

Ki Tavo 9/17/22 Rabbi Chai Levy

Ki Tavo describes a ceremony to mark our ancestors' arrival in the promised land. We're instructed to inscribe the words of the Torah onto stones, coat them with plaster, and set them up on Mount Ebal, which is near Shechem, which today is also known as the city of Nablus.

Half of the tribes are to stand on Mount Ebal, while the other half stand on nearby Mount Gerizim.

The Talmud in Sotah (32a) gives a fuller explanation of how the ritual is performed. The Levites stand in the valley between these two mountains and shout out the blessings and curses in the following manner:

The Levites turn their faces first to Mt. Gerizim and pronounce the first blessing, and everyone on both mountains shouts "amen!"

And then they turn to Mount Ebal, say the first curse, and everyone shouts "amen!"

And they alternate back and forth through the blessings and curses that we read today.

What is the purpose of this ritual and of these giant, plaster-covered stones inscribed with the Torah?

One commentator, Abravanel, explains that the stones were set up at the entrance to the land of Israel. Like a mezuzah on the doorway of a Jewish home, the stones were there to remind us to live by the Torah as we entered our home.

Alshich, another Torah commentator, explains that a new covenant had to be accepted by the people *IN* the land of Israel, and these two mountains would serve as two eternal Edim, witnesses of our pledge to keep the Torah in the land of Israel.

Like the two edim who sign the ketubah at a wedding, these two mountains stood as the two witnesses to our covenant with the Holy One.

But what about all this yelling of blessings and curses and saying "Amen"?

This ceremony affirms the power of speech in creating reality.

We believe that putting words out there into the world makes the words more true.

Which is why we have the custom of reading the curses in this parasha in a quick and quiet whisper.

We don't want to put those curses out into the world and make them real.

What does it mean to shout out “Amen.”?

Amen is an interesting word.

Amen comes from the root meaning “confirmed,” “affirmed,” or “faithful,” as in Emuna, faith. Saying Amen is our way of affirming words that someone else has said. It makes them our own. If someone else says HaMotzie and you say Amen, it’s as if you’ve said the blessing yourself.

The root of this word Amen shows up later in the parasha in the Tochecha (rebuke) section in one of the worst curses mentioned. 28:65-66 –

You shall find no peace, and your foot shall find no place to rest

You’ll have an anguished heart, eyes that pine, and a despondent spirit.

Your life will be precarious, and you’ll be in terror day and night, and (here it comes)

V’lo taamin be’chayecha – literally, “you won’t believe in your life.”

It’s the worst curse you can imagine – not to believe in your own life, to not affirm your life’s existence with meaning and purpose.

To be in a constant state of despair, God forbid.

V’lo taamin be’chayecha.

Emunah, on the other hand, is saying Amen. It’s believing in your life.

It’s affirming and persisting, no matter what life brings.

No matter what we face, individually or collectively.

So, here we are, the 12 tribes of Israel, preparing to enter the Promised land,

With these two mountains ahead of us, one of blessing and one of curse,

Ready to shout Amen!

It’s a powerful image and metaphor for us here in this month of Elul:

Like our ancestors standing at the threshold of the land,

we stand at the threshold of a new year.

The new year stands in front of us, offering us a choice.

We know that the Book of Life soon will be open and

that we’ll have ten days to consider what we want to have written in it.

And we may look ahead and see a lot of problems –

in our country, in our world, for our planet, maybe in our personal lives.

How do we say Amen to the blessings amidst of all of what might feel like curses?

God forbid *V’lo taamin be’chayecha*, that we don’t believe in our lives?

During this time of year, it's the custom to recite each day Psalm 27

And the psalm ends with our root word – Amen – it says:

Lulei He'emanti Lirot betuv Adonai B'eret Chayim

He'emanti – there's that Amen again – it means:

Had I not had faith/believed/affirmed to see the goodness of God in the land of life...

It's a fascinating sentence. It's an incomplete sentence.

Had I not *Heemanti*/ said Amen to seeing goodness and life... what?

It's too terrible to speak of.

The Psalmist's voice trails off...

We shouldn't say such words aloud because God forbid we put the curse out there of

V'lo taamin be'chayecha of what happens when we don't have faith in our lives and

don't see the goodness of God in the land of the living .

There are plenty of curses out there in this world, but let us say AMEN to blessings

Let's say Amen and *taamin be'chayecha* -believe in our lives and what is possible

Lulei He'emanti Lirot betuv Adonai B'eret Chayim

Let's find and see and create the goodness of God in the land of life.

Can I get an "AMEN"?