

# Shabbat Shirah 5776

23 JANUARY 2016 · PARASHAT B'SHALACH

Can I get an Amen? I said, CAN I GET AN AMEN??

If this were a Baptist congregation somewhere in the Southern United States, “Can I get an Amen?” would be a common Sabbath-morning question (that Sabbath, of course, being on Sunday). After a strong point that brings believers to their feet, the reverend would ask for an Amen to get the crowd going. The congregation would thunder in unison, “AMEN!” accompanied by dramatic organ chords—rippling from high to low—whipping the congregation into a frenzy.

The closest I’ve come to experiencing this in the Jewish world was last winter in Jerusalem when I went on the 8<sup>th</sup> night of Chanukah (together with my dear friend Yehuda, Norman Sternthal’s nephew) to the Beit HaMidrash Hagadol of the Chasidei Belz. Thousands of Chasidim (and a few clean shaven party-crashers) were packed around a giant tish — a table longer than a basketball court, covered in a white table cloth. Everyone was waiting for the Belzer Rebbe to emerge, and when he did, we all stood in hushed silence. The Rebbe said the b’rachot over the Chanukiah in a barely audible whisper and when he finished, there was a pregnant pause, followed by the loudest unison OOMAYN you have ever heard, shaking the walls of the enormous room.

So let’s try this again: Can I get an AMEN???

Here at the Shaar, we don’t have an old Hammond organ to get you all going, but we do have a Choir. Whenever I need an Amen, I know I can count on them. In fact, by the time today’s service is over, Roï and the choir will have sung a beautifully harmonized “Amen” 30 times! (count them, I did!) Hey choir: can I get an AMEN?

What does Amen actually mean? Its shresh — its Hebrew root, are the letters Aleph, Mem, and Nun and means *to be firm, to be faithful, to believe*. According to the Shulchan Aruch, Amen means:

“בוה מאמין ואני, המברך שברך הברכה היא אמת.”

The blessing that was just offered is true and I believe in it.” So each time that we say Amen to a b’rachah, we assert our wholehearted agreement with and faith in what has just been proffered. “I believe!”

As an aside, and as part of my never-ending quest to impress Rabbi Scheier with G’matriah, the numerical value of Amen (Aleph, Mem, Nun) is 91, which is the same as the combined value of two of God’s names: the four letter ineffable name of God and that of Adonai, the name that we do pronounce in prayer. So, saying Amen is simply divine!

This morning’s Parasha, B’shalach, is actually read twice per year: today on Shabbat Shirah, and on the 7<sup>th</sup> Day of Passover, the actual calendar date of the crossing of the Red Sea. But the words of Shirat Hayam and the imagery of the Israelites walking to their freedom are part of our T’filot every day. The Passover Haggadah quotes the teaching of Ben Zoma in the Mishna from which we derive the obligation to recall the miracle of the Exodus during the day and at night, and we do so at every Shacharit and every Ma’ariv. The architects of Matbei’ah shel t’filah—the layout of our t’filot—capitalized on the “awe-factor” of greatest miracle of all-time by invoking it at the beginning and end of every day.

In the morning, we read Shirat Hayam in its entirety, but the recitation does not simply begin with “Az Yashir,” the opening words of Moses’ song. Rather it begins two verses earlier to include the phrase “Vaya’aminu Badonai uvMoshe Avdo— upon seeing God’s great hand vanquish the Egyptian host, the Children of Israel believed in God and in Moses.” Vaya’aminu, Amen, they believe.

The evening liturgical appearance of Shirat Hayam is a long paragraph capturing the themes of the Exodus and concludes with Mi Chamocha, quoted directly from Shirat Hayam. The opening words of said paragraph?

Emet ve'emunah. It is true and certain that there is none other than our God. Emunah. Amen again. We believe.

By now, most of you know that next Wednesday, the Synagogue Choir and I will be traveling to New York City to sing at the United Nations as part of their International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust. It's a tremendous honor for each and every one of us: Cantor, Music director, choristers, the many congregants who are traveling to New York with us, the Shaar family, and indeed all of Montréal's Jewish Community. It is also a great responsibility to sing in the room that announced Israel's birth, proclaimed Zionism as racism, and where our homeland is regularly lambasted, to stand on the very spot where Netanyahu, Arafat, Rabin, Gadhafi, Abba Eban and Hugo Chavez and so many others have stood.

Our UN prayer mandate covers two texts. Eil Malei Rachamim, the memorial prayer for those who perished in the Shoah, and Ani Ma'amin. Ani Ma'amin is the penultimate of Maimonides' thirteen principles of faith. Each of these Ikarim begins with the words "Ani ma'amin be'emunah sh'leimah—I believe with perfect faith." Amen, yet again.

The ultimate test of a prayer is its enduring ability to inspire, even under the direst of circumstances. Perhaps no other text has proven its durability to the degree of "Ani Ma'amin." Most of us know how to sing it in two ways that could not be more different. There is the raucous party tune written by Mona Rosenblum that is part of the hora at most weddings in our community. And there is its diametric opposite, the Modzitzer Chasidic melody that too many millions sang as they marched to their deaths at Concentration Camps across Europe. But when we appear at the General Assembly, we will be singing an entirely different melody, that of the Vizhnitzer chasidim, as transmitted by none other than Elie Wiesel.

Ani Ma'amin is a text that Elie Wiesel has struggled with all his life. When you've seen what he's seen, believing with perfect faith is not at all a given. In 1973, Wiesel wrote "Ani Ma'amin: a Song Lost and Found Again." It is a cantata in which he presents a dialog between our forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who have the responsibility of directing God's attention to Israel's suffering throughout the generations.

He writes:

I believe, Abraham,  
Despite Treblinka.  
I believe, Isaac,  
Because of Belsen.  
I believe, Jacob,  
Because and in spite of Majdanek.  
Dead in vain,  
Dead for naught,  
I believe.

Pray men.  
Pray to God,  
Against God,  
For God.  
I believe.

Whether the Messiah comes,  
I believe.  
Or is late in coming,  
I believe.  
Whether God is silent  
Or weeps,  
I believe.  
I believe for him,

In spite of him.  
I believe in you,  
Even against your will.  
Even if you punish me  
For believing in you.

Blessed are the fools  
Who shout their faith.  
Blessed are the fools  
Who go on laughing.  
Who mock the man who mocks the Jew,  
Who help their brothers  
Singing, over and over and over:  
I believe.

I believe in the coming of the Messiah,  
And though he tarries,  
I wait daily for his coming.  
I believe.

In 2010, Elie Wiesel gave a concert at New York's 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y called "Memories and Melodies of my Childhood" and he concluded the concert by singing "Ani Maamin." Different than the somber, more mournful Modzitz melody, the Wiesel/Vizhnitz version is decidedly more hopeful.

Wiesel told of the time, in 1943, when his mother took him to spend a Shabbat with the Vizhnitzer Rebbe. The Rebbe's nephew, who had just escaped from Poland, was also a visitor, and Wiesel reported that "everyone pleaded with him to tell us what was going on in Poland." Wiesel stated: "Romanian Jews knew nothing about Auschwitz until we got there." The Rebbe's nephew, he added, answered the questions only by singing "Ani Maamin." That was the note upon which Wiesel ended the concert, and that is the note upon which I conclude this year's installment of my Shabbat Shirah sermon.

## ANI MA'AMIN

Over the years, our T'filot have become a vessel into which the aspirations, and sometimes frustrations of the ages have been poured. They are the resource. Prayer connects us to one another, in shared longing for our own lives and for the world. Singing together changes the spiritual atmosphere. When one of us is sad, or broken, or cannot sing, the voice of another will lift him up and help soothe his spirit. We pray to heal our hearts and stir our souls. In here, we reach toward God.

Now, can I get an Amen?