



What Does 'Amen' Mean?

As in other faith traditions, saying amen indicates the speaker affirms the truth of what was said.

BY MY JEWISH LEARNING

The word amen is a liturgical response to hearing someone else recite a blessing or certain prayers. The Hebrew root of amen, aleph-mem-nun (אמן), is shared with the word *emunah*, meaning faith or belief. Reciting amen is thus an indication that the speaker affirms the truth of what was said, an indication reflected in its common English translation as “verily” or “truly.” It is used in both religious contexts — as a response to a blessing or prayer — and sometimes to punctuate everyday declarations. Jews typically pronounce it *ah-men* rather than *ay-men*, which is more common in other faith traditions.

In everyday Jewish practice, amen is most commonly recited in response to hearing someone else recite a blessing. This is the case for blessings recited in the course of the thrice daily prayer services — for example, during the public repetition of the Amidah prayer, the congregation recites amen after each of its constituent blessings. It’s also the case for blessings recited in other contexts, including before and after eating and drinking. According to Jewish law, reciting amen with intention after hearing someone else say a blessing is akin to having actually said the blessing. It is through the power of reciting amen that one person has the ability to recite a blessing on someone else’s behalf.

The term itself originates in the Bible — specifically in Deuteronomy, where the word appears at the conclusion of each of twelve successive verses at the close of the 27th chapter, each declaring someone as cursed for violating a particular commandment. After each one, the text states: “And all the people shall say, Amen.” It also appears three times in duplicate (amen amen) in the Psalms, dividing that collection of 150 liturgical poems into distinct groupings or “books.”

The rabbis of the Talmud ascribe an almost magical power to the word. A passage in Tractate Shabbat (119b) lists a series of teachings about the power of amen to annul punishments, achieve forgiveness for idolatry and open the gates of the Garden of Eden. The passage also records the opinion of Rabbi Hanina that the word is an acronym for *el melech ne’eman*: God is the faithful king. Elsewhere (Berakhot 53b), the Talmud records a teaching from Rabbi Yosei that someone who recites amen after hearing a blessing receives a greater reward than the person who said the blessing. The 14th-century commentator Rabbeinu Bachya explains the reasoning behind this teaching: In Jewish law, two

witnesses are required for testimony to be considered legally valid. In the case of a blessing, the person who says the blessing is the first witness, and the person who says amen is the second. And since it is the reciter of amen who makes the blessing into legally valid testimony that God is the source whatever is being blessed, that person is considered greater.

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The rabbis were also concerned about the manner of saying amen. The Talmud teaches that one who recites an “orphaned amen” — an amen recited for a blessing one did not hear — causes one’s children to be orphaned. Likewise, someone who says an abbreviated amen, his days will be abbreviated, while one who extends his amen will have their life extended.

Still the later rabbis caution about prolonging the word excessively. The Shulchan Aruch specifically says it should not be extended longer than the time it takes to say el melech ne’eman, but no longer.

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