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

1"ויעבור ה' על פניו ויקרא": אמר רב יוחנן אומר בר窶
אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: אלמלא מקרא כתוב — אי אפשר לאומרו.
אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: ממלמד שמטעים הקדוש ברוך הוה נשילה
ובור — הראאם ולא משמים דרור תפלה. אמר רב שמעון בן גמליאל
לשים שלם: כל ומי שישארו מותאינו — יושב לפני
כבריו זה — לא יימתו ולא.

“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.

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 Guminber (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 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 Chaftetz 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

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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 Hateshuvah), 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 Amiral 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 no 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:

ר”ח כל המ geçir על מידותיו — מעבירין לו על כל

פשתן — שלמים ג”rowCount על פשתן

למי_CART על פשתן

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...
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 *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. “אנא 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

**Sins Does He Bear?** *The Sins of One Who Forgives His Reckonings with Others for Injustices Committed Against Him.*

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**Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary • The Benjamin and Rose Berger CJF Torah To-Go Series • Rosh Hashanah 5781**
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."

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.

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.
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.

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, tibadi 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: שאמ עمرض ישראל בצפלות עונתיה — אני תורה ומקו. 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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