International Rabbinic Fellowship

Weekly Dvar Torah

Parshat Ki Tissa

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This week's Dvar Torah is provided by Rabbi Rabbi Dr. Don Seeman

The Mandate to Become Like God

Every Yom Kippur and High Holiday season, our traditional liturgy focuses on one allusive passage from Exodus 33, in which Moses demands to see God's glory, but God refuses: "For man cannot see me and live." Yet God agrees, according to the text, to show Moses his "back" rather than his "face," and then reveals to Moses later Jewish tradition has called "the thirteen principles of compassion" : "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin…" Jews continue to recite these on fast days and in the context of public penitence each year. But what do we mean by doing so?

The revelation of God's mercy and compassion takes place in the direct aftermath of the sin of the Golden Calf, which nearly lead to the extinction of the children of Israel. God's revelation of the thirteen principles of compassion in this context is a profound and shattering confirmation of the truth that God desires not the death of the sinner, but that he or she turns from his or her way. This is true for individuals, but it is even truer for the people of Israel as a whole, and our intuitive recognition of that fact is expressed in our use of this passage throughout our liturgy.

Nevertheless, Jewish writers have not always agreed about what precisely this passage tells us. Why do we need to know the nature of divine compassion? Some writers seem to think that reciting this passage from the biblical text has power on its own to arouse divine forgiveness. Yet I want to emphasize another tradition, which is that we focus on the principles of divine compassion *primarily in order to embody them ourselves*. This is captured in a powerful early midrash: "Just as he [God] is called merciful, so you should be merciful. Just as he [God] is called gracious, so you should be gracious." The rabbis are telling us, in other words, that the point of God's revelation here was pedagogical: that God desires our emulation of these particular qualities, and the organization of our personhood around them. Far from emphasizing the gulf between human and divine being, this text emphasizes the mandate for human beings to become more God-like.

Rabbi Moses Cordovero, in sixteenth century Safed, composed an enduringly popular ethical handbook called *Tomer Devorah* which focuses on each one of the thirteen principle of compassion in order of their appearance, with advice on how to train oneself to attain each one. Just as God sustains every single living thing, down to gnats and flies, writes Rabbi Cordovero, so we should support life rather than death, well beyond what Jewish law formally demands. Rabbi Cordovero was a Kabbalist, so it is not surprising that for him, the thirteen principals also describe something about the nature of the unfolding divine.

Not so Maimonides, the great 12th-13th century thinker with whom I want to conclude. Maimonides is steadfastly opposed to any attempt to imply that we really know about God's being in itself— having pursued philosophical speculation to its limit, we then realize that the most we can reliably know about God are the meaning of God's *actions*, which we can and must also emulate. Indeed, for Maimonides, the whole point of the story in Exodus 33-34 is that we can ultimately know *almost nothing* about God in Godself, but can only know what God demands of us ethically, and so the height of philosophy is also the height of ethical practice: to become like God as merciful, compassionate, and so forth. Needless to say, for Maimonides we do not recite the thirteen principles of compassion in order to change God's disposition towards us, but in order to educate and change ourselves. What is more, biblical verses from these two chapters are the most frequently cited in Maimonides' entire broad corpus of writings. He mentions them in the very first chapter of his *Code of Law*, and returns to them in the *Guide of the Perplexed* many times. Because for Maimonides more than for almost any other Jewish thinker, the very purpose of Torah is to do one's utmost to understand and then emulate God. Maimonides describes this most powerfully in the last chapter of the *Guide*, but because it is Purim this week, I want to call attention to a different passage, in which the same theme emerges.

In chapter two of his *Laws of the Megillah*, Maimonides writes that it is better to spend excess money on gifts to the poor rather than on gifts to friends or on the festive Purim meal, even though these are all commandments of the day. He then concludes:

> For there is no greater or more beautiful joy than to rejoice the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows and strangers. For the one who causes the hearts of these distressed people to rejoice is likened to the *Shechinah*[the divine presence], as it is written: "to revive the spirit of the fallen and to revive the hearts of the afflicted."

There is very little to add to these words.