**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**Selichot: The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy**

**I. A Covenant Made with the Thirteen Attributes of God’s Mercy**

One of the central prayers offered during the High Holiday period, the days of mercy and forgiveness, is the *Selichot* service containing the thirteen attributes of God's mercy. God revealed these attributes to Moshe after the sin of the golden calf, and they have accompanied the people of Israel to this very day as a firm promise, so that the people of Israel would not be turned away with their prayers unanswered:

"And the Lord passed by before him and proclaimed" (*Shemot* 34:6) – Rabbi Yochanan said: Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say such a thing. This verse teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped Himself like the leader of a congregation and showed Moshe the order of prayer. He said to him: Whenever Israel sin, let them carry out this service before Me, and I will forgive them…

"A God merciful and gracious" – Rav Yehuda said: A covenant has been made with the thirteen attributes that [one who recites them] will not be turned away empty-handed, as it is stated: "Behold, I make a covenant" (*Shemot* 34:10). (*Rosh Hashana* 17b)

What is the great secret underlying the thirteen attributes of mercy? We will examine the explanations given by the *Or Ha-Chaim* to the first two attributes, and from them suggest a line of thought regarding the role of all thirteen.

**II. "The Lord, the Lord" – One attribute or two?**

Our Rabbisdisagree about how to count the thirteen attributes, mainly regarding the first two, where there seems to be a redundancy – a doubling of the Tetragrammaton. The Gemara explains the redundancy as follows:

"The Lord, the Lord" – I am the Eternal before a person sins, and the same after one sins and repents. (*Rosh Hashana*,ibid.)

The *Tosafot* cite the position of Rabbeinu Tam that indeed these two mentions of the name of God represent two different attributes:

Rabbeinu Tam says that the first two names [of God] are two different attributes, as is stated here: I am the Eternal before a person sins, to have mercy on him, and I have mercy on him after he sins, if he repents. The Tetragrammaton is the attribute of mercy, unlike "*Elokim*," which is the attribute of justice. (*Tosafot*, *Rosh ha-Shana*, ibid., s.v. *shelosh*)

On the other hand, Rabbeinu Nissim Gaon disagrees. In his view, we are dealing here with only one attribute, for the first instance of "the Lord" identifies God who proclaims the attributes before Moshe:

And in *Megillat Setarim* of Rabbeinu Nissim, he does not count the first Divine name, as there is a comma between the names, for this is what the verse means: The Holy One, blessed be He, whose name is the Lord, called out: The Lord, [God] merciful and gracious. (*Tosafot*, ibid.)

**III. I am the Lord Before a Person Sins**

We must try to understand the basis of this disagreement. The plain meaning of the Gemara seems to support Rabbeinu Tam, for the Gemara uses both names to describe attributes: The first instance of God's name referring to His mercy before a person sins, and the second instance describing His mercy after sin. But this very position of the Gemara raises a difficult question – as the Rosh writes:

You might ask: Why does a person need mercy before he sins? (*Piskei ha-Rosh*, *Rosh Hashana* 1, 5)

This is, indeed, a weighty question. If one has not sinned, if he is still innocent and free of sin, why does God have to show him mercy, rather than operating based on the attribute of justice?

**IV. One Who Has Not Sinned Does Not Need Mercy**

**1. The thought of sin**

The Rosh himself suggests two explanations. In his second explanation, the Rosh explains that in some cases, mercy and atonement may be necessary because of the very intention to commit a sin, even if the person has done nothing. He is referring, of course, to idol worship, where the very thought to commit a sin is problematic in itself:

Before he sins with idol worship. Even though he already thought to worship it, and the Holy One, blessed be He, combines the thought of idolatry with the deed (*Kiddushin* 39b-40a) – as it is stated: "That I may take the house of Israel in their own heart, [because they are all turned away from Me through their idols]" (*Yechezkel* 14:5) – even so, [God] deals with him with the attribute of mercy before he sins, and when he sins, He combines the thought with the deed. (*Rosh*, ibid.)

In this explanation, the Rosh has found a situation in which a person is considered a sinner even though he did not (yet) actually sin. In doing so, the Rosh essentially accepted the basic premise of his objection – that when a person does not sin at all, he does not need mercy.

**2. As he is now**

The first explanation of the Rosh is a bit more complicated, but seems to rest on the same assumption:

And even though it is clear and obvious to Him that in the end he will sin, He deals with him with the attribute of mercy “as he is now” [*ba'asher hu sham*]. (*Rosh*, ibid.)

God knows all of a person's thoughts and deeds already from the time of his birth. He knows that the person will eventually sin. This being the case, perhaps the attribute of justice should take strict action to prevent a person from committing the offense. But the first attribute of "the Lord" teaches us that God judges His creatures not based on the future, but rather based on their present actions – extending mercy while they have not yet sinned.

The Rosh alludes to the source for this, from a verse in the story of Hagar and Yishmael. After Hagar leaves her son under a bush so as not to witness his impending death, the Torah describes how God heard Yishmael's voice:

And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her: What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is [*ba'asher hu sham*]. (*Bereishit* 21:17)

On the words "*ba'asher hu sham*," Rashi cites the almost incomprehensible words of the *midrash*:

He shall be judged according to the actions he is now doing, and not according to what he may do in future. Because the ministering angels were prosecuting against him, saying: Master of the Universe, one whose descendants will in the future kill your children with thirst, for him You will provide a well? He asked them: What is he now, righteous or wicked? They replied: Righteous. He said to them: According to his present deeds will I judge him. This is the meaning of what is written: "[For God has heard the voice of the lad] where he is. (Rashi, ad loc., s.v. *ba'asher*)

If God heard the youthful prayer of Yishmael as if he were innocent (even after he had started to demonstrate wickedness by "making sport," *Bereishit* 21:9), all the more so should He hear the cries of His people before a sin has been committed.

This attribute, that God looks not at the future, but at the present, is imbedded in the foundation of creation. At the end of *Parashat Bereishit*, after the created world has corrupted its ways, there is a difficult description of God's regretting, as it were, His creation of it:

And the Lord regretted that He had made mankind on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. And the Lord said: I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the earth; from man to beast, and creeping thing, and fowl of the air; for I regret that I have made them. (*Bereishit* 6:6-7)

Rashi, based on the *midrash*, teaches us the same principle there too – that God judges a person according to his present deeds:

I am writing this [so that you will know how] to refute the arguments of the heretics: A gentile once asked Rabbi Yehoshua son of Korcha, saying to him: Do you not admit that the Holy One, blessed be He, knows what is to happen in the future? He replied: Yes. The gentile said to him: But is it not written: "And He was grieved in His heart"? He answered: Have you ever had a son born to you? He replied: Yes. He asked [the gentile]: And what did you do? He replied: I rejoiced and I brought others to rejoice also. He said to him: But did you not know that he would eventually die? The gentile replied: At the time of joy, let there be joy; at the time of mourning, let there be mourning. He said to him: Such, too, is the way of the Holy One, blessed be He. Although it was revealed to Him that they would ultimately sin and would be destroyed, He did not refrain from creating them for the sake of the righteous men who were to issue from them. (Rashi, ad loc., s.v. *vayit’atzeiv el libo*)

Thus, this answer of the Rosh also explains that the creation of mankind was problematic from the very beginning of his creation, and it would have been better for people if they had not been created.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus, the entire existence of mankind in the world requires God's mercy. Therefore, the attribute of mercy must operate even before one sins.

The common denominator in both of the Rosh's explanations is the assumption that if in fact a person is fully righteous and does not sin, he does not need the mercy of heaven at all; even by the standards of the attribute of justice, he is innocent. If we read the Gemara according to his words, then indeed Rabbeinu Tam's position makes perfect sense: Even before a sin is committed, God must exercise His mercy for the sake of the existence of the world – thus, we have here two different attributes of God.

**V. Always Merciful**

In his commentary to *Parashat Ki-Tisa*, the *Or Ha-Chaim* offers two other explanations of the need for the attribute of mercy before a person sins. Both of his explanations disagree with the assumptions underlying the Rosh's explanations, but each in a different way.

**1. Without *mitzvot* and without transgressions**

In his first explanation, the *Or Ha-Chaim* suggests that even if a person will never sin at all, he still needs God's mercy – for without *mitzvot* he would have no right to enjoy the world at all, and therefore he needs a free gift:

I believe that a person is in need of God's mercy even before he has committed a sin, if he does not have the merit, i.e., by performance of positive commandments, to [justify] his deriving pleasure from the world – God will bestow it upon him with mercy. Behold, the verse is before you: "And it shall come to pass, if you shall hearken diligently… that I will give the rain of your land" (*Devarim* 11:13) – that good will come as reward for a good deed. But if a person was prevented from learning by circumstances beyond his control [and therefore has not performed God's commandments], he will earn neither reward nor punishment. For what, then, would he receive God’s mercy? For this reason, it said “the Lord” [referring to God’s mercy even] before a person commits a sin. This is a novel idea. And in addition, even if one corrupted his deeds and transgressed a prohibition, God will conduct Himself towards him with mercy. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Shemot* 34:6)

The *Or Ha-Chaim's* conclusion is also the assumption of the Rosh – when a person is mediocre, without sins and without *mitzvot*, he is consideredto be entitled to goodness. However, their reasons are different: according to the Rosh, it is because he has not sinned, whereas according to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, it is because God invokes His attribute of mercy for him.

**2. Before and after**

The two explanations of the Rosh and the *Or Ha-Chaim*’s first explanation all assume the view of Rabbeinu Tam – that we are dealing here with two different attributes of mercy. The *Or Ha-Chaim's* second explanation, however, follows the view of Rabbeinu Nissim – that the two mentions of God’s name refer to a single attribute of mercy:

That when God bestows goodness to a person in His mercy, then even if he sins, his goodness will not be lessened at all but will remain at the measure it was beforehand even after he sins. Therefore He spoke of mercy before the sin, in order to equate it with the mercy to be bestowed after the sin. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

According to this explanation, indeed, one does not need any mercy at all before sinning. The first “the Lord,” which refers to before the sin, is not a matter of an attribute or an action, as it were, of God, but simply a description of the situation. Before a person sins, God deals with him with the attribute of mercy because he is righteous. The novelty lies in the second instance of God's name: Even after a person sins, God continues with the same mercy.

In his commentary to *Parashat Shelach*, the *Or Ha-Chaim* writes that the opinion of Rabbeinu Nissim Gaon accords well with this explanation:

It is possible to explain the matter in accordance with the words of Rabbeinu Nissim, that when they said “before the sin” and “after the sin,” the meaning is that God is merciful after a person sins just as He was before he sinned, and there is nothing novel about the mercy except after the sin. According to this, the Rosh has no question – that he had asked why God's attribute of mercy is needed before the sin at all. For according to truth, this is indeed the case. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Devarim* 14:18)

If we go back to *Parashat Ki Tisa*, the *Or Ha-Chaim*, in the wake of this explanation, resolves a big problem that we have in the real world:

And with this, my mind is at peace with the observation that the good of [i.e., received by] the wicked does not change at all [after they sin] – for this is the attribute. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Shemot* 34:6)

The question arising from the fact that there are wicked people in the world who prosper is a timeless problem. Here the *Or Ha-Chaim* suggests a novel answer – indeed, this is the attribute of God's mercy, that even the wicked prosper.

**VI. "I will make all My goodness pass before you"**

We have seen four explanations regarding the need for the attribute of mercy before a person has sinned:

1. Atonement for thoughts of idolatry.
2. Mercy because the person will eventually sin.
3. Mercy for a person who has no merits.
4. A description of the fact that God invokes the attribute of mercy for the benefit of a righteous person who has not sinned.

Based on these explanations, we can try to explain the great power of the thirteen attributes of mercy, and why God made such a strong covenant with them.

After the sin of the golden calf, Moshe asks God for a sign that He will indeed remain with Israel as they continue their journey in the wilderness. In the course of God’s response, there is a thrilling moment in which God refrains from showing His face to Moshe, "for a person shall not see Me and live" (*Shemot* 33:20), but acquiesces to Moshe's request in a different way:

And He said: I will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. (*Shemot* 33:19)

What is the goodness that God passes before Moshe? The *Or Ha-Chaim* offers a fascinating suggestion:

"I will make all My goodness pass before you" – meaning, all the good attributes through which I do good for My creatures… "And I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you" – meaning, I will make My attributes pass [before you] and call each one by its name before you. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Shemot* 33:19)

Proclaiming the name of God here means proclaiming the attributes and ways of God. God does not show Moshe His image (for He has no physical body), but He shows Moshe His ways.

I would like to suggest that those ways are the wondrous secret of the answer: "I am the Eternal before a person sins, and the same after one sins." Until then, a sinner had to be punished, as indeed happened with those who sinned with the calf, but here God reveals to Moshe that in essence, the entire world was created with the attribute of mercy. According to Rabbeinu Tam's explanation, a person needs mercy even before he has sinned, either because he will sin in the future or because he has no mitzvato his credit at the moment, but without the attribute of mercy, the world cannot stand. According to Rabbeinu Nissim's explanation, the same principle is true – God governs His world after a sin just as He governed it beforehand, for if not, we would be denied free choice (since a person who knows with certainty that he will be killed the moment he sins will never sin). Thus, the ability to continue living with sin, and also to repair it and repent, is an essential part of the world and of God – so much so that those attributes are the manifestation of the *Shekina* that Moshe saw.

In the month of Elul and on Rosh Hashana, the people of Israel live in two dimensions – one as a people who crown their King, and the second as a defendant standing trial. It seems that the thirteen attributes of mercy accord precisely with these two dimensions. They make the *Shekhina* present in the world through the proclamation of those attributes, which is the closest thing to revealing the *Shekhina* in the world that we are able to do. At the same time, they remind us – and, as it were, Him as well – that the gates of repentance are never locked.

(Translated by David Strauss; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. As discussed in *Eiruvin* 13b. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)