

The Thirteen Attributes: A Lesson in Atonement

Prologue:

We shall focus here on the “Thirteen Attributes” (*Shelosh Esrei Middot*)⁴⁶ whose recitation is a central feature of the liturgy of *selichot*, in general, and of Yom Ha-Kippurim, in particular. We shall analyze them in the context of a paradox we shall demonstrate between two interpretations of “sin and repentance.” One derives from a linguistic analysis of the High Holy Days’ liturgy; the second, from a passage in the Talmud.

In resolving this paradox, we hope to provide an insight into the function served by the proclamation of these attributes, and the relationship between man and God that they articulate.

Part One: Can the “Evil Decree” Ever Be “Abolished”?

As the solemn *piyut* of *U-Netaneh Tokef* reaches a crescendo, we recite: “*U-teshuvah, u-tefillah, u-tzedakah ma’avirin et ro’a ha-gezeirah.*” With all due deference to most English translators, *teshuvah* is not “repentance,” *tefillah* is not “prayer,” *tzedakah* is not “charity,” *le-ha’avir* is not “to abolish,” and *ro’a ha-gezeirah* is not “the evil decree.”

“Repentance” derives from the same Latin root (*poena*) that produces the words penalty or penitentiary, and, as such, it complements the derivation of “sin” from the Anglo-Saxon for evil, or wickedness. The perpetration of evil incurs a penalty. No such pejorative connotation, however, exists either in the Hebrew *cheit*, to miss (a goal), or *teshuvah*, literally return, which is better served, in this case, by do-over, or, second chance.

While “prayer,” meaning petition (in Hebrew it would yield *bakashah*), is a constituent part of *tefillah*, it is hardly synonymous with the whole enterprise whose derivation from the verb *p-l-l*, to judge, suggests self-judgment, or introspection.

Finally, “charity,” from the Latin *caritas* (love), implies an interpersonal relationship based upon entirely subjective emotions. The Hebrew *tzedakah*, quite to the contrary, preserves the root significance of just, or righteous, implying a more objective basis for that relationship. (Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in *Covenant and Conversation* for *Parashat Re’eh*, calls *tzedakah* “The Untranslatable Virtue.”)

In spite of the objections raised here to these translations, I will continue to use such words as “prayer,” “repentance,” and “sin,” throughout this essay in their colloquial, normative, sense. By challenging their precision, I do not intend to rewrite the prayer book but to sharpen our awareness to both linguistic and theological nuances.

It is the translation of the continuation of the *piyut*, however, which does the Hebrew the greatest injustice. To begin, “the evil decree,” in Hebrew, would be *ha-gezeirah ha-ra’ah*, and “to abolish” would be *le-vatel*. Grammatically, *ro’a ha-gezeirah* is a construct, or possessive, of two nouns (Hebrew: *semikhut*), and means the worst of the decree. *Ma’avirin*, from the verbal root *a-v-r* – to pass or hover (over) – implies partial mitigation (or, temporary suspension) of judgment, rather than its complete annulment.

Translated into programmatic terms, this means that the most that we can expect of a decree that is enacted on account of our guilt is a suspension of its worst effects. We cannot anticipate the total abolition of consequences of deeds for which we ourselves are responsible, as the Sages maintained: “One who would sin and repent is not provided with the opportunity” (*Mishnah Yoma* 8:9). Were it otherwise, there would be no demonstrable advantage to strict observance of the law over its transgression.

Lest this appear to be “pop” theology, let me hasten to cite as evidence the commentary of Rashi on the conclusion of the text that is the focus of this study: the proclamation of God’s attributes in Exodus 34:6–7. In interpreting the oddly ambivalent phrase *ve-nakeh lo yenakeh* (“clearing [the slate], he clears [it] not”), Rashi notes: “According to the plain sense it signifies that He never entirely exonerates the transgressor, but He requites him

⁴⁶. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are by the author.

incrementally.” Rashi, too, is opposed to the suggestion that a guilty party could reasonably expect to get off scot-free.

Part Two: Is There a “Formula” for Pardon?

The second horn of our conceptual dilemma is contained in the following statement of R. Yochanan:

“The Lord passed before him [Moshe] and declared...” Rabbi Yochanan said: Were it not an explicit verse, we would not dare to declare it! God enveloped Himself like the emissary of the congregation and demonstrated to Moshe an order of prayer, saying: Whenever the Jewish people sin...let them perform this order before Me, and I shall pardon them. (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 17b)

Here, we encounter a theme contrary to the one that we developed previously, namely that there exists an “order of prayer” whose mere recitation is guaranteed to attain God’s pardon.

Which of the two, then, is correct? Can we anticipate, as R. Yochanan would have it, the exoneration of sin, or, as we maintained earlier with the tacit support of Rashi, does God never totally exculpate the transgressor?

A Digression: God Enveloped as a *Sheli’ach Tzibbur*

Whence does R. Yochanan evoke the imagery of a *sheli’ach tzibbur*? I believe this evocation is partly literary and partly metaphorical. Literarily, the phrase: *Va-ya’avor...al panav* (“He passed...before him”) strongly resembles the mishnaic idiom: *la-avor lifnei ha-teivah* (“to pass before the Ark”), which designates the function of a *sheli’ach tzibbur*. The metaphorical part concerns the missing ingredient of a *teivah*, the Ark of the Law. I believe that it is represented, in R. Yochanan’s proof text, by Moshe Rabbenu, who was secluded in the cleft of the rock grasping the two tablets of the covenant – the original contents of the *teivah*.

Part Three: Mount Sinai; Revelation II

Moshe descended from Mount Sinai, witnessed the frivolity that accompanied the Golden Calf, and smashed the first tablets to pieces. God threatened the Israelite nation with annihilation and Moshe successfully interceded on its behalf. After the Levites exacted a partial retribution from the wrongdoers, God indicated His continuing displeasure by stipulating that only an angel will accompany them henceforth. He added, ominously, that: “On the day of accounting (*p-k-d*), I will debit them for this crime” (32:34).

Note, en passant, that the plain sense of this verse is consistent with the theology that we advocated in Part One, of divine punishment being suspended rather than annulled. Indeed, here, too, Rashi comments:

At this moment, I have complied with your wish not to completely annihilate them. In the future, however, whenever I settle with them on account of their [recent] sins, I will debit them, slightly, on account of this sin, too.

Indeed, Rashi’s continuing remark, here, is a working theology of Jewish persecution:

Every catastrophe which befalls the Jewish people is partial repayment for the sin of the Golden Calf.

Bear in mind that Rashi was contemporary not only to isolated exiles and persecutions, but also to the more severe and widespread massacres of the First Crusade.

Moshe appealed to God to specify, more precisely, the nature of His continued association with the Jewish people. In so doing, Moshe presumed upon his continued favor in God’s eyes, coupled with God’s singular relationship with him that he described as “knowing [him] by name” (33:12). God acknowledged both the continuing favor and the special acquaintance (v. 17), and promised to “proclaim the name of the Lord” before him (19). Having instructed Moshe to “station yourself” (*ve-nitzavta li sham*) upon the mountain (34:2), God reciprocally “stationed Himself there” (*ve-yityatzeiv imo sham*) and “proclaimed His name” (34:5), just as He had promised earlier (33:19). [We read – along with the cantillation marks – “*Va-yikra I be-sheim Hashem*,” “The Lord I called by His name,” assuming, according to biblical syntax, that the subject of the declaration: “He called by name” (*Va-yikra be-sheim*) is God, who is the prior subject of the descent and station.] He then proceeded to “pass before him [Moshe]” (as in R. Yochanan’s aforementioned aphorism), and, with Moshe secreted in the cleft of the rock, made the proclamation of His attributes (34:6–7).

Part Four: Why/Are There Thirteen Attributes?

A glance at the chart on the opposite page, which accompanies *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 17b in the *Koren Talmud Bavli*, shows that all the medieval authorities agree that there are thirteen attributes enumerated in these two verses. It also shows that there were nine different ways in which they arrived at that total, several openly defying the syntax of the verse. The conclusion at which this evidence points is that the tradition regarding the number of attributes is venerable and universal enough to have commanded respect, yet not elaborate enough to have insured their precise identities.

What does the number thirteen signify in Jewish tradition, and what can that tell us about the specific nature of God and how He chooses to be perceived? What else do we have thirteen of? The answer, I believe, is – months. There are, ordinarily, twelve months in a year, but under certain circumstances that number increases to thirteen. If the number twelve signifies the ordinary, then thirteen represents the extraordinary. By saying that God has thirteen attributes we are implying that there is an aspect of God which can only be perceived after natural, ordinary perception is set aside.

Even more remarkable is that the process that produces the -thirteenth month, called the “secret of intercalation” (*sod ha-ibbur*), places its determination entirely in the hands of man. Transferring this to the detection of His attributes, we would then say that God wants man to discover that extraordinary dimension of Himself, and that the way to do so is to “proclaim His name,” a feat that we accomplish through reciting the liturgical formula of His thirteen attributes – Rabbi Yochanan’s *Seder Ha-Tefillah*.

To keep you thinking along semiotic, or symbolic, lines, while there were also twelve tribes Yaakov actually had thirteen children: twelve sons and a daughter, Dinah. (If we were of a mystical bent, we might hazard an identification of the thirteenth dimension as the feminine aspect of divinity – something that the aforementioned term *ibbur* also implies.)

Part Five: *Ani Le-Dodi Ve-Dodi Li*; Reciprocal Imitation

What does the proclamation of His attributes accomplish? Is it, as Rabbi Yochanan implied, a “sure-fire” method of obtaining absolution? The *Sifrei* poses this essential question and provides, in response, the insight we seek:

“...To follow in all His ways” (*Devarim* 10:12). Which are the ways of God? “The Lord is merciful and gracious” (*Shemot* 34:6). To wit: “Whoever proclaims the name of God shall escape” (*Yael* 3:5); is it conceivable that a man shall proclaim the name of God? Rather, just as God is called merciful – you be merciful, too, and just as He is called gracious – you be -gracious, too. (*Sifrei Eikev* 49)

Ordinarily, this is interpreted as the doctrine of “*imitatio dei*” (*hevei domeh lo*) that exhorts man to emulate the attributes of God. As we are presuming that there is also an extraordinary dimension to God, I submit that this dimension, revealed to Moshe at Sinai and vouchsafed to Jews, eternally, as a means of their ultimate absolution, is that He is as moved by our attributes as we are by His! When we act with grace and compassion towards one another, He will act with compassion and grace towards us. As He met Moshe’s “station yourself” (*ve-nitzavta li sham*) with “He stationed Himself” (*ve-yityatzeiv imo sham*) and responded to his petition “let me know Your ways” (*hodi’eini na et derakhekha*) with “Which are the ways of God” (*Eilu hein darkhei Makom*) so does our prior commitment of “I am my beloved’s” (*ani le-dodi*) inspire a reciprocal “my beloved is mine” (*dodi li*).

Part Six: “*Sheloshah Asar Mi Yode’a*”; How Do the Attributes Divvy up?

A corollary concern of our preoccupation with the thirteen attributes of God is their division, which we have already characterized (at the beginning of Part Four) as somewhat contrived. While there are several aspects of that division that bear examination, we will deal with but the first. The proclamation of the attributes begins with the repetition of the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of God. Does each iteration count independently and designate a separate attribute? Are they independent and yet redundant? Or should we, perhaps, be taking note of only one of the two?

The synagogue liturgy with which we are most familiar counts each name separately. (On the aforementioned chart, it follows the opinion of R. Chananel and *Tosafot*, et al.) In the *Sifrei* we quoted earlier (Part Five), on the other hand, the “paths” of God – i.e., His attributes – are recorded as: *Hashem Keil rachum ve-CHANUN*; that is, the Name is cited only once. Why this discrepancy?

The answer lies not in theology, but in syntax. Here is the full text of the verse in which the proclamation commences: *Ve-ya’avov Hashem al panav ve-yikra Hashem Hashem Keil rachum ve-CHANUN erekh apa’im ve-rav chesed ve-emet*. The punctuation reflected in the Masoretic notes (*Ta’amei Ha-Mikra*) reads: “The Lord passed before him (Moshe) and proclaimed: The Lord, the Lord...,” precisely as our liturgical tradition has it. There is an alternative reading, however, which Ibn Ezra ascribes to Saadiah Ga’on: “The Gaon says that the first ‘Lord’ is connected to ‘He proclaimed.’” Saadiah apparently took the first of the two names of God as the subject of the verb

“proclaim” (in Biblical Hebrew, subjects usually follow their verbs rather than vice versa) and, hence, treated only the second name as an attribute. Indeed, not only does the *Sifrei* seem to follow this reading, but so, arguably, did Moshe himself, since in his plea for God’s absolution following the sin of the spies he uses the Name only once, proclaiming: Now let the Lord’s strength increase as He has spoken. The Lord is slow to anger...” (*Bemidbar* 14:17–18).

Part Seven: *Ikkar Chaser Min Ha-Sefer*; What Are the Attributes Lacking?

When we compare the familiar Yom Ha-Kippurim liturgy to the thirteen attributes – however they are divided – a striking distinction comes to the fore. Whereas the attributes describe God in such terms as: “the compassionate...who overlooks iniquity, transgression, and sin,” the High Holy Days’ liturgy invokes Him in terms of: “*selichah, mechillah, kapparah*” – “forgiveness, pardon, and atonement.” The differences between these terms, in Hebrew as well as in English, bespeak two very different facets of God and warrant further clarification.

Let us first clear up the linguistic morass. “*Rachum*” is misrepresented by “merciful.” A lexicographical glance at “mercy” shows that it derives from the Latin “*merces*,” reward, and thus signifies the expectation of recompense. (This etymology is shared, for instance, by the word “mercenary.”) The Hebrew word, on the other hand, has its etymology in “*rechem*,” “womb,” connoting the totally altruistic feelings a mother has for her child. It is better translated as “compassionate.” (The OED lists “*storge*,” a word of Greek origin, meaning “familial love,” such as between parents and children. Truth to be told, however, had English not already assigned it a pejorative sense, the perfect translation of “*rachum*” would be “hysterical,” combining the elements of a powerful emotion with an etymology from the Latin “*hysterium*,” the womb.)

“*Cheit*,” as we have already pointed out (Part One), is misrepresented by “sin,” with its concomitant sense of evil and wickedness. In Biblical Hebrew, it can simply signify going wrong, or missing a goal, as in the description of the 700 singular left-handed Benjaminite warriors as: “each one could sling a rock within a hairsbreadth without missing (*ve-lo yachati*)” (*Shofetim* 20:16). The theological consequence of this distinction is that whereas evil and wickedness require atonement and punishment, error needs only correction by doing over (*teshuvah*).

In other words: When we call upon God to be “compassionate;” i.e., to act towards us without expectation of reciprocal action on our part; when we call upon Him to requite our “errors,” and not our sins, we are asking to be excused, exonerated, or exculpated – all of which indicate freedom or relief from charge or blame. In more specific legal terms, we are asking for the charges against us to be dropped. This is a different resolution from the one we seek when we ask for “*selichah, mechillah, kapparah*,” which signify remission or release from punishment or penalty. That, in specific legal terms, is called “pardon,” and you can only pardon someone after he has been found guilty!

In yet other words: By intoning God’s attributes, we appear to be calling upon Him to act in grace and compassion by suspending His judgment of us entirely. On Yom Ha-Kippurim, on the other hand, we admit our transgressions and implore Him, in His capacity of Chief Magistrate, to pardon us. If the former appears to be a plea for righteousness (*tzedek*) the latter appeals to justice (*mishpat*); if the former implores grace (*chesed*), the latter, in its admission of guilt, entreats truth (*emet*).

As the *paitan* wrote: *Tzedek u-mishpat mekhon kisekha, chesed ve-emet yekadmu panekha*.

Part Eight: *Ki Yom Kippurim Hu*; What Does “Atonement” Mean?

The term we have deliberately overlooked, until now, is *kapparah*, and it is with this focal point of both liturgy and theology that we conclude this exposition.

The root *k-p-r* is a homonymous one in the Bible. The aspect with which we will deal here is the one signifying, variously, the noun “pitch” (*kofer*), and the verb “to coat [with pitch]” (see *Bereishit* 6:14: “coat it (*ve-khafarta*), inside and out, with pitch (*be-kofer*)”); and, by metaphorical extension, the verb “to cover over, pacify, or propitiate” (see *Bereishit* 32:21: “*akhapra panav*” – “I shall pacify/propitiate him”), whence the noun *kofer*, ransom, or price of life (*Shemot* 21:30: “Should ransom be designated, he shall pay the price of his life”).

Coming closer to our purpose – both textually and contextually – is *Shemot* 32:30: “You have erred/sinned grievously...perhaps I can cover over (*akhapra*) your error/sin (*chatatkhem*).” Rashi (ad loc.), appreciating both the literal and metaphorical usage of *kofer*, comments: “I shall place a coating (*kofer*), or filling, at the site of the sin (*ha-cheit*), to keep you disengaged from it.” Yom Ha-Kippurim, in these terms, becomes the day on which we fill in the cracks that *cheit* causes to develop in our spiritual armor.

What, however, of “atonement”? It has a decidedly delicious derivation: from the Middle English “at one, or, agreed.” The “Day of Atonement” is – literally as well as homiletically – a “Day of At One-ment,” or, recasting Rashi’s metaphor, a “Day of Bonding.” Closing the gaps of the soul, and sealing them against erosion due to the friction of error and sin, makes man one with God, and that is his ultimate *kapparah*.

Part Nine: *Kapparah* and the *Kapporet*: “Pitching” Another Ark

Another usage of *k-p-r* in the Torah is relevant to our theme: The *kapporet*, a slab of pure gold that reposed atop the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle (*Shemot* 25:17 ff.), fitted to its outer dimensions. Its relationship to the usages of *k-p-r* that we have already demonstrated is illustrated by its translation, in older English versions (based upon the Septuagint and the Vulgate), as “mercy seat,” clearly deriving its name from the notion of propitiation. Indeed, a veritable panoply of propitiation is provided by *Vayikra* 16:15–16. Aaron, in order to secure *kapparah* for the Jewish people on Yom Ha-Kippurim, is instructed to sprinkle the blood of the sin-offering (*chatat*) “on and before the *kapporet*.”

The *kapporet* was not merely ornamental; it was functional, and its function, described in *Shemot* 25:22, was to facilitate conversation between Moshe and God: “I will meet (*ve-no’adeti*) with you there, and speak to you from above the *kapporet*.” (Note that the term *Ohel Mo’ed* is derived from the designation of this encounter as “*ve-no’adeti*.”)

That encounter and conversation had a prerequisite, however. According to *Vayikra* 16 – the chapter that, as we have just noted, describes the Yom Ha-Kippurim service – God’s appearance above the *kapporet* required the prior presence of “a cloud” (*ki be-anan eira’eh al ha-kapporet*, v. 2), and that a cloud could be manufactured from the smoke of burning incense (*ve-khisah anan ha-ketoret et ha-kapporet*, v. 13).

Why was God’s appearance linked to a cloud, and why was provision made for an artificial cloud? The answer, again, derives from the context we have been analyzing: God’s appearance in the matter of the proclamation of His attributes. To cite, again, the verse that immediately precedes the thirteen attributes: “God descended in a cloud, stationed Himself with [Moshe], and proclaimed His name” (*Shemot* 32:5).

Just as Moshe stood in the cleft of the rock, clutching the Tablets of the Law, as God, in a cloud, first revealed His attributes of compassion and grace, so was Aharon instructed to seek atonement for the Jewish people by replicating the conditions of Moshe’s revelation. The *kapporet* stood in for the “cleft of the rock” (*nikrat ha-tzur*) and the “cloud of incense” (*anan ha-ketoret*) replicated the “thickness of the cloud” (*av he-anan*). We, who have neither the cleft of the rock nor the “mercy seat,” and who can produce neither genuine clouds nor those of incense, can still rely on two things: the *Seder Ha-Tefillah*, invoking the thirteen attributes of grace and compassion, and the *Selichot*, the liturgical order of Yom Ha-Kippurim, invoking God’s juridical capacity to pardon and atone.