**Brachos on Zoom: Amen in Vain?**

**Introduction**

On *Shavuos*, in addition to celebrating the giving of the Torah thousands of years ago, we are also celebrating that idea that the Torah is as relevant today as it was back then. In the *Birchat HaTorah* we recite daily we say, “*blessed are You, G-d, The giver of the Torah.*” We do not thank G-d for having given us the Torah. Rather, we use the present tense and thank Him for giving us the Torah because in every generation, and in every circumstance, G-d is, so to speak, giving us the Torah. In every situation the Torah is relevant. The past few months have given rise to unique halachic challenges. Specifically, the wide usage of video conferencing calls, such as Zoom and FaceTime, have given rise to the following question: what does Torah have to say about answering Amen over video conference calls? As always, the Torah has much to say. The following shiur will address this question[[1]](#footnote-1):

**Whats the big deal?**

One might be wondering, “what’s the big deal? What’s wrong with simply answering *amen* to a *bracha* I hear? Who cares if it is considered “halachic listening” if, at the end of the day, it doesn’t take too much effort to simply say *amen*!?”

While simply saying “*amen*” seems like a harmless endeavor, the truth is that it is far from harmless. Rabbi Moshe Isserlis in his Rema states the following:

רמ"א או"ח קכד הלכה ח'

לא יענה אמן אם אינו יודע באיזה ברכה קאי ש”צ, דזה נמי מקרי אמן יתומה.

A person shouldn’t recite amen if he doesn’t know what blessing the prayer leader is up to for this too is considered an “orphaned” amen.

It is called an “orphaned” *amen* because the *amen*, which is analogous to a child, is “orphaned” from the *bracha*, which is analogous to a parent. Just as one should not respond *amen* without physically hearing the *bracha* that you are responding to, it is logical to assume one should not respond *amen* to a *bracha* in which you are not considered to have halachically listened to it. Therefore, the halachic status of voices produced from electronic devices are of utmost importance to us.

Regarding an *amen yesomah*, the *gemara* in *brachos* says the following in the name of Ben Azzai:

ברכות מז ע"א

כל העונה אמן יתומה – יהיו בניו יתומים

Whoever recites an “orphaned” amen will have children who become orphans.

Whether this is to be taken literally or not is up to debate. What is clear, however, is that this is a serious issue. We will now seek to understand whether responding *amen* over electronic devices should constitute as an *amen* *yesomah*.

**Is it a real voice?**

The first issue that we must discuss is whether the sound one hears from electronic devices constitutes as a halachic voice that would require one to answer *amen* upon hearing a blessing through the electronic device. Before citing the different opinions, we will bring an important Mishna which serves as the foundation for understanding this topic:

ראש השנה פרק ג משנה ז'

הַתּוֹקֵעַ לְתוֹךְ הַבּוֹר אוֹ לְתוֹךְ הַדּוּת אוֹ לְתוֹךְ הַפִּטָּס, אִם קוֹל שׁוֹפָר שָׁמַע, יָצָא; וְאִם קוֹל הֲבָרָה שָׁמַע, לֹא יָצָא.

One who sounds a *shofar* into a pit, or into a cistern, or into a large jug, if he clearly heard the sound of the *shofar*, he has fulfilled his obligation, but if he also heard the sound of an echo, he has not fulfilled his obligation.

Just as one who hears the echo of the *shofar* (and not the actual *shofar*) has not fulfilled their obligation to of hearing the *shofar* blast, a similar argument can be made that since the sound that emanate from electronic devices are not the actual voice of the speaker, one would not be allowed to answer *amen* to *brachos* heard through such devices. This is the argument posed by Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Aurbach:

שו"ת מנחת שלמה חלק א' סימן ט'

והתינח אם המיקרופון והרם-קול היו רק מגבירים או מרכזים את קול האדם שיהא נשמע גם למרחקים...דאז היה שפיר נחשב כאילו שומעים ממש את קול האדם, אבל למעשה אינו כן כומו שאמרנו, שהחוט היוצא מן במיקרופון מוליך רק זרם משתנה של חשמל הגורם בסופו להגיד את הממברנה הנותנת את הקול באותן התנודות של מברנת המיקרופון ועל ידי זה נוצר הקול...

It would be one thing if the microphone or loudspeaker were just raising or centering the actual person’s voice so that it could be heard in further distances…then it would be considered as if they were actually hearing the voice of a person. However, in reality this is not true as I said, the wire that comes from the microphone carries electrical flows that, in the end, causes the membrane in one’s ear to vibrate and thus perceive it as the sound that was spoken into the microphone…

Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Aurbach argues that since electronic sound waves are not one’s actual voice, one cannot answer *amen* to *brachos* recited on those devices. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, however, argues:

שו"ת אגרות משה אורח חיים חלק ב סימן קח

טובא אף אם נימא שהאמת כאמירת המומחים שלא נשמע קול האדם אלא קול אחר שנעשה מקולו, מטעם שכיון שעכ"פ רק כשהוא קורא נשמע הקול יש להחשיב זה כשמיעת קולו ממש דהרי כל זה שנשמע עושה קולו ממש. ומנין לנו עצם כח השמיעה איך הוא שאולי הוא ג"כ באופן זה שנברא איזה דבר באויר ומגיע לאזנו. וכן מסתבר לפי מה שאומרים חכמי הטבע שהקול יש לו הלוך עד האזן וגם יש קצת שיהוי זמן בהלוכו, ומ"מ נחשב שהוא קול האדם

Even if we assume as the experts claim that [the sound heard through electrical devices] is not really the voice of man, still, since at the end of the day the sound is only heard because one is speaking and therefore should be considered like listening to his actual voice, since all that he heard was a result of someone else’s voice. [And furthermore,] how do we know how hearing really works? Maybe it too is a result of being created in the air [and not really by the person who spoke] and ended up reaching one’s ear. This is logical since the scientists say that sound [even when emanating from a human being] reverberates in the air and takes some time until it actually reaches the ear and yet nevertheless is still considered the voice of a person.

Clearly Rabbi Feinstein considers the sound from electronic devices as halachic sound. In fact, he argues that it is no different than one’s actual voice which is only heard after sound waves bounce off different surfaces and ultimately are perceived as sound when it reaches the listeners ear.

What would Rabbi Feinstein say regarding the Mishna in Rosh Hashana that clearly implies Halacha does not recognize echoes, and by extension, any sound that is not considered one’s voice? I found three answers to this question:

* R’ Feinstein (ibid.) himself says that this Mishna poses no question on him because the intention of the Mishna was just that in order for sound to be recognized in *halacha* it has to be loud and clear and not faint as an echo.
* The Chazon Ish (Shut Minchas Shlomo 1:9) is reported as saying that as long as the sound was initiated by a human being it counts as halachic sound. The sound of the echo is invalid because it continues far longer than the actual human’s voice and thus is considered not initiated by him.
* Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook (Orach Mishpat Orach Chayim 48) says that this Mishna applies uniquely to the laws of *shofer*. Only by *shofer* do we have very specific qualifications of what is considered sound, but in other areas of halacha we are not as stringent.



**Points to Ponder**

* Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Aurbach and Rabbi Moshe Feinstein argue on whether one needs to hear one’s actual voice in order to answer *amen* to a blessing. Can you think of other areas of *halacha* in which this debate would be relevant?
* Modern day computers work differently than the telephones and radios that Rabbi Aurbach and Rabbi Feinstein were discussing. Instead of those devices in which one hears the electronic sound waves that were created by the device, modern day devices create digitalized sounds. In other words, the sound is converted into a series of numbers and symbols and then recreated. It can be argued that what the listener ultimately hears is not the actual voice of the reader at all, but just a mechanical reproduction. Would Rabbi Feinstein change his opinion because of this?

**Answering *Amen* to an unheard *Bracha***

We have discussed whether the sound of electronic devices is considered halachic sound or not. But who says one actually has to hear the *bracha* in order to answer *amen* to it? While we did cite the opinion of the Rema who says this would be a problem of an *amen yesomah,* the following *gemara* in Sukkah implies that, on the contrary, one need not hear the actual *bracha* in order to respond *amen*:

מסכת סוכה נא ע"ב

מִי שֶׁלֹּא רָאָה דְּיוֹפְלוֹסְטוֹן שֶׁל אַלֶכְּסַנְדְּרִיָּא שֶׁל מִצְרַיִם לֹא רָאָה בִּכְבוֹדָן שֶׁל יִשְרָאֵל אָמְרוּ כְּמִין בָּסִילְקֵי גְּדוֹלָה הָיְתָה סְטָיו לִפְנִים מִסְּטָיו פְּעָמִים שֶׁהָיוּ בָּהּ (ששים רבוא על ששים רבוא) כִּפְלַיִם כְּיוֹצְאֵי ... וּבִימָה שֶׁל עֵץ בְּאֶמְצָעִיתָהּ וְחַזַּן הַכְּנֶסֶת עוֹמֵד עָלֶיהָ וְהַסּוּדָרִין בְּיָדוֹ וְכֵיוָן שֶׁהִגִּיעַ לַעֲנוֹת אָמֵן הַלָּה מֵנִיף בְּסוּדָר וְכָל הָעָם עוֹנִין אָמֵן

He who has not seen the double colonnade [the basilica synagogue] of Alexandria in Egypt has never seen the glory of Yisrael. They said: It was like a huge basilica, one colonnade within the other, and it sometimes held (600,000 X 600,000) twice the number of people that went out from Egypt….[There was] a wooden platform in the middle upon which the attendant of the Synagogue stood with a scarf in his hand. And when the time came to answer, *amen*, [when the reader concluded a blessing.] he waved his scarf and all the congregation [who could not hear the reader's voice due to the enormous size of the Synagogue] answered, *amen*.

In Alexandria, many of the congregants did not hear the *bracha* itself but still responded *amen* when the scarves were waved. Accordingly, it could be argued that even if one is not considered to have “heard” the *bracha* recited over electronic devices, an *amen* is still permitted and even warranted. Others, however, reject this *gemara* as a proof because it only implies that one can answer *amen* if the *bracha* was recited in the same room as the person responding *amen*. It can’t be used to prove one can respond *amen* to a *bracha* heard over electronic devices when the person responding amen is not in the same room as the one reciting the *bracha*. This leads us to the following discussion.

**Responding Amen from a different location**

Even if we were to assume that the sound heard over electronic devices is considered one’s voice, another issue arises. Namely, does one need to be in the same room as the person reciting the *bracha* in order to answer *amen* to his or her blessings? The following *gemara* in Pesachim sheds light on this issue:

פסחים פה:

דא״ר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן לֵוִי אֲפִילּוּ מְחִיצָה שֶׁל בַּרְזֶל אֵינָהּ מַפְסֶקֶת בֵּין יִשְׂרָאֵל לַאֲבִיהֶם שֶׁבַּשָּׁמַיִם

For Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Even an iron partition cannot interpose between Israel and their Father in Heaven.

The *Rishonim* derive from this *gemara* that walls are not considered to be an interruption when it comes to prayer and answering *amen*. The exact parameters of this law, however, is subject to a debate between Rashi and Tosafos:

רש"י שם ד'ה אינה מפסקת

שאין הפסק לפני המקום שהכל גלוי וידוע לפניו ואין סתימה לפניו׃

There is no barriers before Hashem for everything is revealed in front of Him and there is no closure whatsoever.

תוספות שם ד'ה וכן לתפלה

ונראה לר״י דהכא מיירי לענין לענות יחיד קדושה ויהא שמיה רבא מברך דאין מחיצה מפסקת

It appears to the Ri, that here we are discussing [only] an individual answering *kedusha* or *yehei shmeh rabah mevarech*, in that [for that] there is no barrier.

**Points to Ponder**

* Rashi holds that one can join in a minyan even if there is a wall in between himself and the quorum while Tosafos holds one can only respond to the blessings of the quorum but he himself may not be counted among them. Would this same debate apply to electronic devices in which the responder might be miles a way from the person making the blessing?
* The context of this *gemara* is that it is discussing where in the city may one eat the *Korban Pesach* and still be considered to have eaten it in Jerusalem. Does this context shed light on the debate between Rashi and Tosafos?

**Unclean Areas**

The fact that the person responding *amen* through electronic devices can be miles away from the person reciting the *bracha*, the following problem, based on the Shulchan Aruch, emerges:

שולחן ערוך או"ח סימן נה הלכה כ'

 ויש אומרים שצריך שלא יהא מפסיק טנוף או עכו''ם

There are those who say that [in regards to responding amen from a distance] there cannot be any filth or idolatry in the way.

When listening to a *bracha* over electronic devices, the chances that the sound waves passed over filth or idolatry are very high. On this basis alone, some prohibit answering *amen* on electronic devices. Rav Kook and Rabbi Chaim Elazar Spiro, however, cite room for leniency:

שו"ת אורח משפט (מאת הרב קוק) אורח חיים סימן מח

י"ל דהרדיא או הטלפון שהם משמרים את הקול ע"י מכונות נחשב כאילו אין הקול עובר כלל במקומות אחרים ואין לנו ראיה שעבר דרך עכו"ם או מקום מטונף. ולא מבעי הטלפון בא רק ע"י החוטים י"ל כן, אלא אפילו הרדיו שמתפשט בכל מקום, מ"מ מאחר שאינו נתפס לשמיעת אדם כ"א ע"י המכונה, י"ל דאין העברתו נחשבת העברה במקום טומאה כלל כ"ז שלא בא למציאות לשמיעה ע"י המכונה.

You can say that the radio or telephone which mechanically carry the voice are not considered to be passing [dirty or idolatrous] places and we have no proof that it is. Not only by the telephone which passes through wires can we say this, but even for radios in which its waves spreads everywhere, still, since it is only heard by a person through his machine [at the other end] you can say that it is not considered to be passing through an impure place as long as it wasn’t heard yet through the machine.

שו"ת מנחת אלעזר חלק ב' סימן עב

וא"כ בנידון הטעלפאן כשנחשוב הקול דרך החוטי ברזל למעלה על העמודין שהוא הרבה למעלה מעשרה גבוה באויר שם כשיש טינוף למטה וכיון שהעומד בבית ומדבר וכן השומע בבית אינם רואים כלל הצואה בדרל א"כ הוי מותר לכ"ע

In regards to the telephone, it goes through iron wires that are above the poles which are in the air and way higher than ten [tefachim] from the ground where the filth is, and since when the person is in his house and speaks [into the telephone] and the listener in his house and they don’t see the excrement at all, it would be permitted according to everyone.

**Points to Ponder**

* Can you list all the potential considerations for leniency in this case?
* Does the fact that the Shulchan Aruch brings this law down with the preface “there are those who say,” have any impact on the law?
* How would more modern electronic devices that use voice digitalization impact this question?

**Delays**

The last issue we will discuss is the idea that there is a delay in between when the speaker speaks and the listener actually hears it. Regarding delays, the Rema writes as follows:

שו"ע הנ"ל

ולא ימתין עם עניית האמן אלא מיד כשכלה הברכה יענה אמן [אבודרהם]

A person should not wait to respond amen. Rather immediately upon the completion of the *bracha* he should say amen.

Being that there is always somewhat of a delay in between the speaker completed their *bracha* and when the listener actually heard it, it would seem on this basis it should be forbidden to respond *amen* in such cases. To defend those who permit answering *amen* over electronic devices, perhaps one can argue that it is only forbidden to delay your *amen* when you have the ability to respond *amen* immediately. Failure to respond amen in such a cases would be considered disrespectful to the *bracha* and G-d. When it comes to electronic devices, however, one can argue that the person responded *amen* immediately upon hearing the completion of the *bracha*, albeit it was not immediately after the speaker concluded the actual *bracha*, and is not considered to be disrespectful to the *bracha* and G-d.

1. Nothing in this shiur is meant to be taken as practical halacha. Even the opinions quoted here which seem to permit one to answer Amen over video conferencing, may not actually conclude like this in a practical sense. Sometimes they are just responding to specific issues raised within the broader topic of halacha and video conferencing but might actually prohibit such practices for other reasons. As always, one should consult their Rav for practical questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)