



THE THIRTEEN MIDDOT AND THE SYMBOLISM OF THE TALLIT

וַיַּעֲבֹר ה' עַל פְּנֵי וַיִּקְרָא ה' אֶל-ל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן
אֲרֻךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת. נִצַּר חֶסֶד לְאֲלֹפִים
נִשָּׂא עֵוֹן וּפְשָׁע וְחַטָּאת וְנִקָּה לֹא יִנְקָה פֶקֶד עֵוֹן
אֲבוֹת עַל בְּנִים וְעַל בְּנֵי בְנִים עַל שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל
רְבָעִים.

The L-rd passed before him and proclaimed: "The L-rd! The L-rd! A G-d compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations."

These pesukim in Parshat Ki Tisa (Shemot 33-34) are as mysterious as they are

famous. What is G-d communicating to Moshe? The prophet has been struggling to attain forgiveness for the Jewish People, while, at the same time, trying to understand *why* G-d would, in fact, grant that *mechilah*. G-d does not offer Moshe all that he is asking for; a limited view of G-d's ways is all that the prophet can see.

On the simplest level, the pesukim serve as a partial answer to Moshe's question. How does G-d judge? With tremendous mercy. G-d is more compassionate than we could ever imagine. What is Moshe supposed to do with that knowledge? Perhaps it makes him better prepared to plead on behalf of Bnei Yisrael, should they err again.

Chazal, in *Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashana* 17b, understand that Hashem is providing the Jewish People with a *formula* and a *ceremony* through which they, themselves, may achieve atonement in the future.¹

"וַיַּעֲבֹר ה' עַל פְּנֵי וַיִּקְרָא": אמר רב יוחנן אלמלא מקרא כתוב — אי אפשר לאומר. מלמד שנתעטף הקדוש ברוך הוא כשליח צבור — והראה לו למשה סדר תפלה. אמר ליה: כל זמן שישראל חוטאין — יעשו לפני כסדר הזה — ואני מוחל להם.
"And the Lord passed by before him and proclaimed..." (Exodus 34:6). Rabbi Yohanan said: Were it not written in the verse it would be impossible to say this. [The verse] teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, wrapped Himself [in a prayer shawl] like a prayer leader and

showed Moses order of [the] prayer. He said to him: Whenever the Jewish People sin, let them act before Me in accordance with this order, and I will forgive them.

There are several important details in this account. First, the Gemara specifies that G-d wrapped Himself, *ki'veyachol*, in a *tallit* like a prayer leader. Next, we are told that the Attributes of Mercy somehow form a prayer and that through this prayer ceremony the nation could achieve atonement. Finally, it is noteworthy that G-d tells us to “do” as He does, rather than to “say” as He says. While this atonement ritual is described as a prayer, its performance must be accompanied by some sort of action.

Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas (*Reishit Chochmah, Sha'ar Ha'Anavah*, chapter 1, in the name of the Geonim) explains this mysterious passage in a way that not only works with the text of the Gemara, but also addresses a fundamental question about the justice of forgiving serious sins in response to lip service. He focuses on the phrase mentioned before “*ya'asu lefanai*” — “do before Me” this procedure, and suggests that G-d asks us to imitate the *middot* of mercy — acting mercifully to others as we hope He will do to us, and forgiving them, as we hope G-d will do for us. We need more than a prayer service; words must be supported by actions. Repeating these words again and again serves not only to sway G-d through heartfelt prayers, but to instill in us the values we must assimilate and build our lives on in order to improve our actions.²

On a simple level, however, the phrase “*ya'asu lefanai*” refers to the prayer ritual itself. What action must we do while reciting the *pesukim*? Only one possibility exists: to don a *tallit*, or at

least to have our *shaliach tzibbur* don a *tallit*, just as G-d did before Moshe.

The Talmud mentions the *tallit* requirement only regarding the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. Rav Avraham Gumbiner (*Magen Avraham* commentary to *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 18:2) quotes Rav Mordecai Yoffe, “the *Levush*,” who says that we should not recite the Thirteen Middot without a *tallit*. The *Magen Avraham* himself, however, extends this practice to every prayer leader. After all, the Talmud says that G-d wrapped Himself “like a *shaliach tzibbur*.” It seems to be a given that every *shaliach*

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tzibbur leader should don a *tallit*.

But is the reason for wearing the *tallit* the same? Does an ordinary *chazan* wear a *tallit* for the same reason as the leader of Selichot? The *Chafetz Chaim* (*Shaar Hatziyun* 581:3) suggests that a typical *shaliach tzibbur* wears his *tallit* for “*kavod ha-tzibbur*,” respect for the congregation. Somehow, donning an additional, ceremonial garment lends gravitas to the *chazan* and to the congregation he leads. But what about the *tallit* worn for the Thirteen Middot? Perhaps the *tallit* serves a different, or additional purpose for Selichot.

Rav Yehuda Amital, founding Rosh

Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, whose 10th *yahrzeit* was recently observed, suggests several reasons why the *shaliach tzibbur* wears a *tallit*.³

His first explanation applies equally to all *tefillot*. The *tallit* serves to cloak the identity of the prayer leader, allowing him to better serve as a messenger of the people. A *shaliach tzibbur* stands before G-d not as himself, a single Jew with his own successes and failures, but as a personification of the Jewish People as a whole. Rabbi Soloveitchik, in his very first shiur after arriving in the United States, and in many later *shiurim*, differentiated between the silent *Shemoneh Esreh*, recited by ten people simultaneously, and the repetition of the *Shemoneh Esreh* said by the *chazan*. The former is an example of “*tefillah betzibbur*” — a prayer offered as part of a group. The latter he calls “*tefillat hatzibbur*,” the prayer of the congregation.

The same phenomenon, the Rav points out, exists by *korbanot*. If several people contribute toward a single sacrifice, the offering would be labeled as a *korban shutafim* — the offering of “partners.” Every contributing member has a stake in the animal — and the offering. The *korbanot tzibbur*, however, such as the daily burnt offerings, had only one “owner”: *Klal Yisrael*.

Chazarat hashatz is much more than the combined efforts of individual congregants. It is a singular *tefillah* offered by the Jewish People as a single entity. The donning of a *tallit* de-emphasizes the individuality of the *chazan*. He is not coming before G-d as himself, with his own persona. He, like a *korban tamid*, has been converted into something much larger than the individual “parts” of the congregation behind him. He

is not *one* of the people, selected on their behalf to approach G-d. He is the Jewish People, cloaked in a *tallit*, mysteriously hidden away from view.

While this idea is relevant to all *tefillot*, it is particularly important for Selichot. As Rabbi Soloveitchik explained in one of his famous *teshuva derashot* (entitled “*Yachid veTzibbur*” in *sefer Al Hateshuva*), our success in achieving atonement goes hand in hand with our connection to *Klal Yisrael*. An individual Jew has no right to demand *mechilah*. He or she has sinned, and punishment is often appropriate. But *Klal Yisrael*, as an entity, can be assured of the gift of atonement. For this reason, congregations have the custom to sing the *vidui* litany when it is recited in *chazarat hashatz* on Yom Kippur. When said in the silent Amidah, the *vidui* serves as the confession of a broken individual, crying out to G-d and hoping for a reprieve from his sentence. In the repetition, however, the Jewish People as a whole turn to G-d and ask for *mechilah*. Such a request comes with a guarantee of success. The *tzibbur* sings “*ashamnu, bagadnu,*” to almost a merry tune, knowing that a single entity — *Klal Yisrael* — will find favor in the eyes of the L-rd.

Atifah, wrapping one’s head with a *tallit* or another garment, has additional meaning. The Gemara (*Moed Katan* 15a) tells us that a mourner and a *metzora* (leper) are obligated to cover their heads. The Meiri (to *Moed Katan*) explains that *atifah* symbolizes *hachna’ah*, submission and humility. Covering our face minimizes ourselves in a way similar to prostrating and putting our face to the floor.

The *metzora* is subjected to a period of debasement in retribution for his

sins. Chazal connect the punishment of leprosy to the sin of *lashon hara*. An individual who repeatedly puts others down is required to now lower himself.

What about the mourner? Rav Soloveitchik connects *aveilut* with repentance in a famous essay composed by Rabbi Abraham Besdin in *Reflections of the Rav, Part II*: “Sitting *shiva* is doing *teshuva*.” The Rav explains that observing *hilkhot aveilut* is “not only a catharsis of sorrow, but also an experience of self-judgement and penitence.”

In this spirit, the *aveil*, like the *metzora*, is obligated to cover himself as an act of self-negation. This *hachna’ah* is a step toward self-reflection and *teshuvah*. As mourners grieve the death of a loved one, they contemplate their own mortality, facing the reality not just of a world without their relative, but without themselves, and remembering that their time in this world is limited.

Rav Amital explains the requirement for *atifah* for Selichot may very well serve a similar purpose. The *chazan* signals for the *kehillah* they must not simply recite the Thirteen Middot Harachamim; as we suggested earlier, they must walk in G-d’s forgiving ways. *Atifah* does more than hide the *chazan*’s individuality; it negates him altogether. He disappears into his *tallit*. And by doing so, he models the behavior most necessary to be forgiven.

What does it mean that G-d forgives? G-d is not just the judge and jury. He is, *k’viyachol*, the offended party! We have sinned against *Him*! To forgive, Hashem doesn’t find us “innocent.” He grants us forgiveness by being *ma’avir al midotav*, forgoing His honor, so to speak, and giving us

another chance. To forgive, Hashem must “look past” the fact that we have sinned against him — despite all that He does for us every day and every moment.

In the words of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (in *Tomer Devorah*):

“Who is a God like You” — This attribute refers to the Holy One as a tolerant King Who bears insult in a manner beyond human understanding. Without doubt, nothing is hidden from His view. In addition, there is not a moment that man is not nourished and sustained by virtue of the Divine power bestowed upon him. Thus, no man ever sins against God, without — at that very moment [emphasis added] — God bestowing abundant vitality upon him, giving him the power to move his limbs. Yet even though a person uses this very vitality to transgress, God does not withhold it from him. Rather, He suffers this insult and continues to enable his limbs to move. Even at the very moment that a person uses that power for transgression, sin, and infuriating deeds, the Holy One bears them patiently ... This then, is a virtue man should emulate — namely, tolerance. Even when he is insulted to the degree mentioned above he should not withdraw his benevolence from those upon whom he bestows it.

Forgiveness is granted to those who model G-d’s behavior. As the Gemara in *Rosh Hashanah* (17a) tells us:

כל המעביר על מידותיו — מעבירין לו על כל פשעיו — שנאמר "נושא עון ועובר על פשע." למי נושא עון? למי שעובר על פשע.

Whoever forgoes his reckonings with others for injustices done to him, the heavenly court in turn forgoes punishment for all his sins, as it is stated: “He bears sin and forgives transgression” (Michah 7). Whose

sins does He bear? *The sins of one who forgoes his reckonings with others for injustices committed against him.*⁴

We are granted *mechilah* in return for offering others forgiveness. And to reach the point of forgiving others, we need to think beyond ourselves — by nullifying ourselves. The *shaliach tzibbur* sends this message to his congregation, just as Hashem showed Moshe the way millennia ago.

What if, however, the prayer leader is signaling not the *tzibbur* — but G-d? What if, in addition to “reminding” Him of his merciful nature, the *shaliach tzibbur* is “reminding” G-d of another reason that He should forgive? A final explanation for the *tallit* at Selichot relates to a different sort of covering — the veil worn by a bride during the *kiddushin* ceremony.

How can we remind G-d of anything, or, for that matter, convince Him of anything? Those are not simple questions. But from the time of Avraham (when he pleaded for Sedom) through the days of Moshe Rabbeinu (seeking forgiveness for the Jewish People’s misdeeds) and throughout history, Israelites have laid out before the Divine the reasons why He should forgive. Avraham tells G-d, “*chalilah lecha,*” it is not in Your nature to kill the righteous along with the wicked. Moshe reminds Hashem that punishing the Jewish People will lead to negative public relations for G-d on the world stage — “*lama yomeru Mitzrayim?*”

Perhaps, spelling out reasons why G-d should forgive — His merciful nature, His promises to the *Avot*, His reputation among the nations — gives Him the “license” to give the people another chance. Were they to commit a grievous sin and simply be “let free”

without any explanation, they would learn little from the process. The goal of delaying punishment creates an opportunity for correction and growth. But why give people another chance if they can learn nothing from the experience? If anything, poor behavior is thus reinforced. Why better ourselves when there are no consequences for failure? Moshe spells out a rationale for *mechilah* — not for G-d to comprehend what happened — but for the people, so that they can understand that they haven’t merited forgiveness on their own. They have sinned and they deserved punishment, were it not for a host of reasons that G-d preferred a different approach. There is a price to be paid for sin, but this time, G-d chose not to exact punishment.

Reciting the Thirteen Middot Harachamim helps us comprehend the gravity of our mistakes, while maintaining hope for forgiveness. “אנו מלאי עון ואתה מלא רחמים,” “we are rich in iniquity and You are rich in mercy.” Sin is not forgotten, nor glossed over in Heaven; without G-d’s mercy, we would be lost. We must be embarrassed to fall back on G-d’s lovingkindness and that shame, as much as fear of punishment, must drive us to teshuvah.

Perhaps G-d showed Moshe how to reveal G-d’s motivation for forgiveness. It is His nature to be slow to anger and to give us the chance to change course. It is, as we have described, G-d’s nature to “minimize” Himself, to be “*maavir al middotav*” and to forgive.

But there is another rationale for *mechilah* that is connected to the relationship between G-d and *Klal Yisrael*. And here is where the wedding imagery may come into play.

The custom to veil the *kallah* is already mentioned in the Talmud (*Ketubot* 17), and many reasons are given for this practice. Some say the veil serves to hide the beauty of the bride from the audience — and even during the ceremony from her future husband. Many see the veiling of Rivkah as she prepared to meet Yitzchak as the Biblical precedent for this *minhag*. Others see the *act* of veiling as significant in and of itself, symbolizing the husband’s acceptance of his responsibility to clothe (cover) his wife.

The Rema (*Even HaEzer* 31:2), quoting the Rashba, introduces the idea that the bride remains veiled during *erusin* so she cannot get a good look at the ring. In one way, this may serve a quasi-halakhic function. Rabbeinu Nissim (Ran to *Kiddushin* 3b) explains in the name of Rabbeinu Tam that a stone is traditionally not attached to the wedding ring to avoid confusion over the real value of the ring. A bride might assume the ring to be of greater value than it truly is and agree to give herself in marriage based on a false assumption. Such a mistake might render the entire *kiddushin* as a *mekach ta’ut*, a transaction conducted under false pretenses, and could render the marriage null and void. Wearing the veil suggests that the *kallah* agrees to not look closely at the ring, and will not base her decision to accept the *kiddushin* on a precise assumption of its value.

The Rashba himself explains the *kallah*’s “blind acceptance” of the ring in more symbolic terms. Brides, claim the Rashba, are not terribly cautious about the object that they are betrothed with. Perhaps one can say that as she enters the covenant of marriage with her husband, the bride

lays the groundwork for a long-term relationship that will not rise and fall on the value of a gift. Of course, even in a loving relationship, a husband and wife must work hard to please each other. Little things can mean a lot in a marriage. But a successful marriage is also a covenantal one, in which the commitment to maintaining the relationship encourages both husband and wife to forgive certain missteps in the context of the greater picture.

The prophets frequently speak of the relationship between G-d and His people as a marriage. It seems that the recitation of the Thirteen Middot Harachamim plays a central role in maintaining the relationship.

The description of G-d cloaking — or veiling — Himself with a *tallit* in *Rosh Hashanah* 17b is followed by a statement attesting to the power of this procedure:

אמר רב יהודה ברית כרותה לי"ג מדות שאינן חוזרות ריקם שנאמר (שמות לד) "הנה אנכי כורת ברית."

R. Yehuda said, "[A] covenant has been made with the Thirteen Attributes that they do not return empty handed — as it says 'Behold I make a covenant.'" [Shemot 34:10]

Rav Ezra Bik (introduction to *In His Mercy: Understanding the Thirteen Middot*) explains: Ordinary *tefillah* does not come with a guarantee. But prayer rooted in covenant is different. The latter begs the petitioned to not respond based on any merit that the *mitpallel* might have. And not even as an act of *chesed* performed for a stranger. Rather, it recalls a covenant sealed ages ago that asks G-d to allow for the continuation of a millennia-old union despite our misdeeds. We ask Him, in effect, not to look too closely at our recent failures and instead focus on the importance of the relationship in its entirety.

A covenant is also made under a *chuppah*. Yes, the reason might be a technical one — if the *kallah* misjudges the value of the ring, the *kinyan kiddushin* might be invalid. But in a larger sense, the covering of the face is the first step of the spirit of the covenant, to commit to remain in a relationship despite certain offenses and some legitimate complaints between partners.

The *Zohar* states that the Nation of Israel entered its covenant with Hashem like "a beautiful girl who has no eyes" (*Zohar* 2:95a). Perhaps

we have the right to ask Him to accept us as our Husband, flaws and all. In this spirit, Hashem showed Moshe *Rabbeinu* that the force of the covenant, the marriage between G-d and the Jewish People, arranged through the Avot and formalized at Sinai, was perhaps the greatest rationale for forgiveness. The *shaliach tzibbur*, as he reminds G-d of his lovingkindness outlined in the Thirteen Middot, also dons a veil to remind Him of the longstanding bond with *Klal Yisrael*. **Don't look too closely.**

It is noteworthy that the Gemara in *Megillah* (31b) uses strikingly similar language to *Rosh Hashana* 17b in discussing the power of the offerings — and more specifically, specific words — to guarantee atonement.

במעמדות במעשה בראשית: מנא הני מילי?
א"ר אמי אלמלא מעמדות - לא נתקיימו
שמים וארץ — שנאמר (ירמיהו לג) "אם
לא בריתי יומם ולילה - חוקות שמים וארץ
לא שמת". וכתוב (בראשית טו) "ויאמר ה'
אלהים במה אדע כי אירשנה": אמר אברהם
לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא "רבוננו של עולם! שמא
חס ושלוש ישראל חוטאים לפניך — ואתה
עושה להם כדור המבול וכדור הפלגה!" א"ל
ל"אוו". אמר לפניו "רבש"ע - במה אדע?" אמר
ליה "קחה לי עגלה משולשת". אמר לפניו

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"רבש"ע! תינה בזמן שביית המקדש קיים. בזמן שאין בהמ"ק קיים — מה תהא עליהם? אמר ליה "כבר תקנתי להם סדר קרבנות. כל זמן שקוראין בהן - מעלה אני עליהן — כאילו מקריבין לפני קרבן. ומוחל אני על כל עונותיהם."

The Mishna states: In the non-priestly watches they read the act of Creation. The Gemara asks: From where are these matters derived, i.e., why do they read the account of Creation? Rabbi Ami said: To allude to the fact that were it not for the non-priestly watches [which were established as part of the sacrificial service — see Taanit 27a], heaven and earth would not endure, as it is stated: "Were it not for My covenant day and night, I would not have set the statutes of heaven and earth" (Jeremiah 33). God's covenant is referring to the offerings sacrificed in the Temple, which sustain the world. And with regard to Abraham it is written: "And he said, O Lord God, by what shall I know that I shall inherit it?" (Genesis 15). Abraham said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, perhaps, Heaven forbid, the Jewish people will sin before You, and You will do to them as You did to the generation of the Flood and as You did to the generation of the Dispersion, i.e., You will completely destroy them? God said to him: No, I will not do that. Abraham then said before Him: Master of the Universe: "By what shall I know this?" God said to him: "Take Me a heifer of three years old" (Genesis 15). With this, God intimated to

Abraham that even if his descendants will sin, they will be able to achieve atonement through sacrificing offerings. Abraham said before Him: Master of the Universe, this works out well when the Temple is standing and offerings can be brought to achieve atonement, but when the Temple will no longer be standing, what will become of them? God said to him: I have already established for them the order of offerings, i.e., the verses of the Torah pertaining to the halakhot of the offerings. Whenever they read those portions, I will deem it as if they sacrificed an offering before Me, and I will pardon them for all of their iniquities.⁵

In its final step, the Gemara connects a prayer service to an upholding of a covenant. Words — and the prayer services constructed around them — can bring ancient agreements to the forefront and assure safety even for sinners. In this case, reciting pesukim about the offerings serves in place of actual sacrifices. Those words thus serve to uphold the covenant established with Avraham's descendants. In a similar fashion, the Selichot procedure reminds G-d of His covenant with *Klal Yisrael* and assures them a clean slate for the new year.

These themes — the importance of the *tzibbur*, the need for humility in our interpersonal relationships and an almost blind commitment to a cause — aptly describe the life of Rabbi Hyman Arbesfeld, our beloved

longtime RIETS vice-chairman and founding sponsor, along with his dear wife Anne, *tibadli lechaim*, of the RIETS *Torah To Go* series. Hy was a larger-than-life figure who led by empowering those around him rather than taking the reins of leadership for himself. After receiving his formative education at Yeshiva University and the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, he spent the rest of his life repaying his debt of gratitude with exceptional commitment and devotion to Yeshiva. His love for Torah, the Jewish People, and RIETS is the legacy he leaves his family, the community, and the *talmidim* of our great Yeshiva.

Endnotes

1. Rashi to that Gemara connects this procedure to fast days in particular: שאם יזכרם ישראל בתפלת תעניתם — אינן חוזרות ריקן. This limitation, however, is not mentioned by most other Rishonim and Acharonim.
2. A similar explanation is famously quoted by R. Hanoch Zundel in his commentary *Eitz Yosef* to *Sefer Ein Yaakov* in the name of R. Moshe Alshich.
3. See *Eit Ratzon: Sichot leYamim HaNoraim*, pp. 77-79).
4. Translation (in bold) and commentary from The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud.
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