

# Torah Table Talk

## Justice or Mercy: The Thirteen Attributes of God Parshat Ki Tisa Exodus 30:11 – 34:31



Ki Tisa focuses on the story of the golden calf. Less than six weeks after Israel received the Torah and heard the voice of God at Mount Sinai the people of Israel had a failure of faith. When Moses did not return promptly from his encounter with God on Mount Sinai, they thought he was dead. (According to the Midrash he was only six hours late in returning.) The people came to Aaron and demanded that he make them “a god.” Aaron is one of the most troubling figures in the book of Exodus. While he served his brother, Moses, faithfully and was the first High Priest in the Tabernacle, he was also at least partially responsible for the worship of the golden calf in the wilderness. With little argument Aaron acquiesced to their demands. In the end however, Aaron evades punishment while the nation is punished for this deed. Parshat Ki Tisa is not just a story of judgment. It also contains a message of forgiveness. Our High Holiday liturgy focuses on this message in the thirteen attributes of forgiveness which we repeatedly recite during this season of the year.

### **Exodus 34: 6-7**

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: The Lord, the Lord, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment but visits iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon third and fourth generation.

### **The Thirteen Attributes as they are found in the High Holiday Prayer Book:**

“The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: The Lord, the Lord, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin, *and granting pardon.*”

### **Justice and Mercy By Rabbi Max Arzt:**

“The concluding words of the Biblical passage which comprise the Thirteen Attributes, “But that will by no means clear the guilty,” (Exodus 34:7) are omitted to underscore the predominance of the quality of mercy (*Middat Harahamim*) over that of strict justice (*Middat Hadin*).

### **Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 17b:**

“And the Lord passed before him and said, The Lord, the Lord, God merciful and gracious...” Rabbi Yohanan said: “Were it not so stated in the Torah, one could not (because of its bold anthropomorphism) say this: The Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped himself in a Tallit like one who leads the congregation in prayer, showed Moses this order of prayer and said to him: “Whenever Israel sins let them recite this same order of prayer and I will forgive them.””

### **Prayer and Penitence by Jeffery M. Cohen:**

According to our Selichot version of the Thirteen Attributes, the single word *ve-nakeh* (“and He acquits”) represents the final attribute. However, if we compare this with the actual biblical source, we find rather surprisingly, that we have curtailed the full version of this attribute which in the original conveys the exact opposite sense.... Abbreviating a biblical verse in this way does however, run counter to a Talmudic principle that “we may not stop in the middle of a verse (in order to create a separate verse) at a place where Moses did not stop. This prohibition was understood, however, to apply only when reading from the Torah. To employ a half verse in the context of prayer and petition was regarded as outside the scope of the prohibition.

## **Questions for Discussion**

1. Why do you think God proclaims this list of attributes at this point in time following the sin of the Golden Calf? What is the connection between this proclamation and the command immediately before this in which God tells Moses to carve a new set of tablets “Which you shattered?” Who is God forgiving here?
  2. Notice that the list of attributes end, “by no means clears the guilty” in the Bible but in the prayer, by leaving off the last word it says “He clears the guilty.” What motivated the Rabbis to make such a radical change in the Biblical text? What were the Rabbis trying to say about our relationship to the text?
  3. How do you feel about this verse? Why do you think the sages left this part of the verse out of the prayer book? Were they justified in doing this even though it completely changed the meaning of the verse? Do you think the sages rejected this idea that God punishes the guilty “unto the third and fourth generation”? If so how could they justify it appearing in the Bible in the first place?
  4. What does it mean to say that God forgives? Do you believe that God forgives? Do you believe that God punishes? How is God’s forgiveness different from human forgiveness?
  5. The statement in the Talmud makes the proclamation of the Thirteen Attributes sound almost magical; the very recitation of them means that one will be forgiven for ones wrong doing. Think of how often we recite these verses in the Selichot service and Yom Kippur? How do you feel about this statement? What must we do to seek forgiveness from God?
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### ***How to use Torah Table Talk***

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind  
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***

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