

# THE 13 ATTRIBUTES OF GOD'S COMPASSION

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Thinking of the 13 attributes of God's compassion, the *yud gimel midot shel rachamim*, we're reminded of the heartfelt *davening* of them during High Holy Days.

When we allow ourselves the luxury of simply resonating to them spiritually, they're a significant source of comfort. We imagine that for most of us, most of the time, notwithstanding our ardent response to them, there's still substantial untapped spiritual potential in them. As we know more of the context and content of these 13 attributes of God's compassion, we imagine that the spiritual power of our *davening* may yet increase.

It was in response to Moses that the *yud gimel midot* were "revealed." With all that he had been shown and witnessed in his life, Moses—like us, that is, like the institutional search of modern science—sought, according to Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888), to understand the unity or uniformity of creation in all its apparent diversity. Moses wanted to see God directly and personally, in a manner of speaking—to see the *source* of the unity. But what he was actually shown was somewhat different.

He wasn't allowed to look at God but rather to look at what God looks at. That is, as the scripture says, ". . . God came down in the cloud and placed himself next to him [Moses] there. . . ." (Exodus 34:5) So, standing in the same place, Moses sees what God sees, has the advantage of the same perspective. And the verse concludes, ". . . and [God] proclaimed God by name."

In Exodus 34:6 we read: "God passed before him and proclaimed: Adoshem Adoshem, God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in kindness and truth, preserver of kindness for thousands of generations, forgiver of iniquity, willful sin, and error, Who cleanses."

So how, precisely, do we get 13 attributes out of this list and what do they represent practically?

Our traditional Torah commentators, not surprisingly, have many different views of how to add up the 13 and what they mean—but our focus is on understanding them *naturalistically*, without reference to supernatural phenomena, relying instead on what we can comprehend with our intellect, rationality, and common sense.

*Adoshem* [1] *Adoshem* [2]—In the Talmud the repetition of God's name is said to affirm that, "I am He before a man sins and I am He after a man

sins and does *teshuvah*, a God compassionate and gracious." (Rosh Hashanah 17b).

However, we have also learned that Adoshem Adoshem, God is God, represents the totality of all creation, both the underlying uniformity that continually manifests itself in the potential for the moral history and future of humankind, and the diversity we see, which is simply a manifestation of the free will God has given to us. Yet Adoshem remains Adoshem, ruling the world in a way that encourages us to achieve happiness and salvation (i.e., to save ourselves from all that would degrade and destroy us).

This inherent goodness of God and His creation manifests itself as:

- *Eil* (אל) [3]—God: The source of all energy and life-giving force, which is given to us purely as a gift from the Creator;
- *Rachum* (רחום) [4]—compassionate (from the root רחם—mother's womb): God's compassion is such that, whenever we stop destroying or degrading life while it still lives, God cares for it and returns it to life, including ourselves;
- *Chanun* (חנון) [5]—gracious (from the root חנן, we derive ענן, the dispensing cloud): God's energizing of the Creation knows no limits, so while we fritter it away, God endlessly replenishes it (which, of course, we take for granted);
- *Erech apayim* (ארך מאפים) [6]—slow to anger: We're allowed time to overcome our weaknesses and to learn slowly how to use the powers we've been given to uplift morally our own lives and the lives of those with whom we come into contact;
- *Rav chesed* (רב חסד) [7]—abundant in kindness (from the root חסד, meaning complete devotion to another): To the extent we are devoted to extending God's goodness in the world, we are given extraordinary grants of energy and satisfaction for our efforts;
- *Rav emet* (רב אמת) [8]—abundant truth (from the root אמן, to care for and bring up): God, however, like a good parent, does not humor our foibles and moral missteps, because that would be to our ultimate detriment, and so the Creator has arranged instructive consequences for *us* as a people—not simply for *me*, which we find particularly painful because they entail

punishing outcomes for the innocent as well as the wrongdoers;

- *Notzeir chesed la'alafim* (נרצור חסד לאלפים) [9] —preserver of kindness for thousands of generations: The love that we receive from God, the simcha shel mitzvah, the blessings and joy we receive from doing the *mitzvot*, act like the seed of a tree of human fulfillment to the thousandth generations into the future, which can be an incredible source of meaning and fulfillment in our own lives; think of Avraham in his tent—which do you think would give him the greater meaning, fulfillment, and contentment, getting a new tent, more camels, and a double portion of meat on his plate, or the knowledge that the goodness he shows to others will create blessings in the lives of his offspring for a thousand generations?
- *Nosei avon* [10] *vafesha* [11] *v'chata'ah* [12] (נשא עון ופשע וחטאה)—forgiving (literally lifting up) iniquity, rebellion or willful sin, and carelessness or error: Not only does God pro-

vide forgiveness (סליחה), but atonement (כפרה), effectively short-circuiting—as Rabbi Hirsch teaches—the natural process of cause and effect, so that when we do *teshuvah*, the usual consequences of wrongdoing are lifted up from us; and

- *V'nakei* (ונקה) [13]—and Who cleanses: When our *teshuvah* is genuine and complete, the effects of our wrongdoing on us are completely removed.

Of course, this list serves to describe the attributes of God that Moses was able to see—the uniformity or unity in the diversity—by taking God's perspective on the world.

It's certainly true that one would only see these attributes when looking at the creation if some significant portion of humankind was living in the image of God. So we have our marching orders if we want to *see* God or rather, as Moses did, see God's attributes.

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