



Meditations on the  
Thirteen Attributes of God  
Part One - Rosh Hashanah 5773

Rabbi Jan R. Uhrbach

**MEDITATION ONE:  
INTRODUCTION TO THE THIRTEEN ATTRIBUTES  
(Erev Rosh Hashanah)**

” ׁל רחום וחנון  
אָרְךָ אַפִּים וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת:  
נִצַּר חֶסֶד לְאַלְפִים  
נִשָּׂא עֵוֹן וְפָשַׁע וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקְיָה

Adonai Adonai God Compassionate and Gracious  
Slow to Anger and Great in Lovingkindness and Truth  
Extending Lovingkindness for Thousands  
Forgiving Iniquity and Transgression and Sin and Exonerating

Over and over on these High Holy Days, we pray these words, known as the Thirteen Attributes of God. Between now and the end of Yom Kippur, mostly *on* Yom Kippur, we may chant or hear these words more than thirty times. Why are they so important? Where did they come from?

They come from the Torah, from the Book of Exodus (Shemot 34:6). God is speaking them, and they're a part of God's response to two things. First, the crisis of the Golden Calf. Here's the story.

In the month of Nissan, we were redeemed from Egypt. Three months later, in Sivan, God gave us the Torah at Mt. Sinai. A mere forty days after that, we blatantly violated the first two commandments, breaching the covenant with God by building and worshipping a golden calf. Meanwhile, Moses has been up on the mountain for those same forty days, learning the Torah from God and receiving the tablets. When he comes down and sees the people's idolatry, he's furious, and smashes the tablets -- God's own handiwork.

It takes forty more days just to appease God's anger and remit the punishment -- to negotiate a "cease-fire." Then the real work of repair begins. Moses goes back up the mountain. He stays there for yet another forty days, praying, fasting, trying not only to gain complete forgiveness, but also reconciliation -- to repair the broken covenant with God. Finally, on the fortieth day, God restores the broken covenant and writes a new set of tablets. And sometime in there, by many accounts right on the fortieth day, on Yom Kippur, God calls out to Moses with these Thirteen Attributes: *Adonai Adonai El Raḥum v' Hanun*.

So the Thirteen Attributes are God's response to *the* central question of these High Holy Days: How do we come back when we've turned away? How do we repair, atone? How do we find forgiveness from God, and from each other? How do we do teshuvah?

And -- the Thirteen Attributes are also God's response to something else. While Moses was up there on the mountain for those last forty days, he not only asked for forgiveness for the people. He also made two personal requests: הוֹדַעְנִי נָא אֶת־דַּרְכְּךָ וְאֶדְעֶךָ, "Make Your ways known to me, that I may know You...." and הִרְאֵנִי נָא אֶת־כְּבוֹדְךָ -- "Let me see Your glory."

As I mentioned earlier, the Torah describes Moses as being very angry in the moment when he saw the golden calf. But afterwards, after the immediate crisis, in those forty days of reconciliation and healing, I imagine him very differently. My guess is he felt frustrated, and terribly disappointed, even betrayed, by the people. I imagine him questioning *himself* -- his efficacy, his authenticity, his significance in the world. I imagine him feeling ashamed of his

anger (he smashed God's tablets!), and perhaps embarrassed by his own feelings of demoralization.

My guess is he felt deeply lonely -- distant from his people, no longer 100% confident of God's accompanying presence. And shaky: unsure now of the mission that had once seemed so clear. The revelations and teachings he's received (more than any human being before or since!) no longer fully satisfying, fully comforting, no longer quite enough to sustain him in such a difficult life. And I imagine -- as does the midrash -- that he had some serious questions about God: God's anger, God's justice, whether there really is a reward, meaning, in a life of service, why the righteous and wicked sometimes seem to fare the same.

That's actually how the Talmud understand's Moses' request, "let me see Your glory." And I think the rabbis of the Talmud meant the question of reward and punishment to be emblematic of all those unanswerable questions about God and about life -- not only why the righteous suffer and bad behavior is so often rewarded; but, why is positive change and transformation so hard; is it really worth taking the harder path, the path of service; does my life really matter?

Questions that come up when life seems unbearably hard, unfair, even cruel. When our dreams and most cherished values are called into question, even shattered -- like the tablets -- sometimes by our own hands. When we're misunderstood, misrepresented. When life spins out of control. Questions that come up when we're deeply lonely -- when people we love die, when important relationships are strained or broken. When our relationship with God seems strained, or broken. When it's hard to find a friend; or it's hard to find ourselves.

Questions that come up around failures and disappointments, big and small. Those moments when our hopes for transformation and change -- either communally or personally -- are dashed by retrenchment, old behaviors resurfacing. When we're working so hard -- to change the world, or to change ourselves -- and we feel like we're getting nowhere. Questions that come up when we know we need to move forward, and don't quite know how. When we need to forgive, when we long to be forgiven. When brokenness is so present, and repair feels so remote.

Questions that come up on the High Holy Days. "Teach me Your ways, that I may know You," Moses pleads. "Show me Your glory."

Moses the leader spent forty days on the mountain seeking forgiveness for his people. But Moses the person was seeking meaning -- for himself. Or as one beautiful Hasidic reading teaches,<sup>1</sup> when Moses said *hareni na et k'vodkha* "let me see Your glory," he wanted to know what aspect of God's glory/kavod was revealed/inherent in this whole humiliating episode of the golden calf. How do we find God, meaning, beauty in human fallibility? In our lowest points and failures, not only our successes and triumphs?

And how did God respond? "I will cause all My goodness to pass before you, and you'll hear Me call out My name . . . Come stand near Me, alone. I'll cover your eyes while My glory passes by, then I'll remove My hand, and you'll see My back, you'll know that I've been here. But My face --- no." And so Adonai did indeed pass before him, and called, "*Adonai, Adonai, El Raḥum v'Hanun.*" God chanted the Thirteen Attributes. That's God's answer -- or perhaps non-answer -- to both kinds of Moshe's questions: "how can we find a way for God to forgive us?" and "how can we find a way for us to forgive God?"

---

1. See Netivot Shalom, Ki Tisa, "Hareni Na."

And so here we are on the High Holy Days, forty days from the first of Elul, to Yom Kippur. Forty days when we *are*, each one of us, Moses on the mountain. We are Moses the leader seeking forgiveness -- for ourselves, for each other, for our people. And we are Moses the person, searching for a way forward. How do we make meaning in our lives? How do we come to “know God” -- for some of us, to forgive God? How do we develop a theology we can live with?

And we are Moses, hearing the response to all of those questions, the Thirteen Attributes: “Adonai Adonai God Compassionate and Gracious, Slow to Anger, Great in Lovingkindness and Truth, Extending Lovingkindness to Thousands of Generations, Bearing Sin, Transgression, and Iniquity, Exonerating.” Clear answers? Hardly. Actually, not so much answers at all, but rather relationship, process, covenant. Engage with them, and they will yield meaning.

So this year, we’ll not only hear them, and chant them -- over and over. We’re also going to be studying them. What do these “attributes” really mean? How do they help us find forgiveness? Grant forgiveness? What do they teach us about God, about meaning, about how to understand our world? What do they teach us about us, about living, and about how to *be* in our world?

» »  
אל רחום וחנון  
ארך אפים  
ורב חסד ואמת:  
נצר חסד לאלפים  
נשא עון ופשע וחטאה  
ונקה

That’s the path forward. We’ll pick up there tomorrow.

**MEDITATION TWO:  
EL RAHUM V'HANUN  
("God, Compassionate and Gracious")  
(1st Day Rosh Hashanah)**

” אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנוּן  
אֶרְדּוּ אִפְיָם וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת:  
נִצַּר חֶסֶד לְאֵלִים  
נִשְׂא עֵינָיו וְפָשַׁע וְחַטָּאת וְנִקָּה

Our study this year is focused on the Thirteen Attributes of God. We just chanted them when we removed the scroll from the ark; we'll chant them another two dozen times by the end of Yom Kippur.

They come from the the Book of Exodus, at the conclusion of the story of the Golden Calf, the sin of idolatry following almost immediately after the redemption from Egypt and the giving of Torah at Sinai. Moses comes down from the mountain, sees the people worshipping the calf, and smashes the tablets. He spends the next forty days getting the people to repent, and getting God to relent. Then he goes back up to Mount Sinai, where he remains for yet another forty days, working for real forgiveness: the restoration of the covenant, a new set of tablets. On the fortieth day -- on Yom Kippur -- God renews the covenant, and reveals these Thirteen Attributes to Moshe

And as I said last night, the Thirteen Attributes are part of God's response to two related types of questions, which we'll be looking at on these High Holy Days. Questions of meaning, about God and about life, that came up for Moses then, and that challenge us now. "Teach me Your ways, that I may know You," he pleads. "Show me Your glory." Help me understand Your justice and compassion, why the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. And, questions about forgiveness. How do we attain forgiveness from God, and from each other?

Which is where I want to begin this morning.

The Talmud teaches:

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say such a thing! This teaches that the Holy Blessed One put on a tallit like a prayer leader (*sh'liah tzibbur*) and showed Moses the order of prayer. [God] said to him: "Whenever Israel sin, let them perform before Me this service, and I will forgive them." . . .

So we do -- it's why we prayed Thirteen Attributes when we opened the ark, it's why we'll pray them repeatedly on Yom Kippur.

Obviously, it's not a magic formula. First of all, it has to be *prayer* -- we can't just recite them. And second, we need to have *prepared* to say these words, before Yom Kippur, by doing *teshuvah*. Like the Israelites at Sinai, it's an eighty day process, from the Seventeenth of Tammuz to Yom Kippur. We've had seventy-one days so far (only another nine days left!) to apologize, and repair.

But of course there's a deeper level of *teshuvah*, and here's where the Thirteen Attributes come in again. As Rabbi Moses Alshekh (16th century) points out, God didn't say, "Whenever Israel sin, let them say before Me this service and I will forgive them," but rather, "let them do this service" (יעשו לפני כסדר הזה), literally, "let them act in My presence in a manner like this." Why? Because, he says:

forgiveness does not depend on words alone, but on performance as well. If a person makes his or her qualities resemble the qualities of the Holy Blessed One, one's iniquities are forgiven.

This is actually *the* main way in which the Thirteen Attributes are the path to forgiveness. What we call *imitatio dei* -- striving to imitate God.

And so we have the classic midrash, which after citing our passage, continues:

[The Torah] says, "All who call with the name Adonai will be saved" (Joel 3:5). How is possible for a human being to call with the name of the Holy Blessed One? Rather, just as God is called "compassionate and gracious" so you too be compassionate and gracious . . .

It's not primarily about "calling on God" with the Thirteen Attributes in prayer. Its about developing the the Thirteen Attributes -- שלש עשרה מדות -- in ourselves. *Midot* -- "attributes," or character traits, qualities.

We find forgiveness by developing our character. Classically, partly as reward - *midah k'neged midah* - "measure for measure," quality for quality -- as we behave, so are we treated. We'll come back to that later. And in less anthropomorphic language, because that's how we become people who are worthy of forgiveness, and it's how we create a more forgiving world.

But what exactly are we imitating? This morning I want to focus on two of the *midot*: *rahum* and *hanun*, "compassionate and gracious."

We can start with our usual understandings. First, active, ongoing care and concern for others, especially but not only, alleviating human suffering. And second, mercy and leniency in judgment; compassion and understanding with people who have made mistakes, hurt us, done wrong. We may know the word from the Yiddish, *rachmonos*.

Now, I can already hear some objections. Really? If God is so compassionate, how come there's so much suffering to begin with? And by the way, God's "judgment" doesn't always seem so lenient and compassionate to me -- sometimes it feels disproportionately harsh. You're in good company. As I've said, I think those are exactly the questions Moses asked, along with countless commentators since. For now, I'll give you the short answer, which I'll explain later. Where is God's compassion and graciousness in our world? That's why God created *you*.

Or, you may be saying, compassion is lovely, but it only goes so far. What about boundaries? Do we just keep giving? What about responsibility, law and order, justice? Do we let everyone off the hook because we feel bad for them? And of course, you're right. Today is *Yom HaDin* (the Day of Judgment), with all the metaphoric language of God as judge. Obviously, there is a need for discernment, accountability, boundaries, judgment -- in the world, in our behavior, and in the Thirteen Attributes, *shelosh esreh midot*, of God. It's a question of balance. Indeed the

word “*midot*,” which I’ve translated as “character traits,” also means “measures”, “quantities.” That is, no single trait, in isolation, is an absolute, is “good” -- it’s all about the right measure, the right balance, at the right time.

And there’s a pretty strong message here regarding the proper measure of compassion. The Thirteen Attributes begin with names of God. YHVH, pronounced Adonai, is associated with God’s aspect of compassion. We have that twice. Then *El* (as in *Elohim*), God, which is associated with the aspect of judgment, severity. So we can read: *Adonai* (Compassion), *Adonai* (Compassion), *El* (Judgment), *Rahum* (Compassion), *v’Hanun* (a form of Compassion).

What’s the right balance of compassion to judgment? Four to one. Judgment needs to be surrounded by, cushioned by, a double measure of compassion, on both sides. In fact, although I’ve been calling these the Thirteen Attributes of God, they’re also called, as a whole, the *shelosh esreh midot rahamim* -- Thirteen Attributes of compassion. Because *rahum* isn’t just one of many -- it’s the essence of them all.

Okay, we know the basic meaning of *rahum v’hanun*. Not surprisingly, there’s more to it.

An eighteenth century Hasidic master, Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, teaches that *rahum* means that God attaches (מַדְבֵּק) to the lower realms (creation). And he draws a very telling analogy. It turns out there are not only Thirteen Attributes of God, but thirteen principles by which we interpret the Torah. Isn’t that neat? And Levi Yitzhak tries to match them up. To what principle does *rahum* correspond? A principle known as *gezeira shava*, “making an equivalence.” That is, if in the Torah you see a word here, and you see the same word there, in a different context, you “make them equal” -- you learn about the meaning of one from the meaning of the other. Why? Because you recognize, *it’s the same word*. God’s *rahum* (compassion) is like that. God sees something of God’s self in creation, in the human being, and, so too speak “makes an equivalence,” attaches to us as equals.

So too us. If I see a human being here (say, me), and I see a human being there, in a different context -- with different joys and pains, different opportunities and challenges -- I’m supposed to make a *gezeirah shavah*. I make an equivalence, recognizing our sameness.

In fact, this sense of being of the same stuff is embedded in the very word *rahum*, which comes from the Hebrew *rehem*, “womb.” God’s compassion is womb-based, as a mother to a child.

And the meaning of this parental connection is beautifully refined by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (19th century), who makes a subtle distinction between *rahum*, on the one hand, and *hanun*. *Rahum*, he says, refers to ongoing nurturing. Because we are God’s work, he says, the children of God’s creative love, God continues to “surround [us] with loving maintaining care.” That is, God provides a kind of gestational womb, ongoingly. While *hanun*, God’s grace, has to do with the initial creative process. It means, he says, “to endow with powers, abilities, and means,” “to allow to be,” “to grant a future to a creature.”

In brief, in God’s grace (*hanun*) God creates and empowers us, allows us to be. In God’s compassion (*rahamim*) God continues to sustain and nurture us.

Which raises a question: if *hanun* parallels creating, and *rahum* is about sustaining thereafter, why not put them in that order? *Hanun v’rahum*, “creator and sustainer” (as it is, for example, in *Ashrei*), rather than *rahum v’hanun* as it is here?

Because, Hirsch says, here in the Thirteen Attributes, it's about second chances. Here (when Moses was asking for forgiveness and God was renewing the covenant), and now (on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), God's "graciousness" isn't about creating and empowering us, it's about creating and empowering us *again*, even though we screwed it up the first time, or wasted the opportunity. God, Hirsch says, is gracious not only in increasing our gifts and resources when we use them well, but in "never becoming tired of granting anew the energy and powers which had been . . . trifled away."

We know we have missed opportunities, we've wasted our talents, our resources. We've wasted our time. And every Rosh Hashanah, they get renewed. Every Rosh Hashanah, we are held in a gestational, nurturing space, and granted new energy, new opportunities, more time. The cosmic "do-over." *Teshuvah*. That's God as *rahum v'hanun*.

That's what we're called to imitate.

What a difference from the way we sometimes think of compassion and graciousness! It's not pity, or mercy, both which can be condescending. "I, superior and powerful (inherently or because of my resources), give to this other who is weaker." Or "I graciously forgive my moral inferior." No. It's not about helping or forgiving an "other" out there, from the safety of physical and emotional distance. It's about experiencing sameness and shared humanity -- and being not only connected but influenced. The way a parent is never at peace when a child is hurting, or will always keep a thumb on the scale when evaluating the child's behavior.

Whether we're responding to suffering and need, or we're responding to error or sin, we're midwifing, parenting, each other's emerging selves. We're striving for a compassion and graciousness that enables others to find a way forward, that "allows them to be," and "grants them a future." Again.

It's not easy. We're all caring people. We *are* empathic-- with our families and dearest friends. Maybe also with a somewhat broader circle of people we know, or encounter face to face. And it's hard enough to be this way with people we love! But it gets much harder as we extend outward. It's nearly impossible to feel this deep sense of connection and equality -- sameness -- with the entire human family. It would be overwhelming just to *feel* it, and harder yet to take seriously the implications:

- that we're not fundamentally different from the vast majority of humanity whose standard of living isn't even close to our own;
- that nothing exempts *us* from the suffering we read about in the paper;
- that we too are capable of making terrible mistakes, causing terrible harm, and that we might one day need the *rachmanos* of the person we now demonize so easily, who we're so quick to judge and condemn.

It makes us feel too vulnerable and too responsible. And sometimes it demands sacrifice.

Individually, and nationally. Whether we're talking about America or Israel, we can disagree about the wisdom or effectiveness of particular tactics and strategies. But characterologically, fundamentally, we are called to be *rahum v'hanun*, and to enact policies and laws that reflect that character.

Israel must defend itself physically. It is both our right and duty to protect ourselves and ensure our own survival. And I am by no means minimizing the very real threats to that survival, and the complexity and difficulty of responding. But, Israel cannot survive -- morally, Jewishly -- if our survival is dependent on denying the fundamental humanity of another people, or on denying the fundamental *sameness* of Jews and Palestinians. Israel cannot survive unless our polices and laws, and behavior, are *rahum v'hanun* -- "allowing to be," "granting a future" - to all. Even if previous chances at that future have been squandered.

And as Americans too, our laws and policies, our communities and institutions must be *rahum v'hanun* -- deeply egalitarian, capable of nurturing the growth and ensuring the future of all, providing safety nets and new opportunities. How we get there -- we may disagree. But *that* we need to get there is of the essence of what our tradition teaches us about imitating God.

Now earlier, I raised the likely objection, "with all the suffering in the world, where is God's compassion?" And I gave a short answer, "that's why God created you." I want to come back to that now. Because the notion of God being *rahum*, attached to and in some sense equivalent to, us, is about more than just empathy.

Here's Moshe Cordovero -- the great 16th century mystic -- in his classic work Tomer Devorah:

[J]ust as a person conducts one's self here below, so will he/she be worthy of opening up the channel of the same Supernal Attribute from above. Exactly according to a person's behavior will the outflow of compassion be bestowed from Above, and he/she will cause this attribute to shine in the world.

In other words, to say that God is *rahum* implies not only a connection, but a *correspondence* between us and God. It's a much more radical reading of *midah k'neged midah* (measure for measure) that I spoke of earlier. It's not tit for tat -- if you forgive others you'll be forgiven; if you're kind, you'll be treated kindly. We know it doesn't work that way. But, in a much broader sense -- a cosmic sense -- God's "measures", *midot*, are responsive to, a reflection of, our own. It's a two way mirroring: we strive to imitate or reflect God, Who, in turn is a reflection of us!

For this reason, [Cordovero says], one should never ignore these Thirteen Attributes or allow these verses to depart from one's mouth. Rather, they should be a constant reminder to a person. Whenever the occasion for making use of one of these attributes arises, one should remember and say, "This matter requires this particular attribute. I will not budge from it, lest this attribute become concealed or disappear from the world."

It's up to us. We bring God's compassion and graciousness into the world, we open the channel, by being *rahum v'hanun* ourselves.

It begins, perhaps surprisingly, with compassion for ourselves. Last night I reminded us that we are Moses on the mountain, on Yom Kippur, begging for forgiveness after the Golden Calf, asking all those hard questions, to see, to understand more.

Why now? Because (the midrash says) he sensed that it was an *et ratzon* (a favorable time). Really? When Israel was at it's lowest point ever, *that's* an *et ratzon*, a favorable time? For us now, on the Days of Awe, the Day of Judgment, when we are so conscious of our failings, our inadequacies, our mortality, it's a favorable time?

Indeed. What is an *et ratzon*? God isn't "nicer" at some times than other, God isn't even *in* time! Rather, as the Sfat Emet, the great 19th century Hasidic master, says,

The truth is that these are times of favor for humans, moments in which we are more able to draw near and attach ourselves to God with the inward desire of our hearts. . . . as a person has compassion on him/her self . . . so too is great compassion for [that person] aroused in Heaven.

I spoke last night about how I imagine Moses must have felt on that mountain. I want to add one more thing: I believe this is one of the very rare moments in the Torah where Moses had compassion for himself. *Hareni na et k'vodekha*, "show me Your glory." I'm tired, I'm demoralized, I'm feeling like a failure, and I need to know -- I need this for *me* -- how does this whole humiliating episode reflect Your glory?

And God's response? Just now, just because failure and sin has aroused this need, this longing. Just because, out of your own compassion for your own need, you're seeking My compassion. Just through your own seeking, I'll reveal it to you. I'll reveal the path of *teshuvah*. I'll reveal Myself as *rahum v'hanun*.

So with us. We begin our *teshuvah*, imitating God as *rahum v'hanun*, first with ourselves. We do it by owning our own failures, our own hurts and pains, our own embarrassments. By owning our own inability to really feel another's hurts and pains and embarrassments. By owning our fears of doing so: the loss of our identity if we give up our self-righteous anger, the loss of our sense of protected "specialness" if we really feel another's suffering as our own.

And in doing so as *rahum* with and to ourselves -- deeply connected, owning every part of ourselves, nurturing our own growth, "allowing ourselves to be", "granting ourselves a future" -- we open all the channels to *experiencing* Divine compassion and grace, and we open the channels to *understanding* Divine compassion and grace.

We begin our *teshuvah* by feeling how much we want someone to cut us a little slack -- not to completely release us of responsibility, but not to demand the full price either. By feeling how desperately we need someone who will stay connected, who will not lose faith, who will replenish our reserves, who will give us another chance.

That's what makes these High Holy Days an *et ratzon*, a favorable time. It's not because God is more available. But because we, by compassionately connecting to our our own failures and wrongdoing, limitations and vulnerability, open also our own capacity to be *rahum v'hanun*, compassionate and gracious, to others. Because it's now that we call out -- not only in words, but in our being -- *Adonai Adonai El Rahum v'Hanun*.

**MEDITATION THREE:  
NOTZER HESED LA'ALAFIM....POKED AVON AVOT  
("Extending Compassion for Thousands of Generations . . . .  
Visiting the Sins of the Parents on the Children")  
(2nd Day Rosh Hashanah)**

” םל רחום וחנון  
ארך אפים ורב־חסד ואמת:  
נצר חסד לאלפים  
נשא עון ופשע וחטאה ונגה

Our focus of study this year are the Thirteen Attributes of God, which we just chanted when we removed the scroll from the ark, and which form the centerpiece of the Yom Kippur liturgy. As I've said, they come from the the Book of Exodus, at the conclusion of the story of the Golden Calf. Moses comes down from Sinai, sees the people worshipping the calf, and smashes the tablets. He spends the next forty days calming God down, and getting the people to repent. Then he goes back up the mountain, where he remains for yet another forty days, working for real forgiveness. On the fortieth day -- on Yom Kippur -- God renews the covenant, and reveals these Thirteen Attributes.

And I've said that the Thirteen Attributes are part of God's response to two types of questions. First, questions of forgiveness, which we spoke about yesterday. And second, questions of meaning, about God and about life. Questions that came up for Moses then ("teach me Your ways, that I may know You," he pleads. "Show me Your glory"), and that challenge us now. Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? Why is positive change and transformation so hard? Is it really worth taking the harder path, the path of service? Does my life really matter?

Which is where I want to focus this morning: how do the Thirteen Attributes help us move forward when we have a crisis of meaning?

To begin, a couple of preliminaries.

First, although we speak of thirteen "attributes" of God, they're not really qualities of God, but rather descriptions of the way we experience God in the world. Think of them as channels, or vessels, through which the Divine light and energy is refracted into the world. Or thirteen categories to understand our experience, to think about and shape our own behavior.

Second, when it comes to questions of ultimate meaning -- e.g., why the righteous suffer -- we're right at the limits of human comprehension. Moses wanted complete understanding, and God said -- you can't. "You will see My back," God says, "but My face cannot be seen." "No human can see Me and live." *But*, God says, "I will call out My name" -- the Thirteen Attributes. I can't give you answers, but I can give you relationship, covenant.

Rav Yehudah said: A covenant has been made with the Thirteen Attributes that they will not be turned away empty-handed [lit. empty], as it says, “Behold I make a covenant”<sup>2</sup>

Engage, live the covenant, and you will not be left empty, devoid of meaning. Just don’t expect clear answers.

OK. *Adonai Adonai El, Raḥum v’Hanun* (Compassionate and Gracious), *Erekh Apayim* (Patient, Slow to Anger), *v’Rav Ḥesed v’Emet* (Great in Lovingkindness and Truth). Then: *Notzer ḥesed la’alafim* (“Who keeps/extends lovingkindness for thousands of generations”). That’s what I want to focus on this morning. And it’s companion piece: *poked avon avot al banim v’al b’nei banim al shileshim v’al ribei’im* -- “Who visits the sins of the parents on the children and children’s children, to the third and fourth generations”

This is theologically problematic in so many ways. Many of us have difficulty accepting traditional notions of Divine reward and punishment at all -- the world certainly doesn’t seem to work that way. But now *vicarious* reward and punishment? Children rewarded and punished for what their parents and grandparents did? It seems neither just, nor particularly “Godly.”

Which is precisely why I’m focusing on it today. Because it’s hard. If we’re going to find a way for God to forgive *us*, we have to look at the parts of *ourselves* that are hardest for us to see. And if we’re going to find a way to, so to speak forgive God, to find a theology we can live with, we have to look at the parts of the world, those aspects of God, that are hardest for us to understand and accept.

So what do we do with this?

Our tradition offers several approaches: from the mystical view that it refers to reincarnation,<sup>3</sup> to the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who just rejected it outright, saying children are *not* punished for the sins of their parents.<sup>4</sup> Or the prayerbook, which keeps the reward (*notzer ḥesed la’alafim*); but stops the quote before we get to the punishment.

But I want to deal with the text in its unvarnished, unqualified form. Why? Because it appears this way only twice in the whole Torah, in exactly the two narratives which provide the imagery and liturgy for Yom Kippur: the aftermath of the Golden Calf, and the aftermath of the sin of the spies, when Moses pleads for forgiveness using precisely this language. Why now, when Moses is seeking both forgiveness and meaning, is this formulation so important?

To make sense of it, we need to pull back from the anthropomorphism, and instead of thinking of God reaching down and “doing” this, we need to think of this trans-generational impact -- lovingkindness for two-thousand generations, sins for four -- as simply a statement of reality.

---

2. Rosh Hashanah 17b.

3. See Zohar 2:113a.

4. Jeremiah (31:29-30); Ezekiel (18:1-20)

I've spoken many times about Judaism's call to integrative wholistic thinking -- the interconnectedness of all things. This is a call to integrative wholistic thinking not only across space, but throughout time. No generation stands alone.

When it comes to families, we know this. Children do indeed pay the price of their parents' sins, and do indeed benefit from their parents' righteousness and good qualities. From practical external realities (the obvious examples being on one side a parent in prison for a crime and child suffering, and on the reward side, a major trust fund), to the emotional, ethical, spiritual, intellectual legacies that children inherit, to genetics, and now *epi-genetics*! In fact, there was an article in last Sunday's New York Times that spoke about new research in epi-genetics showing that our behavior can activate or de-activate certain genes, and that we pass down the effects of our behavior to -- guess what -- four generations of descendants!

But the Torah's point isn't really about families. It's framed in terms of parents and children because that's the arena in which the notion of trans-generational responsibility is easiest for us to grasp, and because that's where it's going to hit us in the *kishkes* and get us to take it seriously. The broader message is that our lives are not about only our lives -- we have a debt to the past and a responsibility to the future. The intent is to awaken our communal consciousness, our awareness of a shared covenantal destiny -- that goes beyond our particular family to the whole human family, across both space *and* time. To reorganize our consciousness, and our values, around a much longer -- an infinite! -- perspective, beginning thousands of years before us, and stretching forward ahead of us to infinity.

Why?

First, as the Torah enjoins us (Deut. 8:17-18) "Lest you say, 'My strength, the might of my hand made all this wealth.' Then you shall remember Adonai your God." Mark Twain was a little sharper: "a self-made man is about as likely as a self-laid egg." *Notzer hesed la'alafim/pokeid avon avot* addresses the complex question of self-determination and free will on one hand, and being the product of generations of influences (good and bad), on the other. It's one reason why we pray to the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, etc. We call that *z'khut avot* (the merit of the ancestors). We remind ourselves that part of God's reward to Abraham and Sarah was being good to their descendants -- what parent wouldn't want that for his or her children? And we remind *ourselves* that we are who we are because of them, because of the pathways they opened.

As Jews, as Americans, as human beings -- we all stand on the merit of prior kindnesses, righteousness, wisdom, achievements not only of our direct ancestors, but of all of those who shaped the cultures and traditions which in turn shaped us. *Notzer hesed la'alafim* -- the *hesed* of the past, plays out in us, for thousands of years. We know this, even if we don't always want to admit it.

And, we have a responsibility to the future; our deeds will impact generations to come. We know this too. We just don't *know* it. Or we choose not to know. Our rational knowledge of the long term effects of our behavior seems irrelevant to our actions; we don't take it seriously unless we feel it *now*. On the side of *pokeid avon avot* -- the impact of our sins -- the easiest example is the environment. It gets hot, we worry. It cools down, we forget. But we're actually not that good at taking seriously the positive side either -- the *notzer hesed la'alafim* part -- the infinite impact of loving deeds.

One of my favorite readings of this is by Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, who makes the connection between *notzer* (guarding, assuring, keeping), and *netzer* -- the bud of a plant. And he says the greatest blessing one can receive is to be a plant-er of seeds that will blossom in the future for others, "a thousandfold in time and eternity." As he says, "God allows the good that a person does to become 'buds of blessings' for all his/her descendants." That is, every act of righteousness -- every *mitzvah*, every loving deed, becomes a bud or seed, a vessel, that carries within it its own internal consequences, as well as Divine love and blessing, forward into time -- to blossom and ripen over thousands of years, into eternity.

How empowering! It's so easy to become demoralized, by major setbacks and roadblocks, and the accumulation of small frustrations and disappointments. In the public sphere -- we lose an election or a case, our social advocacy is ignored, another attempt at peace talks disintegrates into violence. Personally, we try so hard to change an aspect of our character, or a dynamic in our families and relationships, and sometimes it just seems intractable. Or we're just trying to make a difference by being kind and decent, and we're met with indifference, hostility, distrust. Or a lifetime of hard work and trying to do the right thing seems to yield only bitter fruit.

Sometimes it feels like nothing we do makes a difference, or the impact is so small relative to the big picture, so fleeting. You take the people out of Egypt, redeem them from slavery, bring them to Sinai - next thing you know, they're worshipping a fake cow! It's easy to wonder whether it's worth all the effort.

Plant the seed. It *will* blossom, continuously, over two-thousand generations.

The central message of *notzer hesed la'afim....poked avon avot* is that we can't measure the value of our lives in trivial, temporal terms. Any serious attempt to make sense of life -- in general (i.e., "God's ways") or our own lives can only be approached by taking this very long view. If we lose our ability to see ourselves -- as individuals, as a collective -- in the context of a long arc of familial, national, cosmic! history (and I fear we are losing that ability), we risk not only arrogance, but losing our sense of meaning. It's an error -- an arrogance -- to think that we can understand God's ways, ultimate issues -- or that we can discern the meaning or value of our own being -- based on the infinitesimally limited sense of what's happening at any particular moment in time, or even within the confines of our lifetimes

It's hard. It requires not only major-league deferred gratification, but a kind of selflessness, a generosity of spirit, that we usually have only for our own flesh and blood -- applied to the whole future. It requires a willingness to keep investing in life with no guarantee of seeing a reward.

It's very counter-cultural. We're a results oriented society. We value what we can measure. And, we're becoming ever more small-minded, focused on ever-shorter time frames, partly due to technology. We're accustomed to nearly instantaneous results. Which is great for certain things. But not so helpful in meaning-making, or in approaching issues of character with any seriousness.

Now, once we really get this notion of transgenerational responsibility -- and we understand we're not talking literally about God "visiting" or inflicting the sins of parents on children, but simply about the reality of interconnection throughout time -- then we can begin to understand how "visiting the sins of the parents on the children and children's children to the third and fourth generation" might actually be an expression of compassion and love. A blessing.

There are two reasons.

First, because actually, the natural way of the world would be that our deeds have infinite consequence, as indeed, *mitzvot* do. *Notzer hesed la'alafim* -- acts of lovingkindness and compassion are guarded and nurtured and maintained in their impact for two-thousand generations, or according to some, *l'olam* (forever). But in God's compassion, the impact of negativity is limited to four generations. And lovingkindness therefore makes a more powerful impact than sin, in a ratio of at least 500:1.

This is really the essence of faith: that the ongoing connection of deeds and consequences, across time, is nevertheless not simply inevitable and relentless, but that *hesed* (love, compassion, deeds of lovingkindness) will always outlast and overpower negativity and sin -- and that we through *our* deeds can influence both the future and the past. Or, if we want to be theologically radical, we can say that God *is* the reality of this *notzer hesed la'alafim* . . . *poked avon avot*. God *is* the cohesiveness, interconnectedness -- which includes as it must the negative -- but leverages the positive by an exponentially high factor.

The second reason why *pokeid avon avot* is a blessing, an expression of compassion, has to do with our core work on these days: *teshuvah*, our personal transformation and character development. As individuals and collectively, our *teshuvah* is not only about us, our happiness, and our merit. It's an obligation to those who come after us. *Every positive step we take -- personally and communally, whether we succeed or not -- will benefit the future ad infinitum -- even if we don't see the benefit in our own lifetimes*. Conversely, if we don't do our personal and national *teshuvah* -- if we don't take responsibility for our "sins" and change course -- we will be burdening the future. Of course our own children and grandchildren, but not only our own children and grandchildren -- with everything we've failed to heal. Even we don't see the damage in our lifetimes.

And -- our obligation to do *teshuvah* extends also backwards, to those who came before us. One of the great commentators on the Torah, Rabbeinu Bahya, asks the question: "why is the impact of sin limited to precisely four generations?" And he says it's because that's generally what a person may live to see: four generations alive at once, great-grandchildren and great-grandparents knowing each other. And he reads *pokeid avon avot* (as do others) not as vicarious punishment, but compound punishment. "When," as the Talmud says "the children hold the sins of the parents in their own hands," then the children bear responsibility not only for their own sins, but the parents' as well.

In our society, we tend to offer familial history as an excuse, a mediating factor, for our negative character traits and behaviors -- "we come by them honestly," we "inherited" them. The Torah says no. If you see it in your own family, and you just keep repeating the pattern, you have extra responsibility.

*Pokeid avon avot*. We've been translating it as "visiting the sins of the parents," but that doesn't really capture it. The root of *pokeid* has to do with paying attention, remembering, conferring responsibility -- in both a positive and negative sense. Yesterday's Torah reading began with it: Gen. 21:1, *vAdonai pakad et Sarah*, "Adonai took note of, remembered Sarah as God had promised, and Adonia did for Sarah as God had spoken." So to say *pokeid avon avot* may mean not so much "inflict," but that the parents' sins will be noticed and remembered for up to four generations.

And that's considered an act of compassion. Why? Because if they're remembered, they can be repaired. Ongoingly -- meaning we're not supposed to just repeat, we're supposed to learn. *And retroactively*. Physicists are now concluding that time is not as unidirectional as we once

thought. The rabbis, in the way they developed ideas of *teshuvah*, understood this years ago. Our *teshuvah* not only ensures a better future, it actually transforms and atones for the past -- our own pasts, *and that of our predecessors*; just as we will be dependent on those who come later, to atone for us. When we “inherit” a negative way of being -- we see it in our own families, in the Jewish tradition, or just generally in prior generations -- and we change course, we make a *tikkun*, a repair. *That’s why we see it*. The sins of the past aren’t “inflicted” on us, they’re given to us, to heal and repair.

That’s the full implication of this integrated, wholistic worldview across not only space but time: all things are interconnected, and the present can affect not only the future, but the past. It’s one reason why we feel the presence of our ancestors (even those we’ve never met) when we’re here in synagogue, and why we feel we’re here not only for us but for them. It’s not just nostalgia. And it’s why it feels so much more important and powerful when we change those things in us that we know go back generations; some part of us is sensing that we’ve just worked a transformation that transcends time, that echoes both forward and backward through the ages. That’s what *teshuvah* is really about.

We limit the sins of the past to three or four generations, by doing differently. And we multiply lovingkindness “a thousandfold in time and eternity”, by building on the best of what we’ve inherited, and amplifying it for the future. Because it’s *our* responsibility to be *Notzer ḥesed la’alafim . . . pokeid avon avot al banim*.