The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy?

On the Possible Meanings of Repentance

Orit Malka

The Ateret Zvi Prize in Hiddushei Torah
Second Annual Winner
5780
THE HADAR INSTITUTE
Hadar empowers Jews to create and sustain vibrant, practicing, egalitarian communities of Torah, Avodah, and Hesed.

THE AUTHOR
Orit Malka is a Polonsky Fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. She is a legal historian working on Jewish law. She is married to Ram and is the mother of Yonatan, Guy, and Miriam.

Her research focuses on Talmudic and Biblical law and legal thought in its historical context. Her doctoral dissertation, A Set of Witnesses: Testimony and Political Thought in Tannaitic Halakha, focused on the unique rules governing the admissibility and validity of testimony in Tannaitic sources. Her current research is dedicated to the transformation that the distinction between witness and judge had undergone in the early history of Jewish law, and to the contribution that the research of Jewish law may have for understanding similar transformations in other late-antique legal regimes. Orit pursued her PhD at the Zvi Meitar Center for Advanced Legal Studies, Faculty of Law, Tel Aviv University.

Before turning to academia, Orit practiced law in a commercial law firm in Israel for 13 years. She then spent one year in New York, where she visited Hadar and became a regular student of the Talmud classes. Following that year, Orit established and co-led Mistabra, Makom Yerushalmi LeTalmud Bavli, a Beit Midrash for talmud that operated for three Years at Beit Avi-Chai in Jerusalem. Since 2016, she has also been a research fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

THE ATERET ZVI PRIZE IN HIDDUSHEI TORAH
The Ateret Zvi Prize recognizes yearly a work of innovative and exceptional Torah scholarship. The prize is endowed in loving memory of Professor and Rabbi Zvi H. Szubin, a lifelong scholar and teacher who uncovered rich insights buried in traditional texts using legal, historical, and linguistic tools—an approach he termed “text archaeology.”

Professor Szubin studied at Yeshivat Hevron and received the smikhah of yoreh yoreh, yadin yadin from Chief Rabbi Herzog. He served in the Israeli Army for three years, and was deployed to the Sinai during the 1956 Sinai campaign. After completing university and an LL.B. degree in Israel, he came to the United States and received his Ph.D. from Dropsie College. He taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary and the City College of New York and, ultimately, became the Chair of the Classical Languages and Hebrew Department at City College. Professor Szubin was a supporter of Hadar, in particular its fierce commitment to traditional Jewish values and texts, its unabashed egalitarianism, and its promising efforts to energize thoughtful Jews of all ages.
In the Seliḥot Prayers that we recite leading up to the Days of Awe, one of the key texts is the text of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy:

ה' ה', אל רחום וחנון, ארך אפים ורב חסד ואמת, נוצר חסד לאלפים, נושא עון ופשע וחטאה ונקה.


What makes this text so central to the Seliḥot? We have a tradition, dating back to our Sages, that this is a formula which holds the secret of forgiveness, it’s a סגולה for forgiveness. Once we recite it, and of course, repent, God will forgive us. In the Talmud, we read:

Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashanah 17b
Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Were it not [explicitly] written in the verse, it would be impossible to say this: [The verse] teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, wrapped Himself [in a prayer shawl] like a prayer leader and showed Moses the order of prayer. He said to him: Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them act before Me in accordance with this order...
According to the view expressed here, the Thirteen Middot are attributes of the grace of God, which describe His being pardoning and forgiving. When we remind God of His merciful virtues, by reciting the Thirteen Middot, He actually acts through them and forgives. However, when we compare our liturgical version of the Thirteen Middot to the original Biblical text from which they are drawn, we find something interesting and even quite surprising. As many have noted, there is a gap between the two versions. The Biblical Thirteen Middot do not end at the same point as the liturgical Thirteen Middot; in fact, the liturgical version seems to be cut off in the middle. First, the word נקה which concludes the liturgical version of the Middot was originally part of a longer phrase נקה לא ינקה הפוקד עונות אבות על בניהם על בניהם על שלשים ועל רביעים. Moreover, in the Biblical version, following the phrase נקה לא ינקה הפוקד עונות אבות על בניהם על בניהם על שלשים ועל רביעים, there is an additional attribute of God, one which is omitted in the liturgy: פוקד על אבות על בניהם על רביעים. See, for example, Exodus 34:1:

Exodus 34:5-7
(5) The LORD came down in a cloud; He stood with him there, and proclaimed the name LORD. (6) The LORD passed before him and proclaimed: “The LORD! the LORD! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, (7) extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generations.”

We can easily understand why this last attribute is omitted from the text of the Seliḥot: in the Days of Awe we want to encourage God to forgive us, and therefore it does not seem like a good time to mention that He may also not forgive, and instead harshly punish not only the sinners but also their children and their children's children. But what about dividing the previous phrase: נקה לא ינקה הפוקד עונות אבות על בניהם על בניהם על שלשים ועל רביעים? Is it possible to cut it in the middle, without dramatically distorting the meaning of the original sentence? The Rabbis indeed explain their

1 The context here is the aftermath of the sin of the golden calf. See also Numbers 14:17-24, after the sin of the meraglim (spies), where the language of נקה לא ינקה הפוקד עונות אבות על בניהם על שלשים ועל רביעים also appears.
interference with the verse’s syntax in the following way:

תלמוד בבלי יומא פו
תניא, ר’ אלעזר אומר: אי אפשר לומר נקה שכבר נאמר לא ינקה,
וא이 אפשר לומר לא ינקה שכבר נאמר נקה; איה ליבוש? איה מציז?/big.
לשביעי, והא מנאקוה לשביעי שביעי.

Talmud Bavli Yoma 86a
It was taught [in a baraita] that Rabbi Elazar says: It is not possible to say “וְנַקֵּה” since “לא יְנַקֶּה” is already stated. How so? [God] absolves those who repent and does not absolve those who do not repent.

According to this baraita, there is a tension, if not a contradiction, between the two parts of the phrase. יְנַקֶּה means that God absolves, pardons, whereas לא יְנַקֶּה means He does not absolve, does not pardon. The hermeneutic move on the part of R. Elazar explains how the two parts of this phrase actually live together: this is the basic principle of repentance in a nutshell. If we repent, God forgives and pardons our sins. If we do not repent, there will be no forgiveness, we will be punished. This explanation is meaningful and central for the whole idea of repentance. But we remain with the question: what about the original meaning of the Biblical phrase?

What does יְנַקֶּה, לא יְנַקֶּה mean?
Scholars have shown that in some Biblical contexts (especially in Leviticus) sins are portrayed as stains or dirt, and the procedure of forgiveness is accordingly described in terms of removal of these stains, as a procedure of washing and
cleansing. In the Thirteen Middot we are told that God will NOT remove the stain of the sin. The phrase is conjugated in a Biblical emphatic case, following a common Biblical pattern. So for example: סָכָּל (Exodus 19:13) means he will surely be stoned (referring to any person violating the prohibition to climb mount Sinai); תְּנַקֵּי (Deuteronomy 15:13) means: you must surely grant gifts (to the Hebrew slave upon manumission). The same is true for the negative form, יְנַקֵּה לא, which means he will surely not absolve the sins, will not forgive.

A straightforward clarification of our phrase’s emphatic meaning is found in the book of Joel, as part of the description of the punishment that will befall Egypt and Edom for hurting the people of Judah and shedding their blood:

Joel 4:19-21
(19) Egypt shall be a desolation, And Edom a desolate waste, Because of the outrage to the people of Judah, in whose land they shed the blood of the innocent. (20) But Judah shall be inhabited forever, And Jerusalem throughout the ages. (21) I will surely not wipe clean their bloodguilt [lit. “I will wipe clean their bloodguilt, not wipe it clean]; And the LORD shall dwell in Zion.

Here too the Sages attempted to interpret the verses in a way that differentiates between the two parts of the phrases: יְנַקֵּיתִי— even if I will forgive Egypt and Edom for other sins— לא יְנַקֵּיתִי— I will not forgive them for shedding the blood of the people of Judah. Nevertheless, it is clearly not the simple meaning of the phrase. The verses of Joel speak unambiguously of the harsh punishment that will be imposed on Egypt and Edom. יְנַקֵּיתִי קָם לָא and לא יְנַקֵּיתִי means: I will surely not forgive them. Similarly, the sequence of the Biblical Thirteen Middot expresses the idea that even if God delayed the punishment (נָשָׁא עָוֹן [וֹאָב] it will not be delayed eternally, God will not remit punishment entirely.

It is quite incredible that, through the reworking of the Rabbis, part of a text which originally represented the inevitability of punishment has come to be associated with forgiveness, as part of what we call “the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.” To be fair, the Thirteen Middot indeed begin by describing God as רָחוּם וַחֲנֹנִי: merciful and forgiving. But how is it possible to include these two opposites in a single description of the attributes of God? Is He merciful or merciless? Vengeful or forgiving? Do the Thirteen Attributes stand for middat barahamim, the attribute of mercy, or middat hadin, the attribute of strict justice? Yoḥanan Muffs, one of the prominent Biblical scholars of the previous generation, has argued that, our initial impression to the contrary, even the concluding part of the Biblical version of the Thirteen Attributes—the same part in which we read of how God extends punishment to the third and fourth generations—is actually an attribute of mercy, in line with the opening.

3 מפרושה דבר מה בקרי, florida, נמסות, "הברית העשית של", (מודעות על תקופת קר, 454) 좌 theories על פל ימאל על דמס לא נっきり. "
attributes of רחום וחנון. How is such a reading possible? Muffs argues that the very willingness of God to postpone punishment to future generations rather than imposing it with no delay on the sinners themselves is actually portrayed in several Biblical passages as a good thing. Punishing the children for the sins of their parents may sound cruel and unjust to us as modern people, and we might find it hard to imagine the sinning parents that would want to escape punishment if it means it will later be imposed on their innocent children. However, some Biblical stories describe the postponement of punishment as a divine act of mercy and forgiveness.

One example is the story of Ahab’s repentance in I Kings 21. After Ahab hears his anticipated punishment—“All of Ahab’s line who die in the town shall be devoured by dogs, and all who die in the open country shall be devoured by the birds of the sky” (I Kings 21:24)—he immediately repents: “When Ahab heard these words, he rent his clothes and put sackcloth on his body. He fasted and lay in sackcloth and walked about subdued” (I Kings 21:27). God then responds to this act of repentance by delaying the punishment:

Biblical stories describe the postponement of punishment as a divine act of mercy.

As suggested by Muffs, the delaying of punishment from Ahab’s generation to the generation of his son is perceived here as an amelioration of the same. A similar amelioration of punishment is found in II Kings 22. Here the prophetess Huldah promises King Josiah that his sincere repentance will not go overlooked, but rather will win him a delay of the catastrophe till after he has died:

I Kings 21:28-29
(28) Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: (29) “Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the disaster in his lifetime; I will bring the disaster upon his house in his son’s time.”

II Kings 22:19-20
(19) Because your heart was softened and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I

decreed against this place and its inhabitants—that it will become a desolation and a curse—and because you rent your clothes and wept before Me, I for My part have listened—declares the LORD.

(20) Assuredly, I will gather you to your fathers and you will be laid in your tomb in peace. Your eyes shall not see all the disaster which I will bring upon this place.” So they brought back the reply to the king.

In the preceding two stories and in other cases the postponement of punishment is perceived as a benefit to the sinner. Nevertheless, it is doubtful that this is the meaning of the expression וְנַקֵּה לֹא יְנַקֶּה in the Thirteen Attributes. In fact, it seems that Muffs was forced into this reading by a prior assumption that the thirteen attributes must be attributes of mercy—why else would Moses mention them before God in a moment of anger and wrath? For if they reflect middat hadin, the attribute of strict justice and judgment, what was Moses hoping to achieve by bringing them up when asking God for mercy and forgiveness?

Indeed, the assumption that the Thirteen Attributes are attributes of mercy is challenged by certain other Biblical passages. Recall that some of these attributes are mentioned as part of the Ten Commandments, following the Second Commandment and the prohibition on making any sculptured image or likeness of God, and there the meaning is not quite that of mercy and forgiveness. In Exodus 20:4-6 we read:

"(d) לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל וְכָל תְּמוּנָה אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וַאֲשֶׁר בָּאָרֶץ מִתָּחַת וַאֲשֶׁר בַּמַּיִם מִתַּחַת לָאָרֶץ: (ה) לֹא תִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לָהֶם וְלֹא תָעָבְדֵם כִּי אָנֹכִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֵל קַנָּא פֹּקֵד עֲוֹן אָבֹת עַל בָּנִים עַל שִׁלֵּשִׁים וְעַל רִבֵּirim לְשֹׂנְאָי: (ו) וְעֹשֶׂה חֶסֶד לַאֲלָפִים לְאֹהֲבַי וּלְשֹׁמְרֵי מִצְוָתי:

(ד) קָרֵא נַפְתָּחַה תְּמִנָּה לַעֲשִׂי זֶהָן וְלֹא יִבָּא עָלָה לְעָשִׂי זֶהָן: (ה) אֲנַהֲקִי לְעָשִׂי זֶהָן וְלֹא יִבָּא עָלָה לְעָשִׂי זֶהָן: (ו) וְעֹשֶׂה חֶסֶד לַאֲלָפִים לְאֹהֲבַי וּלְשֹׁמְרֵי מִצְוָתי:
Exodus 20:4-6
(4) You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. (5) You shall not bow down to them or serve them.

For I the LORD your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, (6) but showing kindness (Hesed) to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

Two of the attributes which we find in the Thirteen Middot are mentioned in these verses: (1) פקד עון אבות על בנים, “visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children”—the same attribute that we avoid mentioning in the Selihot—and (2)עשה חסד לאלפים, “showing kindness (Hesed) to the thousandth generation”, a line that we do include in our liturgical version, because of course, we understand it in light of the desired expression of God as merciful and forgiving. But note that, in the Ten Commandments’ version of these two attributes, there is an important clarification that is missing in the version recited by Moses with regard to Israel’s sins. The negative treatment פקד עון אבות על בנים is reserved for the enemies of God (literally: to God’s ‘haters’, לְשֹׂנְאָי; whereas the positive conductעשה חסד לאלפים is granted to the ones who love God and follow His commandments (לְאֹהֲבַי וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מִצְוָתי).

The binary articulation of these two attributes forces us to confront that Muffs’ reading of פקד עון אבות על בנים as an expression of mercy is untenable. Visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children is not a good thing, it is not a desirable way of mitigating punishment. Rather, it is a harsh response to sin, to violation of the commandments, and combined with rewarding the righteous, it is simply middat hadin!

Some have tried to suggest that the words לאוהבי and לְשונאי here are a later addition, a gloss on the original citation of the Thirteen Attributes. But, even if we accept this suggestion, our analysis will not change, given that the entire passage describes middat hadin, the attribute of strict justice and not of mercy. God says: “You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the LORD your God am an impassioned God”—I will not let those who violate my commandments get away with it. Immediately after that follows the description of God as “visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children.” Moreover, even the supposedly compassionate attribute of God as “showing kindness to the thousandth generation” appears here not in the context of mercy but rather still as part of the same strict justice: God acknowledges the good conduct of the righteous by repaying them what they deserve, the same way that punishing wrongdoers is simply an act of paying them what they deserve. This is not done לפני משורת הדין, by going beyond the letter of the law; rather by executing law and justice without compromise.

In order to understand what the meaning of these attributes is in the context of what we are used to thinking of as the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, let us begin by looking into the word חסד Hesed. It is often translated as “benevolence,” or “kindness,” as it is here. However, as shown by the late Moshe Weinfeld—another important Biblical scholar—in the Bible, it often means a ברית, or a covenant.5 When appearing in covenantal contexts, Hesed is not an action beyond the letter of the law, beyond

---

what is due or promised; rather it is part of a covenant, a contract. It represents agreed-upon obligations and undertakings. This meaning is clear especially where Ḥesed appears in tandem with אמת/Emet, or truth. We tend to think of these two attributes as in binary opposition: Emet represents strictness and Ḥesed represents the benevolent Lifnim Mishurat Hadin, going beyond the letter of the law. However, in many Biblical passages these two terms are treated as synonyms, or at least as coinciding attributes that operate according to the same logic, the same way punishing wrongdoers and rewarding the righteous have a shared rationale.

In several Biblical passages Ḥesed and Emet are mentioned in the context of oaths, or of sworn obligations. For example, in the book of Micah 7:20:

**Micah 7:20**
You will keep faith (Emet) with Jacob, loyalty (Ḥesed) to Abraham, as You promised on oath to our fathers in days gone by.

Here, Ḥesed and Emet are part of the oath God took as part of his covenant with the Fathers. The JPS translation of Ḥesed here is “loyalty,” and both Ḥesed and Emet refer to the keeping of the covenant with the fathers, keeping God’s oath and remaining loyal to it. A similar combination of Ḥesed and Emet accompanies the oath that Jacob, while lying on his deathbed, requires of his son Joseph:

**Genesis 47:29**
And when the time approached for Israel to die, he summoned his son Joseph and said to him, “Do me this favor, place your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast loyalty: please do not bury me in Egypt.”

Here, Ḥesed is translated in terms of “a pledge of steadfast loyalty.” It is part of an oath and reflects the solemn loyalty to the terms of the oath. Many more examples could be cited here but the principle is clear: Ḥesed in these contexts is about keeping one’s obligation, one’s sworn undertaking, and not about benevolently and generously giving what one has no obligation to give. The meaning of Ḥesed in the context of covenantal undertakings is the fulfillment of those undertakings, not the waiver of what is required from either of the covenantal parties.

To understand further the meaning of Ḥesed as loyalty to the covenant in the context of the Thirteen Attributes, let us pay attention to the analogies between the Biblical concept of covenant and a now well-researched parallel found in Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) forms of treaties and loyalty oaths. Scholarly literature has long
revealed strong links between the covenantal framework of the Ten Commandments and ANE treaty documents. Moshe Weinfeld elaborately explores this comparison in several papers; for our context, three shared parameters are central:

The content of such ANE treaties and oaths is essentially a list of pledges of allegiance, loyalty to the king, along with the designated punishment to those who violate the pledges and promises of prosperity and success to those who fulfill them. The structure of the Second Commandment accurately follows this logic: the demand is to maintain allegiance to God, and alongside that demand, a reward is guaranteed to its sustainers and a punishment is assured to violators.

The adjectives “haters” and “lovers” (or the parallel terms in Akkadian and other ancient languages) are used in ANE alliances as technical terms: the ones keeping the covenant and commitment of loyalty are called “lovers,” while those who betray the alliance, violating the duty of allegiance, are called “haters.” Against this background the inner connection between “showing kindness to the thousandth generation” and “visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children” is quite clear. These are two sides of one equation: as a standard part of the covenant formula, God is said to enforce the covenantal terms and obligations upon the people, in a way that “lovers”—who fulfill the terms of the covenant—will prosper, while the sin of “haters”—who violate the covenant—will be strictly punished.

Finally, the ANE alliances are not made only between its two concrete parties present at the ceremonial event of commitment but apply also to their children and children’s children. The obligation to keep the allegiance obligation is always also undertaken on behalf of future generations, and accordingly the threat of punishment in the event of a violation equally extends to the future members of the covenant. It is in keeping with this basic idea
that descendants are mentioned in the Second Commandment: good reward is also guaranteed “to the thousandth generation” and consequences are visited upon “children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations.”

Weinfeld’s analysis of the treaty context in the background of the Ten Commandments allows us now to return to the Thirteen Attributes. Here, too, “showing kindness to the thousandth generation,” on one hand, and “visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children,” on the other, are not expressions of acting mercifully beyond the letter of the law, but rather a declaration of God’s character as fulfilling His undertaking, standing up to His commitments, the same commitments included in the covenant. In the Thirteen Attributes, God is described as רַב חֶסֶד וֶאֱמֶת—the same technical language which, as we have seen, represents a covenant and sworn undertakings. The Almighty is portrayed as being loyal to the covenant, keeping His promises, an attribute that is represented in our prayers throughout the year (for example, in the blessings that follow the Haftarah).

Muffs asks: Why mention God’s acting according to middat hadin, strictly enforcing of the law, while seeking mercy and forgiveness of sins?! There is seemingly no logic to it. Therefore, in his opinion, the Thirteen Attributes that Moses mentions in his request for forgiveness should be interpreted as Attributes of Mercy, reflecting a willingness to pardon the people of Israel beyond the letter of the law. Instead, I would like to suggest that it makes perfect sense to mention God’s attributes as one who strictly fulfills his covenantal undertakings in the context of a forgiveness request, even if we do not see these attributes as indicating a willingness to drop the strict commitment to the law and to act lifnim mishurat hadin.

Note that in the covenantal model, the question of whether God’s holding His promises is beneficent or punitive depends on another
factor: which link in the chain are we looking at. Are the sinners we are thinking of the fathers—with whom the covenant was made—or their descendants, the sons? If the fathers are righteous, the sons are entitled to grace even if their own actions are evil (which is exactly why we mention the covenant of the fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in our prayers). If the fathers are wicked, then the sons are apparently in trouble, regardless of their own behavior.

It seems to me that when Moses reminds God of his attributes as a covenant maker, as enforcing his pledge and holding his promises for generations, he is thinking of the children of Israel as sons in this narrative, not as the fathers. He essentially says: The question of what to do with the people of Israel at the moment is not dependent only on their specific sin, on what they have done themselves, but also on earlier links in the chain of Israel’s history, from the stage in which the covenant with our ancestors was made. And sure enough, the forgiveness that God grants to Moses, in each of the two stories in which the Thirteen Attributes are cited (the sin of the golden calf and the sin of the spies), is not granted to the individual sinners. In fact, the sinners are executed. The ones who are spared are their children and children’s children, the following generations; God keeps His covenant and maintains loyalty “to the thousandth generation” by not destroying the people of Israel and rather punishing only the sinners, giving their descendants a second chance.

Thus, after mentioning of the Thirteen Attributes God does not pardon the sinners themselves but rather the people of Israel. Moses asks: “Pardon the iniquity of this people according to Your great kindness, as You have forgiven this people ever since Egypt” (Numbers 14:19)—he refers to the people of Israel as a collective, not as individuals. Forgiving the people means removing the burden of sin from the people and maintaining the long-term covenant with the following generations (notwithstanding the need to punish and kill all the individuals who have actually sinned). Understanding this point elucidates the depth of the mental leap that the Sages make in their interpretation to the concept of repentance, and with this I would like to conclude.

In the Talmudic passage with which I opened, our Sages elaborate on the special virtue of repentance:

Talmud Bavli Rosh Hashanah 17b
Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Great is repentance, for it tears up the sentence issued against a person, as it is stated: “Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and smear over their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and they will return, and be healed” (Isaiah 6:10). (This implies that if indeed they return and repent, they will be healed from all their sins.)
Rabbi Yohanan builds on the words of Isaiah to advocate for the individual model of repentance, according to which repentance leads to a pardon from sin. However, note that Rabbi Yohanan here takes the words of Isaiah that originally refer to the corporate people of Israel—"Make the heart of this people fat"/הזה העם השמן לב—and now applies them to every individual person—"Great is repentance, for it tears up the sentence issued against a person"/גור דרכו של אדם. The Biblical perception of forgiveness is embedded in a covenantal framework, and therefore it operates in a collective dimension, that of the people. The people of Israel are the allies of God with whom He entered into a covenant, and therefore when the people return to God, this action maintains the framework of the covenant that grants reward for allegiance. The model of repentance that the Rabbis are working with is a different model: it focuses on the sphere of individuals rather than that of the collective. Here the individual stands alone in the presence of almighty God’s judgment or mercy, resting her hope for forgiveness not on a multigenerational relationship, but on her own personal penitence.

These two models of Teshuvah—the Biblical covenantal model and the rabbinic personal model—coexist in two parallel and complementary dimensions. The Sages call on us to develop a personal and private relationship with God, focusing on our private sin and repentance. But the idea of God’s forgiveness as represented in the Biblical text of the Thirteen Attributes is concentrated on the community and collective, and reminds us that in the Days of Awe we are not alone as guilty sinners before God, but are part of a covenantal community.

We stand before God as a link in the chain of generations. This model also makes sense of the collective formulation of the Selihot’s confession: "אשמנו, בגדנו,"/“we have sinned, we have betrayed”; it clarifies the group dimension of approaching God and asking for His forgiveness. But more than that, instead of focusing on sin, this model offers us worshippers a different spiritual stance, one that puts commitment to the relationship at the center: the relationship between us and God, but also the connection between us and our community members, between ourselves and the Jews in Israel and around the world, and the Jews of all generations. At least for me, as I recite the Thirteen Attributes together with my community, it is a source of a new and different connection to the Selihot prayers.