

# **The Thirteen Attributes of God**

## **A D'var Torah on *Parashat Ki Tisa* (Ex. 30:11 – 34:35)**

**By Alan I. Friedman**

*“Ki tisa et-rosh b'nei-Yisrael lif'kudeyhem....”*  
*“When you take a census of the Israelites to determine their numbers....”*

*Parashat Ki Tisa* contains a familiar story: Moses has left the Israelites encamped at the foot of Mt. Sinai and has ascended to the top of the mountain. There God speaks with Moses at length about consecrating the priests, purifying the altar, building the Ark of the Covenant, taking a census, preparing incense and anointing oil, and keeping the Sabbath. Finally God gives Moses two stone tablets inscribed by the finger of God — The Ten Commandments.

Meanwhile the Israelites at the base of the mountain have become restless and anxious about their leader's absence. “He said that he was going up there to talk with an invisible God,” they argue. “What we really need is a God that we can see, down here with us. And why has he been away so long, 40 days? What if he made God angry and God did away with him? What will happen to us now? We had better take matters into our own hands.”

“Hurry down,” says God to Moses, “for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely. They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: *‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt!’*”

Moses hurries down the mountain, carrying the two tablets of the Covenant. As soon as he comes near the camp and sees the people dancing around the golden calf, he becomes enraged. He hurls the tablets to the ground and shatters them. Then Moses takes the calf, burns it, grinds it to powder, throws the powdered gold upon the water, and makes the people drink it.

Some days later, after God has exacted additional punishments on the Israelites, Moses speaks again with God in the Tent of Meeting. God tells Moses to carve two new stone tablets and carry them up the mountain. Moses does so and spends another 40 days communing with God on the top of the mountain. God speaks, re-establishes the covenant with Israel, and Moses carves the words into stone. Finally Moses descends the mountain, bringing with him the two new tablets of the Covenant.

All of this is a well-known story. What may not be as well known is that some very familiar passages in our prayer books come directly from this

Torah portion. One of these, the *Veshamru*, is sung or recited at every Shabbat service. Another is the *Shelosh Esrei Middot*, the Thirteen Attributes of God, which are recited or sung on Yom Kippur and during the Torah readings on Rosh Hashanah, Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. You know the words; they begin: “*Adonai, Adonai, Eil Rachum Vechanun....*”

Before we focus on the Thirteen Attributes of God, we first need to return to the conversation that Moses had with God in the Tent of Meeting. Moses beseeches God: “...if I have truly gained Your favor, pray let me know your ways, that I may know you and continue in your favor ... Oh, let me behold Your Presence!”

And God replies, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim before you the name Adonai, and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show. But you cannot see My face, for man may not see Me and live. See,” says God, “there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock and, as My Presence passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock and shield you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away, and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.”

Now, back on the top of the mountain, God descends in a cloud, shields Moses, and proclaims, “Adonai! Adonai! A God 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 fathers upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations.”

This proclamation has become known as The Thirteen Attributes of God. The attributes are not theology. They are revelations, manifestations of God’s presence in the world. And even though they have been incorporated into our liturgy, they are not a prayer at all. Nothing is actually requested. What is the significance of reciting attributes of God? Surely a plea from the heart for forgiveness would be more effective! No, the Talmud<sup>1</sup> tells us that these words, themselves, are efficacious. “Behold, I am making a covenant,” God says. “Whenever Israel sins, let them recite these words, and I will forgive them.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bavli, Rosh Hashanah 17b

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Yehuda said that there is no magical power in reciting the Thirteen Attributes of God. The Talmud does not say “Let them say this order before me,” but rather “Let them do this order before me.” Forgiveness is effected not by the saying but by the doing. Only when a person makes his or her attributes similar to those of God will that person’s transgressions be forgiven. The Thirteen Attributes are not a prescription for forgiveness of sin, but a program for human behavior. (Y. Leibowitz, *Discussion on the Festivals and Appointed Times of Israel*, pp. 184-185)

Over the centuries, these attributes became a matter of intense discussion among Jewish scholars. From these words, our sages attempted to discover comprehensive principles that would give man an insight into God's true being.

Maimonides claimed that The Thirteen Attributes only showed that God was ultimately unknowable. The Thirteen Attributes, he said, interpret God's actions, not God's being. At best, we can only know what God is not.

Is God a just God, who administers reward and punishment fairly according to what a person deserves? Or is God endlessly merciful, forgiving even the most heinous transgressors as long as they repent? Herein lies a delicious contradiction. Both must be true. God demands justice and proper behavior from us, yet also, mercifully, knows and accepts our limitations.

Our rabbis teach that we must strive to imitate God's moral qualities: compassion, graciousness, forbearance, kindness, loyalty, and forgiveness. In what ways do we already mirror some of God's attributes in our lives? How, by our actions, do we demonstrate these qualities to our children?

Let us realize that repentance and forgiveness are available to us not just on Yom Kippur but throughout the entire year. And let us strive to increase our awareness of the Godlike attributes we can and should portray in our lives.

*Kein y'hi ratzon* — may this be God's will.