

Yom Hakippurim: God As The Model For The Shaliach Tzibbur

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I. God as the Model “Shaliach Tzibbur”

The Torah, in its description of God’s forgiveness in the aftermath of the sin of the golden calf, tells us of God’s declaration of the “13 attributes of compassion”:

So Moshe carved two tablets of stone, like the first, and early in the morning he went up on Mount Sinai, as YHVH had commanded him, taking the two stone tablets with him. YHVH came down in a cloud, He stood with him there, and proclaimed the name YHVH. YHVH passed before him and declared: “YHVH, YHVH a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin...” (Shemot 34: 4-7).

Commenting on the peculiar phrase, “God passed before him and declared,” the Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 17b) presents a most cryptic image in the name of R. Yohanan:

And God passed before him and proclaimed...
R. Yohanan said: If it were not written this way, it would be impossible to suggest (i.e. we never would have the temerity to suggest such a thing were it not for the testimony of the text) - this teaches us that God wrapped Himself like a *Shaliach Tzibbur* and showed Moshe the order of Tefillah. He said to him: “Whenever Yisra’el sins before me, *ya’asu kaseder hazeh* (they should perform this order) and I will forgive them.”

Besides the difficulties inherent in this anthropomorphic *Aggadah*, which must surely be

understood metaphorically, there is a theological problem in the underlying assumption of the statement. Following the conventional reading of this *Aggadah*, the declaration of the thirteen attributes (or some other form of Tefillah – it isn't clear from the text) is an automatic ticket to Divine forgiveness. Imagine – the Jewish people can be guilty of any number of heinous crimes and, in order to gain God's atonement and cleansing, all they need to do is recite a formula! Needless to say, this conclusion raises our philosophic eyebrows, to say the least. Do we really imagine a “formula” which automatically effects atonement?

Before suggesting a resolution, let's take a look at a seemingly unrelated perspective in Jewish ethics.

II. *Imitatio Dei*: The Basis of Jewish Ethical Behavior

As we have discussed in some earlier *shiurim*¹, the basis for Jewish ethics is the imitation of the Divine, known by the Latin term: *imitatio dei*. This notion is best expressed by the Gemara in Shabbat (133b), in offering an explanation for the enigmatic word *v'Anvehu*, which appears near the beginning of the Song at the Sea (Shemot 15:2):

This is my God and I will *Anvehu*; Abba Sha'ul says: *Anvehu* [means] be like Him [Rashi explains – *Anvehu* is *Ani* (I) & *Hu* (He) – I will make myself to be like Him by adhering to His ways]; just as He is gracious and compassionate, you should also be gracious and compassionate.

In other words, the ultimate model of character traits is God – by imitating these “traits,” we approximate (as much

¹ Note the *shiurim* on Parashat Kedoshim and Parashat Behar in the Vayyikra archives, <http://www.torah.org/advanced/mikra/va.html>.

as is possible) the Divine and we ignite the spark of God within us.

III. *Ya'asu Kaseder Hazeh - Let Them Perform This Sequence*

Imagine, for a moment, the following scene (which, we hope, is only the product of imagination and not the bitter fruit of experience):

A person stands in the synagogue, beating his breast and pleading for God's forgiveness on Yom Kippur. While he is engrossed in his prayers, his neighbor's young child crawls onto his own seat: such that when he finishes this heartfelt supplication, his seat is occupied. Now, imagine that his reaction is, "Get that kid out of my seat!"—imagine the Divine eyebrows raised in question, if you will— "how do you ask Me for forgiveness and patience? How patient and forgiving are you?" The shame of such a picture is almost too much to bear.

Perhaps this picture is too harsh for even the most fertile of imaginations – but don't we say *S'lach Lanu* three times a day? How easily do we forgive our friends, neighbors and loved ones? Isn't it *chutzpadik* to come before the Almighty and ask for His compassion – without stirring and activating our own?

With the message of this picture in mind, we can return to our text and, with the help of a careful reading of the original, gain some insight:

He said to him: "Whenever Yisra'el sins before me, ***ya'asu kaseder hazeh*** (they should perform this order) and I will forgive them."

Note that God is not purported to have told Moshe that B'nei Yisra'el should SAY these words (in which case, it would have read ***Yom'ru kaseder hazeh***); He told Moshe that they should ***Ya'asu*** – (Fulfill) these words. In other words, God declared the attributes of compassion and then

told Moshe: Teach the Jewish people that if they want My forgiveness, let them become more forgiving people. Our greatest appeal to Divine compassion is a demonstration of our own compassion towards each other; the most powerful tool we have in our legal arsenal as we enter the Divine Court is our own ability (and will) to approximate Divine Compassion.

May we all merit complete participation in a complete Teshuvah, personal and national; may we merit Divine grace as we learn to act more graciously with each other and may we all be inscribed in *Sefer HaHayyim*.