

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Ki Tisa
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פרשת כי תשא
ט"ז באדר תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Shmot* (Exodus) 30:11-34:35

In this *parasha*, Hashem continues describing the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) to Moshe; the people worship the *Aygel Hazahav* (Golden Calf), Moshe pleads on their behalf, and Hashem forgives them.

The so-called “Thirteen Attributes of God” are found in this *parasha*. As Moshe pleads for Bnei Yisrael, the Hebrew text says (34:5-7):

ה וַיֵּרָד יְ-הוָה-יְ-הוָה בְּעָנָן וַיִּתְיַצֵּב עִמּוֹ שֵׁם וַיִּקְרָא בְּשֵׁם יְ-הוָה-יְ-הוָה וַיַּעֲבֹר יְ-הוָה-יְ-הוָה |
עַל-פְּנֵי וַיִּקְרָא יְ-הוָה-יְ-הוָה | יְ-הוָה-יְ-הוָה אֶל-לְרַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אַרְבֵּי אַפָּיִם וְרַב-חַסְדִּים וְיִאֲמֹת:
ז נִצַּר חֶסֶד לְאֱלֹהִים נֶשְׂא עוֹן וְפָשַׁע וְחַטָּאת וְנִקָּה לֹא יִנְקָה פֶקֶד | עוֹן אָבוֹת
עַל-בָּנִים וְעַל-בָּנֵי בָנִים עַל-שְׁלֹשִׁים וְעַל-רְבָעִים |

Given the way Hebrew grammar and syntax operate, we could translate these verses into English in a number of distinct ways. Two samples appear below:

1. Hashem came down in the cloud and he stood with him there and he called in the name of Hashem. Hashem passed before his face and **he called, 'Hashem, Hashem,** mighty, merciful, and gracious, slow to anger, full of kindness, and truth. Who assures kindness to thousands, who bears iniquity, transgression, and sin, who forgives, but does not forgive, who visits the sin of parents on children and on grandchildren, on the third generation and on the fourth generation.'
2. Hashem came down in the cloud and he stood with him there and he called in the name of Hashem. Hashem passed before his face and **Hashem called, 'Hashem,** mighty, merciful, and gracious, slow to anger, full of kindness and

truth. Who assures kindness to thousands, who bears iniquity, transgression, and sin, and who forgives, but does not forgive, who visits the sin of parents on children and on grandchildren, on the third generation and on the fourth generation.'

The text is purposely vague on who stood with whom, who called in the name of Hashem, and who pronounced the Divine characteristics. Any of the pronouns could refer to either Moshe or Hashem.

Other aspects of the verses also support these multiple meanings. The *ta'amei haMikrah* (cantillation marks) on the words "וַיִּקְרָא ה' אֶל-לְרַחֵם וְחַנּוּן" seem to separate the word וַיִּקְרָא ("and he called") from the two proper nouns ה' ("Hashem"). This is in accord with the first version of the translation. However, a solid line appears between the two words "Hashem," seeming to indicate that the first "Hashem" should be connected to the word וַיִּקְרָא ("and he called") after all, which matches the second translation.

Further, when we recite this section in prayer as a way to ask forgiveness from Hashem, we cut off the text after the word וַיִּגְדֹּל ("and who forgives"), leaving out the rest of the verse, since it is not conducive to an appeal for forgiveness.

The Talmud begins to address these apparent textual difficulties with the following Midrash from Tractate Rosh Hashana 17b:

"And Hashem passed by before him and proclaimed." Rabbi Johanan said: Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say such a thing; this verse teaches us that Hashem drew his robe round like the leader of a congregation and showed Moshe the order of prayer. Hashem said to him: Whenever Israel sin, let them carry out this service before Me, and I will forgive them.

"Hashem, Hashem:" I am the Eternal before a person sins and the same after a person sins and repents. "A God merciful and gracious:" Rav Judah said: A covenant has been made with the thirteen attributes that they will not be turned away empty-handed, as it says, "Behold I make a covenant."

This Midrash seems to indicate the possibility that first Hashem proclaimed the attributes, followed by Moshe, who was learning them for future use. It also gives

license to those who wrote the prayers we use today to cut off these verses at the most opportune place.

This section from the Talmud is a good example of how Midrash can begin to resolve some seemingly insoluble vagaries in the text and to explain why the Torah contains these vagaries.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- How many ways can you translate the text above, putting Hashem and Moshe's names in place of "he"?
- How do these various translations change what happened in this episode?
- If you were asking Hashem for forgiveness, how much of this text would you use, if any? What else might you say to ask Hashem for forgiveness?