rabbi Alexandri (3rd century, Israel,) celebrated the faithful, daily renewal of life as an anticipation and confirmation of what he deeply believed—that God would continue this faithfulness in the world to come:

חֲדָשִׁים לְבִקְרִים רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ: אָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְכָּסַנְדְּרִי עַל שְׁאַתָּה מְחַדָּשֵׁנוּ  
בְּכָל בֹּקֶר וּבֹקֶר אָנוּ יוֹדְעִין שֶׁאֱמוּנָתְךָ רַבָּה לְתַחִית הַמֵּתִים.

*Renewing each morning great is your faithfulness* (Lamentations 3:23): Said Rabbi Alexandri: Because you renew us each and every morning we know that your faithfulness is great to resurrect the dead. (Lamentations Rabbah 3:8)



Each day, traditional pray-ers reflect on both Rabbi Alexandri's faith in the world to come and upon the ancient poet's celebration of the faithful renewing of life each morning:

מוֹדָה/מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ	I am grateful to you
מֶלֶךְ	Sovereign
חַי וְקַיִם	living and lasting
שָׁחֲזַרְתָּ בִּי	that you have returned to me
נַשְׁמָתִי	my soul
בְּחַמְלָה	in tenderness
רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ.	great is your faithfulness.





For Maimonides, the resurrection of the dead was one of 13 essential principles of faith—not tied to any this-worldly tokens:

אֲנִי מֵאֲמִין בְּאַמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה שְׁתִּהְיֶה תְּחִיַּת הַמֵּתִים בְּעֵת שְׁתַּעֲלֶה רְצוֹן מֵאֵת הַבּוֹרֵא וְתִבְרָךְ שְׁמוֹ וְיִתְעַלֶּה זְכָרוֹ לְעַד וּלְנֶצַח נְצָחִים.

I believe with complete faith that there will be a resurrection of the dead at the time willed by the creator, may his name be blessed and his reputation exalted forever. (Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith – 13<sup>th</sup> principle)



The poet, Yehuda Amichai, used Maimonides' own language to articulate a very different faith in resurrection. Amichai professes to believe (*ma-amin*) with complete faith (*emunah*) that human nature, as well as nature, more broadly, betoken resurrection. The departed will surely want to return to their loves and relationships. Nature demonstrates a capacity for resurrection from the buried and broken seed. The cemetery groundskeeper is no expert in buried Jews, but everything that he knows about buried seed makes him believe that—like the flowers—the Jews planted there, are practicing (*mit'am-nim*) for resurrection:

אֲנִי מֵאֲמִין בְּאַמוּנָה שְׁלֵמָה בְּתִחִיַּת הַמֵּתִים כִּי,  
כְּמוֹ אָדָם שֶׁמִּבְקֵשׁ לְחַזֹּר לְמָקוֹם אֱהוּב, יִשְׁאַר  
בְּכוֹנָה, סֵפֶר, סֵל, מִשְׁקָפִים, תַּצְלוּם קָטָן  
שְׁיִהְיֶה לוֹ תִירוֹץ לְחַזֹּר, כִּדּוּ הַמֵּתִים מִשְׁאִירִים  
אֶת הַחַיִּים וְיִחְזְרוּ.  
פַּעַם עֲמַדְתִּי בְּעֶרְפִּילֵי סֵתוֹ רְחוֹק  
בְּבֵית קְבָרוֹת יְהוּדֵי נְטוּשׁ, אֲבָל לֹא נְטוּשׁ עַל-יְדֵי מֵתָיו.  
הִגֵּנּוּ הֵיךְ מִמָּחָה לְפָרְחִים וְלַעֲוֹנוֹת הַשָּׁנָה  
וְלֹא מִמָּחָה לְיְהוּדִים הַקְּבוּרִים,  
אֵף הוּא אָמַר: הֵם מְתַאֲמָנִים לִילָה, לִילָה, לְתִחִיַּת הַמֵּתִים.

I believe with complete faith in the resurrection of the dead for  
just as a person who wants to return to a beloved place will leave  
intentionally a book, basket, glasses, a small picture  
such that he has some reason to return, just so the dead leave behind  
life for which they can return.

Once, in the mists of a distant fall, I stood  
in an abandoned Jewish cemetery, but it had not been abandoned by its dead.  
The groundskeeper was an expert in flowers and in the year's seasons  
but he was no expert in buried Jews,  
yet he said: Every night they practice for the resurrection of the dead.

Yehuda Amichai  
Translated by Rabbi Steven Sager

## Begrudging *Amen*, Heartfelt *Amen*

שְׁנֵי מַלְאָכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת מְלוּיִן לוֹ לְאָדָם בְּעֶרֶב שַׁבָּת מִבֵּית הַכְּנֶסֶת לְבֵיתוֹ, אֶחָד טוֹב וְאֶחָד רָע. וּכְשֶׁבָּא לְבֵיתוֹ וּמָצָא נֵר דְּלוּק וְשׁוּלְחָן עָרוּךְ וּמִטָּתוֹ מוּצָעֶת, מְלַאֵךְ טוֹב אוֹמֵר: יְהִי רָצוֹן שְׁתֵּיהֶּא לְשַׁבָּת אַחֲרֵת כָּךְ. וּמְלַאֵךְ רָע עוֹנֶה אָמֵן בְּעַל כָּרְחוֹ. וְאִם לֹא, מְלַאֵךְ רָע אוֹמֵר: יְהִי רָצוֹן שְׁתֵּיהֶּא לְשַׁבָּת אַחֲרֵת כָּךְ, וּמְלַאֵךְ טוֹב עוֹנֶה אָמֵן בְּעַל כָּרְחוֹ.

Two ministering angels accompany a man on Shabbat eve as he comes home from the synagogue—one good angel and one bad. And when he returns to the house and finds the lamp lit, the table arranged and the bed made into a couch, the good angel says: May it be God's will that there be another Shabbat just like this one. And the bad angel is compelled to answer: *Amen*. If things are not so arranged, then the bad angels says: May it be God's will that there be another Shabbat just like this one, and the good angel is compelled to answer, *Amen*.

Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 119b



אָמַר רִישׁ לָקִישׁ: כָּל הָעוֹנֶה אָמֵן בְּכָל כָּחוֹ פּוֹתְחִין לוֹ שְׁעָרֵי גֵן עֵדֶן, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: פִּתְחוּ שְׁעָרִים וְיָבֹא גֹי צַדִּיק שׁוֹמֵר אֱמוּנִים (ישעיה כו: ב) אֶל תִּיקְרִי שׁוֹמֵר אֱמוּנִים אֲלֵא שְׁאוּמְרִים אָמֵן. מֵאִי אָמֵן? אָמַר רַבִּי חֲנִינָא: אֶל מְלֶךְ נֶאֱמָן.

Resh Lakish said: Anyone who responds *amen* with all his strength opens the gates of paradise, as it is said: *Open the gates and let a righteous nation that keeps faith enter* (Isaiah 26:2). Do not read the verse as saying, *a righteous nation that keeps faith/shomer emunim*, but read it as if it that says: *a righteous nation that says, amen/ sheh-omer amen*. And what does *amen* mean? It is an acronym for: *Ayl Melech Ne'eman*—God the Faithful Sovereign.

Genesis Rabbah 57:4

## Faith In Two Torahs And In Their Teacher

תָּנּוּ רַבָּנָן: מַעֲשֶׂה בְּנֶכְרִי אֶחָד שָׁבָא לִפְנֵי שַׁמַּאי, אָמַר לוֹ: כַּמָּה תּוֹרוֹת יֵשׁ לָכֶם? אָמַר לוֹ: שְׁתֵּים, תּוֹרָה שֶׁבְּכָתֵב וְתּוֹרָה שֶׁבְּעַל פֶּה. אָמַר לוֹ: שֶׁבְּכָתֵב, אֲנִי מֵאֲמִינָךְ, וְשֶׁבְּעַל פֶּה, אֲנִי מֵאֲמִינָךְ. גִּיּוּרָנִי עַל מִנַּת שְׁתֵּלְמִידָנִי תּוֹרָה שֶׁבְּכָתֵב. גָּעַר בּוֹ וְהוֹצִיאוֹ בְּנִזְיָפָה. בָּא לִפְנֵי הִלֵּל- גִּיּוּרִיהָ. יוֹמָא קָמָא אָמַר לִיה: א"ב ג"ד, לְמַחֵר אֶפִּידָ לִיה. אָמַר לִיה: וְהָא אֶתְמוּל לָא אֶמְרִתָּ לִי הֲכִי?! אָמַר לוֹ: לָאו עָלִי דְדִי קָא סְמַכְתָּ? דְּעַל פֶּה נָמִי סָמוּךְ עָלִי!

The sages taught: A tale of an outsider who came before Shammai and said to him: How many Torahs do you have? He replied: Two—one Torah written and another that is oral. The outsider said: As for the written one, I have faith in you. But as for the oral one, I do not have faith in you. Make me a proselyte on the condition that you teach me the written Torah. Shammai rebuked him and angrily dismissed him. He came before Hillel who made him a proselyte. On the first day of his instruction, Hillel taught him: *aleph, bet, gimmel, dalet*.... The next day, he taught him differently. The proselyte said to him: But yesterday didn't you teach it to me this way?! Hillel replied: Don't you have to depend upon me for this? Depend upon me, therefore, for the oral Torah!

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a



## Faith In Gain, Faith In Loss

Faith is not the same as belief, not the same as the attitude of regarding something as true... Faith is an act of the whole person, of mind, will, and heart. Faith is *sensitivity, understanding, engagement, and attachment*; **not something achieved once and for all, but an attitude one may gain and lose.**

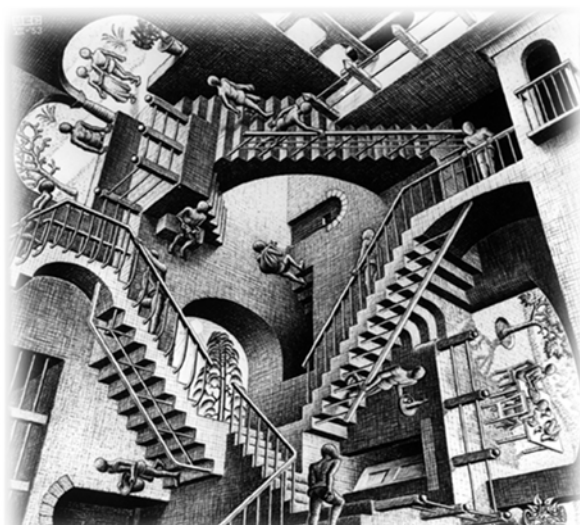
Abraham Joshua Heschel, God In Search of Man



אֱלֹהִים הוּא מַדְרָגוֹת שְׁעוֹלוֹת  
לְמָקוֹם שֶׁלֹּא קִיָּם שׁוּב, אוֹ שֶׁלֹּא קִיָּם עַדִּין  
הַמַּדְרָגוֹת הֵן אֲמוּנָתִי, הַמַּדְרָגוֹת אֲכֻזָּבְתִּי  
יַעֲקֹב אָבִינוּ יָדַע זֹאת בְּחִלּוּמוֹ  
הַמְּלָאכִים רַק קִשְׁטוּ אֶת מַעְלוֹת הַסֵּלֶם  
כְּמוֹ עֵץ אֲשׁוּחַ מְקֻשֵּׁט בְּחַג הַמוֹלָד  
וְשִׁיר הַמַּעְלוֹת הוּא שִׁיר הַלֵּל  
לְאֵל הַמַּדְרָגוֹת.

God is steps that ascend  
to a place that no longer exists, or that doesn't exist yet  
**the steps are my faith, the steps are my disappointment**  
Jacob our father knew this in his dream  
the angels only decorated the steps of the staircase  
like a fir tree decorated for Christmas  
and *The Song of the Steps* is a song of praise  
to God who is the steps.

Yehuda Amichai (Translated by Rabbi Steven Sager)



Relativity by M.C. Escher

## Let Us Say, *Amen*

כָּל הַשּׁוֹמֵעַ אֶחָד מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל הַמְבָרֵךְ בְּרָכָה מִכָּל הַבְּרָכוֹת כָּלָן, אֶף-עַל-פִּי שֶׁלֹּא שָׁמַע הַבְּרָכָה כְּלָהּ מִתְחַלְתָּהּ וְעַד סוּפָהּ, וְאֶף-עַל-פִּי שֶׁאִינוֹ חַיֵּב בְּאוֹתָהּ בְּרָכָה-חַיֵּב לַעֲנוֹת אָמֵן.

Anyone who hears one of Israel offering any of the blessings, even without hearing the entire beracha from beginning to end, and without being obliged to make that particular blessing, he is obliged to respond *amen*.

וְאִם הָיָה הַמְבָרֵךְ עֲבוּרִים אוֹ אַפִּיקוֹרוֹס אוֹ כּוֹתִי, אוֹ תִינוּק הַמִּתְלַמֵּד, אוֹ שֶׁהָיָה גָדוֹל וְשָׁנָה מִמִּטְבֵּעַ הַבְּרָכָה-אֵין עוֹנִין אַחֲרֵיהֶן אָמֵן.

And if a heathen, an apikoros, or a samaritan offers a blessing, or be it a child who is learning or one who is an adult and has changed the text of the blessing—we do not respond *amen* after any of them.

כָּל הָעוֹנֶה אָמֵן לֹא יַעֲנֶה: לֹא אָמֵן חֲטוּפָה, וְלֹא אָמֵן קְטוּפָה, וְלֹא אָמֵן קִצָּרָה, וְלֹא אֶרְכָּה אָמֵן פִּינוּנִית.

Anyone who responds *amen* should not respond with a rushed *amen*, neither with a cut off *amen*, nor with a short *amen*, and not with a long *amen*. Rather, with an intermediate *amen*.

וְלֹא יִגְבִּיהַ קוֹלוֹ מִן הַמְבָרֵךְ.

Nor should one raise his voice above the one who is offering the blessing.

Maimonides' Laws of Blessings/Hilchot Berachot 1:13-14





## ***Amen: The Final Word***

*On my table sits a stone amen written upon it,  
a grave stone fragment, a remnant of a Jewish graveyard  
destroyed more than a thousand years ago, in the city where I was born.  
One word, amen, cut deep in the stone  
an amen harsh and final over what was and will never return  
an amen soft and melodic as in prayer,  
amen and amen; so may it be his will.*



The grave stone fragment was a gift to the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai from an admiring priest who came to Jerusalem from the poet's home town in Germany.

The content of the stone was shattered and scattered beyond reclaiming, but the context was whole and anchored in the one surviving word, *amen*; certainly the response to a verse, a prayer, a hope, a consolation.

But even the clearly etched, clearly purposed *amen* was not whole for Amichai. The poet did not focus his imagination on the characters of the word engraved, but on the character of the word intoned. The depth of engraving notwithstanding, *amen* remained shallow without a voice.

Was this *amen* angry, defiant, hopeful, mournful, meditative, accepting? The tone might change, but the word remained forever fixed—a sure and certain response of a community to the experience of loss. The poet's purpose was not to restore the stone, but to renew the power of *amen*, the response to sometimes unknowable yet undeniable content.

Amichai continued the ancient faithfulness to vitality of *amen*. Maimonides (12<sup>th</sup> century) captured the ancient rabbinic traditions concerning *amen* this way:

*Anyone who hears one of Israel offering any of the blessings, even without hearing the entire blessing from beginning to end, and even without being personally obliged to recite that blessing, such a one is still obliged to respond amen.*

*Amen* is an affirmation of a shared community value evoked by the life of experience of a fellow traveler. But not everyone's blessings carry the values of a community. Thoughtful teachers have always asked: How far does the *amen* community extend? Can one respond with *amen* to celebrate and validate just anyone's experience transformed into blessing?

*And if an idol worshiper, a heretic, or a samaritan offers a blessing, or be it a child who is practicing or an adult who has altered the form of the blessing—we do not respond amen after any of them.*

One cannot always say *amen* to another's blessing. But even so, expanding the *amen* circle is the great challenge and opportunity for enriching one's self and enlarging the community. Neither *amen* nor the opportunities for voicing it should be left fixed in stone. The varied voicings of *amen* is the subject of ancient reflections:

*Anyone who responds amen should not respond with a rushed amen, neither with a cut off amen, nor with a short amen, and not with a long amen. Rather, with an intermediate amen.*

At its best, *amen* is a thoughtful and reflective confirmation, neither perfunctory nor mechanical. *Amen* supports and celebrates an experience translated into a blessing; but *amen* should not overwhelm or draw attention away from the moment that it celebrates.

As the poet teaches, the fullness of *amen* is not written in stone; it is spoken in sincerity.

## *Notes*