

EVEN IF WE CANNOT TRULY EMULATE HASHEM, OUR SELFLESSNESS INVOKES HASHEM'S MERCY

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Ki Sisa

Even If We Cannot Truly Emulate Hashem, Our Selflessness Invokes Hashem's Mercy

By

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: CD #892 Borer: Can You Separate White Meat from the Dark Meat? Good Shabbos!

After Moshe Rabbeinu descended from Har Sinai [Mt. Sinai] and saw that the Jewish people made a Golden Calf, he broke the Luchos [Tablets of Stone] containing the Torah. Then the Almighty told Moshe to make a new set of Luchos.

The Torah then describes the following scene: "Hashem descended in a cloud and stood with him there, and He called out with the Name Hashem. Hashem passed before him and proclaimed: Hashem, Hashem, G-d, Compassionate and Gracious, Slow to Anger, and Abundant in Kindness and Truth; Preserver of Kindness for thousands of generations, Forgiver of Iniquity, Willful Sin, and Error, and Who Cleanses..." [Shemos 34:5-7]

Moshe was standing in the cleft of the rock, the Almighty came down in a cloud, and called out to Moshe the 13 Attributes of G-d's Mercy (Yud Gimmel Midos HaRachamim). The above quoted pasuk is very familiar to us. Recitation of the 13 Attributes of G-d's Mercy makes up a large part of our prayers on Yom Kippur. The Talmud [Rosh Hashannah 17b] attaches special significance to the contents of this pasuk. Rabbi Yochanan says that were the pasuk not specifically written in the Torah, it would be impossible (i.e. - blasphemous) to say it. The Torah is saying, as it were, that the Almighty wrapped Himself in a tallis as if He were a Shliach Tzibbur [representative of the

community leading the congregation in prayer] and demonstrated to Moshe the proper order of prayers. He told Moshe: Any time Israel sins, let them recite this order of prayer and I will forgive them.

This passage is our secret weapon. Therefore, at the time of Neilah, when Yom Kippur is slipping away from us, we invoke the recitation of these pasukim over and over repeatedly. This is our ace in the hole, so to speak. When all else fails, we invoke the 13 Attributes of Divine Mercy to insure our protection from Divine Wrath. After all, G-d promised "Let them recite this order of prayer before Me and I will forgive them."

The Talmud then quotes the Tanna Rabbi Yehudah who says, "A covenant has been enacted with the 13 Attributes of Mercy that they are not returned empty-handed, as it is written 'Behold I am making a covenant'" [Shemos 34:10]. Apparently, we have a Divine promise that whenever these Attributes are invoked they have an effect.

The problem that already troubled the Rishonim [early commentaries] is that many times this does not seem to be the case. It would seem that many times, when we invoke the pasuk of the "Yud Gimmel Middos," they do not elicit the hoped for effect from the Master of the World.

The Reishis Chochmah cites in the name of the Gaonim (The Shalo"h haKadosh on Parshas Ki Sisa says this as well.) that it is not as easy as one might expect. An inference is drawn from the Talmudic statement "...whenever Israel sins ya-asu lefanai k'seder haZeh..." This does not really mean (as we translated earlier) "let them recite before me this order" but rather "ya-asu lefani" means let them DO this order of prayer. It is not sufficient to recite verbally the Yud Gimmel Middos HaRachamim. The person must act them out. We must emulate these attributes of mercy. Just as the Almighty is Merciful, so must we be merciful; just as the Almighty is Compassionate, so must we be compassionate; etc.

The Covenant that has been enacted regarding the 13 Attributes not being returned empty handed is not based on saying the words but rather on emulating in our interactions with others the deeds of Mercy and Compassion that the Almighty demonstrates in His interaction with us.

This is the opinion of the Shalo"h and of the Gaonim as quoted by the Reishis Chochmah. However, not everyone agrees. The Ya'aros Devash, written by the famous Rav Yonasan Eybeschütz, argues with this position. He claims that we cannot be expected to fully emulate all these Divine Attributes of Mercy. He points out that one of the 13 Attributes is "K-el". The Name "K-el" means the Ultimate Powerful One. Rav Yonasan Eybeschütz argues, "We cannot emulate 'K-el.'" Perhaps we can emulate Rachum [Merciful], Chanun [Compassionate], Erech Apayim [Long Suffering]. However, we certainly cannot emulate K-el [All Powerful One]. This is beyond our capability because we are not All Powerful.

The Ya'aros Devash buttresses his thesis by pointing out the introduction to the recitation of the 13 Attributes: "K-el her'eisa lanu LOMAR Shlosh Esrei." You - K-el, the All Powerful One showed us how

to SAY the 13 Attributes. You are aware that the Attribute of K-el is impossible to emulate and that is why you taught us merely to SAY the attributes, not to fully emulate them, as the Gaonim want to claim.

However, this insight of the Ya'Aros Devash leads us back to our previous question: If saying them is sufficient, why does it not always work?

I saw quoted in the Sefer Imrei Binah that the reason it does not always work is that there is another condition to this "Covenant".

As mentioned earlier, according to Rabbi Yochanan in the Talmud, the pasukim in Ki Sisa say, "He wrapped himself in a Tallis like a Shliach Tzibbur and taught us the order of prayers..." Merely saying the words alone is not sufficient. A person must say them like a Shliach Tzibbur. A Shliach Tzibbur has the welfare of the entire community in mind. When we daven for this, we need to pray, not only for ourselves, but also for the benefit of the entire community.

We stand there at Neilah on Yom Kippur and we know that time is slipping away. We know that we need "this, that, and the other thing", and we cry with all our might "Hashem, Hashem, K-el, Rachum, v'Chanun..." However, we are missing something. We are missing the fact that we have not "wrapped ourselves like a Shliach Tzibbur." We have our own needs in mind and not the needs of the entire community. For the 13 Attributes of Mercy to work (even if recital alone is going to be sufficient), it must be done with the spirit of "this teaches that the Almighty wrapped himself like a Shliach Tzibbur". This is sometimes very difficult because when a person has his own needs and his own troubles, it is difficult to put one's own problems aside and say "I need to worry about the other fellow". This is why it is a very big challenge.

I saw a beautiful insight in the Sefer Mikdash Mordechai from Rav Mordechai Rogov. He comments on the pasuk, "And Hashem descended in a cloud and He stood there with him." [Shemos 34:5]. Why was it necessary for the Almighty to come down in a cloud? Rav Mordechai Rogov answers that the Ribono shel Olam was teaching us a lesson: When things are bright and shiny for all of us, it is easy to think about the other person. When, however, a person finds himself "in the middle of a cloud", when he has his own pack of personal problems to worry about, it becomes much more difficult to be compassionate and to empathize with somebody else's problems. Hashem came down in a cloud and told us to act like a Shliach Tzibbur - worrying about the needs of the entire congregation, not just our own needs.

Rav Mordechai Kamenetsky relates a moving story involving his father, Rav Binyomin Kamenetsky. This is an amazing example of being "in the midst of a cloud" and yet thinking about the other person.

A father unfortunately passed away when his son was still very young, prior to Bar Mitzvah age. To add hurt upon hurt, shortly before the boy's Bar Mitzvah, the mother became extremely ill. Rav Binyomin Kamenetsky went to visit her in the hospital a few weeks before the son was to become

Bar Mitzvah.

She told the visiting Rabbi, "Please do me a favor. I don't want you to come to my son's Bar Mitzvah." He looked at her incredulously and asked her to explain herself. She explained that on the same night her family was planning the Bar Mitzvah, another boy in his class was also making a Bar Mitzvah. "I know that every Rav in town is going to come to my son's Bar Mitzvah, because he is an orphan who has no father and I don't even know if I am going to be there. All the Rabbonim are going to come to my son's Bar Mitzvah and no one will be going to the other boy's simcha. Please, Rabbi Kamenetsky, do me a favor and go to the other boy's Bar Mitzvah."

This is an example of "Hashem descended in a cloud". Here is a woman who was enveloped in a terrible cloud of personal tragedy and suffering and yet she was able to think, "What is going to be with that other child?" Such selflessness invokes the Attribute of Mercy in the way that Hashem desires. Just as the Shliach Tzibbur does not merely represent himself before G-d, but he represents the entire community, so too this is how we should act and think when we invoke the 13 Attributes of Mercy.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Ki Sisa are provided below:

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