

Rabbi Noah Arnow
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As I've gotten older, one of the traits I admire most in others is gentleness. The importance of physical gentleness goes without saying, but for me, and maybe for you too, the greater struggle is being gentle in the ways we speak to and interact with people. On my good days, I think I can be gentle, but I also know that sometimes I am less gentle than I should or could be, whether as a parent, husband, or rabbi. Maybe that's why I found the teaching I want to share with you this morning so powerful. It's based on a class I was at last March taught by Rabbi Shai Held at the Hadar Institute's Rabbinic Yeshiva Intensive, a few days of learning for rabbis at Hadar, an institute of higher Jewish learning in New York City. Some of you had the chance to study with Rabbi Held when he was here last November for the Rabbi Arnold Asher Memorial Lecture.

As we'll see, we'll learn something about gentleness, and we'll also learn a little about love, and about change, and we'll think about these in the context of remembering our loved ones, which is on our minds as Yizkor approaches.

Let's start by singing, gently.

Sing with me. *Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v'chanun, erech, apayim, v'rav chesed v'emet, notzer chesed l'alafim. Notzer avon vafesha v'chata'a v'nakeh.*

Sing: A God/ a God/ compassionate and gracious/ slow/ to anger,/ abounding in kindness and faithfulness,/ extending kindness to the thousandth generation,/ forgiving iniquity,/ transgression/ and sin,/ and granting pardon.

These are the thirteen attributes (you can try to count them when we sing them again later today) that God declares to Moses after the Israelites make and worship a golden calf. This is how God chooses to define Godself--as a compassionate, gracious, slow-to-anger, kind and faithful God, who loves, and forgives, and grants pardon.

This is the warm and fuzzy, gentle God that we pray to and about on Yom Kippur. But what are our first impressions of God, as we read Genesis, where we first learn about God, perhaps when we're kids?

We see a God who has the power to create the earth, to separate the waters, to create the sun and moon, plants, animals, and humans, but who is unable to ensure that people or serpents follow God's one single request.

We see a God who, by accepting without explanation, the offering of Abel but not Cain, provokes a man to murder his brother.

We see a God whose most powerful creations run amok and fill the world with violence.

We see a God who regrets creating the world, and destroys it, without warning.

We see a God who destroys the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, again, with no warning or chance to repent.

We see a God who allows their chosen family and people to become enslaved.

We see a God who hardens Pharaoh's heart and causes the Egyptian people to suffer, killing all the first born and causing the army to be drowned, in order to bring God glory.

These are the first impressions we have of the God of the Torah. And they're not the best. They give an impression of a violent, capricious, inconsistent, yet all-powerful God. We might think of God this way when there's a natural disaster, a tragedy, senseless violence, or a bad diagnosis.

God becomes a little gentler, a little more predictable, in God's main revelation in the Ten Commandments. Part of the 2nd Commandment reads:

אֲנֹכִי יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַנָּא פֹקֵד עוֹן אָבֹת עַל בְּנֵי עַל שְׁלֵשִׁים וְעַל רְבָעִים
לְשָׁנָאִי: וְעֵשָׂה חֶסֶד לְאַלְפֵימֵי לְאַהֲבֵי וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי

I the LORD your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments (Exodus 20:5-6).

But this is still, very much, a God who focuses first on punishment, and whose kindness is entirely conditional on our being *shomrei mitzvot*, keepers of the mitzvot. If there's any kind of love represented here, it's tough love.

With this long and somewhat consistent first impression of God, when the Israelites create and worship the golden calf, we'd expect God to get angry and punish the Israelites, and God does get angry. But instead of following through on the tough love God had promised, or becoming even tougher, as we are so often inclined to do when we are angry, God says those 13 attributes: *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 the parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations.* But this last less familiar part about visiting the sins of the parents on the children and grandchildren our tradition and machzor edit out, so that it just reads, "forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, and granting pardon."

In these 13 attributes, God becomes gentler. Rather than God beginning God's jealous and punishing nature, the thirteen attributes begin with God's mercy and graciousness. God doesn't even say, "I'll forgive you this one time, but don't do it again. Instead, God's love has no conditions--it is the very definition of unconditional love. And God will forgive, not punish.

It's worth dwelling on this for just a minute. Whether when we're children or adults, it's so much harder to confess something when we know we'll be punished severely as a result of the confession. But maybe your parent once said to you, "I promise there won't be any punishment; just tell me what happened." When a parent says that, the truth has a tendency to emerge, perhaps amidst some tears of embarrassment, guilt and relief.

On Yom Kippur, when we pour out our individual and communal sins, God and our tradition emphasize not punishment but forgiveness. We can name the things we've done wrong and know that no punishment will come. Confession is safe.

How are we to understand God's evolution? As a character in the Hebrew Bible, God evolves. That's the central insight of *God: A Biography*, a 1995 Pulitzer-prize winning book by Jack Miles. And God wants to evolve. When the Talmud (Brachot 7a) proves that God prays and then wonders what God prays for, we're told that God prays for God's mercy to overcome

God's anger. Just as we try to evolve over the course of our lives, God too evolves, and is evolving, both in the Bible and in the talmudic, rabbinic imagination.

Some of us understand and know God as personal, real, commanding, and as actively present in our lives and in our world. We read the Bible as telling us things that are true, about our history and about our God. For those of us with that deep sense of faith, we strive to imitate God, to follow God's mitzvot and God's example.

For others of us, God is more a sense, or a feeling, or an idea, representing that which is most holy and sacred. The Bible and its interpretive tradition tell us how Jews who came before us experienced, understood and defined the sacred, and we are inspired and guided by the wisdom of our tradition and its highest values.

Whether we read God's evolution here literally or literarily, as history or as story, we can learn so much from it, and I want to highlight three learnings, three lessons.

First, we learn something about gentleness. Ultimately, like God, we are trying not to become tougher, but to become gentler, sweeter, more loving. We know people who become gentler as they age, and we also know people who become tougher as they get older. We cannot control everything that happens to us, but we can try to control our reactions. We can try to react with less anger, with less toughness, and with more gentleness, and love. And not overnight, but maybe over time, like God, we can become more gentle.

Second, we learn something about love. Initially in the Torah, God loves us conditionally—only if we follow the mitzvot. But later, God loves us unconditionally. Thus, we can understand the central quest of religious life as trying to live a life deserving of God's love. Or, as Rabbi Shai Held puts it, "the spiritual life is not about earning God's love, but about living up to it." We should strive to imitate God here too, treating people with kindness and with a kind of love, whether or not they deserve it, and we hope people will treat us with gentleness and love, whether or not we deserve it, but we had darn better do our best to deserve it.

And third, and most simply, may we be reminded that just as God changes, so too can we change. And how does God go about changing? By speech--by saying, "This is who I am," even though it may be aspirational, and not entirely true yet. We can do the same. The moment you say, out loud, and tell people, "I'm a vegetarian," it's that much harder to go back to eating meat. If you say that you are kind, that you are forgiving, you are more likely to be kind and forgiving. Maybe for you it's "I am patient," or "I am a healthy eater," or "I take care of my body."

Think to yourself, who do you want to be this year? Take a moment, and find your one "I am." Say it out loud, with breath, but quietly enough so that no one but you can hear.

And let's say together, "I am gentle." "I am loved." "I can change."

Let's bring this gentleness, unconditional love, and capacity for change, to our remembering, to Yizkor.

First, the gentleness of the 13 attributes doesn't erase everything that came before, and we needn't forget the pain people have caused us, if that was our experience of them. But we can shape the memories we have of our loved ones, holding pain along with love, even forgiving, if need be, as God did. We too can choose to be more gentle than judgmental, when we remember.

Second, so many of us have been loved unconditionally by those that we remember. We miss them, and one way of honoring their memory is by doing our best to live up to the love with which they loved us, defining ourselves as kind, gracious, gentle and loving.

And third, it's not only God who changes over the course of God's maturation. We know that those whom we remember changed over the course of their lives, often for the better. And every time we think, "I can't do this, I can't change," let us be inspired by their strength, adaptability, and example.

As we begin Yizkor, may we remember, honestly, and gently, and be inspired by the love and strength to change of those that we hold in our hearts.