

The Mercy of God in Judaism

Mercy without Boundaries Panel - Salesian Pontifical University Jerusalem March 10 2016

The Hebrew language has a number of different words for mercy. The most common of these is the word “rachamim” coming from the root “rechem”= womb, and thus evokes fundamental unconditional maternal love. Indeed, one of the most common names for God in Judaism is “Harachaman”, the Merciful One (“rachmana” in Aramaic; similarly “baal harachamim” .)

In the opening of “psukei dzimra” the section primarily of psalms that opens the daily morning prayers, Jews praise the Almighty with the words “Blessed is He who has mercy on the world; Blessed is He who has mercy on (His) creatures ” in keeping with Psalm 145:9 “God is good to all and His mercies extend to all His Creatures”. Indeed the appeal to Divine Mercy features throughout the daily liturgy affirming this as the supreme Divine Attribute.

However there are two principle names for God in the Hebrew Bible which are perceived in Jewish Tradition as reflecting two primary Divine Attributes. One is “*Elohim*” (and related forms of the word) which reflects Divine Transcendence and is thus understood in Jewish tradition to express the Divine Attribute of Justice.

But the other name, the Tetragrammaton “*YHVH*” (which religiously observant Jews do not pronounce and rather use the term “*Adonai*” (Lord) for religious purpose, and “*HaShem*” (the Name), for colloquial use) expresses Divine Immanence and it is thus understood in Jewish Tradition as reflecting the Divine Attribute of Mercy – “*midat harachamim*”.

Creation itself is seen as a manifestation of these Attributes.

"Thus said the Holy One, blessed be His name! 'If I create the world with the Attribute of Mercy, sin will abound; and if I create it with the Attribute of Justice, how can the world exist? Therefore I create it with both attributes, mercy and justice, and may it thus endure'" (Genesis Rabbah 12:15). The same is asserted about the creation of the human being (Genesis Rabbah 21: 8).

This reflects the inherent tension between the two Attributes of Justice and Mercy.

God is the Creator of the Universe, its physical laws and moral laws (His commandments) ,and thus there are inevitable consequences to their disregard as the Bible describes so graphically. Indeed, because “there is not a man on earth who does not sin and does only good” (Ecclesiastes 7:20), we would all be condemned by our failures.

Therefore, Judaism teaches, the Divine Attribute of Mercy overwhelms the Divine Attribute of Justice reflecting God’s unlimited love and grace that cleanses us from our sins when our contrition is sincere.

This is the concept known in Judaism as “*teshuvah*”, from the root “*shuv*” meaning, return (see Joel 2:12-14.)

It is founded on the idea that the human person is inherently goodly and Godly, i.e. seeks to be with God and live accordingly; but inevitably because he is human and endowed with the Divine gift of free will, he makes mistakes and is invariably corrupted.

However in order to be back with God, all a person has to do is to be sincerely contrite for his or her errors and thus return to God who in His unlimited mercy accepts the sinner and erases his or her guilt. "As I live says the Lord God, I do not desire the death of the wicked; but that the wicked returns from his (evil) way and lives; return, return, from your evil ways, why should you die (members of the) house of Israel" (Ezekiel 33:11)

When we are sincerely penitent, God in His unlimited Mercy, receives us fully back to Him. In the words of the sages:- "No matter how vile the sinner—be he as wicked as Manasseh or as Ahab—the gate of repentance is open to him" (Pesikta 25:160b,162a).

This idea, rooted in the Hebrew Bible and found through the entire Apocryphal literature, serves as the basis for the daily penitential prayers and every evening service begins with the words "and He who is Merciful will atone (our) sin and not destroy..."

Naturally the liturgy of the fast-days – and in particular of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is replete with this idea. Notable in particular are the words in the closing Ne'ilah prayer on Yom Kippur, already formulated in the first centuries of the common era (see TB Yoma 87b, where Rav of Babylon and Rabbi Yohanan of the Land of Israel refer to some portions of it):- "You offer Your hand to transgressors, and Your right hand is stretched out to receive the repentant" (see TB, Pesachim. 119a). "Not in reliance upon our merits do we lay our supplications before You, O Lord of all the world, but trusting in Your great mercy. For You do not find delight in the destruction of the world, but You take pleasure in the return of the wicked that they may live."

The saying of the Rabbis, "Higher is the station of the sinner who repents is on a higher level than he who has never sinned" (Ber. 34b; see Pes. 119a; Luke xv. 10), emanates from the same principle of God's redeeming mercy.

"God says, 'Open for me an aperture no wider than a needle's eye, and I will open for you a gate through which armies and their supplies can pass'" (Midrash Canticles, 5:2. Pesikta 25:163b).

This concept of "teshuvah" accordingly testifies to Judaism's affirmation that God's mercy always has the upper hand over His judgement. In fact, the rabbis picturesquely describe God as having His own personal prayer which is: "Let my (attribute of) Mercy overcome my (attribute of) Judgment, so that I may deal with my children beyond the strict limits of judgment (TB, Brachot 7a.)

Jewish tradition accordingly came to view Temple sin offerings purely as an outward manifestation of what has to be genuine confessed penitence (Lev. 5:5-6; Num. 5:6. See also Psalms 32:5; 38:19; 41:5; Lamentations 3:40)

The sages' awareness of the evolution of the concept is reflected in the following passage:- "Wisdom, was asked, 'What shall be done with the sinner?' and replied, 'evil pursues sinners' (Prov. 13:21). Prophecy, was asked, 'What shall be done with the sinner?' and replied, 'the soul that sins, it shall die' (Ezek. 18:4). The Torah was asked, 'What shall be done with the sinner?' and replied 'Let him bring a guilt-offering and the priest shall atone for him' (Lev. 1:4). God Himself, was asked, 'What shall be done with the sinner?' and replied, 'Let him repent, and he will be atoned for; is it not said: "Good and upright is the Lord: therefore will He teach sinners the way of repentance" (Psalm 25: 8). For, my children, what do I require of you? "Seek me and live"', (Pesikta 25:158b; TJ, Makkot 31d).

In addition, God's Mercy expresses a Divine imperative for humanity that Judaism understands as the meaning of the commandments to love God and to cleave to Him. This is the concept of *Imitatio Dei*, living in accordance with the Divine Attributes.

In the words of Abba Shaul, (TB, Shabbat 133b), "just as He is compassionate and merciful; so you be compassionate and merciful."

Accordingly the Talmud teaches (TB, Sotah 14a):- "just as God clothes the naked, as it says, "And God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them" (Genesis 3), so you should also clothe the naked. The Holy One Blessed be He visited the sick, as it is written: "And God appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre" (Genesis 18), so you should also visit the sick. The Holy One blessed be He comforted mourners, as it is written: "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son" (Genesis 25), so you should also comfort mourners. The Holy One blessed be He buried the dead, as it is written: "And God buried him (Moses) in the valley" (Deuteronomy 34), so should you also bury the dead."

However God's mercy is uniquely experienced by the Jewish People within the context of His Covenant with Israel

Israel's pledge to this Covenant demands that the People live in accordance with Divine Will; and thus failure brings with it even greater consequences; and it is here that Divine Mercy is perceived in Judaism with even more unique intensity, expressed especially in the Hebrew word "*chesed*".

There is no precise equivalent in our languages for *chesed* . English versions usually try to represent it with such words as "steadfast love," "mercy," and "loving-kindness." Yet these cannot do full justice to the word

It is found in the Hebrew Bible in relation to inter-personal relationships and desirable human conduct and indeed is used in Jewish tradition in the Hebrew term "*gmillut chasadim*", to denote deeds of human kindness especially to the more vulnerable. Notable on this regard is the statement attributed in the Mishnah to Simon the Righteous that "the word stands on three things; on Torah ; Avodah, Divine Service; and on Gmillut Chassadim, acts of merciful lovingkindness (Avot 1:2)

Above all however the word “chesed” is used to denote Divine pathos –particularly, His gratuitous mercy and love that endures beyond any sin or betrayal and graciously extends forgiveness.

Norman H. Snaith (in *Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, London (1944) states that “ the nearest New Testament equivalent to the Hebrew “chesed” is charis (grace), as Luther realized when he used the German *gnade* for both words.”

While this concept does relate to forgiveness for the individual as already mentioned; as also already stated, it is used above all in relation to God’s covenantal relationship with Israel. Accordingly the word often appears together with the word “brit”, covenant (e.g. Deuteronomy 7:9 and 12. I Kings 8:23. Daniel 9:4. Nehemiah 9:32. II Chronicles 6:14.)

As indicated, the Covenantal responsibility of the People of Israel is to live in fidelity to the commandments revealed to them; but God’s everlasting faithfulness to the Covenant is above all experienced by the People in His unlimited compassion, forgiveness, and His promise regarding the eternity of Israel even when Israel fails to live up to the high standards of its covenantal responsibilities. (see Deuteronomy 4:31)

The loving-kindness of God towards Israel is overwhelmingly undeserved on Israel's part. If Israel received the proper treatment for the occasions of her failure to walk in God's Way, there would be no prospect for her of anything but destruction, since God's demand for right action never wavers.

Israel's failures will bring their consequences - even exile (Leviticus 26:14-41), but will never lead to complete destruction, for God remains eternally faithful to His Covenant and returns them again to the land of their Fathers (Leviticus 26: 42,44,45) as manifestation of His “chesed” – His mercy and more.

Indeed after the two greatest debacles of the children of Israel in the wilderness, the sin of the golden calf and the people’s failure of faith with the evil report of the ten spies, Moses elicits Divine forgiveness not only by appealing to the Divine Covenant with the Fathers (Ex. 32:13), but by appealing to the Divine Attributes of mercy, compassion, tolerance, and bounteous “chesed” and truth; (of He who) keeps His “chesed” for the thousands (of generations)..... (Chapter 34:6,7. See also Numbers 14:18,19.)

These are known in Jewish Tradition as the Thirteen Attributes whose articulation elicit the Divine guarantee of forgiveness for Israel (see TB Rosh Hashanah 17b)

The idea of this “chesed” by which God refuses to wash his hands of wayward Israel, already resounds throughout the writings of the Hebrew Prophets. For example:- “With eternal “chesed” I will have compassion on you says your Redeemer the Lord.... Though the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, yet My “chesed” for you will not depart and My covenant of peace shall not be removed, says your God who has compassion on you (Isaiah 54:8,10.)

“He will not maintain His anger for ever for He desires “*chesed*”. Give truth to Jacob, “*chesed*” to Abraham as you swore to our Fathers in days of old (Micah 7:18.20)

“for though He has caused grief, He will have mercy according to the abundance of His “*chesed*” (Lamentations 3:33)

“And He will remember His covenant and be appeased according to His merciful loving kindnesses (“*chasadav*”) (Psalm 106:45 .see also Psalm 107:1)

“And I will betroth you to me forever; and I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice and “*chesed*” and mercy ... “(Hosea2:21)

Thus the predominant use of the word reflects God’s unlimited mercy that guarantees His faithfulness to the covenantal contract. For this reason the Greek translators of the Hebrew used the Greek *eleos* (mercy, pity) as their regular rendering, and Jerome followed with the Latin *miser cordia*.

Despite God’s demands for righteousness and observance of His commandments, the prophets and the rabbis after them, were sure that God's mercy reflects His Character and Ways more than anything else; and that this mercy expresses His love for His People and His loyalty to His Covenant.

However as already mentioned, not only does Judaism affirm that God’s mercy is granted to all His creatures (as per Psalm 145:9), but as stated in Psalm 89:3, it is His “*chesed*” that builds/sustains the world as a whole.

When Saint John Paul II visited the synagogue in Rome in 1986, he concluded his presentation with the refrain that appears so frequently in the book of Psalms “Give thanks to God, ‘*ki l’olam chasdo*’, for His Mercy endures forever”; and when Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI visited the synagogue he concluded similarly with the following words from Psalm 117, with which I too conclude :- “O praise the Lord all you nations, acclaim him all you peoples. For His “*chesed*” , His loving mercy, overwhelms us, and He is faithful forever. *Hallelu-yah*”