

Peninim Ahl Hatorah

RABBI A. LEIB SCHEINBAUM, HEBREW ACADEMY OF CLEVELAND

He shall dwell in it until the death of the Kohen Gadol. (35:28)

The Gemara Makkos 11a teaches that, since the fate of the *rotzeach b'shogeg* was dependent upon the *Kohen Gadol's* longevity, there was fear that the *rotzeach* would pray for the early demise of the *Kohen Gadol*. Once the *Kohen Gadol* died, the murderer would be free to leave the *ir miklat*, city of refuge. To circumvent their prayers, the mothers of the *Kohanim Gedolim* would furnish the murderers with food and clothing to keep them happy and satisfied, so that they would not pray for the death of their sons.

We derive from here the incredible power of prayer. The *Kohen Gadol* is a holy man. The murderer is an exiled Jew, who is in his position for a reason. This man is certainly not on a spiritual par with the *Kohen Gadol*; yet, the *Kohen Gadol* fears his prayers (or, at least, the *Kohen Gadol's* mother fears for her son's life). *Karov Hashem l'chol kor'av l'chol asher yikre'uhu b'emes*. "Hashem is close to all who call upon Him – to all who call upon Him sincerely" (*Tehillim* 145:18). Hashem listens, and, when the prayer is sincere, it achieves efficacy. The exiled murderer is sincere. And, thus, his prayers gave the *Kohen Gadol's* mother reason to be anxious for her son's life. This is the awesome power of prayer.

It works because of our relationship with Hashem. He is our Father in Heaven. A father always listens. He never closes his door to his children – regardless of the offense or the duration of time that has elapsed since they had last spoken. If this is true of human emotion, how much more so of

Hashem, Who is our Creator?

While the significance of prayer cannot be sufficiently emphasized, we often (because of a lack of knowledge and awareness) ignore the significance of one mysterious word: *Amen*. Chazal teach that the individual who answers *Amen* is even greater than the one who initially recited the blessing. *Amen* is related to the word *Emunah* a derivative of *emes*. One who recites a blessing is acknowledging that he is about to partake of Hashem's beneficence, and he offers his gratitude for this opportunity. The one who answers *Amen* is not acknowledging his gratitude to the Creator for the bounty, because he did not receive it. He is, however, seizing the opportunity to express himself to Hashem in terms of pure faith – unfettered by the limits of his gratitude. When he says *Amen*, he is connecting with Hashem on a purely spiritual level, declaring his total subjugation to Him. In other words, he is affirming his faith in Hashem as Provider, Benefiter – even though he personally did not receive; he is affirming it based upon pure faith. Thus, *Amen* is greater than the blessing, because the blessing is contingent upon gratitude, while *Amen* is a declaration of pure faith. When we say *Amen*, we declare to Hashem that we are prepared to do anything that He asks. We believe wholeheartedly in His ability to do anything. It really cannot get any better than that.

Amen is effective – even if the blessing to which one responds might be unreasonable, even injudicious. Even if hope for the realization of the blessing hangs by less than a shoestring, one should respond *Amen* in the hope that his response may catalyze the actualization of the blessing. The following vignette reinforces this idea.

Shabbos Kodesh, Sivan 26, 5677, 1917, in Vienna's most prominent *shul* *Khal Adas Yisroel*, popularly known as the *Shiff Shul*. The *chazzan* began reciting the *Yehi Ratzon* for *Mevarchim haChodesh*, Blessing the New Moon. Herr Goldshmidt, the elderly *gabbai* announced the *molad*, precise time at which the new moon begins to appear in Yerushalayim. Surprisingly, the time was precisely on the complete hour – no minutes or *chalokim*. The congregation continued with the recitation of the prayer with all the wonderful blessings that it engenders. The *Mussaf* service was concluded, and everyone began to return his *siddur* to the bookcase, in preparation for returning home.

Herr Goldshmidt asked everyone to wait a moment; he had something to say, "You all must certainly know that this *molad* is unique in the sense that the precise time falls out on a perfect hour." Immediately, one of the congregants asked, "Does this not occur often?" "No!" replied Herr Goldshmidt. "It takes place only once every eighty-seven years! Therefore, at this most propitious time, I would like to wish each and every one of you to experience such a *molad* one more time in your lives!"

Most of the people smiled; some even laughed. After all, eighty-seven years was expecting a bit much. Even a *brocha* should be realistic. Standing next to the *bimah*, listening to the *gabbai* and the congregation's reaction, was a fifteen-year-old teenager, a refugee from Poland (it was during World War I) who did not react like everyone else. Perhaps it was because of his upbringing by

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Covid-19 Lessons Unmasked

BY RABBI DOVID KAPENSTEIN



Like many people, I am searching to find meaning in the Covid-19 pandemic that has wreaked havoc on not only our own community, but the world at large. The pandemic has affected the

wellbeing of millions of people and brought about the deaths of many of our own rabbis, leaders and family.

While I do not claim any prophetic insight into this horrible situation, I would like to suggest that even at this stage of the disease, there are lessons to be learned – lessons that may shed light on us and our relationships with Hashem and our fellow man.

Our family recently moved from Atlanta, Georgia to Baltimore, Maryland. I went to see a physician who was my primary care doctor over thirty years ago and I am happy to return to his wonderful care. He and I were both wearing face masks when we met in his

examining room. We briefly reacquainted ourselves after three decades apart, and then he asked me to remove my mask briefly so that he could see the face of his former patient.

"Now I recognize you," he commented, even though thirty years ago my hair was a great deal darker and there was no beard at that time. At that moment, it occurred to me just how poignant the words of *Chazal* are when they said, "Just as their faces are different, so are their perspectives" (*Brachos* 58b). Clearly, we do not need our esteemed rabbis to tell us that people look and think differently. To me, the lesson is much deeper.

The masks that we are wearing cover up the differences of each individual. When wearing the masks, we appear to each other as simply a set of eyes. In effect, we are, for the most part, the same now that our faces are no longer visible.

Is it possible that Hashem is sending us a message? Perhaps he is telling us that each person embodies wonderful and unique qualities. Each person has intrinsic value, a *tzelem Elokim* (an image of G-d). We need to always see the virtues of each and every human being. If we cannot see and appreciate

these exceptional qualities, perhaps Hashem says, "I will take those faces away from you." In essence, Hashem is saying to us, "If you think that there are no differences, special qualities in each person, I will show what it is really like to be the same."

Frankly, this perspective would never have occurred to me in Atlanta, where I knew quite well the appearance of the vast majority of people who I saw on a daily basis. In effect, my eyes played tricks on me and essentially filled in the rest of the person's face, notwithstanding the mask that covered it. It was only when we moved to a new city and all I could essentially see was many pairs of eyes walking around that I realized just how important each person's *hadras ponim* (countenance) is. I took pause to consider the value of each individual and whether that recognition is reflected in my relationships.

A separate but equally impactful message occurred to me when I stood in the middle of *Shemoneh Esrei*. With my *tallis* over my head and my mask over my face, I felt almost claustrophobic. Still, there was something more that I was feeling. Something much more significant. There was a sense that I was totally enclosed, enwrapped per-

haps with Hashem. The rest of the world was totally tuned out and, for a brief time, it was just me and Hashem connecting at a level that felt very warm and yet perhaps more intense than I could handle for more than those few minutes together. Indeed, when I stepped back from *Shemoneh Esrei* and took the *tallis* off my head, I felt a sense of relief. The intensity of the encounter had dissipated to some degree.

Hashem wants to connect with us each day on a very deep level. He cherishes having a closeness and connection with each of us. We must endeavor to carry that closeness with us throughout the day and during the most challenging of experiences. The mask may give us an opportunity to connect with Hashem and others in ways that we never anticipated. Our mission is to maintain this lesson even after the pandemic has passed, may it happen soon.

Rabbi Dovid Kapenstein, *Ner Yisroel musmach*, is the director of development for *Yeshivas Toras Simcha* in Baltimore, MD. Previously, he and his wife lived in Atlanta, Georgia, where he was the executive director of *Kollel Ner Hamizrach*.