

The 13 Attributes (*Midot*) – God Teaches *Us* how to Ask *Him* for Forgiveness

The section known as "God's 13 Attributes (*midot*)", from Exodus 34:6-7, forms the heart of the *Slichot* (Forgiveness) prayers of the High Holiday season. Along with *Birkhat Kohanim* and *Kriat Shma*, it, as Torah verse, is amongst the oldest texts in Jewish liturgy, but unlike the priestly blessing, it was not originally meant as prayer. Its development into this role is fascinating historically and spiritually.

Following the incident of the Golden Calf Moses managed to get God to cancel the punishment He had decreed for the Jewish people (Ex. 32:9-14), but *not* Divine forgiveness (vv 30-35). In his persistence to achieve God's reconciliation with the people, Moses utilizes his special relationship with God ("The Lord would speak to Moses *panim el panim*, face to face", Ex. 33:11), asking to see God's Presence (*kevodecha*) (v 18). God offers to pass His "goodness" before Moses, though not His face, since "no human can see Me and live" (v. 20). The revelation that occurs is quite remarkable, beyond our comprehension. The Lord descended in a cloud, "stood with him there" and proclaimed both His name (Ex 34:5) and the "attributes" (**Text 1 and Questions**). Right there, on the spot, Moses challenges God "to deliver," to act in accordance with the mercy and forgiveness He has attributed to Himself.

Moses feels the need to utilize "the 13 attributes" text again a year later. In the book of Numbers, the spies return to the people with a report that causes the Israelites to express disbelief in God's ability to lead them into the land. God, in fury, threatens to wipe out the people of Israel. Standing between the jilted God and the "stiff-necked" people, Moses recites *some* of the attributes as a plea for forgiveness (**Text 2 and Questions**). His choice of words worked; God's response is immediate and unequivocal: "I have pardoned according to your words (סְלַחְתִּי כְּדַבְּרְךָ)" (Num 14:20). Moses thus opened the path for using the 13 *Midot* as prayer, and indeed for molding them as needed.

Since Moses' strategic use of the 13 *Midot* to overcome God's wrath (not without justification), others have used them as well, including prophets (e.g. Joel 2:13) and David Hamelech himself, in Psalm 145 (commonly known as "*Ashrei*" in our *tefilla*), (v 8 - *chanum v'rachum*, "gracious and compassionate"). Not surprisingly, it is usually the "positive" attributes that are quoted, those assuring a favorable treatment by God.

Interestingly enough, in one instance these special attributes cause great anger and distress. Jonah is furious at God for being kind and merciful and accepting the *tshuva* (repentance) of the citizens of Ninveh (**Text 3 and Questions**). In great irony, Jonah's harsh words against God echo the very words that describe God's forgiveness to the Jewish people at the time of the Golden Calf. Jonah does not explain his wrath, but it does pose the issue of the place of *tshuva* and forgiveness in a world where accountability and responsibility for one's actions are important means for maintaining social order.

The power of the 13 *Midot* fascinated the Rabbis as well. In the Talmud Rabbi Yochanan (3rd century Eretz Yisrael) gives an extraordinary explanation of their uniqueness, painting a daring and beautiful picture of the event: God wrapped Himself (in a Tallit)

like a *Shaliach Tzibbur* (the one leading the prayers of the congregation before God) and taught Moses how to pray (Text 4 and Questions). While we normally think of prayer as words we say in an attempt to reach God, here God is portrayed as reaching out for our pleas for forgiveness. He sets the example, He gives us the text.

Rav Yehuda, in the same passage, views the event as a covenant (the ברית שלש עשרה mentioned in Slichot) and concludes that it is a binding agreement: prayer using the formula of the 13 attributes will never be turned away. It is as if God has given Moses the "magic formula" for achieving forgiveness.

Slichot is the perfect opportunity to use this magical formula. Seeing how Moses and the Rabbis of the Talmud "played with" or "interpreted" the original text quite broadly, the composers of the *Slichot* service took liberty themselves (Text 5 and Questions)– they quoted the list from Ex 34:6-7 literally, but omitted the end (*lo yinakei*, etc "yet He does not absolve all punishment"). What has this done to the meaning of the text? And they did not stop there. Lest we have any doubts about the potential of our *Slichot* prayers, they included God's reply to Moses' plea, invoking the verse, in the tough situation following the report of the spies: And the Lord said "סְלַחְתִּי כְּדַבְרְךָ - I have pardoned according to your words" (e.g., in the *Slichot* of Yom Kippur Maariv). The potential for forgiveness is no longer in Divine hands but in our own. God's forgiveness is as sincere, and only as sincere, as our desire to be forgiven.