

Yom Kippur Sermon 5781: the Blessing of the 13 Attributes of Compassion

by Rabbi Josh Jacobs-Velde

I want to explore with you what I think is an amazing blessing connected with this day.

The blessing is the 13 attributes of compassion that we chanted earlier in the Torah service, in *slichot* last night and we will chant again soon. They are known as the 13 middot of *rachamim* in Hebrew; *rachamim* can also be translated as mercy .

As I've mentioned to many of you before, for me, Judaism revolves around 2 poles: 1) engagement with the world through acts of *tikkun* and justice and 2) giving us a framework and practices for going deeper spiritually. My talk on Rosh Hashanah was an example of #1, today is #2.

Why am I talking about this? So we can make a stronger connection with this essential piece of liturgy and Torah which is what I would call a kind of through-line of the tradition—meaning that these words have retained their power and mystery over 3000 years. There is a lot we can cut from the Yom Kippur liturgy, but we could never cut these words. I can guarantee you that, God-willing, when folks find Jews on this earth in 500 years we will still be chanting the 13 attributes.

These words take us into the primordial mystery. Since I first started really taking in their feeling and melody when I reconnected to Judaism in my early 20s, I've always felt something deep was encoded in them.

And yes, I did talk about the 13 middot last year, but don't worry, I'm not going to make you do a 12 minute long meditation again!

So let's start at the beginning:

The 13 attributes appear in one of the climactic moments of Exodus (end of 33, 34). The Golden Calf incident has just occurred (shortly after the collective experience at Sinai); the people have dramatically ruptured their relationship with God.

In the process of restoring God's commitment to the people, Moshe says, Please show me Your Presence! God expresses willingness to do this--but not to show the Divine

face--and then instructs Moshe to carve two tablets like the first ones he smashed, and to come back alone up Mt. Sinai. Moses does this, then the Torah says:

וַיֵּרָד יְהוָה בְּעָנָן וַיִּתְיַצֵּב עִמּוֹ שָׁם וַיְקַרְא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה:

YHVH came down in the cloud, he stationed himself beside him there and called out the name of YHVH. (Exodus 34:5)

וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה | עַל-פְּנֵי וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה | יְהוָה אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אַרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב-חַסֵּד וְאֱמֶת: ז נֹצֵר חֶסֶד לְאַלְפֵי־נֶשֶׁא עֵוֹן וּפְשָׁע וְחִטְאָה וְנִקְהָ לֹא יִנְקָה פִקְדָן | עֵוֹן אָבוֹת עַל-בָּנִים וְעַל-בָּנֵי בָנִים עַל-שְׁלֵשִׁים וְעַל-רִבְעִים:

And YHVH passed before his face and called “YHVH, YHVH God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in kindness and truth. Keeping kindness for a thousand ages, Forgiver of iniquity, willful sin, and error, and Who cleanses (but does not cleanse completely [*v'nakeh lo y'nakeh*], recalling the iniquity of parents upon children and grandchildren, to the third and fourth generations)” (Ex. 34:6-7)

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רחום (compassionate, connected to “*rechem/womb*”)

וחנון (gracious, giving freely of favor/*chinam*)

ארך אפים (patient/slow to anger, lit. “long-nosed”)

ורב חסד (abundant in loving-kindness)

ואמת (and truth)

נוצר חסד לאלפים (keeping kindness for a thousand ages)

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Now there are least two extremely striking things about this text:

1) Do you notice how ambivalent the pronouns are here? The Hebrew for “he” could be God or Moshe. Who is stationing who where? Which is God, which is Moshe? Who called out the name YHVH? God? Moshe? As Rabbi Ruth Gan Kagan taught me recently, it’s like the Leonard Cohen song “Who by Fire” we’ll read shortly: “**and who, shall I say...is calling?**”

2) The actual biblical text is not the one that we chant. The rabbis actually made a radical, ultra-chutzpahdik change, one of their most Reconstructionist moves. They cut off the end of the text after *v'nakeh* and it dramatically changes the meaning to an unqualified sense of God cleansing, removing the idea of God recalling the sins of parents upon the next generations. The retribution element is removed and there is only forgiveness.

It was the rabbis who then made this radical textual change and put it into the liturgy, particularly making it the core of the *slichot* prayers.

So let's move a little into the rabbinic textual world to see how the 13 attributes evolved further.

In a passage from the Talmud, in tractate Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi Yochanan comments on our verse that "YHVH passed before his face and called out..." (Ex. 34:6) and says:

"Whoa. If this wasn't written in the Torah, I couldn't say it. This teaches that the Blessed Holy One wrapped Himself in a tallit like a prayer leader (*shaliach tzibur*) and showed Moshe the structure of the order of prayer. He said to him: Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them act before Me according to this order and I will forgive them (understood to mean--let the prayer leader wrap himself in a tallit and publicly call out the 13 attributes). Rav Yehuda then adds that if these 13 attributes are mentioned, one will not return empty-handed." (Rosh Hashanah 17b, trans. mostly from Sefaria)

Fast forward a little over a thousand years to the teachings of a prominent Safed kabbalist, Eliyahu de Vidas. He comments on this Talmud passage and writes:

"This is a difficult thing, because **we see that many times we mention the 13 middot and are not answered.** But the Geonim [the prominent generation of rabbis after those of the Talmud] say that the intention of [the line from the Talmud] "let them act before Me according to this order" doesn't just mean wrapping in a tallit, but that they should follow the order of the *middot* that the Holy One taught Moshe: "God is compassionate and gracious--just like God is compassionate, so should you be compassionate, and like that for all the 13 midot." (*Reishit Chochmah, Shaar Anavah*, 81, trans. Sefaria)

So you see in these rabbinic teachings a remarkable transformation.

In the Talmud piece, the 13 attributes are almost a formula—when you have a situation where the Jewish people have done wrong, just recite them publicly—voila! 100% guaranteed forgiveness!

But, no, de Vidas says 400 years ago—it doesn't seem to work that way. These words are not intended as some kind of powerful formula, they are instructions for us. Our guidance for what to do is encoded in the thirteen.

And of course you can take this totally secularly; you can take most of the qualities as ultimate guiding values.

Let's explore the idea of emulating God through these qualities. It's really a lifetime practice, but we're just going to suggest a few things.

In emulating the Divine in this way we shift ourselves, as it were, from the side of judgement to the side of compassion/*rachamim*. This applies to judging others, to being caught in a judgmental state of mind. It also applies to shifting our own status of self-judgment, the way some of us can be very hard on ourselves, making a shift to the side of compassion.

I love the literal nature of the *erech apayim* nose image. That in itself contains a practice instruction: when we find ourselves in the short-nosed flare of anger, can we lengthen it? How does the shift to long-nosed patience happen? Through breath, yes--imagining that long breath lengthening our nose. We tap into that lengthening quality of breath to dissipate the anger.

There is a related image/practice instruction with *rechem/womb/rachamim*, which is powerful for working with difficult emotions. I'll use the example of anger, but it could be something else juicy like jealousy. When the anger arises, you compassionately hold it. You acknowledge that it is present, feeling it as fully as you can, but you don't act it out and you don't repress it.

This is the *rechem/womb* quality, this capacity to hold—to say, yes this anger is here, but I'm going to hold it with acceptance. It's not easy but it's powerful.

The tension in these two rabbinic texts suggests a larger question: what are we doing with chanting the 13 middot? Are we doing this to affect God or we are trying to awaken or cultivate something within ourselves?”

The first approach, you could say, has been the traditional Jewish paradigm. The second approach is the humanist paradigm.

I think the answer is “yes,” we are doing both.

Following the Jewish mystical tradition, I'd like to suggest an understanding where the line between human and Divine is blurry, where the separation is very fluid. It's reminiscent of our Torah text itself, where we don't know if it's Moshe or God chanting the attributes.

And so when we arouse compassion within us, that arouses compassion, we can say, through the Divine field, that vast field—which we are not separate from--within which we are each a node, a mini jewel. We vibrate a string that resonates through the broader system. And, the vast storehouse of Divine compassion is made manifest through each of us becoming its channels, the expressers of that compassion.

Suffice it to say, there is something powerful about chanting the 13 attributes. They do seem to me an integral part of the cleansing, the *kapparah*, we seek on this day. Traditionally, they are only chanted in a minyan.

So, although *slichot* doesn't come till a little later in the service, I'd like to move up the chanting of these attributes so we do them together now.

There is a whole introductory piyyut/liturgical poem that introduces the 13 midot traditionally, called *El Melech*. But we don't have a tradition of doing *El Melech* at *Oseh*, so I wrote a simple English invocation:

An Invocation for the 13 Midot of Rachamim

God of Compassion, *El Maaley Rachamim*:

We come before You to chant the 13 qualities of compassion, which You showed to

Moshe our teacher in the earliest, primordial days of our tradition.

May our chanting of the 13 midot cause compassion--*rachamim*--to flow in You and in us, vibrating the strings of our heart and the strings of Your heart in one resonance, cleansing all misdeed.

May our chanting of the 13 midot inspire us to emulate You, Your womb-like compassion that holds it all, Your boundless patience/*erech apayim*, Your great love/*chesed*, Your desire for truth/*emet*.

May our chanting of the 13 midot be a *mikvah* for us, immersing us in the purity of our intention--which is Your intention--radiating Your compassion to a world desperately in need.

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