

PARASHAT KI TISA

The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy

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In this week's parsha we read of the catastrophic debacle involving the generation that left Egypt - the episode of the golden calf. In the midst of Moshe's pleas to God to forgive the nation, we find a personal and intimate tone entering the dialogue. Alongside Moshe's request, "If now You will forgive their sin..." (referring to the nation's sin) we also find another, personal request of Moshe: "Show me Your way, that I may know You... Show me Your glory." This request is problematic; clearly a mortal human cannot perceive God, as God Himself immediately emphasizes in response: "You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live." And so God and Moshe reach a sort of compromise: "You shall see My back, but My face will not be seen."

This personal discussion, which seems to concern Moshe only as a private individual and is completely unrelated to the problem of the sin and the forgiveness of the nation, a problem rendered acute by the impending threat of destruction by God, certainly requires some explanation.

The connection between the two spheres - the private and the public - may be explained in two ways: a. As a result of the sin God ceases to rest His presence in the midst of the camp. From now on, "I will not go up in the midst of you - for you are a stiff-necked people - lest I consume you on the way" (33:3). The task of leadership now falls even more heavily on the shoulders of the nation's human leader - Moshe. It is in this context and against this backdrop that Moshe seeks to know God's ways - particularly His form of leadership - in order that he become a worthy replacement. Strong proof for this interpretation is to be found in Moshe's words immediately after God's revelation to him: "And he said, 'If I have found favor in Your sight, HaShem, let HaShem walk among us, for it is a stiff-necked nation'" (34:9). In other words, as an immediate result of God's revelation, Moshe returns to his concern with the public sphere - God's presence amidst the nation - in a last attempt to persuade God to cancel His evil decree. It appears that God's revelation to Moshe is bound up with the Divine Providence; Moshe understands that it is exceedingly difficult for a mortal to emulate God's ways and actions, and he repeats his request that God once again cause His

presence to rest in their midst. This seems to be the interpretation accepted by the Rambam in Moreh Nevukhim (Guide for the Perplexed) where he tackles this most complicated episode.

b. A second aspect is directly connected to an understanding of the process which Moshe undergoes when God accedes to his request (at least partially) and passes in front of him while he stands in the cleft of a rock. This event would appear to be radically different from that experienced by Moshe and which is known as the "Thirteen Attributes" and which will be the focus of this shiur. (The underlying idea of the shiur was inspired by my friend Itamar Eldar of Yeshivat Har Etzion - whom I wish to thank.)

The Rishonim were divided whether it is Moshe who calls out God's names during their encounter, or whether part of God's revelation is a Divine announcement of these Attributes. Either way, what we have before us is a list of God's attributes: "And God descended in a cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed (in) the name of the Lord. And God passed before him and proclaimed: HaShem HaShem, God merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in love and truth, extending mercy to thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but not clearing 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.' And Moshe hurried and bowed towards the earth and prostrated himself." (34:5-8)

These attributes have become known as the "Thirteen Attributes of Mercy". Indeed, all the attributes mentioned here concern God's forgiveness and His great mercy (including "not clearing the guilty" - see Yirmiyahu 30:11, as well as "visiting the iniquity of the fathers" - implying that punishment is postponed for several generations, such that later generations have the opportunity to repent and thus to avoid punishment altogether). The Torah, on the other hand, refers to these attributes - or, more precisely, to the event which serves as their context - as a covenant (berit): "Behold, I am making a covenant. Before your entire nation shall I perform wonders which have never been done in all the earth and among all the nations."

If this event, where Moshe stands on the mountain and sees God as He passes before Him, indeed represents the forging of a covenant, then we need to understand its status and significance, as well as why there was a need for a further covenant in addition to that forged between God and Avraham.

A close look at the syntax and content reveals that the covenant made now between God and Moshe is generally a repetition of the berit bein ha-betarim that God made with Avraham (Bereishit 15): 1. The berit bein ha-betarim opens with Avraham's

question: "How shall I know that I shall inherit it?" (15:8), and our episode begins with a similar question posed by Moshe: "How shall it be known that I have found favor in Your sight?" (33:16). 2. These two covenants are the only ones in which God passes before the person with whom He is making the covenant, obviously with something preventing the person from seeing God. In the berit bein ha-betarim: "And it was (when) the sun went down and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace and a burning torch which passed between these pieces." God passes between the pieces, in front of Avraham, in the form of a smoking furnace and a burning torch. It seems that the function of the "dark" is to prevent a direct encounter between Avraham and God. (God's revelation in a combination of smoke and fire should be understood in light of our discussion on parashat Tetzaveh and the issue of the mizbe'ah ketoret.) Similarly, when God makes the covenant here with Moshe, we find: "And it shall be that when My glory passes by, I shall place you in a cleft of the rock and I shall cover you with My hand until I have passed over." Here, too, although God passes in front of Moshe, there is a screen which prevents a direct encounter. 3. The content of the two covenants themselves is very similar. Both focus on the return of Am Yisrael to the land of their fathers. In the berit bein ha-betarim: "On that day God made a covenant with Avram saying, 'To your seed have I given this land... the Hitti and the Perizi and the Refa'im. And the Emori and the Kena'ani and the Girkashi and the Yevusi.'" (15:18-21) In our parsha, at the conclusion of the covenant of the Thirteen Attributes we find: "And He said, 'Behold, before your entire nation shall I perform wonders... Behold, I am banishing from before you the Emori and the Kena'ani and the Hitti and the Perizi and the Hivi and the Yevusi'" (34:10-11). (4. In a certain sense there is also another connection between the two covenants, in an indirect way. In the berit bein ha-betarim God postpones the return of Avraham's descendants to the land for four generations because "the sin of the Emori is not yet complete." The idea of postponement of punishment for four generations is mentioned explicitly as part of the proclamation of the Thirteen Attributes: "...visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and upon the children's children, to the third and to the fourth generation.")

In light of these similarities, let us return to our original question: Why is there a need now for another covenant with God, in addition to the one forged with Avraham? Of course my intention here is not to question the Sinaitic covenant which has just been made with the nation, for that covenant represented a whole new aspect of God's relationship with us - Torah and mitzvot, and that covenant did not involve in any way the covenant that God had made with Avraham. But the covenant of the Thirteen Attributes pertains to the question of entering the land of the fathers, and a covenant has already been made over this issue. Moreover, Yitzchak and Yaakov, for example, were both promised the Land - but without having new covenants made with them, since the covenant made with Avraham their father includes them as well. Why then

does God now make a new covenant with Moshe concerning the entry into the land and Am Yisrael's right to it?

As mentioned earlier, the covenant now being made has as its backdrop the nation's sin with the golden calf, God's response and Moshe's plea for forgiveness. Immediately following the terrible sin God speaks harsh words to Moshe: "And now leave me alone that My anger may burn among them and I shall consume them and make of you a great nation." (This, too, may be compared to the berit bein ha-betarim where God makes a similar declaration concerning the future multiplicity of Avraham's descendants.) This harsh pronouncement by God - the destruction of Am Yisrael - represents a change in the basic assumptions that we have held until now. God made a covenant with Avraham stating that his descendants would return to the land, and now the possibility arises that the nation will be utterly destroyed, with the creation of a "new nation" with Moshe as its forefather and founder. How can God simply abandon and ignore the covenant which He made with Avraham? Does God - heaven forbid - break His promises?

The answer is clear and simple: A covenant involves mutual commitment. So long as one party is faithful to the terms of the covenant, the other party is likewise obligated. But the moment one party violates the covenant, the other party is absolved of its obligations - both legally and morally.

The debacle of the golden calf certainly represents a violation of the covenant - not by God, but rather by Israel. They build the calf and declare, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt." This is the most flagrant violation of the covenant that can be imagined, undermining the entire relationship with the "second party" to the covenant - God. With the sin of the golden calf the nation ceased to accept God's exclusive divinity and sought an alternative! (I shall not now discuss what exactly the nation was thinking and what their exact intentions were. Although the plain text would certainly support the view that the purpose of the calf was to replace Moshe rather than God, we cannot ignore God's definition of this episode: "They have made themselves a molten calf and have worshipped it and sacrificed to it.")

The moment the nation violates its historical covenant which God made with Avraham, God is no longer bound by this covenant. This is certainly the case on the purely legal level, but it is true also on the moral-ethical level. God no longer desires the continued existence of this nation which has violated the most basic foundation of its relationship with Him.

Bearing this in mind, I believe that the Thirteen Attributes episode in our parsha seeks to recreate the berit bein ha-betarim and to ensure its continuation, despite the flagrant violation on the part of the nation. The covenant of the Thirteen Attributes has as its

foundation God's attributes of mercy - a fact which is meant to supply special assurance of the nation's continued existence, even in possible future times of sin. The covenant follows the pattern of the berit bein ha-betarim because it is a renewal, completion and continuation of that covenant.

In this light we may understand Moshe's different prayers following the two greatest sins of the desert generation: the golden calf and the spies. The dialogue between God and Moshe is very similar in both cases, except for one most significant difference. Following the sin of the golden calf, God says to Moshe, "I have seen this nation and behold, it is a stiff-necked nation. And now, leave Me alone that My anger may burn among them and I shall consume them and make you into a great nation." Moshe pleads before God that He cancel this evil decree, and the first reason that he uses to support his plea is the hillul HaShem (desecration of God's name) that this outcome will cause in the eyes of the Egyptians:

"And Moshe pleaded before the Lord his God and he said, 'Why, Lord, should Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out of the land of Egypt with great strength and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, "With evil He took them out (in order) to kill them in the mountains and to consume them from the face of the earth"? Turn away from Your fierce anger and relent of this evil towards Your people.'"

In addition, Moshe mentions the merit of the nation's forefathers, and the promise which they received:

"Remember Avraham, Yitzhak and Yaakov, Your servants, to whom You promised by Your own self, and You said to them, 'I shall multiply your seed like the stars of the heavens, and all this land which I have said I shall give to your seed, and they shall inherit it forever.'"

Following Moshe's prayer, God relents and forgives the nation.

This dialogue is repeated almost in every detail after the sin of the spies, with one important exception. At first God suggests that the entire nation will be destroyed and only Moshe will remain:

"How long will this nation provoke Me, and how long will they not believe in Me, in all the signs which I have performed in their midst? I shall smite them with pestilence and disinherit them, and I shall make you into a greater and mightier nation than they." (Bamidbar 14:11-12)

Here, too, Moshe rushes to the nation's defense and pleads with God to forgive them. Again, Moshe's first argument is the impression that will be created amongst the Egyptians and the other nations:

"The Egyptians will hear, for You brought this nation out from their midst by force. And they will tell it to the inhabitants of this land, they have heard that You, God, are amongst this nation, that You, God, are seen face to face, and that Your cloud stands over them and You go before them by day as a pillar of cloud and as a pillar of fire at night. And if you kill this nation as one man, the nations which have heard Your fame will say, "Because God was not able to bring this nation to the land which He promised to them, he killed them in the desert."

And it is here that we are surprised. In his previous prayer Moshe mentioned the merit of the forefathers; here he brings a different argument:

"And now, I pray You, let the power of My Lord be great, as You have spoken saying, "The Lord is long-suffering, and great in love, forgiving iniquity and transgression but not clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, to the third and to the fourth generation. Forgive the sin of this nation according to Your great mercy, as You have forgiven this nation from Egypt until now."

Following this plea God forgives the nation (even if only partially, as was the case after the golden calf): "And God said, 'I have forgiven according to your word.'"

Even at first glance it is immediately clear that Moshe is enumerating God's attributes as they were revealed to him in the Thirteen Attributes. In other words, after the sin of the spies Moshe uses the covenant which he made with God following the sin of the golden calf!

In light of what we have said above we may understand the discrepancy between Moshe's two prayers. Immediately after the golden calf (before the covenant of the Thirteen Attributes was made) Moshe relied on the covenant which God had made with Avraham and His promise to him. But after the sin of the spies (and after having been a party to the covenant of the Thirteen Attributes) Moshe uses the latter covenant as a basis for his plea for forgiveness, since it gave renewed validity to the previous covenant which had lost its significance as a result of the golden calf.

Now we can solve our original difficulty: Why, in the midst of the discussion about the future of Am Yisrael, do Moshe and God engage in a private discussion the Thirteen Attributes? If Moshe's position in the cleft of the rock while God passes before him represents the making of a covenant, which is meant to renew the berit bein ha-betarim which was violated, then this is really part of the general discussion

which concerns the nation as a whole. This represents the climax of God's forgiveness for the nation's sin - the re-establishment of the fallen covenant, and the addition of attributes of mercy into the covenant's content.