



God, as Defined by God (With a Little Help from Covenantal Friends)

R. Yitz Greenberg – ygreenberg@hadar.org

Parashat Ki Tissa 5781

What is God’s true nature? Loving? Just? Jealous? Punitive? Forgiving? There is contradictory evidence in our lives and experiences. Moses experiences the extremes of unparalleled closeness to God out of common concern and communication to Israel. Then he walks on the knife’s edge of divine anger threatening to wipe out Israel for betraying the covenant by worshipping a Golden Calf. This drives Moses to ask God directly “...show me Your way that I may know You...” (Exodus 33:13). Moses wants to understand what God’s nature is really like. The initial divine response is that humans can not grasp a true picture of God but only a partial, as it were, side view.¹ But then God offers a self-definition. This became the most influential guideline in the tradition to the true nature of the Divine.

Exodus 34:6-7

[The] **Loving God** [YHVH—the Divine name expressing God’s close involvement with humans, including the covenant].

¹ “You can see My back but My face can not be seen” [by humans] (Exodus 33:23).



Loving God [YHVH—remains that way even after humans sin or betray the covenant].²

Mighty One [who is] **Merciful** and **Gracious** (gives goodness one sidedly without quid pro quo).

Slow to anger/long suffering and **overflowing with love** and commitment.³

Guards **covenantal love** for **thousands of generations**.

Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
but **does not wipe out guilt**.

Punishes the **iniquity** of the fathers up to the children, children's children
and to the **third** and **fourth generation**.

Two observations leap out in reading this definition. One is that this is overwhelmingly a portrait of a loving, caring, giving, forgiving Deity. (So much for the stereotype that the God of Hebrew Scriptures is a God of Wrath). The second is that the last phrase, “nevertheless does not wipe out guilt,” is in contradiction—or at least, is in tension—with the main description. How can these two qualities be reconciled?

Implicit in this clash is a deeper message that there is no static, once-and-for-all definition of God. The divine-human relationship is dynamic and interactive. Furthermore, the act of entering into covenant, which turns love into commitment, has an effect both immediately and as the covenant continues. The clash of forgiving and of not wiping out is an invitation to the human partner to resolve the conflict. Indeed in Deuteronomy, Moses rules that “fathers shall not be put to death (punished) for children(’s sins) and children shall not be put to death (punished) for father(’s sins), every man shall be put to death (punished) for **his own** sins”

² Talmud Rosh Hashanah 17b.

³ Interpreting אמת וחסד as a hendiadys, not as two separate qualities.



(Deuteronomy 24:16). To which a *midrash* responds that Moses made this new ruling and God consented to his judgement (Bemidbar Rabbah 19).⁴

Since this was God speaking of God, later generations privileged this text as a kind of meta-theological, meta-halakhic, authoritative statement by which to write and rewrite what God was instructing for their time. They directly quoted—or intertextually referenced these verses—to understand God’s nature.

This begins even elsewhere in the Bible. When God wants to wipe out the people of Israel for accepting the spies’ negative report about the land of Canaan, Moses quotes these words back to God directly as a counter-argument (Numbers 14:18). In the prophetic period, Joel calls uses these words to encourage the Jews to repent before a combined famine and military invasion wipes out the land and its people. Since God is merciful and forgiving, he argues, repentance can reverse the decree of destruction (Joel 2:13-14). As a final example, the prophet Jonah explains that he fled from God’s call in order to avoid being the messenger to Nineveh. He explains that he knew that God, being merciful and forgiving, would let Nineveh off the hook, annul their punishment, and thus leave Jonah looking like a false prophet (Jonah 4:2).

The Rabbis continued the focus on the verses in Ki Tissa as the ultimate definition of God, so authoritative that one can depend on it in charting our religious behaviors. Calling the definition “The Thirteen Middot” (“Character Traits,” that are primary aspects of the Divine in encounter with humans), they placed them at the center of the Yom Kippur liturgy of

⁴ This *midrash* has God saying to Moses: “You taught me [the law of no vicarious punishment]. I swear that I will nullify my words [punishing future generations] and uphold your words.”



repentance as well as in all Selihot (penitential prayers) services during Elul (in the run up to the High Holy Days) and throughout the year.

The Rabbis also continued the process of interpretation and reshaping of the divine words in a remarkable fashion. Despite their general rule in the liturgy to use verses from the Torah only in their exact primary textual form, they cut out the last part of the last verse which declares that God will **not** forgive but will punish in the following generations. Even more dramatically they cut it in the middle of the phrase, **ve-nakeh lo yenakeh** [literally; forgiving? No, not forgiving]. The Divine self-definition now read: **ve-nakeh, forgiving** iniquity and transgression and sin. By authority of these covenantal partnership actions, the Divine self-definition became that God is **totally forgiving**.⁵

This is not some arbitrary Rabbinic change. The dynamic of living in covenant with God for more than a millennium taught the Rabbis that God, in essence, was a forgiving, not a punishing, Deity.

One can argue that the dynamic of interaction in the covenant affected God—not just our understanding of God’s nature. After all, the Sinai covenant establishment could be interpreted as a **conditional** election of Israel: “**If you listen to My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be my treasure among the nations...**” (Exodus 19:5). This suggests that if Israel fails to obey God’s voice and betrays the covenant, then it could well forfeit its chosenness. This understanding is supported by God’s initial response to Israel’s betrayal of

⁵ This is actually only one step further than the original Divine self-definition which spoke of punishing. However, it said that God exercised covenantal love for **thousands of generations** whereas the punishment continues for only **up to four generations** (see Exodus 20:5 and 34:7). This means that the minimum ratio of loving forgiveness to punishment is 500 to 1!



the covenant by building a Golden Calf. God proposed to wipe out the people, Israel, and replace it with Moses' descendants and those who remained faithful (Exodus 32:9-10).

Moses insisted that whatever the fate of the Jewish people, it must be his fate. He persuaded the Lord instead to forgive the whole people. There is a replay of this scenario after the fiasco of the spies' negative report. One might say that in these two incidents God learns that the attachment to Israel has grown so much that the Lord is not ready to kick Israel out of the covenant for failure to live up to its terms. The divine love has grown into unconditional commitment.

This understanding was the message of the great prophets of Israel when the First Temple was destroyed. Many Israelites were concerned that if God allowed the Temple's destruction and the Jewish people to be exiled from Israel, it could only mean that the Lord had rejected Israel because of its repeated gross violations of the covenant—both in worshipping idolatrous cults and in stealing and abusing from fellow human beings. The prophets responded that God punished Israel only for the moment and for their own good. They assured the people that God's love had grown in the course of living the covenant over the centuries. The covenantal dynamic showed that God had become all forgiving. Even better, the divine attachment to Israel and the covenant had become unbreakable. In the words of Isaiah "...I hid My face from you for a moment—but with everlasting covenantal love I will gather you to me in mercy... The mountains will dissolve and the hills crumble but my committed love shall not depart from you and my covenant of peace [with you] shall never be removed" (Isaiah 54:9-10).

