

The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy

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THE TRUTH BEHIND EMET

If we would sum up the underlying theme of the Yamim Noraim and Aseret Yemei Teshuva, it would be change. Teshuva exists as a result of our imperfections as human beings and our ability to reflect on our actions and evolve.

The Leadership Traits of Moshe Rabbeinu

Even the greatest leader of the Jewish people, Moshe Rabbeinu, the only person ever to speak to G-d *panim el panim* (face to face), evolved in the way he related to Bnei Yisrael. In one of the earliest stories about Moshe, after he demonstrates his empathy for the Jewish slaves by intervening between the Jew and the Egyptian who was beating him, he again intervenes, this time between two Jews fighting:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה שְׂמָךְ לִאֵישׁ שָׂר וְשִׁפְטֵת עָלֵינוּ הַלְּהִרְאֵנִי אַתָּה אָמַר פָּאֵשֶׁר הִרְאָתָה אֶת הַמִּצְרָיִם וַיֹּירַא מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אֱכָן נוֹדֵעַ הַדָּבָר.

He retorted, "Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses was frightened, and thought: Then the matter is known!

Shmot 2:14

Rashi points out that Moses's fear was that he did not think Bnei Yisrael were worthy of being redeemed. Now Moshe realized why the Jews deserved to suffer: they fought with each other and there were informants among them.

When Hashem first approaches Moshe in the next perek to go to Pharaoh and bring the Jews out of Egypt, his immediate response is:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל הָאֱלֹקִים מַיִן אֲנִי כִּי אֶלְךָ אֶלְךָ פְּרֻעָה וְכִי אֹזֵן אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִפְצְּצִים.

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and take the Jews out of Egypt?"

Shmot 3:11

Rashi explains that Moshe is questioning both his worthiness as an emissary for Klal Yisrael, as well as whether Bnei Yisrael deserves redemption. He continues by questioning whether Bnei Yisrael will listen to him and believe him. Hashem subtly reprimands Moshe when He tells him to take his staff and cast it on the ground, where it turns into a snake. Rashi points out that the stick was to show Moshe that he should be hit for wrongly suspecting Bnei Yisrael, and the snake was a hint that he was wrong in speaking lashon hara about them (Shmot 4:2-3). Even once they leave Egypt and arrive in Refidim where they complain about water

for the second time, Moshe is still somewhat negative toward them and gets angry:

וַיֹּצֶעֶק מֹשֶׁה אֶל ה' לֵאמֹר מָה אֲعַשָּׂה لְעַם הַזֶּה
עוֹד מִעֵט וְסַקְלָנוּ.

Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, "What shall I do with this people? Before long they will be stoning me!"

Shmot 17:4

Hashem again rebukes him and reminds him that he needs to be their advocate and attend to their needs and get them the water they are requesting. The *Midrash Tanchuma* points out that here Moshe is angry and Hashem calms him down, while later in perek 32 after Cheit HaEigel, Hashem is angry and Moshe calms Him. Hashem teaches Moshe to be an advocate for Bnei Yisrael, and a selfless leader, and most important, the ability to forgive them when they transgress — a lesson Moshe learns and demonstrates after Cheit HaEigel.

The Thirteen Middot Harachamim

After Bnei Yisrael sin with the Golden Calf, Hashem is so angry He wants to destroy them. Moshe argues and implores G-d to remember the covenant with the Avot,

וְכָר לְאָבָרָהּ לִיצְחָק וְלִיְשָׂרָאֵל עַבְדֵיךְ אָשָׁר
נִשְׁבַּעַת לְהָם בָּךְ וַיַּדְרֵב אֶלָּהֶם אָרְבָּה אֶת
רוּעָכֶם בְּכוּכְבֵי הַשְׁמִים וְכָל הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אָשָׁר
אָמַרְתִּי אֲתָּנוּ לְרוּעָכֶם וְנִנְחָלוּ לְעַלְמָם.

Remember for the sake of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yisrael, Your servants to whom You sworn by Yourself and You told them I shall increase your offspring like the stars of heaven, and the entire land of which I spoke I shall give to your offspring and it shall be their heritage forever.

Shmot 32:13

Later Hashem invokes His Thirteen Middot Harachamim for the first time

and teaches them to Moshe:

וַיַּעֲבֵר ה' עַל פְּנֵיו וַיֹּקְרָא ה' אֶל רְחוּם וְחִנּוּן
אָרְךְ אֲפִים וְרַב חֶסֶד וְאֶמֶת. נִצְר חֶסֶד לְאַלְפִים
נִשְׁאָעָן וְפִשְׁעָן וְחַטָּאתָן וְנִקְהָה לֹא יִנְקַה פְּקַד עַזָּן
אָבוֹת עַל בְּנִים וְעַל בְּנִי בְּנִים עַל שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל
רַבְעִים.

Hashem passed before him and proclaimed, 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 and who cleanses yet He does cleanse completely, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations.

Shmot 34:6-7

The midrash, *Rosh Hashanah* 17b, describes how G-d put on a tallit and taught Moshe these Middot as a *shaliach tzibbur*. Soon afterward, Hashem forgives them. These Middot are the cornerstone of teshuva and invoked throughout Selichot and tefilla on Yom Kippur. Hashem is again teaching Moshe how to advocate for Bnei Yisrael through invoking these attributes of G-d, which allow for the teshuva process to exist.

The Cheit Hameraglim

Moshe learns well. When Bnei Yisrael are on the threshold of entering the Land of Israel in the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar, and the spies return with a negative report and convince Bnei Yisrael not to enter the land, Hashem once again becomes angry and threatens to destroy them. Moshe, having learned from Hashem, advocates on behalf of Bnei Yisrael; but instead of using the argument of *zechut Avot* that he used after Cheit HaEigel, he uses what seems to be a much weaker argument, saying:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל ה' וְשָׁמַעוּ מִצְרָיִם כִּי הַעֲלִיתָ
בְּכָלָחֶךָ אֶת הָעָם הַזֶּה מִקְרָבֶךָ ... וְהַמִּתְהָה אֲתָּה
הָעָם הַזֶּה בְּאֶישׁ אֶחָד וְאֶמְרָרֶוּ גָּוִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתֶּם
אֶת שְׁמַעַר לְאָמֵנה. מִבְּלִיא תִּכְלַת ה' לְהַבְיאָ אֶת
הָעָם הַזֶּה אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעַ לְהָם וַיַּשְׁחַטֵּם
בְּפִזְבָּר.

And Moshe said to the Lord, Then Egypt, from whose midst you brought up this nation with your power, will hear ... and the nations that heard will say because Hashem lacked the ability to bring this people to the land that He had sworn to give them, He slaughtered them in the wilderness.

Bamidbar 14:13-16

In other words, Moshe is telling G-d not to destroy the Jews because it will make G-d look bad. Moshe continues, invoking the Middot of Hashem saying:

וְעַתָּה יִגְדַּל נָא כִּי אָדָני כִּאָשֶׁר דִּבְרָת לְאָמֵנה ה'
אָרְךְ אֲפִים וְרַב חֶסֶד נִשְׁאָעָן וְפִשְׁעָן וְנִקְהָה לֹא
יִנְקַה פְּקַד עַזָּן אָבוֹת עַל בְּנִים עַל שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל
רַבְעִים.

And now may the strength of the Lord be magnified as you have spoken saying, Hashem, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, forgiver of iniquity and willful sin, and who cleanses ...

Bamidbar 14:17-18

Moshe is clearly using the Middot that G-d had taught him, but at close inspection it is clear that he does not quote the Middot in their entirety. He omits the word "Emet" — the attribute of Truth. The Ramban explains, "כִּי בְּמִדְתָּה אַمְתָה הַיּוֹ חִיבִּים מִתְּהָ" — according to the Attribute of Truth, Bnei Yisrael would be liable to death. Furthermore, he continues, the attribute of "notzer chesed la'alafim" — Preserver of Kindness for thousands of generations — is also omitted because Moshe believes that middah does not apply here since the land of Israel was given to the Avot who loved the land unconditionally. That gift is the

reason Bnei Yisrael are inheriting it now, yet they are now rebelling against their forefathers and rejecting it. This, explains Ramban, is why Moshe is not using the stronger argument of *zechut Avot* when begging Hashem to forgive the Jews. How could he invoke the merit of their forefathers when they are rejecting the very gift that their forefathers were given? And that is why Emet is omitted; Moshe believes that according to the Attribute of Truth, the Jews deserved to be punished and did not merit forgiveness (Ramban on Shmot 14:17-20). Hashem responds to Moshe's argument and the invocation of His Middot by saying "*salachti kidevarecha*" — I have forgiven in accordance with your word. Ramban explains that this *selicha* — forgiveness — means the suspension of punishment and that not only will G-d not destroy the Jews, He will allow their children to inherit the Land of Israel. Hashem is once again demonstrating the power of teshuva and forgiving His people as a result of His Thirteen Middot, Emet included, just as He taught Moshe back on Har Sinai.

The Middot Invoked in Sefer Yona

There is another time in Tanach that a Navi invokes the Middot of Hashem in their entirety while leaving out Emet, and that is in Sefer Yona (4:2). While other prophets reference G-d's attributes, including Yoel (2:13), Micah (7:18), Nachum (1:3), and Nechemiah (9:17), Yona is the only one who invokes them out of anger, not admiration. Here too, as in Bamidbar, the Middot are referenced in the context of a lesson about teshuva.

Teshuva plays a pivotal role in Sefer

Yona. Read at Mincha on Yom Kippur, and one of the highlights of the tefilla service over the course of the day, the story demonstrates the transformative power of teshuva. A key Ma'amar Chazal that helps shed light on this enigmatic process of teshuva is the Yerushalmi in Makkot 2:6:

שָׁאַלُו לְחִכְמָה חֹוטָא מֵהוּ עֲוֹנֶשׁוּ אָמַרְוּ לֵה
מְשֻׁלֵּי יְגַדְּבָא [חַטָּאת] תְּרַדֵּפָה רַעֲה שָׁאַלְוּ
לְבָבוֹאָה חֹוטָא מֵהוּ עֲוֹנֶשׁוּ אָמַרְתָּה לְהָן [חַזּוֹקָאָל]
ח' [ד] הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַחֹוטָאת הִיא תָּמוֹת שָׁאַלְוּ
לְקוֹדְשָׁא בָּרִיךְ הוּא חֹוטָא מֵהוּ עֲוֹנֶשׁוּ אָמַרְתָּה לְהָן
עֲשָׂוֹת שׁוֹבֵה וַיַּכְפֵּר לָן.

They asked Wisdom, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" and it responded, "Sinners will chase after evil" (Mishlei 13:21). They asked Prophecy, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" and it responded, "The sinful soul will perish" (Yechezkel 18:4). They asked the Holy One Blessed be He, "What is the punishment of a sinner?" and He responded, "he should repent and attain forgiveness."

According to this Yerushalmi, without Hashem's magnanimous offer of teshuva, there is no opportunity to change our fate and be forgiven. These various approaches to *cheit* — sin and failure as described in the medrash — frame the entire Sefer.

Sefer Yona presents the story of the navi Yona who is commanded to warn the people of Nineveh of their upcoming destruction. Most believe that this story is read on Yom Kippur because it depicts a story of evil people (the people of Nineveh) who ultimately do teshuva and are, as a result, forgiven and escape punishment. Some add that Yona himself, after attempting to run away from G-d's instructions, finally does teshuva and fulfills his G-d-given job after his encounter with a large fish. The problem with that understanding

is that according to this perspective, the sefer should end after the third perek. In the first perek, Yona is commanded by G-d to go to Nineveh, and he runs away. In the second perek Yona is swallowed by a fish, prays to G-d from inside, and is then spit out to safety. In the third perek Yona goes to Nineveh and delivers the message as he was commanded. If this book was just about doing teshuva, this would be the ending. However, the story continues with the fourth perek, which presents a somewhat strange series of events that lead to a very abrupt ending to the story.

The fourth and final perek begins with Yona feeling extremely angry. He prays to G-d, stating the reason he ran away in the first place:

וַיַּתְפַּלֵּל אֶל ה' וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנָה ה' הַלֹּא זֶה דְּבָרֶיךָ עַד
הַיּוֹם עַל אֶדְמֹתִי עַל כֵּן קָדְמָתִי לְבַרְךָ תְּרַשְ׀ישָׁה
כִּי דְּעַתִּי בַּי אַתָּה אֶל חַנּוּן וְרוּחָם אֶרְךָ אַפִּים
רַב חֶסֶד וְנוֹחַם עַל הָרָעָה.

He prayed to the Lord, saying, "O Lord! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment.

Yona 4:2

This hardly seems like a reason to run away from his mission to bring the people of Nineveh to do teshuva. But it is precisely why he ran away; Yona was afraid the people would be granted clemency and allowed to do teshuva, which he believed was a falsification of G-d's judgment. He describes G-d here using some of G-d's Thirteen Middot, clearly omitting the attribute of Emet, truth, which usually follows *rav chesed*. His argument is similar to Moshe's after the sin of the spies; it's not an inadvertent omission on Yona's part. Yona's anger is rooted in his belief

that G-d is not “emesik,” or truthful. The people of Nineveh sinned and deserved punishment. Actions have consequences. It is not truthful or fair that they can do teshuva and then their sins magically disappear. If we drink poison (physical or spiritual), we will die. We cannot “undrink” that poison, or make it simply disappear, which is exactly what teshuva does to sin. Yona is a man of truth. When the boat on which he has attempted to escape from G-d is overcome by a storm and about to sink, the sailors ask him with genuine concern what to do (Yona 1:11). Yona, as a man of truth, calmly tells the sailors to throw him overboard. He knows very well that he is at fault and, therefore, must pay the consequences of his sin (Yona 1:12). He cannot comprehend the concept of G-d’s *middat hadin*, attribute of judgment, being overtaken by teshuva, which allows consequences to disappear. He believes that placating G-d’s *middat hadin* and accepting the consequences of his actions are G-d’s will, and indeed this calms the sea. When he survives because G-d chooses to save him, and when he prays to G-d from within the fish in the second perek, he takes responsibility for his actions and accepts being thrown overboard. He remains a man of rigid truth, stating his personal predicament and despair (Yona 2:4-7), and expressing belief that G-d will save him, but only because he will now fulfill his obligation:

וְאַנֵּי בָּקוֹל תְּזִדָּה אֶזְבְּחָה לֹךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּדָרְתִּי
אֲשֶׁלְמָה יִשְׁוֹעָתָה לָהּ!

But I, with loud thanksgiving, Will

sacrifice to You; What I have vowed I will perform. Deliverance is the Lord's!

To Yona, this is all about truth and fulfilling obligation, not the deep irrational love G-d has for His creations that can erase sin and override punishment and natural consequences. Yona’s entire essence, his *raison d'être*, is truth, which is even evident in his name, Yona ben Amitai (אַנְתָּא). He is so distraught in the fourth perek at the lack of God’s *emet* that he wishes to die. The rest of the perek demonstrates to Yona, and to us, the purpose of teshuva, and G-d’s reasoning behind the concept and creation of teshuva. Yona needs to learn that G-d’s gift of teshuva to mankind, and to all of His creations, is not a contradiction to *emet*, but transcends *emet*, and is rooted in His abundance of love for His creations; this is, in fact, the greatest example of G-d’s true *emet* in the world.

While Sefer Yona ends abruptly with G-d asking Yona a rhetorical question, most meforshim explain that *shetika k'hoda'a*, meaning Yona’s silence at the end of the story, proves that Yona accepts and understands G-d’s message. The epilogue to Medrash Yona in *Otzar Midrashim* offers a deeper glimpse into Yona’s epiphany by describing Yona’s emotional reaction to G-d’s message. The medrash describes Yona, with tears streaming down his face, bursting forth with his newfound awesome revelation of G-d’s *emet* and *rachamim*. Yona realizes that both stem from His deep love for His creations. [Thanks

to Dr. Shneur Leiman who pointed out this medrash in a shiur on Sefer Yona he gave in his home.] Yona, like Moshe previously, needed to learn the meaning of G-d’s *emet*, and that within G-d’s Attribute of Truth there is room for teshuva that stems from the depths of G-d’s love for His creations.

The story of Yona is specifically read at Mincha on Yom Kippur, perhaps because Mincha, which was established by Yitzchak who was a man of *din*, is the time of day when judgment is strongest, and we are beseeching G-d to follow His *rachamim*, as opposed to His *din*, which gives us an opportunity for teshuva. At this pivotal point in the day, immediately preceding the final prayer of Neila, we are reminding G-d of His mercy and His purpose in giving us the gift of teshuva.

Chazal explain Yona’s identity as the son of the Shunamit woman who Elisha haNavi resurrected from the dead (Melachim 2, 4:18-37). Ironically, Yona’s entire existence is based on G-d’s mercy and allowance for teshuva, since in his understanding of *emet* resurrection of the dead would not be possible. Perhaps this theory is a metaphor for our own resurrection on Yom Kippur. G-d’s gift of teshuva allows us to be reborn with a clean slate. By recognizing the source of this gift of teshuva and understanding the place of deep love from whence it comes, we will hopefully be more inspired to take full advantage of this tremendous gift that G-d offers us year after year.

The topic of *emes* is most apropos in an article honoring the memory of Rabbi Hy Arbesfeld z”l. He was one of the most “emesik” people I’ve known — always striving for truth. He supported Torah study staunchly, passionately and so proudly. I personally always felt his support and pride in my teaching, and it was a real *zechut* to have known him.

יהי זכרו ברוך