



Praying for Knowledge of God's Essence

R. Elie Kaunfer – kaunfer@hadar.org

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What is the knowledge we need in order to pray and to connect to God? How might this knowledge help us approach God, even if we might feel distant from God's presence?

In Parashat Ki Tissa, following the sin of the golden calf, Moshe asks to know God (Exodus 33:13). This is perhaps the most intense exchange in the Bible between God and Moshe. Moshe has already secured a form of initial forgiveness from the sin of the golden calf (32:14), but God has threatened to permanently distance Himself from Israel, and to send an angel to lead them instead (32:34, 33:3). This greatly upsets the people and they begin to mourn the loss of God's presence (33:4). Indeed, to actualize God's distancing, Moshe moves the tent where God's presence appears to him from the middle of the camp to outside the camp entirely (33:7).¹

But Moshe does not give up on reconciling with God. Moshe says:

¹ See Shemot Rabbah 45:3; Rashbam to Exodus 33:7.



Exodus 33:13

“Now, if I have truly found **grace** in Your eyes, please **let me know** Your ways, **that I may know** You and that I might find **grace** in Your eyes; and You will see that this nation is Your people.”

שמות לג:יג

וְעַתָּה אִם־נָא מִצָּאתִי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ
הוֹדַעְנִי נָא אֶת־דַּרְכֶּךָ וְאִדְעֶךָ לְמַעַן
אֶמְצָא־חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה כִּי עַמֶּךָ הִגֹּי
הַזֶּה:

Moshe asks to know God’s ways. But this is not a philosophical exploration about the nature of God. It is a question with a purpose, as noted by the end of the verse: so that God will see the nation as God’s people. Moshe is asking for God to make known the divine aspect that will allow God to return to dwell in the midst of the people. As Dr. Devora Steinmetz writes, “Moses’s request to know God’s ways, then, is not a request for a general knowledge of God. Rather, Moses is saying: Let me know your ways that will enable you to walk with us.”² Moshe hopes that God’s ways, in this case, are characterized by God’s ability to forgive the people and return to their midst. In other words, Moshe’s request for knowledge of God is another way of asking for grace.

This verse highlights the essence of Moshe’s prayer: Moshe wants to know God, and as a result of that knowing, to feel God’s grace. It is God’s grace (and not God’s justice, דין) that will allow God to return to the people. The verse centers these two words (knowing and grace) in a chiasmic (ABCBA) structure around the term for God’s ways:

² Devora Steinmetz, “To Know and Be Known,” p. 21 (forthcoming). This essay appears in a forthcoming book, to be published by Hadar Press. My thanks to Dr. Steinmetz for sharing this essay with me before publication.



Now, if I have truly found grace in Your eyes	A	וְעַתָּה אִם־נָא מִצְּאֹתַי חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ
please let me know	B	הוֹדִיעֵנִי נָא
Your ways	C	אֶת־דַּרְכֶּךָ
that I may know You	B	וְאִדְעֶךָ
and that I might find grace in Your eyes	A	לְמַעַן אֶמְצָא־חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ

The idea of a chiasm is to highlight the middle. The center of the ABCBA structure is “God’s ways,” which, we later learn (33:19) consists of grace (and mercy). This connection is made explicit in the following *midrash*:

Tanhuma Shelah 14 (addition), ed. Buber, p. 41a³

When Israel made the golden calf... [Moshe] said to [God]: “Please, teach me by what attribute do you direct Your world?” For it says: “Please let me know Your ways, that I may know You.”

The Holy Blessed One said to him: Through the attribute of mercy I direct My world, as it says: “...God of grace and mercy” (Exodus 34:6).

מדרש תנחומא (בובר) שלח יד (תוספת)

בשעה שעשו ישראל את העגל... אמר לו בבקשה ממך הודיע אותי באיזה מדה את נוהג בעולמך שכן הוא אומר "הודיעני נא את דרכיך ואדעך"

אמר לו הקב"ה במדת רחמים אני נוהג בעולמי שנאמר "א-ל רחום וחנון"

The *midrash* understands that when Moshe asks to know God, he is asking God to let him know by which attribute God conducts the world. The answer to Moshe’s question of “teach me Your ways” (33:13) is: “I am a God of grace and mercy” (34:6). Even though it takes some back and forth in the biblical text for this answer to emerge, the *midrash* highlights “God of grace and mercy” as the core response to Moshe’s request to know God.

Indeed, in this broader biblical exchange between God and Moshe (from Ex. 33:5-19), two words appear seven times, functioning as the guiding words of this passage: “ידע - to know”;

³ Torah Sheleimah vol. 22, p. 24, #80.



and “חן - grace.”⁴ In the end, it is God’s grace that allows God to be with the people.⁵ The people are stiff-necked, and by all rights do not deserve God’s presence among them. Initially, God is afraid that God might destroy them if God continues to accompany them (33:3). And yet, by the end of the exchange between God and Moshe, God’s grace and mercy are paramount, highlighted in 33:19 and 34:6, and God agrees to return.

The linking of the words “to know” and “grace,” key to this scene of reconciliation, occurs in a central prayer in the weekday Amidah, the first blessing in the series of requests:

You grace people with knowledge	אַתָּה חוֹנֵן לְאָדָם דַּעַת.
and teach humans discernment.	וּמְלַמֵּד לְאָנוּשׁ בִּינָה:
Grace us from You	חַנּוּנוּ מֵאַתָּךְ
knowledge, discernment, and intelligence. ⁶	דַּעַת בִּינָה וְהַשְׂכֵּל
Blessed are You, YHVH, who graces knowledge.	בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', חוֹנֵן הַדַּעַת

What kind of knowledge are we asking for in this blessing?⁷ The key to understanding this blessing is to take note of the combination of the verb “חון - grace” and the object “דעת - knowledge.” If the blessing were asking God for knowledge in a more general sense, one

⁴ Steinmetz, “To Know and Be Known,” p. 18, notes the presence of ידע seven times in this biblical scene. Commenting on Exodus 33, Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible* (New York: Norton, 2019), p. 346, notes that “to know” is the “key word of this section.” Steinmetz also notes the *leitmotif* of חן in this selection in “Perception, Compassion, and Surprise: Literary Coherence in the Third Chapter of Bavli Ta’anit,” *Hebrew Union College Annual*, vol. 82-83 (2011-2012), p. 89, n. 59.

⁵ As Steinmetz writes, “To Know and Be Known,” p. 21: “At stake in this extended conversation, then, is God’s ability to be present among the people. This capacity, it turns out, is a function of the divine qualities of grace (*chen*) and compassion.”

⁶ This line reads “חַנּוּנוּ מֵאַתָּה - wisdom, discernment and knowledge” in most modern versions of this blessing other than Nusah Ashkenaz. This version was attributed to the AR”I and also to the first Chabad Rebbe, Shneur Zalman of Lyady. See Moshe Hallamish, *Hekrei Kabbalah Utefillah* (Be’er Sheva: Ben Gurion University, 2012), pp. 170-174.

⁷ We have explored a different aspect of this blessing previously. See my essay on Parashat Bereishit, “Relational Prayer: Renewing our Understanding of Knowledge,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/relational-prayer>.



might have expected a verb such as “לתת - to grant,” or “ללמד - to teach,” which occur often in the Bible before the object דעת.⁸ Indeed, the opening line of our blessing could have mirrored Psalm 94:10: “אתה מלמד אדם דעת” - who teaches a person wisdom” by stating “אתה מלמד אדם דעת” - You teach people wisdom.” In fact, the verb לחון does not appear with דעת as its object anywhere in the Bible, the source for the language of the Siddur.⁹

And yet, by choosing the more unusual verb חון, our blessing links to the biblical scene in which Moshe asks to know God, and thereby gain God’s grace.¹⁰ Our blessing, then, recalls this scene in which Moshe asks God to be in the midst of the people, despite their sinning ways.¹¹

What could this blessing mean, given this reference to the terms of knowledge and grace from Exodus 33? As we begin a series of requests of God, we are also beginning a journey back into relationship with God. We cannot exist without God’s grace, and we are asking for the knowledge that Moshe asked for following the sin of the golden calf: to know that God will act

⁸ For the verb לתת, see Exodus 36:1, Deuteronomy 29:3; Isaiah 50:4; Jeremiah 24:7, Proverbs 1:4, 2:6, Kohelet 1:17, 2:26, 8:16, 12:9. For the verb ללמד, see Isaiah 40:14 and Psalm 94:10; Psalm 119:64, Job 21:22. Ezra Bick, *Shemoneh Esrei* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2022), p. 73, suggests the word we expect in this blessing is ללמד, and hearing חון raises our level of curiosity, even more so because it is not a biblical combination. For other verbs associated with acquiring knowledge, see Isaiah 11:2 (נחה); I Kings 7:14, Habakkuk 2:14, and Proverbs 24:4 (מלא); and Proverbs 18:15 (קנה).

⁹ The closest may be Psalm 119:29: “ותורתך חנני” - grace me with Your Torah/wisdom.” But that assumes a specific kind of knowledge of Torah. As David Flusser writes about our blessing’s opening: “There is no biblical parallel.” David Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), p. 216. See also Bick, p. 73.

¹⁰ Indeed, Abudraham, ed. Braun, p. 221, points to a connection between the opening phrase of our blessing and Exodus 33:19: “והנחתי את אשר אחון” - I will show grace unto those I will show grace.” This link is strengthened in an alternate form of this blessing, found in the Talmud. Shmuel presents a text for an abbreviated Amidah, to be recited in times of need, in which each blessing is shortened to a few words. The phrase that stands in for our blessing, quoted in Talmud Bavli Berakhot 29a, is: “הבינו ה' אלקינו לדעת דרכיך” - Cause us to discern, YHVH our God, to know Your ways.” While the reference to grace is missing, the biblical phrase “to know Your ways” leads us back to the scene of Moshe beseeching God in Exodus 33:13 – “הודיעני... דרכך” / let me know Your ways.”

¹¹ In another *midrash*, Moshe asks God to teach him God’s ways so that he will be able to pray effectively to God, and appeal to God’s essence (which turns out to be grace and mercy). See Lekah Tov to Exodus 33:13, p. 103a and Siftei Kohen to Exodus 33:10; Moshav Zekenim to Exodus 33:17; Torah Sheleimah vol. 22, p. 24-25.



according to God's grace (not God's anger). Indeed, this request for knowledge is less a fact-finding mission than an aspiration about how God conducts Godself. We want to know that it is grace that God will choose to abide by, even when we anger God.

Of course, God's world is not characterized only by grace and mercy. God Godself struggles with this attribute: according to the Talmud, God even goes so far as to pray to Godself that God's mercy may conquer God's anger. God's prayer is as follows:

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 7a¹²

May it be My will that My mercy conquers My anger, and My mercy overcomes My other attributes, and I behave toward My children with the attribute of mercy.

תלמוד בבלי ברכות ז.

יהי רצון מלפני שיכבשו רחמי את כעסי,
ויגולו רחמי על מדותי, ואתנהג עם בני
במדת רחמים

If God is meant to be in our midst, then God must place grace and mercy at the center. And even though God struggles with this (and has to pray about it), it is the essence that God ultimately wants to be known by.

The first thing we have to ask God for in the Amidah, before any specific request, is God's presence in our lives. This blessing (חונן הדעת) is the necessary opening to our requests. We ask God to grace us with knowledge of God, and specifically to know a God who fills the world with grace. Following the sin of the golden calf, the children of Israel and God are estranged from each other in an extreme fashion. Yet through Moshe's knowledge of a God filled with grace, God returns to the people. In our world, where we might also feel estranged from God's presence, we also ask for the knowledge that God will fill the world with grace. It is only in that world that we can begin to draw near to God's presence.

¹² We have discussed this prayer also in my essay to Parashat Toldot, "Blessing God: A Deepening of Relationship," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/blessing-god>.

