



Meditations on the  
Thirteen Attributes of God  
Part Two - Yom Kippur 5773

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**MEDITATION FOUR:  
NOSEI AVON VA'FESHA V'HATA'AH  
("Forgiving Iniquity, Transgression and Sin")  
(Kol Nidre)**

Part A

We'll soon begin a section of our service known as *seliḥot*, prayers of forgiveness, the centerpiece of which is the Thirteen Attributes of God, which are the focus of our study together on these High Holy Days. As I've said, they come from the book of Exodus, from the story of the Golden Calf: the moment when the people Israel sunk from the greatest height of closeness with God (the giving of the Torah at Sinai) to the most terrible depth of betrayal: constructing a golden calf and worshipping it. After forty days of the people repenting and Moses praying, God relented. But it took another forty days of prayer before Moses was able to attain complete forgiveness, and heal the covenantal relationship with God. On the fortieth day -- Yom Kippur -- he succeeded. And as a sign of the renewed relationship, God revealed to Moses what we call the *shelosh esreh midot*, the Thirteen Attributes of God.

Now, as we said on Rosh Hashanah, these Thirteen Attributes teach us about *teshuvah* -- the Hebrew word for repentance, which means really turning, returning, responding, self-transformation. How do we come back when we've turned away? How do we repair relationships that have become strained or broken? How do we attain forgiveness?

The connection between the Thirteen Attributes and forgiveness is made in the Talmud, where Rabbi Yohanan describes God as wearing a *tallit* like a prayer leader and showing Moses how to pray. God then said to Moses, "Whenever Israel sins, they should recite this passage, and I will forgive them." And that's what these *seliḥot* prayers are.

But as I said last week, we gain forgiveness not only (or even primarily) by *praying* the Thirteen Attributes so much as by *living* them -- imitating God, and developing our character traits to more closely resemble God's. God is:

- *raḥum v'hanun* (merciful and compassionate). So also you (as we talked about on Rosh Hashanah).
- *erekh apayim* (patient, slow to anger), *v'rav ḥesed v'emet* (abounding in love and faithfulness). So also you (we'll deal with those tomorrow).
- *notzer ḥesed la'alafim* (assuring love for thousands of generations). So also you (again, we discussed this on Rosh Hashanah).
- *nosei avon, va'fesha, va'hata'ah* (forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin)

Ah! If we want to be forgiven, we have to learn how to forgive.

It's one of the most difficult aspects of *teshuvah*. I remember years ago, speaking with some of the children in our community about *teshuvah* and asking them which is harder -- to ask forgiveness of someone you've hurt, or to forgive someone who's hurt you. They were very wise, and their answer was, "it depends." For a trivial, silly kind of thing, they said, it's easier to forgive, because it's embarrassing to ask. But for really serious things, it's much harder to forgive. And as one very sensitive young man pointed out, sometimes the hardest thing is to forgive one's self.

*Nosei avon, va'fesha, va'hata'ah* -- forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin. Why three synonyms for sin?

Primarily to convey the wide range that's covered: everything from errors and accidents, to deliberate harms, to malice and pure evil. One-time slip-ups, and systemic or repeated wrongs. Although each word has a specific nuance, for our purposes the distinctions aren't so important. And indeed, apart from the extremes -- the hateful horrific things -- categorizing them isn't always so easy. A "mistake" may actually express a latent desire to cause harm. And something that we are convinced is malicious may really be cluelessness on the part of the other person

And just as there are different words and types of wrongdoing, in Hebrew there are many words for different levels and types of forgiveness: *s'lah lanu, m'hal lanu, kapper lanu* -- forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement. The particular word here in the Thirteen Attributes, which we've been translating as "forgiveness" is quite rich: נָשָׂא (*nosei*). It has three primary meanings, representing three levels -- or steps -- that may be helpful in the process of forgiving. The first of which is to bear, or carry.

*Nosei avon vafesha vahata'ah*. God bears, carries, holds all the various types of wrongdoing.

So do we. Any time there's wrongdoing, of any kind, unless and until there's teshuvah, two parties bear that wrongdoing. When we violate the *halakhah* (Jewish law) in the ritual realm -- an *aveirah bein adam lamakom* (a transgression between a person and God) -- until there's *teshuvah*, both we and God "carry" it. And when we wrong someone else -- what we call an *aveirah bein adam l'havero* -- until there's *teshuvah*, both we and the other person carry it.

So this first level of imitating God as *nosei avon* is becoming conscious of these burdens we bear as a result of our own and others actions.

What does the injured party bear? First, the direct consequences -- physical damage, financial harm, hurt feelings, desecration of the holy, etc. Second, there's a burden of negativity: anger, resentment, pain, etc.

Sometimes when we've been wronged, we know exactly what we're carrying. But sometimes we're so focused on the other person -- so immersed in rehearsing what he did and what she said -- that we're completely oblivious to the way we continue to allow that person to keep hurting us by carrying around all this resentment and anger. And sometimes, the hurts we've suffered may be so hard to bear, that we choose instead just to bury them. It doesn't mean we're not still carrying them.

And what burdens do the wrongdoer bear? Here too, there are direct consequences. Whenever we go astray, we cause harm to ourselves. Brokenness within. Blockages that keep us from connecting with our best selves, other people, and God. We damage our souls. And, here too there's the burden of negativity: guilt, shame, etc.

Most of us, I hope, are aware of some guilt, embarrassment when we screw up. But we're likely less aware of the burden of self-doubt; of the way that even small things -- if unaddressed -- undermine our trust in ourselves. And seldom are we fully aware of the scars in our souls.

It doesn't mean we're not carrying them.

We'll talk later this evening about what to do with these burdens. But before we turn back to our prayers for forgiveness, let's do a little self-reflection.

What you are carrying? Start with how you've been wronged. What hurts and wounds, anger, disappointment, resentment -- recent or old -- are you holding?

Now turn to yourself. What are you having a hard time forgiving yourself for? Where do you carry that burden? In your heart, your thoughts? In your body? Your soul? How are you affected? Are you smaller or more limited? Weighed down? Disconnected?

Now visualize the weight of it all -- the resentment or anger, guilt or anxiety -- in concrete terms. Can you awaken compassion for yourself, for that heavy load you bear?

And as you feel that compassion for yourself, see if you can push yourself a bit further. Remember we said that any time there's wrongdoing, of any kind, unless and until there's teshuvah, two parties bear the burden. Who's carrying the flip side of your burdens? First, the burden of your deeds, words, silences, inaction. Is it your family, friends, colleagues, God? Can you feel for them? Is there any way to lighten their load?

And now the hardest part: the people who have hurt you. What burdens do you imagine they carry? Certainly,, even if they don't know it, they're carrying inner brokenness, the burden of having brought pain and fragmentation into the world. Can you feel some compassion for them? You don't have to forgive yet. Just try to carry and hold -- to bear -- your own hurt, insult, and injury, and simultaneously -- compassion for the person who's hurt you.

Now that we're more conscious of what we're carrying -- let's see if we can lighten our load through our *selihot* prayers. Our machzor actually includes three cycles of them, each with the same structure, but a slightly different theme. The theme of this first one is compassion, which we've been talking about. So we'll pray the first cycle now, and go deeper into the meanings of *nosei avon* before each of the other two.

We open the ark, and rise now please, for *Yaaleh*, and the first cycle of our *selihot* prayers.

## Part B

We turn now to the second meaning of *nosei*. Not just to bear or carry, but now also, "to carry away."

*Nosei avon vafesha v'hata'ah*. God carries away -- forgives -- all variety of wrongs. Provided -- that we repent. It's not a free pass. So, to imitate God in being *nosei avon vafesha* -- a forgiving person, characterologically -- doesn't mean that one should forgive immediately in any particular situation. It's obviously much more nuanced than that. Indeed our tradition understands that there are, at the extreme, unforgiveable sins, and that true forgiveness must be earned. God demands that we do *teshuvah*.

*But* -- and this is crucial part -- God teaches us how to do it. Remember the midrash, that God put on a *tallit*, like a prayer leader, and told Moses, when you need forgiveness from Me, here's what I want you to say, and here's how I want you to be: merciful and compassionate, patient, abounding in love and faithfulness, etc. And we're called to imitate God. Which means we're not only supposed to be forgiving of sin, etc., but we're also supposed to say, "this is what you need to do to gain forgiveness from me."

Mostly we tend to think of the burden of reconciliation as being on the party who did the wrong. "They should come and apologize." "If I have to tell you what you did, and I have to ask you for an apology, it doesn't count."

No. If we're holding anger or resentment, the burden is on *us* to articulate what it would take to forgive.

In the best case, we would actually tell the other person. It makes for very healthy relationships. And although it can't be a crazy unreasonable demand, it can and should be substantive. "If I'm going to forgive you, I need to hear you articulate that you understand how you've hurt me, and why I feel as I do." Or "I need you to stop thus and such behavior."

But obviously, the ideal of two-way *teshuvah* and repair isn't always a reality. Perhaps the person we need to forgive is no longer alive. Or not remotely open to hearing it. And there are circumstances when we can't and shouldn't resume a relationship with the other person. When we're at the extremes of malice and evil, or when someone's behavior continues to be damaging for us.

Even then, we nevertheless have an obligation to articulate for ourselves: what would it take for me to let this go? Because forgiveness in this sense isn't dependant on *teshuvah*. Without *teshuvah*, the person in the wrong will continue to bear his or her burden; that doesn't mean we have to continue to carry it too. If we're holding a claim against someone and we can't -- or won't -- articulate what would enable us to forgive, then the sin, so to speak, shifts. Not because the other person is entitled to our forgiveness (though they may be), but because we're not being kind enough to ourselves.

Which takes us to being *nosei avon* -- forgiving -- with ourselves. It doesn't mean abdicating responsibility. This is, after all, Yom Kippur -- it's the time for self-analysis and critique, holding ourselves accountable. We can and should make substantive demands of ourselves. But, if we can't articulate what it would take for us to forgive ourselves, then we've crossed the line from healthy *teshuvah*, to destructively punitive self-judgment.

It's such a powerful question: what would it take for me to let this go? So why don't we ask it more often? Primarily, because it makes us feel vulnerable.

Articulating any need involves vulnerability. Just because we say what we need something, doesn't mean it's going to happen. It may not. Do it anyway. Because the very process of trying in a serious way to figure it out, shifts something inside. It takes our energy away from our anger, away from the other person, and focuses us instead on our healthy needs, and moving on.

And, asking ourselves seriously what it would take to forgive makes us vulnerable because, usually, it reveals that things are a little more complicated than we want to think. We may hear another side of the story from someone else, or we may ourselves realize that we're not 100% innocent either. Or that our expectations were too high, or we were hypersensitive. Or we jumped to conclusions, without complete understanding. And then we'd have to let go of the stories we've been telling ourselves -- sometimes at the root of our identities. I'm right, he's wrong. They're the aggressor; we're innocent.

And, sometimes we discover that all this anger and resentment, or shame and guilt, has been serving some other function -- keeping us from seeing other parts of ourselves, from connecting more deeply with other people. When we ask ourselves the concrete practical question of what we need to forgive -- ourselves or others -- it shortcircuits our self-deception and rationalizations, it makes us more honest. Try it some time, when you or someone you love is on a tear, rehearsing some outrage. If we really hear the question, it usually pulls us up short. A vulnerable place to be.

And, once we start thinking about forgiving, we usually begin to sense that some part of our being -- our soul, the Godly spark within -- really wants, even needs to forgive -- others and ourselves.

So yes, vulnerable. But also empowering.

It is within our power to lay down many of those burdens we identified a few minutes ago -- we only need to articulate for ourselves how. It's a personal thing, and particular to each situation. And it may take us several iterations to really get it. But if we keep trying, and if we make it a *practice* -- to keep asking that question -- over time we may find that we need less and less in order to forgive. We may find that just articulating it is sometimes enough. And that slowly, we are indeed becoming *nosei avon vafesha* -- *forgiving people*.

So as we turn now to *Ki Hineh KaHomer*, and the second cycle of *selihot* prayers, focusing on our vulnerability, I invite us to go back to those hurts and angers we identified earlier, that we're having trouble forgiving, or perhaps some area where we're having trouble forgiving ourselves, or perhaps anger we're holding at God. Pick one thing. And as we pray this second cycle, especially the Thirteen Attributes,, see if you can articulate for yourself as concretely as possible: what would it take to let it go.

### Part C

We turn now to the third cycle of *selihot* -- and the third meaning of *nosei avon vafesha va'hata'ah*. We've seen that *nosei* means to bear or carry, and to carry away or forgive. It also means to raise up, uplift. God is *nosei avon* in that God raises up wrongdoing and brokenness. What can that mean?

Reish Lakish, a Talmudic sage, teaches that when we do *teshuvah* out of fear, our intentional sins are accounted as mere errors. And when we do *teshuvah* out of love, our intentional sins are actually turned into merits. Uplifted. How?

Well, first of all, the process of confronting and healing our dark side keeps us from pride and arrogance. Without that, we'd likely be insufferable.

And, it's how learn. More is revealed and understood -- of ourselves, in our relationships with others, and about God -- through healing brokenness than by being perfect. The midrash expresses this regarding the Golden Calf. Apparently, Moses felt remorse over smashing the Tablets. According to the midrash, God not only forgave him, but said "Do not grieve about the first Tablets. They only contained the Ten Commandments, but in the two Tablets I am about to give you now, there will also be *Halakhot*, *Midrash*, and *Aggadot*" -- meaning, look at all the Torah -- the learning -- that is revealed because of the brokenness! How impoverished our tradition would be, had there never been a golden calf, and all the *teshuvah*, that followed!

And related to these two, there's a third piece, which has to do with specifically with yearning, the theme of this third cycle of seliḥot prayers. Rav Joseph Soloveitchik puts it this way:

The penitent who does not wipe out the past, but rather makes a point to use the memory of one's sins *to enhance one's longings for holiness*, achieves the type of teshuvah that elevates evil to goodness. It is the memory of that sin that releases the power within him/her to do greater things than one did even before the sin. This type of repentance is called *teshuvah me'ahava* (*teshuvah* from love).

This is the next level, the highest level of *nosei avon*, when it comes to ourselves. Not only forgiving ourselves, but transforming our errors and brokenness into merit, by learning from our mistakes, and by using our own failures to quicken our yearning to be better.

Reish Lakish himself -- the rabbi who taught this very concept -- is a perfect example of this. He was a scholar who became a thief, and later repented, coming back to Torah. Only then did he become a truly *great* scholar, through both his deeper understanding, and his yearning.

But how can we be *nosei avon* to others? Can forgiving elevate another's sin? Yes.

First, while the ideal is for the wrongdoer to do *teshuvah* and then be forgiven, sometimes its forgiveness that opens the door to *teshuvah*.

And, we mentioned the distinction between *teshuvah* out of fear, and *teshuvah* out of love. When we hold anger, stand on our rights -- we may sometimes induce someone to do *teshuvah* out of fear. Fear of negative consequences, or just a desire to avoid our anger. But *teshuvah* out of love can only be a response to love. *Teshuvah me'ahava* isn't motivated by avoidance -- it's motivated by yearning and aspiration. A desire for closeness, a desire to be better.

And, when we forgive someone -- and especially when we're *nosei avon*, forgiving people, characterologically -- we have the potential to awaken in others first, the desire to be closer to us, and second, the desire to *be* like us - to emulate us. We become role models.

When we, in imitation of God's Thirteen Attributes, behave in such a way that people admire our compassion and graciousness, our ability to bear insult and nevertheless forgive, we ourselves function as those Thirteen Attributes for others to imitate. We literally bring people closer to God. Think the transformation of Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*. Or, think about someone you know who is truly a forgiving soul. Isn't there a part of you that wishes you could be more like that, or be like that more of the time?

And the potential is there no matter how egregious the behavior. Indeed, the greater the sin, the greater the power of forgiveness when it does inspire genuine *teshuvah*. Think Nelson Mandela.

The story of Reish Lakish is a case in point. What caused him to do *teshuvah*, and ultimately teach this beautiful Torah about *teshuvah* out of love? He met Rabbi Yoḥanan, swimming in the Jordan. And Rabbi Yoḥanan -- one of the greatest scholars ever, confronting this thief -- didn't accuse. He said, "your strength should be for Torah." He forgave him, built on his strengths, and so awakened his yearning. The two became study partners, and eventually Reish Lakish married Rabbi Yoḥanan's sister.

Indeed, one classical commentator (Hizkuni) defines *nosei avon va'fesha* as the language of "lifting the face" (as in the priestly blessing, *yisa Adonai panav elekha*). Forgiveness has the ability to lift someone's face, not only by removing shame and restoring dignity, but in the sense of elevating their vision, raising their sights to a higher way of being, arousing their yearning to attain that higher way of being.

On the first night of Rosh Hashanah, I mentioned a beautiful Hasidic teaching (from the Netivot Shalom) that when Moses said "let me see Your glory," he wanted to know what aspect of God's *kavod* (glory) was revealed/inherent in this whole 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? The answer is in the name of the parashah in which the whole story is told: *Ki Tisa*. "When you uplift."

There's a medieval midrash (*Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer*) that imagines that after the Golden Calf, when Moses prayed for forgiveness, he could have obtained forgiveness for all of us, for all time. But he limited his request for forgiveness to that particular sin, and so God forgave, "according to his word." It's a very strange reading. Why would the midrash imagine that Moses could have gotten forgiveness for everything, forever, and didn't? Did he just blow it?

I think it's suggesting that tempting as that sounds, it wouldn't have been a blessing. Had Moses attained forgiveness once and for all, none of us would ever experience that blessed yearning to do better that comes from working for and being granted forgiveness. And none of us would ever experience the blessing of uplifting another by being ourselves, *nosei avon va'fesha, v'hata'ah*.

We turn now the third cycle of *selihot* prayers.

**MEDITATION FIVE:  
RAV HESED V'EMET  
("Great in Lovingkindness and Truth")  
(Yom Kippur Confessions)**

Part A (Second Confession)

We are about to pray the confession for the second time, focusing on the second level of the soul (*ruah*). This level of the soul corresponds to our emotional lives, and our confession therefore focuses on our failures of love. In this regard, I want to remind us of the Thirteen Attributes we've been studying, and a particular one that we won't get to address in detail: *rav hesed*. "Great in love, lovingkindness"

What does that mean? *Hesed* isn't only about a warm, loving feeling; it's about acting on those loving feelings in an ongoing way. It suggests faithfulness, loyalty, commitment, and is close in meaning to the word *brit*, covenant.

And *rav*? It may be a qualitative term -- God "loves" supremely well. Or it may be a quantitative term -- God loves in abundance. Or, as Samson Raphael Hirsch understands it, it may mean great in number, diverse. God's *hesed* (true lovingkindness), Hirsch says, is very particular; it's uniquely tailored to each and every creature and each and every situation.

So as we turn to the second confession, I invite us to think about our own *hesed*, our own lovingkindness. Is it *rav* -- great in quality, and free-flowing and abundant? Do we act on it, or merely feel it? And are we nuanced in the way we love, not being loving in general, but loving particularly, sensitive to the unique needs of others, and giving accordingly?

Part B (Third Confession)

We confess now the for the third time, corresponding to the third level of the soul (*neshamah*), related to our intellect. In this confession, as we focus on our failures of truth, we consider again the Thirteen Attributes, and in particular the attribute of *emet* ("truth"). Or more accurately, *rav hesed v'emet* ("great in lovingkindness and truth").

*Rav emet*. Again, *rav* may mean great in quality, abundant (that is, God's "truth" is not occasional or partial, but always and complete). Or as some say, it means God doesn't accept "bribes" -- rationalizations, excuses, bargaining. Alternatively, we might even say that *rav* here means "many" -- a call to tolerating and owning multiple truths

Others see *rav hesed v'emet* as one attribute, two sides of the same coin. For example, one commentator (HeAmek Davar) says that God is unlike people, who when they're really committed to lovingkindness are often lacking in truth, and when they're really truthful they are often less loving. In contrast, God is *rav hesed* and *rav emet*, great in lovingkindness at one and the same time. In other words, although we often experience love and truth as polarities, in conflict with one another, that's an indication that we're not looking from a deep or high enough perspective. From God's perspective, *hesed* is not fully loving if it's not also truthful. And *emet* is not fully truthful if it's not also loving.

Finally, there's Rav Joseph Soloveitchik, who says that this teaches us that *teshuvah* -- the

opportunity to gain forgiveness, to repair and start anew -- is based not only in lovingkindness, but also in truth. When we not only apologize and stop a behavior, but really change our character, really transform ourselves, then our forgiveness isn't dependent on God's kindness or love. We become, as it were, a new person, and our beginning anew meets the standards of strict justice and truth.

So as we confess now to our failures of truth, I invite us to think about the extent to which are *rav emet* (great in truth, not bribing ourselves with rationalizations and excuses) and *rav hesed v'emet* (whether our "truth" is infused and integrated with love, and our love is infused and integrated with truth). And finally, to ask ourselves whether our *teshuvah* meets the standards of truth and strict justice -- is our repentance yet fully "true"?

## **MEDITATION SIX: EREKH APAYIM (“Slow to Anger”) (Yom Kippur Morning)**

Since Rosh Hashanah, we’ve been looking at the Thirteen Attributes of God (*Adonai Adonai El Raḥum v’Hanun*), and we’ve seen that they focus overwhelmingly on compassion, lovingkindness, forgiveness, forbearance. In fact, they’re even called the *shelosh esreh midot raḥamim* -- the Thirteen Attributes of Compassion! And we’ve been saying that we’re called to imitate God in all these ways -- as the path to both forgiveness, and finding meaning.

Now we come to an attribute that may be a little surprising: *Erekh Apayim* -- patient, long-suffering, or more literally, slow to anger.

The most common rabbinic interpretation is that “slow to anger” helps us understand the thorniest theological question there is: theodicy. Why do bad things happen in the world, and why do the wicked sometimes seem not only to get away with it, but to prosper? Because God is *erekh apayim* -- slow to punish the wicked, in order to enable them to repent, to do *teshuvah*.

Now, on the one hand, that can be comforting -- if we don’t see justice happening, it’s because it just hasn’t happened *yet*. It’s related to what we spoke about on Rosh Hashanah, taking the long view in trying to make sense of life.

But what if we’re the victim of the sin that God is so slow to punish? Patience may not feel like such a virtue. We’ll soon pray the *Eleh Ezkerah*, remembering all the martyrs of our people. Was God being “patient” with the Romans when they tortured our sages, with the Spanish Inquisition, with all the pogroms? Was God being *erekh apayim* with Nazis?

We sometimes hear Judaism compared unfavorably to Christianity, because the God of the Christian Bible is a “loving God,” while the God of the Hebrew Bible is an “angry God.” It’s such a facile and shallow critique. As we’ve seen, of course the Jewish tradition portrays God as primarily loving, forgiving, compassionate. But is there anger within God? You bet. Thank God.

Here, it’s framed as “slow to anger,” and we’ll talk about the slow part in a minute. But for a moment I want to stay with the inclusion of anger among the Thirteen Attributes at all.

Anger is a necessity. Anger is a companion of compassion, and part and parcel of justice -- we *should* feel anger when we witness or experience injustice, persecution, the violation of essential values, the desecration of the sacred. Moses himself did.

And by the way, because we have a tradition that can tolerate imagining anger within God, our tradition can also tolerate our feeling anger *at* God. Indeed, there’s a bit of anger underlying the *Eleh Ezkerah*. Whether we’re talking about God or human relationships, if love and compassion are to be genuine and meaningful, there must be accountability and mutual responsibility, and there must be room for anger when commitments are violated.

*But*. As important as anger is, I don’t have to tell you that it’s also very dangerous. And -- particularly likely to be over-used. So yes, Judaism portrays God as sometimes angry, but also as *erekh apayim* - slow to anger.

What do we mean by *erekh apayim*? If we're imitating God in this too, what are we supposed to be imitating?

First, *erekh apayim* may mean simply patient, long-suffering. And of course, it's a very short journey from impatience to anger to rage:

Impatience snuffs out consciousness, and before I even know it's happening, I'm leaning on my horn, or you're going hoarse yelling at your child or cursing the postman. At this point we don't even recognize ourselves, and there is little to be done but to try to rein in these feelings enough to minimize any damage we might do. (Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, p. 58-59)

So patience and slow to anger are related.

Indeed, if you've been here with us since the beginning of Rosh Hashanah, I hope you're starting to sense that all these Thirteen Attributes are interrelated, and mutually supportive of each other. *Erekh apayim* -- patient, long-suffering -- is related to what we spoke about last night, *nosei avon* -- the ability to simply "bear" insult and injury -- just to tolerate it. And it's related to what we spoke about on Rosh Hashanah, in terms of taking the very long view -- i.e., eternity -- in trying to make meaning of our lives. God is patient. With the evolutionary process and the literally glacial pace of change in creation generally, and with the evolutionary process of each and every one of us. And we're supposed to imitate that patience in allowing things to unfold and evolve.

But of course, *erekh apayim* also means more specifically "slow to anger." *Erekh*/ ארך means long; we know the word from *orekh yamim*, "length of days." *Apayim*/ אפים is the plural of nostril (*af*); it came to mean anger from the image of the nostrils flaring. So literally, the phrase means "long of angers." The opposite of the idiom "short-tempered" in English (which, strikingly, lacks the idiom "long-tempered").

Now obviously, *erekh apayim* *doesn't* mean a "slow simmer." It's really not about waiting to express or act on one's anger, it's about being slow to become angry. And in this sense it's a little different from "anger management." It's a characterological trait -- derived from a particular worldview, from certain other *midot* (character traits) like humility, and from emotional control and maturity. And it has to be cultivated over time.

Here are a couple of associations that may be helpful. *Erekh apayim* is related to an Aramaic name for God, *arikh anpin*, the "long face" -- meaning not sad, but "facing someone or something for a long time," staying present, focused. And perhaps there's a play on ארך with an *alef* and ארך with an *ayin*, which means "arranged, ordered, prepared." Our anger shouldn't be a sudden flare-up, an instinctual *reaction*, but rather an orderly careful *response*.

Now, I said earlier that the usual reading of *erekh apayim* is that God is slow to respond in anger with the wicked, "in order that the person might do *teshuvah*." Meaning, literally, that God doesn't punish immediately, in the hope that the person will repent and change, and the punishment will never have to come:

what the Mussar tradition offers as evidence for God's patience is the fact that our lives are sustained, even when we do wrong. . . . God is patient and preserves our lives even when our actions happen to hit way off the mark, to give us time to come to deeper realizations, make amends, and return to a straighter way. (Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, p. 56)

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch says that God's *erekh apayim* "gives time for the powers which [God] has granted, and grants again and again, to bear the intended fruit of moral development of life." It "gives patient consideration to [our] moral weakness -- which [is] just what give[s] the possibility of [our] moral greatness." In other words, to be *erekh apayim* is to create time and space for moral growth.

But it's not only an issue of time, of delay. Being *erekh apayim* allows for the possibility of *teshuvah* for a much deeper reason.

One might think that an angry response -- from God, or from another person -- would be the most powerful impetus for *teshuvah*. As I said last night, sometimes that's true. Sadly, sometimes we only realize our error, and we're only willing to change, when we encounter devastating results from our behavior.

But more often, anger is barrier not an opening to change. When we encounter anger, especially quick reactive anger, most often we shut down. We become immediately defensive, closing our hearts, and sometimes our minds.

And even if anger does provoke *teshuvah*, it only evokes *teshuvah* from fear -- the lower level of *teshuvah* that we spoke about last night, change that comes from fear of punishment, or of unpleasant emotions like anger and judgment. There's a higher level of *teshuvah* -- *teshuvah* from love -- that is aspirational, that is based on yearning to be closer to that which is holy, yearning to be holier one's self. But yearnings like that are like delicate flowers, they emerge slowly from seed to seedling to bud to flower, they need to be nurtured. And quick anger is like a boot that stamps them down.

One of my mentors, Steve Stulman, once challenged an essay I had written, critiquing in very strong terms some of the practices in our movement. He agreed with the substance, but he asked me a question I'll never forget: "Do you want to make a statement, or do you want to make a difference?"

A lot of great statements are made in anger. To make a difference, we need to be *erekh apayim*.

And *erekh apayim* isn't only about making a difference out there, in others. It's also about us, about making a difference within.

A sensitive reading of the Biblical stories about this angry, vengeful God reveals something very interesting. In many of the Genesis narratives where God responds angrily or punitively to wrongdoing, or to oppression and injustice -- in almost every case, there's some question or inquiry first. God says to Adam - "where are you?" "did you eat of the fruit of the tree?" God says to Cain -- "where is your brother Abel?" Of both the tower of Babe and Sodom and Gomorroh, the text describes God "going down to see." Why does God have to "go and see"? Doesn't God know? Our commentators say, to teach us patience, to teach that one should always take time to investigate, to see and understand, before reacting.

In other words, we need to be *erekh apayim* because we may be wrong. We may be wrong about the facts, or we may not fully understand the depth of the situation -- and once we allow ourselves to become angry, it's nearly impossible to learn the truth.

There's a curious passage in the Talmud about these Thirteen Attributes. The Torah relates that after Moses heard them, he "hurried," and prostrated himself in prayer (Exod. 34:8). And the Talmud asks (Sanhedrin 111a-b), which one of the Thirteen Attributes caused Moses to do that? Rabbi Hanina ben Gamaliel said: He saw *erekh apayim*, patient and slow to anger. And then the Talmud tells a story:

When Moses ascended on high, he found the Holy Blessed One sitting and writing *erekh apayim*, "long suffering and slow to anger." He said to [God], "Sovereign of the Universe! *Erekh apayim* to the righteous?"

[God] replied, "Even to the wicked."

Moses urged, "Let the wicked perish!"

"OK," God said, "See what it is you desire!"

So when Israel sinned, [God] said to Moses, "Did you not urge Me, '*Erekh apayim* only for the righteous?'"

At which point Moses said, "Sovereign of the Universe! But did You not assure me, 'Even to the wicked!'" . . . .

We all think we have an accurate sense of justice, who deserves, who doesn't. And it's so easy, in a moment of anger, to indulge ourselves with black and white, rigid thinking: "Let the wicked perish!" We're so often wrong. There *is* real evil in the world, no question. But most people, most groups, aren't quite so readily classified as righteous or wicked as we might, in our righteous anger, think. When we're angry, we lose our sense of nuance, we lose perspective. Maybe also our humility. And, is this really the world we desire? A world with no margin for error, where punishment is immediate and total?

Indeed this little midrash is an example of Moses learning to be a little more *erekh apayim*, patient and slow to anger, with God. And it's something we as a Jewish community could learn from today. Many of us are so quick to be angry at Jewish observance, or at texts that we may read or hear about, or about other Jews. How often do we dismiss the liturgy or the Torah -- "that makes no sense," "I can't believe that," or even, "that's offensive" -- without taking the time to study and learn. Sometimes we're even angry and dismissive of God, based on simplistic, childish theologies, without allowing ourselves the time and emotional space to deepen our understanding. This is one of the reasons why regular Torah study is so important. In addition to the substance, the *process* of Torah study is training in humility, respect, patience -- it's training in being *erekh apayim*.

Indeed, in addition to allowing for the possibility that we may already be wrong, being *erekh apayim* is necessary in helping us learn, adapt and evolve.

I'll give you a trivial example. The week before Rosh Hashana, as I sat down to work on precisely this teaching, about being patient and slow to anger, the spacebar on my laptop suddenly stopped working. I immediately become impatient and angry at my computer. How much writing/preparation time was I going to lose waiting for a repair, or even worse, a whole new laptop -- just when I was feeling most pressured. I was crazed for about 15 minutes. And because I was immediately angry, I missed the obvious -- a \$20 external keyboard -- which would enable me to continue to be fully productive immediately. I realized only later what a perfect metaphor I'd been given. *Erekh apayim* is like an internal spacebar (what Alan Morinis

calls “the space between the match and the fuse”) that creates the space allows for creative solutions, adaptations, learning. And mine had stopped working.

To put it really bluntly: anger makes us stupid.

And worse than stupid. When we’re angry, we become disconnected from our wisest truest selves, and from all the other “attributes” -- compassion, graciousness, forgiveness, lovingkindness, truth -- we’re trying to emulate. In rabbinic terms, it’s referred to as “forgetting.” There are numerous commentaries teaching that whenever Moses would become angry (and he sometimes did), he would “forget” some aspect of the Torah.

It’s such a profound insight: anger causes us to forget. To forget our values, and our learning. To forget our love for each other. To forget our shared humanity. To forget who we *are*, and who we want to be.

And its a vicious cycle, because when we forget our values and our love -- when we’re disconnected from who we *are* and from the things that give our lives meaning -- we become anxious and frightened, we feel out of control. And guess what? We’re then very likely to become irritable and impatient, quickly angry, even enraged. Which will make us forget even more.

I think this is at the root of why we are becoming, as Americans, such angry people -- to devastating effect. We are losing our ability to be “*erekh*” anything! As we spoke about on Rosh Hashanah, we are an increasingly impatient society, accustomed as we are to ever shorter frames of reference, and ever quicker responses. Who has the time or patience to be thoughtful and careful in our responses? Not only our external response (the email we fire off, the words we spit out before someone else even finishes a sentence!), but also in our *internal* response -- allowing ourselves time to get past our initial reaction, to unpack the nuances and implications of what we’re receiving, and how it’s affecting us. To allow our own response to unfold slowly.

In our impatience and quick anger we’ve become disconnected from deep sources of comfort and meaning, as result of which we’re more anxious and fearful, resulting in, nationally, a hair-trigger temper. We no longer even respect patience, and thoughtful, controlled responses, certainly not in our leaders. And we are increasingly seduced by angry statements that feed our self-righteous anger, but don’t make a difference. This, at least, is a bi-partisan issue -- from Fox News to MSNBC. And I have to say, it’s making us really stupid, and leading us to very foolish choices.

And I here I feel obligated -- since our *teshuvah* is not only personal, but national -- to speak to some of the rhetoric that is coming from some American Jewish leaders about Israel. As I said on Rosh Hashanah, we can disagree honestly about which policies -- and which candidates, both here and in Israel -- will best protect Israel from the very real, and terrifying, existential threats that surround it. And I’ll say clearly that we have a right to be angry at those who terrorize Israel, and seek her destruction, God forbid, and public outcry against that violence and delegitimization is important.

But -- what’s most important -- to *Israel* -- is that we make a difference and not just a statement. There’s no doubt that it feels good to hear anger expressed on our behalf. But angry statements alone will not make a difference; they will not make Israelis safer or make Israel more secure. What Israel needs more than statements is concrete support and defense, and thoughtful, careful diplomacy that will calm rather than inflame anti-Israel and anti-American rage. Israel

needs us to be *erekh apayim*. Israel needs leadership -- there and here -- that is *erekh apayim*. Not *never* angry, but slow to anger. Because anger makes us stupid.

So, how do we cultivate *erekh apayim*, as a characterological trait?

The first step is awareness. What generally triggers your anger? What enables you to stop that reaction and pause? Start small-- with the little annoyances and insults. Although ultimately it's about being slow to become angry in the first, pausing before expressing anger is a good place to start.

Second, cultivate other character traits that support and sustain being *erekh apayim*. Number one on the list: humility. Both in terms of being humble about our understanding and knowledge -- we might be wrong -- and in terms of our expectations and sense of entitlement. Beyond that, the other thirteen attributes: compassion, graciousness, an abundance of lovingkindness, great faithfulness, a commitment to truth, ability to bear an insult, and to forgive. And faith -- not necessarily in an anthropomorphized God, but in the possibility of change. Or, as we said on Rosh Hashanah when we spoke about *notzer hesed*, faith that impact of lovingkindness will overpower and outlast negativity in a ration of 500:1.

And finally, because anger causes forgetting, we need to develop a good memory. Not a memory for facts and figures, but we need to remember our values, who we are, and who we want to be. We need to remember that we love, and that we are loved.

How do we do that? One image that may help us remember is the word for anger itself: *apayim*, literally the nostrils. In the story of creation, the *apayim* happen to be where God breathes the soul into the human being -- וַיִּפֹּחַ בְּאַפָּיו נְשֵׁמַת חַיִּים -- and God blew into the human's nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7); it's how we became living beings instead of just a clod of earth. So as we say, breathe. Before allowing our nostrils to flare in anger, imagine that first breath of life. When we're angry, we are literally blowing away our life energy, the Godly breath within us, our souls. When we remember to be *erekh apayim*, we instead breathe in Divine energy, the breath of life.

The Torah offers another example, with God again as role model. I mentioned earlier the numerous examples of God "investigating" before responding in anger. God uses another technique too: us. "Shall I not share with Abraham what I am to do?" God famously says about Sodom and Gomorrah, inviting Abraham to argue with God. And, in the story we've been focusing on, the Golden Calf. When did Moses begin praying for forgiveness? When God asked Moses for help in calming down: "leave Me be that My anger may rage against them....." Moses understood, "so the matter depends on me," and he prayed, "Oh Adonai, don't let Your anger rage against Your people."

In fact, the midrash imagines God and Moses making a deal -- "when I run hot," God said, "you run cold. When you run hot, I'll run cold." When the Torah says they spoke *panim el panim* (face to face), that's what it means: God and Moses, calming each other down, reminding each other who they want to be.

We all need someone like that. We need covenantal relationships, partnerships, with people who we can stay present to (be *arikh anpin* with). We need people to say to us, "do you want to make a statement, or do you want to make a difference?" And we need to be those people, for others.

**MEDITATION SEVEN:  
V'NAKEH LO Y'NAKEH  
("Granting Pardon and Not Granting Pardon")  
(Before Neilah)**

Before we turn to the service of Neilah, and the end of these Yamim Noraim, I want to say a word about the last of the Thirteen Attributes: *v'nakeh* ("and pardons"). Not only "forgives," as we spoke about last night, but "pardons, grants atonement, cleanses." This is obviously the essential piece of Yom Kippur. We gain forgiveness by doing *teshuvah*; we're made new on Yom Kippur.

There's just one problem with this. The actual verse, in the book of Exodus, reads: *nosei avon vafesha vahata'ah v'nakeh lo y'nakeh* (Who forgives sin, iniquity and transgression, and Who pardons and does *not* pardon). When we pray it, we just take out that "*lo y'nakeh*" -- the "not pardoning" part.

But what does it mean, pardoning and not pardoning?

First of all, it's always good to be reminded that a life of faith is about paradox. Ultimate questions (such as questions of justice and forgiveness) have to be approached from a both/and, not an either/or perspective.

But here's the normative rabbinic reading, from the Talmud (Yoma 86a): "[God] clears the guilt' (*y'nakeh*) of those who repent, and does not 'clear the guilt' (*lo y'nakeh*) of those who do not repent." Yom Kippur alone -- all this praying and fasting -- doesn't bring atonement unless we do our work, unless we do *teshuvah*.

I'll add another little tweak on this, based on another classic rabbinic teaching. *V'nakeh* -- God pardons sins against God (*aveirot bein adam l'makom*). *V'lo y'nakeh* -- but God will not pardon sins against other human beings (*aveirot bein adam l'havero*), unless we go and ask forgiveness of the people we've hurt.

Here's another reading. Cassuto, a 20th century commentator, reads *v'nakeh lo y'nakeh* as referring to suspended punishment, "and if a person sins again, God exacts retribution from him for both the present and the former sin." As Maimonides writes, the person who says, "I will sin and Yom Kippur will atone, I will sin and Yom Kippur will atone", Yom Kippur is not effective in granting forgiveness.

Taking it all together, it's a reminder -- even at this late point in the day -- that nothing about Yom Kippur is automatic, pro forma. It's an injunction against what Heschel called "religious behaviorism" -- I'll come to shul and go through the motions, and that's enough.

It's not enough. And it's not too late. It's not too late to really engage, to dig down deep, to search our souls, to apologize. It may be that the person you've hurt is sitting right next to you -- we often hurt most the ones closest to us; it's not too late to say I'm sorry. And if the people with whom we need to make amends are not here, it's not too late to make the commitment to doing it right after Yom Kippur -- provided that we then actually *do* it.

But then, why do we take *lo y'nakeh* out of the liturgy? Aren't we changing the meaning?

Partly I think it's a practical thing, to enable authentic prayer to happen. It's too hard to say out loud, in prayer, that God "doesn't pardon." Instead, we're expected to know the Torah text, to know that *lo y'nakeh* follows *v'nakeh*. So liturgically, we leave it out, trusting that we'll hear the echo (more gently) in our heads.

Or, maybe this is an example of the tradition taking something out of context, and thereby "healing" it - a kind of *teshuvah* for the text. The rabbis weren't so shy about that. We're not a fundamentalist, literalist tradition. Thank God!

But really, I think the liturgy is giving us all the benefit of the doubt. It's assuming that none of us are in the category of *lo y'nakeh*, the unpardonable. It's trusting that we're all taking this seriously, that we're all working hard to do our *teshuvah* -- to repair our relationships and to transform ourselves -- that we mean to really change, and we're going to try hard not to be recidivists. That we're not just going through the motions.

So as we turn now to the service of Neilah, let's strive to be worthy of our tradition's trust in us.

## MEDITATION EIGHT: YHVH YHVH (Neilah)

We've been studying throughout these Yamim Noraim the Thirteen Attributes of God -- as a path to both forgiveness and meaning, through personal transformation and imitating God. From Rosh Hashanah to now, we've looked at each of the attributes: *rahum v'hanun, erekh apayim, v'rav hesed v'emet. We've looked at notzer hesed la'alafim, and nosei avon va'fasha v'hata'ah, v'nakeh.*

Now, as Yom Kippur is coming to a close, and we'll soon pray our *selihot* prayers for the last time this year, I want to go back to the beginning: Adonai Adonai (YHVH YHVH). The four-letter name of God (pronounced "Adonai"), appearing not once, but twice. Why the doubling of the name?

Liturgically, as we pray the Thirteen Attributes, human beings calling upon God, it makes sense. In the Torah, names are doubled as an indication of love and affection (*lashon hiba*), e.g., when God calls Abraham, Abraham (Gen. 22:11), Jacob, Jacob (Gen. 46:2), Moses, Moses (Exod. 3:4) and Samuel Samuel (I Samuel 3:10). So we too are expressing our affection, our love, for God, by doubling God's name.

And, the doubling of the name is an intensifier, an indication of urgency, a request for particular attentiveness. When God calls human beings by a doubled name, the response is almost always *hineni* ("here I am"). Abraham, Jacob, and Moses all respond by saying "*Hineni*," here I am not just physically, but here I am with the fullness of my being -- attentively listening, ready to respond, completely open. That's what we're asking of God. We read it in our haftarah this morning (Isaiah 58:9), "then when you call, Adonai will answer; when you cry out, Adonai will say *hineni*."

But what about in the original context, when God chanted the Thirteen Attributes to Moses following the Golden Calf? Why would God call out God's own name, twice?

The classic interpretation in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 17b) is that the doubling of the name is an indication that God is eternal, unchanging over time. And specifically, that God is consistent even when we're not: "'Adonai, Adonai': I am Adonai before a person sins, and I am Adonai after a person sins and repents." Moreover, the particular name of Adonai evokes our experience of God as loving and compassionate. So, in the narrow sense, it's about God's continuing compassion. God is equally loving to us no matter what -- after we go astray just as before -- like unconditional parental love.

And in this sense, it's certainly worthy of emulation by us, at least in our most intimate and committed relationships. We may disappoint and hurt each other, we may need to do *teshuvah* and reconcile with each other, but our fundamental love and compassion for each other ought never to waiver.

But the midrash also has a broader meaning. It suggests that there is a quality of goodness, possibility, hopefulness, wholeness -- that cannot be destroyed, no matter how far-reaching or destructive our deeds. The name YHVH (which we pronounce Adonai) is actually a combination of the letters in the various forms of the verb "to be" -- *hayah* (was), *hoveh* (is), *yi'yeh* (will be). Almost as though God is saying "I, Being, Was-Is -Will-Be."

I remember after September 11th, going down to the beach at night, seeing the vast array of stars, and taking great comfort in this sense that there's something human beings can't reach and can't ruin. Something pure and holy, both outside us and within us, that remains pure and holy, no matter what. Adonai before we sin; Adonai after we sin.

And, if the Thirteen Attributes are (so to speak) God's "self-articulation," the doubled name suggests to us something else. It's the prelude to the rest of God's "attributes." As we've said, these aren't really qualities of God, but rather descriptions of the way we experience God; they're channels, or vessels, through which the Divine light and energy is refracted into the world. And before we hear them, we need to understand up front that it's impossible to define God in words other than through God's name. It's somewhat similar to God saying to Moses at the burning bush, *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* ("I will be who I will be"); I can only be defined as myself. Here too, God is saying, in a sense, "I am Who I am" -- no further explication is possible.

Remember Moses' questions, in the aftermath of the Golden Calf? "Teach me Your ways, that I may know You," he pleads. "Show me Your glory." They were questions revealing a kind of crisis of personal and theological meaning. 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?

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch says that what Moses really longed for, what would restore his sense of meaning and enable him to move forward, was a sense of unity within all this fragmentation and diversity. Moses saw the many different ways that the Divine is expressed in the world -- sometimes in patterns that affirm faith, other times in patterns that seem to undermine it (the suffering of the righteous, the prospering of the wicked; horrific illnesses; "natural" disasters) -- and he thought, there must be an underlying factor of unity, there must be some way in which all of these ways of being are part of a larger oneness. He wanted an understanding of the way in which all existence is derived from God's Being, even if the connections seem very distant.

Here's the answer he got: "all these many 'attributes,' ways of being that you're about to hear, that you experience in the world -- they are merely refractions into different colors of the singular Divine light. I'm telling you upfront, Adonai Adonai -- I am a unity."

And the implications for us, in terms of *imitatio dei*, imitating God? We obviously can't literally imitate this. We're not eternal, unchanging over time. We're not pure being. We're not, unfortunately, integrated oneness. We live in the world of fragmentation, duality, paradox. A human being is a being in tension with itself, neither completely earthly, animal, nor completely divine. We partake of two realms.

But, we can try. The doubling of God's name calls us to the essential, ultimate goal of *teshuvah*: striving to be consistently, fully, one's most authentic self -- inside and out. Striving to really acquire all the character traits we've been talking about, to integrate them into in our being, in perfect balance, so that we're not thrown off our game so easily. Striving to be, *uniquely*, your own self -- fulfilling the purpose and mission for which you were created, unique in all the world, in the history of time.

We might think of it as striving to be one's self "squared." So that if someone were to ask, for example, who is Lenore? The only real answer would be, "Lenore."

That's what these High Holy Days are really about. They're about discovering, who is my best self? When am I that best self? And how can I be that best self more often, more consistently?

Now, I want to come back to the classical talmudic reading of the doubling of God's name. The Talmud doesn't say "I am Adonai before you sin and I am Adonai after you sin." It says, "I am Adonai before you sin, and I am Adonai after you sin *and do teshuvah.*"

Does that mean that if we sin and don't do *teshuvah*, God is no longer -- so to speak -- God? In some sense, yes.

As we spoke about last night, when we do wrong, we cause all kinds of damage. First, there's the actual damage in the world -- to another person, or to some physical thing. Second, there's the damage to ourselves. And, third, there's the damage to our relationship with God -- a distance we create between ourselves and God. When we do wrong, we become separated from Adonai. We, so to speak, drive out God's Presence. Until we do *teshuvah*. Our *teshuvah* heals all that brokenness, it bridges the distance.

But then we have a problem, posed most sharply by Rav Joseph Soloveitchik.

We know we can't do *teshuvah* alone. We need help. So once we've done wrong, and separated ourselves from God, who helps us come back? "What is the internal voice that seizes hold of [us] and draws [us] away from sin?" Soloveitchik asks. And he finds the answer in this doubling of God's name. The first reference to Adonai refers to God removing God's self from the person who has done wrong. But the second reference to Adonai teaches us that there is an aspect of God Who is there, Who remains, even after a person sins, no matter what. In other words, the *Shekhinah* (the presence of God) never departs completely from any person -- not matter how far we have gone, God remains hidden in the inner recess of the heart. And it's that aspect of God within Who is calling us back.

It's such a beautiful reading, with a very profound implication. When we do wrong, we're not just pushing God away, exiling God from our lives. If it is true that an aspect of God remains, always, within our hearts, no matter what, then, when we behave in such a way as to "drive God out" and separate ourselves from God, *we actually create a disruption within God's unity.*

This is the deeper mystical implication of the Talmud's teaching. God says, so to speak. "I am Adonai (Oneness, Being beyond time) before you sin. But when you sin, and don't do *teshuvah*, then so to speak -- I am not Adonai. I," God says "am no longer whole, but divided. Until *you* heal My brokenness through your *teshuvah*. Then I am Adonai, even after you sin, through your *teshuvah.*"

In fact, in a *humash*, a printed book of the Torah, right here in the Thirteen Attributes there's always a little vertical line between these two mentions of God's name. It's called a *meteg*, and it tells the reader to pause -- to create a slight break -- between Adonai -- and Adonai. A break caused by our deeds.

Indeed, it may be that *the* most important part of the Thirteen Attributes is that little line -- that brief pause within the names of God. That gap is the widest, most significant distance in all of creation -- the Grand Canyon is nothing compared to that little line, representing the disunity within the divine caused by our deeds. What does it take to bridge it, to heal it? It takes *teshuvah*. And most especially, *teshuvah me'ahavah*, repentance from love, from that place of yearning.

How do we get there? Soloveitchik was on to something when he asked the question: if we've become distant from God -- if we've exiled God by breaking the covenant, by wrongdoing, large or small, or (I'll take the liberty of expanding his teaching a little), if there's a distance between us and God because we feel God has broken the covenant (*i.e.*, if we've exiled God from our lives for any of the many reasons and life experiences that may cause a person to turn away) -- then who is calling?

Who called out the Thirteen Attributes on Sinai? The Torah says, *vaya'avor Adonai al panav vayikra* ("Adonai passed before his [Moses'] face and *he* called out") *Adonai Adonai* etc." All this time, I've been telling you that the thirteen attributes are God's response to Moses. The truth is, the text isn't clear. Did God pass in front of Moses' face and call out to him, "*Adonai Adonai El Rahum v'Hanun* etc"? Or, did God pass in front of Moses' face, and in response, Moses called out to God, "*Adonai Adonai El Rahum v'Hanun* etc".

Who is calling?

I want to suggest that the ambiguity here is the key to the most profound meaning of the Thirteen Attributes. On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about a deeper meaning of the idea of imitating God, *midah k'neged midah* -- measure for measure, attribute by attribute. And I said that it's not just a simple tit for tat; if we behave compassionately, we'll be treated compassionately. But, rather, that God's "measures", *midot*, are actually responsive to, reflective of our own. It's a two way mirroring, a correspondence: we strive to imitate or reflect God, Who, in turn is a reflection of us.

So who is calling?

When I'm moved spiritually, is it God calling, or my own internal yearning for aspiration? When I'm moved to do *teshuvah* (*hirhurei teshuvah*), am I listening to my conscience, feeling my own guilt and inadequacy, or am I being called to return? When I'm moved to come to shul -- even if I'm not sure what I believe, or what exactly I hope to gain by coming -- what is that made me come? My connection to my ancestors and my people? My own identity? Or Some One else, God?

Who is calling?

This question is one of the reasons why so many people have such trouble with faith. Because we want an answer to the question. What's externally objectively out there, and what's a product of my own desires?

Here's what Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev says:

Read it thus: *Vayikra Adonai, "Adonai."* "Adonai cried out -- 'O Adonai!' It is the *neshamah*, the soul, calling to the Holy Blessed One. For the soul of a person is a divine portion from above. Thus when "Adonai passed by", that is, when the feeling of love and awe for Heaven overwhelms one, the divine within, "Adonai," cries out to the divine above, "O Adonai."

This is one of the highest levels of *teshuvah* -- connecting with that part of ourselves that is of God, the aspect of "Adonai within." And allowing ourselves to be overwhelmed by love and by longing -- by the yearning of our soul to heal fragmentation, to reconnect with the Oneness from which we are separated and yet still a part, to bridge the gap between Adonai and Adonai. To

cross that little line. That's the *teshuvah* that not only repairs our own brokenness, but heals, so to speak, the brokenness within God.

Who is calling? Did God call to Moses, or did Moses call to God? Is it me, or is it God? YES.

The closer we come to embodying God's attributes, to living them, such that we call them not only in words but in our *being*, through our lives -- the blurrier that line of who is calling, gets. But, paradoxically, at the same time -- the less we need to make a clear distinction in order to make meaning. The closer we come, the greater is our longing, until we not only don't *need* a clear answer to "is it me or is it God," but we actually can't even bear the possibility of the question.

When we pray the Thirteen Attributes in the Torah service, as we did this morning, they're followed by a verse from Psalm 69, *va'ani tefilati l'kha Adonai et ratzon*. It's translated here "May this be an auspicious time, Adonai, for my prayer." But translated hyper-literally, it yields other meanings: "And I, I am my prayer to You, Adonai" -- would that our lives would be prayers offered to God! Or even more profoundly, *va'ani tefilati, l'kha Adonai* -- "And I, I am my prayer, which is Yours, Adonai."

What is a human life, but a prayer of God? A divine yearning, longing, expressed in and through our being? And the highest level of *teshuvah*, is to imitate God as Adonai Adonai, to fulfill the prayer that God prayed in creating us -- to *be* that prayer.

And what of Moses' prayer, in that moment of yearning and learning, Moses' prayer to which the Thirteen Attributes were God's answer, *Hareni na et kvodekha* ("show me Your glory")? It means everything we've talked about: "teach me to make meaning, to make sense of You, Your justice, Your world. Teach me to make sense of me. Let me see sense Your Oneness, despite all the confusing fragmentation that I see, the cognitive and emotional dissonance I bear. Show me how to find Your glory in the human capacity to harm and rebel, in human failings and sin, in my own failings and sin."

And -- *hareni na et k'vokha* -- we can now read not only "show me Your glory", but "reveal through me, Your glory." Make Yourself visible, manifest, in me, through me. "Please God," Moses prays, "teach me how to embody Your dreams. Teach me how to be an answer to Your prayer."