

Gratitude from the Torah

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Parashat Ki Tisa

Why Do the Thirteen Attributes of Compassion Make me Feel Gratitude?

What is the Connection Between ‘G-d’ and ‘Good?’

Last week in Herbal Workshop, I started to teach Rambam about Character Development, Nutrition, and Health. We are learning the first four chapters of *Hilchot Deot* inside the text. I love how Rambam’s holistic approach teaches us that our *Midot* (character traits) greatly influence not only our mental but even physical health. Moreover, I really connect with how Rambam doesn’t consider being healthy a goal in itself, but rather we must be healthy as spiritual people in our endeavor to serve G-d as Jews. Thus, it’s a religious act to take care of our bodies. We also learn from the way Rambam presents how we must accustom ourselves to develop good character traits, that being a good person – as noble as it sounds – is not the ultimate goal of a Jew. Rather, the underlying reason and our motivation for striving to refine our character is to imitate G-d. The essence of our being in this world is to follow Hashem’s ways. Just as He is good, so must we too be good. A discussion ensued in class about whether G-d’s ways are good because they are the ways of G-d, or if they are G-d’s ways because they are good. It quickly became clear that the answer is both because these two are interdependent. G-d’s character traits are good because they are G-d’s ways, whilst G-d adopted these particular ways because they are ultimately good. Interestingly, one of the students noticed that the word for G-d in German ‘Gott’ is almost identical to the German word for good ‘Gut.’ We find the same connection between ‘G-d’ and ‘good’ in several languages not to forget in English. Interestingly the Danish word for ‘good’ is spelled exactly as the English word ‘God!’ These language parallels surely leave us no doubt that G-d is the ultimate good and the ultimate good is part of G-d. It makes me so filled with gratitude to know that the world and my personal life are governed and supervised by a loving caring G-d who is the source of all goodness. This awareness endows me with *emunah* assuring me that even when it is not apparent, whatever happens in Israel and in my life is truly the greatest good that is meant to be!

Is it Simplistic to Believe in Hashem’s Ultimate Goodness?

G-d is even better than the best! You would think that His goodness would apply to us only when we are good and follow His ways. Yet we learn otherwise from the Thirteen Midot of Compassion that Hashem revealed to Moshe right before he was to go up to the mountain and receive the Second Tablets of the Torah. After the sin of the Golden Calf, Moshe ascended Mt. Sinai and pleaded with G-d to forgive the Jewish people. After his supplications were accepted, Moshe used the opportunity of the auspicious moment to ask G-d to grant the Jewish people a way to access Divine compassion should they fall again in the future. G-d complied and told Moshe to wait on a mountain where He would show him His glory. As Hashem was granting His forgiveness for the Jewish people He passed before Moshe and exuded His 13 Attributes of Compassion:

סַפֵּר שִׁמּוֹת פֶּרֶךְ לִד פִּסּוּקִי

וַיַּעֲבֵר הָשֵׁם עַל פְּנֵיו וַיִּקְרָא הָשֵׁם אֶל רַחוּם וְחַנוּן אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חַסֵּד וְאֱמֶת:

“Hashem is compassionate, generous, slow to anger, and abundant in loving-kindness and truth...” (Shemot 34:6).

You may say that it sounds simplistic to believe in Hashem’s ultimate goodness. What about all the pain that He allows to exist? What about the holocaust? What about all the innocent Jewish lives killed

in the current war? How can G-d be good when He allows such evil to exist? You know as well as I do that infinite amounts of books and commentaries are written to answer these kinds of questions. The primary example is inside our own Tanach in the book of *Iyov* (Job). I'm unable to offer any comprehensible answer, except that the darkness of evil is the result of our negative actions causing the hiding of Hashem's light. Those chosen to carry the burden of this darkness are often not the ones who brought it about, but rather those who have the strongest shoulders – so to speak – and are most capable of carrying the pain of the darkening of Divine Light with love and thus bring about atonement for Israel.

Calling Out to Our Loving Compassionate Father

The Thirteen Attributes of Compassion strengthen our emunah and encourage us even when we are in the midst of the deepest darkness. Each of these character traits indicates Hashem's great compassion for all of us even if we are still entrenched in negative behavior and haven't yet repented as Rashi explains HASHEM, HASHEM Heb. **רַחֵם** - This is G-d's Attribute of Compassion. [It is repeated,] once before the person sins, and once for after he sins and repents. G-D Heb. **רַחֵם** - This too is an attribute of compassion [for G-d], as it states, "My G-d, my G-d, Heb. **לָמָּה**. why have You forsaken me?" (*Tehillim* 22:2). One cannot say to the Divine attribute of justice, "Why have You forsaken me?" SLOW TO ANGER - He puts off His anger and does not hasten to exact retribution, [hoping that] perhaps he [the sinner] will repent. AND ABUNDANT IN LOVING -KINDNESS - for those who need loving-kindness because they lack sufficient merits. AND TRUTH - to pay a good reward to those who do His will (Rashi, Ibid).

I find much reassurance in Rashi's above commentary, that each of Hashem's names describes His compassion and love for us. Even if I don't always measure up, I know G-d patiently waits for me to give me a chance to repent and better my ways. Hashem will also cover for me with his Chesed if I don't have enough merits on my own. I personally experienced that when we were a newlywed *ba'al teshuva* couple and full-time Torah students. When we often lacked the means to pay for rent and utilities, Hashem made up for our deficit, and somehow our rent got paid. Likewise, the belief that Hashem will make up for any of my spiritual deficits fills me with love and gratitude. Rabbeinu Bachaya reinforces Rashi's encouragement even more. He concurs that the name "Hashem" invokes the attribute of compassion. Hashem extends this compassion even when we haven't previously confessed our sin or have repented of it. We can always appeal to G-d as to our father, someone who naturally extends his mercy to his children. Just as the father is aware of his children's needs, so is G-d – our collective father – aware of our needs. Such a father will not wait until his son asks for what he needs but will even supply it without being asked to do so. G-d therefore responds to the needs of even the wicked sinner as he too is one of His children. Hashem employs this attribute even in His dealings with Gentiles (Rabbeinu Bachaya, *Shemot* 34:6). It is so comforting to know we can always call out to our loving Father whenever we are in dire straits. Crying out to Hashem with the appellation "Abba" is very powerful. I learned this many years ago from my spiritual healing teacher and since then I have called out to my Heavenly Father often and the more I do it, the more I experience He is there for me.

Walking in Hashem's Way by Emulating His Attributes of Rachamim

When we feel very loved and grateful for all the Chesed our Heavenly Father showers upon us continually, we become inspired to want to return this Chesed so it can keep circulating in the

world. Being recipients of goodness naturally makes us want to become givers and bestowers of goodness. Yet, Hashem wanted to give us extra merit by granting us a mitzvah to do what we, anyway, naturally are inspired to do. When Hashem gave us the mitzvah, “*You shall walk in His ways*” (*Devarim 28:9*), our Sages teach that it implies, Just as He is called ‘Gracious,’ you shall be gracious; Just as He is called ‘Compassionate,’ you shall be compassionate; Just as He is called ‘Holy,’ you shall be holy... [All of these ways] are good and straight paths. We are obligated to accustom ourselves to these ways and to resemble Him to the extent of our ability (Rambam, *Hilchot Deot* Chapter 1, Halacha 4). This is easier said than done. As humans, we have limitations that make it impossible to completely imitate G-d. Yet, our Divine Neshama can override these limitations. Even more so, by granting us the mitzvah to walk in His ways, Hashem imbued us with the ability and Divine assistance to overcome the blocks that prevent us from refining our character. This is the power of the mitzvah! It empowers us to rise above our human nature and activate our Divine soul, and highest will. When we fulfill Hashem’s will through emulating Hashem, we are refining our will to submit ourselves completely to Hashem and His Torah!

Why Attributes of Rachamim Rather than Attributes of Chesed?

Why are Hashem’s attributes called the Thirteen Divine Attributes of רַחֲמִים/*Rachamim* (compassion)? *Rachamim* comes from the word רַחַם/*rechem* which means ‘womb.’ Just as in the womb, the process of a new being develops and grows, Hashem bestows compassion upon us even if we don’t deserve it, because He believes in who we can become. Even if we aren’t yet ready for His compassion and kindness right now, we do have the potential to merit it in the future. So, Hashem gives us time and space to grow to come close to Him. When we sinned with the Golden Calf, we didn’t deserve Hashem’s compassion, rather we deserved to be annihilated. When Moshe cried out to save the Jewish people Hashem taught him these attributes so that the Children of Israel could be forgiven through them. Since then, whenever we recite these thirteen attributes of compassion, we evoke them and make them flow for us and through us to the entire world! (Inspired by Rebbetzin Tamar Taback). The thirteen attributes of compassion are a secret spiritual tool that Hashem bequeathed to His beloved people to tap into to rise above our lowly limitations and receive complete forgiveness for our failings, even when we don’t deserve it yet. The awareness that Hashem has faith in us inspires us to believe in ourselves! That too is a way of walking in Hashem’s ways. Isn’t it?

Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Ki Tisa-

Using Cheshbon HaNefesh (Soul Accounting) for Character Development

The first step of *Cheshbon Hanefesh* is visualizing your higher self, and who you can rise to become. The next step is making a plan for conscientiously working on actualizing your spiritual potential. The final step is making daily, weekly even monthly accounting for how you are doing in implementing the plan.

Practical Steps for Cheshbon HaNefesh -

1. Make a chart of thirteen-character traits you want to work on. Each week focus only on one trait.
2. At the end of each day take five minutes to note down your successes in that trait, and mentally pat yourself on the back for your spiritual and emotional growth.
3. Then note down the further improvements you would like to see in yourself regarding your chosen trait.
4. For the other 12 traits, your successes are also tracked, but no effort is made to improve on them.

5. While tracking each trait either wait until the end of the day and by memory count the number of successes or keep a notepad and track successes during the day as they happen in real-time (make a mark for each time or whatever. This way is superior in that it helps to keep the matter fresh in your mind and guards it from the beginning.)

6. Keep a weekly sum of each trait to track progress. Example use from the book: For the first week, the focus trait is 'equanimity.' Throughout the week repeat to yourself constantly a positive affirmation something like "I chose to rise above events that are inconsequential" or whatever works for you to maintain equanimity. At the end of the day, journal about how well you fared in maintaining equanimity despite the challenges. Also note down how you did in all the other 12 traits in the daily chart. For the second week, the focus is on the second trait (patience). Make up a positive affirmation to focus on maintaining patience. Likewise for the other 11 traits. Then repeat from the beginning. 4 cycles per year.

Character Trait	Successes	Improvement Needed	Work On
1. Equanimity (<i>menuchat hanefesh</i> - peace of mind) - Rise above inconsequential events, both negative and positive, for they are not worth disturbing your equanimity.			
2. Patience (<i>savlanut</i>) - When something happens to you that you don't have the power to avoid, do not aggravate the situation even more through wasted grief.			
3. Order (<i>seder</i>)- Keep all your actions and possessions orderly - each one in a set place and at a set time. Let your thoughts always be free to deal with what lies ahead (i.e. focus your thoughts on what you're doing)			
4. Decisiveness (<i>charitzut</i>) - Weigh all the possibilities carefully before acting. When you have reached a decision, act without hesitating.			
5. Cleanliness (<i>nekiyut</i>) - Let no stain or ugliness be found in your possessions or in your home, and surely not on your body or clothes.			
6. Humility (<i>anava</i>) - Be open to always learning from every person, to recognize your lacks, and to fix them. This will help you to stop focusing on your own virtues and the faults of others.			
7. Righteousness (<i>Tzedek</i>) - What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow (includes theft, taking advantage, cheating, and being jealous etc.			
8. Frugality (<i>kimutz</i>) - Be careful with your money. Do not spend even a penny needlessly.			
9. Diligence (<i>zerizut</i>) - Always find something to do - for your good or the good of others. Do not waste even a moment of your life.			

10. Silence (<i>shitka</i>) - Before opening your mouth, be silent and reflect: "What benefit will my speech bring me or others?"			
11. Calmness (<i>nichuta</i>) - The words of the wise are spoken softly. In confrontations (rebuking, negotiation, etc.) make every effort to ensure your actions do not lead to negative feelings in others.			
12. Truth (<i>emet</i>) - Do not say anything which you are not certain is completely true.			
13. Separation (<i>perishut</i>) - Strengthen yourself from lustful thoughts. Draw close to your spouse when your mind is free, and your heart is filled with love.			

This is an example of a Cheshbon Hanefesh Chart. You can do your own based on the traits you want to inculcate in your psyche. I just noticed that the trait of Simcha/Happiness is missing so please make sure to include it when you make your own Cheshbon Hanefesh Chart! None of this is easy. Rabbi Yisrael Salanter said that repairing one negative character trait is more difficult than learning the entire Talmud. Achieving practical results requires constant awareness and effort. HatzlachaRabbah! May you be successful in your endeavor of self-refinement, which eventually will bring about self-satisfaction, gratitude and happiness.