

Parsha Ki Tisa – March 13 God’s Thirteen Attributes of Mercy

[First, let me start with a summary of this week’s parsha.]

At the heart of this week’s parsha is the story of the Golden Calf. The Israelites, fearing that Moses (who they credit with their liberation from Egypt, rather than an invisible God) will not return from his ascent of Mount Sinai, create a Golden Calf in the desert, and proceed to dance around it. In a “flare” of anger God threatens to renounce His covenant and destroy the Israelites. After dissuading God from punishing the Israelites, Moses, in a show of anger, (*although he obviously knew about the calf and the dancing while he was still up on the mountain*) himself explodes when he sees the Israelites dancing around the Calf and smashes the tablets containing the Ten Commandments that God gave to him. By the end of the parsha, both God and Moses calm down, and Moses persuades God to forgive this “stiffnecked” people. God then re-inscribes the Ten Commandments (*on tablets this time carved by Moses, himself*).

In answer to Moses’ requests to see God’s Presence (Kevod) and to “know His ways”, God passes before Moses and reveals Himself (carefully allowing only His back, but not His face, to be seen in order to protect Moses from God’s radiance) and in Exodus 34: 6-7 recites, what later the Rabbis called God’s *Thirteen Attributes of Mercy*, or – in Hebrew - God’s *Thirteen Middot Ha Rachamim*.

[Give people time to find the verses. In Etz Chayim, it’s page 541. Remember that this is not part of what’s being chanted this morning, so folks won’t already have read it this morning.]

YHWH! YHWH! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet God does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations.

These *thirteen attributes of mercy*, recited as they are following the incident of the Golden Calf and reconciling God with His wayward people, also witness God’s eternal promise of forgiveness. The Talmud [Rosh Hashanah 17b] records a tradition that God appeared to Moses wrapped in a tallit as one who leads a congregation in prayer and says to Moses “*When Israel sins, let them perform these word of prayer and I will forgive them*”.

When I began study of this parsha, I found it difficult to definitively identify the thirteen attributes. Upon further investigation, I was surprised to discover that there are many opinions among the Rabbis concerning which phrases in the verse refer to which attributes, and exactly what those attributes are.

[As an example, here is a matrix of five traditional interpretations of the 13 attributes]

Further, when including the *Thirteen Middot Ha Rachamim* in the prayer book, the rabbis chose an interpretation that did not include the two concluding phrases from the Torah text of this parsha (“...*God does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations*”) and depicted an endlessly merciful and forgiving God – a God of **Chesed**, *Mercy* or *LovingKindness*, - rather than portraying a God who also administers **Din**, or *Justice*, reward and punishment!

In the remainder of this dvar, I would like to quickly inventory God’s *thirteen attributes of mercy*, according to one traditional interpretation, but focus in particular on the last two in the list of attributes in my chosen interpretation. I have long been troubled by the terrifying ending of this declaration, which states that God *visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations*. Perhaps together we can make sense of this.

Let’s start by identifying the *Thirteen Middot Ha Rachamim*. I will intersperse traditional explanations with some of the attributes, where I wish to bring a point or two to your attention:

1. and 2. *YHWH! YHWH!* - The Rabbis explain that *YHWH* is used when speaking of the merciful attribute of God. (Another name for God, *Elohim*, is always used when speaking of God’s judgmental attribute.) According to the Rabbis, the repetition **here** is meant to convey that God remains the God of Mercy, or Lovingkindness, both before and after a person sins.

3. *Compassionate – Eil Rachum*

4. *Gracious - Vechanun*

5. *Slow to anger – Erech apayim*. *God is patient in waiting for our teshuvah* (literally “*turning*”, or, more commonly, “*repentance*”). The claim that God is *slow to anger* is, at first, somewhat difficult to understand in view of God’s threat, a few verses back, to destroy the Israelites. Yet, let’s not forget that, with Moses’ prodding, God did forgive! A previous passage, Exodus 32:14, relates that God regretted the punishment that God had planned to bring upon the people and relents.

6. *Abounding in kindness – Verav Chesed* The Rabbis add that this is shown to both the righteous and the wicked.

7. *Abounding in faithfulness – Ve’emet* The Rabbis add that God is truthful and faithful in carrying out promises.

8. *Extending kindness (Chesed) to the thousandth generation* – The Rabbis add that God takes into account the merit of our worthy ancestors.

9, 10, and 11. Forgiving *iniquity* (*avon*, wrongful deeds committed with premeditation), *transgression* (*pasha*, wrongful deeds committed in a rebellious spirit), and *sin* (*chet*, wrongful deeds that were inadvertent, or which “missed the mark” – it is for this last category of wrongful deeds that we do teshuvah on Yom Kippur).

I would like you to notice that the previous attributes of the Thirteen Middot Ha Rachamim centered not only upon Rachamim (Compassion), but also upon Chesed (LovingKindness). Together, these are the endlessly merciful attributes of God.

The final two attributes also encompass Din, or Justice. It is upon these last two attributes that I really wish to focus:

12. *God does not remit all punishment* – It is not the case that “anything goes”. Taken by the Rabbis to mean that God punishes those who refuse to do teshuvah, but frees from guilt those who do perform teshuvah.

13. And finally, what to me is the most troubling attribute to understand: *God visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations.*

What an awesome responsibility for parents! How can we understand this statement, which sounds more than a bit harsh to modern ears? Why such strong language?

Let’s explore this further. On the simplest level, as noted in the *Etz Hayim* commentary, this attribute indicates that Society is collectively responsible for its actions. The individual is accountable for behavior that affects the life of the community, and an individual’s conduct necessarily has an affect on succeeding generations.

The rabbi’s interpretation of the twelfth attribute (*God does not remit all punishment*) somewhat softens the thirteenth by adding that if the children follow bad examples of their parents, God will not forget their transgressions. However, if the children **refuse** to follow poor examples set by their parents and live righteous lives, God will be merciful.

Elsewhere in Exodus (20: 5-6) and Deuteronomy (5:9), punishment is specifically limited to children who *reject* God. The concept of visiting the parent’s sins upon their children is modified later in Tanakh by God speaking through Jeremiah

(31:29-30), in which God says there will come a time when: “*they shall no longer say parents have eaten sour grapes and children’s teeth are blunted.*”

A secondary question is, why “...*to the third and fourth generations*”? Perhaps, as noted in a number of modern Torah commentaries, it is because four generations, from parents to great-great grandchildren, is the likely maximum of living acquaintances within which one can actually observe traits persevering.

Are there other ways in which we can understand the inclusion of “...*visiting the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children*” in God’s *Thirteen Middot Ha Rachamim*? Perhaps it can be understood as a purposely-jarring means of expressing that Justice (***Din***), not only LovingKindness (***Chesed***), is important in this world.

The tension between strict and harsh ***Din*** (Justice) and expansive and flowing ***Chesed*** (Mercy, or Lovingkindness), and the importance of their proper balance is evoked repeatedly in Tanakh, Talmud, Midrash, and also in the Kabbalah as the key to the world’s thriving. This balance, necessary in the Divine realm, is also essential in human endeavor.

A reading of *Bereishit* as “In the beginning of God’s creating the heavens and earth...” rather than simply as “In the beginning God created...” implies an on-going process of creation. A midrash [*Gen Rabbah* 3:7] tells us “God created and destroyed worlds, none of which God liked, until God found this one (which God liked)”. Another midrash (*the first known example of “Science Fiction”*?) [Rabbi Hanina quoted in *Pesikta Rabbati* 40:2] informs us that before God created our present world, God was about to create a world based only on absolute *Din* – without *Chesed*, but realized that such a world would be too severe for the righteous. God then considered creating an alternate world based only on absolute *Chesed* – without *Din*, but realized that such a world would be too indulgent for the wicked.

God realized that neither of these worlds would work and instead created our present world founded upon the **perfect** balance of ***Din*** and ***Chesed*** essential to the proper running of the universe. (It is for this reason, Rashi and the midrash [*Pesikta Rabbati* 40:2] inform us, that the second account of Creation [Genesis 2:4] uses the two names of God, YHWH Elohim, together – the first name associated with LovingKindness, and the second with Judgment, indicating that a world created using only Justice, or using only LovingKindness – as God previously planned – could not endure.

In her Yom Kippur talk two years ago (5763), Rabbi Toba introduced us to yet another midrash which beautifully illustrates that the need for proper balance between ***Din*** and ***Chesed*** is actually written into the fabric of the world:

There was a king who had delicate glass cups. He said to himself, “If I pour hot water into them, they will expand and burst; if I pour cold water into them, they

will contract and shatter.” So what did he do? He mixed hot water with cold, and poured it into them, and they did not break.

So it was with God. When it came time to create the world, God reflected, “If I create the world with the attribute of Chesed, LovingKindness, alone, there will be an overflow of wrongful acts—no one will be afraid of punishment. But if I create the world with Din alone, how could the world endure? It would shatter from the harsh measure of justice. So I will create it with both justice and compassion, and it will endure.” (Genesis. Rabbah 12:15, adapted)

According to this teaching, as Toba pointed out, we need both *Din* and *Chesed* in order to achieve a livable world. We need to be held accountable for our actions, and at the same time we need a measure of forgiveness, of compassion for one another, or else the world would be too harsh to live in.

But, a question remains: what is the “**perfect**” balance of Chesed and Din for which we should strive? I believe that a strong case can be made that the core teaching of God’s *Thirteen Middot Ha Rachamim* tells us that *Din*, must not *merely* be **equally** balanced by *Chesed*; the fact that *Chesed* is shown by God to the thousandth generation, while *Din* is shown only until the fourth generation, teaches us that *Chesed* must take precedence over *Din*.

The need for balancing *Din* with *Chesed* to sustain our world, and in fact favoring Chesed, is also echoed beautifully in the Kabbalah. The Zohar, the most important book of Kabbalah, states that an excess of *Din* is the source of ultimate evil. When there is too much of an emphasis in one’s life on *Din* (justice or control), evil (which is defined as “lack of balance”, “lack of wholeness”, or “unnatural separation”) arises. For this reason, the Kabbalah advises us that we should “lean” toward *Chesed*.

Without *Din*, according to Kabbalah, the world would be so overwhelmed by God’s love that it would be re-absorbed into *The Infinite- Eyn Sof*; without *Chesed*, the most significant aspect of human existence would be our imperfections. We would be called to account for every wrong that we committed. God’s judgment would unleash forces of destruction on the world, making it unsustainable.

So, let me pose the following three questions for discussion:

- 1. Can you think of a situation when you found yourself caught between these poles of Din and Chesed—of wanting or needing to make a strict judgment, hold someone strictly accountable for their action, versus wanting/needing to forgive or having compassion on them? This could be on the personal level, or in the realm of social/political issues.*
- 2. Which interpretation for balancing Din and Chesed do you prefer: the paradigm of precise balance, as exemplified by the fable of the king with the delicate glass cups, or the paradigm that Chesed should take*

precedence over Din, as exemplified by God extending kindness to the thousandth generation, while extending punishment only to the fourth generation, and by the teaching of the Kabbalah that one must “lean” toward Chesed?

3. *Does anyone have an alternative explanation for “...God visiting the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations”?*

[Discuss with congregation.]

In conclusion, I hope that these teachings from the Talmud, Midrash, and Kabbalah have helped clarify the message of this parsha and that we all may succeed in finding the proper balance of Chesed and Din in our own lives, in the lives of our local and greater communities, and in our world.

Shabbat Shalom