



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת כי תשא תשס"ט 5769 Parshas Ki Sisa

WHO KNOWS THIRTEEN?

One of the most stirring and dramatic moments of our prayers takes place on those occasions when we recite the *Yud-Gimmel Middos shel Rachamim* (Thirteen Divine Attributes of Mercy). These traits are revealed to Moshe Rabbeinu in this week's *parshah* ("And Hashem passed over in front of him, and He called: 'Hashem, Hashem, the Merciful and Gracious G-d...'") [*Shemos 34:6,7*].

The power inherent in these characteristics cannot be overstated. In fact, from the words of Chazal it appears that mentioning these Thirteen Attributes provides an almost automatic guarantee that our prayers will be answered. As recorded in the Gemara:

"R' Yochanan said: The Holy One, Blessed is He, taught Moshe this special order of supplication. He told him: 'If it should ever happen that the Jewish people shall sin, they should repeat this order (literally, they should 'perform this procedure'), and I will forgive them,'... R' Yehudah said: A covenant has been forged regarding the Thirteen Attributes, that their recital shall always be accepted (literally, that they will never return unanswered)" (*Rosh Hashanah 17b*).

Here, however, is where we may seem to find a discrepancy. We recite this "formula" on various occasions: fast days, the *selichos* service during the High Holidays, etc. However, we have not always been granted what we've asked for. What happened to the covenant that seemed to have guaranteed a fulfillment of our prayers?

The Chofetz Chaim explains with a parable:

FOLLOWING DIRECTIONS

A certain individual in need of a livelihood turned to a rich relative. This uncle of his was quite well-to-do, being the owner of numerous factories. Much to the good fortune of the nephew, the magnate had a position that had recently become open.

"I'm glad you came to me," his uncle told him. "I need a supervisor at one of my plants. It's a good job – clean, respectable work, with a nice, fat salary to boot. All you have to do is oversee the workers and ensure that they maintain proper levels of productivity. In fact, I'll make it nice and simple for you. I'll write down a detailed schedule for you to follow, exactly when to inspect this part of the production line, and when to go to a different part. Stick to the schedule, and you'll be fine."

The man's uncle proceeded to do just that and handed him a paper that delineated the exact times he was to conduct each inspection. They made up to meet again at the end of the month, at which point the newly appointed supervisor would report his findings to his uncle. At that point, he would collect his salary: fifty gold pieces for the month, a hefty sum indeed.

When the appointed day came, the supervisor went eagerly to see his uncle – eager to impress his new boss with his performance and even more eager to collect his pay.

"Okay, tell me how things went," his uncle asked him.

His proud nephew proceeded to repeat verbatim the exact contents of the schedule he had been given. "At nine-o'clock inspect the workers at this

Dedicated in loving memory of Mrs. Miriam Kalmuk

מרים בת מנחם מגדל ע"ה

by Dr. and Mrs. R. Shanik, Lakewood, NJ

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of אידל בת אליהו ע"ה, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her neshamah.

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site, at ten-o'clock at that site, etc., etc.” He recited it all by heart, down to the last detail. His uncle was duly impressed.

“I see you’ve memorized the whole schedule,” he told his beaming nephew. “Now, please inform me how the inspections themselves went.”

Suddenly, his nephew grew flustered. “Ummm... what do you mean?” he asked.

“The inspections. What did you observe during the inspections?” his uncle persisted, beginning to show signs of agitation.

“Oh, ummm... I didn’t know that... I mean... ”

Realization began to dawn on both faces.

“You imbecile!” the uncle burst out. “I didn’t give you the schedule just to memorize the instructions! You think for that I’m paying you such a high salary? Couldn’t you figure out that you were supposed to carry out the instructions and simply use the schedule as your guidelines?!”

And so it is with the Thirteen Attributes, explained the Chofetz Chaim. The idea is not just to recite them that is a necessary step, but only a first one. Their power lies in one’s actual performance of them that is, Hashem desires that the Jewish people walk in His ways and emulate His pristine and compassionate traits. It is when they “perform this procedure,” and not just “say” it, that their prayers will certainly be answered (*Otzros Hatorah, Sefer Shemos, pp. 283-5*).

CONTROLLING YOUR DESTINY

And so we begin to understand that “the order of the Thirteen Attributes” is not just some “magical formula,” whereby enunciating certain words the supplicant is automatically granted whatever he wants. Rather, the matter is conducted through Hashem’s system of perfect justness. When a Jew emulates Hashem’s traits of compassion, Hashem will reciprocate and bestow upon him an extra measure of compassion.

This notion is based on the classic concept described in the Mishnah in Sotah (1:7):

בְּמַדָּה שֶׁאָדָם מוֹדֵד, בָּהּ מוֹדְדִין לוֹ.

“A person is treated (by Heaven) in the same manner with which he conducts himself.”

If a person displays harshness and inflexibility in his dealings with others, he can expect similar treatment from the Almighty. His personal failings may be scrutinized, and he will be dealt with accordingly. However, if a person adopts the attributes of Hashem – for instance, to exhibit great patience and understanding for his fellow man – he has cause to hope for Divine patience. In this manner, he may witness the fulfillment of another dictum of Chazal, which expresses a similar sentiment: “To whom does Hashem grant forgiveness (for their shortcomings)? To someone who overlooks the flaws and misdeeds of others” (*Rosh Hashanah 17a*).

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