Commentary on Parashat Ki Tavo, Deuteronomy 26:1 - 29:8

There is a striking scene imagined in Parashat Ki Tavo (Deut. 27:11-26): Upon crossing the Jordan, the 12 tribes of Israel will divide into two groups. Six tribes will stand on a southern mountain facing the other six tribes on a northern mountain. The Levites will then scream a catalogue of 12 sins, each beginning with the phrase "Cursed be the one." After each articulated sin, the other 11 tribes call out: "Amen!"

The tribes answer the curses in unison — what is the power of the word "Amen"?

"Amen" comes from the root "firm." To say amen is to make something more solid, literally, to "affirm" it. Saying amen creates a communal reality by strengthening shared commitments. Judaism normally has us say amen to blessings. We are used to calling out amen for things that we believe or wish to be true. We say amen happily, with great hope, at the blessings offered at weddings, baby namings and holidays. In Jewish law, answering "amen" after a blessing is considered more praiseworthy than saying the blessing oneself (Shevuot 29b).

I learned the following Torah from RABBI DOROTHY A. RICHMAN

And what does it mean to say amen to a curse? By affirming each sin, the eleven answering tribes, individual by individual, voice a commitment to being a holy nation. They affirm their commitment to a shared standard of justice–each prohibited act represents a communal value.

More curses come later in Ki Tavo, and they are graphic: women eating their own children, Israelites returning to Egypt, epidemics, and exile. Perhaps the most severe comes close to the end: v'lo ta'amin b'hayekha — "and you will not believe in your own life." (Deut. 28:66)

The portion seems to say that to deny that our lives have meaning, to not believe in the power of our own lives, is the worst outcome of sin.

Blessing & Promise
If curses represent powerlessness and meaninglessness here, blessings do the opposite: they illuminate possibility and power. By offering a vision of promise, they inspire us to believe in our lives.

Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer, a rabbi and human rights activist, formulated a series of prayers for this season of the Jewish year almost a decade ago. We can imagine these as counter-blessings to the curses on the mountain; a communal call to the meaning of our lives and our ability to effect change, even in our own religious tradition:

Grant us the wisdom to create new paradigms that will carry our tradition forward into the new world. Amen!

Give us the courage to extirpate from our history those ideas and values which are inimical to the sanctity of life of other peoples, creeds, and races. Amen!

Grant us the compassion to empathize with the forgotten, the mourners, the disenfranchised, the sick, the homeless, the anxiety-ridden, the disabled, the unloved and uncared for individuals about us, the masses of humanity that grapple with desperation and hopelessness. Amen!

Enlighten our minds so that we may compose new prayers to stir our tired hearts, to awaken new tears in dry eyes, to move our all too comfortable consciences, and thus may we be moved to inscribe our own letters, perhaps even a word or two, in the eternal Book of Life. Amen!

Say It Out Loud

There is a reason that the ceremony of curses and amens on the mountains of Israel was required to be said loudly. Our ancestors needed to hear one another's affirmations of responsibility. Don't we? In our communities this week, let us hear the curses on the mountains as an affirmation of our shared communal values. Let us also articulate new blessings to challenge the curses, affirming our power to create change.

And let our words bring us to act. Together, when we seek justice, when we volunteer, when we donate, when we engage in advocacy, we add our contemporary amens to the chorus on the mountain, to the ancient Jewish commitment to justice.

Amen, amen, and may it be so.