

Selichot: The Thirteen Middot

A Shift of Focus – Hakadosh Boruch Hu's Attributes

Mrs. Sara Malka (Poupko) Reichman

The Gemara Rosh Hashanah tells us that there is a covenant with regards to achieving forgiveness for *Am Yisrael*. When in need of forgiveness, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (Hashem) guarantees that if *Am Yisrael* recites the - ל"ג מידות the thirteen attributes of Hashem, He will not leave them empty handed. The Jewish nation is equipped with a tool to absolve themselves – at least partially – of their sins. This is a curious statement. One would think that at that critical hour on Yom Kippur when our fate hangs in the balance and we are begging for G-d's forgiveness, it would be far more helpful to focus on repentance. Rather than listing G-d's attributes at the waning moments of Yom Kippur, it would seem more appropriate to list our own improved attributes. For example, a formula like this one may advocate well for us in the heavenly courts. I, _____ used to have a temper, but have become more patient this year or, Master of the World, who better than You knows how generous I always am with my belongings. Just yesterday _____ who never returns anything asked to borrow my favorite jacket and I graciously handed it over.

The thirteen attributes were first revealed to us through Moshe Rabbeinu as a response to his request: כבודיך Please show me Your glory. Moshe wanted to know Hashem's essence. The Creator told Moshe that Moshe will only grasp His "back", not His "face." The Nefesh Hachayim explains that Hashem was conveying to Moshe an important principle. We can never know G-d's essence. We can know the *Ribono Shel Olam* only through the way He interacts with us in this limited world. This mode of Hashem's interactions with us is referred to as the thirteen attributes - ל"ג מידות. As we are being judged, why are we speaking of Hashem's mode of interaction with the world rather than our own?

Another interesting discussion about the ל"ג מידות revolves around a disagreement between the sages about whether the שם השם (name of Hashem) that is doubled at the beginning of the thirteen attributes is to be counted among the attributes or whether the Name is an introduction to the ל"ג מידות. What is so critical about this question? What would the implication of the name of Hashem as an introduction be?

The Pachad Yitzchok (יום כיפור, מאמר א) expounds upon the idea expressed in the Gemara Rosh Hashanah that distinguishes between the first שם השם and the second time It is mentioned - *Hashem Hashem*. Hashem prior to sin and Hashem following sin. Rav Hutner points out that we can all feel a difference in our prayers in the days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in contrast to the rest of the year. To explain this, he cites the Sages' statement in the Gemara Rosh Hashanah 17 quoted by Rashi in *Shemot* 33: that Hashem revealed Himself to Moshe in a vision wrapped in a tallis like a *sheliach tzibbur* in order to demonstrate to Moshe how to ask forgiveness when reciting the ל"ג מידות. Certainly, Moshe knew how to daven and was not in need of a class in the methods of prayer. Understanding the discussion of the distinction between the first mention of Hashem's Name and the second mention of Hashem's Name will shed light on this lesson in prayer. The Sages explain that the reason Hashem's Name appears twice is that the first Name refers to Hashem prior to sin. The second, to Hashem after one commits a sin. The specific Name of Hashem mentioned at the beginning of the thirteen attributes, the Shem Havaya, expresses G-d as The Creator *ex nihilo*. The Creator who created something from nothing, יש מאין. The world that was created had the ability to endure as long as sin was not committed. The moment that a sin is committed, undermining the purpose of the world, a new creation was necessary in order for the world to endure. Another creation *ex nihilo*. A space where humanity can exist through the power of *teshuvah*. The second Name of Hashem (שם השם).

The power of *teshuvah* as a new creation has no expression in terms that relate to any other area of life. The word “kind” is used to describe G-d. Kindness finds expression in the human experience as well. Human beings do not create something from nothing. Creation *ex nihilo* is expressed only in The Name of Hashem. The *Shem* is mentioned at the beginning of the attributes. Twice. Now there is a new world. A world that can contain the sinner through the power of *teshuvah*. Prayer within the context of *teshuvah* is a qualitatively different sort of prayer. Moshe Rabeinu is unfamiliar with this sort of prayer. And so, the *Pachad Yitzchak* explains, Hashem demonstrates the procedure of prayer for forgiveness. And our prayers during the *Aseret Yemei Teshuvah* are experienced differently because they are different. They belong to the world of *teshuvah*.

Only in a world in which *teshuvah* exists is there the need for undeserved kindness, mercy, patience, and the bearing of transgressions. Hashem Hashem twice serves as an introduction, or rather as a prerequisite, to the rest of the attributes.

When it comes to approaching Hashem on Yom Kippur, there is the well-known approach of working on correcting our deeds and character in the weeks leading up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. We focus on our character and worthiness, in hope of attaining both a relationship with G-d and a positive decree. There is a vastly different approach emphasized in *Chassidut* but rooted far earlier. It can be traced back to the moment that Moshe Rabbeinu found himself standing in the cleft of the cliff awaiting instruction from the *Ribono Shel Olam* in achieving repentance. It occurs when Hashem instructs Moshe to recite Hashem’s attributes on behalf of Am Yisrael who is in need of forgiveness. Rather than approaching Hashem with a list of our accomplishments and improvements and hoping to procure forgiveness based on our own merits, we focus on Hashem’s attributes, and rely on His mercy, His kindness, His patience in waiting before punishing, His willingness to carry the burden of our sins and cleanse us from them.

Rather than saying I am now worthy of a good judgment and a renewed relationship with the *Ribono Shel Olam*, we stand before Hashem as if facing Hashem in the cleft of the cliff, and implore Him to pass His goodness before us and allow us a glimpse of the mercy and kindness that will draw us near and purify us in spite of our imperfections, purely as a result of His thirteen attributes. And as a result of the creation of a world in which the penitent sinner can exist. We approach with the humility that when we are in need of forgiveness and the restoration of a relationship, we may not yet be worthy of, it is His attributes that are incomparably more reliable than our own.

May we, each individual, and Klal Yisrael as a whole, merit an outpouring of mercy and kindness as we stand before Hashem this Yom Kippur.