



## Elul and the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy

Each month comes with its special lights and gifts and energies. And mostly we learn about the month from the correspondences presented in the *Sefer Yetzira*. Each month has a letter, a special sensitivity, a part of the body and an astrological sign. The *Sefer Yetzira* informs us that on Elul:

המליך אות י במעשה, יד שמאל בנפש, בתולה (virgo) בשנה :

Hashem caused the letter *yud* to rule over [the sense of] action, the left hand/arm in the *nefesh*, and the astrological sign of virgo in the year.

And so, when the *Sefer Yetzira* reveals that “המליך אות י במעשה” (HaShem caused the letter *yud* to rule over action) it is basically informing us that in this “month of *teshuva*” we need to reflect on our life: How is it going? and Where is it going? This month is a time to harvest the lessons of the previous year and formulate a prayer vision for the coming year. That’s what it means “for *yud* (the letter of HaShem’s name which corresponds to the *sefira* of wisdom/*chokhma*) to rule over action.” We should live a mindful life. People should look at our actions and say, כולם בחכמה עשיתה (“Wow, everything she does, she does it with such wisdom, such thoughtfulness”).

The labor of thinking these questions through, writing down concrete visions, and crafting resolutions is a מעשה/action in itself, and it is the primary work of Elul. This is the אב מעשה (the action behind all other actions) that will hopefully affect, uplift, inform and guide all the myriad of מעשים /*ma’asim* this coming year, so that they are coordinated and build upon each other to create a year of joyful forward motion. So, what exactly does this work entail. As explained, it is a two-fold task of making closure and creating vision.

- The first is a backward facing reflection on the year gone by. What went right and what went wrong? How did I contribute to its successes? What was my role in its failures? What can I do to fix it? What needs to change, and what’s just fine the way it is? This backward focused work also includes a more practical dimension of resolving conflicts, returning borrowed objects, paying off debts, making neglected apologies. That’s one part of the work. To tie up loose ends, sort through the harvest of the previous year, leave the bad behind and extract the good.
- And then with all that under our belt, we need to now look forward and articulate our visions, prayers, hopes and resolutions for the coming New Year.  
We should come to Rosh Hashana with a proposal in hand. As if to say, “HaShem it’s worth investing in my life, because this is what I’m going to do for you this year. The ROI (Return On Investment) is unquestionably worth your while. This is the contribution I intend to make to your global project of *tikun olam*. I’m going to improve and develop my property (my *dalet amot*) in the following ways (XYZ)...I’m going to contribute to the Jewish people and the planet in the following ways (XYZ). A small investment of blessings on your part will pay off in a bounty of *tikun* on my part. You will not regret your venture.”

Yet the energy of each month also derives from the formative Biblical events that occurred within its interval of time. And so, one of these main formative events for Elul is that Moshe ascended Mt. Sinai for the third time, for the third set of forty days. On the first forty days he

received the First Tablets (*luchot*) and its תורה שבעל פה, its unwritten body of interpretations and explanations that express Hashem's intention behind each of the verses and words and letters and crowns of the written text (תורה שבכתב). This first ascent ended abruptly with the calamity of the Golden Calf. The second forty days Moshe pleaded for forgiveness and prevailed. The third forty days he received the Second Tablets and HaShem revealed to him the secret of the Thirteen Middot of Rachamim (The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy). This formula for invoking Divinity's unconditional compassion was revealed to Moshe on Rosh Chodesh Elul.

The passage is quite dramatic. HaShem conveys to Moshe (according to Rashi) that all the prayers for mercy up to that point were based on *zechut avot* (the *merits* of our ancestors). And there is a lot of merit there. We are talking not just about the merits of our founding patriarchs and matriarchs—but also about the ancestors of all of our personal lineages. The fact that we are here and Jewish is because they sacrificed blood, sweat, and tears for Torah, truth and Jewish identity. Yet HaShem, here, is letting Moshe know that there is, at least, the *concept* that *zechut avot* could run out. It's like money in the bank and we could spend it and exhaust it.<sup>[i]</sup> HaShem was revealing to Moshe that if such a desperate moment should arrive, there is another string we can pull—a surefire and inexhaustible one—which is called *brit avot* (HaShem's covenant with the Avot). *Brit Avot* is HaShem's commitment to the eternal survival of the children of Avraham and Sarah, which He promised explicitly. *Brit avot* is premised on HaShem's commitment to His word. And, obviously, HaShem is true to His word.

לֹא-מֵאַסְתִּים וְלֹא-גָעַלְתִּים לְכַלֵּתָם לְהַפֵּר בְּרִיתִי אִתְּם

I will not cast them away, nor will I loathe them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them...[Lev. 26:44]

And it is that string that gets pulled when we recite the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.<sup>[ii]</sup>

The idea being that these thirteen descriptions of Divine compassion, when spoken in a prayer gathering, are always answered, are always potent to invoke mercy. The question is, How?

There are two ways to sweeten *dinim* (harsh judgements).

- By only bringing welcomed, joyful things (ie, revealed good) into the world.
- By stretching/expanding our capacity to see through the outer layers of life into the heart of concealed good that is always there. כל דעבד רחמנא לטב עבד. (Everything that the Merciful One does is good). In this mode of sweetening the *dinim* we are not praying for HaShem to change our circumstances (necessarily). Rather we are praying for HaShem to change and stretch our capacity to see and embrace the good in whatever circumstance HaShem brings. We are asking for x-ray vision. [see Appendix 1]

And it is the latter mode of sweetening that is primarily effected by the Thirteen Middot of Rachamim. Kabbalistically these thirteen middot are the thirteen channels that link the superconscious root of soul (the *keter*) with the conscious layers of mind, with *chokma* and *bina* (Insight and Discernment, right brain and left brain)

The disparity between the expansiveness of the *keter*—the superconscious, radiant wellsprings of absolute good, versus the constricted (*katnut*) state of our *chokma/bina* (conscious mind) with its limited breadth and depth...the greater their disparity, the more we experience life as harsh and cruel. For the good that's coming down (from *keter*) is too bright for us to see. It's a light that appears as darkness to our narrow and short-sighted mind. And

so its goodness is concealed, and sometimes so profoundly so, that it appears as its opposite, ie bad. [see Appendix 2]

In some deep sense (some kabbalistic sense) the more rectified prayer is not for Hashem to only bring welcomed things into our life, but rather that He/She/It should stretch our capacity to see and experience the good that is always hidden in the moments and circumstances of life. **The prayer is that HaShem should feel free to choose the speediest path to redemption, and that we should have the depth of vision (of x-ray vision) to see and truly experience (to whole-heartedly embrace) the good of it.** Not because it's the spiritually correct thing to do. Not because of peer pressure. Not because the mind is dismissing the heart's experience. But because we are genuinely and naturally engaged with the good at whatever level it be found. Because that is what we actually see.[\[iii\]](#)

In Elul we say that the King is in the field. On Rosh Chodesh Elul the sefardim start reciting the Thirteen Middot in their *slichot*. Generally we think of the "King is in the field" as conveying that HaShem is more accessible to us, ie to our prayers and our strivings. But it is also true that we are more accessible to HaShem...that the channels of *ruach hakodesh* are more free-flowing in Elul. That HaShem is letting us know what He wants from us, and what He wants us to be praying for. And so it is a time of not just formulating and reciting our prayer-vision (which is important), but to also ask HaShem to help us grow in our capacity to sense/taste/and see even the slightest traces of good: טעמו וראו כי-טוב ה' / Taste and see that HaShem is good. Having penetrating vision to detect even the slightest photons of "good" is a major key to quality of life and also, on a collective level, to healing the self-destructive habit of *sinat chinam*.

I was reading in Science News that they've discovered that bees have even more sensitive scent detectors than dogs, and they are training them to sniff out explosives, etc. We need to train our inner bees to sniff out *tov*.

There is a saying that flies are drawn to wounds, bees are drawn to honey. So, be like a bee that detects even the slightest traces of *tov* in each moment. And, since He/She/It "Is good and does good / הטוב והמטיב", this is synonymous with detecting the slightest trace of G-d Presence in that moment as well. This skill and *chush* is not just a key to quality of life. It is major tool for bringing mashiach now, for if the primary obstacle is *sinat chinam*, then becoming a master of detecting *tov* (even in the people that are hard to tolerate), is a major contribution to making this world, mashiach-friendly.

So I want to bless us, as individuals and as a community, that we open our hearts and our minds to *HaShem's* communications to us at this time. That we catch His hints and turn them into holy prayers that pierce the firmaments and sweeten the *dinim* (harsh decrees) at their root. May the combined power of our prayers and visions transform our lives in ways that are only good. And may they create a vessel of vision and yearning that is big enough and strong enough to embrace our individual and collective destinies, and to pull mashiach into the world now.

## Appendix 1

**A Time for tears.** R. Yochanan ben Zakai was the most illustrious scholar of his time. He was the originator and decisor of many (if not most) of the rabbinic laws of his generation. In the Torah's value frame, this is the greatest distinction a soul can achieve – to be the one who determines a rule of practice that Jews obey generation after generation till the end of time.

Chanina ben Dosa, in contrast, was a master of prayer. There is no indication that he even contributed to Talmudic discussions, let alone shaped their outcome. Yet the Talmud claims that when R. Chanina would come to the words in the prayer liturgy, “Blessed is God Who causes the winds to blow and the rain to fall...” the winds really did blow, and the rains really did fall.

The Talmud relays the following incident:

*Yochanan's son was deathly ill and neither prayer nor medicine could reverse the decree. R. Chanina came to R. Yochanan's home, and R. Yochanan asked him to pray for his son. R. Chanina put his head between his knees and cried to Heaven for the healing of R. Yochanan's son. R. Chanina's prayer prevailed, and the son enjoyed a spontaneous recovery. R. Yochanan confessed that he could have prayed from here to eternity and he would not have succeeded in healing his son. R. Yochanan's wife remarked, “Perhaps R. Chanina is greater than you.” R. Yochanan responded, “No, I am like a minister before the king, and R. Chanina is like a servant.”*

The meaning of R. Yochanan's remark is that in some ways, a servant is more familiar with the king. He spends more hours with him and does not knock before entering. Yet still, the minister holds the higher rank and communes with the king about matters that are weighty and profound.

Tzadok HaKohen, a 19th century chassidic master, explains that R. Yochanan and R. Chanina were both *tzaddikim*, but of different sorts. R. Yochanan had a deep and gifted mind. He penetrated to the heart of whatever he studied and exposed all facets of the question. He headed the inner circle of Talmudic sages versed in the mysteries of Kabbalah.

Chanina, in contrast, was a pure and trusting soul. He took things at face value and did not spend time analyzing the world.

For R. Chanina, the fact that HaShem would chasten His most trusted servant, R. Yochanan, with the grief of losing a child was intolerable. God is good, and fair, and kind. He does not recompense bad for good. R. Yochanan devoted every fibre of his being to God, and it was unthinkable that God would not respond in kind. All this R. Chanina conveyed through his prayer. HaShem loved R. Chanina and wanted to relieve his distress, and so he healed R. Yochanan's son, for R. Chanina's sake.

Whereas with R. Yochanan, HaShem knew that he would probe the mystery of his ordeal and reconcile the fact of HaShem's absolute goodness even with the ultimate travail of losing a child. HaShem could do what He needed to do, and R. Yochanan would explain it for good.

The least painful and most efficient route through life was different for these two rabbis, and R. Chanina's *katnut* was able to accomplish benefits that R. Yochanan's *gadlut* could not.

## Appendix 2

### ***The Mechanism of Concealed Good Accompanying the Descent of Lights from Above to Below:***

It is true that Hashem is pure, simple Oneness. Yet, when God interacts with creation, He manifests a hierarchy of attributes from above to below—from the inner, higher, essential, and concealed realms to the outer, lower, superficial, and revealed realms. It follows then, that revealed good derives from the revealed levels of God (i.e., the outer, lower, and more superficial modes of Divine Presence). Conversely, concealed good (i.e., suffering) must then come from God's inner, higher, more essential and concealed Self.

The implications of this teaching are profound. It means that in suffering one encounters Hashem at a level of depth and intimacy that is beyond all previous experience. This revelation of light (and good) is “bigger” than anything one has ever known. The “vessel” of one's life is too small right now to receive and perceive this new increment of good (and God). It must stretch beyond itself to accommodate the new light, which is forcing its way in. The process is painful. The dilation hurts. One *sees* only darkness and bad. But in retrospect, when the work is done and the growth integrated, the event takes on a different meaning. It gets reframed, and from this new and slightly expanded perspective, it is even perceived as a (reluctantly welcomed) gift. When hidden good finally becomes visible as revealed good, it is called a blessing in disguise. Depending upon the magnitude of the suffering, this process can take days, years and even lifetimes.

---

## ENDNOTES

[i] In fact, according to kabbalistic sources, that is exactly what happened by the end of our Egyptian exile.

[\[ii\]](#) I will proclaim the name of HaShem before you: to teach you the procedure for invoking compassion even if *zechut avot* is all spent. [from Rosh Hashanah 17b]

...וקראתי בשם ה' לפניך: ללמדך סדר בקשת רחמים אף אם תכלה זכות אבות

and I will have compassion: At the time I will want to have compassion. Until this point, He promised Moshe that “at times I will answer, and at times I will not answer.” Yet here, when HaShem revealed the Thirteen Attributes, Hashem was saying to him, “Behold! I make with you a unilateral covenant” (Exod. 34:10). HaShem promised (brings Rashi) Moshe that the Israelites would never return empty-handed, would never return without an answer to their prayers. -[from Rosh Hashanah 17b]

ורחמתי: עת שאחפוץ לרחם. עד כאן לא הבטיחו אלא עתים אענה עתים לא אענה, אבל בשעת מעשה אמר לו (שמות לד י) הנה אנכי כורת ברית, הבטיחו שאינן חוזרות ריקם

[\[iii\]](#) If nothing else, to see the entire chain of unfolding effects that will inevitably bring infinitely more good/joy/blessing than the pain/loss/bad. To be able to see/know that at the beginning, definitely softens/sweetens the sufferings.