

מתוקים מדבש



Dei'ah, Binah and Haskel on the weekly parashah

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Bemachashavah Techilah

One of the most moving and inspirational *piyutim* we say during the *Yamim Nora'im* is “*Unesaneh Tokef*.” In it, the awesomeness and gravity of *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* are described. Even the angels become “gripped with fearful anticipation and trembling,” for they too “will not be vindicated in Your [i.e. G-d’s] eyes.” But how could angels not come out on the favorable side of the judgment? After all, they fulfill G-d’s will faithfully, and either have no free will to stray from His command or are so aware of His presence that they are unable to not carry out their mission dutifully. Either way, they always execute exactly what G-d wants of them, so why would they have to be judged at all; and if they are, why do they not come out favorably?

One possibility is that they are not being judged on their own merits, but are affected by the verdict of humans (and humanity). For example, when the ultimate redemption arrives (may it be soon), the angels that represent the nations of the world will have to be “defeated” before their respective nations are.¹ These angels fear this inevitability, and despite having done nothing “wrong” are affected by the judgment against these nations. Similarly, the specific actions angels will be commanded to perform will be based on what must be done to, or for humans. Their very existence is dependant on our ac-

tions,² and they therefore will not be “vindicated” if we are not.

However, there is a parallel verse whose context indicates that the judgment that determines whether or not the angels are vindicated is independent of the judgment made on man(kind). “What is man that he should be vindicated; can one born of woman be considered righteous? Even His holy ones He cannot confide in, and the heavens will not be vindicated in His eyes” (Iyov 15:14-15). Elifaz is telling Iyov that if even the angels do not come out favorably when G-d judges them, how can (any) man escape the consequences of an unfavorable judgment. If the “judgment” of the angels was really an extension of the judgment of man, this argument would be pointless. It is only because there is a separate case made against the heavenly messengers of G-d – which they do not, and cannot, win – that Elifaz shows how impossible it is for man to win his case. Which brings us back to our original question: How can beings that perform their tasks flawlessly end up with an unfavorable judgment?

“On *Rosh Hashanah* it is written, and on the fast of *Yom Kippur* it is sealed.” These words, also from *Unesaneh Tokef*, allude to a seemingly separate issue. The decree – determining what kind of year we will have – is made on *Rosh Hashanah*, the first day of the 10 Days of Repentance, but not finalized until the last

of those days, *Yom Kippur*. We go out of our way to do good deeds during this time, even keeping stringencies that we otherwise would not. Although the introspection that will hopefully lead to improvement started the month before *Rosh Hashanah*, the bulk of the *teshuvah* is concentrated in the days after it, especially on *Yom Kippur*.³ As the Rama puts it,⁴ “every person should search and examine his actions and repent from them during the ten Days of Repentance,” a law he does not codify as applying before *Rosh Hashanah*.

However, it is easier to avoid a harsh decree before it is made than to try to change it after it has already been “written.”⁵ Why do we focus more on having an unwanted decree redone than having a better one written in the first place?

Our original premise was built on the notion that the angels are being judged based on their actions. Since they have done everything they were supposed to, they should be judged favorably. The *Metzudas David*,⁶ however, understands their judgment to be based not on how they performed vis-à-vis their potential (which they fulfilled), but against absolute perfection, namely G-d. The

¹ See Ibn Ezra on Yishayahu 24:21

² E.g. the angels that are created when we make a blessing.

³ For example, we don’t start asking G-d to inscribe us for a year of life until *Rosh Hashanah* itself, and continue through *Yom Kippur*. Similarly, we first start saying *Avinu Malkeinu* on *Rosh Hashanah*.

⁴ Orach Chaim 603:1

⁵ See *Rosh Hashanah* 17b

⁶ Iyov 15:15

word for vindicated is “zaku,” which comes from “zach,” or “pure.” As “pure” as angels might be, they are not as pure, not as perfect, as G-d. When the measuring stick is absolute perfection (as opposed to how close to it one can potentially come), no being, not even the angels, can measure up.⁷

My fourth grade rebbe, Rabbi Yitzchak Brody, shlita, never gave any student a grade above a 98. Only Hashem can get a perfect score, he would explain, and only the angels can get just below that.⁸ Even if every question on the test was answered absolutely correctly, the grade would only be a 98.⁹ Elifaz was telling Iyov that man can’t be considered perfect, as even the angels aren’t perfect; only G-d is.

It is possible, therefore, that our judgment on *Rosh Hashanah* is not based on whether we have fallen short of our potential, but whether we have fallen short of pure perfection –

⁷ See Rambam, Moreh Nevuchim 3:13 for a similar approach.

⁸ He never discussed with his fourth graders the issue of humans reaching higher than angels when they do good despite having the opportunity to choose bad.

⁹ I remember it well, as my grandfather z”l, would give his grandchildren a dollar for every 100 we received, and no matter how hard I tried to explain that in Rabbi Brody’s class a 98 was really a 100, the dollar(s) remained in my grandfather’s pocket.

The Jews were impatient for Moshe’s return from atop the mountain and teach them Hashem’s Torah. They made themselves a new intermediary for relating to G-d, a Golden Calf. After forty days they received the Torah anew. But Moshe was not content; he ascended Mount Sinai a third time, seeking to heal the rift opened be-

absolute *din*. Using that scale, we cannot be found to be “pure,” as even the angels are not. It is only on *Yom Kippur* that the judgment changes from *din* to *rachamim*; from how far we are from being perfect to how far we are from fulfilling our potential.

This would explain why our *teshuvah* process is focused more on *Yom Kippur*, as no matter how much closer to perfect we come before *Rosh Hashanah*, the decree will reflect our imperfections. Sure, the better we are the less we will need to have the decree changed.¹⁰ But we will still have to have the decree adjusted no matter what, so we appeal to G-d’s attribute of mercy- promising to come as close to our potential as we can, and changing those areas that need improvement.

It might also explain how Rebbe¹¹ can state that even if one does not repent, *Yom Kippur* brings atonement for every sin but three. If *Yom Kippur* changes the scale from perfection to potential, all actions (and inactions) that fall within that gap are automatically eliminated!¹²

If the scale is eventually moved to the more reasonable “potential”

¹⁰ Which is why we start the process in *Elul*.

¹¹ Yoma 85b

¹² The three that require *teshuvah* along with *Yom Kippur* are all related to purposely rejecting G-d and His Torah, which is not within that range.

tween the Jewish People and their Creator. It was the end of a third set of forty days, the date that Hashem would subsequently consecrate as *Yom Kippur*. Moshe Rabbeinu knew of nothing left to do. Rabbi Yochanan explains, “*Had the Torah not said it, it would be prohibited to say. It teaches that Hashem wrapped Himself in a tallis like a chazzan, and*

anyway, why would there even be a judgment based on “perfection,” a judgment doomed from the outset? While it’s true that ultimately we will have to answer as to why we did not become the person we could have become,¹³ there is no way to know what our potential really is. By setting our sights on perfection, we stand a better chance of reaching our true potential. As the expression goes, when you reach for the stars, you can’t get your hands stuck in the mud.¹⁴

If we can conceptualize what the ideal is, we can strive to attain a level as close to it as possible. *Rosh Hashanah* forces us to visualize how short we are from that ideal, while *Yom Kippur* allows us to commit to a more realistic goal.

¹³ And not why we were not another Moshe Rabbeinu.

¹⁴ Although you still must be careful not to be too disappointed when falling short, as it is inevitable.

RABBI MICHA BERGER

Bakeish Shalom

taught Moshe an order of prayer. [Hashem] said to him, ‘Whenever Israel sin, they can perform this order before Me and I will forgive them. ‘Hashem Hashem...’¹ Rav Yehudah adds that “Hashem made a

¹ Shemos 34:6-7

covenant, that the Thirteen Attributes will never return empty.”²

What a covenant! Anyone who prays the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy is assured forgiveness. Instant and guaranteed success on Yom Kippur – after all, our standard Yom Kippur liturgy includes repeated recitations of these verses!

Unfortunately, it cannot and should not be so simple. Hashem is Just, everything He does for us is for the best. A simple recitation of a few words cannot bribe Him to give us something we want. If it is appropriate, we would get it without asking; if it were not, Hashem would not respond to our pleas to give us something that He knows would harm us overall. The verb *tefillah* is generally conjugated in the reflexive; to pray is “*lehispallel*”, something one does to oneself.

Prayer is not bribery, it is changing oneself into the kind of person who deserves more and would be better served by having.

When Hashem promises that “they can perform this order before Me and I will forgive them”, He is speaking of actual performance. Not just saying the words, but imitating Hashem by relating to others with the same aspects of mercy that we see in how He relates to us.

Rav Moshe Cordevero reaches this conclusion from another direction. “*It is proper for man to emulate His Creator, for then he will attain the secret of the Supernal Form, Image and Likeness.... For the essence of the Supernal Image and Likeness are His actions... Therefore, it is appropriate that he emulate the actions of Keser, which are the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.*”³

Rabbeinu Tam⁴ counts/lists and explains the attributes. We can look

between his words for ways in which we can try to embody them.

Using the trope and the connective *vav*’s linking the *middos*, we can group them into four sets.

Set 1: Before the Sin, After the Sin

The Gemara writes, “Hashem, Hashem’ – He is the G-d of Mercy before one sins, and the G-d of

When Hashem promises that “they can perform this order before Me and I will forgive them”, He is speaking of actual performance. Not just saying the words, but imitating Hashem by relating to others with the same aspects of mercy that we see in how He relates to us.

Mercy after one sins and repents.” What is the mercy necessary before one sins? Rashi explains that even though Hashem knows that we are going to sin, He still shows us mercy. How much more so we, who do not know how relationships will turn out, need to show kindness. It is sometimes difficult to be kind to someone whom we have not yet met, someone with whom we do not yet have a history.

And after one sins, Hashem allows us to repent, to let the relationship heal. Do we have the strength to let bygones be bygones? When someone asks for forgiveness, do we truly let go of the hurt, and treat them the way we did before?

Set 2: Sharing All That You Have

“*Keil*” – Even though it is related to the name “*E-lokim*”, which denotes Divine Justice, “*Keil*” refers to His Mercy. As a different Gemara points out, David cries “*Keili Keili, lamah azavtani* – My G-d, my G-d, why have You abandoned me?” *Keil* is the Master of All Forces in crea-

tion. When someone asks us for help, do we invest the same effort and financial resources we would for our own wants and needs, or only do what is convenient and does not put us out overly much?

“*Rachum*” – The root of the word “*rachum*” is “*rechem*,” womb. *Rachamim* is mercy and empathy as it derives from maternal compassion. A mother loves a child knowing it as an extension of herself. Hashem shows us mercy for we too are His children.

Rav Shimon Shkop describes this as the key to being able to give.⁵ A person most readily provides for himself. He has little problem sacrificing for his children and immediate family. Slightly more noble is sacrificing for one’s extended family. Even more, one’s community. Extending further, one’s country. One’s people. The world. If one could see the interconnectedness, that others are part of my sphere of concern, my greater self, I would be able to utilize selfishness itself to be a giving person.

Hillel asks, “If I am not for myself (*li*), who will be for me? And when I am for my lonesome (*le’atzmi*), what am I?” Rav Shimon explains: If I am not for this greater self, who will be? And when I am for the narrower perspective of myself, I am nothing.

That is *rachamim*. Sharing in the pain of others and working to resolve it because one realizes that it is not their pain, it is our pain.

“*Vechanun*” – undeserved kindness. Esther asked if “*matzasi chein*,” she had found favor in Achashveirosh’s eyes. *Chein* is found, not worked for or earned. To be *chanun* is to give simply for the sake of giving. It is listed here with the prefix “*ve-*”, and, because it is a further development of the theme introduced by “*Rachum*”. Our love for ourselves is also unconditional

² Rosh HaShanah 17b

³ Tamar Devorah, ch. 1

⁴ Rosh Hashanah, ad loc.

⁵ Sha’arei Yosher, introduction

and does not need to be earned. Do we give to others simply, as a child would say, “because”?

Section 3: Tolerance vs. Enabling

“*Erech apayim*” – slow to anger. Hashem gives us opportunity to do *teshuvah*. How often do we make snap judgments, losing our temper before knowing all the facts, before seeing the situation from the others’ perspective, without taking into account that they too are human and can err?

“*Verav chesed*” – *Chesed*, the simple giving of One Who has to the one who has not. Hashem answers those who seek His help in accomplishing their goals, purposes, and desires in life. Beyond “*Erech apayim*”, taking others’ frailties and imperfections into account and giving them time and opportunity to correct their own course. Hashem gives because He has, and we do not. He is perfect, we – not so.

Every person is limited in some way. Some are physically disabled, others do not have sufficient financial resources, others may lack some mental skills, or think slowly in general. People might have emotional handicaps or life problems that overwhelm them and use up their patience and energy. They may be intellectually or emotionally handicapped, or even might lack the upbringing or background to know how to make proper and moral choices.

Chesed is to share our talents and gifts to those that are lacking in those particular areas.

“*Ve’emes*” – Truth. *Chesed* and *emes* are often at odds. When someone does something wrong, *emes* requires that he live with the consequences of his actions. *Chesed* would have us protect him from them. The key is to know when we are following Hashem’s trait, as described in *Shemoneh Esrei*, of “*Gomeil chasadim tovim* – He Who supports oth-

ers through good generosity” and then the *chesed* is neither good nor supporting.

Most often we take the limited me-perspective. When it comes to *atzmi*, to I myself, I want *chesed*. I look at the excuses and dodge blame. I am not wrong, I am flawed. When it comes to others, we are more likely to insist on *emes*. Evil! Destructive! Root it out!

The key to Divine *Tov*, Divine Good, is to know the proper synthesis of *chesed* and *emes*.

Set 4: Counting the Gifts, Not the Hurts

“*Notzeir chesed la’alafim*” – Hashem keeps kindness for thousands. *Hakaras hatov*, acknowledging and recognizing the good that others do for us, requires not only crediting them for their actions, but also for the myriads of consequences of those actions, and the consequences of those consequences, etc.... Hashem rewards good for the thousandth generation, as the impact of the good trickles down through time.

Evil, on the other hand, is destructive and therefore self-destructive. G-d, in His Goodness, created the world such that the effects of evil naturally dampen out over time. Punishment for evil is later described as being to the fourth generation, one five-hundredth of the consequences of good.

We, however, tend to remember our hurts far more than our blessings. When relating to other people, we more readily dredge up past wrongs than past favors. To master *hakaras hatov* we need to reverse that tendency.

“*Nosei avon*” – He Who carries intentional sin. Hashem loves us even when our values do not align with His, when we choose sin.

“*Vafesha*” – He also carries our burden of careless sin. While *pesha*

is less severe than willful sinning, in another sense it shows a more significant flaw. The one who commits an *avon* has concern for G-d. The *poshei’ah* is apathetic about something Hashem considers significant.

“*Vachata’ah*” – Greater kindness than His bearing with our poor judgment, or our lack of concern, Hashem even maintains His love for us during a moment of rebellion against Him.

“*Venakeih*” – Hashem cleanses. Even when He punishes, the purpose of the punishment is not revenge or somehow balancing the ledger. His punishment cleans the effects of our actions for us.

Mastering all thirteen *middos* is quite obviously too large of a task to tackle. Perhaps by incrementally working on each, developing the skills piecemeal in manageable steps, and looking to the general themes of each of the categories of *middos* we can reach for the A-limighty.

May we come to Hashem this Yom Kippur from the midst of the ascent through the Thirteen *Middos* so that He may fulfill His covenant and grant you and all of us a year of blessing and peace, of comfort, health, happiness and plenty, of meaning and *mitzvos*, Torah, and sanctity.

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