

Yom Kippur 5762 – before Neilah

Earlier today I asked a question: The Gemara tells us that *hkb"h* promised Moshe Rabbeinu that whenever Jews sin, if they will recite the 13 middos of rachamim, he will forgive them. How is possible, I asked, that by merely affirming that *hakadosh baruch hu* is merciful we cause Him to be merciful and forgive us.

And we suggested an answer; that the Gemara means not merely that we should recite this attributes, but that we should emulate them, as well. And that is certainly true.

Nonetheless, it is clear that our rabbis placed tremendous importance on the recitation itself. And nowhere is this more evident than in the *neilah* that we are about to say, whose constant refrain is these thirteen *midos*: *Hashem Hashem kel rachum v'chanun*, and so on.

Where does the power of this recitation lie?

I would like to share with you an answer that occurred to me during these past few days, in the light of the events through which we have been living.

Let us consider what had happened when *hkb"h* first told Moshe about these *midos harachamim*. . The Jewish people had just committed the *cheit ha'egel* – a sin so grievous they will carry its scar throughout their future history. The sin is severe enough to warrant, even, *chailah*, their destruction – the *ribono shel olam* Himself says so: *heref mimeni ve'ashmidem*, He says to Moshe – leave Me, and I will destroy them.

And now Moshe asks that they be forgiven; that the *ribono shel olam* forbear from destroying them. And the *ribono shel olam*, being merciful, would like – *k'v'yachol* – to do so. But there is a problem. Because if no punishment follows such a sin then the people might be led into thinking that they are benefiting – not from the *ribono shel olam's* mercy – but from His indifference. Perhaps we are escaping unscathed not because He is forgiving us but because He doesn't really care; perhaps, as the ancient Greeks believed, *azav Hashem es ha'aretz*, He has left the world to its own devices.

After all, when *cheit* goes unpunished it can be perceived in two ways: As proof of G-d's mercy, and as evidence of His indifference. And if it is seen in the latter way, then it would be a *chillul Hashem*.

And so *hakadosh baruch hu* says to Moshe – I am willing to forgive the people. But only if they understand that I am forgiving them; that their survival is My gift to them. And they have to demonstrate that understanding by affirming their belief in My mercy, by reciting my attributes of Mercy.

And so the condition of our forgiveness is our affirmation that He is merciful – our recognition that our survival is a gift that we are receiving from Him.

During these *yomim noraim* we here in New York have been abruptly brought face to face with *midas hadin*; we have had a terrible reminder that *tiga be'harim ve'ye'eshanu*, he touches mountains and they turn to smoke. We are all still shaken by that experience. But just as we have become more aware of His *midas hadin* it is important that we be aware of His *midas harachamim*; that we bring home to ourselves the realization that we who are *chayim kulanu hayom*, alive and well, *baruch Hashem*, are the beneficiaries not of blind good luck, but of His continuing benevolence. If we are to deserve His mercy, we have to recognize that we are receiving it. And therefore we need to say these thirteen *midos harachamim* today with special intent and gratitude.

And therefore, as we stand before the *ribono shel olam* in these last precious minutes of Yom Kippur, as we implore Him to bless us and protect us in the year to come, and as we affirm our faith in His mercy, let us remember to recognize how great is the amount of His mercy of which we are already in receipt. Let us remember that if we have been safe and secure here in this country all these past years it is precisely because He is *kel rachum vechanun*, compassionate and merciful. And therefore we pray – we implore – and we have faith that He will continue to be compassionate and merciful, to us and to all Israel,

Amen.