

From the desk of Yerachmiel Tilles editor@ascentofsafed.com

“*And Let Us Say, AMEN!*”

Rabbi Mordechai Yaffe, known as “*the Levush*” after his famous ten-volume work, was one of the foremost rabbis and Jewish leaders in Central Europe some four hundred years ago. In 1605, at age 75, he was offered the position of chief rabbi in the important Jewish community of Posen, which he accepted on a single condition. Before starting his post he would travel to Italy and study the Torah laws of *ibur chodesh*, i.e. the knowledge of the lunar cycles necessary for understanding the Jewish calendar of new months and leap years, under the great Sephardic sage **Rabbi Yitzchak Abuhav**, in Venice.

He spent three months there until he mastered the subject.¹ Towards the end of his stay, he happened to be in the house of his teacher when a child made a blessing on a fruit. Everyone answered “Amen,” with the exception of the Levush, who unintentionally neglected to respond. The Abuhav rebuked him strongly for this omission and declared a *nidoi*, a personal excommunication, against Rabbi Yaffe.

For thirty days the Levush remained isolated from the rest of the community, while the ban remained in force. At the end of the period, he went to the Rabbi Yitzchak Abuhav to ask him to remove the ban. He also requested to know why his oversight had merited such a harsh punishment, as this was difficult for him to understand.

The Abuhav said that at the moment that he had not answered amen to the child’s blessing, a heavenly death sentence was issued against him. The thirty-day ban had weakened the decree, and it could be completely overturned if the Levush and his descendants would undertake to teach the importance of responding amen to all blessings. “You Ashkenazim tend to be too negligent in this matter,” he added wryly.

He instructed the Levush that when speaking about amen he should relate the following incident, which highlights the life-or-death power of the amen response:

There was a king who despised the Jews and was always looking for an excuse to banish them from his dominion. There was only one thing that prevented him from doing so: in his kingdom was one pious Jew whom he liked and respected. This man was always successful in persuading the king to refrain from carrying out his wishes.

On one occasion the king was especially angry at the Jews, but once again the pious Jew subdued his wrath. A priest was present in the court at that time, and he proceeded to give the king a lengthy blessing in Latin. When he finished everyone answered “amen,” with the exception of the Jew, who was in the middle of reciting *Mincha* and did not understand what had been said.

¹ Indeed, one of his ten volumes is about the laws of *Rosh Chodesh*, which he titled “*Levush Adar Yakar*.”

The priest was furious and said that because the Jew had not answered amen, the blessing would not come to fruition. The king's love of the Jew suddenly turned to hate, and he sentenced him to death on the spot.

Some time after his brutal execution, the pious Jew visited a surviving acquaintance in a dream and explained what he had done to merit such a terrible end. Once a child had made a blessing on bread in his presence, but he had not answered "amen." As a result, a heavenly decree of death had been decreed upon him, but had been held off until the incident with the king.

After the Abuhav annulled the ban against him, Rabbi Mordechai Yaffe undertook to teach the importance of saying amen for the rest of his life. Once a month he would fully recount the above incident, and he would often speak about the critical importance of responding to a blessing with amen.²

Indeed, until this day, the descendants of the Levush continue to bear the responsibility to tell this story.³

~~~~~

*Source:* Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from an article by Rabbi Daniel Travis at //Torah.org/learning/tefilah-life or death, and supplemented from the out-of-print book, "Let Us Say Amen," and the book, *Just One word: Halachos of Amen*.

*Connection:* Seasonal – *Selichot* / asking and receiving forgiveness.

*Biographical notes:*

**Rabbi Mordechai Yaffe** (1530 – 3 Adar B 1612) was one of the foremost rabbis and Jewish leaders in Central Europe in his generation. An expert in Talmud, Jewish Law and Kabbalah, and also in mathematics, astronomy and other sciences, he headed the Yeshiva in Prague, where he was born, until 1561 when the Jews were expelled from Bohemia. He was known as "**the Levush**" because he wrote ten books which he called by the general name of *Levushim* ("garments"), and each had the word *Levush* in its title. (from Chabad.org)

**Rabbi Yitzchak Abuhav III** (b. 1520) of Venice was a noted authority on Jewish Law and author of commentaries on the Torah (not to be confused with 15<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi Yitzchak Abuhav II, after whom the famous synagogue in Safed is named and who is his grandfather, nor with the latter's great-great-grandfather, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi Yitzchak Abuhav I, author of *Menorat HaMaor*).

---

<sup>2</sup> As cited in *Kaf HaChaim* 124,30

<sup>3</sup> Which I heard one of them do at a Melaveh Malka in Los Angeles.