

Ezra Bick

IN HIS
MERCY

UNDERSTANDING THE THIRTEEN MIDOT

TRANSLATED BY

David Silverberg

Maggid Books
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Chapter One:</i> <i>“HaShem, HaShem”</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Chapter Two:</i> <i>El</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Chapter Three:</i> <i>Raḥum and Ḥanun</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>Chapter Four:</i> <i>Erekh Apayim</i>	<i>37</i>
<i>Chapter Five:</i> <i>Rav Ḥesed</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Chapter Six:</i> <i>Emet</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Chapter Seven:</i> <i>Notzer Ḥesed LaAlafim</i>	<i>71</i>

Chapter Eight:
Noseh Avon VaFesha VeHata'a 81

Chapter Nine:
VeNakeh 95

Appendix I:
Davar Shebikedusha 103

Appendix II:
Restoring the Covenant 115

About the Author 129

Chapter One

“HaShem, HaShem”

In our introduction, we established that the concept underlying the recitation of the Thirteen *Midot HaRaḥamim* is that the *Shekhina*'s presence in the world depends upon human recognition. Hence, the presence of the *Shekhina*'s Attributes of Mercy depends upon the reading of the Divine names of Mercy by the servants of God. The general intent required when reciting the Thirteen Attributes is willingness to serve as the “chariot” for the *Shekhina*'s revelation. However, the precise meaning that we discover for each name adds an additional requirement of intention, not only regarding the meaning of the words, but also in terms of consciousness and awareness. We must comprehend what facets of God's presence we are bringing down into the world.

Ḥazal (our sages) conveyed a tradition that there are thirteen distinct Attributes of Mercy in these verses, although they do not enumerate precisely what they are; we must understand the difference between them and the unique significance of each in order to bring about their manifestation. In our studies, we will attempt to explain each attribute independently, basing our analysis on the comments of *Ḥazal* and the *Rishonim*.

The first attribute – or the first Divine name – is *Havaya*

“HaShem, HaShem”

(Y-H-V-H), which is known as the *Shem HaMeforash*, the Ineffable Name. (Because of the sanctity of this name, it is written and pronounced, outside of prayer, as “HaShem,” “The Name.” In the context of prayer, it is pronounced “*Ado-nai*.”) The verse listing the Thirteen Attributes begins with a repetition of this name – “*HaShem, HaShem*” – and the *Rishonim* debate whether we count these two words as signifying two separate attributes, a single attribute, or no attributes at all.¹

In the continuation of the Gemara cited in our introduction (*Rosh HaShana* 17b), the Talmud offers a different interpretation of each mention of the word “HaShem”:

This teaches that the Almighty wrapped Himself as a *shali’ah tzibbur* [leader of the public prayer service] and showed Moses the prayer service. He said to him: Any time Israel sins, they shall perform this service before Me and I shall forgive them. *HaShem, HaShem* – I am He before a person sins, and I am He after a person sins and repents.

Tosafot clarify the Gemara’s intent and explain the significance of the use specifically of the name HaShem:

Rabbeinu Tam says that the first two names are two attributes, as stated here: “I am HaShem before one sins, having compassion on him; and I have compassion after one sins if he repents.” “*HaShem*” as an Attribute of Mercy differs from *Elokim*, which refers to the attribute of Justice.

According to Rabbeinu Tam’s reading of the Gemara, “*HaShem, HaShem*” encompasses two independent and distinct attributes – compassion prior to sin and compassion following sin. This is not the only plausible read-

1. The view that only one attribute is signified assumes that the Thirteen Attributes must each be different from one another. Hence, the same word cannot signify two distinct attributes. According to the view that no attributes are signified here, “*HaShem, HaShem*” constitutes the introduction to the list of attributes, which actually begins with the word “*El*.”

ing; the Gemara could have simply intended that “*HaShem, HaShem*” is one attribute that indicates that God continues to show compassion even after sin, just as He treats one compassionately before he sins. “*HaShem, HaShem*” would then imply, “I am God – I have not changed;” His single attribute of *Havaya* remains intact despite sin.

Indeed, Rabbeinu Tam’s interpretation, while widely accepted, raises a number of questions. In what way does specifically the divine name of *Havaya* express an Attribute of Mercy? Moreover, why does the continued presence of this name despite a person’s sin constitute a separate attribute, something different from its manifestation prior to sin? Indeed, if the persistence of this attribute after sin constitutes an independent attribute, we should seemingly add a second attribute to all the other *Midot* as well; God is *Rahum*, “Compassionate,” before sin and after sin, and so on.

Apparently, the fact that only the attribute of *Havaya* is repeated led Rabbeinu Tam to conclude that it is specifically the manifestation of this particular attribute after sin that reflects a new, independent attribute, even if it is expressed with the same term. Thus, our understanding of the difference between the two attributes depends upon how we understand the meaning of the attribute represented by this divine name. The explanation I will present is based on a discourse of R. Yitzhak Hutner z”l printed in his *Paḥad Yitzhak* (Rosh HaShana).

HAVAYA – GOD WILL’S EXISTENCE

The simple meaning of the divine name of *Havaya* (literally, “Existence”) relates to the notion that God gives existence to the entire universe; all of existence comes from Him. This is true not only in the sense of historical creation, but also in the sense that the very concept of existence is possible only on the basis of the will and power of God.² Nothing exists independently of Him; there is nothing whose existence is possible without the will of God. The very word “existence” can denote only God Himself or His will.

The existence that God did, in fact, will into being was built on

2. The Rambam presents this idea in the beginning of *Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah*.

kindness – “*Olam hesed yibaneh*” (Psalms 89:3). What do we mean when we say that the creation of the world was an act of pure kindness?

Judgment, *din*, is impossible in the absence of the world. After all, “judgment” implies that a person receives what he deserves, that God repays each person in accordance with his conduct. Compassion and justice are responses to human action. Before the world’s creation, there could be no such thing as a justified response, for there was not yet any situation that demanded one. The world’s creation itself certainly cannot be a reward or response deserved due to a prior state, as there was no prior state!

In essence, this is the logic behind the Rambam’s famous question regarding the reason for the world’s creation. Creation, according to the Rambam, most certainly was not intended to meet any need of God, as He has no need or lack, nor could it have served to meet a need in the world, for the world did not yet exist. Therefore – without entering into the complex medieval discussion of this issue – we must conclude that the world was created through *hesed* – not as an act of justice and not in response to anything that occurred before the act of creation.

When someone gives his friend something he does not deserve, he has performed an act of kindness. When existence was given to nothingness, when everything was given to non-existence, this was the greatest act of kindness possible, one which is incalculable and beyond any conceivable quantification. Mathematically, we would say that the relationship between the existent and the non-existent is infinity; God’s creation is thus infinite kindness. Thus, “The world is built through kindness.”

According to R. Hutner, the attribute of *Hesed* inherent in the name of *Havaya* relates to this notion. God is the sole source of existence for everything – *Havaya* – and even before we evaluate that existence in any detail, we qualify it as infinite kindness in relation to the alternative – absolute non-existence.

This explains why the name of *Havaya* is the first of the Thirteen Attributes. *Havaya* relates to the bare fact of existence *per se*, and not any specific condition. Nothing in the world exists “more” than any other thing; as such, everything that exists receives the same degree of kindness from the attribute of *Havaya*. From the perspective of this attribute, there is no difference between adult and child, the wicked and the righ-

teous, a bacterium and an elephant, or a worm and a human being. As it is not a response to any previous reality, the attribute of *Havaya* relates equally to every reality.

The subsequent attributes, in contrast, relate to particular situations; they are responses to human action. For example, the attribute of *Hanun* (“Gracious”) is based on the verse, “I shall hear [the poor man’s cries], because I am *Hanun*” (Exodus 22:26); it is manifest in response to the cry of the poor. Indeed, every other attribute is based upon the attribute of *Havaya*, the Almighty’s will that there exist a reality outside of Himself. Only after we understand that God lends things existence do we note that everything in existence receives to a different extent, in accordance with what it deserves.

There are infinite different levels of power, beauty, and knowledge, and they express infinite and distinct manifestations of the attributes of kindness. *Havaya* is the first attribute of kindness because every other attribute is but a particular expression of the undifferentiated attribute of *Havaya*.

HAVAYA – GOD WILLS THE EXISTENCE OF SIN

This is the meaning of the first *Havaya* – “I am He before a person sins.” What is the meaning of the second *Havaya* – “I am He after a person sins and repents”? The first attribute, signifying God’s will that there be existence (and the lack of existence in the absence of His will), suffices only until the first sin, until twilight of that first Shabbat, when Adam partook of the forbidden tree. By definition, sin opposes the divine will, and God’s will that there be existence does not include that which runs in opposition to His will. Thus, the existence of sin contradicts and annuls the creative act of the first attribute of *Hesed*. A world with sin – a world in opposition to God’s will – cannot continue to exist by His will.

Thus, “I am He before a person sins, and I am He after a person sins.” The second *Havaya* is a new attribute of *Havaya*, which includes even a world of sin. To put it more sharply, this is the attribute of *Havaya* that gives existence to everything, including sin itself. After sin, a person must be created anew, and God must sustain this new existence – an existence with sin.

Although the first attribute is perplexing, as we find it difficult to understand why God desired the world’s existence in the first place, at least it does not cause utter astonishment. The second attribute, however, the attribute of *Havaya* after the sin, may initially leave us in a state of shock. God wants the existence of sin, as He wills the existence of a world in which sin is a component.

As we have noted, the reason that we recite the Divine Attributes is to turn ourselves into vehicles for their revelation in the world. In order to do so, we must have the proper understanding and intent when proclaiming each. The recitation of the first name of *Havaya* requires a sense of being entirely dependent upon the divine will, as existence has no meaning other than the will of God, who, in His kindness, grants life to all living things. The second attribute of *Havaya* has further significance and far-reaching implications both in terms of a general religious ethic and in the particular context of the *Seliḥot* recitation. The attribute of *Havaya* after sin is predicated on the fact that God wants the world even after sin; that He continues to give existence to a world that operates in opposition to His will. A person who sins “forces” the Almighty to consent to – and even grant existence to – the sin that he committed. When we utter the second *Havaya* in the *Seliḥot* recitation, we essentially ask the Almighty to support our sinful existence, to become a participant in the sin. What gall it takes to make such a request! Indeed, as R. Yoḥanan said, “Had the verse not been written, it would have been impossible to say such a thing!”

One who prays and recites the Thirteen Attributes after sinning must recognize that his conduct necessitates the involvement of the absolute Good in a world of sin, for without the Almighty’s continued and boundless kindness, no sin would ever be committed. Kindness builds the sin and sustains it – and the sinner is responsible for the desecration of this pure goodness. One who sins not only betrays God; through his desire to succeed and continue existing, he defiles the divine good. There is an inherent, frightening contradiction in this regard. Kindness – the good seeking to bestow goodness – bestows goodness even upon evil, and thereby becomes a partner in its existence. The worshipper must accept responsibility for this before he can read the second attribute of *Havaya*, so that he can serve as a “chariot” for this attribute.

HAVAYA AND TESHUVA

The Gemara defines the second attribute to mean, “I am He before a person sins, and I am He after a person sins *and repents*.” Despite this stipulation of repentance, I do not believe that the second attribute of *Havaya* is reserved only for those who have already repented. First, God revealed this attribute after the sin of the golden calf, and the Torah does not describe any process of repentance on the *Benei Yisrael*’s part.³ Second, the concept represented by this attribute – the world’s continued existence even after sin – clearly holds true irrespective of *teshuva*. We see with our own eyes that unrepentant sinners continue to exist, despite the fact that sin brings an end to the first attribute of the world’s existence. More generally – as we will discuss at greater length in subsequent chapters – all of the Attributes of Mercy, with the exception of the final one, apply before *teshuva* actually takes place.

R. Yoḥanan’s intent, I believe, is that the Almighty tolerates sin in *anticipation* of *teshuva*. “I am He after a person sins” because he will repent at some point in the future. Why indeed does God’s goodness extend to evil, to the negation of His will? Good sustains evil because the good believes that ultimately more good will grow from the evil through the process of repentance. The good believes in the ability of evil to rehabilitate itself, and this belief is itself part of the Attribute of Mercy inherent in the good.

The faith in the rehabilitative ability of evil, the faith in the sinner, is the added Attribute of Mercy of the second *Havaya*. “And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31) – everything created in the six days of creation, represented by the first *Havaya*, was very good, because there was not yet any evil. There is another good, however, that had yet to be created – the good of repentance, which can exist only after the advent of sin.⁴

The second attribute does not contradict the first, despite the fact that the first attribute desires only goodness and the second wills even

3. Regarding the process of *Bnei Yisrael*’s *teshuva*, see Appendix 11.

4. Of course, God foresees everything, and He prepares the cure before the illness begins. This is why R. Ahava b. R. Ze’ira includes repentance among the things created before creation (*Bereshit Raba* 1:4).

evil. The second attribute desires evil because it knows that there is goodness even within the evil – the goodness of repentance. Fundamentally, then, the second attribute is reserved only for those who repent, insofar as its objective and ultimate purpose is *teshuva*. In actuality, however, *teshuva* is not a prerequisite for this attribute’s implementation.

God, who is good, wants there to be human beings with free choice, even if they utilize their free choice for evil, because they can potentially utilize it for repentance and for good. This is an attribute of kindness, not of judgment. Judgment has no patience to wait until the future; from the perspective of judgment and strict justice, the future does not justify the evil of the present by offering the prospect of future goodness. One must experience a profound feeling of shame over the fact that he depends upon the second attribute to exist and that he did not succeed in actualizing the first attribute.

THE WILL OF GOD

The concept of the divine will appears here in two different senses. God wills the existence of the world, and God wills the existence of free will in Man. It follows that God, given that Man has sinned, wills the existence of the sinner, as well as the existence of sin and the evil implicit in it. However, it is obvious that evil itself is not the object and goal of God’s will. In other words, God does not *desire* evil, even though its existence is included in His will – “Do I truly desire the death of the evildoer, says the Lord God; rather that he repent of his way and live” (Ezekiel 18:23). God’s will, in this respect, means His agreement to the existence of something. Desire, on the other hand, refers to a goal to which His actions are directed.

This distinction illuminates a difficult passage in the midrash (*Bereshit Raba* 2:5):

R. Abahu said: From the beginning of Creation, God perceived the actions of the righteous and the actions of the wicked, as is written, “For God knows the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked...” (Psalms 1:6). “And the Earth was *tohu vavohu*” – these are the actions of the wicked; “God said, ‘Let there be light’” – these are the actions of the righteous. *But I do*

not know which of them He desires, whether the actions of these or the actions of these. When it is written, "God saw the light, that it was good," [I know] that He desires the actions of the righteous, but does not desire the actions of the wicked.

How could the midrash ask which actions God desires more? Based on what we have explained, the meaning is clear. In the final analysis, there can be no doubt that God's will encompasses the actions of the wicked no less than the actions of the righteous; otherwise, they could not exist. The objective observer therefore questions which He *desires* more. When he encounters the verse, "God saw the light, that it was good," it becomes clear that although God wills evil, He does not desire it. The Creator supports the existence of both good and evil, but He is "on the side" of the righteous, and only their actions are desired.

This understanding has an important consequence for the way a person must recite *Selihot*. When reading the second attribute, one must do so with a willingness to repent; one cannot recite the second attribute while denying the possibility of *teshuva*. Although this attribute is effective even for one who at the moment stubbornly refuses to repent, it is simply dishonest and irrational for a worshipper read the name of *Havaya*, proclaiming the attribute of Compassion after sin, without at the very least a basic willingness to correct the wrong.

INTENT IN PRAYER

Let us now summarize the meaning of the first two attributes as they affect a person's intention as he prays.

When reciting the first attribute of *Havaya*, one should have in mind: "I call in the name of God who brings all the worlds into existence, and I request kindness because I exist; I am an object of divine kindness, and God desires the existence of all things. I do not request compassion on account of my personality, my conduct, the merits of my ancestors, or any other specific quality, but rather solely because through my existence I fulfill the will of God that the world exist, as expressed through the name *Havaya*."

Hazal suggest an additional explanation of the name of *Havaya*: "*Haya, hoveh veyiheyeh*" – "He was, He is, and He will be." In other words:

“HaShem, HaShem”

“You are He before the world existed, and You are He even when there is no world.” This essentially expresses the same notion we have developed above, or, more precisely, the other side of the same coin. God is everything, and even before creation, He was whole and perfect. As such, I do not exist in order to satisfy a certain need, but solely because, in His absolute kindness, He wants there to be existence, even though that existence contributes nothing to Him. A person therefore cries from the very depths of his existence, from the inner, simple point that he exists: “*HaShem* – of whose will I am an object.”

But the first attribute has an inherent limitation. It responds to the individual sinner, “You exist because of My will – but you are not in accordance with My will. You are not a reality that fulfills My will; how, therefore, do you exist?” At that point, we must proceed to the second attribute. When one cries out the second “*HaShem*” out of deep-seated feelings of shame and failure, he essentially says: “Indeed, I have failed and I have not fulfilled the divine will. Nevertheless, although I cannot understand how or why, You desire this, too. Even this receptacle filled with shame and humiliation, stained with sin – even this constitutes an object of Your will.”

Of course, as mentioned, this is not possible without the prospect of *teshuva*. Somewhere in the back of one’s consciousness, the seed of future repentance must already begin to sprout. “*Havaya Havaya*” has bestowed such abundant kindness for the sake of the world’s existence that a sinner can “stretch” the divine will and even use it to protect himself, even with the sin still in his pocket, because he still has an opportunity to clean the stained garment.

Psychologically, there is a vast difference between the full process of repentance – including complete remorse for the past, a commitment for the future, and a thorough analysis of the vicissitudes of the soul – and a flickering of the willingness and desire to repent. Herein lies the failure of most of us; on Yom Kippur, we fail to proceed beyond the stage of willingness to perform *teshuva* and do not make the effort to correct our wrongs through *teshuva* itself. In any event, at the time of *Selihot*, we still have not reached the critical stage of rectification, but we have at least arrived at the spark of preparedness, raising the prospect

of future repentance in order to justify God's anticipation. This spark must be part of our calling the second name of *Havaya*.

Of course, the tension that we have drawn between the first and second attributes deserves a separate, in-depth philosophical analysis. What is the relationship between God's desire for goodness and His desire for the world's existence? How do we reconcile God's desire for goodness with His desire that we have free choice? These are important questions that leading thinkers of many generations have addressed, but this is not our topic here. One who prays does not have to solve metaphysical, theological dilemmas. For him, it suffices to understand that both divine wills exist and that they are expressed in the first two Attributes of Mercy.