

The 13 Divine Attributes

Shabbat Chol Hamo'ed Pesach 5784

Congregation Shearith Israel Torah Study 4/27/24

Source Sheet by Rabbi Ari Sunshine

Twelve is viewed in Judaism as the number of order, e.g. the months of a year being twelve, the Tribes of Israel being twelve, etc. Thirteen, then, is the number connoting "beyond measure." Central to the *selichot* prayers is an element from Parashat Ki Tissa monikered "the 13 attributes of mercy" (שְׁלוֹש־עָשָׂרָה מִידוֹת הַרַחֲמִים); i.e. Shemot 34:6-7). This is God's response to the Golden Calf debacle. The second verse of the passage is marked with an enlarged nun, as seen in the Hebrew below.

Exodus 34:6-7

(ו) יהוה passed before him and proclaimed: "יהוה! יהוה! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, (ז) extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin—yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations."

שמות ל"ד:ו-ז

(ו) וַיַּעֲבֹר יְהוָה | עַל-פְּנֵי־וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה | יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב-חַסֵּד וְאֱמֶת: (ז) נֹצֵר חַסֵּד לְאַלְפֵי־מֵאוֹת נֹשֵׂא עוֹן וְנֹשֵׂעַ וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקְיָה לֹא יִנְקֶה פֶקֶד | עוֹן אָבוֹת עַל-בָּנִים וְעַל-בְּנֵי בָנִים עַל-שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל-רַבְעִים:

Former Sephardi Chief Rabbi Chayim Dovid Halevy z"l of Tel Aviv wrote that each case of an enlarged letter anywhere in Tanakh indicates to us an instance of God making an extra effort of *chesed* – lovingkindness – for the sake of the universe; i.e. that God is נֶאֱמָן (faithful) to extend grace to God's *am segulah* (treasured people).

The enlarged *nun* found in 34:7 is connected to the enlarged *resh* which follows it in 34:14. Together they form the word *ner* (נֵר; i.e. candle). This is said to reference two passages in Proverbs, "The candle of God is the soul of man" (Proverbs 20:27) and also a "A candle is a mitzvah and Torah is light" (Proverbs 6:23).

Exodus 34:14

(14) for you must not worship any other god, because יהוה, whose name is Impassioned, is an impassioned God.

שמות ל"ד:י"ד

(י"ד) כִּי לֹא תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאֵל אֲחֵר כִּי יְהוָה קָנָא שְׁמוֹ אֶל קָנָא הוּא:

Rosh Hashanah 17b:4-7

Ilfai, and some say it was the Sage Ilfa, also raised a contradiction: It is written in the list of God's attributes: "And abundant in

ראש השנה י"ז ב:ד'-ז'

אֵילָפִי, וְאָמְרִי לֵה אֵילָפָא רַמִּי, כְּתִיב: "וְרַב חַסֵּד", וְכְתִיב: "וְאֲמֶת". בְּתַחֲלָה –



Congregation
Shearith Israel

The 13 Divine Attributes

Shabbat Chol Hamo'ed Pesach 5784

Congregation Shearith Israel Torah Study 4/27/24

"וְאֵמֶת",

kindness" (Exodus 34:6), and it is written in the same verse: **"And truth,"** which implies the attribute of justice. He answered: **Initially,** at the time of judgment: **"And truth,"** i.e., God employs strict justice, **but in the end,** when He sees that the world cannot survive on judgment based only on truth and justice: **"And abundant in kindness,"** i.e., He is merciful. § The verse states: **"And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed"** (Exodus 34:6). **Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Were it not explicitly written in the verse, it would be impossible to say this,** as it would be insulting to God's honor. The verse **teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, wrapped Himself in a prayer shawl like a prayer leader and showed Moses the structure of the order of the prayer. He said to him: Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them act before Me in accordance with this order.** Let the prayer leader wrap himself in a prayer shawl and publicly recite the thirteen attributes of mercy, **and I will forgive them.** The verse continues: **"The Lord, the Lord,"** and it should be understood as follows: **I am He before a person sins, and I am He after a person sins and performs repentance,** as God does not recall for him his first sins, since He is always **"God, merciful and gracious"** (Exodus 34:6). **Rav Yehuda said: A covenant was made with the thirteen attributes that they will not return empty-handed,** meaning that if one mentions them, he will certainly be answered, **as it is stated in this regard: "Behold, I make a covenant"** (Exodus 34:10).

Rashi on Exodus 34:6-7

(1) ה' ה' THE LORD, THE LORD – This is the attribute of Divine mercy. The one (the first ה') alludes to God having mercy on the sinner before he sins and the other after he has sinned and repented (Rosh Hashanah 17b).
 (2) אל GOD – This is also an attribute of

וּלְבִסּוֹף – "וְיַעֲבוֹר ה' עַל פְּנָיו וַיִּקְרָא". אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: אֲלֵמְלָא מְקַרָּא כְּתוּב, אִי אָפְשָׁר לְאַוְמְרוּ. מְלַמֵּד שְׁנַתְעֵטֵף הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא כְּשֶׁלִּיחַ צְבוּר, וְהִרְאָה לוֹ לְמִשְׁה סֹדֵר תְּפִלָּה. אָמַר לוֹ: כָּל זְמַן שֶׁיִּשְׂרָאֵל חוֹטְאִין – יַעֲשׂוּ לְפָנָי כְּסֹדֵר הַזֶּה וְאֲנִי מוֹחֵל לָהֶם. "ה' ה'" – אֲנִי הוּא קוֹדֵם שְׂיִחְטָא הָאָדָם, וְאֲנִי הוּא לְאַחַר שְׂיִחְטָא הָאָדָם וַיַּעֲשֶׂה תְּשׁוּבָה – "אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנוּן". אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה: בְּרִית כְּרוּתָה לְשֵׁלֶשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה מִדּוֹת שְׂאִינָן חוֹזְרוֹת רִיקָם, שְׁנֵאָמַר: "הִנֵּה אֲנִי כוֹרֵת בְּרִית".

רש"י על שמות ל"ד:ו'-ז'

(א) ה' ה'. מִדַּת רַחֲמִים הִיא, אַחַת קִדְּם שְׂיִחְטָא, וְאַחַת אַחַר שְׂיִחְטָא וַיִּשׁוּב (ראש השנה י"ז): (ב) אל. אֵף זוּ מִדַּת רַחֲמִים, וְכֵן הוּא אוֹמֵר אֵלֵי אֵלֵי לְמָה עֲזַבְתָּנִי



The 13 Divine Attributes

Shabbat Chol Hamo'ed Pesach 5784

Congregation Shearith Israel Torah Study 4/27/24

(תהילים)

Divine mercy (it is not, as אלהים, an attribute of stern justice). Thus also does Scripture say, (Psalms 22:2) “My God, my God (אלי, אלי) why hast Thou forsaken me?” – for surely one would not say to the attribute of stern Justice “why hast Thou forsaken me?”! Thus have I found in the Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 15:2:2. (3) ארך אפים SLOW TO ANGER – He defers (מאריך) His anger and does not hasten to punish – it may be that the sinner will repent. (4) ורב חסד AND ABUNDANT IN MERCY – to those who need mercy because they have not sufficient merits to be saved by them. (5) ואמת AND TRUTH – faithfully rewarding those who perform His will. (1) נצר נצר means God keeps (stores up) the mercy which a person does in His presence, (2) TO THOUSANDS – to two thousand generations (the plural, “generations”, and “two” is the least that this can imply; cf. Rashi on Exodus 20:6). (3) עונות – These are sins committed presumptuously (with premeditation). פשעים – These are sins committed rebelliously. (4) ונקה לא ינקה AND WHO WILL BY NO MEANS CLEAR THE GUILTY – According to its plain sense this means that He is not altogether indulgent to sin (He does not entirely remit the punishment), but little by little exacts punishment from, him (the sinner). Our Rabbis, however, have explained: ונקה, And he clears – He clears those who repent, לא ינקה, He does not clear – but does not clear those who will not repent (Yoma 86a). (5) עון פקד VISITING THE INIQUITY OF THE FATHERS UPON THE CHILDREN – when they retain in their hands (follow the example of) the evil doings of their ancestors. This must be the meaning because in another verse of a similar character it has already been stated: of them that hate Me (cf. Exodus 20:5: Visiting the iniquity of fathers upon the children, upon the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me (Berakhot 7a; Sanhedrin 27b). (6) ועל רבעים AND UPON THE

כ"ב) – ואין לומר למדת הדין למה
עזבתני, כה מצאתי במכילתא: (ג) ארך
אפים. מאריך
אפו ואינו ממהר לפרע, שמה יעשה
תשובה: (ד) ורב חסד. לצריכים חסד –
שאין להם זכות כל כה: (ה) ואמת.
לשלם שכר טוב לעושי רצונו: (א) נצר
חסד. שהאדם עושה לפניו: (ב)
לאלפים. לשני אלפים דורות: (ג) עון
ופשע. עונות – אלו הזדונות, פשעים –
אלו המרדים שאדם עושה להכעיס: (ד)
ונקה לא ינקה. לפי פשוטו משמע שאינו
מוותר על העון לגמרי, אלא נפרע ממנו
מעט מעט, ורבותינו דרשו מנקה הוא
לשבים ולא ינקה לשאין שבים (יומא
פ"ו): (ה) פקד עון אבות על בנים.
כשאוחזים מעשה אבותיהם בידיהם,
שכבר פרש במקרא אחר לשנאי (שמות
כ'): (ו) ועל רבעים. דור רביעי; נמצאת
מדה טובה מרבה על מדת פרענות
אחת לחמש מאות, שבמדה טובה הוא
אומר נצר חסד לאלפים (תוספתא סוטה
ד')

The 13 Divine Attributes

Shabbat Chol Hamo'ed Pesach 5784

Congregation Shearith Israel Torah Study 4/27/24

FOURTH GENERATION – It follows, therefore, that the measure of good (reward) is greater than the measure of punishment in the proportion of one to five hundred, for in

respect to the measure of good it says: “Keeping mercy for thousands” (two thousands at least) (cf. Rashi above: Tosefta Sotah 4:1; see also Rashi on Exodus 20:5).

Liturgical Usage

The selichot prayers are what replaced sacrifices after the fall of the 2nd Jerusalem Temple as the means for petitioning for forgiveness and mercy. This was originally recited on all fast days, including Yom Kippur, Tisha b'Av, and the Fast of Esther, dating back to Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. Later, the selichot were added to the liturgy for the High Holy Days from the week of Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur as well, excluding Rosh Hashanah itself. The central element is the Thirteen Middot haRachamim (13 Attributes of Mercy). The idea behind this is that when the people committed the debacle of the Golden Calf, sacrifice was replaced with prayer as the means for appealing to God for forgiveness and mercy.

Siddur Ashkenaz, Festivals, Selichot, Yom
Kippur Katan 22

(22) **HASHEM, HASHEM, G-d, Compassionate and Gracious, Slow to anger, and Abundant in Kindness and Truth, Preserver of kindness for thousands of generations, Forgiver of iniquity, willful sin, and error, Who cleanses.** May You forgive our iniquities and our errors and make us Your heritage. Forgive us, our Parent, for we have erred; pardon us, our Ruler, for we have willfully sinned; for You, my Lord, are good and forgiving and abundantly kind to all who call upon You.

סידור אשכנז, חגים, סליחות, יום

כיפור קטן כ"ב

(כב) יהוה יהוה אל רחום וחנון ארך
אפים ורב חסד ואמת: ניצר חסד לאלפים
נשא עון ופשע וחטאה ונקיה: וסלחת
לעווננו ולחטאתנו ונחלתנו: סלח לנו
אבינו כי חטאנו מחל לנו מלכנו כי
פשענו: כי אתה אדני טוב וסלח ורב חסד
לכל קראיך:



Congregation
Shearith Israel