

TORAH
OF
Reconciliation

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to conflict resolution in other places where passion and intractable division are to be found.

God's Essence Is Mercy

Moses said to the Lord: "Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your ways, that I may know You, to the end that I may find grace in Your sight; and consider that this nation is Your people." (Exodus 33:13)

And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed: "The Lord, the Lord, God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; keeping mercy to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin; and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, to the third and to the fourth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7)

"The Lord! The Lord!": [The repetition of the Name implies that God's] attribute of compassion is the same before one might transgress and after one might transgress and seek to do repentance. (Rashi, Exodus 34:6)

"God": Likewise this Name [El] represents the quality of compassion. And thus [the Psalmist] says: "My God, my God [Eli, Eli], why have You abandoned me?" (Psalms 22:2). One would not address the quality of judgment [of God] with [the question] "Why have You abandoned me?" (Rashi, Exodus 34:6)

"Long suffering": He is patient and not quick to anger. Perhaps one will seek to do repentance. (Rashi, Exodus 34:6)

"Abundant in goodness": For those who need kindness who lack sufficient merits. (Rashi, Exodus 34:6)

God appears in Torah both angry and patient, severe and compassionate by turns. God's compassion compels God to bring the Jewish people out of their enslavement, to demonstrate great patience with Pharaoh, to provide

ample nourishment in the wilderness, to give Torah on Sinai, and to lead the people to their promised land. God is also angry with Pharaoh and vexed to the point of violence with the people at many points along their way. Remarkably, this passage in Torah has, as it were, God expressing God's own inner essence. Compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation are the deepest divine qualities. Anger is not at the root of God.

The tradition refers to these words as "the thirteen attributes" of God. That the sages attributed great importance to this passage is shown by their bringing it into the liturgy at critical times of the year on major festivals and by ordaining the reading of these words from the Torah at frequent intervals. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, these thirteen attributes become a thread woven throughout the entire day. While the purpose is to invoke and pray for the manifestations of God's compassion, these qualities were continually held up prominently for emulation in human affairs.

At their root, these words express a strong determination to effect reconciliation. Transgression marks a break in the relationship between God and a human being. Forgiveness brings healing to that state of brokenness. God provides an ever-open pathway to return to God's Presence.

...And that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, to the third and to the fourth generation. (Exodus 34:7)

These thirteen attributes do not solely express forgiveness and compassion. They also contain this promise of punishment that is not only meted out to the guilty but is transmitted to future generations. These sentiments are also in tension with a later passage in Torah that states: "The parents shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the parents; every man shall be put to death for his own sin" (Deuteronomy 24:16). In a most daring attempt to shape and soften the earlier troubling passage, the liturgists read this verse selectively and creatively. As the passage moved from Torah to inclusion in the prayer service, it was shortened and concludes with the words "He [God] will cleanse [the guilty]." The literal sense of the verse, its grammar, and the cantillation marks would be: "He will by no means cleanse" (from all due

punishment). While punishment for sin is a feature of Jewish theology, it is my view that the liturgists did not want the message of compassion to be weakened by the full statement of this verse.¹³ They therefore ignored the plain sense of the verse; and, even more, took liberties to make it express the *opposite* of its intent. Instead of an emphatic affirmation of punishment for sin even extending to subsequent generations, they quoted the text partially, completely leaving out and reversing those perplexing words! As a result, this verse is often quoted in its shortened and altered form as though it is a faithful quotation from Torah. It is read as follows:

And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed: "The Lord, the Lord, God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; keeping mercy to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin; and He will cleanse."

In this way the rabbis underscored the possibilities of forgiveness and reconciliation. Even more, they seem here to be actually reshaping the image of God for themselves and for their followers. Their understanding now affirms that God does not punish the innocent. There is both accountability and forgiveness for the guilty, but God's strict justice will not overflow onto those who are guiltless.

There Are Limits on Human Vision

And He said: "You cannot not see My face, for no one shall see Me and live." And the Lord said: "Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand upon the rock. And it shall come to pass, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand until I have passed by. And I will take

13. For a different view, see Rashi on Exodus 34:7, who says his own interpretation is that it means that God does not overlook a sin altogether but punishes a little at a time, while the Gemara (*Yoma* 86a) states that it means that people who repent will be absolved and those who do not will not be cleansed. Rashi further says that justice will be enforced on the children of subsequent generations *only when they perpetuate their parents' sins*, and he brings as proof the conflicting text in Deuteronomy 24:16.

away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen.” (Exodus 33:20–23)

“And you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen”: In the name of the holy one from Kotzk, may his merit be upon us, the explanation is that in this world everything seems as though there are opposites, for it appears to each person to be so according to one’s view. This is the aspect of “My back” which is seen by everyone. But “My face shall not be seen” by any person. (Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk¹⁴)

This enigmatic passage in Torah is opened up by the Kotzker Rebbe as a statement of the limits of human capacity, not only about the nature of God but about the characteristics of this world. In this world, a person tends to see polarities, opposites that defy bridging. Even Moses has such limits. A higher vision would understand the possibilities of union that might bring opposites together.

The Rebbe might be addressing the seemingly insoluble conflicts that are found in human affairs. He may be speaking of the divisions even in the house of study where arguments over sacred themes can persist and become bitter. He may have in mind the tendency among his people to line up in opposite camps. Or he may be considering the world at large and its propensity to foster divisions that frequently lead to wars of words or war on the battlefield.

The Kotzker notes that there is a sphere in which intractable opposites can be resolved. Yet reaching that plane appears unavailable to those who inhabit this world. His message is nonetheless hopeful in that “My face,” the intimate reality of God, does bear the seeds of unification and resolution.

Unity and Peace Are Valued Even in the Face of Grave Sin

And he said: “If now I have found grace in Your sight, O Lord, let the Lord, I pray, go in the midst of us; for it is a stiffnecked

14. Cited in Kadish, *Siach Sarfe Kodesh* 1:88.

people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your inheritance." And He said: "Behold, I make a covenant; before all your people I will do marvels, such as have not been wrought in all the earth, nor in any nation; and all the people among which you are found shall see the work of the Lord that I am about to do with you, that it is awesome." (Exodus 34:9-10)

In three places, the Holy One, blessed be He, made concessions [to the people] when [they took up] idol worship, but He did not make concessions [when the people were involved] in argument. First, in the generation of Enosh, they began to serve idols, as it is said: "Then they began to call out the name of god" (Genesis 4:26). Yet because there was peace among them the Holy One, blessed be He, forgave them. But [with regard to] the generation of the flood who robbed and were violent one with the other and came into argument and conflict, the Holy One, blessed be He, offered no concession, as it is said: "For the land was filled with violence due to them" (Genesis 6:13).

Second, the desert generation: When Israel entered into the making of the calf, the Holy One, blessed be He, forgave them. But when they were in conflict, He made no concession to them. Every place where you find "they murmured," you find a [violent] punishment, the greatest of them all being the conflict with Korah.

Third, when the ten tribes were in conflict with the tribe of Judah, and there was no peace between them, these did violence to those, and those did violence to these. And when these sinned, the Holy One, blessed be He, brought them and punished them; and when those sinned, the Holy One, blessed be He, brought them and punished them.... (*Mishna of Rabbi Eliezer 4:78*)

The sages note a major difference in the way that transgression is handled in the Bible when there is unity versus when there is conflict among the people. When peace prevails even when the people are engaged in a serious transgression, God is likely to be more lenient. When they are in serious conflict with one another, there is very little mercy. A proof text that is not

cited in the *Mishna of Rabbi Eliezer* but that immediately comes to mind is the narrative of the Tower of Babel. The people challenged God, but they were unified. "And the whole earth was of one language and of one speech" (Genesis 11:1). They were punished for their acts, but their lives were spared. Peace matters even in the extreme case when there is open rebellion against God.