

Questioning God's Mercy

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"And Moses hastened and bowed to the ground and prostrated himself." (Exodus 34:8)

What did Moses see?

R. Chanina ben Gamla said: He saw "longsuffering" (slow to anger). (Exodus 34:6)

And the sages say: He saw "truth." (Exodus 34:6)

It was taught in accordance with the one who said that he saw "long-suffering":

When Moses ascended on high, he found the Blessed Holy One sitting and writing "longsuffering."

He said before him: "Master of the world, long-suffering toward the righteous!"

God said to him: "Even for the wicked."

When the Israelites sinned, God said to Moses: "Didn't you say thus to me - 'longsuffering toward the righteous'?"

Moses said before God: "And didn't you say thus to me — 'even for the wicked'?"

Thus it is written: "And now let the power of the Lord be great, as you have spoken, saying: [Lord, long-suffering and great in loving*kindness....*]" (Numbers 14:17-18)

Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 111a-b

This midrash imagines Moses' response to God's revelation of the thirteen attributes after the sin of the Golden Calf. Which of God's words leads Moses to fall to the ground in worship? Is it the attribute of truth - a quality that would certainly be valued by Moses, a man driven by the call of justice toward those who suffer, a leader who single-mindedly guided his people toward freedom and the service of God? Or is it the quality of divine longsuffering?

The midrash tells a story that supports the notion that it is the quality of long-suffering, or being slow to anger, that most impresses Moses, and yet it also suggests that Moses needs to come to appreciate this quality. After all, being long-suffering can stand in opposition to justice. When Moses goes up to heaven to receive the Torah and sees God writing these words, Moses questions the applicability of this divine attribute — it must be, says Moses to God, that you mean to be long-suffering only toward the righteous. God insists that there is divine long-suffering even toward the

wicked and, when Moses protests that this is unjust, God obliquely tells Moses that he now has what he will one day need. Indeed, the midrash concludes, Moses would invoke this very quality in the episode of the other great sin of the Israelites in the wilderness, the sin of the scouts. At that time, Moses appeals to God's attributes of long-suffering and loving-kindness and omits from the litany of God's attributes the quality of truth.

This story about the greatest of all prophets raises a tension inherent in the role of prophet. A prophet's job is to articulate God's vision of a just world — to condemn human injustice and to prod people to follow the divine imperative. But the job of the biblical prophet is also to plead to God on behalf of the people, to ask God for mercy and forgiveness in the face of the people's failure to follow God's will. It is this second task that the midrash suggests is more foreign to Moses, yet Moses learns how to serve as the people's advocate, appealing to God by means of the divine attributes that will assure divine forgiveness.

The book of Jonah tells the story of a prophet who questions these very attributes. Jonah, having reluctantly undertaken the mission that led to the Ninevites' repentance and to God's forgiveness, becomes exceedingly distressed. He complains to God, explaining why he had resisted God's call in the first place: "Because I know that you are a God who is gracious and merciful, long-suffering and great in loving-kindness" (Jonah 4:2) Jonah lists the very qualities that lead God to forgive; he omits the quality of truth, as if to say that, in extending forgiveness to the Ninevites, God has failed to live up to being true and just.

Jonah's name incorporates the idea of truth; he is Jonah ben Amitai, "son of truth." Like Moses before him, Jonah lists God's attributes without including the quality of truth. But, while Moses celebrates God's attributes of being long-suffering and great in lovingkindness — as the midrash imagines it, Moses has learned to give up some on the attribute of justice in order to be an advocate for his people — Jonah decries these very attributes. Where, we hear him asking, is truth? Where is justice?

There are many ways to think about the question that Jonah is raising. I want to reflect

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on it from the perspective of someone hearing the story of Jonah, listening in on Jonah's conversation with God, in the synagogue on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, as the Day of Atonement begins to draw toward a close.

Over and over again on Yom Kippur, we have recited the thirteen attributes that God revealed to Moses after acceding to Moses' appeal not to destroy the people (see Exodus 32:14 and compare with Jonah 3:10). Those who recite selichot prayers have been calling out these same attributes over and over for weeks before Yom Kippur. We come to minchah on Yom Kippur, and an astonishing thing happens. On every fast day, we read the Torah during the afternoon prayer service. The portion that we read is the very story of Moses' intercession to God in the episode of the Golden Calf and of the revelation of God's attributes to Moses. But on this fast day, when we have spent weeks examining our lives and preparing to appeal to God's mercy, at that same moment in the minchah service, we read of Jonah questioning the very attributes that we have been celebrating and by means of which we have been crying out for forgiveness.

While the Yom Kippur liturgy is punctuated by the recitation of the thirteen attributes of God, the focus of the day and of the days and weeks leading up to the day is on us. Where have we gone astray? In what ways have we not lived up to who we ought to be? How can we do better in our quest to fulfill God's will for our lives? Yom Kippur is a day that promises atonement. We enter the day assured of God's capacity to forgive, but we may be less sure of our capacity to transform our own lives. We stand again, year after year, examining who we are and where we are going, and perhaps we are not so sure that teshuvah (repentance) is possible after all. Shifting our gaze from the attributes of God that we affirm to our own all-too-human qualities, we might wonder whether we can fulfill our side of the narrative of repentance and forgiveness.



Jonah's words give voice to our doubts about our own capacity to deserve forgiveness, our own ability to reshape our lives.

As we near the end of our annual journey of repentance, we listen in as Jonah questions God's attributes of mercy. Jonah's words give voice to our doubts about our own capacity to deserve forgiveness, our own ability to reshape our lives. Like the people of Nineveh, we do fast and we do cry out to God and we do determine to turn from our bad ways. But perhaps, like Jonah, we are not convinced that, in truth, we have managed to transform bad into good. The book concludes as God gets the final word: God has compassion on all of God's creatures. We are assured of God's compassion, but we have also acknowledged within our liturgy, if only for a brief moment during the afternoon prayers, the frailty of our own capacity to live the lives we are \boldsymbol{v} called to lead.

On Prophecy and Democracy

ARYEH COHEN

The prophets were not democrats. Addressing a gathering of citizens petitioning their elected leaders for the redress of grievances, I have sometimes felt as though I were channeling Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. or Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Especially if I was "in the zone," the exact words would flow through me and I would feel a direct and deep connection with the people I was talking to, and, at the same time, I would be able to focus the right amount of anger at the people I was talking about. I suspect that when King and Heschel were "in the zone," they felt that they were channeling Isaiah or Amos. It is anybody's guess who Amos and Isaiah thought

they were channeling. This, however, is not democracy. The use of words and rhetoric in a manner moving and poetic in order to focus the righteous rage of citizens on the sources of injustice is not democracy. It may, at times, be one aspect of a democratic culture.

Democracy, like prophecy, is not "one." Bringing democracy back to its basics — the *demos*, the people — reminds us that democracy is a gathering together. Democracy is the organizing of residents — both documented citizens and those undocumented who could be construed as citizens by dint of fulfilling the functions of citizenship (as the political continued on next page

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