**Revelation and Repentance**

**by Rav Yair Kahn**

The significance of the period which begins with Rosh Chodesh Elul and ends on Yom Kippur dates back to the biblical era. According to tradition, the first set of tablets were shattered by Moshe on the 17th of Tammuz, in the wake of the sin of the golden calf. The next forty days were spent praying for forgiveness. Subsequently, Hashem agreed to allow Moshe to return to Har Sinai in order to receive the second tablets. The period of preparation time necessary to receive the Torah the second time was identical to that of the first time, i.e., forty days. These final forty days began on Rosh Chodesh Elul and culminated on Yom Kippur. (See Ta'anit 30b, Rashi ibid.)

During the period of Elul it is customary to wake up early in the morning in order to say selichot. Sephardim recite selichot the entire month of Elul, while Ashkenazim begin the week preceding Rosh Ha-shana. The main focus of the selichot is the public recitation of the thirteen middot ha-rachamim (attributes of mercy). The selichot reach a climax on Yom Kippur when they function as an integral part of the service. I think that we can gain a deeper insight into the nature of this forty day period in general, and of Yom Kippur specifically, if we explore the significance of the recitation of the middot ha-rachamim.

The source for the public recitation of the thirteen middot is a baffling gemara in Rosh Ha-shana: "'And Hashem passed over his (Moshe's) face and called' - Rav Yochanan said: if not for an explicit verse it would not be possible to suggest such a thing; this verse teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped himself in a tallit like a shaliach tzibbur and showed Moshe the order of prayer. He said to him (Moshe): whenever Israel sins let them do the following service in my presence and I will forgive them: 'Hashem Hashem' it is I (Hashem) before man sins and it is I after man sins and repents... Rav Yehuda said there is a covenant forged with the thirteen middot that they will not return empty (unanswered), as it says, 'I hereby forge a covenant'" (17b). What form of prayer is the mere recitation of the thirteen middot? How does it result in automatic forgiveness? Is it some magical formula or incantation? What is the nature of the covenant? Finally, what is the significance of Rav Yochanan's shocking discovery, that Hashem Himself recited the middot to Moshe Rabbeinu?

Let us briefly return to the biblical context of the thirteen middot ha-rachamim. After praying for forgiveness for forty days, Moshe makes a very bold request: "Show me Your glory." Hashem's enigmatic response is as follows: "I will pass all My goodness before your face and I will proclaim the name Hashem in your presence and I will be gracious with whom I shall be gracious and I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy. And He said, You cannot see My countenance, for man cannot see Me and live... and you shall see My back but My face will not be revealed" (Shemot 33:18-23). Moshe is then invited to return to Har Sinai in order to receive the second set of tablets. "... And he climbed up Har Sinai ... and he took in his hand two stone tablets. And Hashem descended in a cloud, and He stood there with him, and He proclaimed the name Hashem. And Hashem passed before his face and proclaimed Hashem Hashem ... (the thirteen middot ha-rachamim) ... and Moshe hurried and bowed to the ground" (Shemot 34:4-8).

Although the exact meaning and symbolism is far beyond my comprehension, the basic point is clear. Moshe's quest is divine revelation. Hashem responds that he is willing to grant Moshe's request, but only partially. Moshe will experience the greatest and most profound encounter with God; he will push his finite human capability to the very limit. He will succeed in catching a brief glimpse of the infinite glory of Hashem. Moshe's request was fulfilled by Hashem's recitation, as it were, of the thirteen middot. The meaning and significance of the middot therefore become clear: the thirteen middot are an act of divine revelation, the greatest and deepest form of revelation possible. Rav Yochanan was electrified by the depth of Moshe's religious experience. "If not for an explicit verse, it would not be possible to suggest." Moshe was there, in the very presence of Hashem as He revealed His attributes. Hashem was so close, although mysteriously hidden and wrapped in His tallit.

But why a shaliach tzibbur? Are there no other metaphors to describe the dialectical nature of the divine encounter? Chazal appear to be conveying an additional message. The thirteen middot were not only the personal religious experience of Moshe, but they were and are an eternal covenant forged between Hashem and the people of Israel: "I hereby forge a covenant, before your entire nation I will work wonders" (Shemot 34:10). The first tablets were shattered in the wake of Israel's sin. However, the second tablets were carved within the context of the covenant of the divine attributes. The content of the covenant is that the divine presence dwells within the Jewish people even after they sin. If the people of Israel turn away from Hashem (heaven forbid), they become distanced and alienated from God. Nevertheless, upon repentance God is there. The return to the presence of a loving God is by definition forgiveness: "And I will pass all my good before your face, and I will be gracious with whom I shall be gracious, and I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy" (Shemot 33:19).

The recitation of the thirteen middot requires a minyan, which represents the entire Jewish people. When the shaliach tzibbur wrapped in a tallit calls out the divine attributes, Hashem is present. The divine presence results in the forgiveness associated with the recitation. This is the essence of the covenant of the thirteen middot, and this is the meaning of R. Yochanan's metaphor. The recitation of the middot, therefore, is neither an incantation nor a prayer in the classic sense. Rather, it is an experience of divine revelation. In some remote way it is a reenactment of Moshe Rabbeinu's experience.

Historically, Moshe Rabbeinu's encounter with the infinite occurred at the beginning of Elul, when Moshe was summoned to receive the second set of tablets. However, the message of the thirteen middot was delivered to Klal Yisrael only on Yom Kippur. It was on that day that the Jewish people actually received the second set of tablets. It was on that day that the Children of Israel beheld with awe and astonishment the light of the divine encounter shining on Moshe's face. Through that light, the entire nation experienced at a distance the encounter with God.

Yom Kippur is the day in which the Children of Israel achieve atonement for their iniquities. Our Rabbis teach us that the essence of the day of Yom Kippur brings forgiveness for those who repent. (Rambam, Hilkhot Teshuva 1:3). Yom Kippur is historically and intrinsically a day of encounter between the People of Israel and the God of Israel. At the time of the beit ha-mikdash, this encounter formed the heart of the Yom Kippur service, when the high priest entered the inner sanctum. It is this encounter, which is expressed by the thirteen middot, that results in the forgiveness and purification of the Jewish people. "For on this day He will atone you to purify you, in the presence of Hashem will you be purified" (Vayikra 16:30). "Rabbi Akiva said, happy are you O Israel -- in whose presence are you purified and who purifies you? Your father in heaven" (Yoma 85b).