YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**YHE-HOLIDAY: SPECIAL YOM KIPPUR 5777 PACKAGE**

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**In honor of our mother Mrs. Diana Weiner, with all our love and gratitude and with best wishes for a shana tov u-metuka!  
Steven Weiner & Lisa Wise  
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**The First Yom Kippur**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

Translated by Kaeren Fish

**Descent from the mountain**

According to the tradition of *Chazal*, as cited in Rashi’s commentary (*Shemot* 24:12), the Revelation at Sinai took place on the 6th of Sivan and on the next day, the 7th, Moshe ascended the mountain to receive the Tablets of the Covenant. Forty days later, the 17th of Tammuz, Moshe descended and upon seeing the golden calf that Bnei Yisrael had made in his absence, he broke the Tablets (Rashi, *Shemot* 32:1).

“And it came to pass the next day” (*Shemot* 32:30) – on the 18th of Tammuz – Moshe approached God once again, to pray and to beg for Divine mercy. This time he did not head for the top of Mount Sinai, but rather pitched his tent at a distance from the camp:

“And Moshe took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far away from the camp, and he called it the Tent of Meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the Lord went out to the Tent of Meeting, which was outside the camp… And the Lord spoke to Moshe face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he turned back to the camp…” (*Shemot* 33:7-11)

In *Sefer Shemot* we find no indication of what Moshe did in his tent far away from the camp, and how long he spent there. In *Sefer Devarim*, however, Moshe states:

“And I fell down before the Lord, as at the first – forty days and forty nights. I neither ate bread nor drank water, because of all your sins which you sinned, in doing wickedly in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger… But the Lord hearkened to me at that time also.” (*Devarim* 9:18-19)

Thus, we can conclude that Moshe remained in the Tent of Meeting for forty days, from the 18th of Tammuz until the 29th of Av. On the 1st of Elul he once again ascended Mount Sinai, in order to receive the second set of Tablets (*Devarim* 10:1).[[1]](#footnote-1) This time, too, he remained atop the mountain for a period of forty days and on the 10th of Tishrei, Yom Kippur, he received the Tablets. Rashi and the midrash both compare the first set of forty days with the middle set of forty days (starting on the 17th of Tammuz) and with the final set of forty days (culminating on Yom Kippur when he received the second set of Tablets):

“‘And I stayed in the mountain like the first time’ – [when I received] the first Tablets. Just as those days were a time of favor, so these were a time of favor. But the middle forty days, when I stood there praying for you, it was a time of [Divine] anger.”[[2]](#footnote-2) (Rashi on *Devarim* 10:10)

In commemoration of this last set of days, which Moshe spent on Mount Sinai, the forty days from Rosh Chodesh Elul until the 10th of Tishrei are designated as a time of repentance and atonement, culminating on Yom Kippur. As we find in *Seder Olam* (chapter 6):

“[Moshe] descended on the 10th of Tishrei, which was Yom Kippur, and he informed them that they had been forgiven by God, as it is written, ‘Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your inheritance.’ Therefore this is observed as a day of commemoration for all generations, as it is written, ‘And this will be for you an eternal statute.’”

**The Yom Kippur of Moshe Rabbeinu**

Yom Kippur of that year was the climax of the fast that Moshe had undertaken – the third forty-day fast. Thus, there is some similarity between the nature of that day and Yom Kippur, as we know it, which is a day of fasting. However, there are also other points of similarity between the Yom Kippur of Moshe and our own holy day.

On the 10th of Tishrei of that year, Moshe descended from Mount Sinai. On the 10th of Tishrei every year thereafter, the *Kohen Gadol* would enter the *Kodesh Kodashim* (Holy of Holies)as part of the Yom Kippur service. Ramban teaches that the Divine Presence in the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) was meant to recreate or recall the Revelation at Sinai, and this implies a strong connection between Moshe’s ascent to Mount Sinai and the entry into the Holy of Holies on the same date each year.

“The deeper essential significance of the *Mishkan* was that the Divine Glory, which had rested upon Mount Sinai, would dwell upon [the *Mishkan*] in concealed form. Just as it is written [concerning the Revelation at Sinai], ‘And God’s glory rested upon Mount Sinai,’ so it is written concerning the *Mishkan*: ‘And God’s glory filled the *Mishkan*,’ such that in the *Mishkan* there dwelled constantly with Israel the [Divine] glory that had been revealed to them at Mount Sinai. And when Moshe came there, he experienced the Divine speech as he had experienced it at Mount Sinai. As it is written concerning the giving of the Torah: ‘From heaven He sounded His voice to you, that He might instruct you, and upon earth He showed you His great fire.’ So, too, concerning the *Mishkan* it is written, ‘[Moshe] heard the voice speaking to him from above the covering that was upon the Ark of the Testimony, from between the two *keruvim*, and it spoke to him.’” (Ramban on *Shemot* 25:1)

Another similarity between Moshe’s ascent of the mountain and the *Kohen* *Gadol’s* entry into the Holy of Holies concerns the cloud. When Moshe ascends the mountain, the text emphasizes that a cloud concealed God’s glory, as it is written: “No man shall see Me and live” (*Shemot* 33:20). In describing the service of the *Kohen Gadol* on Yom Kippur, too, God declares, “For I appear in the cloud upon the covering of the Ark” (*Vayikra* 16:2). Further on, the instructions for the *Kohen Gadol* include the following:

“And he shall place the incense upon the fire before the Lord, that the cloud of incense may cover the covering that is upon the Testimony, that he does not die.” (*Vayikra* 16:13)

Close examination of the verses shows that the location of the cloud shifted in accordance with the degree of closeness between God and Israel. During the intermediate forty days, the period of Divine “anger,” the pillar of cloud separated between the people, on the one hand, and Moshe and the Divine Presence, on the other. God spoke to Moshe “face to face,” while *Bnei Yisrael* were on the other side of the pillar of cloud:

“And it came to pass, as Moshe entered the Tent, that the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the Tent, and [God] talked with Moshe. And all the people saw the pillar of cloud stand at the door of the Tent, and all the people rose up and worshipped, each man at his tent door. And the Lord spoke to Moshe face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.” (*Shemot* 33:9-11)

In contrast, during the final forty days, a time of Divine “favor,” the Divine Presence was on one side of the cloud, while Moshe (on top of the mountain) and Bnei Yisrael (at the bottom) stood on the other side.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Gemara (*Yoma* 19b) records a dispute between the *Tzeddukim* (Sadducees) and the *Perushim* (Pharisees) concerning the order of the *Kohen Gadol’s* service on Yom Kippur. The *Tzeddokim* maintained that the *Kohen Gadol* would offer the cloud-producing incense at the entrance to the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim*, and then cross through the cloud and enter. In their view both the *Kohen Gadol* and the Divine Presence were located inside the *Kodesh Kodashim*, with the cloud separating them from the nation outside – just as during the intermediate forty days the cloud had separated between Moshe and God, on one side, and the nation, on the other. But the Sages viewed the incense cloud as paralleling the situation during the final forty days: they maintained that the *Kohen Gadol* would first enter the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim*, and there he would offer the incense. The incense cloud separated between the place of the Divine Presence, on one side, and the *Kohen* *Gadol* along with the nation standing behind him – just as the pillar of cloud had separated between God and Moshe, with the nation standing behind him.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Thirteen attributes of mercy**

The most significant parallel between the Yom Kippur of Moshe’s descent and our Yom Kippur is the recitation of the Thirteen Attributes of Divine mercy. These were first declared to Moshe when he received the second Tablets:

“And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed: The Lord, the Lord, mighty, merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in love and truth, keeping faith to thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but by no means clearing the guilty; punishing the iniquity of the father on the children, and on the children’s children, to the third and to the fourth generation.” (*Shemot* 34:6-7)

The recitation of the Thirteen Attributes is the essence of Yom Kippur. This is apparent from the *Ne’ila* prayer in which the Thirteen Attributes are repeated seven times, and according to some customs, even more.[[5]](#footnote-5)

What is the background to the declaration of these attributes to Moshe?

When we read the description of Moshe’s second ascent of Mount Sinai, we expect God to reveal Himself and to repeat the Ten Commandments. After all, Moshe has ascended after having broken the first set of Tablets, and the purpose of his second ascent is to receive the second set. However, instead of the Ten Commandments, God declares the Thirteen Attributes of Divine mercy.[[6]](#footnote-6) Seemingly, the function of the Thirteen Attributes is the opposite of that of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are the backbone of the Torah: they are commands that God issues to His people. The Thirteen Attributes, on the other hand, are the backbone of prayer: they are Israel’s supplication to God that He act towards them with mercy. Moreover, God uttered the Ten Commandments at the Revelation at Sinai, before the people, as a King commanding His servants. The Thirteen Attributes, however, are uttered by God in concealment, following the sin of the golden calf. As God tells Moshe, “You shall see My back, but My Face shall not be seen” (*Shemot* 33:23).

The manner in which the Thirteen Attributes are conveyed entails concealment, but at the same time this “non-revelation” has its own greatness: God passes before Moshe and before the people, becoming, as it were, part of the congregation. Since God passes before *Am Yisrael* as a prayer leader, Moshe sees only His “back,” just as we see the back of the prayer leader in the synagogue. This image is described explicitly in Chazal’s teaching:

“‘And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed…’ Rabbi Yochanan said: Were this not written in the text, it would be impossible to say such a thing. It teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped Himself [with a *tallit*] like a prayer leader, and showed Moshe the order of the prayer.” (*Rosh ha-Shana* 17b)

God is not revealed here as a King commanding His people, but rather as a leader Who shows them a personal example to follow, like a commander on the battlefield, calling to his troops, “Follow me!” The nation, like soldiers, see only the back, not the face.[[7]](#footnote-7)

**From justice to mercy**

The final similarity between Moshe’s Yom Kippur and our own pertains to the transformation of the Divine attribute of justice into the attribute of mercy.

Following the sin of the golden calf, God showed Israel His strict attribute of justice, and this led Moshe to ascend the mountain for a third period of intense communion with God . This strict justice found expression in God’s anger during the intermediate period of forty days, as well as in the Levites’ killing of the three thousand Israelites who worshipped the golden calf, and the plague that befell the nation thereafter: “And the Lord struck the people because they made the calf, which Aharon had made” (*Shemot* 32:35).

In view of this strict justice, Moshe ascends the mountain in order to appease God. On Yom Kippur he descends, after his prayer is accepted and Divine justice has been transformed into mercy.

A simple reading of the text suggests that the *parasha* setting forth the *Kohen* *Gadol’s* service for Yom Kippur (*Vayikra* 16) was given after the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. Following the terrible justice meted out to Aharon on the day of the inauguration of the *Mishkan* – the death of two of his sons – Aharon feels a need to come before God to make atonement and to renew the relationship with Him. To this end he is told the order of the service allowing his entry into the Holy of Holies, which ultimately became, with certain additions, the Yom Kippur service in the *Mishkan* and the Temple.

In our time, Yom Kippur comes after the Day of Judgment – Rosh Ha-shana, when we stand in judgment before our King. On Rosh Ha-shana there is almost no supplication for mercy; the character of the day is one of awe, strict justice, acceptance of God’s judgment, and the sounding of the shofar, which is meant to cause the entire nation to tremble. Yom Kippur comes afterwards, and its essence is supplication to God to “sweeten the judgment” and to arouse God’s attribute of mercy. On Yom Kippur we seek to appease our Father and King, and aspire to renew our relationship with Him, starting anew, cleansed, reconciled, and full of hope for a better future.

1. *Seder Olam* (Chapter 6) records Moshe as ascending on the 29th of Av and not on the 1st of Elul. Nevertheless, here too Moshe’s descent coincides with the 10th of Tishrei. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. While the great majority of the commentators understand the verse as Rashi does, the Targums, and especially the Targum Yerushalmi, suggest that the verse refers to the middle forty days, such that the middle forty days, too, were spent atop the mountain. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This would seem to have been in acquiescence to Moshe’s request, “If Your Presence does not go with me, do not carry us up from here” (*Shemot* 33:15). Since that time God had not spoken with Moshe face to face; rather, the situation was one of “You shall see My back, but My Face shall not be seen” (33:23). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I heard this many years ago from my good friend Danny Weil. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Tur (Orach Chaim *siman* 620) cites the custom of the *Geonim*, who would recite the Thirteen Attributes many times during the other prayer services of Yom Kippur, too. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. There is, in fact, a connection between the Ten Commandments and the Thirteen Attributes. Both are introduced with God’s Name (“I am Y-H-V-H your God…”; “Y-H-V-H, Y-H-V-H, mighty, merciful and gracious…”). Both mention the visiting of the iniquities of the father upon the children and the children’s children (“I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of those that hate Me”; “punishing the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the children’s children, to the third and to the fourth generation”), and in both cases God declares that He will not clear those who hate Him (“for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that takes His Name in vain”; “but by no means clearing the guilty”). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. There are also *mitzvot* in which we do not view God as issuing a command, but rather as showing a “personal example.” This idea is conveyed in *Chazal’s* teaching, “Just as He is kind and merciful, so you should be kind and merciful” (*Shabbat* 133b). On the basis of this principle R. Moshe Cordovero wrote his *Tomer Devora*, in which he learns from the Thirteen Attributes of Divine mercy how a person should follow God’s example and imitate Him. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)